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BICS and CALP: Origins and Rationale for the Distinction

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The acronyms BICS and CALP refer to a distinction introduced by Cummins (1979) between basic interpersonal communicative skills and cognitive academic language proficiency. The distinction was intended to draw attention to the very different time periods typically required by immigrant children to acquire conversational fluency in their second language as compared to grade-appropriate academic proficiency in that language. Conversational fluency is often acquired to a functional or peer-appropriate level within about two years of initial exposure to the second language whereas at least five years is typically required to catch up to native speakers in academic aspects of the second language (Collier 1987; Hakuta, Butler and Witt 2000; Klesmer 1994; Cummins 1981a). Failure to take account of the BICS/CALP (conversational/academic) distinction has resulted in discriminatory psychological assessment of bilingual students and premature exit from language support programs (e.g. bilingual education) into mainstream classes (Cummins 1984).

1 Evolution of the Distinction

Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa (1976) brought attention to the fact that Finnish immigrant children in Sweden often appeared to educators to be fluent in both Finnish and Swedish but still showed levels of verbal academic performance in both languages considerably below grade/age expectations. Similarly, analysis of psychological assessments administered to English language learners (ELL) showed that teachers and psychologists often assumed that children had overcome all difficulties with English when they could converse easily in the language (Cummins 1984). Yet these students frequently performed poorly on English academic tasks as well as in psychological assessment situations, with the result that they were often diagnosed as suffering from learning disabilities or communication disorders. Psychologists assumed that the verbal IQ tests were valid for these bilingual students because they could converse easily in English and appeared to understand instructions and questions.

The need to distinguish between conversational fluency and academic aspects of L2 performance was highlighted by the reanalysis of large-scale language acquisition data from the Toronto Board of Education (Cummins 1981a). These data showed clearly that there was a gap of several years, on average, between the attainment of peer-

appropriate fluency in L2 and the attainment of grade norms in academic aspects of L2. Conversational aspects of proficiency reached peer-appropriate levels usually within about two years of exposure to L2 but a period of 5–7 years was required, on average, for immigrant students to approach grade norms in academic aspects of English.

The distinction between BICS and CALP was intended to draw educators' attention to these data and to warn against premature exit of ELL students (in the United States) from bilingual to mainstream English-only programs on the basis of attainment of surface-level fluency in English. In other words, the distinction highlighted the fact that educators' conflating of these aspects of proficiency was a major factor in the creation of academic difficulties for bilingual students.

At a more theoretical level, the BICS/CALP distinction also served to qualify John Oller's (1979) claim that all individual differences in language proficiency could be accounted for by just one underlying factor, which he termed *global language proficiency*. Oller synthesized a considerable amount of data showing strong correlations between performance on cloze tests of reading, standardized reading tests, and measures of oral verbal ability (e.g. vocabulary measures). However, it is problematic to incorporate all aspects of language use or performance into just one dimension of general or global language proficiency. For example, if we take two monolingual English-speaking siblings, a 12-year-old child and a six-year-old, there are enormous differences in these children's ability to read and write English and in the depth and breadth of their vocabulary knowledge, but minimal differences in their phonology or basic fluency. The six-year old can understand virtually everything that is likely to be said to her in everyday social contexts and she can use language very effectively in these contexts, just as the 12-year old can. In other words, some aspects of children's first language development (e.g. phonology) reach a plateau relatively early whereas other aspects (e.g. lexical knowledge) continue to develop throughout our lifetimes. Thus, these very different aspects of proficiency cannot be considered to reflect just one unitary proficiency dimension.

Another way of expressing this difference is to note that native speakers of any language come to school at age 5 or so virtually fully competent users of their language. They have acquired the core grammar of their language and many of the sociolinguistic rules for using the language appropriately in familiar social contexts. Yet, schools spend another 12 years (and considerable public funds) attempting to extend this basic linguistic repertoire into more specialized domains and functions of language. CALP or academic language proficiency is what schools focus on in this endeavor. It reflects the registers of language that children acquire in school and which they need to use effectively if they are to progress successfully through the grades. For example, knowing the conventions of different genres of writing (e.g. science reports, persuasive writing, etc.) and developing the ability to use these forms of expression or *registers* effectively are essential for academic success.

Conversational and academic language registers represent subsets of what James Paul Gee (1990) has termed *primary* and *secondary discourses*. Primary discourses are acquired through face-to-face interactions in the home and represent the language of initial socialization. Secondary discourses are acquired in social institutions beyond the family (e.g. school, business, religious and cultural contexts) and involve acquisition of specialized vocabulary and functions of language appropriate to those settings.

Secondary discourses can be oral or written and are central to the social life of non-literate cultures as much as they are in literate cultures. Examples of secondary discourse common in many non-literate cultures are the conventions of story-telling or the language of marriage or burial rituals which are passed down through oral tradition from one generation to the next. Oral forms of secondary discourse are in no way inferior to written forms, as illustrated in the fact that two of the greatest "literary" achievements of humanity, the Homeric epics of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, existed for many centuries only in oral form before being written down.

The BICS/CALP distinction was elaborated into two intersecting continua (Cummins 1981a) that highlighted the range of cognitive demands and contextual support involved in particular language tasks or activities (context-embedded/context-reduced, cognitively undemanding/cognitively demanding). The BICS/CALP distinction was maintained within this elaboration and related to the theoretical distinctions of several other theorists (e.g. Bruner's (1975) *communicative* and *analytic competence*, Donaldson's (1978) *embedded* and *disembedded language*, and Olson's (1977) *utterance* and *text*). The terms used by different investigators have varied but the essential distinction refers to the extent to which the meaning being communicated is strongly supported by contextual or interpersonal cues (such as gestures, facial expressions, and intonation present in face-to-face interaction) or supported primarily by linguistic cues that are largely independent of the immediate communicative context.

2 Critiques of the BICS/CALP Distinction

Early critiques of the conversational/academic distinction were advanced by Carole Edelsky and her colleagues (Edelsky et al. 1983) and in a volume edited by Charlene Rivera (1984). Edelsky (1990) later reiterated and reformulated her critique and other critiques were advanced by Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986) and Wiley (1996). The major criticisms are as follows:

- the conversational/academic language distinction reflects an autonomous perspective on language that ignores its location in social practices and power relations (Edelsky et al. 1983; Wiley 1996).
- CALP or academic language proficiency represents little more than "test-wiseness" – it is an artifact of the inappropriate way in which it has been measured (Edelsky et al. 1983).
- The notion of CALP promotes a "deficit theory" insofar as it attributes the academic failure of bilingual/minority students to low cognitive/academic proficiency rather than to inappropriate schooling (Edelsky 1990; Edelsky et al. 1983; Martin-Jones and Romaine 1986).

In response to these critiques, Cummins and Swain (1983) pointed out that the construct of academic language proficiency does not in any way depend on test scores as

support for either its construct validity or relevance to education. Furthermore, they argued that the BICS/CALP distinction has served to highlight how schools create academic difficulties for bilingual students. The notion of CALP was always presented as an intervening variable mediating between sociocultural and educational factors and student outcomes rather than as a direct causal variable of student outcomes.

In a more recent response, Cummins (2000) noted that the BICS/CALP distinction has been integrated since 1986 with a detailed sociopolitical analysis of how schools construct academic failure among subordinated groups. The framework analyzes how coercive relations of power in the wider society affect both educational structures and the ways in which educators define their roles. Educational structures (e.g. English-only instruction) and educator role definitions (e.g. low expectations for ELL students), in turn, have resulted in patterns of interactions between educators and subordinated group students that have constricted students' academic language development and identity formation. The framework documents educational approaches that challenge this pattern of coercive power relations and promote the generation of power in the interactions between educators and students (Cummins 1996).

Evidence that the BICS/CALP distinction is not just an artifact of test scores comes from several sources. For example, the following observations were made by Carolyn Vincent (1996) in an ethnographic study of a program serving second-generation Salvadorean students in Washington, DC:

All of the children in this study began school in an English-speaking environment and within their first two or three years attained conversational ability in English that teachers would regard as native-like. This is largely deceptive. The children seem to have much greater English proficiency than they actually do because their spoken English has no accent and they are able to converse on a few everyday, frequently discussed subjects. Academic language is frequently lacking. Teachers actually spend very little time talking with individual children and tend to interpret a small sample of speech as evidence of full English proficiency. However, as the children themselves look back on their language development they see how the language used in the classroom was difficult for them, and how long it took them to acquire English. (p. 195)

The research of Biber (1986) and Corson (1995) also provides evidence of the linguistic reality of the distinction. Corson highlighted the enormous lexical differences between typical conversational interactions in English (BICS) as compared to academic or literacy-related uses of English (CALP). The high-frequency everyday lexicon of English conversation derives predominantly from Anglo-Saxon sources while academic language is primarily Graeco-Latin in origin (see also Coxhead 2000).

Similarly, Biber's (1986) factor analysis of more than one million words of English speech and written text from a wide variety of genres revealed underlying dimensions very consistent with the distinction between conversational and academic aspects of language proficiency. For example, when factor scores were calculated for the different text types on each factor, telephone and face-to-face conversation were at opposite extremes from official documents and academic prose on Textual Dimensions 1 and 2 (Interactive vs. Edited Text, and Abstract vs. Situated Content).

3 Conclusion

The BICS/CALP distinction was not proposed as an overall theory of language but as a very specific conceptual distinction that has important implications for policy and practice. To say that BICS and CALP are conceptually distinct is not the same as saying that they are separate or acquired in different ways. Developmentally they are not necessarily separate; all children acquire their initial conceptual foundation (knowledge of the world) through conversational interactions in the home. Similarly, discussion about conceptual issues is an important, and in many situations essential, way of deepening our understanding of concepts and developing critical literacy. By the same token, cognitive skills are involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in most forms of social interaction.

This intersection of the cognitive and social aspects of language proficiency, however, does not mean that they are identical or reducible one to the other. The implicit assumption that conversational fluency in English is a good indicator of "English proficiency" has resulted in countless bilingual children being "diagnosed" as learning-disabled or retarded. Despite their developmental intersections, BICS and CALP are conceptually distinct as reflected in their very different developmental patterns and contrasting lexical composition.

The criticisms of the BICS/CALP distinction derive, to some extent, from what critics have "read into" the distinction. None of the critics has disputed the basic realities from which the distinction derives. To reiterate:

- In monolingual contexts, the distinction reflects the difference between the language proficiency acquired through interpersonal interaction by the vast majority of six-year-old children and the proficiency developed through schooling and literacy that continues to expand throughout our lifetimes.
- Research studies since the early 1980s have shown that immigrant students can quickly acquire considerable fluency in the target language when they are exposed to it in the environment and at school but despite this rapid growth in conversational fluency, it generally takes a minimum of about five years (and frequently much longer) for them to catch up to native speakers in academic aspects of the language.

A final point concerns the "validity" of any theoretical construct. Theories must be consistent with the empirical data to have any claim to "validity." However, any theory represents only one of potentially many ways of organizing or viewing the data. Theories frame phenomena and provide interpretations of empirical data within particular contexts and for particular purposes. They generate predictions that are, in principle, falsifiable. If a theory is not consistent with the data, then it must be rejected, or refined to achieve that consistency. However, no theory is "valid" or "true" in any absolute sense. A theory represents a way of viewing phenomena that may be relevant and useful in varying degrees depending on its purpose, how well it communicates with its intended audience, and the consequences for practice of following through on its implications (its "consequential validity"). The generation of knowledge (theory) should be part of a collaborative dialogue (Cummins 2000).

In this respect, the response (both critical and supportive) to the BICS/CALP distinction has resulted in clarifications, elaborations, and refinements. The distinction represents *one way* of interpreting and communicating the research data to policy-makers and practitioners with the goal of improving educational experiences and outcomes for bilingual students. I believe it has served a useful purpose in this regard but at some point it may cease to serve this purpose or be subsumed into a more comprehensive framework that communicates to practitioners and policy-makers in a more effective way. Hopefully, the collaborative dialogue that is theory generation will usher in such a comprehensive framework sooner rather than later.

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