

What are BICS and CALP?

Knowing the difference between BICS and CALP supports teachers of EAL/D learners

Rationale

The [Multicultural Education Policy](#) commits schools to providing opportunities that enable all students to achieve equitable education and social outcomes, and participate successfully in our culturally diverse society. Approximately 25% of students in NSW public schools are learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). These students require support to develop their academic English language skills so they can access the curriculum, successfully participate in learning alongside their peers in mainstream classes and engage confidently in the broader Australian community. This document aims to develop teachers' knowledge of the distinction between BICS and CALP and its significance for EAL/D learners. It also aims to assist teachers to plan effective English language learning support that aligns with system priorities in literacy and numeracy and meets the commitments of the Aboriginal Education Policy and the Multicultural Education Policy.

Audience

EAL/D specialist teachers, classroom teachers, SLSOs, Assistant Principals Curriculum and Instruction, School leaders

Timeframe for use

The document should be read in planning the implementation of intensive English programs and by teachers planning support for EAL/D learners.

Instructions for use

The document can be used to professionally develop teachers on key precepts in English language acquisition and EAL/D pedagogy. It can assist school leaders to plan professional learning, lead professional discussion and guide programming for EAL/D learners.

Concept overview

BICS (Basic interpersonal communication skills) refers to conversational fluency – the ability to talk about objects or experiences in face-to-face and familiar contexts. CALP (Cognitive academic language proficiency) is the oral and written language needed to succeed in school subjects. EAL/D learners usually master BICS within one or two years of learning English, while mastery of CALP can take significantly longer even with English, approximately 6 years, and significantly longer for those students who have had disrupted or limited education, depending on when students commenced school (AERO 2025, Cummins 1981, Thomas and Collier, 1997). While at school, students are initially learning BICS and CALP simultaneously. Knowing the distinction between BICS and CALP allows teachers to plan effective English language learning according to the type of support required by their EAL/D students.

Why is knowing the distinction between BICS and CALP important?

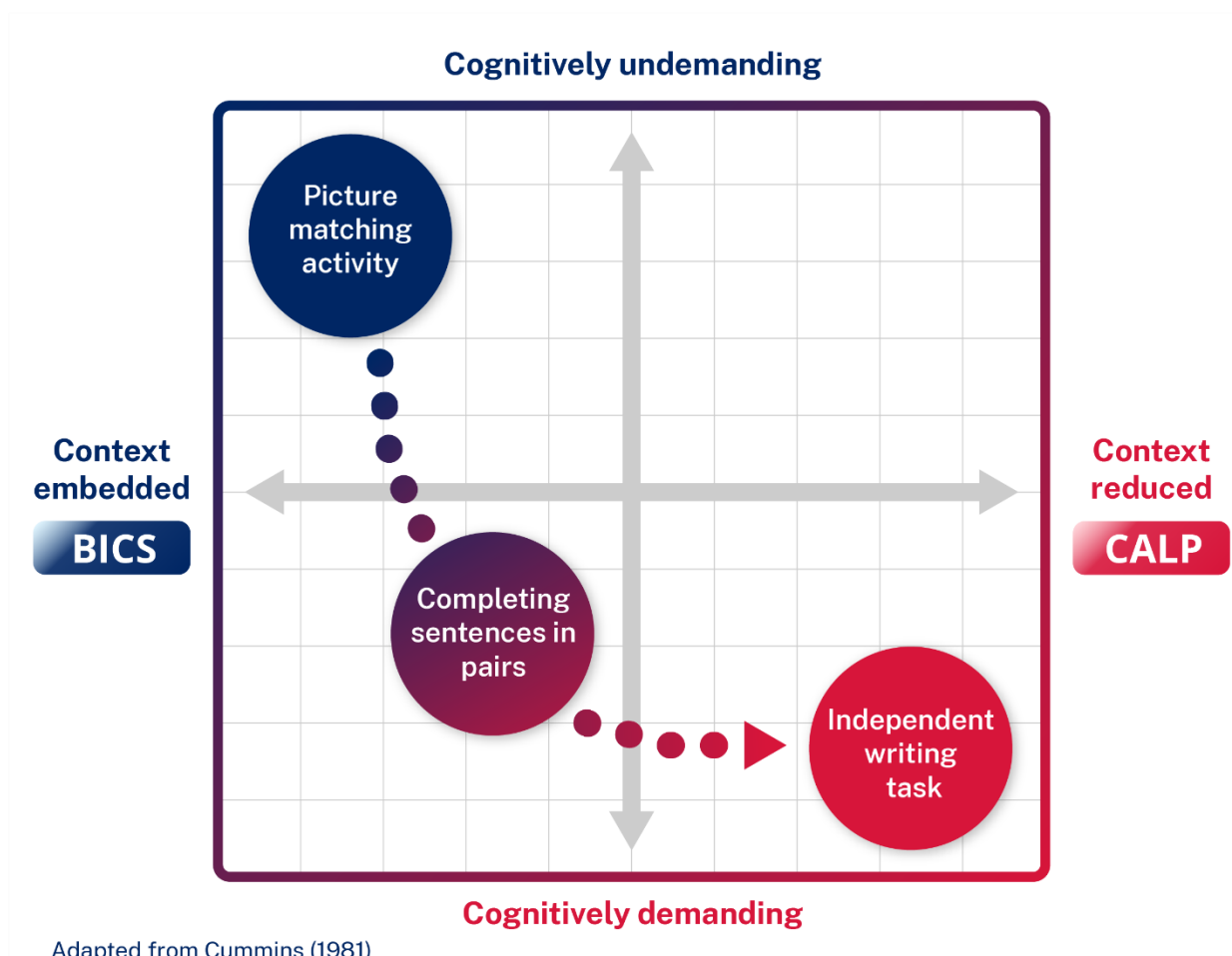
Jim Cummins' (1979, 1981, 2000) research into second language acquisition conceptualised a distinction between BICS and CALP. Some EAL/D learners develop conversational fluency in English rapidly. They are able to negotiate familiar social situations and readily participate in routine oral classroom activities. These students may demonstrate strong speaking and listening skills in informal face-to-face communication contexts, as described on the [Kindergarten EAL/D Learning Progression](#) and the [ACARA EAL/D Learning Progression](#). However, this linguistic competency may not be matched in more academic or abstract situations. These students may not demonstrate the same command of English when reading, writing or speaking in more academically demanding situations.

The distinction between BICS and CALP allows teachers to understand the different kinds of English language proficiency shown by EAL/D learners. Equally important, the distinction helps to explain the kinds of language proficiency demanded by tasks – the lower demand on understanding and using English in responding to a question about the weekend or family compared to the more challenging demand of writing an academic essay.

An EAL/D learner's high degree of mastery of BICS may disguise a low level of proficiency in CALP, highlighting the importance of assessing students' English language proficiency in a range of communicative contexts and across the language modes. It is typical for EAL/D learners to have uneven English language skills across the language modes and varying proficiency according to the context. For example, an EAL/D student may be able to confidently discuss familiar social topics such as family life, the local weather or their hobby but struggle to discuss more abstract topics that require more complex academic English such as how cooking changes the properties of food.

How do you develop CALP?

Cummins' framework is a conceptual pathway to develop teaching and learning activities to harness EAL/D learners' proficiency in BICS, the language of the everyday, to develop CALP, the academic language required to succeed at school.



Classroom tasks to develop English language proficiency ideally begin in the Context embedded/Cognitively undemanding quadrant (top left quadrant). An activity could be a group picture match activity, in which students discuss how to match explicitly taught new vocabulary to images. The students' language and content learning is scaffolded through the pictures and words, reducing cognitive load while affording opportunities for students to notice and use the new vocabulary. While students may be using conversational English (BICS) while talking, they are discussing academic vocabulary.

The next task in the sequence has increased cognitive and academic language demands, but the context is still supplied. In the next step of moving students towards CALP, an activity could be students working in pairs to complete sentences about the topic, in which students draw on explicitly taught vocabulary and concepts to complete a sentence starter. Cognitive demands and language demands have increased in this task as students need to draw on their English language vocabulary and knowledge of the English language to write complete sentences. Through pair work, the students are discussing how they can write sentences in academic English.

Once vocabulary and concepts have been consolidated by the students, the tasks can increase in abstraction, using activities such as [cloze \(PDF 154 KB\)](#) or [dictagloss \(video\)](#). These activities can be oral and/or written, allowing students to demonstrate their increasing command of CALP.

Why would we avoid designing tasks which are Cognitively undemanding/Context reduced (top righthand quadrant) if our aim is to develop academic English? While students will be exposed to new vocabulary in activities such as memorising a spelling list or looking up words in a dictionary, the meaning and use of the new language remains abstract and unconnected. New language should be explored in a context. For example, learning about bees, introduce and teach the key vocabulary- hive, colony, Queen bee, worker bees; learning how to write a book review, teach evaluative language and collocations– will appreciate, enjoyed by, disturbed by, much loved – and how and when to use it; learning how to write a science procedure, teach the use of imperatives and present tense – add nitric oxide to the mixture, stir thoroughly and then add 2 ml of magnesium. Significant research reinforces the precept that new language is most effectively learned when it is taught and practised in a relevant context (Halliday 2009, Derewianka and Jones 2012, Gibbons 2009, 2015).

The distinction between BICS and CALP allows teachers to plan and implement targeted English language support to assist their EAL/D learners to learn the academic English required to achieve syllabus outcomes. Students may be fluent conversational speakers yet require explicit English language learning support to speak, read and write academically in each subject area/Key Learning Area.

Further information

[EAL/D literacy and numeracy](#) to view videos on English language acquisition and BICS and CALP.

Evidence base

The resource is informed and underpinned by the research of AERO (2025), Cummins (1981, 2000) and Thomas and Collier (1997) into English language acquisition, Gibbons (2009, 2015) research into pedagogy for EAL/D learners, Halliday (2009) and Derewianka and Jones (2012) into functional linguistics, and CESE's research into [EAL/D effective practices](#). This document aligns with [Multicultural Education policy](#) and [procedures](#) and the [Multicultural Plan 2024-2027](#).

Reference list

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Derewianka, B and Jones, P (2012) Teaching language in context, South Melbourne: Oxford.

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Gibbons, P (2015) Scaffolding language scaffolding learning: Teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom. 2nd ed Portsmouth: Heinemann.

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Alignment to system priorities and/or needs: Aligns with strategic priority to improve literacy and numeracy, aligns with [What works best – EAL/D](#), aligns with [Multicultural Education policy](#) and [procedures](#) and the [Multicultural Plan 2024-2027](#).

Alignment to School Excellence Framework: Learning domain: Curriculum

Alignment to Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: 1.3; 1.5; 2.5; 3.2

Consulted with: Literacy and Numeracy

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Comments and feedback: Comments, feedback and suggestions for improvement, please email eald.education@det.nsw.edu.au, citing the name of the resource.

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