

# 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. Almost 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, Lead specialists, 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 students usually master BICS within one or two years of learning English, while mastery of CALP can take up to 7 years with English language support, and longer for those students who have experienced disrupted or limited schooling. 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.

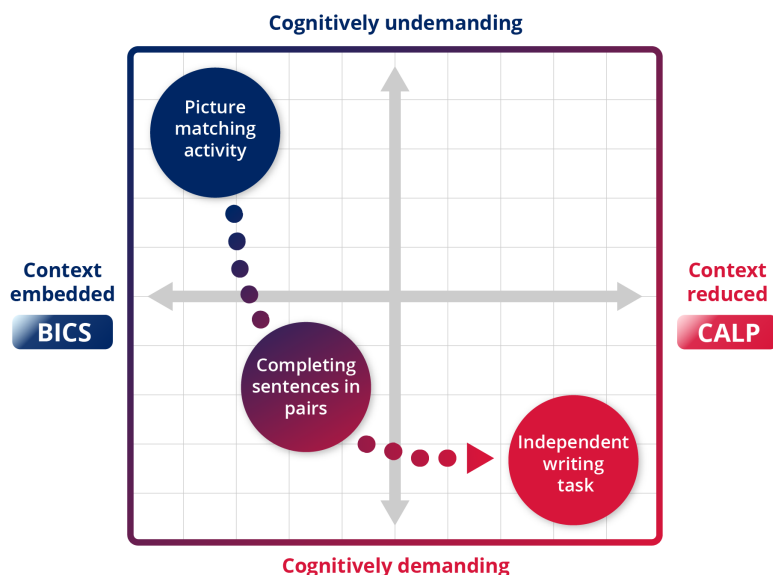
## Why is knowing the distinction between BICS and CALP important?

Jim Cummins' (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 [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. 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.



Adapted from Cummins (1979)

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 their choice of explicitly taught concepts and new vocabulary. 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. An activity in this stage of moving students towards CALP could be working in pairs to complete sentences about the topic, in which students draw on the vocabulary and concepts introduced 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 do we avoid designing tasks which are Cognitively undemanding/Abstract (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, unless the language is explored in a context (learning about bees, the language of a book review, how to write a science report, for example), for EAL/D learners, the meaning and use of the new language remains abstract and unconnected.

Language is most effectively learned when it is taught and practised in a context (Halliday 2009, Derewianka and Jones 2012).

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 a video on BICS and CALP

[EAL/D Advice for Schools \(PDF 5.4 MB\)](#)

## Evidence base

The resource is informed and underpinned by the research of Cummins (1981, 2000) into English language acquisition, 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](#) statements and [Multicultural Plan 2019-2022 \(PDF 1804 KB\)](#) targets.

## Reference list

Cummins, J (1981) 'Empirical and theoretical underpinnings of bilingual education', Journal of Education 163 1

Cummins, J (2000) Language, power and pedagogy, Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters

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

Halliday, M A K (2009) The essential Halliday London: Continuum

**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](#) statements and [Multicultural Plan 2019-2022 \(PDF 1804 KB\)](#) targets.

**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

**Reviewed by:** EAL/D Education Co-ordinator, Leader Multicultural Education

**Comments and feedback:** Comments, feedback and suggestions for improvement, please email [eald.education@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:eald.education@det.nsw.edu.au), citing the name of the resource.

**Created/last updated:** January 2024

**Anticipated resource review date:** January 2025