

ELL Analysis Paper

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Challenges of Acquiring English

Throughout the history of our country, the United States has made a reputation of being a “cultural melting pot” due to the constant care, concern, and focus with educating English Language Learners (ELL), long before public education was established, and even though English is not the official language of the country. As populations rise, fluctuate, and change, educators in all content areas have been tasked with developing English lessons, standards, and curricula that adapt to increasingly diverse and multicultural populations in order to fully instruct their students regardless of where they come from and what cultures they bring with them. Nowadays, the numbers of ELL in school classrooms are so substantial that governmental policies have come and gone into place to assist and support these students to surpass their academic obstacles, or to provide them with further obstacles, depending solely upon which political leaning the US is in that year or couple of years. Regardless of whether the political scene chooses to acknowledge ELLs or not, these students face several challenges within schooling, education, and academia due to the complicated nature of learning a specific language in a specific culture – in our case, English in the United States. This paper will focus on the complexity of language systems and the differences between conversational fluency and academic language affecting students learning English in American schools, with a reflection on why it is essential for educators to consider these factors.

Language System

A language system describes how a language is made up of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse. From the basics of the foundational sounds heard and made in a language, all the way to the assumptions made because of specific

actions in a given culture, ELL are tasked with learning all of these layers, which is more than just vocabulary as many may assume initially. Native speakers of any language are subconsciously aware of the phonological patterns in the languages they speak and know, which are the consonants and vowels that make up words. For example, someone born to an English-speaking family would be able to sound out or assume that “subgrased” was a word because there are other English words with similar sounds, while “pmuououeg” is unlikely to be an English word because of the letter placements. (Wright, 2019) Both words are, in fact, not real, and do not exist, but because of the patterns in consonants and vowels, English speakers can at least attempt to pronounce the first one. For ELL who were raised with different letter orders, or phonologies, in different language systems, it may not be so instinctive at first glance. That is one of the foundational reasons for struggles in learning how to read English, and the beginning of a single layer in a language system. Without understanding the foundations of how a language and its system work, it will be daunting to educate with fullness and perspective.

BICS and CALP

Jim Cummins at the University of Toronto coined two acronyms to speak to English skill development, which we can use in discussing ELL: BICS, or basic interpersonal communicative skills, and CALP, or cognitive academic language proficiency. These refer to two different levels of language fluency –“BICS refers to conversational fluency in a language while CALP refers to students’ ability to understand and express, in both oral and written modes, concepts and ideas that are relevant to success in school” (Cummins, 2008, p. 1). Part of the distinction between BICS and CALP is the fact that the former is not highly regarded in society even when native English speakers use it, while the latter is consistently viewed with a positive light due to the

classist implications and roots of education. Academic English is an impersonal and objective style and tone of English that is used in educational spaces, and so often associated with CALP, and acts as a social barrier to native English speakers in American education through vocabulary, nominalization, and complexity of phrases. A teacher who writes: “Hornworm growth exhibits a significant amount of variation,” will find that more students can understand it when it is rewritten as “Hornworms sure vary a lot in how well they grow,” because of words like ‘sure’ and ‘a lot’ rather than ‘exhibits’ and ‘significant,’ and the centering of the sentence on the bug in the first sentence as opposed to its growth in the second (Gee, 2004, p. 281). This is because there are more spaces, and more people, in the world where English is spoken and understood colloquially, or with BICS, than there are places where CALP and Academic English reign. When ELL first begin to study in English, there is a misunderstanding that their education begins in the classroom, when really it begins in the world, with their neighbors and the community they live in, as well as the media they watch and read. As an educator, it is crucial to understand that fluency in BICS does not determine fluency in CALP, since conversational fluency can be attained in 2-3 years, but academic language can take between 5-10 years (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

Conclusion

As an educator who believes in equity, it is imperative to consider the perspectives of ELL on why and how learning English may be challenging for them, in order to accommodate students and provide them with the best opportunities for success. In understanding the source of the misunderstanding, educators have a chance to help bridge the gaps in knowledge by providing supplemental resources and materials that will elevate ELL learning. Language

systems and the study of them is vital to understanding the foundations that literacy is built on, and dismantling biases in our expectations as educators towards our students we may not have realized, while differentiating between BICS and CALP is helpful in knowing and perpetuating that there are specific social connotations to the ways a language can be spoken. There are many ways to be fluent in a language, and there truly is no wrong way to use a language so long as you are understood. I hope all students who enter my classroom will be able to take away this message, and utilize their English to the best of their ability according to each task ahead of them.

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