

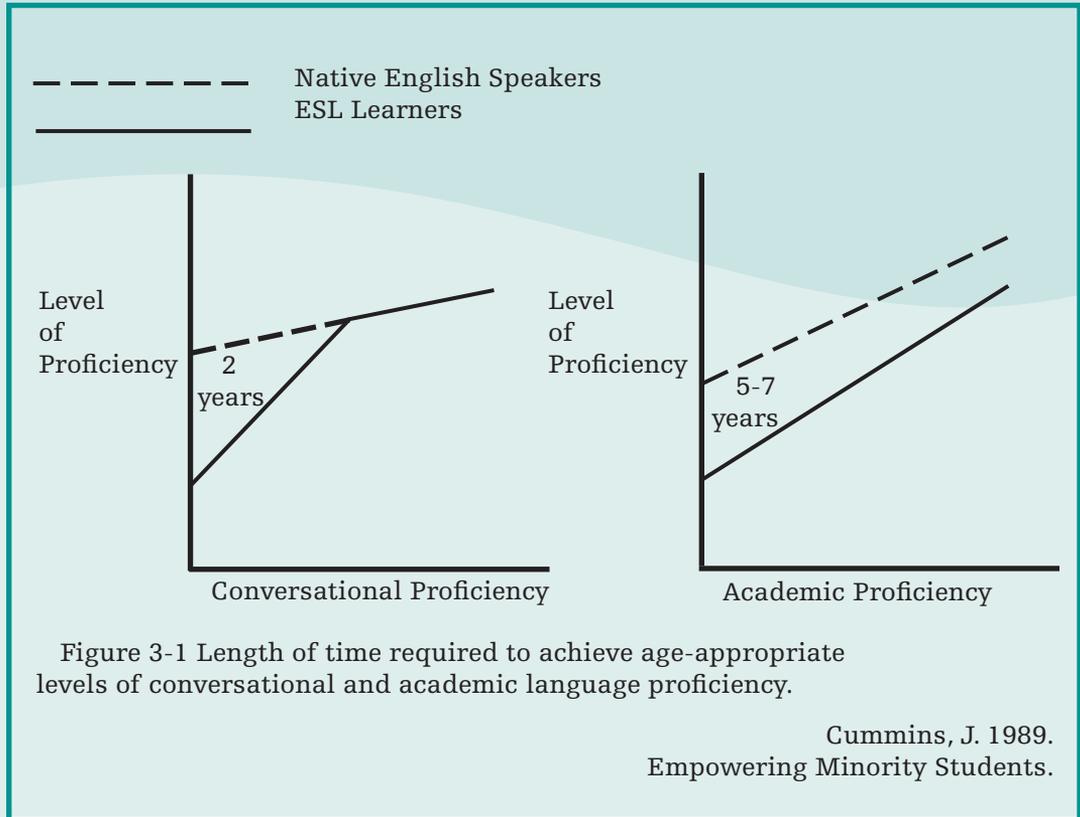
Understanding ESL Learners: Distinguishing between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)



The purpose of this pamphlet is to help teachers understand why second language learners, who appear to be fluent in English, may experience a great deal of difficulty in their academic work.

- For more information, contact the English as a Second Language Council of The Alberta Teachers' Association.

English as a Second Language (ESL) students who enter schools across Alberta will develop, fairly rapidly, fluent conversational skills in English—Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). Their academic skills—Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) may continue to lag behind grade norms for a considerable length of time.



It is important for educators to be aware of this research since failure to take into account the distinction between conversational and academic language skills can result in unfair assessment and evaluation of students who are trying to “fit in” with mainstream school programs while still in the process of developing English language skills. Often these students, recent arrivals to Canada, are compared unfairly in the academic setting with peers who have spent a lifetime learning and communicating in an English milieu.



Educators must be careful not to link lower academic performance of ESL students with deficient cognitive ability. Often, lower academic performance can be accounted for by lack of prior knowledge and/or lack of vocabulary particular to the content being presented. As well, additional time is required by these learners to process information in a language that is new.

BICS are acquired fairly quickly because in day-to-day, face-to-face conversation, meaning is supported by a range of contextual cues such as: a concrete situation, gestures, intonation, facial expression, immediate feedback, negotiation of meaning, etc. This is seldom the case for CALP—academic and textbook language.

Tasks related to academic work require the learner to manipulate textual language without the support provided by contextual cues apparent in conversation. Academic language is more formal, more abstract and the vocabulary becomes more specifically related to the topic.

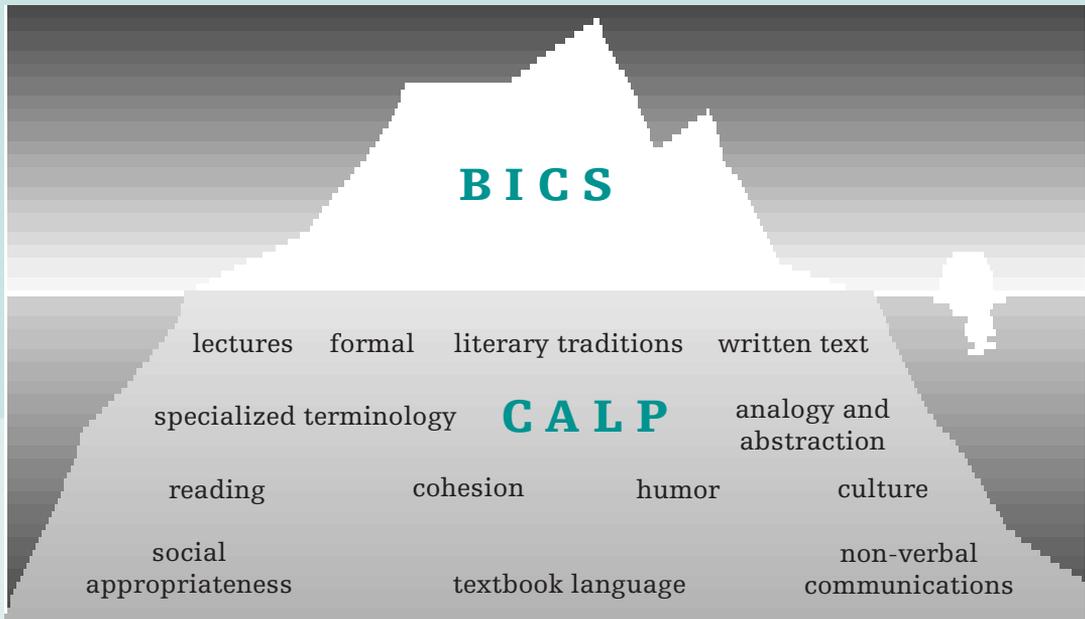
“In short, this type of language is substantially different from the English we use in everyday spoken interactions and it is, therefore, not only a lot more difficult to understand, it is also much more challenging for ESL students to carry over and produce that language in their written assignments or ‘to use’ during discussions.”

Meyers, M. 1993. Teaching to Diversity.

As well, these students are trying to “catch up” to English speaking peers at a time when these peers are also making progress in their academic skills (eg vocabulary knowledge, reading and writing skills). Trying to “catch up” to a moving target for ESL students is no easy task and requires much perseverance and focused learner strategies. Some students find the task too daunting. They give up and withdraw from academic effort. Based on the students’ performance of BICS, they are sometimes perceived as lazy because teachers do not realize that the students may, in fact, be encountering legitimate problems related to CALP.

A great deal of support, understanding and empathy from administrators, teachers and peers is required if ESL students are to experience success in academic areas and not end up as school drop-out statistics. Teachers must focus on strengths and accomplishments and note that success should be recognized in more ways than percentages on exams.





What can teachers do to help students in their classes who are experiencing difficulties related to CALP?

1. Develop academic skills in English (not just focusing on conversational skills) keeping in mind that academic skills require 5–7 years, or longer, to develop to grade norms.
 - build on prior knowledge by making connections to the students' previous experiences and cultural backgrounds;
 - highlight and expand on key vocabulary required for development of the topic;
 - use advance organizers (structural overviews, diagrams, charts, graphs, etc) when presenting new material;
 - assist students in developing strategies which will help them become independent learners (asking questions for clarification, seeking help from peers, good study habits, etc);
 - modify assignments to ensure that students meet success.
2. Use strong visuals (graphs, time lines, charts, etc) to reduce the print load and help students understand and remember concepts being presented.
3. As a teacher ask yourself, "How long would it take me to become proficient enough in a new language to be able to handle academic content (reading, writing, discussing, interpreting, evaluating)?"

References

- Cummins, Jim. 1989. *Empowering Minority Students*. California Association for Bilingual Education, Sacramento, CA.
- Meyers, Mary. 1993. *Teaching to Diversity: Teaching and Learning in the Multi-Ethnic Classroom*. Irwin Publishing, Concord, ON. (ISBN 0772519587)

Other pamphlets published by the ATA include:

- Understanding ESL Learners: Teaching in the Content Areas
- Understanding ESL Learners: Meeting Needs in the Classroom

