

US Naturalization Preparation for Low-Income Seniors

This paper presents the development and refinement of a special-purpose ESL class which I have taught. This class was associated with the Ministry to Immigrants outreach program of St. James Cathedral in Seattle, WA. One aspect of this ministry is providing support for immigrants to become naturalized citizens of the US. The program receives monies to help with this work, so they are able to subsidize the application process, as well as provide technical assistance with the naturalization process. This particular class is volunteer work for a 501c3, the tax-code that describes non-profit organizations. The Ministry to Immigrants program supports the class with a small stipend to cover the costs of photocopying materials.

The population who is served is constrained by the funding agencies. Typically, the individuals need to demonstrate financial need. This is relatively straight forward since many of the potential students are parents of naturalized citizens who have entered this country as relatives of citizens. Often, these individuals are living with governmental assistance: subsidized housing, food and utility assistance, and SSI (supplemental security income). The dependence on any of these services is sufficient demonstration of financial need. Of these subsidies, SSI is the one that typically prompts this population to seek naturalization. The Social Security Administration policies support the distribution of SSI monies to non-citizens for up to seven years after initially qualifying for SSI support (SSA, 2013).

Naturalization Process

While there are a number of requirements to apply for US naturalization (USCIS, 2012), this project focuses on preparation for the naturalization examination, often officially called the *interview*, which comes at the end of the process. There are several constituent parts to the interview: establishing eligibility for naturalization; demonstrating English language competence: reading, writing, and speaking; answering questions about US civics (USCIS, 2014).

Often, the initial segment of the interview includes some general information such as how the applicant got to the USCIS office that day, any family that they may have in the area, etc. This

conversation serves as the speaking portion of the examination. Therefore, not surprisingly, interviews have been terminated when the applicant cannot demonstrate basic conversational competence in English during this introductory segment of the interview (Jim Hodges, personal communication).

The reading portion of the exam consists of “correctly” reading one of three sentences presented by the interviewing officer. Upon sufficiently accurate reading, this portion of the exam is done. The Scoring Guidelines (2013) state that the applicant must read all of the content words but “may omit short words that do not interfere with meaning.” Similarly, the writing portion of the exam consists of “correctly” writing one of three sentences presented by the interviewer. The Scoring Guidelines state that the written sentence “has the same general meaning as the dictated sentence” and may contain grammatical, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization errors which do not interfere with meaning.

The part of the exam which is the most familiar to both the applicants and the general public is the civics portion of the exam. For this portion of the exam, USCIS has published 100 questions covering aspects of US government and history. These are the questions that are typically posted on “Could you pass the citizenship exam?” websites.

The remaining portion of the interview, establishing eligibility for naturalization, typically takes the form of an informal conversation, where the USCIS officer asks about nation of origin, length of time in the US, when the applicant became a legal permanent resident (LPR), any interruptions in US residency since attaining LPR status. This information is included on the Form N-400, Application for Naturalization.

The Target Population

As mentioned in the introductory material, this course has as its target population low-income senior citizens. The income limitation is a requirement of the funding agencies which support the program. Also as noted above, the students are commonly receiving SSI support which is available if they are 65 years of age or older, blind, or disabled. This alters the needs around English fluency for the target population. Typically, they won’t have any need for English as used in the workplace.

Also, the level of English competence that is required for the naturalization exam involves only basic communicative abilities. It is quite acceptable for the applicant to speak in relatively heavily “accented” English, omitting all articles, with verbs expressed as present participles with temporal adverbs to indicate tense and aspect.

“Yesterday I riding bus. Man talking very loud next to me. ‘Shut up’, I say him.”

Clearly, this does not meet academic English standards by any means. It is, however, enough for the naturalization interview, and, more importantly, basic, everyday communication in English.

Thus, this class does not have to address a number of the concerns that are typically raised in other ESL contexts. As shown in the previous example, fossilization, which is a common feature of language learning in more mature students (Shumin, 2002), is not an issue here.

The Course

The class meets once a week, for 90 minutes. The classes typically take place in the residence of the students. As noted in the introduction, they often are living in subsidized housing, Seattle Housing Authority or King County Housing Authority facilities. These facilities typically have a library or common room which serves nicely as a classroom. This relieves the students of the need to pay for transportation or to negotiate the transit system.

The class will have “on-going” enrollment; that is, students may join the class as they identify a need for this material. Similarly, there is no requirement for regular attendance at the classes, since each class will cover portions of the exam material. This flexibility makes the course more accessible, since there are many potential interruptions in student attendance: doctor’s appointments, illness, vacation with family, etc. There is no problem with the students being away for one or more weeks. The material recurs. Moreover, the naturalization process requires a minimum of five years between the receipt of LPR status and the naturalization interview (USCIS, 2012). So, there is often a significant amount of time to prepare the students for the exam.

Since this is a targeted class, with the naturalization exam as its endpoint, there is no need for any formal assessment within the course. The activities within the class will serve as formative assessment for the instructor and for the students. Also, the level of attainment needed for the

interview has been published by USCIS (2013). So, the core class can indeed be driven the by needs of the test.

In the classes of this ilk which I have taught, the student population generally is quite homogeneous: students from the former Soviet Union, students from Latin America, and students from PRC. This allows students to use L1 in the classroom. This can decrease the affective difficulties that older students may have approaching a classroom, particularly a language class. The use of L1 has the added advantage that limited English capability in a small group of students or of a single student does not impose a general level of language use within the classroom.

Each class session will follow the same basic pattern: ~15 minutes of warm-up, ~15 minutes of reading and writing, ~ 60 minutes of working with “the questions.” Each of these segments of the class will be described in greater detail below, with some examples of materials included in the text.

The Warm-Up Segment (~15 minutes)

This segment will include general English conversation. Topics such as:

- How are you today?
- How was your week?
- Have you done anything different recently?
- How was your trip? Where did you go? What did you do there?

The purpose of this is to mirror the speaking part of the interview. It also serves the classic function of a warm-up exercise, to get the students thinking and speaking in the target language. The warm-up will continue long enough so that each student has the opportunity to speak.

As student facility in English grows, this warm-up exercise could broaden to include other aspects of spoken English: asking directions, giving directions, talking to the manager (complaining) at a store, etc. These topics don’t have to be scheduled, but can develop from the sharing of the students during the warm-up time. If / when an interesting topic presents itself, there is flexibility enough to pursue that topic immediately. Alternately, if the topic might benefit

from realia or other preparation, a note can be made to the class that the topic will be taken up again at the next session.

The Reading/Writing Segment (~15 minutes)

Given the structure of the class, it is virtually inevitable that there may be significant variation in the appropriateness of the activities based on student level. In the initial courses which I taught, I generally targeted the mid-point of the class capabilities and more or less relegated some students to boredom or sense of being “lost at sea,” comforting myself by the relative short duration of this segment.

Bowler and Parminter (2002) offer some very workable concrete suggestions in addressing this variability in student level. For example, if the day’s activity is writing, different students can be given radically different scaffolding for the exercise.

Students with minimal facility in written English can be given a sheet with the sentences already written upon it for copying practice:

The boy went to the store with his sister.

Students who are more advanced in their knowledge of written English can receive a paper with the function words provided:

The _____ to the _____ with his _____

Students who are approaching target level abilities are expected to write the complete sentence.

The evaluation for the naturalization interview describes a very course level of accuracy to pass the exam. So, the fundamental response to the student will be if the work seems to be good enough to pass the exam. Even though the target performance will accept relatively great variation, the student work will be marked for general accuracy, with students rewriting the sentences to address the discrepancies. This can prompt the students to develop their listening and writing skills, while knowing that they have sufficient skill for the upcoming exam.

For reading exercises, the students with the most rudimentary knowledge of written English can be given the sentence in English orthography as well as transcribed into their L1 orthography. This is possible because the students with whom I have worked have all possessed basic literacy in their L1. Some accommodation would need to be made for pre-literate students.

For the most fundamental level students, the reading sentence would be the same as the sentence they were given to copy, quite possibly on the same piece of paper.

The boy went to the store with his sister.

Да бой вент ту да стор вис хис систр.

For the more advanced students, the sentences can be “novel.” They will still be in the general ilk of the reading and writing sentences for the naturalization interview, though. This will allow the other students to participate in a listening activity, as each student practices reading. Also, basic pronunciation problems / issues can be addressed in this reading time. With the guiding principle being things that do not interfere with meaning are acceptable.

If students are interested in homework, particularly for those students who have more rudimentary reading and writing skills, worksheets similar to those used in class can be prepared and offered as additional practice / homework. This can be particularly helpful when students do have an upcoming exam and need to demonstrate better reading or writing. As an example, one of the students who came to the class relatively close to his scheduled exam date, passed most of the exam, except the reading and writing. This homework option would have been very reasonable to provide additional practice. As it turns out, his language level was such that the additional study work would have been copying sentences and reading them from Cyrillic transcription.

The “Questions” Segment (~60 minutes)

The bulk of the class time is devoted to “learning the answers” to the “100 questions,” which cover civics: US government, geography, and history. The USCIS site provides several levels of study materials for the civics questions: the questions and answers in booklet form and as flash cards. These materials are currently available in English and Spanish, with the questions and

answers as a booklet also available in Chinese. There are numerous sources for the “100 questions” in other languages, for example, from cliniclegal.org.

With these materials available in the students’ L1, even students with limited English capabilities can participate in the Questions segment. Moreover, the availability of the material in L1 will help to insure that there is understanding of the material, rather than simple “parroting” of the “nonsensical” syllables as answers, “House of Representatives”. Thus, by listening with understanding, the students can participate in the Question segment using true conversational skills (Tsang and Wong, 2002).

In larger classes, this would be an excellent time for pair work (Lewis, 2002). Initially, students might be paired with others who share the same L1. This pairing could be either a beginning level students with a more advanced student. As students progress, the need to have a shared L1 decreases. So, two intermediate to advanced level students could work together regardless of L1.

One of the primary benefits of structuring the bulk of the class around the 100 questions is that student satisfaction is high; that is, they are studying what they expect to study. In the process, they are gaining speaking, listening, and reading skills in English. Thus, the boring work of gaining basic communicative competence is “hiding” in studying history, government, and geography.

As students near their actual interview, the activities in the Question segment will alter. It would be very beneficial for the students who are in their final preparation for the exam to interact with other speakers. Students become accustomed to the voice, intonation, and phrasing of their teacher. They will have a different interlocutor for the interview. Practice with other speakers can be very helpful, as this can be arranged. It may be possible to invite other residents of the housing facility to come in for conversation or reading through the questions. In the case of the classes arranged through St. James Ministry to Immigrants, the staff from the office will come to provide “mock” interviews with the students.

Also, this period before the actual interview is the appropriate time to practice the questions that appear on Form N-400, the Application for Naturalization, since the interviewing officer can ask any questions from the N-400 as a means to prove eligibility for naturalization. These

questions include personal demographic information: address, birth date, phone number, data about spouse and children, so it may not be appropriate to cover these questions within a larger group. The N-400 also includes a number of questions about past political activities of the application: for example, “Have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?” For most of the students with whom I have worked, these “have you ever ...” questions can uniformly be answered, “no.” In fact, this is a common tactic that is used in most naturalization preparation courses.

Possible Follow-on Work

There is a certain segment of the students who have been involved in these naturalization preparation classes who want to continue their study of English. Sometimes, because they are not heading into the workforce, as noted before, there are limited options available for them to continue to study English at no cost. While there are often low-cost classes available in English, for example at the local community college, these options pose some potential problems: there is the issue of transportation to the class, the cost of the class and any associated materials, and the relative rigidity of the schedule, with fixed start and stop dates. So, I have had students express an interest in continuing to study, even after passing their naturalization exam.

The class format changes relatively little. The warm-up period can be extended to ~30 minutes. This provides greater opportunity for the students to talk, to tell about the things that are going on in their lives. Needless to say, this speaking practice for one student is an opportunity for listening for the other students. Since they are typically living in the same housing authority facility, they students also have shared experiences with other residents and staff at the facility. This opens options to discuss typical ways to handle disagreements and conflicts within the context of American culture.

The Question segment can be replaced by a variety of activities. As older students, a grammar-translation approach to language learning is very familiar and expected. This can be balanced with cultural readings, often with associated comprehension questions, available on the Web. Other activities can include: cooperative writing tasks, word games, recipe exchanges, and the like.

In Conclusion

This class has broadened the palate of activities that I could apply within this type of classroom context. It has provided options and ideas for structuring classroom activities that would help engage the students more actively in the class. It also suggested ways to manage the class activities that could maximize the student retention of the material.

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The Situation:

- Adult naturalized citizens bring their parents to the US as family members
- Use of governmental support: subsidized housing, food stamps, SSI
- Some of these are dependent on immigration status: SSI

The Naturalization Process:

- Residence requirement
- The exam:
 - Basic conversational English
 - Brief reading and writing tests
 - Oral examination: US civics, history, geography (“100 questions”); N-400

Proposed course:

- At the student’s residence: community room, library
- One 90-minute session per week
- “On-going” enrollment, flexible class size: 1 - 10
- Literally, teaching to the test as the basic format
- No need for course-internal assessment, USCIS provides
- USCIS describes required level of attainment in language use.
- Typically no need to prepare for workplace use of English.
- Tailored (responsive) to individual student needs
- Can easily be adjusted to accommodate different levels
- Associated with an agency that is supporting the N-400 application process
- Anticipate relatively small classes: up to half a dozen students, typically uniform L1.
The classes I have taught have been primarily students from the former Soviet Union.

Class Schedule:

- Warm-up exercise (~15 minutes)
- Reading/Writing segment (~15 minutes)
- Work on questions (~60 minutes)
- The content of these sections will be adapted to the student level and needs

Warm-up exercise:

- General conversation questions:
 - How are you today?
 - How was your week?
 - Did you visit with your family?
 - Did you go anywhere?
- Mirrors introductory conversation in the naturalization exam
- Long enough so each student has an opportunity to listen and speak
- With student facility, this can broaden to other aspects of “survival” English.

Reading/Writing Segment:

- Dependent on student level.
- Primary material: published sample sentences
- Activity dependent on language level:
 - Copying sentences and then “reading” them
 - Sight recognition of common words, also target words for USCIS list
 - Single word dictation
 - Sentence dictation
- As students gain reasonable facility with the appointed texts, this segment can broaden to other topics, other readings.

Work on Questions:

- Primarily based around “100 questions”
This is what the students are expecting in a preparation class
- Copies of the 100 Qs available in many L1s. Some from USCIS.
- Initially reading the questions and the answers, starting with L1 copies
Hearing the question in English, reading L1 version
Hearing the answer in English, reading L1 version
Goal: build understanding
- As students develop, they can begin to ask each other questions: pair work
- Nearer scheduled naturalization exam: Individual work on answering N-400 questions

Possible follow-on classes:

- I have had students who wish to continue after Naturalization.
- Same basic structure:
 - Warm-up (~30 minutes): more general-use language
 - Reading/writing (~60 minutes): primarily reading with personal translation, followed by comprehension quiz or discussion
- Older students “expect” grammar/translation style language instruction.
- Reading/writing can be substituted with language games, cooperative story writing, etc.