

# Teaching Citizenship Preparation in a Multi-Level Class

Kathleen Klose and Andy Koppel  
The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.  
www.ilctr.org  
[kklose@ilctr.org](mailto:kklose@ilctr.org)  
781-322-9777

## Contents

- ❖ Passing the interview: What knowledge and skills are needed?
- ❖ Materials and activities: Identify what works for students with widely varying abilities:
  - literacy, language, memory, education
- ❖ Managing a mixed-level, mixed-ability class
- ❖ Using a student-centered approach
- ❖ Evolving a management style that works for you
- ❖ Assessment: Using ongoing assessment and adjustments

## Passing the Interview

- Naturalization applicants will need to:
- Answer any of 100 questions about U.S. government, history and civics (6 of 10)
- Read a sentence containing prescribed vocabulary (1 of 3)
- Write a sentence containing prescribed vocabulary (1 of 3)
- Communicate in English (at varying levels of proficiency)

### A. 100 Questions -- 10 chances for 6 correct responses\*

What skills are needed?

- Memorization
- Listening comprehension with attention to detail
  - Focus on the complete question
  - Listen, don't anticipate
- Confidence and ability to ask: Can you repeat that slowly, please?
- Adequate pronunciation for comprehensible responses

### B. Reading a Sentence -- 3 chances to read 1 sentence *mostly* correctly\*

What skills are needed?

- Sight word recognition
- Compensation strategies for low literacy (see Commercial materials: card readers)
- Forgivable errors
  - Misreading or omitting minor words
- Fatal errors
  - Long hesitations, gross errors, misreading important words
- The pronunciation must be comprehensible

### C. Writing a Sentence -- 3 chances to write 1 sentence *mostly* correctly\*

What skills are needed?

- Aural word recognition
- Legibility
- Spelling
- Compensation strategies for low literacy (see Commercial materials: card readers)
- Capitalization and punctuation
- Forgivable errors
  - Minor omissions or misspelling, punctuation, capitalization
- Fatal errors
  - Major omissions or misspelling, illegibility

*\*See [www.uscis.org/Applicant Performance on the Naturalization Test/Scoring guidelines for the U.S. Naturalization test](http://www.uscis.org/Applicant%20Performance%20on%20the%20Naturalization%20Test/Scoring%20guidelines%20for%20the%20U.S.%20Naturalization%20test)*

### D. English Communication -- What assessment is used by the USCIS?

The “pass threshold” for English ability is interpreted differently by individual USCIS officers.

Adequate English communication and comprehension will be expected in the following exchanges:

- Greetings and small talk
- Following directions (left, right, stand, sit, place left index finger on the ink pad, etc.)
- Comprehension during civics, reading & writing assessments
- Interview based on N-400 information and questions
  - Personal Information: comprehension and responses
  - N-400 Form Part 12: Additional Information about You -- up to 50 questionsIn addition to answering "yes" or "no", applicants may be asked to explain the meaning of a question, for example:
  - Have you ever been a member of the Communist Party? What is communism?
  - Have you ever been in prison or jail? What is the difference between prison and jail?
- Important questions to ask when needed:
  - Can you please repeat slowly?
  - Can you say that another way/say that a different way/rephrase that?
  - May I please speak with a supervisor? (Use with discretion and only if necessary, for example if the applicant can't understand the strong non-native accent of the officer.)

### Approach to curriculum & instruction methods in a multi-level classes containing low-literacy or low-English students

- Your approach is student-centered – You are serving individual students within a group environment.
- Your approach to each student must be guided by:
  - individual abilities and needs of that student
  - the single goal of passing the interview

### Curriculum for Multi-level Classes

Your curriculum is a box of tools that you will apply as needed for each individual student and/or group of students.

- Your curriculum is fluid and flexible.
- You constantly evaluate and adjust your instructional approach with respect to:

- Length and scope of a lesson (too long? too broad?)
- Length and nature of an activity (too complicated?)
- Method of instruction (clear? effective?)
- Type of materials (see Materials, below)

## **Grouping**

Consider the following attributes of each student when forming groups:

- Literacy level
- English comprehension
- English fluency
- Learning style
- Learning challenges
- Learning strengths
- Personality
- Circumstances (interview time frame)

Students can be grouped by ability and or content mastery:

- spelling skills, fluency, comprehension, etc.
- content mastery (percentage of 100 questions mastered, level of "spelling list" mastery)

Groups can be collapsed or divided depending on:

- objectives for the activity
- availability and experience of volunteers or student leaders

Groups can also work independently on many skills if the activities and materials are appropriate, (simple, self-directed, self-correcting).

## **Management Considerations**

### **People**

Well-trained volunteers are invaluable assets in multi-level classes. I use a combination of native English speaking community volunteers, former student volunteers and student leaders.

#### **Community volunteers**

- Advantage: They model native English.
- Disadvantage: They are unfamiliar with your methodology and the students' needs and abilities.
- Training is important.
  - It's crucial to understand how to work with adults who have limited educational background (My [Low-Literacy Volunteer Guide](#) is available online.)
- Flexibility and attitude are important.
  - Must be willing to drop expectations and to be adaptable. As one volunteer coined it, "It's not about what I want; it's about what they need."
- Patience is essential.

#### **Former student volunteers and current student leaders**

- Advantage: They know the ropes. They have an inside perspective on the methodology.
- Disadvantage: They have varying English abilities. However, students should understand that their USCIS interview may be conducted by a naturalized citizen with a foreign accent. They need to tolerate non-native accents.

## Space management

- Organize your tables for both whole class and small group work.
- Have a small table for one-on-one or individual work.
- Is there space available outside the classroom for small groups or one-on-one tutoring? (I utilize the lunch room, copy room and empty office space when available, as well as corners of my classroom.)
- Get used to a noisy space with different activities.

## Time management

- Find what works for you:
  - Do you begin with all students together and then break up into groups?
  - Do you have students begin with independent activities and then come together?
- Have extra copies of materials so 2-3 groups can do the same activity at different paces.
- Experiment.

## Assessment

Assess each student frequently. Do this while you are working with the whole class, with a small group or one-on-one.

### Assess each student in the group.

- How is she doing? Is this working for her? If not, why not?
  - Is there a problem with the group dynamics?
  - Is the activity too difficult or too abstract for this student?
  - Does she need more one-on-one work or can you subdivide the group?
  - Is this activity necessary to this objective or can you substitute another activity?

### Assess yourself.

- Is the grouping appropriate?
- Does the activity target the objective?
- Is the activity appropriate for these students' abilities?
- Is the activity simple so that students can concentrate on the content and not the activity?
- Do the materials fit the activity?
- Does this activity and these materials meet the learning objective for these students?

## Materials and Activities

- Useful published textbooks and CDs - available here for browsing
- Online resources -- USA Learns Citizenship; USCIS.org/citizenship
- Useful commercial tools
  - Small laminator - endlessly useful
  - Califone or other brand of card reader/recorder for self-paced dictation, listening comprehension, reading, etc.
  - Hanging pocket charts for matching, sorting, organizing, etc.
- **Homemade materials – guaranteed to be designed for your students**

### Evaluating the Materials

- What objectives do they target?
- Are they easy to use?
- What knowledge or skills are required to use them?
- Can they be used independently?
- Are they self-correcting?
- Can they be used for different size groups, for partners, individually?
- Are they easy for you to make?

### Evaluating the Activities

- Active
- Interactive
- Easy to understand
  - Is training required?
- Targeted to the objective. What is their function?
  - Learning new material?
  - Practicing?
  - Memorizing?

### Notes on classroom management

#### In my highly multi-level class that meets 12 hours a week

- I use two to three basic groups based on students' stage in the preparation process and learning pace.
- These groups can be subdivided based on available volunteers, needs, abilities and the current activity.
- I generally teach new material while my volunteers lead follow-up activities. I may switch groups after the break.
- Student volunteers can lead many practice activities for civics, dictation and speaking.

#### Example of Grouping

- A community volunteer works with the advanced group using the civics "Talk about It" cards.
- Two former student volunteers lead small "practice" groups using question or dictation strips;  
**or** small groups do self-directing activities without a leader.
- I work with one or two students doing assessment in: civics, reading, writing, or answering questions from the N-400 form;  
**or** I introduce new material to a group of new students.

#### In a "homogeneous" higher level class that meets only three hours a week

- One experienced volunteer works with a group of students who have already submitted their applications but don't yet have interview dates. This group practices civics, spelling and N-400 vocabulary and questions.
- One group works with a highly experienced volunteer who prepares them for the interview. These students have received their interview dates.
- I work with a group of new students who have not yet applied. We work on learning the civics questions, practicing dictations (for spelling practice) and learning the terminology used in the N-400 application form.

➤ **Summary**

- Space – Be creative with what you have and, if possible, invade new territory!
- Time – Whatever works for you, do it and don't be afraid to revise the schedule; it's a learn-as-you-go process.
- Assessment – Note the specific challenges and strengths of each student on a daily basis and regroup or make adjustments as needed (materials, scope, activities, group size).
- Materials and activities must be targeted to the objective and appropriate for the individual student or group of students
- Materials and activities should be easy to use and suitable for use by pairs, small or large groups, and with or without a teacher or group leader

➤ **Recommendation**

Develop a teachers' support group. It's helpful to collaborate with teachers sharing similar circumstances with respect to the level of their students' needs and abilities and their number of hours and class meetings per week. Take advantage of this workshop to connect and exchange contact information with other teachers.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Institution</u>	<u>Phone</u>	<u>Email</u>
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____