

# **APEC Second/Foreign Language Standards and their Assessment: Trends, Opportunities, and Implications**

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## **I. Introduction: Toward Achieving 21<sup>st</sup> Century Competencies in English and Other International Languages**

With the intense globalization and human migration taking place within the Asia-Pacific region as well as beyond it, an appreciation of multiple languages and cultures and an ability to communicate effectively with people across languages, genres, cultures, communities, and using new digital media is crucial. To that end, high quality second/foreign language (S/FL)<sup>1</sup> skills, communicative competence, and intercultural sensitivity must be nurtured in 21<sup>st</sup> century global citizens. Teachers, for their part, as the ones guiding the learning process, must also have the requisite knowledge of S/FL teaching methodology and of language (as a structured semiotic system), and must also be proficient in the language of instruction.

The results of the APEC-EDNET survey of language learning standards conducted in Fall, 2007 and subsequent seminar presentations from the research meeting in Chinese Taipei in Dec. 2007, are summarized in the very comprehensive and useful document “APEC EDNET Project Seminar on Language Standards and their Assessment” (Chen, Sinclair, Huang, & Eyerman, 2008). That report and its source documents reveal a number of important trends. In this paper, I (1) analyze the trends related to S/FL policies and standards in the APEC region, (2) review the most promising existing standards for language learning, language teachers, and language teaching programs, and (3) consider related language assessment issues. One implication, for example, is that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR for short; Council of Europe, 2001) be adopted as a common reference framework across economies that can also help guide inservice and preservice language teacher education, curriculum reform, and assessment practices. The discussion in this paper centers around the standards for English first and foremost because of its global dominance and its crucial role across all 21 economies (both English-dominant and otherwise), and then consider implications for other S/F languages. Because of the diversity of APEC economies vis-à-vis the role of English as a second, foreign, or lingua franca language and the level of English proficiency already commonly attained in each economy (connected in part to the colonial legacy of English in the economy, its official status, and the necessary interaction between S/FL education and indigenous/community language education), it is necessary to consider the implications as rather general statements rather than as prescriptions for any and all economies.

## **II. Contextualizing Policy/Standards Trends**

Language policies and standards typically evolve over time in response to world and regional politics and economics (e.g., industrialization, globalization, colonization, postcolonial

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “second/foreign language” (S/FL) throughout this paper as a shorthand that includes heritage languages and lingua francas as well. “Additional language” or “international language” would be more neutral terms, especially as it is often difficult to apply the terms SL or FL to contemporary transnational learners or to “SL” learners in first-language ethno-linguistic enclaves in otherwise “SL” contexts.

reform) as well as from grassroots local or regional concerns related to the validation and maintenance of community languages and the selection of preferred languages for wider communication within and across regions. Language policies and standards are naturally also often informed and shaped by research and developments in other parts of the world (e.g., drawing on the experiences of Europe, where trilingualism or “plurilingualism” is now an accepted educational and communicative objective, with English serving as the default first additional language) and by new political and economic alliances (again, in regions such as the European Union, with the accession of new member countries). Language policy practices have also been heavily influenced in recent years in some economies by new (perceived) international and domestic security threats (e.g., in the U.S. post-September 11, 2001), by changing immigration patterns (e.g., the influx of immigrants into both urban and rural regions in the U.S. and changing immigration demographics in other immigrant-receiving English-dominant economies), as well as by the desire for mobility of skilled and professional workers (Duff, 2004).

The resulting diversification of the ethnic and linguistic composition of workplaces and schools has also been the impetus for reforms in language (education) policies and standards. In APEC economies, perceived competition from neighboring economies has affected many economies with respect to the teaching and learning of English and there has been a concomitant surge in community and parental advocacy for effective English language teaching. Finally, the global impact of new digital information, communication, and learning technologies and intense economic competition and cooperation have also resulted in a serious consideration of best practices and standards in language teaching, assessment, and teacher education and in the use of new media to achieve economies’ educational goals.

### **III. Observed Policy/Standards Trends across APEC Economies**

In this section, I present a number of trends in language education among APEC economies captured by Chen et al. (2008) and the source documents and experts they consulted, and supplemented with my own observations and related research trends.

#### *1. Theory vs. practice in policy/standards implementation*

All APEC economies surveyed seem to recognize the need for better strategies both to *establish* and then successfully *implement and sustain* L2 learning policies and standards successfully. For example, Yoshida (2003), a well known scholar in English education in Japan, reported a few years ago in a policy section of the *Modern Language Journal* how in his economy the “espoused” policies related to English language education reform and the practical implementation of those policies and objectives have often been at odds, to the detriment of language learners and reflected to some extent in standardized test national mean scores such as on TOEFL (see Section V below). Such situations of policy-practice disjunctions and shortfalls are reported in other economies as well, such as Canada, which espouses national bilingualism through official language policies but has yet to demonstrate widespread success in implementing this policy (Duff, 2007). Bilingualism and multilingualism in Canada tend to be enjoyed by new-immigrant and long-established Francophone communities in Canadians to a much greater extent than by Canadian-born Anglophones. Thus, a recommendation based on this item is that economies should remain proactive and vigilant about the implementation of desired policies, providing sufficient resources, including training, in order to effect change in language education practices and in resulting language competencies, according to their priorities.