

FORUM

Future Expansion for the Asia TEFL Movement: What Should Be Done and How Should We Proceed?

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I would like to take this opportunity to suggest courses of action for Asia TEFL that will promote its expansion and benefit the peoples of Asia. However, before offering specific proposals, I think it appropriate to briefly review the status of Asia TEFL to appreciate our current position.

ASIA TEFL

Last year saw the successful launch of a truly pioneering organization in Asia. We have organized two well-attended international conferences, published a journal, enjoyed modest recognition from governments and educational institutions, and seen our membership rolls expand at a gratifying rate to over 1,000 strong. At present, Asia TEFL stands at a unique position in educational and even world history. The global influence of Asia is growing in every way, politically, economically and culturally at unprecedented rates. Activities between Asian countries are also increasing, both in terms of economic interdependence and cultural exchanges.

In terms of the English language too, Asia TEFL enjoys the opportunities given by the trend towards the internationalization of English. Of course, in part, I refer to the fact that English has become the de facto language of international commerce as well as the official language of international corporations. But I also mean to include under this topic, the trend towards making English the province of all the world's nations, with linguistic richness imparted from multi-national contributors, not only of the so-called "native-speaker" in England, Australia or the U.S. However, the historical context from which Asia TEFL benefits is not the essence of Asia TEFL's uniqueness. For that, we may take justifiable pride in the foundations of our constitution.

Asia TEFL, unlike national-TEFL organizations which limit themselves to one country, has pledged itself to address the concerns of the entire Asian region. This is a singular undertaking, bringing with it opportunities, responsibilities and difficulties far beyond those we have dealt with previously. Another reason for Asia TEFL's uniqueness is its membership, which is truly pan-Asian, and even to an extent, global. Our membership may be described as exceptionally well educated, committed to a field which advances humanity, and capable of looking beyond narrow, parochial concerns. The wealth of such a resource is awesome in its potential, and we owe it to ourselves and to the world to consider carefully how we may put such potential to beneficial use.

SHORT AND MID-TERM PROJECTS: OPINION EXCHANGES

With the achievements, unique position and potential of Asia TEFL noted, I would now like to propose future courses of action. Such courses may be considered in both the short and long term, and though I intend a long-term project to which the major part of this article will be devoted, I must briefly mention some short-term, interrelated projects, some of which are currently being done and which I hope will continue, and others which I hope will be

started.

One of the most fundamental concerns in our field is the need to exchange ideas and experiences, so that we may all be helped from the efforts of others. To this end, we should continue to encourage personal contacts through conferences and fact-finding visits. No amount of distant communication can duplicate the depth of feeling and commitment to understanding that results from face-to-face contact.

As an auxiliary to conferences, we might well consider the formation of significant interest groups, or SIG's. Such groups are highly flexible and can form to examine any relevant topic of interest to members. Of course, we should promote study and research on Asian, English-language concerns, as such research is now in its infancy, and there is little data on which to decide or advise. Further, we should take advantage of emerging technologies, and I refer specifically to the Internet, which is a great, new power for compiling and disseminating information.

LONG-TERM PROJECT: ESTABLISHMENT OF ASIAN COMMON FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGE

As valuable and rewarding as the preceding projects are, I would now like to propose a long-term endeavor, which I hope you would judge to be a suitable and worthy undertaking for Asia TEFL. I propose no less than the establishment of an Asian Common Framework of Reference for Languages. More details about what is meant by a common framework of reference will follow, but succinctly, it is a guide for language administrators, educators and learners to allow them to work towards common goals despite geographic, political, cultural and linguistic separation.

Goals

The Common Framework of Reference would both define and work

towards a number of goals. Most important would be the understanding that English is a tool for communicative use, and views on teaching, learning and assessing English should keep that foremost in mind.

The value of such a view is obvious; given a common language, we may look forward to improved communications between peoples of Asia, with predictable benefits.

Such benefits include increased mobility among the populations, both domestically and internationally; increased cooperation internationally, and a better chance to achieve a mutual respect for others' cultures and world views.

Development of Attitudes

That lastly mentioned benefit, the development of attitudes that allow people to see themselves as part of an international community and to realize that a mutual dependence necessitates respect and appreciation for what previously had been foreign, strange and threatening, would be another goal of the Common Framework. And, in passing, I should mention that although we as English-language educators are chiefly concerned with English, the Common Framework should recognize that in many cases, having only English as a target language may not be sufficient, for example, in countries with multi-ethnic populations or where international, yet localized, trade is carried out.

Practically speaking, the Framework would have to establish a set of pan-Asian standards and guidelines for language-teaching objectives, teaching and assessment, which would allow all who are active in language learning to work toward commonly accepted goals that are derived from shared concepts. With such a set of standards and guidelines, administrators, educators and learners will be able to plan towards local needs, yet still be in concert with the international community.

A REALISTIC AND USEFUL GOAL: AN ASIAN COMMON FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGE

The Asian Common Framework of Reference will be a monumental undertaking. It is, nonetheless, a realistic one, and I would now like to mention a few points which, in my subjective opinion, should be considered when constructing the Framework. My thoughts on these matters have been influenced by the works of the European Council, whose influence I gratefully acknowledge.

Comprehensiveness

The first point is that the Framework must be comprehensive. That is to say, it must be both detailed enough and broad enough to guide workers in every field and level of language instruction toward a set of shared objectives. And, the objectives themselves should be defined in terms of real user needs and in terms of actual resources available.

Transparency

The second point concerning the Framework is that it must be transparent; it must be understandable to all and must be available to everyone concerned with language teaching.

Coherence

A third point is that the Framework be coherent, meaning that it must be free from internal contradictions.

Action-oriented Approach

Fourthly, the Framework should adopt an “action oriented approach,” which depends on viewing learners as social agents, with real needs, who are

engaged in doing tasks in the real world. Therefore, it is the responsibility of educators to determine those needs in order to better serve them.

Comprehensive Standards of Language Proficiency Levels

Fifthly, I should like to treat the topic of establishing standards of language proficiency levels at length, as I consider this quite important. One of our goals should be to form highly comprehensive, standardized levels of proficiency that could be used to describe the many different qualifications, tests and examinations found throughout Asia. This would be a great help when attempting to compare the various systems, and could also provide considerable guidance for implementing programs and constructing materials

A conceptual matrix that would allow educators to describe their systems could consist of a grid of reference levels coupled with descriptive illustrations. Regarding the reference levels, they should be workable, that is, they should avoid the extremes of being too vague and general to discern between finer levels of proficiency or too specific as to be unusable practically.

Such a matrix should be soundly grounded in theory, however difficult this may be due to current lack of research, and it should be accessible to users. It should also be divorced from overly specific contexts, that is, it should allow generalized use from a variety of contexts, say, with both adult vocational and child educational.

The reference levels could be presented in a number of ways, including global proficiency, self-assessment for the various skills such as understanding, speaking and writing, and qualitative aspects, such as range, accuracy, fluency, coherence and so on.

A set of well-defined proficiency levels for Asia would be of great use, and should be a priority for the Framework.

Views of Language Teaching and Learning

Sixthly, the Framework should not hide from the responsibility of setting

forth a number of views of language teaching and learning. Among these should be the recognition that there are varied areas, or domains, of use, including the public, personal, occupational and educational, and that language varies with the domain.

Within the area of language learning, we should also attempt to recognize and clarify aspects of language learning, which include learning strategies and procedures, which are not strictly linguistic, but nevertheless play an important part in learning and communication.

Language Assessment

Seventh, we should examine the field of language assessment, for it is not at all clear that traditional methods of assessment currently in use are valid measurements, despite their widespread use and social importance. The Framework should address questions concerning the content of tests and examinations; it should specify criteria for determining whether learning objectives have been attained; and, it should describe levels of proficiency in current tests to allow comparison between them.

User/Learner Competence

And eighthly, we should also examine various “competences,” which include not only the linguistic, but also the sociolinguistic, with its sensitivity to social norms and customs, and pragmatic competence, the use to which the language is put.

Language Learning and Teaching

Ninth, and understandably, we must deal with the nuts and bolts of language learning and teaching. We should attempt to define what learners must learn, and attempt to clarify the learning process, and propose frameworks to facilitate language learning and offer various methodological options.

Task Description and Performance

Tenth, we should describe learning tasks, their performance, and rank them by difficulty.

CONCLUSION

First, Asian Common Framework of Reference is a Realistic, Useful and Worthy Goal. To conclude, I would like to restate that we, in Asia TEFL, are uniquely placed in terms of historical context and human resources to undertake the grand project of establishing a Common Asian Framework for languages.

Second, Call for Mutual Respect and Understanding as Contributors to World Peace and Prosperity. If we succeed in such a momentous undertaking, there can be no doubt of the great benefits of such an accomplishment for world peace and prosperity. Surely, this is task worthy of us.

THE AUTHOR

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