

Want to Immigrate to France? Better Know Slam Poetry.

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Highlight: Either there was a complete disconnect between immigration and the team that devised the questions or the test is designed to leave behind a large portion of the immigrant population.

Body

A recent study found that an estimated one in three native-born Americans could not pass the civics test immigrants have to pass to become naturalized citizens. The British government has announced a major update to its citizenship test, to include questions about British history from the Roman times to the present. And this year France started requiring anyone applying for French citizenship to take an oral comprehension and expression test.

As an American who has spent more time living in France than in the United States, I finally decided early this year to apply for French nationality. This meant that to complete my already hefty application dossier, I also had to take this new test, which was described this way in news reports:

Candidates will be tested on French culture and history, and will have to prove their French language skills are equivalent to those of a 15-year-old mother tongue speaker.

Fair enough. But the requirements for the test, which is called TCF-ANF (French Knowledge Test for Access to French Nationality), were fairly vague and the sample exercises that various websites recommended I take had me either in a state of panic because I had forgotten the rules of the direct-object complement, or had me yawning with boredom. Just recently the official website posted sample questions which are similar to the real test, but you would only realize this once you had already taken the TCF-ANF.

Before taking the test it would be impossible to understand why one would be listening to a 58-second tape of a man with a Marseilles accent rambling on about the role of young fathers in France today.

The TCF-ANF is administered in independent test centers all over France, which then relay the tests to the Ministry of Education to be corrected. When I tried to sign up for the TCF-ANF I found there was a four-month wait and that the test took six weeks to be corrected. After paying 100 euros I was told I had to clear my entire day for the test.

When the day finally came about 25 of us filed into the classroom looking slightly embarrassed. Most of us were over 30 and school exams were far behind us. Our names and nationalities were on stickers on the various desks but in no particular alphabetical order, so we had to look on each desk before finding our place.

An African man wearing a colorful wax print cloth outfit mopped his brow nervously while a veiled woman leaned over and asked her neighbor in a loud whisper if he had done the practice questions online. Most people seemed fluent in French and had obviously lived in France long enough to be familiar with the ins and outs of the administrative processes, but when the test began we were all thrown.

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The first test consisted of 30 minutes of listening exercises - a scratchy recording of various situations was played to the classroom followed by timed multiple-choice questions. Not only was it difficult to hear the tape (compounded by the persistent grumbling of the middle-aged Algerian taxi driver sitting behind me), the situations being discussed in the recordings were decidedly bizarre. One consisted of two people discussing slam poetry, and the question at the end was "is slam poetry a collective activity?"

Now, how was the average immigrant from a rural area supposed to know what slam poetry was? Or the average French person for that matter? Another recording was a radio announcement for a special deal for two people who could win Eurostar tickets plus free entrances to a Turner exhibition at a London museum. Eurostar? Turner?

The one-on-one 15-minute oral examination that we were called back to take that afternoon was even stranger. An African student doing her PHD in linguistics (I later found out she was Kenyan) was the administrator who was going to interview and record me. I wouldn't have batted an eye had the student been from the former French colonies of Senegal or Cameroon, where French is widely spoken, but this particular student's French was slightly iffy, and had me a little worried.

One of the first questions was: "Men are often said to be jealous, what do you think of this?"

Was this a trick question? Was it something to do with polygamy or honor killings?

Another question was: "Is having bilingual parents an advantage or a disadvantage?"

Well, obviously an advantage, I answered, but then had my doubts about how I should have answered.

There were a few role-playing exercises in which I had to interview a prospective nanny for my children, and then it was over. When the test administrator told me where she was from, we immediately switched into English. She would not be correcting me, she reassured me; the Ministry of Education would listen to the tape.

"The Ministry of Education will think the Kenyan student is you," remarked my husband.

So, the French culture and history test boiled down to listening to recordings of people conversing about slam poetry and the Eurostar played on a scratchy tape and then answering multiple choice questions? All of the recordings involved cultural or professional situations one might encounter in France but had nothing to do with French history or specific French culture. It was entirely frustrating and mystifying.

Either there was a complete disconnect between Immigration and the team that devised the recordings and questions or else the test is very, very perverse and, in fact, specifically designed to leave behind a large portion of the immigrant population.

The more I thought about it the more it meshed with the French administrative process: opaque and complex, leaving you in a permanent state of doubt.

Yesterday I picked up my test results. With great relief I saw I had passed all levels and could now add this certificate to my bulging application folder. How lucky I knew what slam poetry was.

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