

Language and Citizenship

New citizen exams given in other languages

by Thomas D. Elias

More applicants than ever before are winning American citizenship without having to learn enough English even to answer the rudimentary questions on the multiple-choice civics tests of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Besides INS operated test centers, all of the 828 other organizations authorized to give the test received permission late last year to give citizenship exams in languages other than English.

The non-English tests — often given in Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese and Tagalog — have been available since 1951 to any citizenship applicant who is over 50 and has lived in this country more than 20 years. Persons over 55 who have lived here legally more than 15 years also are not required to take their test in English.

But until last month, the foreign-language tests were given only at INS offices and not by community groups that contract to administer the exam.

When the private Educational Testing Service of Princeton, N.J. began giving the test in Spanish in California and five other states last fall, demand was immediate. Of the 10,000 tests the firm administered Dec. 16, 700 were in Spanish, for a total of 7 percent.

No one knows precisely how many applicants for citizenship fall into the categories where English is not required. "We're not tracking those numbers," says INS spokeswoman Kelly Richfield.

But the demand for foreign-language tests is growing, reports ETS, the government's largest testing contractor. Its affiliated test sites will soon start offering the exam in Korean and Vietnamese. The demand is an outgrowth of the exponential increase in citizenship applications since November 1994, when California voters passed the Proposition 187 ballot initiative aiming to deprive

illegal immigrants of more government services.

"Legal immigrants, people who have lived here and paid taxes for decades, saw that vote as a direct threat," said Bobbi Murray, an official of the Los Angeles-based Coalition for Humane Immigration Rights. "They saw it as a first step, with an attack on the rights of all immigrants to follow."

Since passage of Proposition 187, the INS has received more than 60,000 citizenship applications per month, with an average of 31,000 per month in California. Fully 725,000 persons applied for citizenship nationally in the year after Proposition 187 passed, almost double the number from the previous twelve months. Many are eligible to take the required exam in their native languages.

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"We can see the demand increasing steadily," said Juliette Contreras, director of field activities for the ETS New Citizen Project. The firm subcontracts testing functions to community organizations in most parts of the nation, including more than 100 in California.

"This is a good thing," says Murray. "These people have been paying taxes for decades. Why should language prevent them from becoming citizens?"

Because if they don't learn English, they can't hope to be full-fledged citizens, responds Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform. "English is the grand pillar of American assimilation," Stein asserts. "This is all part of a dumbing-down trend. Teddy Roosevelt said we need to have a shared sense of what it means to be an American. That

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includes English as a common language.”

Agrees Daphne Magnuson of U.S. English, a 640,000-member group dedicated to making English the only official language in the U.S. “To participate in the democratic process, people must know English. By allowing these tests in other languages, the government is sending a destructive message.”

But those arguments mean little to the applicants, who often stand in line for hours before taking their tests.

“I see that if I don’t become a citizen, they may take away some of my rights,” said Guatemalan native Arturo Gonzales, a self-employed sheet-metal worker waiting to take the test in Spanish in

Los Angeles. “I have lived here 27 years and I speak English. But I think I understand the questions better in Spanish.”

Because the INS doesn’t even keep track of how many non-English tests it gives, no one knows precisely how many of the new citizenship applicants speak passable English.

But a 1993 survey by the state’s Research Bureau found that fully 70 percent of all immigrants in California, both legal and illegal, claimed they were proficient in English.

“That still leaves 30 percent, most of whom have paid taxes for many years,” said Murray. “If they now want to participate by being citizens why should we let language get in the way?” □

Discomforting Truths About Bilingual Ballots

by George Will

John Silber, the sandpapered president of Boston University, might have been elected governor of Massachusetts in 1990 were he not given to speaking his formidable mind as bluntly as he did when a voter asked what we should teach our children. “Teach them that they are going to die,” he said. And have a nice day.

His point was that children need a sense of reality, beginning with the fact that life is short and that living nobly may depend on an early understanding of that brevity.

Recently he was in Washington among the politicians, displaying his penchant for uttering discomforting truths. He is a philosopher by academic training and his testimony in favor of repealing bilingual ballot requirements was a model dissection of ill-conceived compassion.

The 1965 Voting Rights Act, as amended in 1975 and subsequently, requires bilingual ballots in jurisdictions with certain demographic characteristics pertaining to linguistic minorities, English deficiency, illiteracy and low voter turnout.

George Will is a syndicated columnist. This article is reprinted by permission of the Washington Post Writers Group.

But as Representative John Porter (R-IL), another advocate of repeal, noted in testimony, all this is patently peculiar because since 1906 any immigrant seeking citizenship has been required to demonstrate oral English literacy, and since 1950 has been required to “demonstrate an understanding of English, including an ability to read, write and speak words in ordinary English.” Applicants over 55 who have lived here at least 15 years are exempted.

Deval Patrick, assistant attorney general for civil rights, testified against repeal of the bilingual ballot requirement, warning of “the pernicious disenfranchisement resulting from lack of English proficiency.” He regards bilingual ballots as instruments of compassion for people who are “limited-English proficient” and exhorted one and all to “recognize, respect and celebrate the linguistic and cultural variety of our society.” He said repeal would “resurrect barriers to equal access to and participation in the democratic process for American citizens who do not speak English very well.”

How can bilingual ballots produce “equal access to and participation in the democratic process?” What is at issue is accommodations for people who cannot read English language ballots, and the law of the land is supposed to be a barrier between

such people and citizenship.

It fell to Silber to say why bilingual ballots are of “constitutional consequence, amending in effect the very concept of United States citizenship.” The naturalization statutes clearly presuppose that English is the language indispensable for life in America, where all the founding documents, and all the laws and all the proceedings of legislatures are in English. Citizens not proficient in English are, Silber said, “citizens in name only” because they cannot follow a political campaign, talk with a candidate, or petition a representative, and providing them with a bilingual ballot merely makes a mockery of civic life.

Silber stressed that in no other nation do so many people, spread over so large an area, speak the same language. This nation is a creedal nation,

founded on shared affirmations, not on ethnicity. Here, Silber said, ethnicity is “a private matter.” Various ethnic groups celebrate their saints and other sources of communal pride. However, the government properly recognizes only Americans, not ethnic groups. In opposition to that principle, bilingual ballots “represent a dangerous experiment in deconstructing our American identity.”

But of course. For some of the diversity-mongers who advocate bilingual ballots, such deconstruction is precisely the point. They think it is oppression for one American identity to be “privileged.”

Silber says such deconstruction is how nations die.

Have a nice day. □

Immigrants and the Language Issue

What should our policy be?

By Richard Estrada

Like it or not, Sen. Bob Dole is the linguistic if not the political reincarnation of George Bush: No habla bold vision.

However Dole has been anything but tongue-tied when it comes to articulating his position on an issue of vital importance to American nationhood: the necessary primacy of the English language.

“Lacking the centuries-old bonds of other nations,” he wrote in a *Washington Post* opinion piece in December, “we have used not only our history and values but our language, English, to make the American experiment work.”

Because the language issue is of widespread concern to the American people, President Clinton should take note. Polls routinely find enormous voter support for making English the nation’s official language. A survey conducted last year by

Richard Estrada is a columnist with the Dallas Morning News. This March 11, 1996 article is ©1996 by the Washington Post Writers Group and is reprinted with permission.

Luntz Research Companies on behalf of the Washington-based lobbying organization U.S. English found no less than 86 percent support for such a law.

Broadsides were fired anew recently after the release last week of voluntary national standards for standard English. Crafted by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association — organizations whose efforts to establish English standards were initially encouraged and funded by the federal government — the new “standards” instantly earned the scorn of everyone from conservative Republican education expert Diane Ravitch to Michael Cohen, a senior adviser to Clinton’s education secretary, Richard W. Riley.

Cohen succinctly complained that the standards don’t “tell parents or students what is important to learn and ... teachers what is important to teach and by when.” Here is one of the “guidelines”: “Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.” The others weren’t much better.

Meanwhile, author Rosalie Pedalino Porter [has

published] an epilogue to her exposé about another controversy on the language front. Originally published in 1990, *Forked Tongue: The Politics of Bilingual Education* condemned a bilingual-education establishment that has been more concerned about promoting liberal ideology and bilingual teaching jobs than about helping immigrant students achieve English fluency. [See an ad for the new edition of her book on page 267.]

In other words, bilingual education has been driven by bureaucratic needs rather than legitimate educational needs. According to the American Legislative Council, an estimated \$12 billion was spent on special language programs in 1994. These programs primarily emphasized the maintenance of the source culture of the student while downplaying American culture.

But the Milton Marks Commission on California State Government Organization and Economy recently termed bilingual education in California “divisive, wasteful and unproductive.” Against this backdrop, the following findings of a 1994 GAO report help explain why things are not destined to improve under the current system:

- Immigrant students tend to speak little if any English upon arrival in the United States.
- Among newcomer students placed in high school classes, some have never been schooled in their homelands and are altogether illiterate.
- Immigrant students are often poor and transient, with parents who are often unable or unwilling to show meaningful interest in their education.

Two important conclusions should be drawn: While educators should focus on developing the potential of all students, lawmakers should not deceive themselves about the consequences of constantly expanding the number of limited-English-proficiency students through other policies.

No one is harmed more by a chronic expansion of students with limited proficiency in English than non-English-speaking

students who are already here. Around 2 million are currently enrolled in special language programs nationwide.

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, which features the highest percentage of limited English proficiency students in California, the four year dropout rate is almost 44 percent.

Dole is succeeding in raising the language issue partly because he is no loose Buchanan. But while the Senate majority leader deserves credit for that, he has been less than forthright in failing to note with equal emphasis that the language issue is driven by the nation's system of mass immigration.

With 1.1 million newcomers entering the country each year, it should be obvious that a policy of mass immigration is creating constituencies demanding specially tailored programs, including bilingual education and affirmative action.

In sum, Dole's failure to link immigration to language hardly means he is wrong in seeking to enshrine the primacy of English in law. And Buchanan's boom-box approach to speechmaking does not mean he is wrong in his general notion of limiting immigration. □

Language and Migration

As ethnic Germans move from the former Soviet Union to claim citizenship, Germany is enforcing the requirement that there be a satisfactory grasp of the German language. Beginning in July, 1996, ethnic Germans in the former Soviet Union who wish to migrate to Germany may receive a summons to take a German language test at the nearest German diplomatic mission. A senior official for ethnic German matters at the federal administrative office in Cologne, Christoph Verenkotte, says these tests are designed to make sure would-be immigrants meet legal requirements before leaving their countries of origin.

— From the Internet: The Voice of America