Proficiency Levels Defined

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Beginning Level

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)

When children first enter a second language environment they are most concerned with socialization with peers. They seek social acceptance and interaction. By socializing, they get input, that is, they get opportunities to hear the language spoken and to figure out what it means from context. Cognitively, they try to hear recognizable recurring words and phrases, which they then learn to produce as formulaic utterances or memorized units. They use these phrases in a variety of contexts and, as the phrases become more and more familiar, they begin to break them down into recurring parts. These then become the basis for developing a language system. So, the teacher can expect children in the early stages of acquisition to spend a lot of time listening and trying to adjust to the new social environment. Learners should be encouraged in their early productions by teachers who respond primarily to the meanings that the learners are trying to express and not so much on correcting student errors.

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

In the earliest stages of CALP development learners focus on comprehension of materials being presented by the teacher. They

must establish conceptual categories to represent the new ideas being presented and they must link these concepts to their previous experience and interests. Manipulation of these concepts in hands-on learning activities enables learners to acquire associated vocabulary both receptively and productively. They also begin to familiarize themselves with academic discourse structure and how it differs from conversational language. In the area of literacy, learners ideally become involved in a community of readers and writers in which literacy skills acquisition is purposeful and fulfilling. They develop a myriad of notions about reading and writing including 1) written language is an important form of communication, 2) scanning occurs from left to right, 3) what can be said can be written and what is written can be read, 4) language has recurring sounds and these sounds can be represented by letters, 5) words in written form can be learned as units and can be analyzed into constituent parts and letters, 6) unfamiliar sequences of letters can be decoded into meaningful words.

Intermediate Level

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)

Intermediate learners are those who have gotten past the stage of formulaic speech and are engaged in breaking the language system down into its component parts. As language skills increase through listening and interaction, learners naturally increase their attention to the details of the language system. Their ability to recognize the distinctive sounds of the language and their abilities to produce those sounds gradually improve until they sound more and more like those of the native speaker model. They begin to develop the basic word formation strategies (e.g., putting the [s] sound on the end of words to form plurals) and function word usages (e.g., using common prepositions such as 'in' and 'on') of their peers. They progress through stages of correctness in the formation of complex syntactic

patterns such as negation and question formation, and they begin to become aware of speech act patterns such as how to apologize, how to make requests with varying degrees of politeness, etc. Meanwhile, their vocabulary development burgeons to include the receptive and productive use of hundreds of high-frequency vocabulary items used in social discourse.

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

At the intermediate level, learners continue to increase their comprehension and production of general and technical vocabulary used in content classes, however, they are still far behind their native English-speaking peers in this regard. They are becoming more familiar with forms of academic discourse such as persuasion, description, comparison, etc., but primarily at the receptive level. They are developing fluency in simple reading (e.g., simplified texts) and writing (e.g., journal writing) tasks, but they still experience cognitive overload when faced with grade-level tasks in reading and writing. They continue to develop phonemic awareness and decoding skills in the second language system.

Advanced Level

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)

An advanced L2 learner is one whose basic communicative language skills are in place and whose pronunciation and grammar are moving toward those of a native speaker. As English language learners progress through stages of L2 development their concerns turn more and more toward the establishment of social identity with their peer group. That is, they work toward conforming their language patterns and usage to that of their peers. This entails refining their pronunciation to the point that they sound like a member of that group. It requires that they develop the idiomatic expressions,

vocabulary, and other discourse patterns characteristic of the reference group. If the reference group happens to use a non-standard dialect of English, the English language learners will often develop the speech patterns characteristic of that group, rather than those of the standard dialect.

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

At the advanced level of CALP, the child is engaged in learning different registers of language from informal to formal varieties, including highly abstract forms of academic discourse. This requires the learning of thousands of vocabulary items and the integration of these items into semantic networks that facilitate the manipulation of complex ideas and the utilization of higher-order thinking skills. It requires the development of high levels of literacy. In reading, this involves the ability to comprehend narrative and expository texts on many different levels, from main ideas to details, to inferences, to the application of the material to novel situations. In writing, it involves an understanding of the writing process and the ability to apply it in the development of many different genres of discourse including argumentative, descriptive, comparative, cause and effect, forms. It also entails developing the ability to choose the appropriate form for the appropriate task.

Adapted with permission from:

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