

**BASIC INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS (BICS) AND
COGNITIVE/ACADEMIC LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY (CALP)
(Based on the writings of J. Cummins)**

Basic Interpersonal Communication, or “everyday conversational language” differs in a number of ways from Cognitive/Academic Language, or the kind of abstract language used in classrooms, academic texts and literacy works. Literate speakers of every language develop proficiency in both types of language. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are developed naturally by all speakers of any language from infancy on. The development of Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in any language occurs through education and schooling in that language and is a cumulative and life-long process.

The term *Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency* was first used widely by researcher Jim Cummings (1985) to conceptualize the differences between easily-learned everyday conversation and more difficult and abstract academic language which all students and scholars use both for conceptual thinking and in communicating academic concepts. When applied in educational practice, however, the term is sometimes erroneously confused with cognitive ability even though it refers only to proficiency in language that has certain characteristics or is used in certain ways. Because of the potential for confusion, in this course we will drop the term *cognitive/academic language* and simply refer to *academic language*.

Students who are schooled in a second language must develop proficiency in the second language in both interpersonal communication and academic language. Second-language interpersonal communication skills are the easier of the two to learn and are picked up through interaction with peers and adults, both in and out of school. Within two years of exposure to a second language, most second-language learners are fairly proficient at interpersonal communication about everyday topics. Becoming a proficient user of *academic-second-language* is another story. Academic-second-language skills are learned through schooling and education in the second language and takes much longer. In fact, research indicates that it may take four to ten years to develop academic second-language proficiency to equal the level of school peers who are native speakers of the language and to compete successfully with those peers in their language. The length of time to develop such proficiency depends not only on the nature of instruction the ESOL student encounters in school, but also on the amount of prior schooling the student has had in his or her first language (Thomas and Collier, 1995). Since the level of conceptual and academic language development in one’s first language influences the development of academic second-language, the better-schooled a student is in the first language, the easier it will be to develop academic-second language.

In order to plan effective instruction for second-language learners, educators must be cognizant of the characteristics which distinguish academic language from the language of interpersonal communication and must base planning on this knowledge. When educators do not understand these differences in language dimensions, they may contribute to problems that second-language learners encounter in school. Because interpersonal communication proficiency develops rapidly and is very apparent, students may seem to be totally proficient in a second language even when they have limited proficiency in academic second-language. Teachers may mistakenly assume that because a student can carry on an adequate conversation in the second language, the student can handle academic work in that language with little or no further assistance in second-language learning. This misconception may actually create academic

Empowering ESOL Teachers: An Overview (1995 Revised Version)

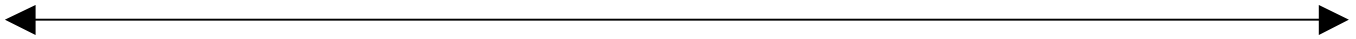
problems for the student or result in premature exiting of the student from ESOL, where English learning is assisted, or from bilingual education, where, in addition to English-language instruction, conceptual and academic language development in the first language are cultivated.

The amount of contextual support that accompanies the language of any situation can be rated on a continuum as below. The more contextual support provided, the easier it is to understand the language.

HIGH CONTEXTUAL SUPPORT
(Facilitates language)

MODERATE

LOW CONTEXTUAL SUPPORT
(Makes language difficult)

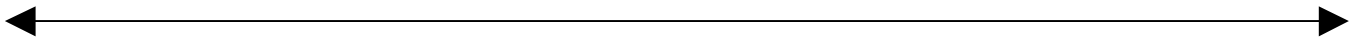


Degree of cognitive demand refers to how easy or how hard the topic or content of a discussion is for the language learner. For example, talking about what to eat for lunch in the cafeteria line is an easy topic that places little cognitive demand on the discussant. Discussing how to calculate the square root of a number might be a very difficult topic for someone who does not have the prerequisite math background. Such a conversation would place high degree of cognitive demand on that individual. Someone who has already mastered the math involved in calculating square root would experience less cognitive demand when discussing that topic. *The degree of cognitive demand for any given activity will differ for each individual, depending on the individual's prior knowledge of the topic. The degree of cognitive demand also can be characterized on a continuum:*

HIGH COGNITIVE DEMAND
(Makes language difficult)

MODERATE

LOW COGNITIVE DEMAND
(Facilitates language)



Academic Language Proficiency refers to proficiency in using language that is supported by few or no contextual clues to meaning and, at the same time, is about difficult topics that require abstract thought, making them cognitively demanding. This type of language characterizes most academic learning.