**SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORIES**

**BICS, CALP and CUP**

Professor J Cummins is one of the world’s learning authorities on bilingual education and second language acquisition. He (as cited in Baker, 2011) makes a distinction between two differing kinds of language proficiency.

**[[1]](#footnote-1)BICS are Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills**, these are the “surface” skills of listening and speaking needed in social situations.  The interactions occur in authentic social contexts and include many physical and visual supports to support the communicative exchange. BICS are not considered as demanding cognitive tasks and the language required is not specialized.  These skills typically develop quickly in second language learners (one to two years).

**[[2]](#footnote-2)CALP is Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency** and refers to the students’ academic learning in the various subject areas.  This level of language learning is essential for students to succeed in school. It includes the oral and written production skills of speaking and writing and the oral and written comprehension skills of listening and reading in content areas.  As a student gets older the context of academic tasks is reduced and the language is more cognitively demanding, meaning that there are fewer clues or supports to help students comprehend content information. This academic proficiency takes a much longer time to develop in second language learners (generally five to eight years).

**Common Underlying Proficiency Model**  
The Common Underlying Proficiency model (Cummins, 1980a, 1981a, as cited in Baker, 2011) has frequently been described as the two icebergs model. The main idea behind this theory is that when students learn one language, they acquire a bank of skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge that they can draw upon when they learn subsequent languages.  Anything that is learned in either language becomes part of the “bank” to be drawn upon when needed across languages.  This theory has also been used to explain why it becomes easier to learn a third or fourth language.



(Baker, Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism)

**Implications for teachers**

Second language learners who display proficiency in everyday spoken language (BICs) don’t necessarily have the corresponding academic proficiency (CALP). Moving learners from BICs to CALP means engaging them in learning that challenges them to think critically, and demands the use of all their linguistic resources in the learning process. Similarly, conceptual knowledge developed in one language, can help the learner make conceptual connections in a second language. It is important to recognise that second language learners already have a language base which can be leveraged off to help them acquire a subsequent language.

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Baker, C. (2011) Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 5th edn (Bristol: Multilingual Matters) <https://scholar.google.co.nz/citations?user=cVGbBUEAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=sra>

1. <http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/support/cummin.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://eder66983.weebly.com/second-language-acquisition-theories.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)