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TEACHING IMPLICATIONS—UNDERSTANDING ‘BICS’ AND ‘CALP’

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ABSTRACT

This paper will make an analysis of the distinction between two different English language proficiency—basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Teaching implications will be proposed to the English language teachers as how to develop students English level effectively and efficiently.

KEYWORDS: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, Teaching Implications

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INTRODUCTION

The difference between basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) was introduced by Cummins in 1979 to draw educators' attention to the timelines and challenges that second language learners encounter as they try hard to master and use a second language skillfully.

1.1 Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are language skills people need in social situations. It is the daily language used to interact socially with people. English language learners usually acquire these skills quickly as this kind of communications is usually context embedded and they are not very demanding cognitively.

1.2 CALP refers to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, which is essential for students to succeed at school. It includes skills such as comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating, and inferring. Academic language tasks are context reduced and the language also becomes more cognitively demanding. So students need time and

support to become competent in academic areas. This process usually takes from five to seven years.

Cummins states that while many children develop native speaker fluency within two years of immersion in the target language, it usually takes between 5-7 years for them to be working on the same level with native speakers as far as academic language is concerned.

1.3 Implications for mainstream teachers

We should not assume that non-native speakers who have attained a high level of fluency and accuracy in everyday spoken English possess the corresponding academic language proficiency. This may help us to avoid viewing students who exhibit this disparity as having special educational needs when all they need is more time. Classifying students as incompetent in language learning rashly can be quite discouraging for their future study.

2.1 Common Underlying Proficiency

Briefly stated, Cummins holds that in the course of learning one language, a child acquires a set of skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge that he can draw upon when learning other

languages. This common underlying proficiency (CULP), as he names these skills and knowledge, is illustrated in the diagram below. It can be seen that CULP provides the basis for the development of both the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). It implies that any progress in CULP that takes place in one language will have a positive influence on the other language(s). This theory also serves to explain why it becomes increasingly easy to learn additional languages.



2.2 Implications for mainstream teachers

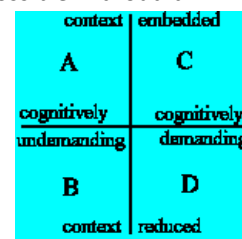
It is quite important that students be encouraged to further their native language development. When parents ask about the best ways they can help their children at home, we can reply that the children should have the opportunity to read extensively in their own language. We could suggest that parents take some time every evening to discuss with their children, in their native language, what they have done at school that day: ask them to talk about the science experiment they did, question them about their understanding of historical information, and have them explain how they have solved a math problem, etc.

As Cummins (2000) points out: "Conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input in the other language comprehensible." If a child has already understood the concepts of "justice" or "honesty" in his own language, all he has to do is to acquire the labels for these terms in English. He will have a far more difficult task, however, if he has to acquire both the labels and the concepts in the second language.

3.1 Task Difficulty

Cummins has designed a model whereby the different tasks we expect our students to engage in can be categorized. In the diagram below student tasks range in difficulty along one continuum from cognitively undemanding to cognitively demanding, and along the other continuum from context-embedded to context-reduced. A context-embedded task is the one in which students have access to some visual and oral cues; for example

they can look at illustrations of what is being talked about or ask questions to confirm whether they understand the content. A context-reduced task is the one such as listening to a lecture or reading textbooks, where there are no other sources for help than the language itself. Clearly, a D quadrant task, which is both cognitively demanding and context-reduced, is the most difficult one for students, particularly for non-native speakers in their first few years of learning English. However, it is indispensable that non-native speakers develop the ability to accomplish such tasks, since academic success is impossible without it.



3.2 Implications for mainstream teachers

If teachers can be aware of the likely difficulty of a task, based on Cummins' model, they can judge its appropriateness of their teaching materials for the students in their classes and in this way to avoid much frustration caused by the much more difficult tasks beyond the students' language proficiency. This does not mean, however, that students should only engage in cognitively-undemanding tasks. It may be beneficial to apply these cognitively-undemanding activities in the students' early stage of learning a foreign language, in order to build confidence, or as a lead-in to a more challenging activity. Once students are comfortable with these kinds of activities, they can gradually engage in tasks that are both cognitively-demanding and context-reduced.

4.1 Additive/subtractive bilingualism

Cummins draws the distinction between additive bilingualism and subtractive bilingualism. In additive bilingualism the first language continues to be developed and the first culture to be valued as the second language is acquired, while in subtractive bilingualism the second language is acquired at the expense of the first language and culture, which diminish as a consequence. Cummins (1994) quotes research which suggests students learning in an additive bilingual environment succeed to a greater

extent than those whose first language and culture are devalued by their schools and teachers.

4.2 Implications for mainstream teachers

The dangers of subtractive bilingualism for the non-native speakers living in their mother country are obviously not so strong as, say, for the children of immigrants to the USA. Nevertheless, we should do what we can to demonstrate to our non-native English students that our culture and language are equally as important and valued as American culture and English language. Teachers should tell students how to appreciate and understand different cultures, and absorb the good values from different cultures. Thus students could easily accept and adjust to a different culture in their future study, work and life.

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