

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

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I. Introduction: Toward Achieving 21st 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)¹ skills, communicative competence, and intercultural sensitivity must be nurtured in 21st 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

¹ 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.