



5. LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Language acquisition can be distinguished into two areas: **BICS** (Basic Interpersonal Skills) and **CALP** (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency). BICS is not specialised language and is usually context embedded. It is language used for social interaction e.g. on the playground and on the telephone. It generally takes pupils up to 2 years to acquire BICS.

CALP involves language that is more cognitively demanding and is required for children to access the curriculum fully. The skills required at this level of language proficiency will involve comparing, classifying, evaluating and inferring. It takes 5 - 7 years, under **ideal** conditions, to develop academic language at a level equivalent to peers in school.

Look at the examples below and decide whether you think they are examples of **BICS** or **CALP**:

- A) A teacher asks a pupil to name the different parts of a flower and then sort plants into flowering and non-flowering.
- B) Pupils ask a newly arrived pupil if they want to go to the canteen and then play football.
- C) 2 pupils are talking about their favourite singer on YouTube.
- D) Pupils are asked to discuss and give their opinion on whether school uniform should be banned.

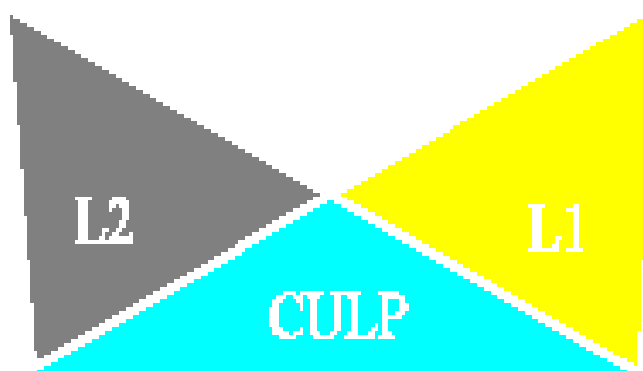
A and D are examples of **CALP**, this is language that is likely to take place only in the classroom setting and will therefore not be familiar to a pupil learning language, it will take much longer to acquire and teachers need to be modelling this language on a regular basis for the pupil to remember and use it proficiently. The key to identifying CALP is to look at what language is required from the task e.g. sorting, discussing and giving opinions on topics that are more academic rather than social.

B and C are examples of social language that a pupil may acquire at a much quicker rate because they are using it on a daily basis

The rate at which pupils acquire English will also depend on other factors such as their prior education. Refugee children may have experienced sporadic if any schooling which may affect the progress they make. Furthermore, refugee children are likely to have experienced trauma and may be withdrawn or silent for a period of time after arriving in the UK which will also influence their language acquisition.

Iceberg model for importance of first language (L1)

The use of home language alongside the acquisition of a new language is paramount. Jim Cummins believes that through learning one language a child acquires a set of skills and metalinguistic knowledge that can be drawn upon when working in another language. This common underlying language proficiency (CULP), as he calls these skills and knowledge, is illustrated in the diagram below. It can be seen that the CULP provides the base for the development of both the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). It follows that any expansion of CULP 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.



(<http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/support/cummin.htm>)

It is very important that students be encouraged to continue their first 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 their own language. You could suggest that parents make some time every evening to discuss with their child, *in their home language*, what they have done in school that day: ask them to talk about the science experiment they did, question them about their understanding of primary and secondary sources of historical information, have them explain how they have solved a math problem etc.

The impact of stress and/or trauma may influence the rate of language acquisition – case studies examples include Nargam

The Cummins quadrant

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

(<http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/support/cummin.htm>)

Cummins has devised a model whereby the different tasks we expect our students to engage in can be categorized. Tasks range from cognitively undemanding to cognitively demanding and 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 EAL students develop the ability to accomplish such tasks, since academic success is impossible without it.

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 EAL 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 ([link to strategies sheet](#)).