Should We Continue to Rely on the BICS/CALP Distinction as a Key Learning-Theory When Teaching Second Language Learners?

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of whether or not we should continue to rely on the BICS/CALP distinction as a viable learning theory when teaching English to language learners. The research explores several pieces of literature that address the distinction as valid points to build on. There is at least one perspective that questions the BICS/CALP distinction as a reliable learning theory. The conclusion proposes that more focus should be made on exploring CALP and how it is learned and taught.
Introduction

The BICS/CALP distinction is a learning theory by Jim Cummins that postulates that there are two forms of proficiency that second-language learners acquire: one that is informal and non-academic and one that is formal and academic-centered. This distinction served to explain how ELLs (English Language Learners) are able to learn how to speak fluently in L2 English, but not meet academic standards in L2 academics.

Cummins recognized the disparity and proposed that English learners’ proficiency in everyday vernacular was distinctly different than the academic language and literacy L2s. He called this proficiency BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communications Skills). BICS can be described as the language that is used by people in ordinary social settings such as greeting or bidding farewell; describing one’s vacation or trip to the store; or any playful banter between friends or strangers. ELLs’ BICS proficiency usually takes less than two years to develop (Schon, Shaftel, Markham, 2008). At this point, the user can carry out conversations comfortably and fluently using their L2. Additionally, BICS is contextualized to specific social settings (Schon, Shaftel, Markham, 2008).

CALP (cognitive-academic language proficiency) differs from BICS because it is primarily academic language. It is what most textbooks are written in and how most academic settings and situations are expressed. This form of communication takes an average of five to seven years to become fluent (Schon, Shaftel, Markham, 2008). Unlike BICS, CALP is decontextualized and is expressed differently. CALP is described by Cummins as “context-reduced” and adopts different ways of expressing ideas such as using a “precise, detached, and authoritative style”
of writing (Ranney, 2012). These qualities make CALP much more cognitively demanding than BICS.

The issue of fluently-speaking ELLs with low academic scoring is one that has been prevalent for several decades. A lack of understanding of CALP by ELLs results in various learning problems such as low standardized scores and high drop-out rates for ELLs. The achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs is a significant one (Bylund, 2011). A better understanding of BICS/CALP has been one way of addressing this issue.

Lit Review

The literature found generally recognizes the BICS/CALP distinction as a reliable learning theory. Many research projects address BICS/CALP as a key point for their research and activities. Not all the studies, however, follow this trend. Some authors claim the distinction is too linear and binary and must be expanded.

Bylund (2011) outlines several parallels between Vygotsky’s social theories and BICS/CALP theory, mainly the role that social interaction plays in the development of proficiencies. Vygotsky theorized that verbal development occurs when children interact with other members of their society. This can be seen in BICS, where the language developed is social and the occurrence of development is faster. Consequently, a child’s interaction with their educational institute plays a key role in their language development – something Bylund states as acquisition problems not being within the child, but with the education they receive.
Also, he argues that BICS/CALP does not “explain the underlying cognitive processes involved in second language development.” (Bylund, 2011). He states that Vygotsky’s theories of language development in children coincide with Cummins’ BICS/CALP theory (both believe that language can be cemented in children around the ages of ten to thirteen). Both also echo each other when regarding to building up previous knowledge. Cummins believes the learner’s L1 must be developed before they can adopt an L2 or an academic language. Vygotsky similarly believed that if a child’s development is interrupted, no more proper learning can occur (Bylund, 2011).

The example outlined is one where LEP students are placed in English-only classes. The results are children that are behind in the L2 and, consequently, are stuck in academic development. The most significant parallel is where both theorists agree that the learner’s L1 and L2 complement each other especially when it comes to learning (Bylund, 2011).

V. McDonald and M. Mitsutomi’s piece outlines the importance of social interaction in accelerated language acquisition. Along with intrinsic factors like motivation, cultural identity, and study strategies, learners and teachers must consider the acculturation of the learner.

“Psychological distance between the two cultures” is a consistent predictor of a learner’s success in acquisition (McDonald, Mitsutomi, 2005). Another important factor is the social identity of the learner must acquire in order to truly have social opportunities in which to develop their L2. Of the thirteen acculturation areas researched, eight had to do with social interaction (hobbies/activities, insider/outsider dynamics, peers, culture, friendships, and dating). Additionally, students who experienced longer exposure to communication with native speakers also experienced stronger oral skills (McDonald, Mitsutomi, 2005). This idea is consistent with the previously-mentioned idea of having a a solid L1 basis on which to build L2
knowledge. They conclude that mixed-language classes are beneficial to all parties, whereas
ELL-only classes will not benefit L2 development and acquisition.

In concert with the previous article, Karen A. Carrier (2005) argues for a support system
for ELL when learning science. The focus is on syntax and subject vocabulary. She does this by
suggesting the use of sentence builders, a method where L2s can use knowledge (presumably
their BICS) to comprehend CALP syntax. This method has students using sentence frames that
have available spaces for science vocabulary. Carrier (2005), like other authors, supports social
interaction between ELL students and native English speakers – something that can promote
the development of BICS and eventually CALP.

Michele de Courcy’s and Jovanka Smilevska article on writing strategies and bilingual
programs in Victoria also addresses issues with L1 and L2 acquisition and literacy. The study
looks at Macedonian children learning English in Australia. Like the other articles mentioned so
far, this one clearly states that “there is an interdependent ability between the first language
and the second language in writing and that there is a positive transfer of skills, strategies and
knowledge from Macedonian to English” (Courcy, Smilevska, 2013). As stated in the “Research
Background” of this piece, the basis of this study is the theory that proficiency in the L1 leads to
higher success in L2 proficiency – another Cummins theory. As with other studies, this one also
references the BICS/CALP theory. This qualitative study observed how the children wrote,
spoke, and expressed themselves with their two languages: “…five of the children transferred
the phonetic spelling strategy to their English samples…” (Courcy, Smilevska, 2013). The study
concludes with the observation that Macedonian and English can develop interdependently.
Defining and Teaching Academic Language: Developments in K-12 ESL looked at recent work in the field of ESL education and analyzes academic language. An issue brought up in this report is the problem with the BICS/CALP duality – specifically, in opposition to each other. Typically, BICS is described as being content-rich, whereas CALP is perceived as being decontextualized. (Ranney, 2012) Ranney (2012) argues that both are, indeed, contextualized and should be viewed as having their own contexts. Academic Language (or CALP) has its own context that must be understood as such. Ranney (2012) outlines specific features in academic language and along with the various ways it functions in literature. She promotes explicit language instruction that uses techniques like the development of academic vocabulary, deliberate planning, and repeated exposure to academic terms (Ranney, 2012). In her conclusion, she states that instructors must pursue a deeper understanding of academic language and to not see BICS/CALP as binary, but as something that can be used to aid language acquisition and aid success with academic learning.

Schon, Shaftel, and Markham’s report on contemporary issues ELLs face when learning outlines the importance of recognizing BICS/CALP. Not having awareness about BICS/CALP results in poor administration. For example, Schon et. al. point out that some educators do not have awareness of this distinction and assume that when a child’s BICS is proficient, so will their CALP (Schon, Shaftel, Marham, 2008). Suggestions for helping ELLs learn English include immersion and two-way immersion programs. The latter of these was the program that was found to be a more effective transitional program (Schon, Shaftel, Marham, 2008). Interestingly, a program mentioned in this study had students go into immersion programs where they made great gains academically. Unfortunately, upon being removed from these
programs, there was no follow-up for these students. BICS/CALP theory dictates that it takes eight to ten years to develop CALP (Schon, Shaftel, Marham, 2008). Students removed from these programs can lose the gains they have made without the continued support. This is another example of how important it is to be aware of the BICS/CALP distinction.

Jim Cummin’s BICS and CALP: Clarifying the Distinction makes several points that are noteworthy when considering the BICS/CALP theory. Cummins (1999) reminds us that “The sequential nature of BICS/CALP acquisition was suggested as typical...It was not suggested as an absolute order that applies in every...situation.” (1999) Cummins is aware that BICS/CALP has a limited scope, yet this – he argues – does not make it invalid. In regards to CALP being different and more challenging than BICS, he argues that BICS is just as cognitively demanding as CALP; it is just developed differently. Cummins points out that the inability to properly recognize the developmental time for CALP in bilingual students can put them at risk for discontinued academic support (something mentioned in Schon, Shaftel, and Markham’s Contemporary Issues report). Consequently, he hopes the distinction will influence policy so students can receive proper academic support instead of losing it (and falling back) after just a few years. Cummins is also a proponent of interdependent L1 and L2 development for both groups, ELLs and non-ELLs, stating that years of research and evidence show no adverse effect for either group. Many of the points Cummins brings up in his piece are consistent with other studies mentioned.

Maren Aukerman criticizes the BICS/CALP distinction as being in need of expansion and clarity. Aukerman argues that the narrow definition of CALP can dismiss one student’s
knowledge – whereas that student’s knowledge is a form of CALP itself. CALP, she states, should be seen as varying from person to person. Additionally, children that learn at home learn a form of CALP that pertains to their own personal setting. BICS and CALP are not at odds because of the contextualized/decontextualized duality, but because there is a lack of knowledge on how to make students’ experiences part of the learning context. This duality is irrelevant; the key is to consider context the student creates. BICS and CALP are more related than originally believe and this idea blurs the distinction. Aukerman illustrates many examples where proper context is the key to learning. Recontextualization is an alternative to BICS/CALP that Aukerman proposes; it can be worked academically and non-academically through socially meaningful participation.

Krakow, Roberts, and Scott’s article on international adoptions used the BICS/CALP distinction as a framework for understanding the language development of internationally adopted children. Additional studies observed by Krakow, Roberts, and Scott show similarities to BICS/CALP. For example, a study by Dalen shows that children do, indeed, struggle more with academic language than they do with social language (Krakow, Roberts, Scott, 2008). Another study by Dalen and Saetersdal shows how there is a consistent and clear divide between social language and academic language in children. Further echoes of BICS/CALP lie in the statement:

...existing studies, although few in number, have indicated that the language skills of school-age internationally adopted children from some countries falter as linguistic demands increase during the early academic years (Krakow, Roberts, Scott, 2008).

Marie-Anne Hansen Pauly’s outline of language issues views BICS/CALP as a valuable tool when considering activities and workshops.
Discussion

The BICS/CALP distinction is undeniably an important distinction that must be made when discussing language acquisition for English learners. But how has it held up over the years? Can even further distinctions be made on the CALP side of the theory? What can we learn about CALP if it is further developed?

The previously-mentioned literature addressed BICS/CALP as a valuable tool that gives insight into how language acquisition occurs for learners. Bylund’s (2011) observations on the parallels between the distinction and Vygotskian development theory give strength to the reliability of BICS/CALP. BICS/CALP can be seen as a proposal that builds on the existing knowledge of previous theories, such as Vygotsky’s. Both acknowledge the importance of social learning and the role it plays in the development of language. Similarly, McDonald and Mitsutomi (2005) also emphasize the importance of social interactions and acculturation. Like Cummins’ proposal, these important interactions develop not only the student’s BICS, but their L1. De Courcy and Smilevska (2013) conclude that “Vocabulary knowledge in L1 and L2…enrich [students’] writing in both languages (2013).” This is consistent with Cummins’ interdependence hypothesis as well as the importance of social support when children are starting to learn.

In spite of being used as an insightful tool into language development, Cummins’ BICS/CALP proposal faces criticism. Aukerman believes that viewing BICS and CALP as binary is doing a disservice to how students can potentially learn. She questions how CALP is assessed and measured; something that could be faulty and measuring a student’s ability to take tests
instead of their actual CALP (Aukerman, 2007). Additionally, she argues that BICS/CALP is not much of a distinction – the two forms of proficiency more related than previously thought. Also, the distinction and the tendency to address them as contextualized versus decontextualized is misleading; instead, academic language must be embraced as having its own context (Aukerman, 2007). As Ranney (2012) points out, less emphasis is being made on the distinction and more on the academic language itself.

Although criticized, Cummins’ BICS/CALP distinction is still viewed as an important development when observing language acquisition. Aukerman regards Cummins’ breakthrough theory as “a step forward in pedagogical thinking about ELLs (Aukerman, 2011). She also agrees with Cummins’ belief of developing the learner’s L1 as a means of strengthening acquisition. These findings can be backed up by years of studies on the subject (Aukerman, 2007). BICS/CALP observations also defend a learner’s ability to learn by not seeing them dismissed as being “stupid” or incapable of learning. Similarly, policy and programs built on the BICS/CALP model have shown more success than immersion-only programs (Schon, Shaftel, Marham, 2008).

Conclusion

The BICS/CALP distinction is truly a break-through observation in L2 acquisition. This distinction has been a useful guide in predicting achievement in students and in drafting effective policy. It is evident in the literature that there is solid merit to the BICS/CALP distinction and it should be continued to be used as a framework for observing language and academic language acquisition in ELLs.
Something that resonates within all the findings of BICS/CALP research is how it relates to Academic Language. What can be done for ELLs as far as teaching academic language? Are there better alternatives than the BICS/CALP distinction? Aukerman (2007) made references to recontextualization. What can be learned from pursuing this method? Also, there sure are many exceptions to BICS/CALP. What can we learn from them? More studies that focus on recontextualization will hopefully emerge. Overall, the literature is supportive of the BICS/CALP distinction as a reliable framework for observing ELLs, but more expanded research should be done.
References


   Language and Linguistics Compass. 6/9, 560-574.
