

Theoretical Overview

The research in language acquisition has been rich and productive during the past 20 years. Linguists and educators working together (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) have discovered effective ways to support students in their acquisition of new languages and content knowledge. It is vital that classroom teachers understand the implications of the language acquisition research so they can provide the scaffolding necessary for their students to be successful in the classroom.

Language Acquisition Theory and the Classroom Teacher

For classroom teachers to make good decisions about instructional practices for English language learners, they must understand how students acquire English and how this acquisition differs from the way foreign languages have traditionally been taught in the United States (Collier, 1995). Many teachers have experienced classes in Spanish, French, or other languages in which they have practiced repetitive drills and translated long passages using English-French (or Spanish) dictionaries. While these approaches have been used for many years in the United States without much success, it should be noted that linguists such as Jim Cummins and Stephen Krashen have been researching new approaches to language acquisition.

Krashen (1982), in his study of language acquisition, makes a distinction between language acquisition and language learning that is vital to the support of students' gradual acquisition of fluency in a new language. Krashen states that language acquisition is a natural thing. Young children acquire their home language easily without formal teaching.

This acquisition is gradual, based on receiving and understanding messages, building a listening (receptive) vocabulary, and slowly attempting verbal production of the language in a highly supportive, nonstressful situation. It is exactly these same conditions that foster the acquisition of a second language. The teacher is responsible for providing the understandable language (comprehensible input), along with whatever supports are necessary for the students to understand the messages. Using approaches and materials that add context to the language—props, gestures, pictures—all contribute to the child's acquisition and eventually to the production of language.

Krashen and Terrell (1983) also stress the need for English language learners to be allowed to move into verbal production of the new language at a comfortable rate. Students must hear and understand messages in the target language and build a listening vocabulary before being expected to produce spoken language. This does not mean that the English language learners should be uninvolved in classroom activities, but that the activities should be structured so that English language learners can participate at a level of comfort. Questions asked of them should be answerable at first with gestures, nods, or other physical responses. This language acquisition stage is called the silent or preproduction period, and it is a vital start to language acquisition....

The role of the classroom environment in supporting children's language acquisition cannot be ignored. Meaningful exposure to language is not enough. Students need many opportunities for language interaction. Swain (1993) proposes that a classroom where children work together to solve problems and produce projects supports their language development in several ways. It gives them authentic reasons to communicate and support in refining their language production. It also provides students with the realization that their verbal communication is not always understood by others. This realization helps to move the child from receptive, semantic processing (listening to understand) to expressive, syntactic processing (formation of words and sentences to communicate). If children are left to simply listen and observe without the opportunity or necessity to communicate they remain in the preproductive stage for an extended period of time. The structure of communicative classroom activities, those that necessitate communication and verbal interaction, prevents this from happening.

Another important component supportive of children's language acquisition is their discovery of what they can do with language. Halliday (1978) identified seven functions of language or purposes for using language, which provide impetus for children's verbal communication. The functions that Halliday identified are the following:

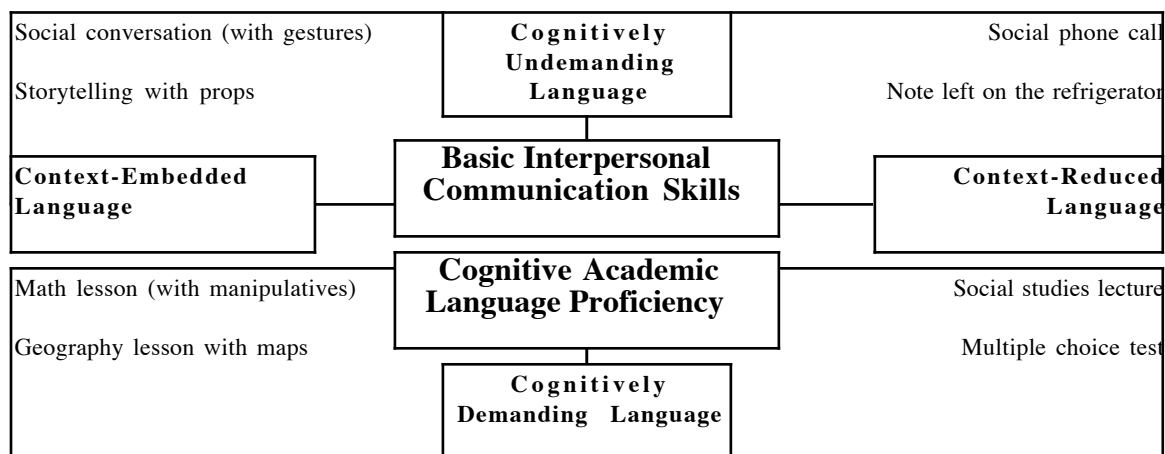
1. *Instrumental*. The use of language to cause things to happen. For example, "Bathroom" causes the teacher to take notice and excuse the student to use the bathroom.
2. *Regulatory*. The use of language to control events or the behavior of others. For example, "He hit me!" causes the teacher to intervene on the child's behalf.
3. *Representation*. The use of language to communicate ideas or knowledge. For example, "I have two pennies" tells the teacher that the child understands the number concept.
4. *Interactional*. The use of language to get along with others. For example, "Sit with me" is used to make a friend.
5. *Personal*. The use of language to express personality, feelings, or emotions. For example, "I sad" is used to convey feelings.
6. *Heuristic*. The use of language is to acquire knowledge. For example, "Show me" is used to gain access to information.
7. *Imaginative*. The use of language to create an imaginative world for pleasure or play. For example, "Pretend we are on a train" is used to create a fantasy play situation.

Many researchers (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; McLaughlin, 1990) have studied the role of emotions on the acquisition of language. Krashen calls the effect of emotions on learning the "affective filter." When a learner is placed in a stressful situation in which language production or performance is demanded, the student's ability to learn or produce spoken language is impaired. This underscores the responsibility of the teacher to provide a supportive classroom environment in which students can participate at a comfortable level without having to worry about being embarrassed or placed in a situation where they will be made to feel foolish. Krashen's **Affective Filter Hypothesis** stresses that for the student to learn effectively the student's motivation and self-esteem must be supported while anxiety is diminished. This provides an opportunity for the English language learner to take in information, process

vocabulary, and eventually produce language because stress levels are low and the affective filter is not interfering with thinking or learning.

Jim Cummins's research (1986) contributes to the understanding of language acquisition and effective classroom practice in several ways. First, Cummins differentiates between social language, called **basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS)**, and academic language, called **cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)**. While students may acquire BICS and be able to communicate in English while on the playground or in asking simple questions, this is not the same thing as having the level of language proficiency necessary to benefit fully from academic English instruction (CALP) without additional support.

Cummins also helps us understand what must be added to instruction to make it comprehensible to students. He identifies two dimensions of language, its **cognitive demand** and its **context embeddedness**. Using a quadrant matrix, Cummins demonstrates how the addition of context supports the students' understanding of more cognitively demanding language such as the language of content instruction in the class.



By examining Cummins's quadrant the teacher can see that even social language is made more understandable by the addition of context. Directions given orally with gestures are more easily understood than the same words spoken over the telephone without the aid of gestures. This becomes even more important in the classroom, where teachers are using academic terms that may be unfamiliar to the English language learner or using them in a different way from the customary social meaning. This is demonstrated by one English language learner's illustration of a riverbed in response to a geography lesson. The student's understanding of the word *bed* was linked to his prior knowledge of the word and did not support his understanding of the term when used to describe a geographic feature.

References

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Questions to Consider

- How is language learning differentiated from language acquisition?
- How can the classroom teacher help English Language Learners acquire English? What is the significance of the Affective Filter Hypothesis in the classroom?
- What is BICS? What is CALP? Compare and contrast them.
- Cummins talks about two dimensions of language: cognitive demand and context embeddedness. What do they mean?
- From examining Cummins' quadrants interposing the two dimensions of language, which appears to be the optimal learning environment you should create and why?