



Putting Language Proficiency in Its Place: Responding to Critiques of the Conversational/Academic Language Distinction

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The issue of how language proficiency relates to academic achievement is clearly relevant to the educational development of bilingual and trilingual children. These children may be exposed to a wide variety of language interaction patterns in home and school. In many contexts in Europe and elsewhere, it is increasingly common for schools to promote knowledge of three (or more) languages. A typical pattern is for primary schooling to be conducted bilingually through a minority language (which children speak at home) and the national language, with instruction in a language of wider communication (frequently English) introduced at a later stage (see Cummins & Corson, 1997, for numerous examples).

A number of issues arise for policy-makers contemplating the introduction of bilingual and trilingual education programs. For example, if instruction is divided among two or three languages, will proficiency in each language develop adequately? When is it appropriate to compare bilingual children's proficiency in their two languages (L1 and L2) with that of monolingual children whose instruction has been totally through their L1? In other words, how long does it take children to attain grade expectations in their second (or third) language? In a transitional bilingual program such as those implemented for minority students in the United States and parts of The Netherlands (e.g. Verhoeven, 1991), when should children be mainstreamed to classes taught predominantly or totally through their L2? If children experience academic difficulties (e.g. in reading) in a bilingual program, should they be transferred to a monolingual program where more intensive instruction can be given through just one language? How valid are tests administered through a bilingual child's second language, or even first language if that language is not being promoted strongly in school? Should the introduction of reading in a second language be delayed until a certain level of oral language proficiency in that language has been attained? If so, what level?

These issues have been debated in the context of bilingual education for linguistic minority students in

the United States, for majority language students in Canadian French immersion programs, and in a wide variety of bilingual and trilingual programs in Europe. I have suggested that underlying many of these issues is the question of what do we mean by *language proficiency* and how is it related to academic achievement. Two examples will illustrate the relevance of this underlying issue. In North America, minority children have frequently been tested on IQ tests through English (their L2) after two or three years in the country and assigned to special needs classes based on the results of these tests (usually a pattern of low verbal scores and higher non-verbal scores). In Texas in the early 1980s, for example, there were more than three times as many Latino/Latina students labeled as "learning disabled" as would be expected based on their proportion in the school population (Ortiz & Yates, 1983). This pattern raises obvious issues such as the validity of ability and achievement tests whose norms reflect the experiences of the dominant group in the society; but it also raises the issue of how conversational fluency in a second language is related to academic development in that language and how long do students typically require to develop conversational and academic language skills in a second language.

A related example is the debate in the United States over how long bilingual students should remain in bilingual programs before being transferred to all-English classrooms. Because of controversy over the desirability of permitting minority languages into the school system, there is considerable pressure on educators to limit the time that a student can spend in a bilingual program to less than three years. Students who are transferred after this period of time to classrooms without additional support for learning English and catching up academically frequently experience academic failure. An obvious issue that arises is "How much proficiency in a language is required to follow instruction through that language?"

In short, the question of how we conceptualize *language proficiency* and how it is related to academic development is central to many volatile policy issues in the area of bilingual education. I have suggested that in order to address these issues we need to make a fundamental distinction between conversational and academic aspects of language proficiency (originally labeled *basic interpersonal communicative skills* [BICS] and *cognitive academic language proficiency* [CALP]). (Cummins, 1979). In this paper I use the terms conversational/academic language proficiency interchangeably with BICS/CALP.

This distinction has been influential in a number of contexts (e.g. Cline & Frederickson, 1996) but it has also been severely critiqued by a number of investigators (e.g. Edelsky et al., 1983; Martin-Jones & Romaine, 1986; Romaine, 1990; Wiley, 1996). In this paper, I try to clarify the rationale and nature of the distinction in light of research evidence from a number of contexts and I respond to the critiques that have been addressed to the distinction. In the first section below I elaborate the rationale for the distinction and the evolution of the constructs during the past 20 years.

Evolution of the Conversational/Academic Language Proficiency Distinction

Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukoma (1976) had brought attention to the fact that Finnish immigrant children in Sweden often appeared to educators to be fluent in both Finnish and Swedish but still showed levels of verbal academic performance in both languages considerably below grade/age expectations. Similarly, analysis of psychological assessments administered to minority students showed that teachers and psychologists often assumed that children who had attained fluency in English had overcome all difficulties with English (Cummins, 1984). Yet these children frequently performed poorly on English academic tasks as well as in psychological assessment situations. The need to distinguish between conversational fluency and academic aspects of L2 performance was highlighted by the reanalysis of large-scale language acquisition data from the Toronto Board of Education (Cummins, 1981a). These data showed clearly that there was a gap of several years, on average,

between the attainment of peer-appropriate fluency in L2 and the attainment of grade norms in academic aspects of L2. Conversational aspects of proficiency reached peer-appropriate levels usually within about two years of exposure to L2 but a period of 5-7 years was required, on average, for immigrant students to approach grade norms in academic aspects of English.

The distinction between BICS and CALP (Cummins, 1979) was intended to draw educators' attention to these data and to warn against premature exit of minority students (in the United States) from bilingual to mainstream English-only programs on the basis of attainment of surface level fluency in English. In other words, the distinction highlighted the fact that educators' conflating of these aspects of proficiency was a major factor in the creation of academic difficulties for minority students.

The BICS/CALP distinction also served to qualify John Oller's (1979) claim that all individual differences in language proficiency could be accounted for by just one underlying factor, which he termed *global language proficiency*. Oller synthesized a considerable amount of data showing strong correlations between performance on cloze tests of reading, standardized reading tests, and measures of oral verbal ability (e.g. vocabulary measures). I pointed out that not all aspects of language use or performance could be incorporated into one dimension of global language proficiency. For example, if we take two monolingual English-speaking siblings, a 12-year old child and a six-year old, there are enormous differences in these children's ability to read and write English and in their knowledge of vocabulary, but minimal differences in their phonology or basic fluency. The six-year old can understand virtually everything that is likely to be said to her in everyday social contexts and she can use language very effectively in these contexts, just as the 12-year old can. Similarly, as noted above, in second language acquisition contexts, immigrant children typically manifest very different time periods required to catch up to their peers in everyday face-to-face aspects of proficiency as compared to academic aspects.

This distinction was elaborated into two intersecting continua (Cummins, 1981b) which highlighted the range of cognitive demands and contextual support involved in particular language tasks or activities (context-embedded/context-reduced, cognitively undemanding/cognitively demanding) (see Figure 1). The BICS/CALP distinction was maintained within this elaboration and related to the theoretical distinctions of several other theorists. The terms used by different investigators have varied but the essential distinction refers to the extent to which the meaning being communicated is supported by contextual or interpersonal cues (such as gestures, facial expressions, and intonation present in face-to-face interaction) or dependent on linguistic cues that are largely independent of the immediate communicative context.

The framework elaborated in Figure 1 differs from distinctions made by theorists such as Bruner (1975) [communicative/analytic competence], Donaldson (1978) [embedded and disembedded thought and language], Olson (1978) [utterance and text] and Snow et al. (1991) [contextualized and decontextualized language] in that it goes beyond a simple dichotomy in mapping the underlying dimensions of linguistic performance in academic contexts. In these one-dimensional distinctions, as in distinctions between oral and literate forms of language, the degree of cognitive demand of particular tasks or activities is not represented. Thus there would be no way of highlighting the fact that an intense intellectual discussion with one or two other people can be just as cognitively demanding as writing an academic paper, despite the fact that the former is contextualized while the latter is relatively decontextualized.

Cognitive and Contextual Demands. The framework outlined in Figure 1 is designed to identify the extent to which students are able to cope successfully with the cognitive and linguistic demands made on them by the social and educational environment in which they are obliged to function. These demands are conceptualized within a framework made up of the intersection of two continua, one relating to the range of contextual support available for expressing or receiving meaning and the other relating to the amount of information that must be processed simultaneously or in close succession by the student in order to carry out the activity.

The extremes of the context-embedded/context-reduced continuum are distinguished by the fact that in context-embedded communication the participants can actively negotiate meaning (e.g. by providing feedback that the message has not been understood) and the language is supported by a wide range of meaningful interpersonal and situational cues. Context-reduced communication, on the other hand, relies primarily (or, at the extreme of the continuum, exclusively) on linguistic cues to meaning, and thus successful interpretation of the message depends heavily on knowledge of the language itself. In general, context-embedded communication is more typical of the everyday world outside the classroom, whereas many of the linguistic demands of the classroom (e.g. manipulating text) reflect communicative activities that are close to the context-reduced end of the continuum.

The upper parts of the vertical continuum consist of communicative tasks and activities in which the linguistic tools have become largely automatized and thus require little active cognitive involvement for appropriate performance. At the lower end of the continuum are tasks and activities in which the linguistic tools have not become automatized and thus require active cognitive involvement. Persuading another individual that your point of view is correct, and writing an essay, are examples of quadrant B and D skills respectively. Casual conversation is a typical quadrant A activity while examples of quadrant C are copying notes from the blackboard or filling in worksheets.

The framework elaborates on the conversational/academic distinction by highlighting important underlying dimensions of conversational and academic communication. Thus, conversational abilities (quadrant A) often develop relatively quickly among immigrant second language learners because these forms of communication are supported by interpersonal and contextual cues and make relatively few cognitive demands on the individual. Mastery of the academic functions of language (quadrant D), on the other hand, is a more formidable task because such uses require high levels of cognitive involvement and are only minimally supported by contextual or interpersonal cues. Under conditions of high cognitive demand, it is necessary for students to stretch their linguistic resources to the limit to function successfully. In short, the essential aspect of academic language proficiency is the ability to make complex meanings explicit in either oral or written modalities by means of *language itself* rather than by means of contextual or paralinguistic cues (e.g. gestures, intonation etc.).

As students progress through the grades, they are increasingly required to manipulate language in cognitively-demanding and context-reduced situations that differ significantly from everyday conversational interactions. In writing, for example, they must learn to continue to produce language without the prompting that comes from a conversational partner and they must plan large units of discourse, and organize them coherently, rather than planning only what will be said next. The difference between the everyday language of face-to-face interaction and the language of schooling is clearly expressed by Pauline Gibbons (1991) in outlining the differences between what she terms *playground language* and *classroom language*:

This playground language includes the language which enables children to make friends, join in games and take part in a variety of day-to-day activities that develop and maintain social contacts. It usually occurs in face-to-face contact, and is thus highly dependent on the physical and visual context, and on gesture and body language. Fluency with this kind of language is an important part of language development; without it a child is isolated from the normal social life of the playground. ...

But playground language is very different from the language that teachers use in the classroom, and from the language that we expect children to learn to use. The language of the playground is not the language associated with learning in mathematics, or social studies, or science. The

playground situation does not normally offer children the opportunity to use such language as: *if we increase the angle by 5 degrees, we could cut the circumference into equal parts*. Nor does it normally require the language associated with the higher order thinking skills, such as hypothesizing, evaluating, inferring, generalizing, predicting or classifying. Yet these are the language functions which are related to learning and the development of cognition; they occur in all areas of the curriculum, and without them a child's potential in academic areas cannot be realized. (p. 3)

Thus, the context-embedded/context-reduced distinction is not one between oral and written language. Within the framework, the dimensions of contextual embeddedness and cognitive demand are distinguished because some context-embedded activities are clearly just as cognitively-demanding as context-reduced activities. For example, an intense intellectual discussion with one or two other people is likely to require at least as much cognitive processing as writing an essay on the same topic. Similarly, writing an e-mail message to a close friend is, in many respects, more context-embedded than giving a lecture to a large group of people.

Contextual support involves both internal and external dimensions. Internal factors are *attributes of the individual* that make a task more familiar or easier in some respect (e.g. prior experience, motivation, cultural relevance, interests, etc.). External factors refer to *aspects of the input* that facilitate or impede comprehension; for example, language input that is spoken clearly and contains a considerable amount of syntactic and semantic redundancy is easier to understand than input that lacks these features.

A central implication of the framework for instruction of second language learners is that language and content will be acquired most successfully when students are challenged cognitively but provided with the contextual and linguistic supports or scaffolds required for successful task completion. In other words, optimal instruction for linguistic, cognitive and academic growth will tend to fall into quadrant B.

Clarifications of the Conversational/Academic (BICS/CALP) distinction. The distinction between BICS and CALP has sometimes been misunderstood or misrepresented. For example, the distinction was criticized on the grounds that a simple dichotomy does not account for many dimensions of language use and competence (e.g. sociolinguistic aspects of language) (e.g. Wald, 1984). However, the distinction was not proposed as an overall theory of language but as a very specific conceptual distinction addressed to specific issues related to the education of second language learners. As outlined above, the distinction entails important implications for policy and practice. The fact that the distinction does not address issues of sociolinguistics or discourse styles or any number of other linguistic issues is irrelevant. The usefulness of any theoretical construct should be assessed in relation to the issues that it attempts to address, not in relation to issues that it makes no claim to address. To suggest that the BICS/CALP distinction is invalid because it does not account for subtleties of sociolinguistic interaction or discourse styles is like saying: "This apple is no good because it doesn't taste like an orange."

Another point concerns the sequence of acquisition between BICS and CALP. August and Hakuta (1997), for example, suggest that the distinction specifies that BICS must precede CALP in development. This is not at all the case. The sequential nature of BICS/CALP acquisition was suggested as typical in the specific situation of immigrant children learning a second language. It was not suggested as an absolute order that applies in every, or even the majority of situations. Thus attainment of high levels of L2 CALP can precede attainment of fluent L2 BICS in certain situations (e.g. a scientist who can read a language for research purposes but who can't speak it).

Another misunderstanding is to interpret the distinction as dimensions of language that are

autonomous or independent of their contexts of acquisition (e.g. Romaine, 1990, p. 240). To say that BICS and CALP are conceptually distinct is not the same as saying that they are separate or acquired in different ways. Developmentally they are not necessarily separate; all children acquire their initial conceptual foundation (knowledge of the world) largely through conversational interactions in the home. Both BICS and CALP are shaped by their contexts of acquisition and use. Consistent with a Vygotskian perspective on cognitive and language development, BICS and CALP both develop within a matrix of social interaction. However, they follow different developmental patterns: phonological skills in our native language and our basic fluency reach a plateau in the first six or so years; in other words, the rate of subsequent development is very much reduced in comparison to previous development. This is not the case for literacy-related knowledge such as range of vocabulary which continues to develop at least throughout our schooling and usually throughout our lifetimes.

It is also important to point out that cognitive skills are involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in most forms of social interaction. For example, cognitive skills are undoubtedly involved in one's ability to tell jokes effectively and if we work at it we might improve our joke-telling ability throughout our lifetimes. However, our joke-telling ability is largely unrelated to our academic performance. This intersection of the cognitive and social aspects of language proficiency, however, does not mean that they are identical or reducible one to the other. The implicit assumption that conversational fluency in English is a good indicator of "English proficiency" has resulted in countless bilingual children being "diagnosed" as learning disabled or retarded. Despite their developmental intersections, BICS and CALP are conceptually and follow different developmental patterns.

An additional misconception is that the distinction characterizes CALP (academic language) as a "superior" form of language proficiency than BICS (conversational language). This interpretation was never intended, although it is easy to see how the use of the term "basic" in BICS might appear to devalue conversational language as compared to the higher status of *cognitive academic* language proficiency. Clearly, various forms of oral language performance are highly complex and sophisticated both linguistically and cognitively. However, these forms of language performance are not necessarily strongly related to the linguistic demands of schooling. As outlined above, access to very specific forms of language are required to continue to progress academically and a major goal of schooling for all students is to expand students' registers and repertoires of language into these academic domains. However, the greater relevance of academic language proficiency for success in schooling, as compared to conversational proficiency, does not mean that it is intrinsically superior in any way or that the language proficiency of non-literate or non-schooled communities is in any way deficient.

A final point of clarification concerns the relationship of language proficiency to social determinants of minority students' academic development (e.g. Troike, 1984). The conversational/academic language proficiency theoretical construct is psychoeducational in nature insofar as it focuses primarily on the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of proficiency in a language. The role of social factors in minority students' academic success or failure was acknowledged in early work but not elaborated in detail. In 1986, I proposed a framework within which the intersecting roles of sociopolitical and psychoeducational factors could be conceptualized (Cummins, 1986). Specifically, the framework highlighted the ways in which the interactions between educators and minority students reflected particular role definitions on the part of educators in relation to students' language and culture, community participation, pedagogy, and assessment. It hypothesized that minority students are educationally disabled in school in much the same way that their communities have historically been disabled in the wider society and pointed to directions for reversing this process. The framework argues that educational interventions will be successful only to the extent that they constitute a challenge to the broader societal power structure (Cummins, 1986, 1996).

Linguistic Evidence for the Conversational/Academic Language Distinction

To this point, two major sets of evidence have been advanced to support the conversational/academic language distinction:

- In monolingual contexts, the distinction reflects the difference between the language proficiency acquired through interpersonal interaction by virtually all 6-year old children and the proficiency developed through schooling and literacy which continues to expand throughout our lifetimes. For most children, the basic structure of their native language is in place by age 6 or so but their language continues to expand with respect to the range of vocabulary and grammatical constructions they can understand and use and the linguistic contexts within which they can function successfully. A typical 16-year-old student has considerably greater knowledge of language and options for language use (e.g. reading novels, encyclopedias, etc.) than a typical six-year old despite the fact that both are fluent native speakers of their L1.
- Research studies since the early 1980s have shown that immigrant students can quickly acquire considerable fluency in the target language when they are exposed to it in the environment and at school but despite this rapid growth in conversational fluency, it generally takes a minimum of about five years (and frequently much longer) for them to catch up to native-speakers in academic aspects of the language (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1979, 1981a; Klesmer, 1994) as assessed by measures of literacy and formal language knowledge.

In addition to the evidence noted above, the distinction receives strong support from two other sources: (a) Douglas Biber's (1986) analysis of a corpus of authentic discourse gathered from a wide range of communicative situations, both written and oral, and (b) David Corson's (1995) documentation of the lexical differences between English everyday conversational language and textual language, the former deriving predominantly from Anglo-Saxon sources and the latter from Graeco-Latin sources.

Biber's Analysis of Textual Variation. Biber used psychometric analysis of an extremely large corpus of spoken and written textual material in order to uncover the basic dimensions underlying textual variation. Among the 16 text types included in Biber's analysis were broadcasts, spontaneous speeches, telephone conversation, face-to-face conversation, professional letters, academic prose and press reports. Forty-one linguistic features were counted in 545 text samples, totaling more than one million words.

Three major dimensions emerged from the factor analysis of this corpus. These were labeled by Biber as *Interactive vs. Edited Text*, *Abstract vs. Situated Content*, and *Reported vs. Immediate Style*. The first dimension is described as follows:

Thus, Factor 1 identifies a dimension which characterizes texts produced under conditions of high personal involvement and real-time constraints (marked by low explicitness in the expression of meaning, high subordination and interactive features) - as opposed to texts produced under conditions permitting considerable editing and high explicitness of lexical content, but little interaction or personal involvement. ... This dimension combines both situational and cognitive

parameters; in particular it combines interactional features with those reflecting production constraints (or the lack of them). (1986, p. 385)

The second factor has positive weights from linguistic features such as nominalizations, prepositions, and passives and, according to Biber, reflects a "detached formal style vs. a concrete colloquial one" (p. 396). Although this factor is correlated with the first factor, it can be empirically distinguished from it, as illustrated by professional letters, which, according to Biber's analysis, represent highly abstract texts that have a high level of personal involvement.

The third factor has positive weights from linguistic features such as past tense, perfect aspect and 3rd person pronouns which can all refer to a removed narrative context. According to Biber this dimension "distinguishes texts with a primary narrative emphasis, marked by considerable reference to a removed situation, from those with non-narrative emphases (descriptive, expository, or other) marked by little reference to a removed situation but a high occurrence of present tense forms" (p. 396).

Although Biber's three dimensions provide a more detailed analysis of the nature of language proficiency and use than the conversational/academic distinction (as would be expected in view of the very extensive range of spoken and written texts analyzed), it is clear that the distinctions highlighted in his dimensions are consistent with the broad distinction between conversational and academic aspects of proficiency. For example, when factor scores were calculated for the different text types on each factor, telephone and face-to-face conversation were at opposite extremes from official documents and academic prose on Textual Dimensions 1 and 2 (Interactive vs. Edited Text, and Abstract vs. Situated Content). In short, Biber's research shows clearly that the general distinction that has been proposed between conversational and academic aspects of language has linguistic reality that can be identified empirically.

Consistent with Biber's distinctions is recent work by Gibbons and Lascar (1998) in Australia. Gibbons and Lascar point to the fact that Biber's descriptions of different registers of language are consistent with the characteristics that Michael Halliday (e.g. Halliday & Hasan, 1985) assigns to the concept of *Mode* "which examines the linguistic effects produced by the distance (in terms of time, space and abstractness) between a text and the context to which it refers, and also the distance between listener/reader and speaker/writer" (p. 41). Gibbons and Lascar note that degree of context-embeddedness is a defining feature of this register parameter *Mode* and refer to it as the *literate register* on the grounds that "it constitutes an important element of literacy" (p. 41). Gibbons and Lascar point out that many minority language speakers often have a well-developed domestic or everyday register but have not had opportunities to acquire many other registers, particularly the academic or literate register. Their research used multiple choice cloze procedures as a way of operationalizing cognitive academic language proficiency.

Corson's Analysis of the English Language Lexicon. . Corson (1993, 1995) has pointed out that the academic language of texts in English depends heavily on Graeco-Latin words whereas

everyday conversation relies more on an Anglo-Saxon-based lexicon: "most of the specialist and high status terminology of English is Graeco-Latin in origin, and most of its more everyday

terminology is Anglo-Saxon in origin" (1993, p. 13). He cites data that suggests that approximately 60% of all of the words in written English text are of Graeco-Latin origin. These words tend to be three or four syllables long whereas the everyday high frequency words of the Anglo-Saxon lexicon tend to be one or two syllables in length.

Corson (1997, p. 677) points out that

...printed texts provided much more exposure to [Graeco-Latin] words than oral ones. For example, even children's books contained 50% more rare words than either adult prime-time television or the conversations of university graduates; popular magazines had three times as many rare words as television and informal conversation.

An obvious implication of these data is that if second language learners are to catch up academically to native-speakers they must engage in extensive reading of written text because

academic language is reliably to be found only in written text. The research on reading achievement also suggests, however, that in addition to large amounts of time for actual text reading, it is also important for students to have ample opportunities to talk to each other and to a teacher about their responses to reading (see Fielding and Pearson, 1994, for a review). Talking about the text in a collaborative context ensures that higher order thinking processes (e.g. analysis, evaluation, synthesis) engage with academic language in deepening students' comprehension of the text.

To better illustrate the centrality of the Graeco-Latin lexicon to the comprehension of academic language consider the following passage from Edgar Allan Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum* which appeared in a high school literature compendium:

My outstretched hands at length encountered some solid obstruction. It was a wall, seemingly of stone masonry -- very smooth, slimy, and cold. I followed it up; stepping with all the careful distrust with which certain antique narratives had inspired me. (ScottForesman, 1997, p. 256)

Among the more difficult words in this passage are the following: *outstretched, encountered, solid, obstruction, masonry, slimy, distrust, antique, narratives, inspired*. With the exception of *outstretched* and *slimy*, all of these words are Graeco-Latin in origin and have semantic relationships across the Romance languages. *Outstretched* has indirect cognate relationships with Graeco-Latin-based languages through its synonym *extended* (e.g. *extendido* in Spanish). Thus, at least in English, the lexicon used in conversational interactions is dramatically different than that used in more literate and academic contexts.

In summary, there is solid linguistic evidence for the reality of the conversational/academic language distinction in addition to the evidence of different time periods required to develop peer-appropriate levels of each dimension of language proficiency among second language learners. In the North American context, failure to take account of this distinction has led to inappropriate psychological testing of bilingual students and premature exit from bilingual or ESL support programs into "mainstream" classes where students received minimal support for continued academic language development. In other words, the conceptual distinction between conversational and academic language proficiency highlighted misconceptions about the nature of language proficiency that were contributing directly to the creation of academic failure among bilingual students.

Critiques of the Conversational/Academic Language Distinction

Early critiques of the conversational/academic distinction were advanced by Carole Edelsky and her colleagues (Edelsky et al., 1983) and in a volume edited by Charlene Rivera (1984). These critiques were responded to and will not be discussed in depth in this paper (see Cummins & Swain, 1983). Edelsky (1990) later reiterated and reformulated her critique and other critiques were advanced by Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986) and Romaine (1990). More recently, Terrence Wiley (1996) has provided a detailed review and critique.

The major criticisms in these and other critiques are as follows:

- The conversational/academic language distinction reflects an autonomous perspective on language that ignores its location in social practices and power relations (Edelsky et al., 1983; Romaine, 1990; Troike, 1984; Wald, 1984; Wiley, 1997).
- CALP or academic language proficiency represents little more than “test-wiseness” - it is an artifact of the inappropriate way in which it has been measured (Edelsky et al., 1983).
- The notion of CALP promotes a “deficit theory” insofar as it attributes the academic failure of bilingual/minority students to low cognitive/academic proficiency rather than to inappropriate schooling; in this respect it is no different than notions such as “semilingualism” (Edelsky, 1990; Edelsky et al., 1983; Martin-Jones & Romaine, 1986).

I will outline in more detail the points raised by Edelsky (1990) and Wiley (1996) as representative of the general orientation of these critiques.

Edelsky’s (1990) critique. Consistent with her previous critique (Edelsky et al., 1983), Edelsky disputes the legitimacy of the constructs of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) and basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS). She argues that CALP consists of little more than test-taking skills and the construct encourages skills-oriented instruction, thereby impeding the literacy development of bilingual students who will thrive only in meaning-oriented whole-language instructional contexts. The tone and substance of her critique can be gauged from the following extracts:

The fundamental problem with all versions of Cummins’ THEORY is that it is premised on an

erroneous, psychologically derived 'theory' of the nature of reading—a conception of reading as consisting of separate skills with discrete components of language. What counts as either reading-in-action or as evidence of reading ability is 'reading skills'. These are demonstrated by performance in miscontextualized tasks (performed for the sole purpose of either demonstrating proficiency or complying with the assignment) or on tests whose scores are presumed to represent some supposedly context-free reading ability. (pp. 60-61)

Despite Cummins' occasional use of 'whole language' terminology (e.g. 'inferring', 'predicting' 'large chunks of discourse'), his underlying skills orientation shows through. (p. 61)... he uses a discourse of empowerment and puts forward a set of suggestions that implicitly contradict his 'theory' of reading as consisting of separate skills (Cummins, 1986). ... And Cummins uses the right rhetoric. He talks of students setting their own goals and generating their own knowledge and he mentions congruent educational practice... Even so, the separate skills 'theory' slips out and he contradicts his own message. For example, for empirical support, he relies heavily on test score data that can only provide evidence of how well students perform on skill exercises. He applauds and describes at length programs that operate according to a skills 'theory'. For instance, he talks of two programs that make language or cultural accommodations which benefit minority language children by helping them attain readiness or success. Readiness for what? For the academic tasks of the traditional kindergartens the children will enter in California. Success at what? Success in doing reading exercises in tests and basal reading lessons in Hawaii. (p. 62)

What Edelsky is referring to here is reference to two programs that incorporated many of the characteristics that I postulated were necessary to challenge coercive power structures in school. One was the bilingual preschool program in Carpinteria that used Spanish as the predominant language of instruction and attempted to incorporate children's cultural background experience into the design of the program which was strongly child-centered (Campos & Keatinge, 1988). The other was the Kamehameha program in Hawaii that dramatically improved native Hawaiian children's reading performance by incorporating culturally-familiar communal story-construction patterns into reading instruction (Au & Jordan, 1981).

According to Edelsky the theoretical constructs "gained popularity so fast and was so effective in influencing policy" (p. 63) because they reinforced ideas that "undergird predominant thinking about education in North America" namely "[t]hat written language consists of separate skills, that curriculum should teach those skills, that tests can assess them" (p. 63).

Edelsky points out that in disputing the constructs of CALP and BICS, she is not claiming that all children are equally competent. She also points out that she does not believe that proficiency with *any* language variety, in either oral or written modes, enables one to do *everything* humanly possible with language (p. 65):

Though *potentially* equal, at any given historical moment different language repertoires (including literate repertoires) of particular speech communities are unequally efficient for all purposes and even then, unequally assigned to members. ... However, the nature of those repertoires, their functions, their meanings, and their inequalities must be determined by ethnographies of speaking and of literacy, not by differential performance in one (testing) context that is subject to criticism on multiple grounds. (p. 65)

She is explicit about how she views the construct of cognitive academic language proficiency: it is nothing more than "test-wiseness" (p. 65) or what she terms "skill in instructional nonsense" (SIN). Any research that has used any form of "test," whether standardized reading measures or non-standardized measures of any kind of cognitive performance is dismissed. For example, in referring to Gordon Wells' (1986) documentation of the relation between exposure to literacy at home and subsequent literacy performance in school she notes: "In fact, from the use he makes of Wells' research, Cummins seems to interpret the social grounding of CALP to mean no more than a correlation between test scores and certain kinds of home interactions" (p. 68). It is not surprising to her that support for the theoretical constructs of CALP and BICS would come

... almost entirely from studies using tests of separate so-called reading skills. (No wonder. His small parts, psychometric orientation that views all human activity as first divisible into atomized skills and then measurable would certainly lead him to prefer such evidence. (p. 61)

Edelsky concludes her critique by rejecting theories that locate "failure in children's heads (in their IQ, their language deficits, their cognitive deficits, their learning styles, their underdeveloped CALP)."

Response to the Critique. A first point to note is that there is nothing new in the Edelsky (1990) critique that was not already in the Edelsky et al. (1983) critique. The only difference is that any elaboration of the sociopolitical determinants of students' academic difficulties is dismissed as suffering from "internal contradictions." The same charge is leveled against any explication of the pedagogical implications of the theoretical framework which attempt to go beyond apolitical one-size-fits-all whole language approaches towards transformative or critical pedagogy (Cummins, 1986, 1996; see also Delpit, 1988, and Reyes, 1992, for critiques of whole language from progressive educators).

To set the record straight, the sociopolitical and instructional implications of the theoretical framework which Edelsky dismisses as internally contradictory were expressed in 1986 as follows:

Sociopolitical perspective:

Minority students are disabled or empowered in schools in very much the same way that their communities are disempowered in interactions with societal institutions. ... This analysis implies that minority students will succeed educationally to the extent that the patterns of interaction in school reverse those that prevail in the society at large. (p. 24)

Given the societal commitment to maintaining the dominant/dominated power relationships, we can predict that educational changes threatening this structure will be fiercely resisted. (p. 34)

Instructional perspective:

A central tenet of the reciprocal interaction model is that “talking and writing are means to learning” (Bullock Report, 1975, p. 50). ... This model emphasizes the development of higher level cognitive skills rather than just factual recall, and meaningful language use by students rather than correction of surface forms. Language use and development are consciously integrated with all curricular content rather than taught as isolated subjects, and tasks are presented to students in ways that generate intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation. In short, pedagogical approaches that empower students encourage them to assume greater control over setting their own learning goals and to collaborate actively with each other in achieving these goals (p. 29)

In terms of the quadrants outlined in Figure 1, these approaches fall into quadrant B (cognitively demanding, context embedded). In later work, I have emphasized the importance of going beyond whole language or “progressive pedagogy” as illustrated in the quotation below:

Transformative pedagogy uses collaborative critical inquiry to enable students to relate curriculum content to their individual and collective experience and to analyze broader social issues relevant to their lives. It also encourages students to discuss ways in which social realities might be transformed through various forms of democratic participation and social action.

Thus, transformative pedagogy will aim to go beyond the sanitized curriculum that is still the norm in many schools. It will attempt to promote students’ ability to analyze and understand the social realities of their own lives and of their communities. It will strive to develop a critical literacy... (1996, p. 157)

So how are these perspectives “internally contradictory” with the conversational/academic language distinction and with the dimensions outlined in Figure 1? *They are not in any way contradictory.* The construct of academic language proficiency does not in any way depend on test scores as support for either its construct validity or relevance to education. Three out of four sources of evidence cited above make no mention of test scores. The obvious differences between 6-year-old and 16-year-old monolingual students in multiple aspects of literacy-related knowledge (assessed by *any* criterion) illustrate this reality as does Corson’s analysis of the lexicon of English and Biber’s analysis of more than one million words of English speech and written text (although Biber’s work might be suspect to Edelsky since he did use psychometric tools to analyze relationships among words and their linguistic and social contexts of use).

Edelsky’s vehement dismissal of any test used for any purpose in any context and her adamant endorsement of only one way of collecting data on language proficiency (through ethnographies of speaking and literacy) might appear to some researchers as extreme. To others it might appear as a fundamentalist approach which recognizes only one truth and adopts an “off with their heads” attitude to other perspectives. There are very few researchers in the area of bilingual education (or any other area of educational research) who, on ideological grounds, have refused to even cite research that used statistics or that involved formal testing of academic progress.

A characteristic of fundamentalist approaches to any topic or belief system is that attempts at dialogue tend not to progress very far. This is illustrated in the fact that Edelsky (1990) makes no attempt to respond to the rebuttals of the Edelsky et al. (1983) position advanced by Cummins and Swain (1983). We made three basic points in response to the arguments that the CALP/BICS distinction entailed a “deficit position” that blamed the victim by attributing school failure to “low CALP” and furthermore that it promoted a “skills” approach to pedagogy that would further victimize minority group students. We

suggested:

- That rational discussion of which theories constitute 'deficit theories' require *explicit criteria* of what constitutes a 'deficit theory'; for example, does it constitute a "deficit theory" to note, as many researchers and theorists have done (e.g. Wells, 1981), that middle class children tend to have more experience of books than low-income students when they come to school and that this gives them access to a greater range of language functions and registers that are relevant to the ways schools tend to teach initial literacy? In this case, children's linguistic experience and the consequent earlier access to certain registers of language is seen as an intervening variable that interacts with patterns of instruction at school. Is any positing of learner attributes and linguistic experience as an intervening variable a deficit theory?
- That universal condemnation of all formal test situations is simplistic and fails to account for considerable data documenting strong positive relationships between reading test scores and "authentic" assessment measures such as miscue analysis and cloze procedures. We pointed out that "if cloze tests are to be dismissed as 'irrelevant nonsense' then this surely merits some comment in view of their widespread use and acceptance among applied linguists" (1983, p. 28) including Sarah Hudelson, one of Edelsky's co-authors.
- That when language proficiency or CALP "is discussed as part of a causal chain, it is *never* discussed as an isolated causal factor (as Edelsky et al. consistently depict it) but rather as *one of a number* of individual learner attributes which are determined by societal influences and which interact with educational treatment factors in affecting academic progress" (p. 31). In other words, language proficiency was always seen as *an intervening variable* rather than an autonomous causal variable; it develops through social interaction in home and school.

To deny this essentially Vygotskian perspective on language and academic development, one has to either adopt an extreme Chomskian perspective that identifies "language proficiency" as Universal Grammar and immune from virtually all social interactional and environmental influence or claim that a student's language proficiency in a particular language has no relationship to that student's ability to benefit from instruction in that language.

Edelsky's (1990) failure to define what she means by a deficit position, explain how "authentic" measures of reading are so closely related to "skill in instructional nonsense," and discuss the extent to which, within her belief system, there is a place for any construct of "language proficiency" and if so how it relates to academic progress (intervening variable, "causal" variable, totally unrelated?) suggests that she is more interested in rhetoric than dialogue.

A more open approach would admit that there is no contradiction between the conception of "language proficiency" outlined in the early part of this paper and a theoretical framework that

- identifies coercive power relations as the causal factors in the underachievement of subordinated group students; and

- promotes transformative pedagogy as a central component in challenging these coercive relations of power in the classroom.

In fact, the distinction between conversational and academic dimensions of proficiency has been instrumental in highlighting both how standardized tests (e.g. IQ tests used in psychological assessment) and premature exit from bilingual programs on the basis of conversational rather than academic development in English have contributed to the perpetuation of coercive power relations in the educational system. A balanced critique would have acknowledged the impact of the conversational/academic distinction in highlighting these realities.

A final issue concerns Edelsky's dismissal of the efforts of dedicated educators in Carpinteria and Hawaii (and countless other programs that have used standardized tests as one way of documenting student progress and establishing credibility to skeptical policy-makers and the general public). While the offensive tone of this dismissal is probably unintended, it illustrates the consequences of adopting a one-dimensional perspective on the contradictions encountered by educators attempting to create contexts of empowerment in the real world of classrooms and schools.

Wiley's (1996) critique. Wiley's critique forms a chapter in his useful volume *Literacy and Language Diversity in the United States*. The critique derives from a basic distinction he makes between different orientations to literacy. Specifically, he contrasts the *autonomous approach* with the *ideological approach*. The former is described as follows:

The autonomous approach to literacy tends to focus on formal mental properties of decoding and encoding text, excluding analyses of how these processes are used within social contexts. The success of the learner in acquiring literacy is seen as correlating with individual psychological processes. ... Those operating within the autonomous approach see literacy as having "cognitive consequences" at both the individual and societal level... An autonomous perspective largely ignores the historical and sociopolitical contexts in which individuals live and differences in power and resources between groups. (p. 31)

By contrast, in the ideological approach advanced by Street (1993) and critical pedagogy theorists (e.g. Freire, 1970) "literacy is viewed as a set of practices that are inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in the society (p. 32). From this perspective, literacy problems are seen as related to social stratification and to gaps in power and resources between groups. The role of schools in reinforcing this stratification is expressed as follows:

Because schools are the principal institutions responsible for developing literacy, they are seen as embedded within larger sociopolitical contexts. Because some groups succeed in school while others fail, the ideological approach scrutinizes the way in which literacy development is carried out. It looks at the implicit biases in schools that can privilege some groups to the exclusion of

others. Finally, the social practices approach values literacy programs and policies that are built on the knowledge and resources people already have. (p. 33)

Wiley's major concern is that constructs such as BICS/CALP or conversational/academic language and the contextual and cognitive dimensions outlined in Figure 1 appear to invoke an autonomous orientation to language and literacy that isolates language and literacy practices from their sociocultural and sociopolitical context. He concurs with the critiques of Edelsky et al. (1983) that the construct of CALP relies on inauthentic test data and cites Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986, p. 30) that the distinction between CALP and BICS is suspect

...if both are seen as independent of rather than shaped by the language context in which they are acquired and used... The type of literacy-related skills described by Cummins are, in fact, quite culture-specific: that is, they are specific to the cultural setting of the school.

Wiley is also concerned about the higher status supposedly assigned to academic as compared to conversational language:

Notions of academic language proficiency and decontextualization, as they are often used, are particularly problematic because they confound language with schooling and equate a higher cognitive status to the language and literacy practices of school. Academic language proficiency seems to equate broadly with schooling. Schooling is not a neutral process. It involves class and culturally specific forms of socialization. (p. 183)

Finally, Wiley criticizes the "simplistic" but "well-intentioned" ways in which practitioners have attempted to operationalize the kinds of language tasks/activities that would fall into the four quadrants of Figure 1. He gives one set of examples of such tasks/activities used for professional development in California which he describes as "value laden and arbitrary" with categorization of tasks which is "confused and inaccurate." He points out that "[p]rofessional development materials such as these illustrate the limitations of applying constructs in practice that have not been fully elaborated at the theoretical level."

Wiley concludes that it is "necessary to rid the framework of those constructs that are compatible with an autonomous view of language use. ... It would require focusing more on social than on cognitive factors affecting language development (Troike, 1984) and on the cultural factors that affect language and literacy practices in the schools" (p. 178).

Response to the Critique. Wiley's analysis suffers from a rigid "either-or" perspective on what forms of inquiry are appropriate in the area of literacy and schooling. Either an approach is autonomous or it is ideological but it can't be both, or draw from each tradition in order to address different kinds of questions. Linked to this is a prescriptivism which, although much less strident than Edelsky's (1990), suggests that only questions deriving from an ideological perspective can and should be asked.

This rigid dichotomy leads him to largely ignore the fact that the theoretical constructs associated with the notion of language proficiency (e.g. as outlined in Figure 1) have been integrated since 1986 with a detailed sociopolitical analysis of how schools construct academic failure among subordinated groups. This framework (Cummins, 1986, 1989, 1996) analyzes how coercive relations of power in the wider society ("macro-interactions") affect both educator role definitions and educational structures which, in turn, result in patterns of "micro-interactions" between educators and subordinated group students that have constricted students' academic language development and identity formation. The framework documents educational approaches that challenge this pattern of coercive power relations and promote the generation of power in the micro-interactions between educators and students.

This framework, however, does not regard "language proficiency" as irrelevant to the schooling of subordinated group students. I believe that, in order to analyze how power relations operate in the real world of schooling, it is crucial to ask questions such as "How long does it take second language learners to catch up to native speakers in English academic development?" The data showing that five years are minimally required to bridge this gap continue to provide bilingual educators with a powerful rebuttal to efforts to deny students access to bilingual programs or exit them rapidly from support services whether bilingual or English-only. Yet, Wiley would presumably classify this question as deriving from an "autonomous" perspective.

I also believe that it is legitimate to ask "What forms of proficiency in English do bilingual students need to survive academically in all-English classrooms after they have been transitioned out of bilingual programs?" This question would also fall into the "autonomous" category of the artificial either-or dichotomy that Wiley constructs. The conversational/academic language proficiency distinction has been instrumental in helping educators understand why students transitioned on the basis of conversational fluency in English frequently experience severe academic difficulties in all-English mainstream classrooms.

The same issue surfaces with respect to the assessment of bilingual children for special education purposes. The BICS/CALP distinction highlighted the fact that psychological assessment in English was considered appropriate by psychologists and teachers when students had gained conversational fluency in English but frequently were far from their native English-speaking peers in academic English development (Cummins, 1984).

Wiley's dichotomy would also consign any question regarding how language and cognition intersect (in either monolingual or multilingual individuals) to the garbage heap of scientific inquiry. All of the research studies documenting that acquisition of bilingualism in childhood entails no adverse cognitive consequences for children and, in fact, is associated with more advanced awareness of language and ability to analyze language would also be castigated as reflecting an "autonomous" perspective.

It is also legitimate, I believe, to ask how linguistic interactions in home and school, and interactions related to print, affect children's linguistic, cognitive, and academic development. These interactions take place within a sociocultural and sociopolitical context but their effects are still linguistic, academic, and cognitive. A student from a bilingual background who does not understand the language of instruction in school and receives no support to enable him or her to do so is unlikely to develop high levels of academic or literacy skills in either first or second language.

The list of questions could go on. The point I want to make is that within the framework I have proposed, "language proficiency" is seen as an *intervening variable* that mediates children's academic development. It is not in any sense "autonomous" or independent of the sociocultural context. I fully agree with Martin-Jones and Romaine's point that the development of conversational and academic aspects of proficiency are "shaped by the language context in which they are acquired and used" and that academic language is "specific to the cultural setting of the school." Their claim that the BICS/CALP distinction proposes otherwise is without foundation. A central aspect of the framework, in fact, is that language proficiency is shaped by the patterns and contexts of educator-student interaction in the

school and will, in turn, mediate the further outcomes of schooling.

The claim that the BICS/CALP distinction ascribes a superior status to academic language as compared to conversational has already been addressed above. No form of language is cognitively or linguistically superior to any other in any absolute sense outside of particular contexts. However, within the context of school, knowledge of academic language (e.g. the Graeco-Latin lexicon of written English text) is clearly relevant to educational success and adds a crucial dimension to conversational fluency in understanding how "language proficiency" relates to academic achievement.. Wiley, like Martin-Jones and Romaine, take a conceptual distinction that was addressed only to issues of schooling, and criticize it on the grounds that this distinction is "specific only to the cultural setting of the school." They seriously misrepresent the distinction when they label it "autonomous" or "independent" of particular contexts..

An inconsistency in Wiley's attitude to "inauthentic test data" should be noted. He suggests (p. 167) that there is a major concern regarding the authenticity of using school-test data as a means of determining language proficiencies. I would agree. School-test data attempt to assess certain kinds of language proficiencies but often do it very inadequately without regard to cultural and linguistic biases in the test instruments, as the study of psychological test data demonstrated (Cummins, 1984). However, in view of Wiley's dismissal of school-test data as even a partial basis for constructing theory, it is surprising to see him invoke exactly this type of data to assert that "[t]here is an ever-growing body of evidence that bilingual education is effective in promoting literacy and academic achievement among children when adequate resources are provided" (p. 153). Virtually all of this evidence derives from "inauthentic" standardized test data. For example, among the references cited to back up this claim are Ramirez (1992) and Krashen and Biber (1988) who relied almost exclusively on standardized test data to support their claims for the effectiveness of bilingual education.

A final point concerns Wiley's unease with the "simplistic," "confused and inaccurate" interpretations by some practitioners of what kinds of language task or activities would fall into the four quadrants of Figure 1. He fails to appreciate that the quadrants represent a visual metaphor that incorporates hypotheses about the dimensions underlying various kinds of language performance. It makes linkages between the theoretical literature on the nature of proficiency in a language and specific instructional and policy issues faced on a daily basis by educators working with bilingual learners (e.g. how much "English proficiency" do children need to participate effectively in an all-English classroom?). It attempts to provide tentative answers to certain questions such as why certain kinds of "English proficiency" are acquired to peer-appropriate levels relatively quickly while a longer period is required for other aspects of proficiency. However, it was also intended as a heuristic tool to stimulate discussion regarding the linguistic and cognitive challenges posed by different academic tasks and subject matter content and in both the British and North American context it has been effective in this regard (e.g. Frederickson & Cline, 1996). Thus, it risks appearing condescending to dismiss as "simplistic" the efforts of educators to use the framework as a tool to discuss, and attempt to better understand, the linguistic challenges their students face.

In summary, Wiley's basic point is that the theoretical construction of language and literacy and prescriptions regarding how they should be taught are never neutral with respect to societal power relations. An "ideological" approach is fundamental to understanding literacy development, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts. I am in full agreement with this perspective and have attempted to highlight how coercive power relations affect the development of language and literacy among bilingual students. However, there are also many important and legitimate questions regarding the nature of language proficiency, the developmental patterns of its various components, and the relationships among language proficiency, cognitive development, and academic progress, that cannot be totally reduced to "ideological" or sociopolitical questions. To dismiss these issues as reflecting an "autonomous" orientation and to demand that any traces of such an orientation be purged from theoretical approaches to literacy is not only to dismiss much of the entire disciplines of psychology and applied linguistics but it also reflects a misunderstanding of the nature of intervening or mediating variables. There is absolutely no internal inconsistency in asking questions about the nature of the

relationships between language, bilingualism, cognition, and academic achievement within the broader context of a sociopolitical causal model.

Conclusion

Although much of the discussion in this paper has revolved around theoretical issues relating to language proficiency and how it relates to academic development, my primary goal has been to clarify misconceptions regarding these issues so that policy-makers and educators can re-focus on the issue of how to promote academic language development effectively among bilingual children. If academic language proficiency or CALP is accepted as a valid construct then certain instructional implications follow. In the first place, as Stephen Krashen (1993) has repeatedly emphasized, extensive reading is crucial for academic development since academic language is found primarily in written text. If bilingual students are not reading extensively, they are not getting access to the language of academic success. Opportunities for collaborative learning and talk about text are also relevant in helping students internalize and more fully comprehend the academic language they find in their extensive reading of text.

Writing is also crucial because when bilingual students write about issues that matter to them they not only consolidate aspects of the academic language they have been reading, they also express their identities through language and (hopefully) receive feedback from teachers and others that will affirm and further develop their expression of self.

In general, the instructional implications of the framework within bilingual programs can be expressed in terms of the three components of the construct of CALP:

Cognitive - instruction should be cognitively challenging and require students to use higher-order thinking abilities rather than the low-level memorization and application skills that are tapped by typical worksheets or drill-and-practice computer programs;

Academic - academic content (science, math, social studies, art etc.) should be integrated with language instruction so that students acquire the specific language of these academic registers.

Language - the development of critical language awareness should be fostered throughout the program by encouraging students to compare and contrast their languages (e.g. phonics conventions, grammar, cognates, etc.) and by providing students with extensive opportunities to carry out projects investigating their own and their community's language use, practices, and assumptions (e.g. in relation to the status of different varieties).

In short, instruction within a strong bilingual program should provide a *Focus on Message*, a *Focus on Language*, and a *Focus on Use* in both languages (Cummins, in press). We know our program is effective, and developing CALP, if we can say with confidence that our students are generating new

knowledge, creating literature and art, and acting on social realities that affect their lives. These are the kinds of (quadrant B) instructional activities that the conversational/academic language distinction is intended to foster.

Footnote

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