A student who is strong in BICS likely will:

- Be able to carry on a casual conversation, perhaps with some specialized vocabulary in her/his area of work.
- Be familiar with idiomatic English expressions commonly used in conversations.
- Speak with rhythm and intonation similar to a native speaker.
- Feel comfortable listening and speaking in English.

A student who is strong in CALP likely will:

- Be able to comprehend and analyze higher-level academic texts in English.
- Know the basic grammar rules of English.
- Have a wide vocabulary that extends across multiple areas of academic knowledge.
- Be capable of completing some level of academic work in English.
- Feel comfortable with reading and writing in English.

For a school-age student who is starting at a beginning level of English, it will take about 6 months to 2 years to become proficient in BICS, but it will take 5-10 years for that student to catch up to his/her native speaking peers in CALP (Cummins, 1999).

Circumstances in which a student might be strong in BICS, weak in CALP:

- Student has spent many years in the U.S. working and interacting with native English speakers, but has little experience formally studying English in the classroom. People who come to an English-speaking country as an immigrant or refugee often develop BICS before CALP.
- Student has limited/interrupted formal education and perhaps limited literacy skills in his/her first language. This makes it difficult for the student to acquire the skills of reading and writing English.

Circumstances in which a student might be strong in CALP, weak in BICS:

- Student has many years of English study in his/her home country, but teaching methodology in his/her home country consists mainly of memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary, with little or no listening and speaking practice.
- Student may study or work at a U.S. university but have limited contact with native speakers of English. For example, the student might live with other students from his/her home country, study in a major with mostly other students from his/her home country, or work as a researcher who has limited contact with colleagues.

Ideal circumstances in which student would develop strong BICS and strong CALP simultaneously:

- Student is literate in his/her first language and is taking English classes that will focus not only on grammar and vocabulary, but also how to apply the grammar and vocabulary to listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
- Student takes advantage of opportunities for interaction with speakers of English outside the classroom. A word of caution: It can be easy to tell students, “Just speak English more outside of class,” but this can be more difficult than it sounds due to real or perceived power imbalances between nonnative and native speakers of English. Also, a student’s home language is an important part of his/her identity, so the advice, “Just speak English at home with your family and friends” might seem like it makes sense, but the student could feel like you are telling them to discard an important piece of their cultural identity.
Implications for assessment:

- When informally assessing a student’s ability upon first meeting the student, it is easiest to assess BICS first. If the student is relatively able to have a short conversation in English, this means that the student has at least some level of BICS. Try to understand the student’s BICS level by speeding up your speech and seeing how much the student understands or steering the conversation into topics the student might be unfamiliar with to assess the student’s level of language production outside of familiar, everyday topics.
- If a student is very strong in BICS, you may want to move on to assess CALP. Have the student read something that you think might be at his/her level, then ask the student questions about the reading. Include basic comprehension questions along with more analytical questions, such as predicting, evaluating or making inferences about the source.

Implications for teaching:

- Whether your teaching will focus on BICS or CALP will depend on the student’s current level as well as his/her stated goals. Ideally, our teaching would focus on BICS and CALP simultaneously, but this might not always be appropriate for a student’s goals.
- Situations in which teacher might focus more on BICS:
  - Student already has a strong CALP or is already studying English in a more formal capacity elsewhere.
  - The student just wants “conversation practice.”
  - It is not the student’s goal to complete any higher level of education in English. The student just wants to be able to have conversations and complete basic daily tasks in English.
- Situations in which teacher might focus more on CALP:
  - Student already is strong in BICS and wants to be able to be stronger in reading and writing English.
  - Student is preparing to take a test in English that focuses mainly on academic English skills.
  - The student has a goal of completing a higher level of education in English.
  - Student is a “true beginner” in English who has limited literacy skills in his/her first language or is coming from a different script (i.e. Arabic or Chinese) and cannot yet recognize the letters of the English alphabet. In this case, teaching the English alphabet and phonetics will allow the student to approach language learning more systematically than learning phrases by ear alone.
- Students who require CALP-heavy teaching should be paired with other students who require the same, and vice-versa for BICS.

Overall, the more dialects a student is able to use, the more communities of communication the student will have access to. In short, the ability to codeswitch = having a voice in more situations = more access to power in society. This means that it is beneficial for students to become proficient in both BICS and CALP, even if it doesn’t always fit with their immediate goals (i.e. passing a written test of English or being able to take orders at a restaurant where he/she works).

Source/additional reading: