



## The Meaning of *Citizenship*: Tests, Policy, and English Proficiency

This paper addresses the ideal of *citizenship* in the US and how particular meanings of history, culture, and language are encoded in government policy and practice. The US government (Citizenship and Immigration Services) presents citizenship as a commitment to shared knowledge and values, and it requires applicants to possess competence in “ordinary English language.” However, a critical discourse analysis of the naturalization test material reveals a *de facto* policy of higher English proficiency than is claimed. Furthermore, the history and civics requirement of the citizenship test demands memorization of only certain historical facts deemed important. Citizenship policy analysis is paralleled by a localized ethnographic study of an adult ESL/citizenship class, where the instructor’s teaching perspectives and pedagogy reveal how a different set of citizenship meanings is understood and transmitted to the students than is officially promoted. The paper concludes by offering suggestions for citizenship curricular reform.

### Introduction

“Citizenship is the common thread that connects all Americans. We are a nation bound not by race or religion, but by the shared values of freedom, liberty, and equality” (*Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities*, 2008). So says the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (hereafter referred to as CIS) on its government website, highlighting collective ties and idyllic characteristics of citizenship. While the US does not have an official, national language, the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) mandates that naturalization applicants be examined on their “ability to read, write, and speak words in ordinary usage in the English language” (*Applicant Performance on the Naturalization Test*, 2008). Knowledge of history and government in addition to a verification of “good moral character” is the final requirement. Once the exam is passed, a newly American citizen is said to be *created*. In the last decade, 6.8 million immigrants have been naturalized in the US (*Naturalization Fact Sheet*, 2008), and by their subscribing to common values and linguistic practices, it is assumed American identity is upheld.

Prior research has emphasized various shortfalls of the current naturaliza-

tion test with respect to language, assessment, and the nature of Americanism. The language of the test itself is English, meaning that the test becomes a *de facto* policy enforcing English usage in a country that is not *de facto* monolingual (McNamara & Shohamy, 2008). Shohamy (2009) also argues that there are misguided, widely held beliefs about language, testing, and citizenship that countries' respective policies are based on—for example, the beliefs that immigrants need to become fluent in the national language, tests are fair and objective, and cultural and linguistic assimilation is necessary for incoming immigrants. These assumptions gain strength as they become intertwined and can lead to a violation of basic rights for immigrants who lack a space in which to contest them. The citizenship test itself has been criticized for not being an accurate measure of citizenship, partly because of its focus on esoteric facts and residual questions from the Cold War (Kunnan, 2009b; Orgad, 2011).

The material required to pass the test indicates US ideals and what knowledge is valued in American citizenship. The US government's policy is that foreigners need to be tested on citizenship while native-born citizens do not. I argue that there is a gap between how CIS conceptualizes citizenship in its official discourse (shared values, common threads) and how it presents citizenship in the naturalization test itself (a memorization of facts and rote phrases). This in turn contrasts with the meaning of citizenship in a grounded context of an ESL/citizenship class, which directly affects and shapes immigrants undergoing naturalization.

To understand how the US government (CIS) defines and presents citizenship, I offer a critical discourse analysis of the naturalization test material. This test partially delineates the scope of *citizenship*, affecting how citizenship is taught in an adult ESL/citizenship class. I also offer a critical ethnographic study of a localized context, where the citizenship test is taught and very particular meanings of citizenship are transmitted. The key questions I explore are:

1. How does CIS represent the meaning of citizenship, as demonstrated by the content of the naturalization test?
2. How does the citizenship instructor view the meaning of citizenship as evidenced by his teaching pedagogy?

With respect to the first question, I focus on two aspects of the test: the 100 history/civics questions and the citizenship application (N400) and interview. For the second question I analyze how the teacher's perceived role as a coach and advocate and his focus on memorization, repetition, and use of handouts demonstrate his view of citizenship.

## Literature Review

### *Citizenship in the US*

In the last decade, not only have citizenship and immigration testing policies around the world garnered more attention (see Shohamy & McNamara's [2009] special issue of *Language Assessment Quarterly*), but they have also become more rigorous in their language requirements. The US was actually

the first country in the world where naturalization “was put to common use” (Spiro, 2008, p. 34). While there was no formal definition of citizenship in the Constitution (Pickus, 2005), 3 years later Congress passed the first citizenship bill: the 1790 Naturalization Act. To be a citizen, one had to be free, white, have lived in the US for at least 2 years, be of good character, and take an oath to support the Constitution. While the Declaration of Independence promised “all men are created equal,” only “free white persons” could be naturalized.

In the 1800s, additional requirements were created, including proving good *moral* character and allegiance to the Constitution. At that time, satisfying the requirement of “good moral character” meant adhering to “Anglo-Saxon values ... rooted in Christian values and English common law” (Orgad, 2011, p. 6) and was used to exclude applicants who were homosexuals, prostitutes, polygamists, illegal gamblers, and habitual drunkards.<sup>1</sup> In 1868, civil liberties were extended when African Americans were recognized as citizens under the 14th Amendment, but they were again limited in 1882 when Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibiting Chinese people from naturalization, the most restrictive policy since the 1790 Naturalization Act (Pickus, 2005). In 1896, Congress made the first of many attempts to pass a literacy test requirement, but it was continuously vetoed until 1917, when it passed in a climate of World War I fervor (Orgad, 2011). Requiring literacy in applicants’ native languages restricted “undesirable immigrants” from Southern and Eastern Europe from entering the US and becoming citizens. It was not until 1952, with the passage of the INA (Immigrant Naturalization Act), that an ability to speak, read, and write *in English* became a component of naturalization, along with a knowledge of US history, government, and principles. In 1986 the Immigration Reform and Control Act standardized the naturalization test and strengthened educational requirements for citizenship (Kunnan, 2009a).

The current version of the test has undergone many revisions in the last 2 decades. From 1991 to 1996 the naturalization test was administered by six private testing services with subcontractors operating 1,000 testing sites nationwide (Kunnan, 2009a). Considerable variation existed from site to site: Different interviewers used different genres of questions to test listening and speaking, and they used sentences of varying difficulty levels for reading and writing (Kunnan, 2009b). A report by Miller and Muldoon (as cited in Kunnan, 2009b) revealed that applicants in Arlington, Virginia, were expected to answer 7 history/civics questions correctly out of 12 (58% correct), while in Atlanta, applicants could possibly receive all 100 history/civics questions, and with no stated minimum requirement a passing score was at each interviewer’s discretion (Kunnan, 2009b). CIS took control of administering the test in 1997 after numerous complaints of the private testing contractors arose.<sup>2</sup>

From 2001 to 2007, efforts were made to revise the naturalization test, in particular to make it more *fair* to applicants by standardizing it and more *meaningful* by not testing for memorization, while maintaining the same pass rate (84% on the first attempt) (Kunnan, 2009b). However, besides standardization, the revised citizenship test of 2008 did not change the content or structure of the test (Kunnan, 2009a; Kunnan, 2009b; Orgad, 2011). The “revised” test that

applicants see today consists of four parts: speaking, writing, and reading in English, and history/civics. The history/civics requirement is met by answering 6 of 10 questions correctly from a prepublished list of 100 questions and their answers. For the reading and writing sections of the test, applicants are given three attempts to produce a correct sentence that is dictated to them. The government provides a vocabulary list for both these sections, which totals 93 terms. To pass the English-speaking requirement, applicants are asked questions from their submitted N400 naturalization application.

### ***Implications of Citizenship Tests: Assessment and Cultural Capital***

Tests are commonly believed to be valid and objective measures, and public rhetoric emphasizes their “symbols of success, achievement and mobility” (Shohamy, 2009). Because tests are inextricably wrapped in power, they are more than tools for simple assessment. Citizenship tests are loci of authority that can create an obstacle to naturalization for immigrants who fear government bureaucracy and that have the power to determine an individual’s future opportunities. As it is a high-stakes test, failing the test means failing to receive rights and benefits that native-born citizens inherently do, such as access to health, education, and welfare (McNamara & Shohamy, 2008); being eligible for federal jobs, grants, and scholarships (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2007, September); and living without fear of deportation.<sup>3</sup>

When tests such as the citizenship test officially add a language component (mandatory productive and receptive competence in English), the prestige and status of that language is elevated over other languages spoken in that country. In the US, the citizenship test acts as a *de facto* language policy because English is the sole language of the test and the degree of English competency required to interpret the test language is much higher than naturalization policy claims. This illustrates Shohamy’s (2009) argument that citizenship tests “stipulate standard criteria of correctness ... and thus present unrealistic linguistic goals and criteria detached from the ways in which second language adult learners use new languages” (p. 51).

Citizenship tests can be seen as gate-keeping mechanisms that allow the government to judge who is worthy to become a citizen. As demonstrated in the previous section, “Citizenship in the US,” throughout US history certain groups of people have been excluded from citizenship. Even today the structure of the test allows for examiners to fail applicants because of their “moral character,” meaning people who are polygamists, drunkards, mentally incompetent, drug users, have an arrest record, or who were involved in undesirable groups such as the Communist Party can be denied citizenship.

Citizenship tests can reconstruct a country’s idealized identity by highlighting favorable historical events while ignoring unfavorable ones. While American public discourse encourages independent thought as a basis of citizenship, the test instead encourages conformity in its test responses. Consequently, “many immigrants might conclude that in order to be accepted into society, one should not challenge the state’s narratives and ideals” (Löwenheim & Gazit, 2009, p. 155).

The fact that naturalized citizens must take this test but native-born citizens do not reveals a crucial paradox. It is assumed that native-born citizens do not need to take a citizenship test because they already know what it means to be a citizen simply by being raised in the US.<sup>4</sup> But for foreign-born citizens, the belief is that they must be *taught* what American citizenship entails because they have not had formative experiences. However, it is striking how similarly different countries define citizenship. While citizenship is presented as a set of values that are unique to the nation in question, they are in fact more universal qualities, such as: the ideals of human rights, tolerance for others, and the rule of law (Hogan-Brun, Mar-Moliner, & Stevenson, 2009). The British Home Office defines “Britishness” as someone who “respect[s] the laws ... traditional values of mutual tolerance, respect for equal rights and ... allegiance to the state” (as cited in Orgad, 2011, p. 30). These requirements could easily be substituted for any country’s definition of citizenship, which begs the question that if the ideals of citizenship are “universal,” then why do immigrants need to demonstrate it?

The question can be partially elucidated under the theory of cultural capital. As defined by Bourdieu (1991), cultural capital is “knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications” (p. 14). The type of knowledge and skills comprising one’s cultural background is inherited, as citizenship is in the US.<sup>5</sup> If we think of cultural capital including “what it means to be a citizen,” even calling it *citizenship capital*, we can extrapolate that immigration policy views citizenship capital as nation-specific. The inherited citizenship capital from one’s home country does not necessarily transfer into appropriate citizenship capital in another country.

Just as schools can be sites of cultural reproduction because their “formally defined credentials or qualifications become a mechanism for creating and sustaining inequalities” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 24), the government can also be a site for cultural reproduction by legitimizing the citizenship capital of native-born citizens while devaluing that of immigrants. Government policy asserts that the type of knowledge and dispositions that immigrants bring to a new country is not valid currency, and they must start from scratch in learning nation-specific knowledge and values. Conceptualizing naturalization under the lens of citizenship capital is useful in understanding the macrolevel forces shaping how citizenship is viewed nationwide.

### **Details Regarding the Present Study**

This study works to extend the area of literature as reviewed above by presenting a localized ethnographic study. I situate myself with a growing body of work that investigates language policy from a political, bottom-up approach (Canagarajah, 2005; McCarty, 2011; Ramanathan, 2005). Ethnography is well equipped to study a grounded context such as a citizenship class because it allows the researcher to understand local knowledge from an emic perspective.

Citizenship classes, first introduced in 1914 during the nativist period, are an important locus to observe the “creation” of citizenship: “Their official purpose was orientation: to supply immigrants with the knowledge required for

examination in a naturalization court ... the second step was to generate an American identity and promote the adoption of American lifestyles” (Orgad, 2011, p. 13). If the implicit goal of citizenship classes is to *create* citizens, then it is important to understand the complex dimensions of such classes.

Therefore, the focus of this study is to understand the meaning of citizenship that is presented in the US, both within the constructs of an adult citizenship class and also by the government (CIS). Conducting a textual analysis of the documents provided by CIS on its website is an essential starting point, since the government’s definition of citizenship influences how the citizenship course instructor is able to interpret his role as a citizenship teacher. Students in the citizenship class are influenced by both transmissions of citizenship meanings.

## Methodology

### *Description of the Setting*

Ford Adult School (a pseudonym) is situated in an urban city in central California. Combined with its sister branch, the two schools boast 1,640 students, of which 61 have attended at least one citizenship class at Ford Adult School during my period of observation.<sup>67</sup> There are two Citizenship/ESL classes offered in the same classroom, the walls of which are adorned to resemble a classroom community. One wall houses an 85-member collection of “graduates”—students who have passed the naturalization test in the last 1.5 school terms. Each person’s picture is affixed to a sheet of paper beneath the words “America’s Newest Citizen.” The whiteboard is also used to depict an emergent community: Each current student’s name in the class is listed next to his or her stage in the naturalization process (a date for a scheduled interview, fingerprinting appointment, or the month in which a student becomes eligible to apply).

The teacher is a 77-year-old man named Mr. Morris who began teaching ESL and citizenship when he retired from his job as a high school principal 15 years ago. The class is structured around various handouts, about six per day, taken from USCIS.gov, other websites with citizenship curriculum, or designed by Mr. Morris himself. Every class begins with a handout designed to practice some of the 100 history/civics questions, and it is accompanied by the “master copy”—a one-page, double-sided complete list of the 100 questions and answers as compiled by Mr. Morris. The remainder of the class is occupied by numerous, yet recurring activities: completing and reviewing other handouts to practice the different components of the naturalization test, having partners quiz each other with CIS flash cards, conducting mock interviews, and practicing conversational English with ESL flash cards.<sup>8</sup>

Community is also built during the day-to-day classroom routines. Each week Mr. Morris reminds the class who among them has the next scheduled interview by asking, “Who’s the most nervous person in the room?” It is understood that after students pass the test, they will return to class to share their experience with their remaining classmates. When they return, Mr. Morris announces: “I’d like to introduce to you a new citizen.” They inform their fellow

students which specific questions they were asked on the history/civics section of the test and the English sentence they read and wrote; some students even bring a typed list of every question asked throughout the entire interview. Students themselves acknowledge the sense of classroom community that Mr. Morris creates. One day a student brought her camera to class with a hand-drawn sign that read, "Citizenship class Mr. Morris 2010-2011" and orchestrated various group pictures. Even a very advanced English student who already knew the vast majority of the 100 questions, as well as related, nontest questions, continued to attend class week after week. Mr. Morris conjectured, "He keeps coming [because] I think he likes being with the people."

### ***Positionality***

Under a critical ethnographic perspective, it is essential to acknowledge that a researcher has vested interest in the topic at hand and can never be a completely neutral observer (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). Thus, it is equally important to recognize how a researcher's positionality changes during the course of investigation. Initially my thoughts were that the class was useful to the students, but very mundane and repetitive. However, as the months progressed I found myself deeply supportive of the structure of the class. Not only did I believe that the repetitive nature of the class was necessary to support each individual student's growth, but I also saw the class as an asset for immigrants needing to navigate a mystifying system of bureaucracy. With an absence of practical information supplied by CIS, this citizenship class is one of the few resources available to would-be citizens to learn about the process of citizenship.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The data under investigation come from a qualitative, critical ethnographic study of an adult ESL/citizenship class for 5 months in the 2010-2011 school year, coupled with an analysis of policy documents regarding the citizenship test. With respect to the citizenship test, I analyzed INA policy documents, news bulletins on the CIS website, and components of the test itself: the N400 application, the 100 history/civics questions and answers, and vocabulary sheets for the English reading and writing section. Data indexing was done through Excel spreadsheets, which variously sorted the test questions, focusing on *de facto* and *de jure* positions. I approached the text from a critical-discourse analysis standpoint to explore the interface of language, power, and ideology. Understanding that texts reveal ideological standpoints (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), I analyzed the meaning of each of the 100 history/civics questions under the CIS classification system to understand the area and type of knowledge necessary to answer each question. In terms of the classroom handouts, the data are from the 108 class handouts plus the master copy of the 100 history/civics questions and answers that was available each week. Since these handouts were used readily, I looked for curricular themes and use of language to understand how they complemented Mr. Morris's understanding of citizenship.

Classroom observations were conducted in 2 weekly citizenship classes, both taught by Mr. Morris. My role in the classroom was as a participant ob-

server, with my class time spent writing field notes, quizzing students, asking them questions from flash cards, conducting mock-oral interviews, and editing English writing sentences. After a few months of continuous classroom presence, ethnographic observations led to in-depth interviews with Mr. Morris and with 5 students of various backgrounds and ethnicities (Italian, Filipino, Chinese, Hmong, and Albanian).<sup>9</sup> The style of interviews was nonscheduled and standardized to enable a comparison of different student responses to the same set of questions, which were grouped thematically by key topics. All interviews were transcribed and passages were coded as they related to the previously indexed field-notes categories. All materials were revisited in light of the interview data until it became apparent that categories were sufficiently saturated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This also coincided with a significant change in the student body: four students “graduated” in the same week and many other regular students stopped attending. The value of this data is that they come from varied sources and were analyzed from a close, critical standpoint.

## Findings

### *CIS: The 100 American History/Civics Questions*

Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) delimits citizenship as correctly answering 6 of 10 American history/civics questions, which are divided into three categories and nine subcategories, illustrated in the following chart:

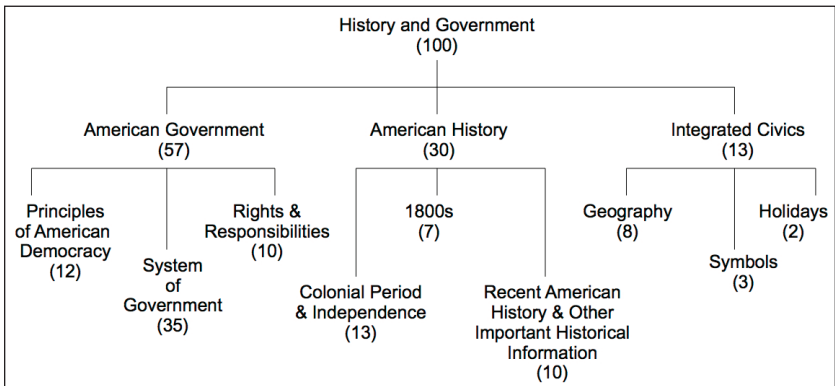


Figure 1. CIS classification of 100 history/civics questions.

An 11 page-document of these 100 questions and possible answer choices is published on its website. As evidenced by the number of questions in each category, the main focus of this section of the test is “American Government,” which total 57 of the 100 total questions, followed by “American History” with 30 questions and “Integrated Civics” with 13 questions. This demonstrates that the purported emphasis of the test, and therefore what CIS thinks are essential components of citizenship, are the structure of government and details from the past. While Figure 1 reveals the government’s conception of citizenship in terms of history and civics, this portrayal of citizenship is merely the *de jure* classification and can represent only how CIS *believes* it presents citizenship. I



propose reanalyzing the purported categories to see whether each category is the best fit for each question, following Blackledge's (2009) assessment that "every inclusion, like every omission, is ideologically oriented" (p. 11). I therefore suggest the following reclassification of the test questions, with the hope that the types of questions asked becomes more transparent:

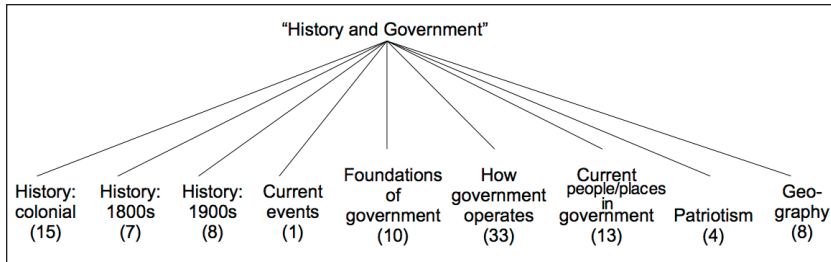


Figure 2. Alternative classification of the 100 history/civics questions.

Instead of a neat division of three categories each with three subcategories in Figure 1, Figure 2 sorts the questions into nine equal categories, excluding one miscellaneous question.<sup>10</sup>

The justification for this alternate chart is that the CIS headings are not the most accurate terms to represent the questions contained. For example, the subsection "Recent American history and other important historical information" includes the following questions:

- (#79) Who was President during World War I? [(Woodrow) Wilson]
- (#85) What did Martin Luther King, Jr. do? [fought for civil rights; worked for equality for all Americans]
- (#86) What major event happened on September 11, 2001, in the United States? [terrorists attacked the United States]

Calling events from the early 1900s "recent history" is questionable, but even more problematic is that the category's name masks the fact that question #86 is the only question in the entire test from the 2000s, and the only period I would call recent history. This allows CIS to avoid including a category called "Recent history" that contains only one question, which would reveal a lack of attention toward current events. This is why Figure 2 includes a category called "Current events," and questions #79 and #85 are placed in the category "History: 1900s."

Another reason I sort the questions differently from CIS is that some of its divisions obscure the fact that related questions exist across categories. For example, there are four questions about the Declaration of Independence; two questions are in the subsection "Principles of American democracy":

- (#9) What are two rights in the Declaration of Independence? [life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness]
- (#8) What did the Declaration of Independence do? [declared independence from Great Britain]

while two questions are in the subsection “Colonial period and Independence”:

(#62) Who wrote the Declaration of Independence? [Thomas Jefferson]

(#63) When was the Declaration of Independence adopted? [July 4th, 1776]

However, I see the last three questions grouped together, because all ask for knowledge about what happened during the same period: 1776. Question #9, on the other hand, is not something that *happened* during this period, as the other three are, but is relevant to the building of government. So this question belongs in a category I call “Foundations of government,” which includes questions that focus on structure of government, not specific events from the period.

This same logic applies to questions about the Constitution:

(#2) What does the Constitution do? [defines the government]

(#3) The idea of self-government is in the first three words of the Constitution. What are these words? [We the people]

Questions #2 and #3 share the CIS subsection “Principles of American democracy,” but they have different contents. Question #2 is similar to #9 in that both are facts about the government’s structure, so it belongs in “Foundations of government,” while Questions #3 and #8 are both facts about history during the “Colonial period.” Arguably, restructuring the test question bank would make the connections between questions easier for applicants to conceptualize.

Each of the first four categories listed in Figure 2 is concerned with events and details from those respective periods. The remaining groups are: “How government operates,” which is concerned with current workings of government:

(#27) In what month do we vote for president?

and “Current people/places in government,” which includes questions about people, places, parties, and events in the present-day government:

(#40) Who is the chief justice of the United States now?

Classifying the questions in Figure 2 reveals the *de facto* focus of the test. Of the history questions, the “Colonial period” is seen as the most significant. “How government operates” is the emphasis of the test, comprising a third of all questions. The other categories with more than 10 questions apiece are “Foundations of government” and “Current people/places in government.”

Besides question content, I also categorized the 100 history/civics questions by the *type* of question asked. One reason for drawing out this distinction is that some questions have a similar sentence structure but ask for different types of responses:

(#1): What is the supreme law of the land? [the Constitution]

(#12): What is the “rule of law”? [everyone must follow the law]

At first glance both questions appear to be asking for a similar answer, but in fact Question #1 is asking examinees to respond with a particular *term* while Question #12 asks for a *definition*. In total, there are 11 types of questions in the history section of the test, displayed in Figure 3 alongside their descriptions and frequency count.

<p><i>names</i>: specific people, groups (16)</p> <p><i>terms</i>: our specific word for something (16)</p> <p><i>places</i>: cities, states (12)</p> <p><i>responsibilities</i>: someone, something’s power (12)</p> <p><i>concepts</i>: why something is the way it is (10)</p> <p><i>attributes</i>: characteristics of someone or something (9)</p> <p><i>numbers</i>: how many, age (9)</p> <p><i>purposes</i>: what something does or motivation for something that happened (8)</p> <p><i>events</i>: wars, holidays (6)</p> <p><i>dates</i>: which month, which day (5)</p> <p><i>definitions</i>: what the word or phrase means (4)</p>
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Figure 3. 100 history/civics questions by question type.

Classifying questions in this manner allows us to see what type of knowledge is necessary to answer each question, which is important because some question types are conceivably easier to learn (or conversely, memorize) than others, and the citizenship literature claims that not many questions require high-level thought. Questions about names, numbers, places, events, and dates are simple memorization-type questions, and they include questions that even native-born citizens would have to memorize, such as:

(#7) How many amendments does the Constitution have?

(#66) When was the Constitution written?

Only 10% of the questions involve concepts, requiring a higher level of cognitive thinking:

(#25) Why do some states have more representatives than other states?

CIS has compiled the 25 most difficult questions and has shared this information at the community meetings that Mr. Morris attends. The question type

that is reportedly the most often missed is *responsibilities*, comprising the largest number (6) *and* the highest percentage of question type (50%) on the most-missed list. I believe this difficulty partially lies in the fact that the responsibility questions test subtle distinctions and possible answers sometimes overlap:

- (#49) What is one responsibility that is only for U.S. citizens? [serve on a jury; vote in a federal election]
- (#50) What is one right only for U.S. citizens? [vote in a federal election; run for federal office]
- (#51) What are two rights of everyone living in the United States? [freedom of expression; freedom of speech; freedom of assembly; freedom to petition the government; freedom of worship; the right to bear arms]

Not only are questions #49 and #50 difficult because voting is regarded as both a right and a responsibility, something that is plausibly even more unclear for ESL students, but question #50 as it relates to #51 is also confusing. In #50 the rights in question are actual practices, but in #51 the word *right* refers to more abstract notions.

Since answers to these questions are not always intuitive, even for native-born citizens, many applicants memorize test answers, a practice that CIS condones by publishing answers that require only factual repetition, not actual knowledge. CIS even lists different ways of phrasing the same answer choice, allowing examinees to practice possible answer constructions:

- (#65) What happened at the Constitutional Convention? [the Constitution was written; the Founding Fathers wrote the Constitution]

This practice is exemplary of the banking concept of education. From this pedagogical approach, CIS “makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (Freire, 2000, p. 72). Concepts and meanings are not transmitted; only context specific “packets” of information are acquired. This is a dated approach for teaching history, which reveals that the designers of the citizenship test are not drawing from teaching pedagogy progress in constructing a current test. It is arguable how many details of the past are necessary to be a “good” citizen in the present, but the message of the test is that memorizing specific words, proper nouns, and various history and government facts is the type of knowledge that being a citizen requires.

Besides analyzing the question content and type of each of the 100 history/civics questions, examining frequent word usage in this section of the test further uncovers the test’s *de facto* meaning of citizenship (Figure 4). While determiners were not included in the following figure, collocations including *the*, such as “the main concern” in Question #83 reinforce the fact that CIS believes that only its answers are legitimate:

- (#83) During the Cold War, what was the main concern of the United States? [Communism]



(power, right, freedom). Collocations and frequency counts suggest that while CIS promotes a well-rounded view of citizenship (Figure 1), it in fact heavily relies on a small set of particular words. Insofar as these terms are unique to US government, learning them is part of acquiring a new citizenship capital.

### **CIS: The N400 Form and Interview**

The 100 history/civics questions are just one component of naturalization; the N400 application and the interview section based on this form are used to assess English proficiency. The way that the form and interview are structured can lead to linguistic discrimination by testing beyond “ordinary English usage” and rewarding only particular frames of English use, which fundamentally affects how future citizens are taught English.

Submitting the N400 application is the first step of the naturalization process and consists of seven direction pages and 10 pages to complete, with questions varying from citizenship eligibility, to employment, to marital history.<sup>11</sup> The N400 form is available for applicants to download on the CIS website or pick up from the government office, with the belief that the seven pages of instructions will provide enough assistance with completing the form. No additional study assistance for the N400 interview is offered besides posting a video of a sample interview on the CIS website. An excerpt of the application language is seen in Figure 5:

<b>22. Have you ever:</b>		
<b>a. Been a habitual drunkard?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
<b>b. Been a prostitute, or procured anyone for prostitution?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
<b>c. Sold or smuggled controlled substances, illegal drugs, or narcotics?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
<b>d. Been married to more than one person at the same time?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
<b>e. Helped anyone enter or try to enter the United States illegally?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
<b>f. Gambled illegally or received income from illegal gambling?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
<b>g. Failed to support your dependents or to pay alimony?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
<b>23. Have you ever given false or misleading information to any U.S. Government official while applying for any immigration benefit or to prevent deportation, exclusion, or removal?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Figure 5. Sample section of N400 application, page 8.

This passage, as well as the language in the application as a whole, is rife with specialized terminology (*procured, narcotics, alimony*) and complex syntax (especially in question #23). Thus, even though the level of English required to pass the test is specified as “ordinary English usage” in INA Act 312, the test is in fact a *de facto* policy of technical, advanced English use. In fact, a lexical analysis of the US study handbook reveals a strong tendency of using academic words (Hargreaves, 2010). In lieu of comprehending the meaning of each specialized word, applicants can pass this section of the test by memorizing answers patterns (all “no”).

Because the level of conversational English necessary to pass is at the interviewer’s discretion, interviewers are free to fail those whose English is non-standard or not easily understood. Applicants who are not able to participate

in the interviewer's bureaucratic conversational routine may fail, even if their English proficiency level would be judged sufficient in typical conversational formats. In a study of 63 recorded naturalization interviews conducted from 1999 to 2000, Baptiste found that interviewers used little to no eye contact during the interview, tended not to clearly transition between topics, and failed to give justification for repeated questioning, causing applicants to wonder if they had made a mistake (Baptiste & Seig, 2007). The potential of these areas for miscommunication is likely why Mr. Morris practices conversational frames in class, because knowing the culturally and linguistically appropriate ways to respond in these scenarios is essential to succeeding.

I have shown in this and the previous section that it is necessary to understand how the government presents both the *de jure* and the *de facto* meanings of citizenship because this is the official knowledge system that is transmitted to future citizens. However, it is equally important to investigate localized knowledge systems that naturalization applicants interact with more directly. An ethnographic study of an ESL/citizenship class is able to elucidate particular meanings of citizenship that the teacher transmits to his students.

### ***Citizenship Instructor: Teaching Perspective***

Examining the transmission of citizenship within a classroom is important because it is not only top-down government-level policies that affect students; an additional key source of information is their citizenship instructor. Mr. Morris's view of citizenship is seen in his teaching perspective, as he adopts a role of a coach and advocate for his students.

Acting as a coach, Mr. Morris encourages his students to send in their N400 applications and asks for status updates each week. Even those students who do not feel ready to send in an actual copy of their applications are still urged to practice filling out a form in class. His perspective is: "They are waiting to be pushed." It is his duty to coach the students to first feel ready to apply, and second, to pass the test. Also as a coach, Mr. Morris conducts thoroughly detailed mock interviews with students with approaching test dates, including: polite etiquette at the beginning of an interview (making small talk about the weather), physical commands (taking an oath to tell the truth, presenting one's green card), various questions from the student's N400 application, 6 of the 100 history/civics questions, and a sentence to write. Through modeling the entire interview, not only does the chosen student have an opportunity to practice the established routine, but the rest of the students can witness this process many times as an observer. Mr. Morris emphasizes this aspect of secondary learning, explicitly instructing the class: "While I'm doing this you do it too, pretend it's you." This practice of some students' modeling behavior for other students is a key strategy of a coach who is responsible for an entire group's learning.

Mr. Morris also shares test strategies and practical test-day information with the students, advising where to park for the interview and relaying that cell phones are not allowed in the CIS building. His information makes the naturalization process more transparent to applicants so that they know what to expect on their interview day.

It is also clear that Mr. Morris plays a complementary role as an advocate for the students. He played a major role in convincing local CIS officials to hold a community outreach meeting for local educators so that both sides could share information and suggest ideas. Even that accomplishment was a struggle:

I had to fight to get that I just kept going down there and talkin' to this person and that person wherever I could ... we said why don't we have a community outreach group where we can just meet with you once or twice a month, once or twice a *year* even, we don't care. (Mr. Morris)

Mr. Morris's perceived role as a coach and advocate for his students is paralleled by classroom practices that display his view of citizenship.

### ***Citizenship Instructor: Teaching Practices***

Mr. Morris's teaching practices reflect his belief that his students are already citizens, but now they have to prove it: "They're guys that have just worked their *butt* off for 20 years—building homes and you know picking fruit and what have you, and been good guys and paid their taxes. ..." Mr. Morris's perspective is that by living in the US for the required amount of time, holding a job, and paying taxes, then his students deserve to be citizens, and the test is just a technicality. His view of citizenship capital is different from the CIS view; for Mr. Morris citizenship capital is acquired by being a responsible and hard-working person, which does not need to be learned in the adopted country. Since Mr. Morris believes his students already possess the qualities and knowledge necessary to be US citizens, his main priority is assisting his students to pass the test. This explains why the study materials he distributes in class focus on memorization of terms and phrases at the expense of deeper content learning.

At the beginning of every class period there are at least two handouts at the front table of the classroom for students to pick up upon entering the classroom. One handout is always Mr. Morris's master copy of the 100 history and civics questions, which contains simplified phrasing of all the questions and answers so that they fit on one double-sided page. Half (12 of 24) of the 100 history/civics question handouts that Mr. Morris used in the 17-week period in which I observed were fill-in-the-blank handouts, consisting of 10 or 25 chosen sentences written next to a blank line for students to write in the answers. Since the master copy is always available to students, most complete the handout by copying the given answers from the master version.

Handouts and classroom activities are used for two distinct purposes in the class: to teach oral interactional frames as practice for the interview and to teach vocabulary and cultural meanings. Even though the handouts are a *written* mode for learning, they are designed to practice *oral* conversational frames. Since the oral N400 questions do not have an established, published answer, Mr. Morris uses handouts that provide possible answer choices to practice answer frames. The following excerpt is from a handout titled "Simple Citizenship Interview," whose pages have been distributed in class seven times.



20	Do you work? (How do you support yourself?)	a) Yes, I work. b) I am retired. c) I stay at home and take care of my family. d) My (husband, wife, children) support me.
21	Where do you work?	I work at _____ (Name of Business)
22	What is your job?	I am a _____ (Job, occupation, position)

Figure 6: Handout excerpt of N400 interview.

This handout assumes that students are familiar with multiple-choice formats and understand the routine of filling in blank lines with personal information as it is applicable. There is some evidence that not all students share this system of knowledge, as I have witnessed one student confused by a similar handout that expected her to substitute her responses for the samples given. Mr. Morris’s goal with this type of handout is to allow students to practice their individual responses to oral interview questions by following a certain template. This teaching practice subscribes to the position that memorizing answer frames is a suitable alternative for more exhaustive ESL-type lessons, because this is not the type of citizenship meaning that Mr. Morris emphasizes.

The second type of handout that Mr. Morris employs teaches particular vocabulary terms. One exemplary handout, excerpted in Figure 7, comprises a word bank of 16 terms from the N400 application and interview, matched to 16 illustrations. The illustrations on this handout are clip art-type pictures; the three icons shown here supposedly represent “noncombatant,” “illegal drugs,” and “Communism,” respectively.

Arrested	Bear arms	Communism	The Constitution
Gambling	Group	Habitual drunkard	Illegal drugs
Jail	Mentally incompetent	Nobility	Noncombatant
Promise	Taxes	Terrorism (9-11)	Vote


  


Figure 7. Vocabulary matching handout.

Native-born citizens themselves would assumedly also have trouble completing this exercise, as the nurse in the first picture can arguably depict a nurse administering drugs to a *mentally incompetent* patient. In the second picture *illegal drugs* is associated with what appears to be a child. The third is representative of Communism only for those from China or who have a knowledge of world history. The fact that these concepts are portrayed as simple icons sug-

gests that particular cultural meanings are conveyed with the vocabulary terms, and their meanings are reduced to a low-level understanding if understanding is achieved at all.

Besides restricting meanings and limiting answer frames, other classroom handouts and activities suggest a more encompassing view of citizenship. While CIS presents voting as a *responsibility* for citizens, Mr. Morris frames it as a *benefit* that naturalized citizens can take advantage of. In the weeks leading up to the 2010 midterm election, class handouts included a voter guide handout in four languages and a sample voting registration card. Besides voting, Mr. Morris emphasizes other practical benefits of citizenship, instead of shaping the discussion in terms of obligations and responsibilities. All new students on their first day of class receive an introductory presentation by the teacher in which they are given a handout specifically on the benefits of becoming a citizen.

While many classroom handouts promote a more well-rounded view of citizenship than CIS does, it is also the case that some fall short by making assumptions based on students' background knowledge. It is taken for granted that students come to class knowing how to interpret multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and matching handouts, and furthermore, that they can translate interactional frames from the written medium to oral competency. Additionally, if the interpretation of certain words and illustrations is not obvious even for native-born citizens, then it cannot be presented as such for English language learners. Understanding that the students do not share the same range of cultural and citizenship capital as the instructor should be a necessary first step in reforming citizenship curriculum.

### Conclusion

While the ethnographic part of this study is highly localized, when taken with the analysis of the citizenship test several crucial issues regarding citizenship are significant to applied sociolinguistics and the teaching of ESL. First, this research draws attention to the fact that citizenship is an ideal, a metaphor around which very distinct meanings of culture and history are encoded. This is evident in history questions that focus on colonial history, wars, rights, and responsibilities, all the while using a monologic voice and casting US history in the most positive light possible. Because the naturalization test requires English literacy, English language ideologies become further encased in ideals of US citizenship. Mr. Morris emphasizes a different set of citizenship meanings: Being a citizen instead of a permanent resident is rife with practical benefits, passing the test is a process that takes time and commitment, and leading a productive and law-abiding life in the US for the required length of time is what makes a US citizen, not the test itself.

Second, we see that when citizenship is translated into a test, it consequently whittles history and culture into memorizable units, which is seen in pedagogic materials. These bits of knowledge must be learned, because the view is that citizenship requires the acquisition of a new country-specific citizenship capital that is not compatible with what one already knows.

Third, teaching memorizable facts about citizenship, history, and culture

does not fully address concerns about *rights* and *duties*. The rights that are singled out in the citizenship class are selective; for example, Miranda rights, witness-protection rights, and the right to interpretation and translation are left out. These are fraught areas because they are concerned with fellow humans trying to make sense of a new place, history, and culture in a different language, and while applied sociolinguistics has begun to address these (see Ramanathan, 2006, for issues relating to translation and interpretation across and between languages and geographic terrains), issues relating to citizenship are underinvestigated. The research in this paper is an early step in ameliorating this situation.

Finally, while teachers of ESL/citizenship cannot change the naturalization test, they can develop lessons and materials that encourage critical thinking as a component of citizenship education. When memorization of historical facts and predetermined responses is endorsed and thinking critically is not encouraged, an opportunity is missed for *transformative citizenship education* (Banks, 2008). Instead of presenting the test questions as the only legitimate knowledge for becoming a US citizen, teachers could begin by acknowledging what students already know, historically and culturally. By recognizing the knowledge that students already possess, teachers would validate students' *citizenship capital* and use it as a foundation on which to introduce new material. In teaching the citizenship test content, instructors do not need to present the questions and answers as absolute. Rather, they can use the test content as a forum to discuss and analyze alternate, yet still correct responses, which would also be an ideal setting for practicing English in different contexts. For example, the previously mentioned test question about "*the* main concern of the United States" during the Cold War could be used as a basis for a general discussion about the Cold War, in which multiple concerns are highlighted.

These ideas for citizenship curricular reform, prior scholarly research, and evidence throughout this paper suggest that the current naturalization test is not an accurate measure of citizenship. Needless to say, the validity of the test depends on how citizenship is defined. When citizenship is interpreted in its legal sense, as CIS does, then rights and responsibilities are conferred on naturalized citizens after a successful demonstration of history, government, and English knowledge. Under this view, the naturalization test is an appropriate measure of citizenship. What is not assessed, but what is arguably more crucial to true citizenship, is being active, informed, and critical (see Ramanathan's forthcoming edited volume for arguments for citizenship being interpreted more widely). In this light, true citizenship cannot be measured by the current test; citizenship is demonstrated in part by participation and involvement in the community.

Because these facets of citizenship cannot be ascertained by a standardized test, this suggests the need for alternatives to the citizenship test. If the core of true citizenship is engagement, citizenship could be demonstrated by such actions as voting, becoming involved in the PTA, joining a community organization, or attending a town hall meeting. Instead of participating in a high-stakes, formal interview to assess English proficiency, one option for satisfying

the English requirement for citizenship could be attending an ESL/citizenship class. In Germany, those who are not fluent in German but desire citizenship must attend German language classes for 600 hours (Makeba Laversuch, 2008). While extreme, this option eliminates the high-pressure testing format and additionally provides an opportunity for community building among prospective citizens. While there are no foolproof solutions to citizenship valuation, with the increased numbers of naturalized citizens in the US, analyzing the meaning of citizenship is an essential subject for critical inquiry.

### Author

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The current version still asks all of these questions except about sexuality.

<sup>2</sup>According to Mr. Morris, pseudonym of the adult citizenship class teacher.

<sup>3</sup>According to Mr. Morris.

<sup>4</sup>This is also why immigrant children under the age of 18 become citizens automatically if one of their parents becomes naturalized.

<sup>5</sup>This is the principle of *jus sanguinis* (citizenship by blood, descent).

<sup>6</sup>As of January 2011.

<sup>7</sup>This figure is an estimate, calculated from field notes.

<sup>8</sup>Sample questions: “What’s a good age for people to get married?” and “What place do you want to visit?”

<sup>9</sup>While data from these student interviews are not centrally related to the research questions addressed here, see Loring (in press) for an account of student meanings of citizenship.

<sup>10</sup>This question is (#87): “Name one American Indian tribe in the U.S.”

<sup>11</sup>The cost of submitting the N400 application is \$680. A hefty price for many immigrants, all immigration application fees total 90% of CIS’s 2.8 billion budget for the 2011 fiscal year (USCIS [Fact sheet], 2010).

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