

Conceptualizing Language Proficiency: BICS and CALP Revisited

FUKUSHIMA Mieko

1. Introduction

It has been some thirty years since these terms for language proficiency were coined by James Cummins (1980): BICS: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills; and CALP: Cognitive and Academic Language Proficiency. This two-fold conceptualization of language proficiency goes hand in hand with his developmental interdependence hypothesis between first (L1) and second (L2) languages in regard to CALP (1979, 1980). It was not until recently that these theoretical explorations had begun to get attention from educators and researchers working in Japan. Cummins' focus has been on the language development of children, rather than that of adolescents and adults. His theory on it has recently been referred to in books on primary school English, or English teaching in more general terms, as one scholastic source for those concerned with this new development in Japan (e.g., Oshima et al. 2003; Otsu 2005; Yamada in Otsu 2006).

The main purpose of the present study is to explore ways to discuss language teaching in Japan through drawing on Cummins' model of language proficiency. The immediate contextual background of Cummins' theorization of language proficiency was the perceived need for theory building on the language development of minority language children in Canada for appropriate assessments of their language proficiency. Japanese overseas children in Canada (or in an English-speaking country in more general terms), and children of new Japanese immigrants over there are entailed in his framework. His interdependence hypothesis was tested in a large-scaled empirical study on Japanese overseas children and Vietnamese immigrant students in Toronto (Cummins et al. 1984). From the standpoint of language teaching in Japan, Cummins' language proficiency model and hypothesis are most relevant to groups of children who were born outside Japan and have been brought to this country for their parents' job-related reasons (e.g., children of Brazilian people working in Japan). As for English language teaching in Japan, there should be both possibilities for and limitations on the applicability of Cummins' theory.

2. Cummins' conceptualizations of language proficiency

When it comes to those native Japanese-speaking children being brought to an English speaking country, one might assume that the children will be able to acquire English (as L2) faster than adults, perhaps with greater ease. This casual expectation, or observation, may largely be on children's oral

fluency. Cummins (1980) draws our attention to the kind of language proficiency which is needed for children's school work, and suggests that children's language development in this aspect may not be so easy as expected and may take a long time.

(1) BICS and CALP

Cummins' theorization of language proficiency is addressed to what should be assessed and why it is so. An initial motive for his two-fold model was a discrepancy often reported by teachers of minority-language children, not only in Canada but also in some other countries, between a child's well developing oral fluency in L2 and his or her poor academic performance or achievements at school (Cummins 1980).

BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) refers to the aspect of language proficiency which is required for everyday face-to-face communication between persons, whereas CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) expresses the aspect of language proficiency which is required to meet academic demand in a school context. Cummins' focal point is CALP: the relationship between children's language proficiency and their academic achievements at school. Focusing on the development of children's L2 CALP, Cummins (1980, 1983) pinpoints a lack of theoretical framework shown in pervasive language assessments for the transition of minority language children from bilingual programs to ordinary English-medium classes.

As pointed out by Cummins (1980), the distinction between BICS and CALP is more evident in L1 contexts than in L2 contexts. L1 BICS is the kind of language proficiency which children acquire in their early years to function in everyday interpersonal communication. It may reach its developmental plateau around when children enroll in primary school, and it is "cognitively undemanding" in Cummins' terms. CALP, on the other hand, denotes literacy-related skills, and L1 CALP may flatten out around when children reach mid-adolescence, following their overall cognitive development. Cummins (1980) presupposes that the quality of verbal communication between children and adults (parents and teachers) affects the development of L1 CALP. However, in light of its earlier developmental plateau, he says, children's L1 BICS has no implications for the developmental level to be attained in their L1 CALP.

The question arises as to whether it can be assumed that BICS and CALP will also become differentiated in L2. Based on findings of research studies on minority language learning situations and French immersion programs, Cummins (1980) argues that BICS and CALP can be deemed to be

differentiated in L2 also. In so doing, he suggests two necessary conditions for the differentiation: “extensive opportunities for interpersonal contact in L2” and “motivation to take advantage of these opportunities.” Cummins (1983) further assumes that, like in L1, the quality and quantity of initial verbal communication between children and adults is related to the development of literacy skills in L2. Of importance is how long it will take for minority language children to reach the grade norms in the new language. Cummins (1982) estimates 2 years for L2 BICS, and from 5 to 7 years for L2 CALP, on the average.

In relation to traditional concepts of language proficiency, one might assume that BICS is a refined umbrella term for the aural and oral aspects of language use (or listening and speaking) and CALP is one for literacy (or reading and writing). These may not be incorrect matching, and Cummins himself (1980) uses such familiar terms as “oral fluency” to be a specific component of BICS, and “literacy-related skills” to be equivalent to CALP. However, his constructs are more abstract and profound, and it is necessary to grasp them both in empirical and theoretical terms.

From an empirical point of view, an important issue arises as to how BICS and CALP can be measured if it is possible at all. Cummins’ et al.’s study (1984) shows an empirical exploration in this regard. The study was conducted with ninety-one Japanese overseas students and forty-five Vietnamese immigrant students. The measures used in the Japanese part of Cummins’ et al.’s study (1984) were of two types: measures for academic language proficiency and those used in oral interviews with each individual student. The former consisted of three tests in English (which collectively entail vocabulary, reading, prepositional usage, antonyms and sentence repetition) and a standardized diagnostic test in Japanese (which includes reading comprehension, usage, recognition of Chinese characters and critical thinking). The interview was comprised of four tasks: a warm-up informal conversation, role-playing on a toy telephone, story-telling with a series of five pictures, and oral description of a picture. In order to look into the structure of proficiency, a factor analysis was conducted to examine the variables obtained through these measures (a total of 21 variables for English proficiency and 12 variables for Japanese proficiency).

In the English factor analysis, three identifiable factors were labelled "Syntax" (which was defined by three syntax measures from the interview), " Interactional Style" (defined by three richness measures and an ease measure from the interview), and "English Academic Proficiency" (defined by all the five measures from the written tests). In addition, the variables defining the last factor also showed moderate loadings on the first two factors. The Japanese analysis, on the other hand, did not confirm Cummins'

model of language proficiency so well as in the English analysis. The first factor had high loadings from many of the measures from the interview, which is deemed to be suggestive of "a general Japanese proficiency dimension" (1984: 69). The second factor was defined by the measure from the written test, and a pronunciation measure and a fluency measure from the interview. Length of residence had a high negative correlation to this factor. Lastly, the third factor only showed a high loading from a measure concerning use of English from the interview. Correlations between English and Japanese factor scores were examined, with age on arrival and length of residence controlled. This analysis suggested that interactional style (e.g., richness of verbal utterances) might also be cross-lingual, which was regarded as related to personality.

Theoretically, Cummins (1982, 1983) elaborated his BICS and CALP model into the distinction between "context-embedded" and "context-reduced" aspects of language proficiency, drawing on whether communication is supported by the participants' active negotiation of meaning, and a wide range of paralinguistic and situational cues (e.g., gestures and intonation), or it depends primarily on linguistic cues to meaning, with world knowledge involved in some cases. Then, he further incorporated the notion of continuum from more context- embedded to more context-reduced, together with the continuum regarding the degree of cognitive demand. This is represented by a diagram with two crossing axes in the center, with four quadrants led by the incorporation of the continua: A) more context embedded and cognitively less demanding; B) more context embedded and cognitively more demanding; C) more context reduced and cognitively less demanding; and D) more context reduced and cognitively more demanding.

In his 1980 article, Cummins regards BICS as cognitively undemanding (which is the reason for the use of the word "Basic"), but if an interpersonal task for communication is cognitively demanding, he says, it "would be regarded more as an index of CALP than BICS." The more elaborated framework seems to sustain the typical way of differentiating BICS and CALP: a one-to-one face-to-face communication in a child's everyday life outside the classroom which would go to quadrant (A), and such classroom tasks as reading a difficult text and writing an essay which would enter quadrant (D). However, the revised theorization seems to be more sensitive to situational differences in language use and more task-oriented than the developmental BICS-CALP distinction.

Cummins (1982) points out that classroom situations are more context reduced than one-to-one face-to-face situations outside the classroom, as each student shares the teacher as a communication partner with other students and he or she needs to use more knowledge of the language. Then, in my view,

different communication activities and skills required inside the classroom can also be examined along with the two continua. For example, there are classroom-related skills which are aural and oral, and thus may be more context-embedded than reading and writing, but still rather cognitively demanding. Among them are discussion skills, public speaking skills and presentation skills. These skills might be placed in quadrant (B) in Cummins' diagram in his 1982 article. ⁽¹⁾

(2) The interdependence hypothesis

Cummins (1979, 1980) claims that the cognitive and academic aspect of language proficiency (i.e., CALP) is cross-lingual: there exists a common underlying proficiency among L1 and L2 CALP. This is called the interdependence hypothesis, and is represented by an iceberg metaphor with dual surface icebergs (i.e., different features of L1 and L2) connected into one under the surface of the water (i.e., common underlying proficiency).

The linguistic interdependence hypothesis, which is developmental in nature, has implications for the age factor in child L2 acquisition and the issue of the instructional language to be chosen for minority language children. First, the hypothesis predicts that older-arriving children, who began to be exposed to L2 at an older age, can acquire L2 CALP more rapidly than younger starters, thanks to their more developed CALP in their L1. This is a claim in favor of older children which was made in the research context of on-going debates on the age factor, and it is challenging where the younger is believed to be better. Second, the interdependence hypothesis claims that the instruction in either L1 or L2 may be effective in promoting CALP, as it will manifest itself in both languages. This would undermine the idea that minority language children need to be taught in English as early as possible and as much as possible. Also, it would encourage minority language parents to talk to their children in their stronger language, namely in their L1.

There are two points of discussion which require attention in regard to Cummins' research framework. First, Cummins' assumption is that the most decisive factor for children's L2 development is not the age of arrival but the length of residence. In conjunction with this, he refers to "a balance effect" (Macnamara 1966: cited by Cummins 1979), that is: the longer the child lives in a L2 context, the better his or her L2 will be, with his or her L1 proficiency decreasing accordingly. This is about a person's language learning history, but it could also be applicable to the L2 gaining and L1 loss which can be attested over generations of many immigrants. Second, Cummins (1979) assigns a central role in minority language children's

academic achievements and their language development to the interaction between socio-cultural factors (e.g., value placed on L1 as home language), school program factors (e.g., differences in culturally appropriate behaviors) and linguistic factors as he hypothesizes.

Cummins et al.'s study (1984) presents the results of three types of analysis which can be viewed as consistent with the developmental interdependence hypothesis: 1) significant correlations between measures for English CALP and both measures for Japanese CALP (i.e., variables from the written test) and the age on arrival (which were shown when the length of residence was controlled); 2) English reading scores greatly accounted for by length of residence, measures for Japanese CALP, and age on arrival of the older group of students; 3) significant differences between the group of older siblings and that of younger siblings in three English academic measures and in the Japanese general proficiency factor.; and 4) significant differences between older students (in the 5th and 6th grade) and younger students (in the 2nd and 3rd grade) in four out of five English academic measures and in all Japanese scores but on the pronunciation and the use of English measures. Two suggestions are made from these findings. First, the development of L2 CALP is partially a function of the level of L1 CALP at the time of arrival. Second, older-arriving students maintain and develop their L1 better than younger-arriving students.

3. Relevance of Cummins' theory to the teaching situations in Japan

(1) Minority language children

The language learning situation of minority language children in Japan is different from that of their Japanese-speaking peers. The former is called a second language (L2) learning context, where the language new to the children is used widely in the social milieu. The latter is a first language (L1) learning context, and when native Japanese-speaking children start learning English at school, it can be called a foreign language (FL) learning context, where the learning of the new language is not based on intensive and extensive exposure to the language at school and a wider social milieu but is supported mainly by classroom instruction.

Another relevant learning situation is that of children of the first or second generations of foreign descendants (e.g., children of Chinese descendants). An anecdotal evidence for the possibility of the development of sufficient bilingual proficiency was obtained from a female friend of mine who is a Chinese descendent. This friend was born in Japan and went to a school where school subjects were taught in Chinese. She enrolled in a Japanese-medium university and graduate school, and is now a university

professor. She is competent in Japanese, and less competent but fully functional in Chinese. The Chinese-medium school she went to might be called a heritage language school. According to this friend, her husband, who is also a Chinese descendent, went to regular Japanese-medium schools and university, and thus is a Japanese monolingual if focus is placed on these two languages, with his foreign language proficiency (e.g., in English) disregarded.

(2) Primary school English provision

There have been three separable phases in the recent development of primary English provision in Japan: 1) initial local- and school-based offerings since the early 70's; 2) government-assigned exploratory studies since the early 90's; and 3) general provision of English instruction made possible by the implementation of the new Course of Study for Primary Schools in 2002, which was termed "hands-on learning activities to expose children to foreign languages." A newer political decision and implementation is now supposed to be made to include English in the curriculum category of school subjects.

As mentioned earlier, Cummins (1979, 1980) makes a claim for faster learning of L2 CALP by the older-arriving children. The question might be raised as to whether his claim can be utilized to argue for a later start of English, say in the third or fourth grade, or to dispute a head start at the beginning of primary school education or even earlier than that. The answer to this question should be negative. Cummins (1980) confines his model within the context where children have ample exposure to both L1 and L2, being well motivated to learn L2. In FL situations, on the other hand, it is unlikely that classroom teaching, even if it is accompanied by extra teaching or learning outside the classroom, will bring sufficient exposure to the new language to children to the extent that a balance effect will face them. No one can expect that L1 Japanese of native Japanese-speaking children in Japan will be weaker than their FL English.

An argument for an unfavorable effect of an early start of English on the development of L1 Japanese, if any, should be concerned with the instructional time allotments to the Japanese languages and the foreign language chosen for children. It is not the length of time of residence but the time for classroom instruction which is to be considered in the FL learning context. It is worthwhile to note here that Driscoll (1999) suggests the time-related borderline for primary foreign language teaching between programs highlighting language acquisition and those focusing on motivational and attitudinal aspects of learning: one hour or more a week for the former, and one hour or less a week for the latter. Furthermore, Johnstone (1994) estimates two or three hours a week for "subject teaching" (i.e., teaching a foreign language as a

school subject). A message which is extractable from these suggestions is that teachers cannot expect any substantial acquisition of the target language to occur if they offer instruction for one hour or less per week. Then, how many hours of instruction in English as FL has actually been set up? This issue is likely to involve the values and needs of the society, or the institute, in regard to the targeted level of English proficiency. The amount of time needed for subject teaching in Johnstone's terms has never been allotted to primary school English in Japan, except for some private schools and some of those schools which were involved in the government-assigned research projects in the 1990's.

As for the language proficiency as projected for the aim of primary school English, Cameron (2003) presents a rare model of language construct which is specifically addressed to children's language acquisition in FL situations. She points out that there are two important features of child learning: their tendency to search for meaning in language use and demands in their initial literacy learning. Focusing on oral skills of young learners, she entails two major components of language in her model, namely, vocabulary and discourse. Cameron's concept of vocabulary is inclusive of not only words but also the units larger than words which children may acquire by "chunking." Discourse skills are elaborated into "extended talk" (e.g., "the ability to understand, recall, and produce songs, rhymes, chants, and stories") and "conversational skills" (which involves "understanding and using phrases and sentences in interaction with other children and with adults"). Cameron places grammar within her model, defining it as "the informal building up of language knowledge in children's minds" which relates to all the components of language skills (2003: 109-110).

As pointed out by Sallabank (1999), it is common for primary school FL teaching to focus on the aural and oral aspects of language proficiency. However, Johnstone (1994) suggests that this is not always the case through drawing on Cohen's research (1987 and 1992 cited by Johnstone 1994: 51). According to Johnstone, Cohen's teaching principles show an advocacy for the simultaneous development of spoken and written language skills. To such a projected language development, the notion of reaching the grade norm in L2 BICS and CALP might be relevant, although the urgent need for it is far greater in L2 situations than in FL situations. Perhaps no one would expect that students learning a new language in FL situations will reach the level of their native speaking counterparts in several years after they start learning the language. However, it is useful to refer to the great gap between the two groups in what they can do in the language, or the considerable difference between what students can do in their FL and L1. A prime factor leading to those gaps may be vocabulary building, and it could happen that young learners of a foreign language do

not know the kind of vocabulary items which native speaking little children can use. It is in this context that I see a benefit of lowering the start of FL learning to primary school education.

(3) English teaching in secondary and higher education

Cummins' thought on language proficiency (1979, 1980) implies the greater importance of CALP in children's school lives than BICS. On the other hand, FL teaching as captured over primary school through higher education, presupposes the importance of both. Furthermore, there is the need for an inclusion of students' future job-related purposes of FL learning (e.g., skills in business communication). From these viewpoints, Cummins' conceptualization of language proficiency seems to be restricted within the realm of school and home education in the L2 context.

In the FL context, the classroom is the main situation where students are encouraged to acquire a new language, owing to a lack of enough exposure to the language outside the classroom. Then, it is necessary for those of us English teachers who are engaged in higher education in Japan to raise the question of whether Japanese students have been able to acquire what might be called BICS and CALP in English. It appears to me that many students enroll in a program in higher education without basic oral skills sufficiently developed. Students might have received a kind of teaching focusing on the aural and oral aspect of language proficiency in English at the beginning stage of middle school education. If so, this may have been greatly affected by a gradually intensified tendency towards learning English purely in a written, or visual, mode. As a result, there seems to be an incredible gap between the level of English shown in the reading texts contained in the authorized textbooks for high school students, and what high school graduates can orally do in English. I may not be the only teacher of English who feels that many university freshmen have not developed BICS in English as yet. This situation may not be improved without involving students intensively in oral modes of classroom communication activities. Furthermore, a presumable focus on written modes of learning English in secondary education would not always lead to well developed literacy skills. Cummins' notions of language proficiency would draw our attention to the need to explore an outlook for the development of English as FL primary through higher education and instructional endeavors to be made for it.

(4) Japanese teaching to international college students

Cummins' distinction between BICS and CALP, if it could be utilized for discussions on the learning of

Japanese by high school students and college students from other countries, might lead one to realize some differences in the learning modes each group of learners had adopted in their home country before they came to Japan. My informal observations, as a teacher of Japanese in higher education in Japan, have suggested a seemingly considerable difference between particular groups of students from China and those students from countries where Chinese characters are not used (e.g., the United States, France and Russia).

Chinese students have an advantage of reading Japanese texts, thanks to shared Chinese characters. However, like many Japanese students learning English, the particular groups of Chinese students I have encountered have shown difficulties in coping with oral communication in Japanese, especially at the initial stage of intensive exposure to this language widely used around them. This observation should be taken into consideration in collective terms. I occasionally find a student from China who has developed not only everyday face-to-face communication skills but also more school-related oral skills (e.g., talking to the whole class about one's own research study). The latter groups from other countries, on the other hand, have to spend a lot of time to learn Chinese characters and Japanese words to develop their literacy skills. However, the particular groups I have been teaching seem to know how to start their language learning with the aural and oral components of Japanese. This gives me the question of how they might develop the more CALP aspect of oral fluency. In addition, some of them further show advanced skills required for academic work in Japanese, such as synthesizing what they have learned to develop their own ideas. These observations suggest that the development of a new language would not proceed in an educational and social vacuum.

4. Concluding remarks

Cummins' theory on language proficiency was intended for the understanding and assessing of the language development of minority language children in L2 situations. It is necessary to examine what notions are now used for those children who have brought to Japan from other countries to assess their language proficiency. Cummins' projection of CALP has made it possible to realize the importance of the aspect of language proficiency required for children's school work, the development of which may not be so easy and fast as expected, say, of Japanese overseas children learning at schools whose education is offered in their target language.

The greater benefit on older-arriving children in L2 situations as implied by the interdependence hypothesis cannot be used as a rationale for a late start of English teaching at primary schools in Japan.

However, Cummins' theorization of language proficiency could provide opportunities to think about the development of proficiency in English as FL with a long-term prospect from primary school to higher education. My observations on Japanese college students suggest that even BICS seems to be hard to develop in FL. This may be related to an increasing tendency towards written modes of learning English. The tendency, if it is the case, also might not help in learning literacy skills in a sufficient manner. In my view, it is necessary to examine these problems not only in psycho-linguistic terms but also in educational and social terms. Some differences in the learning style, or the ideas about language learning, as suggested by particular groups of international students learning Japanese in Japan, seem to indicate educational and social differences in the development of a new language, both in the aspect of everyday oral communication and that of language proficiency necessary for school-related academic work.

Notes

- (1) On the whole, Cummins' theorization of language proficiency (1980) is more psycholinguistic than the model of communicative competence presented by his then colleagues, Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980). Canale and Swain's model, which is more widely received by Japanese teachers of English in Japan, is more linguistic. It covers different levels of language such as grammatical competence, discourse competence and sociolinguistic competence.

References

- Cameron, L. (2003) Challenges for ELT from the expansion in teaching children. *ELT Journal* 57/2, 105-12.
- Canale, M., and Swain, M. (1980) Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics* 1, 1-47.
- Cummins, J. (1979) Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research* 49, 222-51.
- Cummins, J. (1980) The entry and exit fallacy in bilingual education. *NABE Journal* 4, 25-60.
- Cummins, J. (1982) Tests, achievement, and bilingual students. *Focus* No. 9, 1-5.
- Cummins, J. (1983) Language proficiency and academic achievement. In Oller J. W. (ed.), *Current Issues in Language Testing Research*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

- Cummins, J., Swain, M., Nakajima, K., Handscombe, J., Green, D., and Tran, C. (1984) Linguistic interdependence among Japanese and Vietnamese immigrant students. In Rivera C. (ed.) *Communicative Competence Approaches to Language Proficiency Assessment: Research and Application*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Driscoll, P. (1999) Modern foreign language in the primary school. In Driscoll P. & Frost D. (eds.), *The Teaching of Modern Foreign Languages in the Primary School*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Johnstone, R. (1994) *Teaching Modern Languages at Primary School: Approaches and Implications*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Council for Research in Education.
- Oshima, M., Sakuma, R., Tsuruta, K. and Okumura, S. (2003) 『バイリンガリズムと小学生英語教育』 [*Bilingualism and English Education to Primary School Students.*] Tokyo: Liber Press.
- Otsu, Y. (2005) 『小学校での英語教育は必要ない！』 [*There is no need for primary school English!*] Tokyo: Keio University Press.
- Sallabank, J. (1999) An Early Start – A Head Start? Unpublished MA Dissertation, Institute of Education, University of London.
- Yamada, Y. (2006) 「計画的言語教育の時代」 [The times of strategic language education.] In Otsu Y. (ed.), 『日本の英語教育に必要なこと』 [*What is Needed for English Education in Japan.*] Tokyo: Keio University Press.