

Knowledge Economy and Standards Reform in Higher Education: General Education English Curriculum for L2 Learners

Sterling M. Plata

*De La Salle University,
Manila, Philippines*

Revising content standards to keep up with the 21st century demands especially for English language learners plays a critical role in the development of L2 proficiency. In L2 countries this has an economic effect as English proficiency is necessary to become globally competitive. In addition, content standards are at the heart of instructional design, professional development, and assessment policies. Finally, English proficiency enables L2 learners to become better learners. This is critical for L2 university students because the academic demands in the tertiary level require critical reading, critical writing, and effective listening and speaking skills. These are the reasons why this paper examines global changes affecting standards reform in L2. Next, it proposes a set of standards for English 1 and English 2, which are foundational courses in higher education in the Philippines. This paper intends to start a serious discussion on the revision of content standards because the last set of standards for general education English curriculum was created by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in 1996.

Keywords: Content standards, higher education, academic literacy, information literacy, General Education curriculum, English 1, English 2, standards reform

There is an increasing interest in reviewing and revising content standards because of the advent of the 21st century, globalization, explosion of information because of the internet, and the new economic order. There is even a stronger call for reform in the English curriculum in higher education particularly in nations where English is the second language like in the Philippines. Content standards are at the heart of reform that affects policies in teaching, teacher development, materials preparation, and assessment. In the Philippines, setting English proficiency standards is crucial because English proficiency can help the country become globally competitive.

However, despite the wind of change affecting standards reform in the world, the Philippines has yet to start a discussion on what students in higher education taking English 1 and English 2 have to know and be able to do to become better learners and better members of workforce. It is because of these reasons that this paper discusses the global changes that affect standards. Next, it presents a framework for curriculum standards reform in GE English for higher education. Finally, it combines the two in a proposed set of content standards for English 1 and 2.

English 1 and English 2 in Selected Universities

In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) is the governing body for higher education institutions. It has organized Technical Panels for different subjects and different programs. However, CHED has not yet released a new set of standards for GE English Curriculum. The last set of standards was released and disseminated in 1996.

A review of GE English curriculum in selected higher education institutions showed that there were no common standards for English 1 and 2. For example, Table 1 below shows the different course descriptions from these universities.

Table 1 shows the lack of consensus among selected universities about the objectives of English 1 and English 2. This affects the inconsistent learning outcomes for university students. As English courses in General Education are so-called enabling courses, there is a need to identify these core skills that will enable university students to participate in the academic discourse and to succeed as readers, writers, listeners, and speakers. The next section explains the need for a set of common core standards for English 1 and 2 in higher education in the Philippines, and it also discusses the need to align the standards with the changes in the 21st century.

Table 1
English 1 and English 2 Targets

	English 1	English 2
University 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading, • writing paragraphs and essays • language 	library research paper writing
University 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading academic texts • writing academic text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • writing essays • preparing a term paper
University 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • development of reading and writing skills across the curriculum • application of students' critical thinking skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advanced composition • research writing
University 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic communication skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing • functional grammar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • thinking skills for academic study • reading and writing academic texts
University 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading and writing combined to equip learners with integrated skills and strategies necessary for the performance of academic tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • technical communication skills
University 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading different texts that develop critical thinking; • writing meaningful, unified and coherent paragraphs; • writing short compositions using rhetorical devices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listening, speaking, reading and writing as foundation for the higher English studies • writing in the various rhetorical modes including different patterns of organization and aids to exposition • writing a research paper.
University 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listening, speaking, reading, and writing • using grammatical structures as a tool to facilitate the competency in the use of the language • library orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading with comprehension, • synthesizing information, • writing unified and coherent paragraphs • producing a well-organized term paper.

The Need for Standards Reform

There are four factors that have an impact on standards reform. These are economic changes, the increasing role of English proficiency in the economy, the new standards, and the advent of the millennials. These same factors are affecting assessment policies in the world.

The first factor is the fact that the economic order in the world is changing. The recession in the United States and the European Union's decreasing economic power are some of the examples. Canton (2007) claims that the center of gravity is shifting to the East, the population is aging in developed nations, and there will be a global war for talent, and innovation will be the driver of prosperity. These changes open doors for countries with an increasing population like the Philippines. This can only happen if the educational standards help the future workforce to hone the necessary skills to thrive in the new economy.

The new economy is called the knowledge economy. "Knowledge economy is one where knowledge is acquired, created, disseminated and applied to enhance economic development" (A Roadmap to the Philippines' Future, n.d.). Bloch (1988) claims that the knowledge economy demands the following skills: solution-oriented thinking, gathering and researching information, team work and collaboration, and presentation skills.

In this economy, English plays an important role. Tullao in his lecture during the First English Proficiency Assessment in 2009 pointed out the importance of English as the language of science, of global commerce, and of globalization. Tullao stated that "As one of the major languages of globalization English is a powerful tool in understanding abstract concepts, using holistic approaches, manipulating symbols, acquiring and utilizing knowledge, working in teams and in breaking boundaries."

The second factor is the increasing role of English in the Knowledge Economy

- (1) English is the "language of international trade and mutual understanding among interconnected global communities (APEC HRD, 2004, p. 1). It is also the language that will help build the human capital.
- (2) Scholtz (2010) claims that English is the major language in such fields as international diplomacy, business and commerce, science and technology, and the travel industry. English is the language of diplomacy. Key international bodies such as the United Nations, have adopted English as the working language. The 21st Century demands that workers possess critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, collaboration, and communication skills because of the fast-paced, competitive global economy. These skills require a language used in the world. English is also the language of diplomacy, negotiation, and conflict resolution.
- (3) English is a stepping stone to get a job as multinational companies require resumes, essays, and interviews in English in multinational companies (Gao, 2010). It is also a ticket to promotion.

English-speaking employees compete in an elite but relatively smaller pool. Among employees with similar skills, those with English fluency are paid substantially higher. English ability offers more opportunities and options for both job and life. In MNCs, email equips a bigger advantage to those who can master English and further weakens others who are able to perform but unable to write well in English. Tele-conference and video reduce the necessity of face-to-face interaction and amplifies the factor of English. But PC and internet in office also offer opportunities for employees to interact with English more frequently (Gao, 2010).

The third factor is the global movement for new standards. These standards include the new basic skills, the 21st century skills, and the new literacy skills. With the explosion of information because of the internet comes a new set of skills needed to survive in an age where change is at its dizzying speed. First, Murnane and Levy (1996) in their study to find out the skills needed in high wage positions in major companies in the United States found that the new basic skills include the hard skill of problem solving and soft skill of working in teams and effective oral and written presentations. They also suggest that these new basic skills be included in schools to make students see the connection between what they are learning and their future job prospects. Teachers should also update themselves with the changing job market and update their teaching methods. Finally, Murnane and Levy (1996) also suggest that assessment should be comprehensive to include assessment of the ability to structure problems and to test solutions as well as write clearly in English. It cannot be denied that these new basic skills are anchored on language skills.

In addition, there are 21st century skills that nations are integrating in their curricula. The 21st century skills are important because “our children live in a global, digital world—a world transformed by technology and human ingenuity. Given the rapid rate of change, the vast amount of information to be managed, and the influence of technology on life in general, students need to apply current skill sets, as well as develop new skill sets to cope and to thrive in this changing society” (NCREL/Metiri Group, 2003, p1.). These skills include digital age literacy (basic, scientific, economic and technological literacies as well as visual, information, and multicultural literacies). Inventive thinking is also an important skill in this century that requires adaptability, self-management, creativity, risk-taking, higher order thinking, sound reasoning, and the ability to manage complexity. All of these are anchored one effective communication skills because in the 21st century people will work in teams and they need to collaborate on projects. These skills need to be coupled with personal, civic, and social responsibility. Finally, NCREL/Metiri Group (2003) also point out that high productivity is also very important because with multitasking and the complexity brought about by the new media, human beings have to plan, prioritize, use real world tools in order to produce high quality products. Another organization, P21.org (n.d.), includes the following 21st century interdisciplinary themes such as “global awareness, financial,

economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy, health literacy, environmental literacy, critical thinking and problem solving” (p.1).

Lastly, the advent of the new technology has also created a new breed of learners called the millenials. According to Wilson (2005) “millenials have heightened tecno skills and ability to access information so students need to learn to investigate sources.” He suggests that plagiarism policies must be clear and students’ critical thinking should be honed through scholarly investigations. He also claims that millenials are looking for frameworks, rules, organization structures that will allow creativity . They also hunger for information and problem solving challenges. Finally, Wilson (2005) also points out that the millennials are discriminating consumers, they work hard, and they value volunteerism and community service. In addition, teachers of millennials need to use projects, authentic assessment, clearly defined grading and performance, and materials relevant to the future lives of their students to help them see the connection between what they are learning and the real world.

In a nutshell, the economic changes may open doors for the increasing population of Filipinos because of the aging population in most developed countries and because of the increased opportunities in the East. However, there are keys to open these doors and these are improved English proficiency and the 21st century skills needed to thrive in the knowledge economy. In addition, educational institutions have to consider the changing nature of their clients, the millennials. They require different approaches compared to those who were schooled before the advent of the internet and computers.

Towards a Framework for Content Standards

Frameworks are created to ensure that an agreed-upon knowledge base is shared by everyone involved in standards reform or in any curriculum reform for that matter. The framework combines research on standards for the traditional literacy as well as new literacies such as academic literacy and information literacy. The framework that follows can be used for setting standards in the department, school, college, or national level.

“Content standards are statements that define what students should know and be able to do” (IRA and NCTE, 1996, p. 1). These two influential organizations IRA or International Reading Association and NCTE or National Council of Teachers of English started to define the standards that will prepare for the literacy requirements in this century and the next century. These organizations also claim that standards ensure that stakeholders like teachers, literacy researchers, parents, and teacher trainers share a vision of what the students should attain in the English curriculum. Finally, IRA and NCTE (1996) also “believe that the act of defining standards is worthwhile because it invites further reflection and conversation about the fundamental goals of ... schools (p.1).

Content standards are targets, and in the field of English language teaching (ELT) setting targets can be a bit complicated. Traditionally, the main

target is communicative competence. However, some curriculum designers equate grammatical competence or the knowledge people have of a language. However, Richards (2006) points out that communicative competence includes the following:

- Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions
- Knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants
- Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts
- Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in language knowledge (p.3).

However, as shown above, the targets are too broad that they are difficult to assess. In addition, the demands in higher education include not just communicative competence but a kind of thinking that will help the students cope with the complex demands in various subjects. In fact, Tynjala, Mason, and Lonka(2001) believe that university students need to transferrable general skills such as critical and abstract thinking, the ability to use and produce information, teamwork, cooperation skills, communication skills requires for writing reports and giving oral presentations, lifelong learning skills, and the ability to reflect.

“Instead of communicative competence, some nations target 21st century literacy. Literacy is defined by NCTE (2008) as a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups” (p.1).

As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies—from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms—are multiple, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities and social trajectories of individuals and groups. Twenty-first century readers and writers need to

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology
- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes
- Manage, analyze and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media texts
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments (NCTE, 2008, p.1).

In addition, universities that cater to L2 or second language learners provide English 1 and English 2 courses that develop academic literacy.

Academic literacy is defined by Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (ICAS) (2002) as a complex process that includes the following:

The dispositions and habits of mind that enable students to enter the ongoing conversations appropriate to college thinking, reading, writing, and speaking are inter-related and multi-tiered. Students should be aware of the various logical, emotional, and personal appeals used in argument; additionally, they need skills enabling them to define, summarize, detail, explain, evaluate, compare/contrast, and analyze. Students should also have a fundamental understanding of audience, tone, language usage, and rhetorical strategies to navigate appropriately in various disciplines (p.11).

ICAS (2002) reports on the results of multi-sectoral consultation about the targets for incoming university or college students. Based on their extensive research and discussion, they were able to arrive at a set of standards divided into the following:

- reading for information
- writing to learn and communicate effectively
- grammar, usage, and mechanics
- conventions of oral presentations
- speaking and listening in formal and informal settings
- interpreting, critiquing, and creating literature
- finding, analyzing, applying, and communicating information

Aside from academic literacy standards, there are also information literacy standards that have recently been added to the English curriculum in higher education because of the shift to the knowledge economy. Information literacy has several definitions. According to the American Library Association, information literacy is the ability to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (ACRL, 2000, p. 1). Allen (2000) cites the Boyer Commission Report of April 1998 to point out the importance of information literacy to university students through resource-based learning. Allen (2000) claims that resource-based learning ensures active learning through “undergraduate research, service learning, inquiry learning, problem-based learning and evidence-based learning” (par. 9). She adds that this integration will not only develop information literacy of university students but will also develop team work, critical thinking, and the ability to see analyze and solve real-life problems in the community.

Several organizations have defined the standards or pillars of information literacy. One organization is The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL). This organization identified seven pillars. There are the following:

- (1) The ability to recognise a need for information

- (2) The ability to distinguish ways in which the information ‘gap’ may be addressed
- (3) The ability to construct strategies for locating information
- (4) The ability to locate and access information
- (5) The ability to compare and evaluate information obtained from different sources
- (6) The ability to organise, apply and communicate information to others in ways appropriate to the situation
- (7) The ability to synthesise and build upon existing information, contributing to the creation (SCONUL, 1999, p.6)

In a nutshell, the content standards of English courses in general education have to include academic literacy and information literacy to ensure the development of enabling skills.

Part 3 Proposed Curriculum

The proposed curriculum is anchored on EAP, EOP and service learning framework as well as the skills needed in the knowledge economy and the learning needs of the millennials. English for Academic Purpose is an approach to the teaching of English that intends to prepare students for the demands of the university. These demands include using different reading skills and strategies to be able to process different types of texts. In addition, EAP courses also introduce different writing skills and strategies to help university students write term papers, research reports, critiques, summaries, and other forms of essays following the academic discipline and observing intellectual honesty. Some EAP courses also provide other study skills such as listening to lectures and taking down notes.

On the other hand, EOP or English for Occupational Purpose is an approach that helps its learners to communicate better in their workplace for those who are working or EOP prepares the future workforce for the demands of the workplace. Some EOP courses are discipline specific such as English for Business and English for Nurses. However, pre-service EOP courses provide workplace communication skills such as technical communication, business communication, and presentation skills.

Finally, service learning is “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 2011, par 1). Harkavy (1998) points out that colleges and universities are becoming civic institutions serious in developing learners who solve problems in their communities. There are several benefits of service learning such as the development of positive beliefs about service and higher academic achievement (Markus, Howard, and King, 1993). Other benefits include the development of problem-solving skills as well as a deeper understanding; “other research supports the contention

that service learning has a positive impact on personal, attitudinal, moral, social, and cognitive outcomes” (Bingle and Hatcher, 1996, p.2).

Proposed GE English Curriculum Standards for Universities and Colleges

The proposed standards for English and English 2 are anchored on the 21st century skills, the expectations of the millennials, academic literacy, information literacy.

General standard: At the end of English 1 and 2, each student will become a critical reader, writer, listener, speaker, and viewer who uses effective communication skills to become a better student, a better researcher, a better problem-solver, and an effective leader. S/he will become self-directed and will learn how to learn.

English 1 Academic Literacy

This course for first year college students equips the learners with the necessary reading, writing, and thinking skills needed to understand and analyze current national issues. This course is anchored on self-directed learning and on inquiry-based learning.

Goal 1 Students interact with various reading texts in the literal, inferential, and critical level.

Goal 2 Students apply pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading strategies.

Goal 3 Students apply a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing strategies to meet their communicative needs and audience needs.

Goal 4 Students use metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies for learning.

Goal 5 Students apply their knowledge of language structures and conventions in various writing tasks.

Goal 6 Students assess their strengths and weaknesses as academic literate individuals, set goals, prepare and implement a learning plan, and evaluate their progress.

English 2 Information Literacy

This course guides the learners as they seek, evaluate, use, and create information to solve a problem. It also develops their ability to write following the conventions of academic and professional writing. It is anchored on project-based learning as students work with the Social Action Center in preparing a service project for a community based on their needs analysis and research. They also write a report of the evaluation of their project.

Goal 1 Students conduct research on an issue by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and

- synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
- Goal 2 Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
- Goal 3 Students work in teams on a project to solve a problem.
- Goal 4 Students follow the conventions of academic and professional writing as they plan, implement, and evaluate a project that will benefit a marginalized group of people.
- Goal 5 Students observe the principles of professional writing as they communicate through emails and snail mails to their team members and to the beneficiaries of their project.

Conclusions

This paper was conceived to synthesize global changes and local needs in order to contextualize the need to revise the 1996 content standards of English 1 and English 2 in higher education in the Philippines. The global changes include the new economic order, the increasing role of English proficiency in the economy, the new standards for the workforce that include 21st century skills and new literacies such as information literacy and academic literacy, and the advent of students in the digital called the millennial. On the other hand, the local needs include the declining English proficiency of Filipinos amidst vast opportunities in business process outsourcing services. If the Philippines wants to develop a knowledge economy, then it is imperative that it develops its human resource to be knowledge workers. If the Philippines wants to succeed in the 21st century, then it has to provide for support to ensure that schools develop Filipino students' 21st century skills. The revision of the 1996 content standards in English 1 and English 2, foundational courses in higher education in the Philippines, is a step towards educational reform. Once this is done, assessment policies, professional development, and materials preparation can follow.

This paper hopes to start the process of setting content standards for English 1 and English 2 in higher education institutions in the Philippines. The next step may be to hold a meeting of stake holders such as key persons in professional organizations of English teachers, policymakers from the Commission on Higher Education, and university professors in the various fields in order to look at the proposed standards and achieve consensus as to how to proceed with the process of finalizing the content standards. Content standards are critical in policymaking that related to curriculum design, professional development, and selection of learning materials. This is the reason why there is an urgency to review the 15-year-old English curriculum of the Commission of Higher Education.

References

- ACRL (2000). *Information literacy competency standards for higher education*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency>.
- APEC HRD. (2009). *Learning each other's language*. Retrieved from http://hrd.apec.org/index.php/Learning_Each_Other's_Languages
- Bloch, E. (1988). National Science Foundation, testimony to Congress.
- Bringle, R. and Hatcher, J. (1996). Implementing service learning in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2), 18-34.
- Canton, J. (2006). *The extreme future*. New York: Plume.
- Gao, G. (2010). *Importance of language in human resource development*. Retrieved from <http://www.apecknowledgebank.org/file.aspx?id=2330>.
- Harkavy, I. (1996). Back to the future: From service-learning to strategic academically based community service as an approach for advancing knowledge and solving the problem of the American city. *Metropolitan Universities*, 7, 157-170.
- IRA/NCTE. (2010). *NCTE and IRA standards for the language arts*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/standards>.
- Intersegmental Committee of Academic Senates [ICAS]. (2002). *Academic literacy: A statement of competencies expected of students entering California's public colleges and universities*. Retrieved from <http://icas-ca.org/academic-literacy>.
- National Service Learning Clearinghouse. (2011). Service learning. Retrieved on February 2, 2011 from <http://www.servicelearning.org/>
- NCTE (2008). NCTE Position statement. Retrieved on December 12, 2010 from <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/21stcentframework>.
- Murnane, R. and Levy, F. (1996). *Teaching the new basic skills*. New York: Free Press.
- NCREL/Metiri Group. (n.d.). *21st century skills*. Retrieved from www.metiri.com/21st%20Century%20Skills/PDFtwentyfirst%20century%20skills.pdf
- P21.org (2004). *21st century skills*. Retrieved from <http://www.p21.org/>.
- Richards, J. (2005). *Communicative language teaching today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scholtz, G. (2010). *English programs*. Retrieved on May12, 2010 from <http://www.apecknowledgebank.org/file.aspx?id=2331>
- P.Tynjälä, L. Mason, & K. Lonka (Eds., 2001) Writing as a Learning Tool: Integrating theory and practice. *Studies in Writing*, vol. 7. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- SCONUL. (2000). *The seven pillars of information literacy standards*. Retrieved from http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information_literacy/seven_pillars.html

- Tullao, T. (2009). Lecture during the First English Proficiency Assessment Summit.
- Wilson, L. O. (2005). *Teaching millennial students*. Retrieved from www.uwsp.edu/education/facets/links_resources/Millennial%20Specifics.pdf.

About the Author

Dr. Sterling M. Plata helps teachers, administrators, and educational institutions to evaluate their assessment practices and to develop essential tools and processes that will deeply impact on student learning and deeper understanding. She has a Specialist Certificate in Language Testing and Assessment from SEAMEO-RELC, Singapore. She is a full-time faculty member of the Department of English and Applied Linguistics, De La Salle University-Manila. She is the President of the Network of Language Teachers/Testers, Inc, and a member of the International Language Testing Association. Dr. Plata is also an individual affiliate of the Association of Language Testers in Europe.