

## Teaching the ESOL Student in a Mainstreamed Classroom

### BICS vs. CALP

Think of BICS vs. CALP language acquisition as an iceberg. What you see on the surface is only the beginning of what a child needs to be a successful student. Below the surface is the knowledge and support of CALP and an enormous amount of information and language needed to be a successful student.

Linguist Jim Cummins distinguishes between two types of language – Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

Cummins developed the BICS and CALP Theory as a way to distinguish the time periods of language development. Without knowledge of BICS vs. CALP, teachers may have unrealistic expectations or remove educational support too early.

Basic Interpersonal Communications Skills (BICS) refers to the first two years of language acquisition where children are acquiring conversational language.

Children need active knowledge of approximately 3000 words to begin feeling comfortable with conversational English.

As shown in this graphic BICS is just the tip of the iceberg. Throughout the first three years of language development children gain conversational fluency and feel comfortable using English with others.

Let's watch as this teacher uses song to build conversational English skills in these beginning English Language Learners.

Teacher: *Where is Jolie? Where is Jolie?*  
Student: Here I am. Here I am.  
Teacher: *How are you today Jolie?*  
Student: I am fine.  
Teacher: *Nice to see you. Nice to see you.*

Here are two more examples of English Language Learners beginning to use conversational English in the classroom.

Student: Can you give me some glue?  
Teacher: *Here are some scissors. There you go.*  
Student: I'm going to write I thank you.  
Teacher: *And I'm going to give you some more.*

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As we continue our discussion of BICS vs. CALP, we will now focus our attention on CALP.

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency refers to the stage where children are acquiring academic language. It takes about 5-7 years to acquire the cognitive academic language necessary to be a successful student.

Children need active knowledge of approximately 6000 words to begin feeling comfortable with academic English.

As we look at this graphic again, we see cognitive academic language as the bottom of the iceberg. The vast amount of language needed to support a successful student is often overlooked. While after a few years a child may speak English and communicate well, there is still much more language development needed to take place.

Let's take a look again into a classroom, as English Language Learners are actively using cognitive academic language in science, language arts and social studies.

Student: The butterfly lays eggs and then the caterpillar grows up and then becomes pupae and then a butterfly. And the butterfly does eggs again all over again.

Teacher: *That's right. Sort of like a life cycle.*

Student: That's why it's called a life cycle.

Teacher: *When you think about how do we summarize. I want you to think of a synonym. A synonym is a word that means the same thing. What's a synonym for people?*

Student: Human

Teacher: *You got it. Human. Human is a synonym for people.*

Think of language acquisition as an iceberg. What you see on the surface is only the beginning of what a child needs to be a successful student.

Below the surface is the knowledge and support of CALP, an enormous amount of information.