



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs

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CONVERSATIONAL AND ACADEMIC LANGUAGE USE IN THE CLASSROOM: WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW

Students for whom English is a second language (ESL) experience a language acquisition process which is misunderstood by many educators. Although ESL students give the appearance, through their oral proficiency, that they are competent users of English, this is only a partial indicator of English use. A more relevant indicator of English competence is the ability to use the language academically.

This *Bulletin* examines these two broad levels of language competence: basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) as exemplified in conversational language; and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) as demonstrated in content-based instruction.

Conversational language: Basic Interpersonal Communication (BICS)
Normal face-to-face interactions require mastery of the "surface" features of the language, i.e., pronunciation, grammar,

and enough vocabulary to carry on conversations. They also include the ability to gain meaning from gestures, intonation, and the situation. Manipulating English comfortably in this manner *usually takes 1-2 years to acquire*. Although a necessary aspect of the total language acquisition process, conversational language represents only one part of communicative competence.

Academic language: Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)
The ability to use language in a variety of content-based contexts, utilizing the vocabulary, concepts, and information of the academic subjects (e.g., literature, science, math, etc.) in more complex oral and written modes *requires approximately 4-10 years for students to acquire* in a manner equal to the grade-level abilities of native-speaker classmates.

Whereas conversational language prima-

rily exists outside the classroom, academic language is classroom-based and often has little or no visual or other support. The ability to read and use texts and to write a variety of products (essays, journals, lab reports, etc.), therefore, demands language using specialized vocabulary and expressions which take a great deal more time to practice and acquire.

Two Misconceptions about Learning English

1. *Students have acquired enough English to succeed in school once they can speak it.* Even though students have acquired the ability to converse, it takes much more time to be able to use English in a variety of academic ways. Students may have perfect English pronunciation and *appear* as if they are native-like in their competence; however, they may still need a great deal of reading and writing practice using a variety of language activities.

2. *Younger students have more potential to acquire competence in all aspects of English use.* This is not necessarily true. Students who start learning English in grades K-3 may not have adequately achieved competence in their first language; as a result, they may have difficulty transferring concepts into English. On the other hand, adolescent students learning English for the first time are also at risk because they may not have enough time in school to practice and to acquire academic language equal to their grade level. The optimum time for students to succeed in academic use of English is when they start learning English between the ages of approximately 8-12. At this age students have usually acquired enough proficiency in their first language to attain

conceptual knowledge in English, and they have enough time in school to catch up with their native speaker peers.

Teachers can help students succeed by:

1. *Be sensitive to the cognitive demands of the learning activities you assign your students.* Students for whom English is not the first language, *no matter how long they have been studying in U.S. schools*, may continue to struggle conceptually with the material presented, especially if the information is accompanied with few or no visual cues. Language-sensitive teaching for students may frequently require modifications to make CALP (i.e., complex oral expression, reading, and writing) more comprehensible.

2. *Check frequently for comprehension.* Asking oral and/or written questions, requesting summaries, requiring student journals, etc. are some of the ways in which teachers can effectively monitor the comprehension of their students.

3. *Allow students, if necessary, opportunities to confer in or to use their first language to clarify concepts and to comprehend new vocabulary.* Opportunities to use the first language in order to understand new concepts in English can save students valuable time and frustration in learning, especially when working with abstract concepts.

Sources

- Collier, Virginia P. (1997). Increasing the Academic Success of Your English Language Learners. Torrance, CA: Staff Development Resources.
- Cummins, Jim (1996). Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society. Ontario, CA: CAFE.
- Ovando, Carlos J. and Collier, Virginia P. (1985). Bilingual and ESL Classrooms. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

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Three Recommendations for Language-Sensitive Teaching

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