

Factors to consider in Second Language Acquisition

Research into the language development of bilingual children has consistently shown a distinction between conversational (surface) fluency and the language proficiency necessary to make efficient use of the formal learning situation.

This is what Cummins (1986) refers to as:

Social conversational fluency

- fluency in everyday conversation – playground language
- acquired quickly - within 2 years
- may mask real language needs of the child
- does not require language associated with higher thinking skills, such as, hypothesising, evaluating, inferring, predicting

Academic language

- abstract language of the classroom
- fewer concrete visual clues to support meaning
- may take between 5 and 7 years to acquire
- very important for educational success

Advantages of Bilingualism

- a greater capacity for lateral thinking and problem solving
- a greater facility for learning additional languages
- enhanced ability to perform certain cognitive tasks

Knowledge of one language supports the development of another language. This idea may be expressed using the metaphor of icebergs: the tips of the icebergs symbolise the surface features of the different languages such as vocabulary and grammar. The larger quantity of ice below represents the common underlying proficiency; cognitive and academic skills acquired in one language can be transferred to the learning of another language. Children who have acquired literacy skills in their mother tongue are likely to be more proficient at acquiring those skills in English.

