

## **Developments in English Language Assessment APEC Strategic Plan for English and Other Languages**

### **I. Introduction**

English has become a global language (Crystal, 1997). As a consequence, in APEC economies where English is not the native, majority or official language, it has become a priority foreign language. In a background paper presented at the APEC EDNET symposium convened in Xi'an, China, Chen and his colleagues reported the results of the APEC-EDNET survey they conducted on the status of foreign language standards and assessment among APEC member economies. The authors noted that English was the primary foreign language for 80% of the APEC members (Chen, Sinclair, Huang & Eyerman, 2008). Given the significance placed on the English language in many APEC economies, it is important to monitor global trends and important developments in the assessment of English language ability and to consider their implications for APEC members.

This paper supports Activity 6 in the Strategic Plan for English and Other Languages and complements research conducted by Chen et al. (2008) on language standards and assessment. In this paper, I (1) review some notable developments related to high-stakes assessments of English language ability used in selected APEC economies, (2) highlight key issues in the assessment of English language ability and discuss their implications for developers of high-stakes second language (L2) tests, (3) note current global standards for the assessment of English and other second language abilities, and (4) identify several exemplary frameworks for guiding the development of large-scale, high-stakes assessments of English as a foreign language (EFL) ability.

### **II. Recent Developments in Major High-stakes Tests of EFL ability**

In APEC economies where English is the priority foreign language, English tests frequently perform a gate-keeping function that significantly affects test-takers' educational, employment, and career advancement opportunities (Ross, 2008). When the scores on tests are used to make decisions that have serious consequences, they are considered *high-stakes* tests (Kane, 2002). The principal high-stakes, international tests of EFL ability used in APEC member economies include the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language™ (TOEFL®), and Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and there have been some important recent developments related to them.

#### *1. IELTS*

The current version of the IELTS was launched in 1995. Enhanced rating procedures, assessment criteria, and scale descriptions were introduced in the speaking component in 2001 and the writing component in 2005. A computer-delivered version of the test (CB-IELTS) was introduced at selected test centers in 2005, and test takers who elect to take the CB-IELTS have the option of handwriting their responses to Writing section tasks or composing them on the computer. The Speaking section for the paper-based and CB-IELTS is delivered in the same manner, using an interviewer and a face-to-face format. The IELTS is designed to assess test