



Podcast Transcript

Beyond Civics Content: Using Sentence Structure to Build Comprehension and Confidence

This is Paul Kim from the USCIS Office of Citizenship. I'll be your host today for this podcast on Beyond Civics Content: Using Sentence Structure to Build Comprehension and Confidence.

When we think of the civics portion of the naturalization test, the first thing we think of is usually not sentence structure. Instead, most people think of content—history, government, and geography. Although teaching the content is a crucial part of preparing your students for the test, it should not always be the first thing you teach unless you have a class of proficient English speakers.

Many citizenship classes around the nation have either a mixture of levels in one class, or a high percentage of students at the High Beginning and Low Intermediate levels. These levels I'm referring to are based on the U.S. Department of Education's National Reporting System level descriptors. For these students, jumping straight to content without first addressing sentence structure often leads to memorization, which is not as meaningful as actually learning the content.

Now, having said that, this doesn't mean that content cannot or should not be taught in conjunction with sentence structure; it's just better if the citizenship course is divided into two basic instructional parts. The first instructional part should focus more on sentence structure and less on content, while the second part should concentrate more on content and less on sentence structure. Both parts include vocabulary building.

Building a solid sentence structure foundation helps to achieve several goals. First, it builds the students' comprehension levels. Second, it reduces stress. Third, it promotes learning and not simply memorization, and fourth, it better prepares the students for other parts of the naturalization interview.

So let's consider the variety of sentences that are included on the civics portion of the test. All of the 100 civics items ask the applicant to provide information, but not all of the items are questions. For example, "What is the supreme law of the land?", "How many amendments does the Constitution have?", and "Who was the first President?" are typical questions. However, there are also items such as "Name one branch or part of the government." and "There are four amendments to the Constitution about who can vote. Describe one of them."

This second type of item—the command, or imperative items as I refer to them—ask students to "do something." You can help students understand and become comfortable with these imperatives by first creating some basic sentences from daily life with the same structure as those items on the test. Then read them to the students and ask for a response. For example:

- Name one thing in your wallet (or purse);
- Name the students who are sitting in front of you;

- Name two days of the week;
- Name your favorite color; or
- Name three things in this classroom.

And for the other imperative examples I gave, you might try some sentences such as:

- Describe your house;
- Describe your car; or
- Describe your best friend.

Once students have learned the sentence structures using vocabulary they may be somewhat familiar with, begin to insert the vocabulary from the naturalization test. Always start with the familiar and build upon it.

I hope this podcast provided you with some helpful ideas for your classroom. To find additional instructional resources, be sure to visit the Teachers section of the Citizenship Resource Center at www.uscis.gov/citizenship. I'm Paul Kim and on behalf of USCIS, thanks for listening!