

296. Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (2013). Entry "Jim Cummins." *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, ed. Carol A. Chapelle. Malden, MA: Blackwell. DOI: 10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal0306.

Entry "Jim Cummins"
Tove Skutnabb-Kangas

Professor James (Jim) Patrick Cummins, hereafter JC (born 3rd July 1949, in Dublin, Ireland) is one of the world's most influential researchers in bilingualism studies. His research has focused on various aspects of literacy development in multilingual school contexts, particularly the relationship between students' home languages (L1) and their developing proficiency in the dominant language(s) of instruction. He has also highlighted the interactions between societal power relations and teacher-students identity negotiation, arguing that only instruction that explicitly challenges coercive power relations in the wider society will be effective in promoting subordinated group students' academic achievement.

JC grew up in Ireland and experienced first hand through his schooling both immersion education and the challenges of reviving an endangered language (Irish). He started his studies at The National University of Ireland (Psychology). After his PhD (1974, Alberta), he worked for two years in Dublin at the Educational Research Centre, he returned to Canada. Since 1978 he has been at the Modern Language Centre, OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), Toronto (see <http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/index.htm>).

A prolific researcher and writer, JC has authored close to 20 books and edited an additional 11. He has also written almost 200 book chapters and more than 100 refereed journal articles. This work has focused on issues of policy and practice relating to the education of bilingual students and has been particularly influential in supporting the significant growth of bilingual and mother tongue oriented multilingual education in countries around the world during the past 30 years.

JC's most influential work has involved the synthesis of apparently contradictory research findings and the articulation of theoretical constructs to resolve these contradictory findings. An early example is his 1976 paper *The influence of bilingualism on cognitive growth: A synthesis of research findings and explanatory hypotheses*. It hypothesized that the level of bilingual proficiency that students attained mediated the effects of bilingualism on their cognitive and academic development. Thus, the apparent contradiction between early studies (1920s to 1950s) reporting negative cognitive and academic consequences associated with bilingualism and more recent studies (1960s and 1970s) highlighting the potential cognitive benefits of bilingualism could be resolved by positing two thresholds of proficiency that students needed to attain (a) to avoid the negative effects associated with instruction through a weaker language, and (b) to experience the enhancement of cognitive and linguistic functioning that knowledge of two or more languages confers on the developing child. In other words, the threshold hypothesis (developed together with Pertti Toukomaa and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas) argued that educational treatment interacts with students' academic language proficiency to produce positive or negative educational and cognitive outcomes.

This theoretical work was expanded into the emerging debate on the merits or otherwise of bilingual education. Bilingual programs for minority group students, implemented on a limited scale in contexts such as the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, had become highly controversial. Opponents argued that dilution of the instructional time between minority students' L1 and the dominant language (L2) would inevitably result in deficient L2 academic development. In a widely cited paper published in the influential *Review of Educational Research* in 1979, JC drew on research carried out in Scandinavia, Canada, the United States and elsewhere to propose the *Interdependence hypothesis*. This hypothesis (also known as the *Common Underlying Proficiency* [CUP] hypothesis) argued that literacy-related concepts and skills in L1 and L2 are interdependent, or manifestations of a common underlying proficiency, such that academic knowledge and skills transfer across languages under appropriate conditions of development (e.g., educational support for both languages). This transfer of concepts and literacy-related skills explains the fact that instruction through a minority language exerts no adverse consequences on students' academic development in the majority language despite less instructional exposure to the majority language. This holds true for students from both minority and majority language backgrounds in various kinds of bilingual programs.

In addition to work related to bilingual education during this period, JC also proposed a distinction between two dimensions of proficiency in a language—*basic interpersonal communicative skills* (BICS) and *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP). This distinction derived from an analysis of more than 400 teacher referral forms and psychological assessments carried out on students who were learning English as an additional language in a western Canadian city. It was clear from the data that students quickly gained conversational fluency in English but took considerably longer to catch up to grade expectations in academic aspects of language (e.g., vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension). These data were consistent with previous research in Sweden that identified the “surface fluency” developed by Finnish minority group students in Swedish (their L2) (Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa, studies for UNESCO).

A subsequent re-analysis of data from the Toronto Board of Education (Cummins, 1981) showed that, on average, students required 5-7 years to come within a half standard deviation of grade norms on measures of academic language. The distinction between BICS and CALP has exerted a major influence globally on issues such as the amount and duration of instructional support deemed appropriate for immigrant and second generation students and also the use of inappropriate psychological tests with immigrant and minority group students. However, it also led to accusations by a number of researchers that the distinction constituted a “deficit” theory which attributed students' underachievement to “low CALP”. This interpretation was vigorously repudiated by JC (see Cummins, 2000, Chapter 4 for the most complete discussion).

Although JC consistently acknowledged the central role of broader societal factors in determining students' academic development, his early focus was on psycholinguistic and psychoeducational considerations related to bilingualism and bilingual education. This focus shifted in the early 1980s partly in response to the misinterpretation of the construct of CALP but also because of the vehement rejection of bilingual education by media commentators and many policy-makers in the United States. This rejection was clearly ideological in view of the fact that

the research evidence was very clear: bilingual education represented a legitimate policy option with the potential to reverse patterns of minority group underachievement.

JC's 1986 paper *Empowering Minority Students*, initially published in *Harvard Educational Review* and expanded upon in subsequent publications (e.g., his 1996 and 2001 [2nd edition] book *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society*). This body of work integrated the previous psycholinguistic analyses and theoretical constructs into a broader framework that linked identity negotiation between teachers and students in the classroom to patterns of power relations in the broader society. JC distinguished between coercive and collaborative relations of power which correspond to the common distinction between "power over" and "power with". The former was defined as the exercise of power by a dominant individual, group, or country to the detriment of a subordinated individual, group or country. This process is subtractive—the more power one player gets, the less is left for others. By contrast, collaborative relations of power are additive—the more power that accrues to one partner in the relationship, the more is available for others to share. Based on this distinction, JC defined *empowerment* as *the collaborative generation of power*. The implication of this analysis is that any educational reform that seeks to close the achievement gap between dominant and subordinated group students will only be effective to the extent that it challenges the operation of coercive relations of power within the school and classroom, and, ultimately, the whole society.

JC's recent work has involved collaboration with educators aimed at creating interpersonal spaces in schools and classrooms that generate power for minority group students. For example, within the context of English-medium instruction, educators have implemented bilingual instructional strategies such as encouraging students to create and web-publish dual language books (in L1 and English) (see www.multiliteracies.ca). These *identity texts* hold a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light, a very different message from the messages that schools have typically communicated to subordinated group students and their communities (see Cummins 2009 for a summary article of JC's recent work).

Summing up, comparing languages competence and school achievement of English mother tongue children in French immersion programmes, and (other) immigrant and other minority children (and later also Indigenous/First Nations children) in English medium submersion programmes made JC realise how differently the educational systems treated them, and how minority children were unfairly tested and labelled as deficient in terms of their capacities, background and environment. This led JC to create *theoretical concepts*, today known and used everywhere in the world. He has continued to refine the concepts, to revise ways to test their validity and reliability (often working in schools, with children and educators, in many parts of the world), to relate them to school-internal and societal unequal power relations, to develop alternatives together with educators in schools. JC continues to educate teachers, school authorities, parents, politicians and colleagues all over the world about the consequences of the unfair educational treatment of children. His work has influenced deeply hundreds of thousands of educators all over the world, and, through them, millions of children.

References:

Cummins, J. (1976). The influence of bilingualism on cognitive growth: A synthesis of research findings and explanatory hypotheses. *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, 9, 1-43.

Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, 49, 222-251.

Cummins, J. (1981). Age on arrival and immigrant second language learning in Canada. A reassessment. *Applied Linguistics*, 2, 132-149.

Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, J. (1996, 2001). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. Los Angeles: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Cummins, J. (2009). Fundamental psychological and sociological principles underlying educational success for linguistic minority students. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas, R. Phillipson, A. K. Mohanty & M. Panda (Eds.), *Social Justice through Multilingual Education*, (pp. 19-35). Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 19-35.