

Big Idea: Teaching English language learners requires knowledge of what it means to become proficient in another language and what can be expected at each level of proficiency.

What do I need to know about English language learners and language acquisition?

This learning guide is designed for use by instructional leaders and learning communities or as a self-paced study to explore Strategies for Supporting English Language Learners.

This learning guide is intended for use after viewing the video:

It is important to get to know each student's background, culture, primary language, educational background and interests, as well as whether they are proficient in their first language. We know that acquiring an additional language is more likely to be successful if there is a strong first language.

Key understandings:

- Educators must determine a student's level of proficiency of English to effectively plan instruction. The Alberta ESL Proficiency Benchmarks can be used as a guide.
- Language acquisition involves conversational fluency (BICS) and academic fluency (CALP). Conversational fluency is acquired within 1-2 years of arrival; whereas academic fluency takes up to 7 years to acquire.
- The acquisition of cognitive academic language requires support in the classroom; it cannot be left to chance encounters and mere exposure to academic English. The development and use of academic language will contribute to a student's long-term success at school.
- Additional languages are more easily acquired if the student has a solid proficiency in the first language.

Questions for discussion:

- How could the distinction between BICS and CALP influence policy and practice in your school? In your classroom? (e.g. of answers: awareness of time needed to acquire another language, efforts to make academic content context-embedded, changing the classroom environment to accommodate academic learning for ELLs, incorporating academic vocabulary teaching to help ELLs catch up), less psychological testing for learning disabilities)
- What changes could you make to your classroom to accelerate the acquisition of academic language?
- How have you welcomed ELLs in your school? How do you build a relationship with your ELLs?

For more information:

- Alberta Education ESL Proficiency Benchmarks: www.learnalberta.ca
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon, OH: Multilingual Matters
- Cummins, J. (2001). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society* (2nd ed.) Los Angeles: Association for Bilingual Education
- Freeman, Y. & Freeman, D. (2003). Struggling English language learners: Keys for academic success. *TESOL Journal*, 12(3), 5-10.

Acknowledgement:

At This Consortium and funded through a grant from Alberta Education to support implementation. It is freely provided in support of improved teaching and learning under the following Creative Commons

