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Second language acquisition - essential information

The information and advice on this page was written for FIS teachers in advance of the visit to the school of Professor J. Cummins. Cummins is one of the world's leading authorities on bilingual education and second language acquisition. Mainstream teachers who have a knowledge of his theories and act on his advice will be in a much stronger position to help the ESL students in their classes.

1. BICS/CALP

Cummins makes the distinction between two differing kinds of language proficiency. BICS are Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills; these are the "surface" skills of listening and speaking which are typically acquired quickly by many students; particularly by those from language backgrounds similar to English who spend a lot of their school time interacting with native speakers.

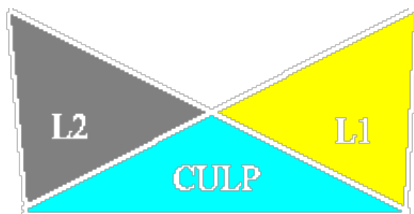
CALP is Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, and, as the name suggests, is the basis for a child's ability to cope with the academic demands placed upon her in the various subjects. Cummins states that while many children develop native speaker fluency (i.e. BICS) within two years of immersion in the target language, it takes between 5-7 years for a child to be working on a level with native speakers as far as academic language is concerned.

Implications for mainstream teachers

We should not assume that non-native speakers who have attained a high degree of fluency and accuracy in everyday spoken English have the corresponding academic language proficiency. This may help us to avoid labelling children who exhibit this disparity as having special educational needs when all they need is more time. The non-native speakers in your classes, who have exited from the ESL program, are still, in most cases, in the process of catching up with their native speaking peers.

2. Common Underlying Proficiency

Briefly stated, Cummins believes that in the course of learning one language a child acquires a set of skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge that can be drawn upon when working in another language. This common underlying proficiency (CUP), as he calls these skills and knowledge, is illustrated in the diagram below. It can be seen that the CUP provides the base for the development of both the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). It follows that any expansion of CUP that takes place in one language will have a beneficial effect on the other language(s). This theory also serves to explain why it becomes easier and easier to learn additional languages.



Implications for mainstream teachers

It is very important that students be encouraged to continue their native language development. When parents ask about the best ways they can help their child at home, you can reply that the child should have the opportunity to read extensively in her own language. You could suggest that parents make some time every evening to discuss with their child, *in their native language*, what she has done in school that day: ask her to talk about the science experiment she did, question her about her understanding of primary and secondary sources of historical information, have her

explain how she has solved a math problem etc.

As Cummins (2000) states: "Conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input in the other language comprehensible." If a child already understands the concepts of "justice" or "honesty" in her own language, all she has to do is acquire the label for these terms in English. She has a far more difficult task, however, if she has to acquire both the label and the concept in her second language.

3. Task Difficulty

Cummins has devised a model whereby the different tasks we expect our students to engage in can be categorized. In the diagram below 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 one in which the student has access to a range of additional visual and oral cues; for example he can look at illustrations of what is being talked about or ask questions to confirm understanding. A context-reduced task is one such as listening to a lecture or reading dense text, where there are no other sources of help than the language itself. Clearly, a D quadrant task, which is both cognitively demanding and context- reduced, is likely to be the most difficult for students, particularly for non-native speakers in their first years of learning English. However, it is essential that ESL students develop the ability to accomplish such tasks, since academic success is impossible without it. [\[More on this.\]](#)

context	embedded
A	C
cognitively undemanding	cognitively demanding
B	D
context	reduced

Implications for mainstream teachers

If teachers have an awareness of the likely difficulty of

a task, based on Cummins' model, they can judge its appropriateness for the non-native speakers in their classes and in this way avoid much frustration. This does **not** mean, however, that ESL students should be fed a diet of cognitively-undemanding tasks. It may be beneficial to use such activities in the student's early days at school, in order to build confidence, or as a lead in to a more challenging activity. However, teachers should switch soon to tasks that engage the students' brains, making these tasks accessible by providing visual or other support. Once students are comfortable with these kinds of activities, they can be gradually exposed to tasks that are both cognitively-demanding and context-reduced.

(For an interesting discussion of what happens when teachers start with a D quadrant task and then have to modify it to avoid embarrassment and confusion in the classroom, see the Mackay article listed in the references below.)

4. Additive/subtractive bilingualism

Cummins draws the distinction between additive bilingualism in which the first language continues to be developed and the first culture to be valued while the second language is added; and subtractive bilingualism in which the second language is added at the expense of the first language and culture, which diminish as a consequence. Cummins (1994) quotes research which suggests students working in an additive bilingual environment succeed to a greater extent than those whose first language and culture are devalued by their schools and by the wider society.

Implications for mainstream teachers

The dangers of subtractive bilingualism for the non-native speakers in our school are obviously not so strong as, say, for the children of immigrants to the USA. Nevertheless, we should do all we can to demonstrate to non-native English students that their cultures and languages are equally as valid and valued as the Anglo/American culture and English language that inevitably dominates FIS school life. Teachers and departments should explore every possibility to incorporate the different cultural backgrounds of our

students into their daily teaching and curricula.

References

The summary above is based on the following articles or book extracts by Cummins or about his theories. Please let me know if you would like copies (offer applies to FIS teachers only).

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