

Position Statement on the Redesign of the U.S. Citizenship Exam

For many adult English language learners in the United States, the development of English language skills is part of a larger goal: the attainment of U.S. citizenship. Teachers and educators in the field of adult English as a second language (ESL) have long recognized this fact, and have served valuable roles in assisting immigrants to attain U.S. citizenship. Moreover, the field of adult ESL in the U.S. has responded by developing programs and curricula built on teaching civics in conjunction with ESL.

As the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) redesigns and standardizes the U.S. citizenship exam, TESOL strongly urges consideration of the following issues:

- *Access* - Thorough analysis of field test results must ensure that groups such as the elderly, those with disabilities, or those with limited formal education are not unfairly or adversely affected by the new test. Even a small percentage change in the failure rate (between the current test and the new test) could ultimately result in thousands of individuals being denied citizenship.
- *Level of Difficulty* - Although the aim of making the test more meaningful is laudable, this may be difficult to achieve without raising the language and reading proficiency level, and the volume of content mastery required of examinees in order to receive a passing score on the exam. The statutory requirements related to meaningful content and language proficiency level should be explicitly defined by USCIS, and publicly disseminated to all stakeholders for comment so that consensus can be reached upon the test items. Careful attention and consideration must be paid to the number of topics, the volume of information, and the level of detail included in the study guide and test.
- *Test Format* - Because testing situations may be arduous and intimidating to some, the test should be short in duration, avoid unnecessary duplications in skill objectives, and employ a simple “user-friendly” format. In addition, the criteria for scoring the test should be clearly defined, and a process for inter-rater reliability and recalibration among test administrators must be established to ensure that the test is consistently administered and scored.
- *Test Content and Study Guide* - The test content and study guide should be nonpartisan in nature and remain politically neutral. This should be especially true of the civics content, which should emphasize practical civics knowledge (i.e. civic participation).

TESOL commends USCIS for its efforts thus far to seek stakeholder input in the test redevelopment. As adult ESL educators will continue to play critical roles in the citizenship process, TESOL urges USCIS (and its test development contractor) to continue to seek guidance from adult educators at each step of the test development process to ensure that the test is fair and appropriate for the many examinees who have limited experience with formal education and standardized test formats.

*Approved by the Board of Directors
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