

BICS & CALP Revisited: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract – This paper makes an attempt to capture introductorily the notions of BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) introduced by Cummins. Assuming that BICS encompass rudimentary knowledge of speech and basic fluency, CALP, in contrast, evokes a high degree of cognition needed for academic subjects and tasks. In length, other aspects of the Model termed CUP/CULP (Common Underlying Proficiency) as well as the Iceberg Model connected to the above notions are discussed. Later the paper compares the Model with Language Immersion Program to bear the Model out. Then by introducing the Threshold Hypothesis as well as the Unitary Trait Hypothesis, the study tries to relate these perspectives to the concepts of BICS and CALP. Still other concepts such as intelligence and introversion/extroversion and their link with BICS and CALP are delineated, though briefly, at the final phases of the paper. At the end, some criticisms leveled at the Model are sketched, Cummins' response is presented and some conclusions are made.

Keywords: BICS, CALP, CUP/CULP, Iceberg Model, Language Immersion Program, Threshold Hypothesis, Unitary Trait Hypothesis, Intelligence

I. INTRODUCTION

In second language acquisition, it is crucial to take into account specific factors which influence the *attitude* held by different groups of learners leading to different levels of L2 proficiency. Some of these important factors comprise *age*, *sex*, *social class*, and *ethnic identity* (Ellis, 1985). As Preston (1989; cited in Ellis, 2008) has pointed out, there is a clear parallel between sociolinguistic phenomenon associated with *social class* and *interlanguage development*. Moreover, a clearer evidence can be seen as to the relationship between *social class* and *overall L2 achievement* which is actually more conspicuous for learners studying in an L2 setting.

II. BICS AND CALP

In line with what was briefly put regarding the attitudes taken by L2 learners in the process of learning, Cummins (1979) differentiated between two notions: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The former describes L2 capability that learners need in order to be able to engage effectively in

routine conversational interactions whereas the latter refers to the kind of L2 proficiency that learners apply for effective engagement in academic study.

The distinction between BICS and CALP was initiated by Cummins (1979) to draw attention to the disparate time periods that immigrant children typically need so as to acquire basic interpersonal communicative fluency in their L2 in contrast to 'grade-appropriate academic proficiency' in that language. The time period for acquiring oral fluency to a functional level is assumed to be about two years of initial exposure to L2 whereas the time limit amounts to at least five years in order for the learners to catch up to native speakers in academic success (Collier, 1987).

BICS are language skills which are applied in social situations: English students utilize BICS when they are, for example, at the barber's, in the bank, at the dentist's office, in a bus station, at the airport, talking to a friend on the cell phone and so many other daily social interactions with other individuals. BICS usually involve context-embedded and meaningful situations which are not very demanding in terms of cognitive capacity. It follows that the language used in these situations does not appear to be very specialized or technical. Whereas BICS encompass known ideas along with restricted vocabulary and routine grammar mainly used in informal speech, CALP comprises the macro skills required for formal interactions around varying subject area content in the classroom. CALP development initiates from birth but separates from BICS after school starts; social context of schooling is its specific feature. To compare and contrast, categorize, synthesize, evaluate, and infer, CALP is needed to be employed, whereas to name things and actions, accept or reject an offer, and the like, BICS are conspicuously adequate (Cummins, 1981b).

"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 in the United States) into mainstream classes" (Cummins, 1986, p. 24).

A. CUP/CULP

Cummins also believes that in the course of language learning, students acquire a set of skills as well as implicit metalinguistic knowledge that can lend themselves well to working in another language. This is what Cummins calls '*common underlying (language) proficiency*' (CUP/CULP). By introducing CUP, Cummins (1986) tried to show the promotion of cognitive academic skills through cross-lingual proficiencies. In Cummins' (1986) terms, "CUP refers to the interdependence of concepts, skills and linguistic knowledge found in a central processing system" (p. 67). Through this model, he underscored the significance of developing L1 in minority students for high-level competence achievement of their L2, particularly in terms of their literacy-related abilities. He believed in the existence of language commonalities or interdependency of the bilinguals' literacy-related proficiency across languages as providing the rudiments for the development of the first and the second language. In other words, any expansion of CULP transpired in one language will have also a beneficial effect on others. Representing bilingual proficiency in this way suggests

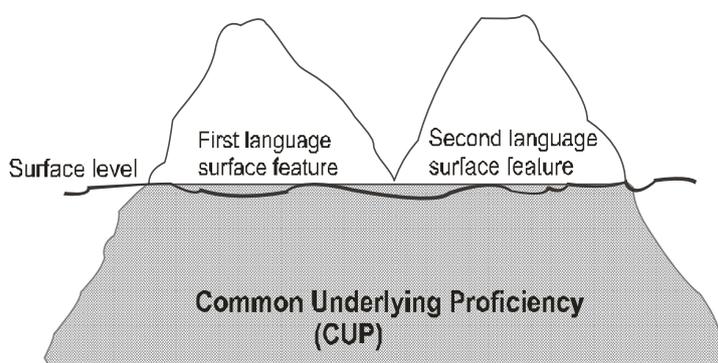
development of the learners' L2 through conceptual and linguistic development in their L1 the continued support of which would be advantageous for cognitive development as well.

For supporting this hypothesis, Cummins (2000) later presents the work of many other researchers to claim that “bilingualism and continued development in the first language enhances metalinguistic skills and development in proficiency in the second language.” (p. 18).

Moreover, this theory lends itself well to reason why learning even additional languages assumes to be easier and easier. Also it implies the importance of encouraging students to continue developing their first language. When parents, for example, are looking for the best ways to help their child at home, you, as a language teacher, can suggest them to provide opportunities for her to read extensively in her L1 (Cummins, 2000, p. 58).

B. The Iceberg Model

Cummins' (2008) iceberg model of bilingualism, which is another representation of CULP, also assumes the transferability across languages of merely cognitive and literacy skills named CALP. As the following illustration reveals, the two icebergs represent the two languages overlapping and sharing a common underlying operating system with the water as their deep structure; although they share in some concepts, outwardly, both languages are separate.



Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) (Cummins, 2008)

Moreover, this figure can demonstrate the formulation of linguistic knowledge in the brain of the bilinguals in this way: their working memory has the capacity to store distinct proficiencies in each language in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, and the concepts are then stored as the common underlying proficiency.

In line with this model, Cummins also stipulated that the different tasks our students are expected to engage in, range in difficulty along two continua: “along one continuum from cognitively undemanding to cognitively demanding; and along the other continuum from context-embedded to context-reduced” (2008, p. 112). As the terms suggest, in a context-embedded task, the examples of which are asking a partner a subject-related question while the lesson is processing and following the illustrations of what is being discussed in the classroom, a range of additional visual and oral cues are accessible to the students whereas in a context-reduced task such as intensive reading or listening to a lecture, no other sources of

help are available to the language learner. Evidently, a D quadrant task (diagram below) is possibly the most difficult for students for

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| Context A Cognitively | Embedded B Cognitively |
| Undemanding C Context | Demanding D Reduced |

The simple reason that it is both cognitively demanding and context- reduced particularly for L2 learners at the start of learning English. However, since academic success is impossible without it, ESL students are required to develop the ability to perform such tasks as well.

The implication of this model is that teachers' awareness of the possible difficulty of a given task can help them well discern the appropriateness of the task for their L2 learners. This does **not** mean, however, that a diet of cognitively-undemanding tasks should be instilled to ESL students. It is understood from this model that teachers' switching to tasks that students are comfortable with should primarily be taken into account; only gradually can they expose learners to tasks that are both cognitively-demanding and context-reduced (Goldstein & Liu, 1994).

Also as Duff (2005) asserts, the BICS/CALP model is in agreement with Canale and Swain's communicative competence comprising, linguistic competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence, although in the latter model, no explicit reference to academic proficiency is made.

C.BICS, CALP and Language Immersion Program

A notable feature of the Canadian bilingual education is termed the *language immersion program*. Introduced in the 1960s, the program was emerged to provide a high level of French proficiency for the school children who enjoyed just English as the language of their minority group. As French was the dominant language of that country, children were immersed in academic setting in that language but used their L1 (i.e., English) to communicate with a bilingual teacher who would reply in French. This process leads students from what is named BICS by Cummins (1981 a), calling for just language proficiency status of the learners with limited vocabulary and simpler syntax, to CALP bearing a developed vocabulary and sufficiently complex syntax appropriate for abstract and analytical thinking or generally academic success. According to Tavakoli (2012) the success of the language

immersion model in Canada has evoked enthusiasm and controversy in the utilization of bilingual education in American educational system.

D. BICS, CALP and the Threshold Hypothesis

The assumption underlying the threshold hypothesis is that, for taking advantage of the merits of bilingualism, a child needs to achieve a certain level of competence or proficiency in L1 or L2. In other words, if there are to be any benefits from bilingualism, learners need to achieve a minimum threshold of the language they acquire or learn. This hypothesis also assumes that maintaining a low level of language competence may have negative consequences. This has sometimes been referred to as *semi-lingualism*, the term which is not much in vogue nowadays. It follows that seemingly a minimum level of linguistic and conceptual knowledge or BICS is needed in the first language to help develop a bilingual learner who is also successful in academic subjects representing CALP (Francis, 2005). Therefore, it can be concluded that this hypothesis bears the distinction between BICS and CALP out.

E. BICS, CALP and Oller's Unitary Trait Hypothesis

According to Wiley (1996), Cummins was one of those researchers who, in 1980, through his BICS and CALP model challenged Oller's Unitary Trait/Competence Hypothesis.

The BICS/CALP distinction was posited to challenge John Oller's (1979) claim that all individual differences in language proficiency could be accounted for by just one underlying factor termed *global language proficiency*. In other words, Oller had collected a considerable amount of data to suggest that language proficiency is 'indivisible' (Brown, 2004). Cummins (1979, 1981b) repudiated the likelihood of incorporating all aspects of language use or performance into just one dimension of global language proficiency. He further put forth that if, for example, we take two monolingual pupils, one younger but the other several years older, enormous differences can be observed in their literary skills as well as their knowledge of vocabulary; however, minimal differences are seen in their phonology or basic fluency. In other words, both of these children are virtually at the same level of using the language in everyday social contexts but different in reading and writing skills.

Hawkins (2005) noted that Cummins Model tries to show language bearing multiple forms.

Finally, it is not pointless to refer to the fact that Oller (1983) finally returned from his earlier position and admitted his hypothesis to be wrong.

F. BICS, CALP and Intelligence

Explained by Dornyei and Ushioda (2012), "intelligence is the general set of cognitive abilities involved in performing a wide range of learning tasks. It constitutes a general sort of aptitude that is not limited to a specific performance area but is transferable to many sorts of

performance" (p. 13). In this regard, a reasonable hypothesis is that intelligence is a factor concerning CALP but less concerning BICS (Ellis, 2008). Ellis adds that a number of studies support this hypothesis. The notion of BICS/CALP connected with intelligence is also implied from Ellis words: "Genesee (1976) found that intelligence was strongly related to the development of reading, grammar, and vocabulary but largely unrelated to oral productive ability thus being in agreement with what Skehan (1990) and Ekstrand (1977) found in different settings" (p. 674).

G. BICS, CALP and Introverts/Extraverts

Stated by Ellis (2008), there are 2 major hypotheses regarding the relation between **introverts/extraverts** and L2 learning. The first one which is most widely studied is that **extroverts** do better in acquiring Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). The rationale behind this hypothesis is that extroversion feature contributes to providing more opportunities for learners to practice, receive more input, and thus more success in communicative practices. The second hypothesis concerns the introverted learners who might do better at developing Cognitive Academic Language Ability (CALP) for the reason that they typically enjoy more academic success perhaps due to spending more time on reading and writing. Ellis (2008) furthers that there is some support for the first hypothesis, that is, extraversion is an advantage. However, not all studies have supported this position. Therefore the important factor for this disparity, as Ellis (2008) concludes, "might be the task used to elicit samples of oral language and the choice of criterion measure" (p. 674).

All in all it is important to note that, like some other researchers, Ellis (2008) also echoes his sentiment in this way: "the development of oral/aural interpersonal communication skills in a second language does not appear to be dependent on individual differences of a cognitive, linguistic and ...social nature. In other words, where BICS are concerned, social differences in learners have no effect" (p. 317).

III. CRITIQUE

Cummins's notion of BICS and CALP has been criticized from several fronts. Romaine (1989; cited in Jones, 2001) accusing Cummins of equating '**semantic development**' with '**cognitive development**' argues that language skills cannot be compartmentalized as accurately as Cummins explains. He further notes that certainly all subjects cannot simply and easily be placed in their respective quadrants. For example, science is a subject which is cognitively demanding; however, there is the possibility of teaching it in a context-embedded /context-reduced style. Most other subjects bear the same resemblance. It is the style and skill of the teacher which counts. Nevertheless, being likely difficult to neatly place all school subjects into one of the four quadrants, Cummins's model does provide insight into why learners working in L2 may do well in some subjects but need to struggle in others. The issue becomes even more complicated when Cummins suggests that communication capability, being context-reduced, and cognitively-demanding, develops independently and can be promoted by either or both languages. It follows that if knowledge

is transferable across languages, then there is no need for a pupil to begin studying, for example, mathematics which is a cognitively-demanding subjects at an early age through the medium of English as a preparation for an English-medium examination that s/he will take eight years later.

A. Other Criticisms in Brief

Through conversational/academic language distinction, an autonomous perspective on language is reflected that overlooks language function 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).

In as far as the concept of CALP ascribes the academic failure of bilingual pupils to low cognitive/academic proficiency where inappropriate schooling can be incriminated, it promotes a ‘deficit theory’ (Edelsky, 1990; Edelsky et al., 1983).

IV. CUMMINS’ RESPONSE

In response to some of these critiques, Cummins (Cummins & Swain, 1983) acknowledged the sociopolitical framework as determining the underachievement of the pupils within BICS/CALP issues. He pointed to the relations of power imposed on the society at large which can be reflected in schooling practices. He also invoked the work of Biber (1986) and Corson (1995) as evidence of the linguistic reality of the distinction. Corson highlighted the enormous lexical differences between academic or literacy-related uses of English compared to the typical conversational interactions in English. Similarly, Biber had analyzed more than one million words in spoken English as well as written texts and detected the underlying pattern of his findings much in line with the distinction between academic and conversational aspects of language proficiency. Cummins also pointed out that test scores fail to act as support for either the construct validity of academic language proficiency or its relevance to education construct, as evidenced by Corson and Biber’ analysis.

V. CONCLUSION

The distinction between BICS and CALP has exerted a significant influence on a variety of educational policies and practices in the world. This distinction has highlighted specific ways in which teachers’ awareness of the nature of language proficiency have led to the resolution of the academic problems among bilingual students. This reflects the fact that, although at a theoretical level the differentiation is still controversial, there is no cross-disciplinary concurrence as to the nature of language proficiency and the ways it can contribute to academic achievement (Cline & Frederickson, 1996).

In the Iranian educational milieu as well as other countries which are concerned with teaching English as a *foreign* (and not as a second) language, i.e., English is used merely in academic settings, the differentiation between BICS and CALP appears to be pointless. In these countries, language teachers are only concerned with CALP and if any improvement in the communicative aspect of L2 is felt, which, in Iran, is actually the concern of the private sector, it is only carried out within these private institutes mostly through conversational interactions, their sequel of which more often than not seems to be the same as what is done in the state sector. This is for the simple reason that students often fail to have access to real situations of L2 use in Iranian educational environments.

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