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An Ethnographic Case Study: Exploring an Adult ESL Learner's BICS and CALP Proficiency Disparity

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic case study investigated the disparity in an adult learner's second language (L2) proficiency between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). The learner, well-educated in his first language (L1) Italian, demonstrated higher CALP but lower BICS in L2 English. Data collection spanned 15 weeks and included classroom observations, in-class artifacts, and semi-formal interviews. Two main factors were identified as contributing to the disparity: (1) unbalanced language exposure favoring CALP over BICS and (2) the positive transfer of CALP from L1 outweighing that of BICS. The study found that teacher instruction and learner's language engagement and investment increased exposure to grammar and literacy, thereby enhancing CALP development and facilitating CALP transfer from L1 to L2. However, limited exposure to interpersonal communication practices both inside and outside the classroom led to his underdeveloped BICS. Consequently, the unbalanced proficiency further influenced his second language acquisition. The learner's low BICS level resulted in negative self-positioning, increasing fear of interacting with English speakers and reducing opportunities to acquire the target language in natural interactive environments. Pedagogical implications are provided for adult EFL teaching, emphasizing balanced instruction and interactive and multilingual approaches. The research suggests future directions for supporting bi-/multilingual adults in developing balanced language proficiency and a positive language identity effectively.

Keywords: Second language acquisition; Proficiency disparity; BICS and CALP; Language exposure; Language transfer; Instructional materials; Investment and engagement; Identity and positioning

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1. Introduction

In the age of super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007), characterized by “increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants” (p. 1024), the profiles of adult language students have become increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse in the English-speaking countries. In adult English as a second language (ESL) programs, there are diverse immigrant second language (L2) learners with different learning needs and purposes, such as employment seeking and efficient communication in social life and the workplace (Cozma, 2015). These programs serve to help learners overcome linguistic and cultural barriers while addressing their educational needs in their new countries (Wrigley, 2008). Research has emphasized the necessity of literacy instruction in ESL adult programs (Burt et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2010; Schaetzel & Young, 2010; Sticht, 2022). However, in reality, adult ESL programs often struggle to successfully meet learners’ academic and socio-communicative needs in a balanced manner. This is partly because some teaching and learning approaches place more emphasis on literacy development (e.g., Benati, 2018) while others focus more on communicative skills (e.g., Savignon, 1987).

In the field of language education, much attention has been given to second language acquisition and the language proficiency of learners from diverse backgrounds. Instead of focusing solely on general language proficiency, many studies investigate students’ communication and academic language acquisition and achievement (e.g., Afful, 2007; Kern et al., 2015; Proctor et al., 2020). Research has shown that bilingual students’ acquisition of L2 cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) and basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) could be influenced by their first language (L1) proficiency. This has been explored among both child learners (e.g., Blom et al., 2021; Berthele & Lambel, 2017; Castilla et al., 2009; Proctor et al., 2017) and adult learners (e.g., Kave & Yafe, 2014; Kim et al., 2020; Ströbel et al., 2020). The imbalance between these two dimensions of language proficiency has been revealed: high conversational language ability cannot represent academic language proficiency, especially for students in elementary

and secondary education (e.g., Cummins 1999; Cummins, 2005). However, there remains a paucity of studies investigating adult English learners’ BICS and CALP development and the issues behind their language proficiency disparity. The language proficiency development of older language learners might be different from that of the younger (e.g., Cozma, 2015; Kave & Yafe, 2014). Understanding these gaps is crucial for designing effective ESL programs that address both conversational and academic language needs, ensuring comprehensive language development for adult learners.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring an adult learner with high CALP but low BICS, investigating the factors leading to this disparity between these two aspects of language proficiency, and the potential effects of lower proficiency in BICS on the learner’s further second language acquisition (SLA).

The research questions are:

1. What factors affect the acquisition of BICS and CALP in an adult ESL learner?
2. How does lower proficiency in BICS influence the further second language acquisition of an adult ESL learner?

The following paper first provides brief conceptual backgrounds of linguistic interdependence (Cummins 1979/1980/1981), language exposure (Krashen, 1981), and identity and (Norton, 2010) self-positioning (Davies & Harre, 1990) grounded in relevant studies. The methodology section then introduces how this research was conducted, detailing the participant background, data collection and analysis methods. The research findings are presented next, highlighting the key factors contributing to the disparity between BICS and CALP in the adult learner studied. Lastly, the study offers implications to inform the practices of researchers and instructors for adult ESL learners.

2. Conceptual backgrounds

2.1 Language interdependence between L1 and L2

To better examine language learners’ development, specific aspects of language proficiency, such as BICS and CALP, caught great attention. According to Cummins (1979),

BICS refers to the aspects of daily face-to-face communication, focusing on pronunciation and oral production fluency, while CALP is magnified as those aspects of language proficiency related to literacy skills. Cummins (1980) coined the *Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis* of CALP across languages: “To the extent that instruction in L_x is effective in promoting proficiency in L_x, transfer to this proficiency to L_y will occur provided there is adequate exposure to L_y (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn L_y” (p. 180). Along with that, Cummins put forward the *Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) Hypothesis* in 1981, indicating literacy-related aspects of L1 and L2 are manifestations of the same underlying dimension. Consequently, compared with younger second language learners, older learners could acquire syntax, morphology, and literacy skills more rapidly, due to their matured cognition (Cozma, 2015; Cummins, 1981). Older learners often do not have an advantage of “the aspects of L2 which are unrelated to cognitive maturity” (Cummins, 1981, p. 132), such as oral production fluency and accent (Cummins, 1981; Cozma, 2015; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018), as the conversational syntax of L2 was more associated with the length of residence (Cummins, 1991).

Several researchers conducted studies with adult L2 learners on the *Interdependence Hypothesis* between their L1 and L2 CALP. Abu-Rabia (2001) examined the relationship between reading, syntactic, orthographic, and working memory skills in two orthographies among first-year university students of English in Russia, finding that L1 proficiency was a strong predictor of L2 word recognition. Similarly, August (2006) explored language transfer between L1 reading and L2 academic processes in 55 adult Spanish-speaking English learners. The results showed that those with stronger L1 reading skills demonstrated better academic reading skills in L2 compared to those with less advanced L1 reading knowledge, further supporting the *Interdependence Hypothesis*.

More recently, Kave and Yafe (2014) explored the performance of younger and older adults on tests of word knowledge and word retrieval. Their study found that older adults were more successful than younger adults in producing word definitions, likely due to their more developed knowledge systems and cognitive maturity. Kim et al. (2020) examined 108 Korean English as a foreign language (EFL) undergraduate students’ relationship between English reading and

writing skills and L1 reading and writing skills. The results indicated that L1 reading scores could predict L2 reading scores and a positive correlation between L1 and L2 writing skills was observed in L2 learners with higher L2 vocabulary knowledge. Ströbel et al. (2020) conducted a study with 80 undergraduate students at a German university to explore the relationship between L1 and L2 writing through automatic analysis of linguistic complexity. The results showed significant correlations between L1 and L2 complexity for all but one measure, suggesting that the impact of L1 is strong across various levels of linguistic analysis.

Accordingly, language transfer in the cognitive/academic aspects from L1 to L2 is effective among adults due to their cognitive maturity and available L1 CALP ability in their common underlying language system. However, it should be noted that successful language transfer presupposes high motivation and adequate exposure to the target language (Cummins, 1980).

2.2 Second language exposure affecting SLA

In terms of language exposure, Krashen and Seliger (1976) defined exposure as “the product of the number of years the student reported having spent in a target-language-speaking country and how much target language the student said he spoke every day” (cited in Krashen, 1981, p. 43). Krashen (1985) put forward that the *Input Hypothesis* posited that increased exposure to L2 directly correlates with enhanced language acquisition. Language exposure, in general, refers to contact “outside and involves self-instruction, naturalistic learning, or self-directed naturalistic learning” (Al-Zoubi, 2018, p. 152).

Recent work has explored the relationship between language exposure and various language skills development. For example, Al-Zoubi (2018) studied 42 EFL students’ language exposure both inside and outside the classroom and their self-perceived language acquisition. The result showed a strong impact of exposure to the English language on overall language acquisition and developing the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This finding was consistent with Domingo’s (2019)’s study, which showed a significant correlation between language exposure and proficiency in the four language skills of senior high school students through medium of instruction.

Under naturalistic L2 exposure conditions, Ghader-

panahi (2012) found that using authentic and real-life aural materials, such as American or British movies and educational CDs, improved university EFL students' listening ability significantly. Similarly, De Wilde et al. (2020) investigated the English proficiency levels achieved by 780 Dutch-speaking children through informal and out-of-school exposure. The study found that many children made substantial language improvements, though there were notable individual differences. The most effective types of input were gaming, social media use, and speaking, which are interactive, multimodal, and involve active language production. Additionally, Lai et al. (2014) conducted a survey on 82 middle school EFL students and found that certain out-of-class learning activities met the varied needs in language learning, balanced meaning and form and complemented classroom learning. These out-of-class exposure were linked to better English grades, higher language learning effectiveness, and increased enjoyment.

Accordingly, numerous studies have documented the positive relationship between language exposure and language acquisition as above. Krashen (1981, p. 48) distinguished *exposure-type* informal environments and *intake-type* environments, indicating that language exposure generally refers to exposure outside the classroom in natural English-speaking environments. However, in this study, language exposure is used to refer to the contact learners have with the target language that they are attempting to learn and acquire through both inside and outside language exposure, as *linguistic interdependence hypotheses* (Cummins, 1980, p. 180) presuppose “adequate exposure (either in school or environment)”.

2.3 Identity and positioning affecting SLA

Identity is a crucial concept in socially informed research on second language learning. Using the identity approach to second language learning, Norton (2010, p. 419) describes “identities as fluid, context-dependent, and context-producing, in particular historical and cultural circumstances” from the post-structural perspective. From this viewpoint, individuals' identity aspects such as “personalities, learning styles, and motivations are not fixed, unitary, or decontextualized” (Norton, 2010, p. 420). Norton contends that English learning involves more than just acquiring knowledge and skills; it also encompasses the intricate process of construct-

ing and reconstructing learners' identities.

Identity work can be described as the process of participants negotiating roles and positions in the community of practice. While “role” refers to a relatively fixed concept, “position” provides a more accurate understanding of social relations as dynamic and fluid (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Wortham (2004, p. 166) defined positioning as “an event of identification, in which a recognizable category of identity gets explicitly or implicitly applied to an individual”. According to Davies and Harre (1990), positioning can take two forms: intentional self-positioning, where learners position themselves intentionally, and interactive positioning, where others position the learners. McKay and Wong (1996) were pioneers in applying positioning theories to SLA research, investigating how different forms of positioning influenced students' language learning outcomes.

Many researchers have investigated how the construct of identity and positionings influence learners' learning outcomes. Self-positioning impacts learners' language learning. For example, De Costa (2011) conducted an ethnographic case study on an ESL learner from China in a Singapore secondary school and found that the learner's language ideology and negotiation of self-positioning during language learning influenced her language acquisition outcomes. Additionally, research (e.g., Cervatiuc, 2009; Giroir, 2014; Morita, 2004; Pavlenko, 2003) has done about non-native English speakers (NNES) negotiated their self-positionings and identity under power relations between NNES and native English speakers (NES). Morita (2004) examined the academic discourse socialization experiences of six Japanese female graduate students in a Canadian university through a qualitative multiple case study. It revealed that L2 learners faced challenges in negotiating competence, identities, and power relations, affecting their classroom participation and membership. The students also shaped their learning and participation by actively negotiating their positionalities. Giroir (2014) used ethnographic methods to examine how two Saudi Arabian men negotiated their positionality and engaged in discursive practices to achieve participation in an intensive English program of an American university. The study highlighted the struggles and strategies of learners as they navigated power dynamics and sought to assert their identities and positionality.

The positions given by other surroundings, such as

teachers and classmates, could also cause an influence on language learners' learning accomplishment. For example, Ollerhead (2012) explored how ESL teachers positioned learners and learners positioned themselves, which jointly affected learners' levels of engagement and participation in classroom learning activities. In a study of a British primary school classroom, Black (2004) investigates how teachers position students as either highly competent or less competent. The study highlights that teacher-student interactions play a crucial role in determining the social positioning of students within the classroom, which significantly affects their access to the learning process. Denham (2020) suggested positioning students as linguistic and social experts. By teaching "linguistics" instead of narrowly defined grammar, students can gain more than just grammatical knowledge. They become empowered by their unconscious language knowledge, learn to use scientific methods to analyze language, recognize the systematic nature of all language varieties, and work towards reducing discrimination associated with standardized grammar.

Second language learning can be influenced by learners' self-positioning, how others position them, as well as their multiple and fluid identities within social contexts. This study will draw on the constructs of positioning and identity, combined with the theories of language interdependence and language exposure, to explore an ESL adult language learner's acquisition of English, specifically focusing on the development of BICS and CALP.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research context

The research was conducted in the ESL program at an adult community school in Los Angeles County in the United States. The school serves students aged 18 to 70 and offers six different programs, with the ESL program having the highest enrollment. This program is for all adult students, regardless of nationality. According to school enrollment statistics, Hispanic students make up the largest portion of the ESL enrollment, followed by Asian students. Students are placed into different levels (beginning low, beginning high, intermediate low, intermediate high, advanced low, advanced high) based on their placement test scores in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The ESL program offers

classes at various times, including weekday morning, afternoon (computer lab), evening, and Saturday classes, with an average class size of 25 to 30 students. All teachers have at least a bachelor's degree and the relevant California teaching credential.

The research was specifically conducted in one of the ESL Level Four (intermediate high) morning classes. This class had 25 students, predominantly female, with around 70% being Hispanic. The students' general learning purposes included seeking employment, joining the community, improving family literacy, and enhancing civic literacy. The instructor, originally from Asia, had been teaching at the school for ten years. He had a good rapport with the students and demonstrated an understanding of the unique challenges adult learners face, such as balancing jobs with ESL learning.

3.2 Participant profile

The case study focuses on a student in my researched classroom, Zac (pseudonym), a male in his 30s who moved from Italy to Los Angeles with his wife just before COVID-19. Zac's primary motivation for learning English was to find a decent job and communicate with others, which gave him a strong drive for English learning. Though he was placed in a Level Four (intermediate high) class, he perceived that he was only at a Level Two (beginning high) proficiency. He received relatively high scores in his placement test in terms of reading and writing compared to speaking and listening.

Among his classmates, Zac stood out in terms of his rich educational and work background. He holds a bachelor's degree in law from an Italian university and worked as a lawyer in Italy for almost a decade. As noted in the Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar report (1992), lawyers' basic skills include communication, counseling, negotiation analysis, and reasoning (as cited in Gantt & Natt, 2006). This background indicates that Zac possesses high levels of overall language proficiency in his L1, as well as strong logical and critical thinking abilities. Zac is an expressive person, stating "my life is speak, not because my job, I like to speak with different people" (Personal communication, February 2020). For previous English learning, Zac had attended English courses during his undergraduate studies. However, in his daily life, he mainly speaks Italian with his wife at home and with his friends in Italy. This is largely due to his preference for speaking Italian, which may stem from a com-

bination of comfort and confidence in his native language. As a newcomer to the US, he seldom speaks or practices English outside of school, possibly due to his L2 proficiency discouraging him from practicing English in social settings. Additionally, his lack of friends to converse with in English further limits his opportunities for language practice.

3.3 Research design

This research adopted an ethnographic case study as its research design, blending the strengths of both ethnographic and case study methodologies. A blended design utilizes data collection methods from both approaches, while still bounding the research in specific contexts of time and space (Fusch et al., 2017). The case study approach “provides a unique example of real people in real situations” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 376), offering detailed insights into individual experiences within their natural settings. Ethnography was employed to “explore the feelings, beliefs, and meanings of relationships between people as they interact within their culture or as they react to others on response to a changing phenomenon” (Fusch et al., 2017, p. 923). By integrating the case study’s detailed, context-bound investigation with ethnography’s focus on cultural and social dynamics, the research aimed to capture a comprehensive picture of the participants’ SLA development in terms of BICS and CALP.

3.4 Data collection

This research spanned 15 weeks, from January 2020 to April 2020, with seven weeks dedicated to in-person class data collection and eight weeks to online class data collection via Zoom (the class transitioned to virtual sessions due to COVID-19). The data was gathered using classroom observations, in-class documents, and semi-formal interviews with Zac. The class observation lasted for 35 hours in total. Field notes were taken on Zac’s class performance, including the activities he found engaging and the areas of language knowledge he paid more or less attention to. Notes were also made on his class participation, such as the frequency of his responses to the teacher’s questions and the questions he asked. Additionally, observations were made on his interactions with peers and the teacher, focusing on his position in group activities and how he initiated interactions with other students.

Additionally, documents were collected from teaching materials shared by the teacher (to analyze instructional emphasis), in-class assignments (to evaluate the types of classroom language practice that the teacher focused on and Zac’s performance in these activities), and Zac’s language knowledge notebook entries (to identify which aspects of language knowledge he deemed necessary to note). The study also used semi-formal interviews to collect data from Zac. Three interviews were conducted, each lasting about 1.5 hours. The first interview focused on Zac’s background information and his general perceptions between his L2-English and L1-Italian. Based on class observations and document data, subsequent interviews included questions about his attitudes and feelings regarding the teacher’s instruction, classroom norms, class participation, beliefs about language transfer, and identity issues.

3.5 Data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis, which is a method for “identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 1). Using an inductive approach, which is data-driven and particularly well-suited for exploratory research, the study allowed themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being predetermined by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process adhered to the six phases of analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which include “(1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report” (pp. 87–93). All interview voice recordings were digitally recorded and then manually transcribed to facilitate an in-depth analysis. The collected data underwent continuous analysis and was documented in the study report on a weekly basis to ensure thorough and iterative examination.

The qualitative data from class observations, in-class documents, and semi-formal interviews were triangulated to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings (Fusch et al., 2017). Triangulation involves cross-verifying data from multiple sources to build a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the research subject. By comparing and complementing the data from these different sources, the study aimed to ensure a more robust interpretation of Zac’s

language acquisition process in terms of BICS and CALP.

4. Findings

4.1 Language exposure towards L2 BICS and CALP

***“My ideal classroom is students have more speak, interview students and teacher”:
Teacher’s instruction***

Inside the classroom, “one of the most central roles of the teacher is to provide learners with sufficient exposure to practice the target language in a variety of contexts” (Al-Zoubi, 2018, p. 152). The students’ language exposure inside the classroom can be affected by the teaching materials (input) and the classroom language practices (output). Teaching materials are “not simply the everyday tools of the language teacher, an embodiment of the aims, values, and methods of the particular teaching-learning situation” (Lawrence, 2011, p. 3). Materials act as a road map for both instructors and learners, shaping the teaching focus and the content students acquire.

In the observed class, the classroom culture was teacher-centered, with a strong emphasis on grammar and literacy instruction and minimal communicative activities or interactions between the teacher and students. The teacher consistently began each class with one recent latest news, then selected materials from four main sources: the textbook (for grammar and vocabulary learning and practice), grammar handouts (for grammar learning and paired reading practice), electronic reading books (for self-reading and reading comprehension), and a writing book (for composition practice). The majority of class time was dedicated to vocabulary, grammar, literacy instruction, and independent practice. Given that language exposure positively correlates with language proficiency in specific areas (Domingo, 2019), increased focus on morphology, syntax, and literacy can significantly contribute to Zac’s CALP development.

On the other hand, the teacher’s pedagogical design gave limited attention to social-constructivist methods, such as peer interaction, communicative activities, and cooperative learning. According to the class plan and syllabus, each day’s focus varied throughout the week, with Fridays designated for group work. However, during my observation period, the teacher deviated from this plan, arranging

group work in collaborative reading only once a month. As a result, students had few opportunities for meaningful interaction and communication with each other, except when answering the teacher’s questions. This limited exposure to communication-oriented input and output contributed to the underdevelopment of Zac’s BICS (De Wilde et al., 2020; Al-Zoubi, 2018).

Indeed, the teacher’s instruction effectively supported students in developing CALP but was less effective for BICS. The teacher’s focus on grammar and literacy reflected his perception of the most important linguistic aspects of language teaching and learning. However, he was unaware that he was depriving students of valuable opportunities to develop in-person communication skills and build confidence in speaking. As Zac expressed, “My ideal classroom is students have more speak, interview students and teacher” (Personal communication, February 2020). The teacher’s approach overlooked students’ hope to practice more in their second language in the classroom. With limited opportunities for oral practice in class, students like Zac were underprepared to speak English confidently and integrate English oral communication into their outside-classroom daily lives.

***“I read LA newspaper [in English] ... I like to read, because in Italy, I also now...I go to the Italian website to check the situation, politic, policy, society”:
Learner’s investment and engagement***

Based on Ushioda (2016), the processes of motivation can aid in acquiring specific aspects of the target language. Zac was a highly motivated learner in both L2 literacy and communication acquisition, though he expressed a stronger motivation for communication, stating, “First communication, and then academic, step by step” (Zac, Personal Communication, February 2020). However, he was an only excellent investor in literacy since he had a strong personal engagement in this area. To complement the construct of motivation, Norton (2010) introduced the construct of investment, emphasizing that “high levels of motivation did not necessarily translate into good language learning” (p. 353). A language learner can be highly motivated but may still show minimal investment in the language activities of a specific classroom or community (Darvin & Norton, 2023).

Inside the classroom, Zac engaged in the daily class starter, which involved a recent news article illustrated by the teacher. Most of the notes Zac took during these classes were

focused on grammar and language structures. In addition to attending regular ESL classes every weekday morning, Zac also participated in an afternoon reading class held in the computer lab at the same adult school. Outside the classroom, Zac maintained a routine of reading news and articles in both Italian and English daily to stay updated on social and political news. He further analyzed what he read and compared the differences between Italian and American media, with critical language awareness (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018).

Language learners are more likely to pay attention to and engage with content that captures their interests. Krashen's *Compelling Comprehensible Input Hypothesis* suggests that the most effective input materials for second language acquisition are those that are highly interesting or "compelling" to language learners (Lao & Krashen, 2014). Combining the effects of compelling comprehensible input with the positive correlation between language exposure in specific areas and corresponding language proficiency (Al-Zoubi, 2018; Domingo, 2019), Zac's extensive exposure to syntax, morphology, and literacy skills significantly boosted his English CALP development.

On the other hand, Zac thought developing BICS was the priority for him since it was the most significant barrier to communicate with his interviewer in job seeking. "I want to get good job here because my English is not good...my pronunciation is bad...I can't get a job here" (Zac, personal communication, February 2020). However, his investment in BICS did not match his motivation (Darvin & Norton, 2023). Inside the classroom, observations revealed that Zac seldom volunteered to ask questions or respond orally to the teacher's questions, nor did he actively interact with his peers. Outside the classroom, he also seldom applied English in oral communication in his daily life. "I have no people to talk here because English is bad" (Zac, personal communication, April 2020). While it is challenging for newcomers with limited BICS to apply the English language outside the classroom communication, Zac did not take advantage of hand-on resources and invested in improving his basic communication skills both inside and outside the classroom as he did with reading.

In summary, two factors affect Zac's language exposure in terms of BICS and CALP: the teacher's instruction focus, and Zac's personal language investment and engage-

ment. Teacher's instructions and class practices emphasized grammar and literacy. Also, Zac was more self-engaged in article reading and grammar learning but less invested in oral activities and class participation. Consequently, the greater exposure to grammar and literacy advanced Zac's CALP development, whereas the limited exposure to interpersonal communication practices resulted in underdeveloped BICS.

4.2 L1 and L2 interdependence

"Things I know in Italian [L1] help... helped me to know the format and... skills of writing and reading in English [L2]": CALP development

Cummins (1979)'s *Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis* posits that "the cognitive/academic aspects (CALP) of L1 and L2 are interdependent" (p. 3) given adequate exposure to L2 (either in school or environment) and sufficient motivation to learn L2. In addition to the language exposure that facilitated Zac's acquisition of English literacy, his high motivation and adequate exposure enhanced the transfer of his existing L1 literacy skills to his L2. Cummins's *Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis* explains that Zac's quick and successful acquisition of L2 literacy is primarily connected to his strong L1 literacy background (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018; Kim et al., 2020) and extensive education experience (Wrigley, 2008). According to Cummins (1981)'s *CUP ypothesis*, these factors are part of the shared language proficiency system of L1 and L2.

Zac himself acknowledged the role of his L1 background, stating, "Things I know in Italian [L1] help... helped me to know the format and... skills in writing and reading in English [2], sometimes, I feel" (Zac, personal communication, April 2020). He might attribute his rapid L2 literacy acquisition solely to his background knowledge but might not fully recognize the significance of the cognitive/academic aspects in his L1 (Cummins, 1980; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018; Ströbel et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020), his cognitive maturity (Cozma, 2015; Cummins, 1980), and background knowledge (Kave & Yafe, 2014) in developing his L2 CALP.

"There are a lot of tense, a lot of words, the big difference in English and Italian": BICS underdevelopment

Due to a lack of communicative practices both inside and outside the classroom, Zac had limited exposure to oral

communication and production. In addition to less language exposure, BICS, according to (Cummins, 1979), cannot be easily transferred from L1 to L2 in the positive and successful way, compared with CALP. Cummins noted that “Oral fluency and accent are the areas where older learners most often do not show an advantage over younger learners” (p. 132). Similarly, Cozma (2015) claims that younger students may be better at acquiring pronunciation.

Zac observed that Italian, his L1 and English, his L2 have many differences, including grammar, word usage, expressions, sociocultural factors, and pronunciation. He did not view his L1 communication skills as a strong facilitator for his L2 acquisition in BICS; instead, he sometimes experienced negative transfers in pronunciation from Italian to English (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018). According to Cummins (1984), BICS-related linguistic skills are not related to cognitive aspects but are more associated with the length of residence in target language countries, might requiring at least two years for acquisition (Cummins, 1999).

In summary, Zac’s high motivation and adequate exposure facilitated the transfer of his existing L1 literacy skills to his L2, consistent with the *Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis* (Cummins, 1979). However, BICS cannot be transferred from L1 to L2 as easily or successfully as CALP (Cummins, 1984; Cozma, 2015).

4.3 Learner’s self-positioning and identity

Language exposure and language transfer jointly contributed to Zac’s disparity between BICS and CALP proficiency. This unbalanced proficiency influenced his self-positioning and further impacted his SLA. On the one hand, Zac valued his CALP abilities since he could utilize his literacy skills to read various texts (e.g., books, articles, news); on the other hand, he positioned himself as an English speaker with a low BICS. Just as Norton (2010) put it, some learners’ identity positions may constrain opportunities to speak, read, or write, while some may enhance social interaction and human agency. Zac’s low level in BICS led to negative self-positioning as an illegitimate communicator in English, which affected his further language learning and acquisition both inside and beyond the classroom.

Underdeveloped BICS affecting classroom learning and acquisition

Zac rarely volunteered to share his comments, pose questions, actively respond to the teacher’s inquiries, or engage with his peers during class time. This self-perception significantly impacted his classroom participation and interaction. His reluctance to participate not only limited his opportunities for language practice and feedback but also reinforced his sense of inadequacy in communicative competence.

Example 1. *Interview with Zac (April 2020)*

[Researcher: What do you think about your class participation? For example, asking teacher questions or expressing your opinions?

Zac: ...If you stay with me next season...probably you see me ask question, I am confidentand comfortable. Because I think that’s ok. Time is important for all.]

The self-positioning in BICS caused him to lack confidence in asking and answering questions publicly in the class, resulting in missed language acquisition opportunities. He expressed that “I understand half half of the teacher and students” (Zac, personal communication, April 2020), indicating that he only could comprehend 50% of what his classmates and teacher were communicating. However, when he encountered language-based or content-based questions, he turned to nearby resources, such as his phone, or occasionally asked me for help, instead of asking questions and seeking clarifications during class. He explained his reluctance to participate in class, saying, “Wrong mean losing face” (Zac, personal communication, April 2020). As Duff (2002) notes, “Silence protected them (language learners) from humiliation” (p. 312). Similarly, Norton (2010) explained that “the English language learners in the class were afraid of being criticized or laughed at because of their limited command of English” (p. 354).

This continual trend of low self-positioning in BICS fostered a greater fear of asking language-based questions and seeking clarification. This reluctance further limited classroom SLA opportunities, not only related to BICS but might be extending to CALP.

Underdeveloped BICS affecting outside-classroom language acquisition

Outside the classroom, Zac experienced a significant identity shift, transitioning from his established role as a lawyer in Italy to that of a language learner in the United States. This transition offered him new experiences and insights within an unfamiliar environment, but it also posed substantial challenges. His limited basic communication skills and the scarcity of opportunities to develop BICS significantly impacted his daily life and interactions.

Example 2. Interview with Zac (April 2020)

[Researcher: As you mentioned, you were a lawyer before coming to America. How do you think of returning to school and learning English as a student in this new environment?

Zac: “It’s ok to be the student because I want to learn English. When I am in Italy, I speak a lot and explain a lot.... Now, different, no people to talk here, you know, my English is bad”.]

From his eyes, his limited BICS constrained his ability to express ideas and expand his network in the U.S. He stated, “For Americans, I only can only understand them about 30%-40%” (Zac, personal communication, March 2020). This significant gap in comprehension underscores the challenges he faced in both personal and professional interactions. Consequently, on the one hand, he feared that others would not understand him; on the other hand, he had trouble comprehending other people’s talking. This dual challenge of limited expressive and receptive skills significantly affected his confidence and willingness to engage in social interactions. Just as Norton (2010) put it “While language learners may be comfortable in being positioned as newcomers to the knowledge and skills of the grammar teacher, some may resist being positioned as newcomers to the practices of being an adult, such as renting an apartment, going to the doctor and taking a bus” (p. 170). Accordingly, Zac may accept his identity as the language learner inside the classroom, where the environment is relatively structured and supportive. However, outside the classroom, he faced the harsh reality of his limited BICS, which hindered his ability to perform everyday adult responsibilities.

Consequently, this identity shift had profound impacts on his self-esteem and social positioning. Zac’s self-

positioning as an English speaker with low BICS led to low confidence and high speaking anxiety when practicing English orally. This may lead to his refusal to be involved in the English-speaking environment, decreasing English language acquisition opportunities in the natural and authentic environment of his daily life.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The study investigated the second language acquisition of a case study student (Zac), with a particular focus on the development of BICS and CALP. Research Question 1 concerned factors contributing to the disparity between his BICS and CALP proficiency. The findings identified two main factors: (1) unbalanced language exposure favoring CALP over BICS, and (2) the positive transfer of CALP from L1 outweighing that of BICS. The teacher’s instructions emphasized the input of grammar and literacy, along with corresponding class practices for students’ output. Concurrently, Zac self-engaged and invested more in reading and grammar learning while participating less in oral activities and interactions both inside and outside the classroom. As a result, Zac had greater exposure to grammar and literacy activities. The findings align with studies on language exposure, such as Al-Zoubi (2018) and Domingo (2019), which highlight the strong impact of English language exposure on overall language acquisition. His motivation and exposure in literacy-related content facilitated the transfer of CALP from L1 to L2, effectively facilitating his CALP development. This resonates with the findings of Kim et al. (2020) and Ströbel et al. (2020), highlighting the positive correlation between L1 and L2 in terms of literacy and conceptual aspects. Conversely, the limited investment and engagement in interpersonal communication practices led to less related exposure, finally underdeveloped BICS.

Research Question 2 concerned the influence of lower proficiency in BICS on further second language acquisition in the adult ESL learner. The study indicated that Zac’s low BICS proficiency contributed to negative self-positioning and diminished confidence in this language domain. This exacerbated speaking anxiety and fear of communicating with English speakers, including teachers, classmates, and others outside the classroom. This finding supports the notion that identity and social positionings influence learners’ learning

outcomes (e.g., De Costa, 2011; Giroir, 2014; Ollerhead, 2012). Such anxiety reduced opportunities for Zac to ask language-based questions and seek clarifications in class, as well as to acquire language skills in natural communicative environments. This ongoing trend suggests that the proficiency gap between BICS and CALP is likely to widen over time.

5.1 Limitations

This study has two major limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the temporary closure of the observing school, which significantly disrupted the case study by halting in-person classroom observations. While online-class observations were conducted as a substitute, they could not fully capture the richness and nuances of the observed student's performance, behavior, and interactions. The absence of vivid, ground-level classroom observation data limited the depth of insights into the student's engagement and social dynamics within the classroom environment. Online observations are inherently constrained by the lack of physical presence, which can obscure subtleties such as non-verbal cues, peer interactions, and spontaneous classroom exchanges that are crucial for understanding the complete educational experience (König et al., 2020).

Second, there were notable conversational breakdowns between Zac and the researcher due to his limited basic BICS. Zac's difficulty in comprehending some of the researcher's questions, coupled with his restricted productive oral abilities, hindered his ability to fully express his thoughts and experiences. This communication barrier meant that some of his responses were incomplete or lacked the detail necessary for a comprehensive understanding of his perspectives on L2 acquisition. Consequently, the data collected might reflect some of the researcher's subjective interpretations, potentially influencing the study's findings (Mackey & Gass, 2015).

5.2 Implications

This study offers significant implications for language teaching and learning, emphasizing the importance of balanced instructional approaches, supportive classroom environments, formative assessment, students' language expo-

sure outside the classroom, translanguaging pedagogy and educators' professional development.

To support adult language learners in balancing BICS and CALP, educators should design balanced instructional approaches that equally address the development of literacy skills and communicative skills (Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008). Emphasizing content-based teaching approaches that integrate the four language skills (Ewert, 2014; Sadiku, 2015) can help ensure a holistic language learning experience. Also, in terms of learning content, adult language learners tend to engage more with classroom topics that prioritize authenticity (McDonough, 2014) and practicality (Cercone, 2008). Creating an interactive and communicative class environment is necessary (Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Biryukova, 2015), which can be achieved by creating the "student-centered" culture (Celce-Murcia, 2014) and resorting to "cooperative learning methods" (Kagan, 1998) and "social constructivist approach" (Ormrod, 2011). By incorporating activities that engage students in both academic and social language use, teachers can better support the development of both BICS and CALP. Some activities, such as discussion, group work, debates, presentation and role play, could be implemented more in class, which can provide opportunities for language learners to talk, build good relationships (Ewert, 2014) and ensure that students practice both BICS and CALP (Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008).

Continuous assessment of both BICS and CALP is necessary to monitor students' progress and adjust instructional methods accordingly. Andrade and Brookhart (2020) highlight the importance of formative assessment in promoting student learning. Teachers should provide constructive feedback that targets specific areas of improvement, helping students develop a more balanced language proficiency. Using assessment tools that evaluate both interpersonal and academic language skills can provide a comprehensive picture of student progress and inform instructional decisions. Regular feedback sessions and reflective practices can also empower students to take an active role in their language learning journey.

Beyond classroom instruction, to maximize students' L2 development, teachers should emphasize the importance of daily language exposure outside the classroom. Research suggests that raising learners' awareness about the benefits of authentic and real-life aural materials is crucial. Utiliz-

ing resources such as American or British movies and educational CDs (Ghaderpanahi, 2012), as well as YouTube videos in L2 (Mayora, 2009), can significantly enhance language acquisition. Interactive and multimodal types of input, including gaming, social media use, and speaking activities, are also particularly effective (De Wilde et al., 2020). Richards (2015) suggests incorporating interactive technologies to bridge in-class and out-of-class learning, offering rich language input and engaging learning experiences. Digital tools like language learning apps, online forums, and virtual exchanges provide students with diverse opportunities to practice language skills in meaningful contexts. By integrating these varied methods, teachers can ensure that students receive increased exposure to the target language outside the classroom, fostering a more comprehensive language learning experience.

In an increasingly super-diverse world (Vertovec, 2007), classrooms in English speaking countries are becoming more diverse, with students coming from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To support adult ESL learners' better English learning outcomes and positive language identity, ESL teachers should realize that all the ESL adult learners are bi/multilinguals (Ortega, 2019) who bring extensive L1 foundations to the classroom. Teachers should view students' existing L1s as valuable resources in language teaching and learning from the asset-based perspective (Marshall & Moore, 2013). To leverage students' existing repertoire and semiotic resources, teachers can adopt translanguaging pedagogy (García & Li, 2014), which is "a theoretical and instructional approach that aims at improving language and content competencies in school contexts by using resources from the learner's whole linguistic repertoire" (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, p. 1). Translanguaging works "as a bridge to connect students' linguistic expertise, as a scaffold to support new understandings and student participation, and as a sign of linguistic expertise and content understandings" (Kang et al., 2019, p.15). This pedagogy not only supports students' content comprehension but also acknowledges and validates the dynamic language practices and identities of bi/multilinguals (García & Li, 2014). A language-open classroom environment, coupled with translanguaging pedagogies, can help build a safer space where language learners feel free to practice their target languages.

Finally, professional development for teachers should

include training on better addressing students' different needs. Farrell (2020) emphasizes the importance of ongoing teacher professional development to address the evolving needs of language learners, underscoring that teachers must be capable of reflecting on their practices and making suitable adjustments in their teaching (Guo & Sidhu, 2024). Training programs should equip teachers with strategies to identify and support individual student needs, fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. This could involve workshops, peer observations, and collaborative planning sessions focused on integrating both BICS and CALP development into everyday teaching practices.

5.3 Future research

In the field of SLA, less attention has been given to ESL adults, compared with that of K-12 education. Researchers should pay attention to this part because adults have many challenges socially, culturally, linguistically, and mentally when they step into a new country and learn a new language from scratch. Adult ESL education has many unresolved issues that warrant further investigation.

Future studies should explore how to pedagogically support bi/multilingual adult newcomers in developing BICS and a positive language identity effectively within ESL programs in English-speaking countries. Research can investigate the impact of integrating translanguaging pedagogies (García & Li, 2014) and asset-based approaches (Marshall & Moore, 2013) on adult learners' language acquisition and identity formation. Examining the effectiveness of various instructional strategies that balance the development of BICS and CALP in adult learners is crucial. Another potential area of research is the role of multimodal, multimedia, and technological tools in adult ESL education. Investigating how digital tools, such as language learning apps, online forums, virtual exchanges, and other interactive technologies, can enhance language exposure and facilitate both in-class and out-of-class learning experiences will provide valuable insights (Richards, 2015). Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to track the language development of adult learners over time. These studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of various pedagogical interventions on language proficiency and identity construction (Norton, 2010). Understanding how adult learners' language skills evolve and how their self-positioning as language learners

change over time can inform more effective teaching practices.

Author Contributions

Ziyue Guo: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing—Original Draft, Writing—Review & Editing, Project Administration; *Qihua Feng*: Investigation, Writing—Original Draft.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report in relation to the work detailed in this article.

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