

## USCIS' Redesign of Naturalization Testing

### Background

To qualify for U.S. citizenship, applicants must demonstrate a basic understanding of English, including an ability to read, write, and speak the language. They must also be able to show that they know the fundamentals of U.S. history and government. Currently citizenship applicants are quizzed on these topics as part of the naturalization examination interview. The test questions are generally culled from a lengthy pre-approved list, but there is no standardized testing format or method for administering the questions. As a result, the test content and process can vary from officer to officer and from office to office.

### Overview of the Redesign Project

In September 2001, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) launched a project to revise the citizenship testing procedures and ensure they are uniform, fair, efficient, secure, and applicant-centered. The USCIS plans to begin implementing new, standardized tests in late 2006 after the tests are pilot-tested and revised, if necessary, based on the pilot results. USCIS completed a pilot of the revised English test in June 2003—the first phase in a two-step pilot process. Along with the test, the USCIS is developing study guides that applicants will be able to use in preparing for the new test.

- *Director Aguirre Meets with History Experts to Discuss the Redesign of the U.S. History Portion of the Naturalization Test* (News Release, January 22, 2004)
- *Director Aguirre Visits with Stakeholders at Naturalization Testing Redesign Conference* (News Release, January 15 2004)
- *BCIS Takes First Step Toward Development of New Citizenship Test* (Press Release, March 13, 2003)

### Phase One—English Language

In the first phase of the two-stage pilot, the USCIS administered the proposed new English test questions to more than 4,900 participants at the end of their existing naturalization interview in six offices (Newark, New Jersey; Atlanta, Georgia; San Antonio, Texas; Sacramento, California; El Monte, California; and Bellflower, California). At the end of the naturalization examination (that used current English and U.S. history and government tests), USCIS officers gave participants part of the proposed new English test—one reading, writing, or speaking question. Pilot participation did not affect the outcome of the application. Nevertheless, 85% of applicants who were asked to participate in the pilot agreed to do so.

### Results of the Pilot

- For the reading part of the phase one pilot test, applicants answered four or five multiple-choice questions after reading a short paragraph. Almost 75% of participants to whom USCIS administered a reading test booklet answered all the multiple choice questions correctly; 87% answered either three out of four or four out

of five questions correctly; and 91% answered either two out of four or three out of five questions correctly.

- For the writing part of the test, applicants provided a brief description of a photograph depicting a scene from daily life. Almost 65% of participants to whom USCIS administered a writing test booklet received an average score of 4 or higher on a scale of 0-5; 93% received an average score of 3 or higher; and 98.5% received an average score of 2 or higher.
- For the speaking part of the test, the officers recorded the applicants' spoken descriptions of what they saw happening in two photographs of everyday life. Almost 60% of participants to whom USCIS administered a speaking test booklet received an average score of 4 or higher; 90% received an average score of 3 or higher; and 98% received an average score of 2 or higher.

For the purposes of the pilot test, USCIS made no determination on what score would be considered as "passing."

The following sample writing and speaking responses illustrate the scoring:

- Sample 5 level response: A family is sitting at the table and eating. The little boy is drinking juice. His mom and grandmother are watching him.
- Sample 4 level response: The family is having dinner. The boy is drinking coca cola at lunch time.
- Sample 3 level response: He is looking some book and reding [sic].
- Sample 2 level response: Look newspaper
- Sample 1 level response: Family
- Sample 0 level response: No response/unintelligible.

Applicants with more than a high school education (regardless of where the education was provided) scored higher across all three measures (reading, writing, and speaking) than did applicants with lower levels of education. Applicants with no formal education received an average 75% correct reading score and 2.8 score on both the writing and speaking test items. Applicants with some elementary school education received an average 64% correct reading score and 2.9 and 3.3 scores on the writing and speaking test items, respectively.

Applicants with formal education in the U.S. scored higher than did applicants with no formal education in the U.S. Applicants with no formal education in the U.S. received an average 84% correct reading score and 3.6 and 3.5 scores on the writing and speaking test items, respectively.

The pilot findings indicate that applicants, as a group, are capable of performing successfully on (i.e., likely to answer correctly) these types of test items: reading passages with multiple-choice test questions and photograph prompts for speaking and writing responses. Because applicants performed these tasks without preparation, these results likely underestimate applicants' ability to perform well on the test. In phase two of the pilot applicants will have time to prepare before taking the tests. As a result, we

will be able to see if performance improves with prior knowledge of item formats and time to prepare.

**Phase Two—U.S. History and Government**

The second phase will begin in 2005 and will include the complete test on English, U.S. history, and government. In the second phase, participants will take the revised test in a group setting prior to the applicants' naturalization interviews. Applicants who pass the pilot test will not be re-tested on English (writing and reading), U.S. history, and government during their individual naturalization interviews. Interviewers, however, will have the discretion to evaluate the applicant on spoken English. Applicants who do not pass the pilot test will follow the traditional testing process during their naturalization interviews.

For more information, or to provide feedback on the USCIS' Redesign of Naturalization Testing, please send an email to [Services.Modernization@dhs.gov](mailto:Services.Modernization@dhs.gov).