

BICS & CALPS

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)

Experts such as Jim Cummins differentiate between social and academic language acquisition. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are language skills needed in social situations. It is the day-to-day language needed to interact socially with other people. English language learners (ELLs) employ BIC skills when they are in the cafeteria, at parties, playing sports and talking on the telephone. Social interactions are usually context embedded. That is, they occur in a meaningful social context. They are not very demanding cognitively. The language required is not specialized. These language skills usually develop within six months to two years after arrival in the U.S.

Problems arise when teachers and administrators think that a student is proficient in a language when they demonstrate good social English (i.e., BICS).

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

CALP refers to formal academic learning. This includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material. This level of language learning is essential for students to succeed in school. Students need time and support to become proficient in academic areas. This usually takes from five to seven years. Many studies have been conducted in bilingual-speaking regions of Canada.

Academic language acquisition isn't just the understanding of content area vocabulary. It includes skills such as comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating, and inferring. Academic language tasks are context reduced. Information is read from a textbook or presented by the teacher. As a student gets older the context of academic tasks becomes more and more reduced.

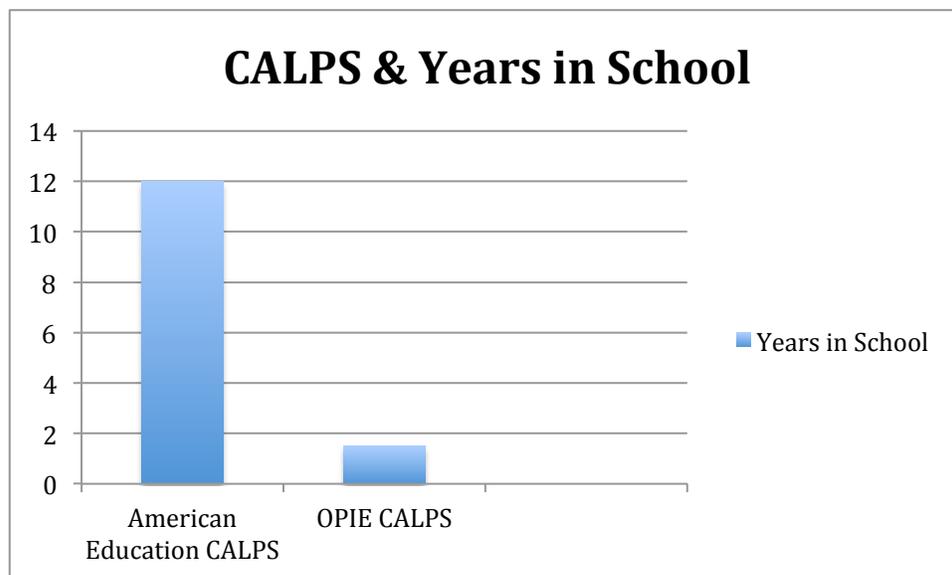
The language also becomes more cognitively demanding. New ideas, concepts and language are presented to the students at the same time.

CALP Instruction at OPIE

At Ohio University, international students study in classes with domestic (i.e., American) students who have acquired CALP during

their twelve years in an English-speaking context in elementary, middle and high schools. These students practice their research and presentation skills at a young age, usually in the early years of elementary school. In contrast, many international students come from school environments where they listen to the teacher, take notes, memorize facts, and then take multiple-choice tests. Thus, these two education environments are very different.

Instruction in OPIE is aimed at giving international students practice in gaining CALP in an intensive English-speaking environment and in a short time frame. OPIE faculty and staff realize that students do not have five to seven years as research indicates might be needed. Thus, students practice skills such as comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating, and inferring information – and present the results in comprehensible written and spoken forms in our classes. The fact that the majority of our students are successful graduates of American universities is a testament to the efficacy of the program.



From http://www.everythingsl.net/in-services/bics_calp.php

For an interesting video by Dr. Cummins, see <http://vimeo.com/56112120>

An interesting description is also available at <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Specialist-Councils/ESL-3-1%20Distinguishing%20between%20BICS%20and%20CALP.pdf>