

## **Explaining BICS and CALP** by Judie Haynes

Classroom teachers need to understand the difference between social language and academic language acquisition. Here is a simple description of BICS and CALP as theorized by Jim Cummins.

### **Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills**

Experts such as Jim Cummins differentiate between social and academic language acquisition. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are language skills needed in social situations. It is the day-to-day language needed to interact socially with other people. English language learners (ELLs) employ BIC skills when they are on the playground, in the lunchroom, on the school bus, at parties, playing sports and talking on the telephone. Social interactions are usually context embedded. They occur in a meaningful social context. They are not very demanding cognitively. The language required is not specialized. These language skills usually develop within six months to two years after arrival in Canada.

Problems arise when teachers and administrators think that a child is proficient in a language when they demonstrate good social English.

### **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency**

CALP refers to formal academic learning. This includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material. This level of language learning is essential for students to succeed in school. Students need time and support to become proficient in academic areas. This usually takes from five to seven years. Recent research (Thomas & Collier, 1995) has shown that if a child has no prior schooling or has no support in native language development, it may take seven to ten years for ELLs to catch up to their peers.

Academic language acquisition isn't just the understanding of content area vocabulary. It includes skills such as comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating, and inferring. Academic language tasks are context reduced. Information is read from a textbook or presented by the teacher. As a student gets older the context of academic tasks becomes more and more reduced.

The language also becomes more cognitively demanding. New ideas, concepts and language are presented to the students at the same time.

Jim Cummins also advances the theory that there is a common underlying proficiency (CUP) between two languages. Skills, ideas and concepts students learn in their first language will be transferred to the second language.