

# In the Classroom

## *En Classe*

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This section presents descriptions of teaching techniques or practical classroom activities.

*Cette section est consacrée à la description de différentes techniques ou activités d'enseignement.*

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### **BASIC COMPONENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL CITIZENSHIP COURSE**

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In the past few years a growing number of institutions have begun offering programs to prepare immigrants for interviews with judges from the Court of Canadian Citizenship. During these interviews the applicants are tested on their knowledge of Canada. The questions are chosen at the discretion of the individual judges, who also assess whether the immigrants' command of English or French is sufficient. There are citizenship preparation courses and materials available to individuals whose proficiency in an official language is fairly high; however, until recently, there has been very little in the way of curriculum for immigrants with limited language skills. Not only are most of the available materials linguistically unsuitable (they are written in a complex style), but the content is so detailed that students who have very little formal education are intimidated and overburdened.

The ethnic communities were the first to recognize this problem, and in an effort to remedy the situation, several organized their own citizenship classes. Unfortunately, the students who completed these programs often found themselves ill-prepared for their hearings. Many attempted the interview only to find that the judges were not satisfied with their limited knowledge of Canada. The long lists of questions and answers provided were outdated or even incorrect. Furthermore, the students often could not respond to the same questions when they were worded differently. In response to the need for a more satisfactory preparation program we and our colleagues developed<sup>1</sup> a citizenship course aimed at immigrants who have low proficiency in English. It consisted of six two-hour sessions

which covered the important aspects of Canadian geography, history, and government, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Relevant current events were also discussed when appropriate. Students paid a one-time registration fee and were allowed to repeat as often as they wished. We believe that our program, to which the citizenship court now refers all low proficiency English applicants in Edmonton, owes its success to several factors.

First, all of our staff were experienced ESL instructors who had taught low proficiency students for a number of years. One of the difficulties faced by citizenship instructors is the fact that a class is likely to consist of students at many different levels. In this situation it is essential that the instructors adjust their speech to ensure comprehension by students at the lowest level, while at the same time ensuring that the more advanced students do not lose interest. We found that ESL teachers had little difficulty in assessing the overall level of a class and adjusting both their speech and the course content accordingly.

Second, emphasis was placed on students' ability to answer questions in English regardless of their degree of fluency. Some programs offer citizenship preparation entirely in the native language; our program made use of interpreters in the case of classes of very low level students. However, in these special classes (once the students gained an understanding of the material in their own language) the instructor provided practice and review in English. The bilingual classes included extra review sessions at the end of the course as well. These sessions served not only to review content material but also to teach students comprehension and communication strategies. For example, they were taught to pay particular attention to question words, and they were encouraged to ask the judge to rephrase questions which they did not understand, rather than simply respond with "I don't know." We feel that our approach is more effective than a native-language-only program in view of the fact that the citizenship interviews, with very few exceptions, are always conducted in one of the official languages. Students may have an adequate grasp of the material, but if they are unable to express this knowledge, as is often the case with students who have attended native language programs, they will fail.

The careful selection of topics was also an important factor in the development of our program. Initially the areas covered were determined in large part by the questions which the judges were asking. At a meeting between one of the judges in Edmonton and the citizenship coordinator, the judge indicated which areas she considered to be most important. We subsequently consulted the court on a regular basis and found the judges and their staff to be most cooperative. With the information we obtained from the court in mind, we developed four criteria for determining how the topics were to be handled in class.

Obviously our first consideration was relative importance. We tended to de-emphasize information of secondary importance on the grounds that it was likely to confuse and overburden the students, opting instead for a clear, straightforward explication of crucially important issues. For example, in a discussion of how laws are passed in Parliament, we explained the initiation of legislation in Cabinet, the readings in each House, and Royal Assent. We did not, however, mention such complications as the tabling of legislation, private members' bills, or filibusters unless time permitted and the level and interest of the students warranted discussion of these topics. The only time we included secondary information or topics not mentioned by the judges was when they contributed to the continuity of the lesson, our second criterion. Thus it seemed appropriate in our discussion of Canadian history to talk about the depression, the subsequent economic recovery brought on by World War II, and the post-war baby boom, although the judges rarely, if ever, asked questions concerning these periods; rather they emphasized earlier historical events. Nevertheless, we felt that the students would have a much deeper understanding of Canada in the twentieth century and of current economic and social problems if they were presented with an overview of the whole range of Canadian history.

Our third consideration in dealing with a given topic was its impact on our students' everyday lives. For example, we spent a considerable amount of time discussing the industries of the western provinces, whereas we only briefly outlined those of the eastern provinces. Furthermore, we attempted to make our discussion of the oil and gas industry relevant to the students by pointing out the relationship of current economic conditions (of which our students are painfully aware) and the downturn in the industry's fortunes. In choosing examples for our lessons, we always opted for common, concrete ones. For instance, in our presentation on passing a law, we often talked about the passage of seatbelt legislation. Since Alberta has no seatbelt law, and since the issue comes up in the legislature regularly, it is a timely example to which students can readily relate.

Our final criterion was the potential practical value of the course content. Some of our lessons contained "how to" sessions. In particular, we conducted mock elections. The students thereby learned all the steps in the voting procedure (enumeration, obtaining a ballot, what to do in the voting booth, depositing the ballot, etc.). Another example comes from our lesson on rights and responsibilities, in which it was made clear that if our students experienced discrimination they had some recourse through the Alberta Human Rights Commission, the Landlord and Tenant Act, etc. Another manner in which we tried to give our content practical significance was to stress the approachability of the students' elected

representatives. Many were unaware that they could solicit the help of an MP, for instance, in bringing family members to Canada.

We also made extensive use of anecdotes to bring the lessons alive. Historical events in particular were enhanced by short accounts in which we personalized occurrences which might otherwise seem unimportant. For example, the judges frequently asked students when the CPR was completed. By means of a story we were able to fix in the students' minds a visual representation of the event: the drudgery and danger faced by the workers day after day, the challenges posed by the climate and the topography, and finally the driving of the last spike in 1885. Students (many of whom were of Chinese origin) were often surprised and interested to discover the contribution of the Chinese labourers. It is our belief that our students had a fairly clear idea of what was involved in the building of the railroad which they would not have gained from the simple memorization of a date.

The structure of our course was such that the relatively transparent material was presented at the beginning. The introductory lesson, geography, was simple enough that even the most intimidated student relaxed and gained confidence. History was discussed after geography, and the intricacies of the electoral process and the parliamentary system were covered well into the course after the students had had a good opportunity to know the instructor and to become familiar with classroom procedures.

Another aspect of our program which has contributed to our students' success is the design of our materials. At the end of each class students were provided with a written summary of the lesson in simplified English, together with review questions. The instructors went over the highlights with the students, who were then encouraged to attempt the questions at home. The answers were discussed the following week as a part of an extensive review before new material was introduced. The questions were organized in a logical progression and allowed for considerable elaboration on the part of the teacher. Because the answers were embedded in a context, the students tended not to rely on memorization. We stressed to the students that the judges expected them to answer in their own words, that is, that they should understand their own responses. Moreover, we often phrased the same question in several different ways to emphasize the necessity of careful listening.

When the student handouts were designed, a strong effort was made to avoid the inclusion of information of minor importance which could detract from the students' understanding of the essential concepts. On the other hand, we took extreme care in writing the materials to avoid simplification to the point of distortion of the facts. Although the language is very simple and straightforward, the information provided is

accurate. An additional advantage of these materials is that they are accessible to students who may be fairly competent in spoken English, but who have reading difficulties.

Occasionally, native English speakers or highly proficient non-native speakers registered for our course. Rather than have these people attend classes, we provided them with a self-study package consisting of Eugene Forsey's booklet, *How Canadians Govern Themselves*, published by Supply and Services Canada, and an eighty page self-study guide, compiled by Murray Munro. The guide essentially replicated the content of the course but was directed toward an audience with a good command of English and thus could incorporate more elaborative information. Review questions were included, as well, although these were more challenging than those in the class handouts.

When we began teaching citizenship, we were dismayed at the paucity of audiovisual materials suitable to our program. Since that time, of course, some materials have been developed (e.g., the *Naturalization Slide Show*, produced by Citizenship Registration in cooperation with the communications branch of the Department of the Secretary of State). A problem which arises with most of these materials, though, is that often they are directed at a specific audience and are not useful in a low level classroom. Furthermore, some old but excellent materials such as the Ontario Citizenship Branch's filmstrip series are in dire need of updating. Until a modular package of audiovisual materials is developed—one in which only the most important information is represented—instructors will have to take an eclectic approach to the use of supplementary materials. Obviously, maps are useful in teaching geography and constituency boundaries, for example. We were able to obtain a voting booth, sample ballots, and a ballot box from the local returning officer. From our local MP's and MLA's we solicited photographs. Of course we also used photos of important sites such as the legislature and city hall. Although these materials proved adequate, this was perhaps the weakest aspect of our program and, we suspect, of most citizenship programs.

We have outlined here the essential components of a successful citizenship preparation program.<sup>2</sup> Our experience has shown that second language teachers are eminently suited to teach citizenship classes. In addition, our heavy reliance on English in bilingual courses provided the students with adequate linguistic skills for the interview. In a sense, the structure of the program was determined by the judges' questions in the interviews. We have been guided by the pragmatic goal of getting our students through the interview successfully but have not lost sight of their broader need for a clear understanding of their adopted country, of their rights, and of their responsibilities to Canada. We have not addressed the larger issue of citizenship education: what should it entail and who should

be responsible for its dissemination? However, we feel that it is incumbent upon agencies and individuals involved in the delivery of citizenship preparation programs to provide more than the bare minimum. It may be possible to teach enough isolated facts to enable some students to pass the interview, but immigrants benefit more when the instructor gives coherent, comprehensive presentations: they are likely to gain a deeper insight into material that has been presented in such a way as to illustrate its relevance to their own lives. In other words, the ultimate goal of a good citizenship program is not only to provide students with the necessary information to pass a test, but to help immigrants become active, functioning citizens in a free society.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> We would especially like to mention Jeffrey Bullard, who initiated and later coordinated the program. His view that citizenship courses should address the broader needs of immigrants is reflected in this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> The authors would appreciate hearing from others who have been involved in the delivery of citizenship programs.

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#### THE AUTHORS

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