

Submission to DIMA in response to the discussion paper suggesting the introduction of a formal citizenship test

Summary

We argue that Australia should not introduce a formal citizenship test.

To begin with, a formal citizenship test diminishes the value of Australian citizenship. Second, a formal citizenship test is undemocratic. The principle “no taxation without representation” holds for native-born and non-native born residents alike. Consequently, anyone who is required to fulfill the obligations placed upon citizens (abide by the laws, pay taxes etc.) should also be entitled to the benefits of citizenship irrespective of linguistic proficiency. Third, unlike the discussion paper, we regard proficiency in English as not only an obligation placed on prospective citizens but also a right. It is more important to provide access to English tuition to all Australian residents than to introduce a test that will unfairly disadvantage some prospective citizens. In this context, we provide evidence from research in other countries to show that citizenship tests tend to be administered unfairly and in a discriminatory manner. Sociolinguistic research into second language learning and gender also shows that language testing generally tends to produce iniquitous outcomes and is likely to discriminate against working-class refugee women with limited education/literacy and with care obligations. We also take issue with the discussion paper’s narrow view that migrants need to be coerced by a test into studying English. Sociolinguistic research into the spread of English as a global language shows that increasing numbers of people around the world are learning English. If migrants to Australia have insufficient English, this is unlikely to result from lack of motivation.

In sum, our answer to the question whether Australia should introduce a formal citizenship test is a resounding ‘No.’ The narrow vision of what it means to be Australian and what it means to be an English speaker expressed in the discussion paper is very likely to be counterproductive and alienate the people it seeks to bind to Australia.

This submission has been authored by Professor Ingrid Piller and Ms Emily Farrell, MA, and is supported by the 122 Australian linguists and language professionals appearing as signatories at the end of this document.

For related arguments we also commend the submissions by Professor Tim McNamara (specifically on language testing issues), the submission by Dr Giancarlo Chiro, Dr Shamsul Khan, A/Prof Tony Liddicoat, Dr David Lundberg, Dr Zaniah Marshallsay, Prof Elisabeth Porter, Ms Angela Scarino and A/Prof My-Van Tran from the School of International Studies, University of South Australia, and the submission by Professor Michael Clyne and Dr Howard Nicholas.

What's wrong with a formal citizenship test?

1. Tests are a means of exclusion

Despite the inclusive intentions and rhetoric of the discussion paper all evidence in language testing points to the fact that tests are a means of exclusion (Shohamy, 1997, 2001). Most of the exclusion and discrimination that a formal citizenship test is likely to create is unintended – at least there is no evidence in the discussion paper that the exclusionary effects of a formal citizenship test have been considered. Based on research in Applied Sociolinguistics, we are convinced that a formal citizenship test will achieve very few of its intended (as per the discussion paper) inclusive consequences, but will have a number of unintended (as per the discussion paper) exclusive consequences. We will now discuss these intended and unintended consequences.

2. Life is not a multiple choice test

A formal test does nothing to show that prospective citizens have the capacity to be active citizens of their adopted country. There are many different definitions of “citizenship” that range from the purely formal (“right to apply for an Australian passport” etc. as in Sect. 7) to a deeply-felt sense of belonging. The discussion paper mostly takes two views of citizenship: either as a formal relationship with the state or a sense of identity and belonging. Democratic citizenship as involvement in civic organizations and as political participation is relatively absent.

It is obvious that only the most formal definitions of citizenship are open to testing. How would one test for civic engagement and political participation, or, even more difficult, for a sense of belonging?

Consider the following narrative told by Sarah,¹ a naturalized Australian of South Korean background, told during a research interview for a project on language learning in Australia (Piller, 2003-4):

I got my citizenship I mean- I've been living in Australia? how long? I came here at the end of 1987, so, sixteen years now? it's gonna be sixteen years. so, quite a long time. but it was like five years ago

¹ All the names of participants are pseudonyms.

when I decided to obtain citizenship. because I wasn't quite sure whether I can really. you know. see myself as a part of Australia. I mean like some people just erm- you know, get their citizenship as soon as they are eligible. well I mean they can just- erm they just do it for the purpose of getting a benefit out, getting citizenship. but for me, it was a serious question. to myself! I mean like can you imagine if there is a war between Korea and Australia, which country are you gonna choose? well- then if I choose to be a CITIZEN of Australia, then what are you gonna do? you got this DUTY, as an Australian citizen, to defend Australia! if there is a war between Korea and Australia, I CAN'T say, I couldn't say YES! I'll FIGHT for Australia. NO. so! so! after TEN years [...](transcript edited for better readability)

Like all participants in our study, Sarah had carefully weighed the rights and responsibilities inherent in taking up Australian citizenship. How would one ever test for this kind of soul-searching? Introducing a formal citizenship test would bring citizenship down to “seeking a benefit” for everyone.

Considering the complexity of what it means to be a citizen, life itself is the best “test” and must be the only “test.” That is, if prospective citizens have led economically independent lives and remained of good character for the stipulated period of their permanent residency, this in and of itself means that they have the capacity to be active citizens.

3. Making a contribution

I think in my mind,
having a working permit meant that Australia
was acknowledging that I could give some contribution.
(Anna, Naturalized Australian from the Czech Republic)

The discussion paper highlights the benefits offered by Australian citizenship (Sect 5) but downplays the obligations that citizenship carries. According to the 1948 Citizenship Act, citizenship involves “rights and obligations” and nothing is to be gained by suggesting – implicitly or explicitly – that that obligation consists of passing a test, as the discussion paper does. As Anna says in the quote above, migrants want to – and must be expected to – make a meaningful contribution – one that makes us a better society and better human beings, rather than one that shows that we are good test takers.

The citizenship award is also a means of acknowledging that prospective citizens have been actively contributing to Australian life and society as permanent residents. Citizenship is a step in the journey of our lives. The value of Australian citizenship is diminished if a formal citizenship test comes to be seen as the end point of a migrant's contribution to Australian society.

4. Australian citizenship: more than a driver's licence

The form of the suggested test presents a related concern. The vision of the citizenship test presented in Sect. 70 is exactly the same kind of test that drivers need to take to get their driver's licence. To have identical practices to obtain such vastly different privileges cannot but diminish Australian citizenship.

The suggestion that such a citizenship test would have the added value to help candidates familiarize themselves with modern computer technology shows an extremely limited understanding of computer-technology and the ways in which people use it. The idea that access to computer technology and computer literacy would rise because of a computerized citizenship test must be called far-fetched.

5. A formal citizenship test is an inappropriate way to seek a commitment

How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.
(William Butler Yeats, "A Prayer for My Daughter")

Becoming an Australian citizen is a commitment – as those of us who are Australian by choice rather than by birth are fully aware. The Australian government now proposes to use a formal citizenship test as evidence of this commitment – this is a culturally inappropriate and highly unusual way to seek a commitment. Let's consider other points in life where we make a commitment: for many of us one of the biggest commitments we ever make is to get married. After a period of engagement, two people make a commitment to each other by exchanging vows in a ceremony. They do not

normally take a formal test – the engagement period is the test and the commitment is embraced in the vows during a ceremony witnessed by family and friends. The same goes for most other commitments we make in life: a period of apprenticeship or “peripheral participation” as it is called in education (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is followed by a ceremony where the new member professes their commitment in the form of a promise, vows, or a pledge in order to henceforth participate as a full member. The current practice is therefore in line with related cultural practices: after a period of apprenticeship as a permanent resident, the former novice is accepted into the community as a full member in a ceremony where they pledge their commitment. Changing this practice to include a formal citizenship test would bring citizenship out of step with other “commitment practices” in our culture.

6. Language and making a commitment

Given its significance, it is vital
that those who make the Pledge
fully understand the commitment
they are making and the inherent
privileges and responsibilities
that come with Australian citizenship (Sect. 18)

This is indeed the case, and there is no better way to ensure that prospective citizens fully understand the significance of their commitment and the pledge than to let them choose the language in which they want to make it. Understanding the words of the pledge is one thing and emotional involvement in the pledge is another. Most bi- and multilingual speakers have a stronger and a weaker language. Often, but not always, the stronger language or languages are those learnt first (“native language/s”, “mother tongue/s”), and the weaker language or languages are those learnt later in life (“second language/s”, “non-native language/s”). There is significant evidence that a weak language does not trigger the same depths of feeling as a strong language (Pavlenko, 2006). In order to ensure a strong commitment it will therefore be best to let the prospective citizen choose in which language they wish to recite the pledge.

7. English is not the only Australian language

A related point concerns the very narrow view of English as the only legitimate language of Australia and the only important language in Australia that the discussion paper assumes. There can be no doubt about the status of English in Australia but, at the same time, it is also important to acknowledge the economic, social and cultural benefits of Australia's other languages (Clyne, 2005). Australians of non-English speaking backgrounds will always be multilinguals who lead some parts of their lives in English and who lead other parts of their lives in languages other than English. In an increasingly globalized world the benefits of multilingualism can no longer be doubted (Dor, 2004). We therefore regard it as misguided – from a societal, an economic, a cultural, and an individual perspective – to view citizenship exclusively through the lens of English monolingualism. Michael Clyne's (2005, pp. 63-64) comments about the cost of Australia's monolingualism apply equally to citizenship:

“It is monolingualism that is unaffordable because it denies some people social justice, and all of us (and especially our younger generation) social, cultural, economic and cognitive benefits that the population of most of the rest of the world have.”

8. Australia continues to be well ahead of other countries in its multilingual and multicultural outlook

Some other countries, including those identified in Sect. 19, have recently moved towards repressive and illiberal language testing policies. In an ethnographic study of applicants for German citizenship who took the German language test introduced in 2000, Piller (2001) found that the test was highly problematic both from a linguistic and a democratic perspective. Linguistically, it was problematic because it was based on a very narrow and unsophisticated understanding of language. Democratically, it was problematic because it was applied arbitrarily. Linguists involved in an international symposium on language testing for citizenship (Stevenson, 2006) echo these findings in a range of national contexts, including those described in the discussion paper (see also Hogan-Brun, Mar-Molinero, & Stevenson, forthcoming).

9. A test provides no incentive to learn English

The assumption that a test would provide “a real incentive to learn English and to understand the Australian way of life” (Sect. 24) is fundamentally mistaken. To begin with, contemporary migrants come to Australia by choice. Most migrants – except those who come as refugees – even have the choice to go back to their former countries. The act of choice in and of itself implies that migrants have every interest in learning English, understanding Australian ways of life, and becoming responsible and committed citizens of this society. Second, the current speed of the spread of English around the world, even in countries far removed from any British heritage (e.g., Crystal, 1997; Jenkins, 2003) is evidence that no incentives are needed for people internationally to learn English.

So, if migrants actively embrace an Australian way of life and if there is a significant body of evidence that people do not need incentives to learn English, how come some Australian residents are not particularly proficient in English? Before we can answer this question, we need to put it in perspective: according to the most recent census data the vast majority of Australian residents actually have at least a basic knowledge of English, and a “basic knowledge of the English language” is the proficiency that is stipulated in the 1948 Citizenship Act (Sect 13g). According to the 2001 census only 112,069 Australian residents claimed no knowledge of English, that is 0.6% of the Australian population². Furthermore, in terms of country of birth, the largest number of non-English speakers were in fact born in Australia itself – 36,788 of the respondents with no English are Australian-born, presumably young and elderly Aboriginal people in remote communities – thus further lowering the number of migrants without any knowledge of English.

The fact that most Australian residents, including migrants, have at least basic English is of course not surprising given that most migrants – those coming in the

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category of skilled migrants – actually need to demonstrate proficiency in English before they are even admitted, as explained in Sects 57ff.

Nevertheless, there remains a small minority of migrants whose English remains weak. However, if their English is weak we can be sure that it is because of lack of opportunity (“access”) to learn English and not because of lack of motivation and incentives. Reasons why some migrants have no access to the language of wider communication in their new society could be among the following: migrants often work longer hours than any other group in the population as the need to make a living may be more urgent for people who have to start their life again “from scratch.” In conjunction with a lack of formal education, a lack of English, or the inability to transfer professional skills from their former countries, migrants often work in workplaces with limited communication needs (e.g., cleaning services) or it may be easier for them to find work in ethnic workplaces. It is well-known that many migrants experience downward economic mobility (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). For example, a study of Portuguese women in Toronto, Canada (Goldstein, 1995, 1996, 2001) shows exactly such a scenario: these women only found work in workplaces where they had connections through the Portuguese church, the factory work they did called for little communication, and they worked long hours, which in conjunction with their family obligations, left no time for formal English study. These women wanted to learn English but they could not – a test would do nothing to change the conditions of their lives.

10. *A test is likely to discriminate against women*

A related point is the fact that, even where there is government assistance with English learning – as is the case in Australia through the AMEP program – availability does not necessarily translate into access. Another Canadian study demonstrates this. Kouritzin (2000) shows that in addition to the work obligations mentioned above, it is the family and care obligations of mothers that sometimes make it impossible for them to make use of governmental language assistance.

Thus, a test will do nothing to improve the English proficiency of Australia’s migrant population. Those who have a hard time accessing English language services, will simply not be able to prepare and pass the test, and the test is therefore likely to

discriminate against the very group it is supposed to help with learning English – most likely, migrant women, particularly women from working-class backgrounds, with limited formal education, and with care obligations. Migrant women work double shifts – employed work and domestic work – like most women in our society (Hochschild, 2003) – but they do so under more precarious conditions, and some of them will find preparing for a formal citizenship test just too much of an extra burden.

This is an important point where we want to stress that a formal citizenship test is likely to produce exactly the opposite of what it intends to achieve. The discussion paper repeatedly, and quite rightly, of course, stresses the equality of men and women in Australia. However, all the evidence in gender and second language learning to date suggests that a formal citizenship test would most likely discriminate against some women, namely those of working class and refugee background, those with limited literacy, and those with care obligations (see also Piller & Pavlenko, 2004; in press).

11. A test does nothing to improve employment outcomes

Sects. 31 and 32 quote a direct link between English ability and employment outcomes. This is an important point but we must remember that it is not a causal link: that is, high levels of English proficiency do not necessarily *lead to* better employment – the causation may well work in the other direction, that is, participation in the workforce may improve English proficiency, or the two variables may co-vary together with a third variable, such as educational background (e.g., those who have tertiary education are more likely to be highly proficient in English *and* have good employment outcomes). Thus, Sect. 33 is mistaken in suggesting that a formal test will maximize employment chances. Those migrants who do not have English need the opportunity to participate in sufficient English classes immediately upon arrival in Australia – a test after a few years in the country will have no effect whatsoever on their English proficiency. Most migrants will consider it as minor hassle and successfully take it and those who do not have sufficient English and access to English classes, will defer it indefinitely and it will become another significant hurdle to their integration.

12. What level of English is necessary? No one-size-fits-all answer

There is no one-size-fits-all answer and different people will find different levels of English necessary. People “do things” with language (such being the title of a famous text in the philosophy of language (Austin, 1962) – some of us write policy discussion papers and submissions some of our time, others sometimes create hip-hop lyrics, others still sometimes chat on skype, and some do these and other things with language all in one day. Migrants, just like non-migrant Australians, live and work in a great diversity of circumstances where diverse proficiency levels of English and other languages are needed. Migrants must have spent a significant amount of time in Australia as permanent residents before they become eligible to apply for citizenship. If they have led successful lives during this period, been gainfully employed, paid taxes, remained of good character, they obviously have the level of English necessary to their situation.

13. Australian ways of life

‘Here we are the foreigners,
no matter what the papers say.’
(Eva, naturalized Australian from Chile)

The discussion paper assumes an unnecessarily narrow view of our society in its use of the singular “Australian way of life.” It should not need pointing out that there is no one single Australian way of life but that there are many, as is the case in any complex society. As Australians we rightly take pride in the multiculturalism and diversity of our country, as the discussion paper does, too. However, suggesting that there is only one Australian way of life denies the very multiculturalism and diversity we profess to cherish. As long as we keep pretending that there is only one single Australian way of life, Eva and many other Australians will continue to feel Australian “only on paper.” Formal citizenship testing will do nothing to promote appreciation of multiculturalism and diversity, but will return us to a narrow “Anglo” vision of what it means to be Australian.

14. Commitment to universal human rights

None of the “Australian values” outlined in Sect. 26 are in any way specifically Australian. Freedom and dignity of the individual, democracy, the rule of law, the equality of men and women, justice (“the spirit of a fair go”), and mutual respect and compassion for those in need are universal human rights. To suggest that any of these are specifically Australian is plainly wrong.

What does it mean to suggest that universal human rights are specifically Australian, and that migrants need to have their values tested? In effect such a suggestion places all migrants under a blanket suspicion. If anything, migrants are likely to find this assumption that they only would need to be educated and tested in these matters alienating, and this can only weaken rather than strengthen their commitment to Australia. The argument made by Irene Khan in her recent Sydney Peace Prize lecture³ applies in the context of citizenship testing as well:

“More human rights education would be good for all of us. But as teachers and parents know well, it is not what we say but what we do that children learn. Take the example of Australia. When the Australian government fails to criticise human rights abuses by the US and does not condemn the bombing of women and children in Lebanon, when the Australian government subjects asylum seekers to harsh incarceration and refuses to recognise the wrongs done to Indigenous Australians, when it introduces and enforces discriminatory counter-terrorism laws, it undermines its credibility and legitimacy to promote human rights - and that is dangerous.” [our emphasis]

15. English testing for permanent residents: skilled migrants vs refugees

It is obviously the right of the Australian government to place an English condition (in addition to other conditions) on permanent residency. Sect. 60 explains the current practice. However, Sect. 60 is misleading in suggesting that an English language

³ <http://www.usyd.edu.au/news/84.html?newscategoryId=17&newsstoryid=1416>; last accessed Nov 02, 2006

condition might also be placed on refugees admitted on humanitarian grounds. As a signatory to the Geneva convention on refugees Australia has an international obligation to protect refugees from persecution, and refugee status cannot be determined on the basis of whether someone speaks English or not. To suggest that an English condition might be placed on the granting of refugee status is misleading. However, once refugees enjoy Australian protection and have been admitted (or are going to be admitted), every effort should be made to help them learn English (see our comments above regarding access to English language tuition).

Given that there are conditions for skilled migrants in place and that their English is being tested, questions 6-11 of the discussion paper must be considered spurious. Skilled migrants and refugees fall into separate categories in relation to language testing.

16. *English testing for long-term temporary residents such as students*

Such a practice would be economically harmful to one of our largest export sectors, namely education. Many students come to Australia to study English and it would be extremely detrimental to our ability to attract overseas students if they had to study English somewhere else before they could be admitted.

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