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Educating Adults for Citizenship:
Critiquing *Adequate* Language Practices and Canada's
Citizenship Test

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Articles

EDUCATING ADULTS FOR CITIZENSHIP: CRITIQUING ADEQUATE LANGUAGE PRACTICES AND CANADA'S CITIZENSHIP TEST

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Abstract

In 2012, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) implemented a requirement that all aspiring Canadians who wish to take the citizenship test must have an adequate level of English- or French-language skills, defined as Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) 4. The CLB 4 language policy directly and, we argue, problematically links language abilities with the right to citizenship for new immigrants and, relatedly, assumes a deficit conception of literacy. We examine the discourses embedded within the citizenship test study guide Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship (2012), the new language requirement policy, and the CIC website to expose how these place problematic restrictions on new immigrants who aspire to become Canadian.

Résumé

En 2012, le Bureau de Citoyenneté et Immigration Canada (CIC) met en place une nouvelle exigence que toute personne désirant prendre l'examen de citoyenneté Canadien devrait démontrer une connaissance adéquate de l'anglais ou du français. Plus précisément, il devra atteindre un niveau de compétence linguistique canadien (CLC) de 4. L'exigence de ce niveau de compétence crée un lien problématique entre la maîtrise d'une langue et l'accès aux droits associés à la citoyenneté pour les nouveaux-arrivés. Corolairement, le fait de lier ce niveau avancé de compétence linguistique à la citoyenneté suppose une conception déficitaire de l'alphabétisation. Nous examinons les discours intégrés dans le guide d'étude pour l'examen de la citoyenneté Canadienne « Découvrir le Canada: Les droits et responsabilités liés à la citoyenneté » (2012), les nouvelles exigences linguistiques, et le site web du CIC pour révéler la nature des restrictions imposées par ces nouvelles politiques linguistiques sur les nouveaux immigrants.

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Introduction

This inquiry seeks to expose and problematize both the explicit and the implicit connections forged between citizenship and literacy in the Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) study guide and website for the Canadian citizenship test, required for aspiring Canadians aged 18 to 54. Recent proposed changes would move the age requirement to aspiring Canadians aged 14 to 64. While around 170,000 immigrants acquire legal citizenship each year, the Conservative government's recent modifications to both the citizenship test and its more stringent success criteria coincides with an increased rate of failure. This increase in failure is significant, up from 4% in 2009 to 15% in 2011 (Mills, 2012). Notably, on July 1, 2012, the language requirements for the Canadian citizenship test were raised from a Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) Level 3 to a Level 4. CIC states that "citizenship applicants must attain Canadian Language Benchmark/Niveau de compétence linguistique canadien 4 to demonstrate *adequate* [emphasis added] knowledge of English or French" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2013b). CIC (2014a) makes frequent reference to the concept of *adequate* language practices in its online publications. This move indicates the Canadian government's assumption that an intermediate to advanced level of either of the two official languages, English or French, is required for newcomers to Canada to enjoy the rights of citizenship.

The recent changes to the citizenship test, notably the changes in language requirements, necessarily preclude a larger group of potential citizens from acquiring Canadian citizenship than in the past. The consequences of this policy disadvantage particular groups of potential citizens; for example, the failure rates of Vietnam-born aspiring Canadians have almost tripled in seven years, from 14.8% in 2005 to 41.2% in 2011 (Mills, 2012). In spite of the Canadian government's willingness to fund three years of language training (CIC, 2013a), the assumption that it is possible to move from a Level 1 to a Level 4 within those three years may prove unrealistic for immigrants who aspire to Canadian citizenship, many of whom have considerable financial and familial constraints. Refugees and other economically disadvantaged immigrants, particularly those who have little experience with formal schooling in their former contexts, are marginalized through this policy.

In 2014, the Government of Canada tabled a bill to make sweeping changes to its Citizenship Act (CIC, 2014b). One of these proposed changes—which will be implemented by 2015—include that an aspiring Canadian must live at least four out of six years in Canada to apply for citizenship. This represents an increase from the previous policy requiring immigrants to demonstrate three years of residency prior to writing the citizenship test. Additionally, to identify desirable candidates for citizenship, a new question that ascertains applicants' intent to reside physically in the country has been added to the application form. This time commitment represents a challenge, as aspiring citizens may be less likely to have the language abilities to succeed in the citizenship test. This change in residency also withholds the benefits of citizenship for a longer period, meaning new immigrants continue to contribute to our national economy without enjoying the privileges of Canadian citizenship. Problematically, a recent Government of Canada report (Keung, 2014) has suggested that the longer immigrants remain in Canada, the higher the likelihood of failure on the citizenship test. Further proposed changes include that a residency fast track will be put in place for individuals who are willing to serve in the armed forces, which effectively reduces the residency requirement by one year (three years instead of the proposed four).

This indicates a preference on the part of the Government of Canada for immigrants who are willing to serve in the military on behalf of the country—equating willingness to serve with Canadian-ness. In addition, Chris Alexander, the citizenship and immigration minister, has stated that “there’s only one way to really get to know Canada...and that is through direct experience of the life in this country” (Wingrove & Friesen, 2014). These modifications are an indirect articulation of the government’s measurement of an ideal Canadian citizen.

The proposed changes to the process of according Canadian citizenship indicate an attempt to streamline governmental procedures for bestowing citizenship upon aspiring Canadians. This move is in line with current neo-liberal tendencies to reduce involvement on the part of government service providers. Tellingly, the CIC minister will be granted the ability to autonomously provide or deny citizenship to aspiring Canadians without a court hearing (CIC, 2014b). The justification for this change is allegedly to address the problem of newcomers attaining citizenship through false representation or fraud. Prior to these changes, a long-standing citizenship application process comprised three steps across different levels of bureaucracy; the proposed process would remove two out of the three. Further, each aspiring citizen will now work with a citizenship officer instead of a judge. It seems likely that these officers’ experience with the legal system will be considerably less than a judge’s.

Tougher language requirements—proposed in the 2014 shift—include that applicants from the ages of 14 to 64 will have to meet the language requirements for citizenship. What is more, these individuals will now be asked to complete the knowledge component of the exam without the aid of an interpreter, as was previously allowed. At present, the citizenship test is required for aspiring Canadians aged 18 to 54. The implications of the proposed expanded age range for families with dependent children are notable, particularly when considered in conjunction with the increased cost to take the test. In addition to the long-standing citizenship fee, the government is now requiring a \$300 processing fee, for a total of \$400 per person to apply for citizenship. The addition of a costly processing fee is particularly disturbing given the concurrent reduction in labour required for determining citizenship. We see a reduction in the involvement on the part of the government and a shift of the burden onto individual aspiring citizens and their families.

Drawing on the work of Baker (2006), we conduct a corpus analysis of the CIC website as well as the *Discover Canada* study guide provided for aspiring citizens. Through this analysis, we show how these documents forge links between a singular and autonomous conception of literacy and an equally unidimensional concept of citizenship for aspiring Canadians. In particular, we problematize the extent to which the CLB 4 language policy itself assumes a deficit conception of literacy. This deficit conception of literacy is embodied in the new practice of requiring citizens to write the knowledge component of the citizenship test without the aid of an interpreter. We argue that the perpetuation of this deficit model serves to strengthen and perpetuate existing hierarchies within Canadian society between long-time and new citizens. We acknowledge that these models also perpetuate differences between groups of new citizens: desirable and undesirable. Finally, we provide a series of recommendations for the reformulation of the CLB documents based on the results of our analysis that we hope will lead to a transformation from hierarchical and exclusionary discourse and practice to a more inclusive and participatory citizenship policy and practice for new Canadians (Cook & Westheimer, 2006).

Situating the Researchers

Casey Burkholder's interest in Canada's citizenship test and its connection to literacy began during her teaching practice at a government-funded non-profit organization for new immigrants in Alberta. In this position, Burkholder worked with new permanent residents and refugees who were provided with language instruction for a variety of purposes: from learning basic interpersonal communication skills (Cummins, 2003), to English for the workplace, to English for academic purposes. During the tenure of her position—as a number of her students were studying for the citizenship test—her class collectively examined the *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship* study guide (CIC, 2012). Burkholder began to wonder about the practice of connecting notions of citizenship to a high-stakes, text-based exam. What does it mean to connect citizenship to a written test in a person's second, third, or fourth language? In working with refugees and new permanent residents who had little formal schooling experience, Burkholder wondered what chance these adults have to become a Canadian citizen if the parameters for citizenship are narrowly defined and tested in a text-based examination. How do these changes create divisions between new immigrant groups?

Marianne Filion is an educational philosopher whose interests lie in citizenship education in Canadian schools. Owing largely to her position as a Quebec resident, the common theme in her work is the similarities and differences between interculturalism and multiculturalism. The links that interculturalism both passively assumes and actively forges between language and culture sparked her interest in the citizenship test, which requires increasing proficiency in Canada's official languages for contributors to the national landscape to enjoy the benefits that recognition through citizenship accords.

Theoretical Framework: Citizenship Theory and the New Literacy Studies

We address the Canadian citizenship test's link with the Canadian Language Benchmarks from two theoretical standpoints: citizenship theory and the New Literacy Studies.

Citizenship Theory

The dominant conception broadly understands citizenship to encompass legal status, political agency, and membership in a political community (Kymlicka & Norman, 2000). Within this dominant legal-political-economic conception of citizenship, individuals either hold formal rights and responsibilities from birth or are granted them through a legal process (Kymlicka, 1992; Fleming, 2010). CIC's *Discover Canada* outlines the rights and responsibilities associated with citizenship for aspiring Canadians, thereby embodying this legal-political-economic conception of citizenship. The guide stipulates that would-be citizens adequately demonstrate familiarity with Canada's political process, history, landscape, indigenous groups, the rights and responsibilities that accompany Canadian citizenship, and one of the two official languages. While this model offers clear-cut criteria for the acquisition of rights accorded through citizenship, a myriad of unintended and extraneous consequences are worthy of recognition and analysis.

Fleming (2010) argued that simultaneous to the legal-political-economic conception of citizenship, which understands membership as acquired by birth or through legal means, there is an ethnic-cultural-linguistic model of citizenship at play within CLB documents. The

ethnic-cultural-linguistic model extends beyond the dominant conception of citizenship and instead sees membership as acquired by birth or assimilation into a particular culture (Fleming, 2010). Indeed, Fleming argued that language benchmarks and other official documents “describe being Canadian in terms of normative standards...which imply the existence of a dominant and singular culture to which second language learners have to conform” (p. 599). Additionally, Fleming argued that CLB documents have a tendency “to represent learners as somewhat isolated and passive consumers” (p. 598).

The New Literacy Studies

We problematize CIC’s notion of adequate literacy skills for aspiring Canadians through the theoretical grounding provided by the New Literacy Studies (NLS). As Brian Street (2003) attested, the NLS “takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking ‘whose literacies’ are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant” (p. 77). The NLS views literacy—and text—as interpretive rather than autonomous and suggests that literacies are oral, visual, multimodal, and written. To understand the relationships among literacy practices, discourses, and social practices, the use of literacy as a tool of domination and a way of emphasizing difference is taken up (Gee, 1996, 2001; Luke, 2003; Robinson-Pant, 2004).

We look to understand the impact of policy discourses on citizens and on language and literacy practices (Coupland, Nussbaum, & Grossman, 1993; Robinson-Pant, 2001). As Lee (2006) noted, “Language is a tool to carry meaning. It also represents our identity. It binds us in distinctive groups and at the same time separates us from the others. Because of that, our language choice directly reflects our attitudes towards our identity” (p. 30). Policy discourses and cultural, linguistic, and social practices are negotiated by government institutions that “render certain sorts of activities and identities meaningful; certain sorts of activities and identities constitute the nature and existence of specific social groups and institutions” (Gee, 2005, p. 2). With this in mind, this project examines which literacies are employed in the *Discover Canada* document. We specifically examine the ways in which this dominant culture to which aspiring citizens are asked to conform is re-inscribed through a devaluation of non-normative and non-official literacy practices.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Collocational Networks

This inquiry is situated within the tradition of a number of works on government policies, language, and the conceptual construction of new immigrants through deficit models (see Fleming, 2010; Hamilton and Pitt, 2011). We seek to understand the alignment of the conceptions of citizenship put forth in *Discover Canada* with literacy practices, described as *adequate* levels of language knowledge by CIC.

We look to the government policy documents to create particular collocational networks (Baker, 2006), which make the discursive links between specific search terms visible. This paper examines the words that appear in close proximity to the specific search terms of *citizen* (inclusive of *citizenship*) and *language*. The data have been coded by compiling the CIC’s website content on citizenship and the *Discover Canada* publication in two separate Microsoft Word documents to identify the collocational networks surrounding the search terms. We have read through these materials to illuminate general themes directed at new

and aspiring Canadians. The themes surrounding language and citizenship emerge from the initial coding process and have become the basis for the critical discourse analysis on the particular terms *language* and *citizen*, which are repeated throughout the online publications. These terms have been input into the search function in Microsoft Word, which highlights each case where these terms arise. From the search function, we have identified each case and found the collocations that occur five words before and five words after the chosen word of *language* or *citizen*. We have omitted articles (the, an, a, etc.) in our analysis to find the strongest collocations between the chosen terms and the government discourses that surround them. The words appearing most frequently in collocation with the target terms have been used to create a visual depiction of the link between particular government discourses and the target terms.

Data Sources

This discursive analysis looks at CIC’s policy shift from CLB 3 to CLB 4 as a prerequisite for taking the citizenship test. Two particular data sources were used: (1) CIC’s website, www.cic.gc.ca, and (2) CIC’s citizenship test study guide for new immigrants, *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship* (2012). In particular, the policy discourses surrounding what counts as *adequate* language learning are highlighted and analyzed to ascertain the larger assumptions about the implicit connections forged here between language practices and citizenship.

Findings

We created collocational networks (Baker, 2006) by weighting the terms that occur alongside *language* and *citizen* by their frequency of occurrence and using the website wordle.net to create visual representations of the relationship between these terms. We have created four specific collocational networks: (1) *language* on the CIC’s website, (2) *language* in the citizenship test study guide, (3) *citizen* on the CIC’s website, and (4) *citizen* in the citizenship test study guide.

Discourses Surrounding the Term Language

On the CIC website, the word *language* appears a total of 70 times across 20 separate web pages. Broadly speaking, we have found the connection between *language* and *adequate* practices, which suggests that language practices that are not proven, tested, or required

Figure 1: Collocational Network of Language on CIC’s Website



may in fact be inadequate. In looking at the words that occurred five words before *language* and five words following *language*, we have found a strong collocation between the terms *language* and *citizenship*. There is also a strong relationship between the words *language* and *test*, as well as *language* and *requirements*. These collocational relations suggest that language and citizenship are related and that language skills and the right to citizenship must be ascertained through proof, testing, requirements, and results.

The word *language* appears 20 times in the *Discover Canada* citizenship test study guide. In addition to omitting articles, we omitted from the analysis any words that occurred fewer than twice in collocation with the search term. Here, the word *language* appears closely related to both *French* and *English*, which are situated importantly as the official languages in Canada. The concepts of *home*, *identity*, and *rights* are linked to these two *official* languages. Canadian identity, then, is largely based on language and, more specifically, on the act of speaking these two official languages.

Figure 2: Collocational Network of Language in Citizenship Test Study Guide



In these discourses that surround the term *language*, the citizenship test study guide suggests to aspiring Canadians that Canadian identity itself is enacted through *adequate* language practices. In linking the CLB 4 requirement with *adequate* levels of English or French knowledge for achieving Canadian citizenship, the government both marginalizes non-dominant literacy practices and denies the right to citizenship to those who do not fit a particular prescription of *adequate* language speakers. As demonstrated through the citizenship test study guide, new immigrants' literacy practices are valued and devalued within the larger discussion of their access to citizenship in Canada. Home literacies and multilingual and existing literacy practices are not valued within the study guide. Instead, *adequate* language practices are those that take place in either English or French. To become Canadian is thus dependent on the ways in which aspiring Canadians use languages and which languages they choose to practice. If certain practices of English and French are deemed *adequate*, these discourses suggest that other language practices are therefore inadequate.

Situating CIC's language requirement policies in the theoretical framework of the NLS brings to light the role of multiliteracies, linguistic capital, othering, and hegemony on linguistically marginalized populations (Street, 2001a, 2001b). CIC fails to recognize the NLS theory that language and literacy should be understood as multiple rather than as singular and autonomous. As such, CIC has decided which literacy practices belong within the citizenship test and what level of English or French literacy skills count as *adequate for obtaining Canadian citizenship*.

Discourses Surrounding the Terms Citizen and Citizenship

On CIC’s website, the word *citizen* appears a total of 176 times across 20 discrete web pages. In a search for the term *citizen*, we also considered all occurrences of the word *citizenship*. Here, being a citizen or holding citizenship is closely tied to the term *get*, and thus the notion of *getting*. Citizenship, then, is something that must be gotten by aspiring Canadians. *Citizen* is linked with *language*, *requirements*, *applications*, *responsibilities*, *testing*, *meeting*, and *becoming*. Thus, *becoming* a citizen is laden with obstacles for potential new citizens. The obstacles that will occur in the new articulation of the policy focus on physical time spent in the country, military service, high language skills, and reduced government assistance. Here, citizenship is discussed as something that is tested and linked to *Canadian-ness*. You can become a Canadian citizen, but only if you have *adequate* language skills, only if you meet the *requirements*, and only if you *pass* the test. Other collocations that arose around the concept of citizenship included the notion of *proof*. Aspiring Canadians must be able to prove that they have the right kinds of *adequate* knowledge and language practices in English or French to become a citizen.

Figure 3: Collocational Network of Citizen (Inclusive of Citizenship) on CIC’s Website



The word *citizen*, inclusive of *citizenship*, occurred 47 times in the pages of the citizenship test study guide. The word *citizen* is closely tied to *you*, in this case the aspiring citizens who will make use of this study guide. Unsurprisingly, *citizenship* is most closely tied to *Canadian-ness* in the study guide. Interestingly, *rights*, *responsibilities*, and *test* are equally weighted, suggesting the importance of the test to the acquisition of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The words *our* and *information* also notably receive equal weight, which suggests the importance for aspiring citizens of taking up a narrative that is tacitly presented as belonging to long-time Canadians. In the same vein, the two official languages as well as the words *role*, *prepare*, and *study* further situate aspiring Canadians as having to study, to assume a role, and to prepare in order to access citizenship. While the policy itself does not hide the obstacles to citizenship, these collocational networks make the discursive links more visible.

Figure 4: Collocational Network of Citizen (Inclusive of Citizenship) in Citizenship Test Study Guide



Discussion

The policy shift and the link between citizenship and language and literacy skills mean that new Canadians may develop a deficit view of their existing language and literacy practices, such as their home languages and multilingual literacy practices. Problematically, if aspiring Canadians cannot decode words and meanings in either CLB 4 English or French, they cannot access the rights and privileges associated with Canadian citizenship. The thin conception of citizenship portrayed throughout the study guide privileges certain citizenship acts, notably “personally responsible” citizenship practices such as voting, volunteering, and contributing to the economy, while simultaneously obscuring more participatory and social justice-oriented citizenship practices such as investigating social movements and questioning and contributing to discussions regarding social justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Through these discourses, CIC effectively constructs social and linguistic inequalities between aspiring Canadians based on their abilities to decode meaning in either English or French. Ultimately, linking specific language practices and literacy achievements with the right to citizenship promotes social exclusion and furthers social and linguistic inequality.

From this study, we call on Canadian policy makers to reconceptualize the extent to which *adequate* language skills are put forth as the bedrock of what it means to be a Canadian citizen. The discussion of *adequate* language practices suggests that other language practices are therefore inadequate. We call on Canadian policy makers to reflect upon this choice of language in their online policy documents directed at new Canadians as well as in the *Discover Canada* study guide. We ask, is this deficit positioning intentional? What is the rationale for these discourses? We suggest that this discussion of adequate and inadequate language practices contributes to an us/them or Canadian/other dynamic, which we argue is inherently problematic. However, we also wonder about what type of citizenship testing might respect and acknowledge aspiring Canadians’ diverse ways of knowing, speaking, representing, and acting. How might these aspiring Canadians be included as citizens? How might we encourage a participatory and/or social justice-oriented conception of citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)?

Concluding Thoughts

Research has called attention to the construction of national identities on the parts of new immigrants to Canada (Fleming, 2010), to the links between literacy and voting rights (Kates, 2006), to language requirements in conjunction with citizenship testing (McNamara & Ryan, 2011), and to the development of deficit conceptions of literacy in policy discourses

directed at new immigrants (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011). This paper brings much-needed attention to the strengthened links between a unidimensional conception of language and literacy practices and a thin conception of citizenship through evidence within a Canadian context. We argue that the links between specific *adequate* language practices (CLB 4) with citizenship are inherently problematic.

Notably, these government discourses refrain from taking gendered perspectives into account in their policies. In this, women are disproportionately disadvantaged by these policies. Child care obligations, which often weigh more heavily on women than men, present a barrier to women's opportunities to avail themselves of government-funded language classes. For example, in Burkholder's teaching practice, fewer than 20 places were available for child care during class time, but there were many more women for whom child care was a prerequisite for their participation in the courses. Unsurprisingly, her classes were populated by a majority of male learners in the higher levels. Additionally, in Burkholder's practice, far more women were in the beginner-level language classes than men. In this instance, these women had experienced less formal educational opportunities in their first language. Though we make no assumption that it is always the case that women have less experience in formal education than their male counterparts, we wonder whether this situation points to a specific exclusion of women, or whether this is simply a matter of discursive oversight? A gendered analysis of these policies clearly requires further inquiry.

This article specifically asks Canadian policy makers to re-think these assumptions and move away from the deficit model of conceptualizing knowledge about what it means to be a citizen and what it means to be an *adequate* language speaker within the context of Canada. We ask, what kind of citizenship can we promote that includes diverse ways of knowing, representing, and being Canadian? In a future inquiry, it is worth asking how aspiring Canadians develop understandings of what it means to be a part of Canada as they navigate multiple languages and are provided linguistic capital based on their (in)adequate language abilities in Canada's citizenship test study guide.

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Appendix I: Citizenship and Immigration Canada Web Pages Consulted for Collocational Networks

- After you apply: Get next steps—Citizenship*, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/citizenship/become-after.asp>
- “Am I Canadian? See if you are already a citizen”*, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/citizenship/rules/index.asp>
- Apply for citizenship*, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/citizenship/become.asp>
- Can I provide my LINC/CLIC placement test as proof I meet the citizenship language requirement?*, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/helpcentre/answer.asp?q=594&t=5>
- Can I submit the results from a third-party language test that I took when I first applied to immigrate to Canada as proof I meet the citizenship language requirement?*, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/helpcentre/answer.asp?q=595&t=5>
- Can the government-funded language program I took be used as proof I meet the citizenship language requirement?*, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/helpcentre/answer.asp?q=574&t=5>
- Complete your application: Citizenship*, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/citizenship/become-how.asp>
- Determine your eligibility*, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/citizenship/become-eligibility.asp#age>
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