In Unit 1 Section 4 of our course, we address BICS and CALP a lot which is a theory which you have articulated and which we have implemented while teaching academic English. Could you please tell us what the acronyms stand for and what is the difference between the two?

Okay, BICS stands for basic interpersonal communicative skills and CALP stands for cognitive academic language proficiency and that distinction came about as a result of research study that I was able to do in a western Canadian city where I was invited to look at psychological assessments and teacher referral forms of more than 400 students from non-English speaking backgrounds. The psychologists in the particular school district were concerned in case the measures that they were giving like, such as, the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children might not be valid for students and they didn’t know when the test might become valid. So I went through these assessments and a striking pattern emerged. What was very frequent in the teacher referral forms were comments like “Jose arrived two years ago from Latin America and he’s learnt English very well, he speaks it fluently but I’m really concerned that he may have some kind of learning disability because his reading skills are so far behind the rest of the class, please advise if some special education issue is involved.

The child would then go to the psychologist who in some cases wouldn’t pay that much attention to the fact that the child was from a non-English speaking background or if the teacher had not explicitly mentioned, wouldn’t even pick it up. So, they typically, the students were doing much better in the non- verbal parts of the test as compared to the verbal. And so, what this suggested was that there’s something going on here where children were picking up the fluency and the phonology of English pretty quickly but there’s still a gap there. And this, the pieces of the puzzle came together when I came to Toronto and I was able to reanalyse data from the Toronto Board. They had carried out a large survey of 25% of their grade 5, grade 7 and grade 9 students so they had a representative sample from the Board. And in one of their analyses they had pulled out the immigrant students from the overall sample. And they had analysed this but had interpreted the results in terms of age of arrival which didn’t really make that much sense. It made much more sense to look at it in terms of length of residence. So I was able to reanalyse the data from the perspective of what kind of proficiency students had acquired in English in relation to how long they’d been in the country and learning English. And what came out of that was that we were looking at 5-7 years for students to come close to grade norms – not actually reach them – in academic aspects of the language. And so it seemed necessary to make a distinction between the kind of fluency that kids could pick up fairly quickly and the kind that was involved - that involved much longer trajectory in terms of catching up in reading skills, writing skills and vocabulary knowledge. And so that BICS CALP distinction or whatever else it’s called - conversational fluency versus academic language proficiency represents those different components and if we don’t make the distinction we can get into all kinds of problems. First of all in terms of assessment, we can assume that because the child is speaking English fluently that he or she has learnt English. In actual fact, the child may still be a long way from the stage where a cognitive test or an educational test could be administered to that child without bias. And so we risk assuming that a child has some kind of learning difficulty or processing problem because they are doing poorly on the verbal parts of the test when in actual fact it’s the normal trajectory…