English as the Language of Unity with Simple Lessons of History
By Touria Ghaffari

The United States has been the land on which people of various languages and cultures have come to settle, fulfill their dreams, and provide a better life for themselves and their families. But no matter where they settle in the world, immigrants can face difficulties with the adjustments they have to make in their lives. A new language that is connected to the new culture is often part of the initial shock wave they receive. Language incompetency can create a barrier against integration, leaving a newcomer isolated. It can also create a barrier toward understanding the laws of the country, which aim at protecting them. Speaking from personal experience, no matter how much you prepare before you arrive, the shocks and the initial feeling of isolation and helplessness will hit hard at some point.

Possessing the ability to use the four language skills, even at lower levels on the competency scale, could mean better integration into the society both economically and socially. A good example would be having a competitive edge in the job market, thus raising one’s productivity and earnings (Armas, 2002). Basic competency can also avoid confusion when being treated in medical facilities where a translator is not available.

In the United States, English is the adopted official language in 31 states (Liu & Sokhey, 2014). It is worth noting that in the borough of Queens, about 140 languages are spoken, and some by no more than just one person (Roberts, 2015). This is just a portion of the over 800 languages that experts believe are spoken in New York City (Turin, 2012). Along with this come cultural diversity and historical experience generated by the immigrants. In my opinion, it is unfair to have an official second language here in the USA considering the over 300+ (official figures) and some 800+ (unofficial figures) languages spoken here and not unite under one existing English language.

It would be unfair to have a second adopted language when all the citizens and permanent residents can unite under one existing language to exchange their ideas. Both Canada and Germany are two countries that receive a large number of immigrants, and require their immigrants to learn the languages spoken in those countries. Canada needs a proof of English language ability through an IELTS test result before the application for skilled worker visa can be submitted. Germany requires those wishing to apply for citizenship to show adequate (high-intermediate level) German language skills and knowledge of the legal and social system and living conditions there.

In the United States, the number of legal permanent residents or Green Card holders becoming eligible for naturalization is on the rise (Rytina, 2013). The level of language required for the interview is just basic, and there are 100 questions covering some history, geography, and the government that applicants can download from the website www.USCIS.gov and study in preparation for of their interview.

It would be of great practical benefit if the U.S. citizenship applicants could receive language lessons covering topics related to the 100 questions. This would avoid rote memorization of the
questions and offer meaningful learning of both the language and the history of the United States. To give an example, the U.S. flag could become the central theme of a lesson. One question at the interview could be to give a colloquial name of the flag, such as Old Glory, or to give reasons for the number of stars and stripes, i.e., 50 and 13. The lesson could focus on teaching numbers, and with it other useful information such as the emergency phone number: 911, or 311 for inquiries; dates, including those related to the U.S. history; and colors, including those of the flag, could be taught. Within this lesson, learning to ask simple questions gives the learner a chance to ask basic questions in English. Because “wh question” words are used regularly, they could be incorporated into questions, such as What is the name of the U.S. flag, or Where or when is an American flag seen (including on the Moon). The lesson can continue with information on the first president, George Washington, and a simply worded account of his life. The ultimate aim of these lessons should be to provide meaningful learning of the history of the country that is being adopted and provide the means of cultural integration and communication. Learning to speak English would make immigrants less dependent on others; ultimately, sharing a common history and language would create unity and synergize the population to work together toward improving life for all.

References

Touria Ghaffari, M.A., with over 15 years’ experience in teaching ESL, moved to New York City as an immigrant just over four years ago. She is affiliated with GEOS and EC English. She has closely experienced some of these difficulties during the adjustment of her new life, and sees the need for a strong support for English as the language of unity among all whom she believes are blessed to live in the United States. <touriaghaffari@gmail.com>