Rationale for Teaching English Literacy and Civics Education in the Adult English Language Learner Classroom

Adults coming into the United States of America need to have the opportunity to enroll in an English literacy program that incorporates civics education. For immigrants and other Limited English Proficient (LEP) persons to effectively participate in the communities they live in, these persons need to not only master the English language but be able to understand and navigate governmental, educational, and workplace systems and institutions such as banks and health care. By providing a program that offers survival English with facts about the country in which they reside, immigrants and LEP learners can and will become a more integral part of their communities and society.

With the immigrant population rising to the highest in 70 years at 11.5 percent of the United States population, there is a societal need for an English literacy and civics program (US Census, 2000). Since the 1990s, immigration has increased by 57 percent and eighteen percent of all Americans speak a language other than English in their homes (US Census, 2000). A study published in Urban Institute states the number of immigrants being naturalized is also on the rise. In 1990, the number of naturalized immigrants was 6.5 million. As of 2002, eleven million immigrants because naturalized citizens, which is 32 percent of the estimated 34 million foreign-born population in the United States. In addition, there is the belief that there is a larger population of immigrants who are eligible for naturalization but do not apply for naturalization for different reasons. One of the main reasons for lack of applying is that these immigrants
have limited English skills. An estimated 60 percent of immigrants currently eligible for naturalization have limited English proficiency, which is an estimated 3.5 million adults. The other 40 percent of immigrants reported that they speak English “not well” or “not at all” (Fix et al., p. 6). The population of limited-English is the adults who would benefit from an English literacy and civics program.

Because it is important for adults to learn about their country and master the English language, the ESL program is developed around Ohio’s Standards for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Ohio’s standards reflect the philosophy that students will be able to listen actively, speak so others can understand, read with understanding, and convey ideas in writing. The program provides opportunities for students scoring in level 2, which is identified as Low Beginning ESOL. Along with using the Ohio Standards for ESOL, the program will also use the English Language Civics Standards adopted by the state of Ohio in February of 2007. These standards focus on three major aspects of civics education: rights and responsibilities of citizenship, civic participation, and U.S. history and government and citizenship preparation. Study materials obtained from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) are also incorporated into the program. The incorporated study materials are based on the redesigned Naturalization Test. The test focuses on three areas: English Reading and Writing, Civics, and English Speaking. The materials include an emphasis on the important concepts of American democracy and the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen (www.uscis.gov, March 25, 2007). By having a focus on the EL Civics standards
and citizenship materials, students in the program can learn and identify with the basic values that all Americans share. Because the program is using the ESOL state standards, the EL Civics state standards, and materials from the USCIS which encompass listening, speaking, reading and writing, students are prepared to take the Naturalization Test to become a U.S. citizen.

The program is designed for Low Beginning ESOL adults and is incorporated into a semester long evening program that meets two nights a week for two hours. The program improves the knowledge of United States civics through the English language. The recommendation is that a volunteer is present to allow additional help with comprehension and understanding of the subject matter.