Second language instructional competence
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Recent developments in education policy in the USA have focused attention on language and literacy, especially for bilingual learners, in US schools. More specifically, these efforts, prominently related to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), focus on the development of ‘academic English’ for immigrant students. The focus on language in school contexts has renewed interest in the classic Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)/Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) distinction. The article reviews the BICS/CALP distinction in relation to other dichotomies of language proficiency, and promotes an alternative view of language development in school for bilingual children known as second language instructional competence, or SLIC. While SLIC has seemed useful to many in the field, there is a need for further theoretical development of the concept, with attention to how SLIC, rather than the BICS/CALP dichotomy, might usefully guide effective teaching for second language learners in US schools. A theory of language in school, in relation to monolingual and bilingual speakers with developing second language proficiency, is proposed, drawing on recent work in language minority education and second language acquisition.

Keywords: BICS; CALP; SLIC; second language instructional competence; second language acquisition; interaction hypothesis; linguistic deficit theory

Recent developments in education policy in the USA have focused attention on language and literacy, especially for bilingual learners, in US schools. More specifically, these efforts, prominently related to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), focus on the development of ‘academic English’ for immigrant students (Wiley and Rolstad 2014), with some going so far as to advocate that English language learners (ELLs) be called ‘academic English learners’ or AELs (Zwiers, O’Hara, and Pritchard 2014). As Bailey and Huang (2011) have noted, ‘The BICS/CALP distinction proposed by Cummins (1979, 1980) serves as the precursor to many subsequent views of academic English’ (349) which underlie current objectives of the CCSS.

Spurred by the CCSS, Anstrom et al. (2010) conducted an extensive review of research on academic English as it relates to language minority students, noting the early influence of Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) and Cummins (1986), among

An alternative to the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)/Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) dichotomy, second language instructional competence (SLIC), as proposed in MacSwan and Rolstad (2003) and elaborated in Rolstad (2005) and Rolstad and MacSwan (2008), has been widely referenced as a potential improvement in our conceptual framework for language development among bilingual learners; the framework is discussed or used in Crawford (2004), Edelsky (2006), Crawford and Krashen (2007), Johnson (2009, 2011, 2014), Windle (2009), Cantone and Haberzetl (2008, 2009), Wright (2010), Babyi (2011), Baker (2011), Farrell (2011), Cantone (2012), Chadwick (2012), Henn-Reinke (2012), Hult (2014), and Petrovic (2014), among others. While SLIC has seemed useful to many in the field, there is a need for further theoretical development of the concept, with attention to how SLIC, rather than the BICS/CALP dichotomy, might usefully guide effective teaching for second language learners in US schools in the context of current reform agendas.

SLIC conceptualizes the language of school not as a developmentally related, improved version of language used in out-of-school contexts, but as the language of a particular set of overlapping linguistic communities – collectives of language users pursuing common interests and engaged in common practices.

**Linguistic communities**

Typical children succeed in acquiring the language of their speech communities quickly and in the absence of any apparent instruction (Pinker 1994; Clark 2009). They acquire new words at an astounding rate during the most active periods of acquisition, and acquire highly specific syntactic knowledge, often in the absence of relevant experience (Berwick, Chomsky, and Piattelli-Palmarini 2012). Indeed, by the time they arrive at school, children have already learned most of the rules of their home language, and possess an essentially adult-like grammar (Tager-Flusberg 1997; MacSwan 2000; Clark 2009). Children’s biological endowment for language underlies these special linguistic achievements, and suggests that all children should be linguistically successful, regardless of their social status (Gee 2001, 2014, MacSwan and Rolstad 2010). Language acquisition is ‘something that happens to a child, not that the child does’ (Chomsky 2000, 8).

Literacy and other school subjects make use of a child’s inherent language ability, but these are very different in nature from language itself (MacSwan 2000; Gee 2004). Humans acquire their first languages instinctively, upon exposure. Academic achievement, on the other hand, is diversely represented across a broad range of subjects; each
denotes a context-specific domain of knowledge (MacSwan 2000) or ‘specialized language’ (Gee 2004), but the knowledge and language used to talk about it should not be understood as special, improved versions of out-of-school knowledge and language (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005; MacSwan and Rolstad 2010). While all typical children develop language, not all children will come to know specific facts about geography, history, or physics.

As such, languages vary within and across communities, generating language varieties. Some varieties have higher social prestige than others, but the prestige associated with a specific language variety results from social and political forces, and does not reflect linguistic or cognitive ‘development’. School is one social/situational context in which language is used and shaped, but the language we use in that context is itself no more complex than any other variety (MacSwan and Rolstad 2010; Wiley and Rolstad 2014; Rolstad, MacSwan, and Guzman 2015). This perspective, known to linguists and anthropologists as linguistic egalitarianism (Newmeyer 1986), has unfortunately had limited impact on intellectual traditions rooted in educational psychology (Labov 1970; Rolstad 2004). Instead, many within education and psychology have posited dichotomies of language proficiency – representing linguistic differences as linguistically different ability levels – to explain school failure among children in disadvantaged communities, cutting across both monolingual and bilingual communities.

**Dichotomies of language proficiency**

Scholars seeking to make sense of the school experiences of minority students have often posited dichotomies of language proficiency as a lens through which academic – and ultimately socioeconomic – outcomes should be understood. Often, such distinctions have been met with critique noting their proximity to common language prejudice. Dittmar (1976) identified Schatzmann and Strauss’ 1955 study as among the first modern versions of the linguistic deficit theory, the notion that language abilities of some social groups are inherently deficient when compared to the abilities of other groups. Schatzmann and Strauss (1955) reported that lower class speakers they interviewed following a disaster heavily employed emotional language that made use of ‘elliptical syntax’, conveying meaning only ‘implicitly’, while the educated classes interviewed in their study conveyed meaning ‘explicitly’. A similar and better-known theory was Bernstein’s (1971) public/formal language dichotomy, later dubbed the restricted/elaborated code distinction. Like Schatzmann and Strauss (1955), Bernstein studied speakers of a socially stigmatized dialect, and determined that their speech accessed ‘restricted code’ but not ‘elaborated code’. For Bernstein (1971), ‘restricted code’ was characterized by ‘fragmentation and logical simplicity’, whereas ‘formal language’ or ‘elaborated code’ expressed ‘universal meaning’. The appropriate remediation would ‘preserve public language usage’ but additionally enable speakers to use ‘a formal language’.

Bernstein understood differences in ‘codes’ to be about performance, or language use, not competence, or linguistic knowledge, in Chomsky’s (1965) sense. He thus saw differences between the language of the poor and the language of the educated classes as a matter of choice and use, not grammar. Despite his efforts to navigate these complexities, Bernstein’s view of language nonetheless appears to be representative of the Deficit Hypothesis because, as Dittmar (1976) observed, he sees the
characteristics of what is generally believed to be ‘better speech’ to be exactly those characteristics which poor people lack.

Bereiter and colleagues (Bereiter and Engelmann 1966; Bereiter et al. 1966) similarly sought to relate African-American Vernacular English to the poor educational achievement of African-American school children. Bereiter and colleagues reported that the four-year-olds in their study communicated by gestures, ‘single words’, and ‘a series of badly connected words or phrases’. These children could ‘without exaggeration … make no statements of any kind’, and could not ask questions, according to them.

Of particular significance was the expectation in the study that children answer in complete sentences. In response to the question ‘Where is the squirrel?’ Bereiter’s subjects tended to answer ‘In the tree’ – a response Bereiter characterized as illogical and badly formed. As Labov (1970) pointed out in a scathing critique, the response ‘In the tree’ is the natural response in this context, and the one that anybody would use under normal circumstances – except, perhaps, in the context of an academic exercise. Labov (1970) concluded his review of Bereiter and colleagues’ work with a strong rebuke: ‘That educational psychology should be strongly influenced by a theory so false to the facts of language is unfortunate; but that children should be the victims of this ignorance is intolerable’ (187).

Similar taxonomies were being developed in research on literacy, positing a cognitive divide between literates and non-literates, as proposed in Havelock (1963), Goody and Watt (1963), Goody (1977), and Ong (1982) (see Lankshear 1999, for discussion). More specifically, Ong (1982) argued that members of oral cultures must resort to contextualizing their knowledge in the immediate world of concrete and shared experience, whereas writing among literates allows for abstract thinking; Olson (1977) made similar claims, arguing that oral language is more ‘context embedded’ or ‘context dependent’ than text.

This tradition, known as ‘the Great Divide’ (Wiley 2005; Wiley and Rolstad 2014), mirrors the BICS/CALP distinction and related constructs such as contextually embedded/reduced language and cognitively demanding/undemanding language (Cummins 1981, 2013). Indeed, Cummins has identified the work of Donaldson (1978) and Olson (1977) as representing ‘related frameworks’ (Cummins 1981, 17); specifically, his work builds on their view of oral language as less cognitively demanding than literate or academic language because it relies on the use of extra-linguistic and non-linguistic cues. Although Cummins is cautious to present his work as reflecting a continuum rather than a dichotomy, it is typically presented as dichotomous in nature, and tightly related to the academic/non-academic language distinction embedded in the CCSS (Bailey and Huang 2011; TESOL International Association 2013; Wiley and Rolstad 2014).

Although Cummins’s BICS/CALP distinction persuaded many educators against prematurely mainstreaming bilingual learners, a number of researchers responded with concerns; early critical responses were due to Edelsky et al. (1983), Genesee (1984), Spolsky (1984), Troike (1984), and Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986). Although the BICS/CALP distinction was specifically developed in relation to bilingual learners for whom English was an additional language, the distinction was seen as fundamentally relevant to the first language of immigrant students.

Specifically, Cummins identifies ‘schooling and literacy’ as the agency by which a more advanced stage of language development, called CALP or ‘academic language’,
is reached, echoing Havelock (1963), Goody and Watt (1963), Goody (1977), and Ong (1982). As Cummins puts it, specifically in reference to children’s first language:

In monolingual contexts, the [BICS/CALP] 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 the age of 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. (Cummins 2000a, 63)

Reflecting the perspective of Schatzmann and Strauss (1955), Bernstein (1971), and Bereiter and colleagues (Bereiter and Engelmann 1966; Bereiter et al. 1966), Cummins posited qualitative distinctions between the language used in school, typical of the educated classes, and language used in other contexts and typical of poor and working class children:

Considerably less knowledge of language itself is usually required to function appropriately in interpersonal communicative situations than is required in academic situations. … In comparison to interpersonal conversation, the language of text usually involves much more low frequency vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, and greater demands on memory, analysis, and other cognitive processes (Cummins 2000b, 35–36).

Moreover, Cummins sees academic language proficiency as ‘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 such as gestures and intonations’ (Cummins 2000a, 59).

A number of scholars have treated the BICS/CALP dichotomy as a deficit theory (Edelsky et al. 1983; Martin-Jones and Romaine 1986; Romaine, 1995; Wiley 1996, 2005; MacSwan and Rolstad 2003, 2006, 2010; Valdés, MacSwan, and Alvarez 2009; Petrovic 2012, 2014; Valdés 2013; Gee 2014). Valencia (1997) defined a deficit theory as holding ‘that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies … [evident] in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn and immoral behavior’ (2). These deficiencies are typically transmitted through genetics, culture, class, and familial socialization, Valencia (1997) notes. Because acquiring a language is an inherent human ability that reflects our identities and communities, dichotomizing levels of proficiency in the first language context appears to do exactly what Valencia warned against: It attempts to explain failure at school as a ‘low ability level’ in the child’s knowledge of the first language. Cummins did not intend these consequences, and has vigorously defended the BICS/CALP distinction against claims that it represents a deficit theory (Cummins and Swain 1983; Cummins 2000b, 2003).

For Cummins, like others who have posited dichotomies of language proficiency, school is seen as having a special effect on language development, such that language used in school is believed to have greater complexity and expressiveness than language used in other contexts. Furthermore, a very important feature of the BICS/CALP dichotomy, which often goes unnoticed, is that it is as relevant to the monolingual context as it is to bilingual learners for Cummins. The distinction does not guide our understanding of children’s progression through stages of second language
acquisition (SLA), but through their linguistic development from simple ‘conversational language’ to ‘academic language’. As I will discuss in the next section, SLIC relates only to the second language context, and accepts children’s community languages as resources, viewed as inherently as rich, complex, and expressive as any other language variety.

Second language instructional competence

Majority language children are expected to master subjects such as science, mathematics, and social studies in school, while minority language children have the additional need to learn the language of instruction. Bilingual education, known to be more effective at improving schooling for dual language learners than alternative English-only approaches (Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass 2005), allows children to learn school subjects through their home language while simultaneously learning a second language. As Krashen (1996) has pointed out, bilingual education not only helps children develop knowledge of school subjects, but also provides important ‘background knowledge’ which serves as a context to better understand English-medium instruction during sheltered content instruction. For Krashen, this background knowledge facilitates comprehensibility of input ($i + 1$), helping learners make inferences about word meaning and language structures.

Children have developed SLIC once they have learned English well enough to understand school subject matter instruction in the majority language. Whereas the BICS/CALP dichotomy ascribes special linguistic and cognitive status to the language of schooling, applying in both first and second language contexts, SLIC does not. SLIC is not relevant to children’s native language, which flourishes naturally within its community of use; rather, SLIC applies specifically to the development of a second language in school contexts, acknowledging that second language learners need time and learning experience before they can and should be placed in mainstream classes where specially prepared teachers with language-teaching expertise may not be available. (See Rolstad and MacSwan 2008, for additional discussion.)

This conception of language learning is consistent with Krashen’s (1996) idea that bilingual education creates a context for children as they acquire English in sheltered content lessons by contributing to the comprehensibility of second language input, as noted. Krashen’s (1977) original comprehensible input hypothesis, which has defined the field of SLA since its inception, posits that language acquisition proceeds naturally in a context in which learners understand messages. Similar to Krashen’s theory, Long (1996) proposed the Interaction Hypothesis, which posited that ‘environmental contributions to acquisition are mediated by selective attention and the learner’s developing L2 processing capacity, and … these resources are brought together most usefully, though not exclusively, during negotiation for meaning’ (414). For Long, comprehensible input may be gained through interactional adjustments chiefly involving negotiating for meaning, resulting in modified output. A large body of empirical work, reviewed extensively in three recent meta-analyses (Keck et al. 2006; Russell and Spada 2006; Mackey and Goo 2007), has now shown a significant positive effect of interaction on SLA. A crucially important aid to the negotiation of meaning for bilingual learners in school settings is subject matter background knowledge (Gass and Varonis 1984; Bygate 2001).¹

Note that this perspective views school as a specific context for language use, and does not treat school language as a special language variety corresponding to unique
cognitive abilities that are inaccessible to language users in out-of-school contexts. This distinction is of crucial importance. Cummins (1981) elaborated the BICS/CALP distinction by positing a four-quadrant model in which context-embedded language was contrasted with context-reduced language, and cognitively demanding language was contrasted with cognitively undemanding language. Snow (1990) proposed a similar framework distinguishing ‘contextualized’ and ‘decontextualized’ language. For both Cummins and Snow, the contrast relates to whether, or to what degree, language is used in a contextualized setting (generally believed to be conversational in nature) in contrast to a context-reduced or decontextualized setting in which ‘language itself’ is responsible for making meaning explicit.

In contrast, Gee (2014) argues that the contextualized/decontextualized distinction ‘is wrong and misleading, because it is based on a poor theory of how human language works’ (9). Gee observes that there ‘is no such thing as decontextualized language’, as all language is contextualized (11). Consider, for instance, Gee’s examples shown in (1) and (2).

\begin{enumerate}
\item Hornworms sure vary a lot in how well they grow.
\item Hornworm growth displays a significant amount of variation.
\end{enumerate}

The first of these might be regarded as ‘conversational language’ or ‘contextualized language’, while the second might be viewed as ‘academic language’ or ‘decontextualized language’. Both express the same thought.

The difference is not whether there is context or not, but what the context is in each case. The first might be used among friends with a common interest in hornworms, and the second might be used in print or among academics at a conference. The difference relates to the specific social identity which the speaker wishes to establish among interlocutors. As an additional point, Gee notes that ‘decontextualized’ language is often as vague and imprecise, or much more so, than so-called ‘contextualized’ language. The point is illustrated with the sentence in (3), adapted from Halliday and Martin (1993):

\begin{enumerate}
\item Lung cancer death rates are clearly associated with an increase in smoking.
\end{enumerate}

While certainly meaningful in context, (3) is not precise, and its meaning is certainly not made clear from the use of ‘language itself’. Gee notes, for instance, that the subject of (3) (lung cancer death rates) is itself multiply ambiguous, with four different possible interpretations. Only prior knowledge and familiarity with the topic can guide the listener or reader to the correct interpretation. Learning to use and understand language in academic settings is part of learning academic subject matter, just as learning to use and understand language in any out-of-school endeavor (farming, boat building, residential construction, or video gaming, among many others) involves gaining the associated skill and expertise. As Petrovic (2014) notes, school language is not just contextualized, but is ‘hypercontextualized’ (106).

SLIC conceptualizes SLA as a process in which language use in a particular context interacts with developing second language proficiency in emergent bilinguals. As bilingual instruction builds competency in school subject knowledge, SLA and development proceeds as a context of learners’ negotiation of meaning and interaction in bilingual and sheltered English lessons.
Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass (2005) found bilingual education to be consistently superior to all-English approaches, with developmental bilingual programs shown to be superior to transitional bilingual education programs. Access to the home language for the purpose of illuminating children’s understanding of school subjects helps them keep up academically while they are learning English. This understanding of school subjects and culture forms crucial background knowledge, too, which in turn assists them in learning English. While it is reasonable to transition bilingual children to the regular school program once their English is adequate to understand instruction, Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass (2005) showed that continued access to the home language through longer-term developmental programs provides further enrichments which result in even better outcomes.

Conclusions
While majority language children face the single objective of mastering academic content in school, language minority children have two objectives, which they must face simultaneously – mastering both the content and a new language in school. Bilingual education allows them to participate in the academic program through home language support while they learn English. In addition to the development of children’s school subject knowledge, bilingual instruction provides children with a deeper understanding of the context of schooling, allowing them to make inferences about new words and structures in the second language.

Once they know the second language well enough to understand subject matter instruction through it, children have acquired what we have called SLIC. SLIC is not relevant to the first language context, and does not ascribe any special status to school language. SLIC is about second language learning, not a developmental dichotomy that echoes the long history of dichotomies of linguistic proficiency. A child who has not yet developed SLIC is not cognitively or linguistically less developed; she simply has not yet learned enough of the second language to rely exclusively on it for learning in the context of second language instruction. In this respect, SLIC allows us to stress the need for the child to continue to receive interesting, intellectually challenging instruction that she can understand during the time needed to achieve SLIC, but does not imply that the home learning context has resulted in cognitive or linguistic deficiencies.

In addition to learning the structure and general vocabulary of the target language (English, in the USA context), SLIC implies that children have also begun to acquire the languages of school subjects – the languages of biology, physics, social studies, history, mathematics, and so on. Each subject matter represents a unique community of practice for language use (Faltis 2013), just as out-of-school endeavors do. As children become proficient in English, they learn the language of school subjects through sheltered content teaching; ideally, they learn the language of school subjects bilingually, and consequently learn English bilingually (MacSwan and Pray 2005).

To this point, Katz (2008) distinguishes between academic and intellectual activity at school. When the goal of instruction is academic, teacher and student attention tends to focus on drills and activities that give the appearance of knowledge, leading to what Bloome, Puro, and Theodorou (1989) called procedural display. When the goal of instruction is intellectual, teacher and student attention tends to focus on content, on the authentic pursuit of children’s interests, and on activities
that excite and inspire children. While the pursuit of intellectual goals provides a rich experiential base for the development of academic skills, the reverse does not follow; children who are pushed to focus on academic skills may cease to engage intellectually.

We should consider ways of engaging children in intellectual experiences and inquiry, including but not limited to academic experiences and academic inquiry, allowing them to pursue concept development while trusting that the specialized languages that inhere in every specialized domain will develop naturally alongside the concepts. Teachers and other more expert peers and adults can thus facilitate language development authentically, as needed, minimizing overt language instruction. Children will thus acquire the language of school subjects hand in hand with school subject matter competency, well suited to their growing intellectual and conceptual needs.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note
1. Considerable work has been done on the role of context in language learning around the cognitivist/social debate in second language acquisition research (Larson-Freeman, 2007). This debate primarily concerns the locus and outcomes of learning; a prevailing view among researchers on both sides of the debate is that second language acquisition is facilitated by communication in context (e.g., Long, 1997; Kasper, 1997).

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