CUMMINS' FRAMEWORK AS A TOOL

Cummins' Framework as a Tool for Continuous Improvement of SLL Instruction

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This working paper will explore the usefulness of Cummins' framework relating language proficiency to academic performance (1983) as a reflection and planning tool for continuous improvement of second language learning (SLL) instruction. SLL activities designed for a Language Experience intervention class for seventh and eighth grade English language learners (ELLs) identified a performing at English language proficiency (ELP) level three (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium, 2008a) will be mapped to the framework. Family friendly "Can Do" descriptors developed by WIDA for this ELP level (2008b) will be tied to these SLL activities and also mapped to the framework. The usefulness of the framework as a tool for continuous improvement will be assessed. Insights gained from the exploration with Cummins' framework will be shared. The paper will conclude with a summary and recommendations for future use and ongoing research.

Cummins' Framework

In 1983, Cummins introduced a framework relating language proficiency (in native language [L1] and a second language [L2]) to academic performance (p. 131). "The potential of such a framework is that, in principle, it permits findings from many different contexts to be integrated and to contribute more effectively to the development of a theory of language proficiency and its cross-lingual dimensions" (p.134).

For the limited purpose of this exploration, Cummins' thoughts from 1983 will be used to guide application of the framework, augmented by an elaboration on Cummins ideas suggested by Tompkins (2008).

SLL Activities mapped to Cummins' Framework

The SLL activities mapped to this framework formed part of a thematic unit of instruction on the impact of global warming on Arctic animals introduced as modified problem-based learning activity for seventh and eighth grade English language learners (ELLs) participating in a Language Experience course (TRANSLANGEXP) as part of the bilingual curriculum at Kimball Middle School, School District U-46, in Elgin, Illinois. This course served as an intervention class for ELLs identified at ELP level three (Developing). The Language Experience class met daily throughout the school-year in a computer lab for one 44-minute period. The overall purpose of the class is for students to practice, apply, and improve their English skills by engaging in a variety of computer-based and computer-supported activities. This project ran between April 4 and May 30, 2008. Twenty-four students participated in the project. The class met in the school library for the first two days of the project, then met in the computer lab for the remainder of the time.

ELP Skill Descriptors Tied to SLL Activities and Mapped to Cummins' Framework

The state of Illinois has joined the WIDA Consortium and recognizes the ELP standards developed by WIDA as the official English language performance standards for the state of Illinois (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], 2004). WIDA developed "family-friendly" ELP descriptors. These "Can Do" descriptors for level three and selected descriptors for level four are matched with the SLL activities mapped to Cummins' framework.

Continua Used in Cummins' Framework

In explaining the continua used in his framework, Cummins (1983) offers examples of communicative behaviors going from left to right on his horizontal continuum. These include engaging in discussion, writing a letter to a close friend, and, at the outer extreme, writing or reading an academic article. Cummins emphasizes the importance of multisensory cues in the

communication of context. He sees communication typical of the everyday world outside the classroom as rich in multisensory contextual cues. When he looks at the linguistic demands on communication in the classroom, especially for the acquisition of literacy, he sees a significant reduction in the range of multisensory contextual clues. In fact, many of the clues at the far right of this continuum are limited to linguistic cues (p. 132).

The vertical continuum of Cummins framework (1983) refers to the degree of active cognitive processing required to accomplish cognitive tasks and activities. Tasks and activities found in the upper part of the continuum have been largely mastered and require little active cognitive involvement for appropriate performance. There tends to be a high level of cognitive involvement until a task or activity performance has been mastered or until a plateau is reached at a level below mastery. Tasks and activities found in the lower part of the continuum are still being mastered (p. 132).

BICS and CALP

Cummins observes that the conceptual distinction between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) put into perspective "misconceptions about the nature of language proficiency that were contributing directly to the creation of academic failure among bilingual students" (1999, p. 3). While never intended as a theory of language, the concepts of BICS and CALP serve as reference points for policy decisions and practice. Cummins notes that this distinction is supported by an enormous base of authentic discourse gathered from a wide range of written and oral communicative situations analyzed by Biber (1986).

BICS and CALP are not necessarily separate in the manner they develop. All children construct their conceptual foundation (knowledge of the world) from conversational interactions

they are exposed to, largely in the home. Developing critical literacy skills and deepening understanding of concepts is similarly constructed from discussions about conceptual issues. Most forms of social interaction involve, to a greater or lesser extent, cognitive skills.

BICS Slows and CALP Grows

BICS and CALP do follow different developmental timelines. Both native English-speaking and immigrant children usually reach a plateau in the development of native-like phonology and fluency after several years of acquisition. After that point, development slows significantly compared to early development. "Literacy and vocabulary knowledge (CALP) continue to develop at least throughout our schooling and usually throughout our lifetimes" (Cummins, 1999, p.3).

Measures of Program Effectiveness

Programs designed to improve CALP should address the three components of the construct:

1. cognitive--programs are cognitively challenging and stimulate higher-order thinking skills;
2. academic—academic content (social studies, science, math, art, etc.) are included along with language instruction;
3. language—critical language awareness is fostered by the program.

When a program demonstrates that students are generating new knowledge, creating literature and art, and acting on social realities that affect their lives, the program is effective. "These are the kinds of instructional activities that the BICS/CALP distinction is intended to foster" (Cummins, 1999, p. 6).

Usefulness of the Framework as a Tool for Continuous Improvement

The process of mapping the SLL activities and the EPT skill descriptors to Cummins' framework proved to be a useful reflection activity after the end of the school year. See figure one. The framework itself highlighted the areas where the student would be expected to be and were most challenged and weakest—those activities targeted to EPT level four (their "stretch goals"). These were found in the D quadrant on the framework. Assessments used during the project allowed wide latitude to the students with regard to their outputs matched to the EPT level four descriptors. Some of the students working with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in the class never produced output at EPT level four. While this study does not deal with the results of the SLL activities being mapped to Cummins' framework, based on his (1999) measures of program effectiveness, the SLL program—at least in so far as this project is concerned—was effective.

BICS and CALP—New Perspectives for Using Cummins' Framework

The concepts shared by Cummins in his 1983 and 1999 articles put a different perspective on his concepts of BICS and CALP with regard to his framework. Based on his conceptual definitions of the terms, both exist simultaneously, though in differing degrees for each student. To design an effective program for improving academic literacy, the three components of CALP need to be taken into account. The SLL activities and the adapted PBL, thematic unit on global warming and its impact on Arctic animals did focus on all three elements though more attention needs to be given to the language component in the future—especially in assisting students to be conscious of leveraging their L1 CALP proficiency to help them increase their L2 CALP mastery. While students can use their BICS proficiencies in collaborating with each other and with the teacher, they are also using existing CALP skills as they engage with the

project deliverables. The WIDA skill descriptors for ELP levels three and four are more focused on CALP than on BICS.

Multisensory Contextual Cues in a Computer-Supported Classroom Learning Environment

While human interaction provides the richest environment to work with multisensory contextual cues, computers connected to the Internet certainly provide more of such clues than a traditional book-paper-pencil environment. In addition, framework and related research show the importance of creating collaborative, multidimensional academic, problem-based learning activities supported by a building sequence of authentic multimedia assessments in the ELL and SLL classroom. Due to the nature of the project mapped to the framework, students received more multisensory contextual cues as they worked on activities in quadrants C and D than they would normally receive in a traditional classroom. Those extra clues, including frequent feedback from peers and the teacher, function to assist the students to grow into "stretch" goals with regard to moving from ELP level three to ELP level four.

Implications of the Framework and Reflection Activity for Continuous Improvement

The framework can provide additional focus as plans for next year's Language Experience class continue. In addition to mapping activities and skills to the framework, appropriate assessments can also be planned and built into the evolving matrix for SLL instructional design and assessment. The global warming and Arctic animals project was a culminating activity for the year. Students in this course worked for several months to complete teacher-assigned, mastery-projects on information skills modules from Skills Tutor (Achievement Tech, 2008). As they worked with these modules, students were also building their academic vocabulary skills with regard to research skills. Requirements for mastery was 90% or higher on all parts of each project except for the pre-tests. All students in the class

achieved mastery on these projects prior to participating in the SLL activities reported on in this exploration. Next year, based on reflection guided by Cummins' framework, more interdisciplinary projects may be planned throughout the year—at growing levels of proficiency. The framework may also provide a vehicle for communication between multiple teachers offering this class to different students—and even between buildings. The Language Experience class is an offering in at least two middle schools in School District U-46. A collaboration and planning day among teachers of the class may be able to be scheduled as a professional development opportunity at the beginning of the next school-year.

Summary and Recommendations

This working paper explored the usefulness of Cummins' framework relating language proficiency to academic performance (1983) as a reflection and planning tool for continuous improvement of second language learning (SLL) instruction. SLL activities designed for a Language Experience intervention class for seventh and eighth grade English language learners (ELLs) clustered at English language proficiency (ELP) level three (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium, 2008a) were mapped to the framework. "Can Do" descriptors developed by WIDA (2008b) for this ELP level were tied to these SLL activities and also mapped to the framework. The usefulness of the framework as a tool for continuous improvement was assessed. Insights gained from the exploration with Cummins' framework were shared. The paper concluded with a summary and recommendations for future use and ongoing research.

Recommendations

Cummins' framework lends itself for use as an effective tool for both reflection and planning for continuous improvement of SLL instruction. Tying the tool to WIDA's ELP

performance descriptors appropriate to the ELP level of the class and tying both of these to activities and assessments planned for a course will provide teachers greater insight into how class activities can be designed to assure that students achieve the greatest value from the class, especially in terms of growing their CALP skills—in both L1 and L2 classes. School District U-46 ELL teachers can benefit from professional development opportunities to work with this framework and with these approaches to continuous improvement and planning for the upcoming school-year.

More research is needed on the use of Cummins' framework for this purpose. More research is also needed to determine how a positive interrelationship can be established between L1 and L2 BICS and CALP in the same classroom and how a teacher can mold the classroom environment (including appropriate computer use if available) to increase the achievement of L2 CALP by engaging students more fully in interactive, multidimensional, multisensory academic projects.

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