

Unveiling English language education policies across primary and secondary levels in ASEAN

Emi Emilia¹, Esra Nelvi Manutur Siagian², Nita Novianti^{3*}, Rina Dwiyanana²,
R. Dian Dia-an Muniroh³, and Misbah Fikrianto²

¹English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Language and Literature Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Jl. Dr. Setiabudi, No. 229 Isola, Sukasari, Bandung, West Java, Indonesia

²SEAMEO Regional Center for Quality Improvement of Teachers and Education Personnel (QITEP) in Language (SEAQIL), Jalan Gardu, Srengseng Sawah, Jagakarsa, Jakarta Selatan, Jakarta, Indonesia

³English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Language and Literature Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Jl. Dr. Setiabudi No. 229, Isola, Sukasari, Bandung, West Java, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a small part of the results of a bigger research project carried out under the cooperation between Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia and SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization) Regional Centre for QITEP (Quality Improvement of Teachers and Education Personnel) in Language conducted during 2021-2023. The study, unique in its scale and scope, investigates language policy in ASEAN countries involving eleven experts of foreign language teaching and 4,219 students from all ASEAN countries. This paper presents only data on English language education policy in ASEAN, obtained from a Google form questionnaire addressing foreign language education policy, and a focus group discussion involving eleven language teaching and policy experts in ASEAN countries. The qualitative analysis identified two key themes, including the existence of law on English and their application in primary and secondary education. The results show that all ASEAN countries have distinct legal frameworks for English education, positioning English as the dominant foreign language. While most countries mandate English as a compulsory subject at primary and secondary levels, some also prioritize other foreign languages like French and Portuguese. English frequently serves as a medium of instruction (EMI) alongside local languages, reflecting innovative bilingual and multilingual policy approaches. This study uniquely highlights how ASEAN countries balance the global importance of English with preserving local linguistic identities. It underscores the need for policies that support multilingualism, equitable access to quality education, and culturally responsive pedagogy in diverse contexts, offering new insights into the intersection of language policy and educational equity.

Keywords: ASEAN countries; English education; foreign language education policy; primary and secondary education

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INTRODUCTION

Language policy, a relatively recent field, bridges educational and language policy studies (Tochon, 2015; Zein, 2020). Defined as “the most dispersed practice of applied linguistics” (Lo Bianco, 2004, p.

739), this field initially used terms like language planning and regulation but has evolved to include concepts such as “language policy and planning,” “language management,” and similar concepts (Zein, 2020). Language policy encompasses more

*Corresponding author
Email: nitanoviantiwahyu@upi.edu

than formal regulations; it also addresses language ideologies, practices, and the social contexts shaping language choices (Spolsky, 2009). These choices, influenced by bilingualism, social structures, and linguistic repertoires, involve conscious decisions reflecting historical, ideological, political, and educational frames, as outlined by Chiatoh and Akumbu (2013). In Asia, for example, language policies adapt to globalization while striving to preserve national identity, as seen in Vietnam's efforts to balance cultural heritage with global interaction (Pham, 2014).

Language education policy, part of language planning, involves decisions on access, curriculum design, and funding (Kaplan & Baldauf, in Tochon, 2015). This subset highlights the importance of foreign language education for national development, as seen in China's evolving policies shaped by politics and diplomacy (Yang, 2023). Additionally, the U.S. "Every Student Succeeds Act" of 2016 offers flexibility for English learners by decentralizing assessment, though it lacks provisions for bilingual or multilingual programs (TESOL, in Gorter & Cenoz, 2017).

Globally, foreign languages hold a significant place in education systems, often integrated with local languages to meet national and regional needs (Hayes, 2020; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2019; Pham, 2014; Saud & Abduh, 2017; Spolsky, 2021). Many ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, emphasize both their national language and the importance of foreign language learning for development (Lee et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024; Pham, 2014).

Foreign language education policy, in particular, has been a topic attracting sustained attention from scholars and educators, particularly over the last two decades. The choice of which foreign languages to teach varies greatly by context. Key factors guiding this choice include the language's role in international communication, its association with influential nations, and its prestige or utility in business and education (Salomone & Salomone, 2022; Spolsky, 2009; Zein et al., 2020). Popular languages, often reflecting economic and diplomatic significance, include English, Mandarin, Spanish, and French, among others (BIG Language Solutions, 2022; University of the People, 2023).

In ASEAN, English has been prioritized as both a tool for global engagement and an essential component of educational frameworks. In Indonesia, for instance, foreign language education experts have long focused on English language policy, examining its role in educational frameworks and national development (Alwasilah, 2000, 2001, 2013; Hamied & Musthafa, 2019; Kharis, 2020; Saud & Abduh, 2017). This focus reflects a broader trend within ASEAN countries, where English has increasingly been seen as a gateway to global communication and economic opportunity.

Despite extensive research on English language policy in ASEAN countries, much of the existing scholarship focuses on higher education or the use of English as a lingua franca in regional cooperation and diplomacy (Kirkpatrick, 2017). While these studies provide important insights, they often overlook the specific policy associated with primary and secondary education, regardless of the fact that English is increasingly taught at these levels of education. Additionally, studies on English language policy in ASEAN often treat the region as a unified bloc, neglecting the nuanced variations in how different countries implement policies at the national and local levels.

This paper addresses existing gaps by focusing specifically on English language education policies in primary and secondary education across ASEAN countries. Drawing on data from a large-scale study conducted by Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia in collaboration with the SEAMEO Regional Centre for QITEP in Language, it provides a comparative analysis of English language education policies across the region. By focusing on primary and secondary education, this study offers new insights into the intersection of language policy and educational equity, presenting a fresh perspective on a topic that has been underexplored in the existing literature.

METHOD

This study is part of a larger research project examining language policy across ASEAN nations. While the overarching project addresses language policy in a broad sense, this particular report narrows the focus specifically to English language education policy at the primary and secondary levels. Conducted in 2022, the study engaged 11 participants—one from each ASEAN member country: Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Singapore, Timor-Leste, and the Philippines. Participants were selected based on their expertise in English education or their roles as policymakers specializing in language policy in their respective countries. Participation was voluntary, with each participant fully informed about the study's objectives and the potential use of their contributions.

The data collection process was conducted in two main stages: questionnaire distribution and focus group discussions (FGDs).

1) Questionnaire distribution

The first stage involved a questionnaire developed during the pandemic, designed to capture initial insights on key themes related to language education policy. This open-ended, semi-structured questionnaire allowed participants to provide detailed responses while ensuring consistency

across the themes addressed. The questions focused on:

- a) The existence of official regulations governing language education;
- b) Languages taught at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (including United Nations official languages, ASEAN languages, and other foreign languages) and their respective status;
- c) Bilingualism and multilingualism policies;
- d) Current practices and assumptions regarding language teaching at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels;
- e) Language instruction offered by public and private language institutes.

The questionnaire was in English, and participants were informed that their contributions would assist SEAMEO QITEP in Language in developing a regional policy framework to address shared challenges in language education policy. Participants completed the questionnaire prior to participating in FGDs, ensuring that their individual perspectives were documented in a structured manner.

2) Focus-group discussion

The second stage involved three focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted online via Zoom on June 6, June 8, and August 24, 2022. These sessions were recorded (with participants' consent) to ensure that all contributions were captured verbatim. The FGDs were organized to facilitate in-depth dialogue and to explore the diverse perspectives of participants regarding their countries' language education policies. A trained moderator facilitated the discussions, ensuring that all participants had equal opportunities to present their insights and that the conversation remained focused on the study's themes. Additionally, the FGDs served to validate and expand upon the data collected through the questionnaires, enabling a richer qualitative exploration of shared and contrasting challenges among ASEAN nations (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997).

The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The collected data were condensed, coded, and thematically organized into two overarching themes by the SEAQIL research team: (1) official regulations on English language education, and (2) the position and role of English in

primary and secondary education systems. While the questionnaire initially addressed five themes, these were synthesized and consolidated during the analysis to emphasize the two most relevant themes for this English-focused report.

To ensure the reliability of data coding and analysis, the study implemented a peer review process. The coded data and themes were independently reviewed by UPI researchers, who provided feedback to ensure their accuracy and completeness. The findings were subsequently interpreted with reference to relevant theories, previous research, and established language policies. The results of this English-focused report are presented below.

FINDINGS

The results presented in this section align with the study's aim of comparing English language education policies across primary and secondary levels in ASEAN. Appendix A shows that ASEAN countries, except for Timor-Leste, have a law or official regulations on English language education policy in both primary and secondary education levels. This indicates that each country pays a great attention to the English language education policy. English becomes a dominant foreign language in all countries, except for Timor Leste, for whom Portuguese is still the main foreign language. In all these countries, English is also taught at both primary and secondary schools, serving as the compulsory subject in secondary education and optional and compulsory subject in primary education. In Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, and The Philippines, English serves as the medium of instruction in both primary and secondary education, alongside other local languages. The data in the table are further elaborated in the following sub-sections for each country.

English Language Education Policy in Indonesia

In Indonesia, English language education policy for primary and secondary education is guided by several laws and regulations aimed at promoting language proficiency, including foreign languages like English. The policy on English teaching at the secondary education has remained quite stable; however, the same cannot be said for that at the primary level that has constantly changed depending on the reigning governments.

According to Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System, foreign languages, including English, are required to be taught from the secondary level onward. The Ministry of Education and Culture's Regulation No. 23/2013 further emphasizes the importance of English as a compulsory subject at the secondary level.

However, the status of English has continued to change, with the latest curriculum reintroducing English into the primary curriculum, starting from as early as the first grade. As the Indonesian representative for the FGD explained,

In terms of language education in primary school, . . . and based on the newest curriculum, 2021 curriculum, English is taught from year one in primary school up to 12. So, in the previous policy English was taught as an obligatory subject since from grade 7 but now the government has English should be [*sic*] taught since Grade 1, and this is expected to make the students ready to use English or to have a better capacity to use English as a lingua franca later on. (Day 2, Speaker 2)

The statement by the Indonesian representative reflects the broader intent or aspiration of the 2021 curriculum to encourage early exposure to English, rather than describing its actual implementation status across all schools. English remains an optional subject, allowing schools the flexibility to decide whether to include it in their curriculum, particularly those with the resources and capacity to offer it. This approach aligns with the principle of school autonomy under the 2021 curriculum.

Additionally, the Regulation on the Standard of Educational Content (Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture No. 22/2016) ensures that English is a core subject in the curriculum, specifically for secondary schools, with schools expected to provide resources and qualified teachers to ensure students' proficiency. Presidential Decree No. 63 of 2019 does not restrict the teaching of English but reinforces the primacy of Bahasa Indonesia in education and official activities. It promotes the proper use of the national language while allowing space for foreign language education to support global competitiveness.

English Language Education Policy in Malaysia

Similar to Indonesia, the status of English in the primary and secondary education in Malaysia consistently changes, following the political climate. The National Language Act 1963/67 primarily solidifies the position of Malay as the national language while permitting English and other languages in specific educational and governmental contexts. The Education Act (1996) established English as the compulsory subject in both primary and secondary education levels. This is confirmed by the representative of the country, who explained:

Okay, so in 2003 English was registered as the medium of instruction for the subject science and mathematics but reverted to Bahasa Melayu only in 2016. So, this is the another example that I mentioned, when the when the new ministry come into office, they try to change the policy, and after the Mahathir become the Prime Minister again in

2018, he also proposed the new science and mathematics again.

So, this is stated, clearly stated in the Education Act, what the subject must be, must be taught in the primary school, which is the national language, English language, the Chinese language for the National Bible schools, the Tamil language in the national prep schools, Tamil and the course subject at the Secondary School, the national language, the English language. (Day 3 Speaker 4)

To be more specific, the Education Act (1996) stipulates that the national language, Malay, and English are the core and compulsory subjects to be taught at both primary and secondary schools. In primary education, Chinese and Tamil, are also treated as the core subjects for national-type schools, in which the selection between the two languages is based on the dominant language used in the local communities where the school is located. English was used as a medium of instruction, for science and maths, starting from 2003 until the policy reverted to the use of the national language as the medium of instruction in 2016. Thus, the English education policy, while not directly addressed in Article 152, is shaped by the recognition of English as a vital language for academic, technological, and international communication, ensuring its continued use in education alongside the national language.

English Language Education Policy in Singapore

In Singapore, English language education policy is shaped by the nation's bilingual education framework, where English plays a central role. English is the main medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools, ensuring that students are proficient in the global lingua franca while also retaining fluency in their respective mother tongues, such as Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil. This bilingual policy aims to maintain national unity while fostering global competitiveness. During the FGD, the representative explained,

Okay, the Ministry of Education ensures that the bilingual policy is fulfilled by students in the elementary schools since 1960 and secondary school since 1965 included in the learning curriculum since 1975, when they are not only required to master English as their first language, they must also learn their mother tongue as a second language. . . Melayu as national language, four official languages, English, Mandarin, Melayu and Tamil, with English as a working language. So, the working language here is English. All the subjects in Singapore are taught in English. (Day 3, speaker 3)

The representative added that on 28th November 2011, the Lee Kuan Yew Fun was established to complement the Ministry's efforts to promote bilingual education. The aim is to nurture young children's love for bilingual learning, creating a foundation for language learning in their

later life. At the primary school level, English is taught as a first language and is used across subjects. Starting from the age of seven, students are expected to achieve proficiency in both written and spoken English. Secondary education continues to emphasize English, with its use in key subjects such as mathematics, science, and literature, ensuring that students can communicate effectively in both academic and professional settings.

Singapore's bilingual policy, established in the 1960s, was formally integrated into the curriculum in the following decades. As scholars like Wee (2010) and Kirkpatrick (2009) discuss, the policy reflects Singapore's efforts to balance cultural diversity with the demands of globalization, positioning English as both a practical tool for communication and a symbol of the country's connection to the wider world. However, it also recognizes the importance of mother tongues in preserving cultural identity and fostering national cohesion.

English Language Education Policy in Thailand

In Thailand, English language education policies vary across different educational settings. Public schools, which follow a national curriculum, primarily focus on the Thai language, but English is also a key component of the curriculum. English instruction typically starts at the primary school level, with students learning it as a foreign language from the early grades, but often with limited focus on writing and speaking proficiency. English is further emphasized at the secondary level, where it is one of the core subjects along with other subjects like mathematics and science. The FGD speaker representing Thailand elaborated:

In primary schools, the compulsory languages taught are Thai and English. There are some private and international schools that provide foreign languages, especially Chinese. English is taught from year 1-12. For primary education, language of instruction is supposed to be Thai and very basic English. English has appeared yearly in the national test, namely Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) to evaluate basic knowledge and comprehension of primary and secondary students in grade 6, 9, and 12. (Day 3, Speaker 1)

As the speaker added, the integration of English into the Thai education system reflects the country's recognition of its importance in the global landscape. However, challenges persist, particularly in the consistency and quality of English instruction across public and private institutions. In public schools, resource constraints and limited exposure to native-level English speaking environments often hinder proficiency levels, particularly in rural areas. On the other hand, private and international schools, which often have greater resources and a broader curriculum, provide enhanced opportunities for English language acquisition, sometimes

incorporating other foreign languages like Chinese as part of their offerings. In conclusion, while English remains a compulsory subject throughout primary and secondary education in Thailand, its efficacy in fostering comprehensive language skills depends heavily on the type of school and resources available.

English Language Education Policy in Brunei Darussalam

In Brunei, the medium of instruction in educational institutions is primarily Malay, as outlined in the national policy. However, English is also used as a medium of instruction alongside Malay in most schools. The representative of the country said in the FGD:

So, there are Arabic medium schools in Brunei, and in these schools, Arabic is used as the as the medium of instruction in together with the Malay and English language . . . in these schools, the Malay language and the English language must be taught as compulsory subjects. When it comes to the Teaching of Foreign Languages in Brunei at primary and secondary level. As mentioned, English is used as one of the main mediums of instruction . . . However, there are a number of private international schools in Brunei, and these schools implement only English as the medium of instruction, because they are not governed . . . But there are other schools in Brunei, private schools, that offer the Bruneian national curriculum. So, in these schools, English is the main medium of instruction in addition to Malay. (Day 1, Speaker 1)

As the representative added, English language education in primary and secondary schools is a cornerstone of the National Education System for the 21st Century (SPN21), reflecting the nation's goal of producing a bilingual population proficient in both English and Malay. English plays a critical role as both a medium of instruction and a core subject across different educational levels. This policy supports Brunei's aspirations under *Wawasan Brunei 2035* to develop a highly skilled and competitive workforce.

English Language Education Policy in The Philippines

In the Philippines, English language education is governed by a comprehensive set of policies under the K to 12 Basic Education Program, which aims to equip students with the necessary skills for global competitiveness. The program includes revisions to the curriculum across various special programs, such as foreign language and technical-vocational education, ensuring that language education remains a central aspect of the academic structure. The representative explained in detail:

We have two official languages we have Filipino which is actually different from Tagalog . . . as well as our second language, which is English and other foreign languages. OK, so we have two official

languages Filipino and English . . . Like what I've mentioned, the English is not a foreign language in the country, but it is our second language. English the medium of instruction for grades four to six, would be English for the secondary" (Day 2 speaker 3)

The K-12 curriculum integrates foreign language education, with English playing a central role alongside other foreign languages. Implemented in phases starting in 2012, these programs give schools the flexibility to enrich their curricula while adhering to core educational standards. In primary education (grades 4-6), English is the medium of instruction for key subjects like Mathematics, Science, and English itself, while Filipino is primarily used for other content areas. In secondary and higher education, the use of Filipino and English becomes more specialized. Filipino is used for specific subjects, while English dominates as the medium of instruction for Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies.

At the senior high school level, the curriculum aligns with the Philippine Qualifications Framework (PQF), which emphasizes quality assurance and the recognition of learning pathways. The curriculum includes core, applied, and specialized subjects, all taught in English to meet international educational standards and enhance students' preparedness for higher education and careers.

English Language Education Policy in Vietnam

In Vietnam, English has a prominent role in primary and secondary education, reflecting the government's prioritization of English as a key foreign language. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has established policies and initiatives to improve English proficiency nationwide, including making English a compulsory subject starting in Grade 3. This policy was first introduced under Decision 1400 in 2008 as part of the National Foreign Language Project (NFLP) 2008–2020, later extended to 2025 under Decision 2080. The project aims to enhance the nation's competitiveness by equipping students with effective English communication skills. As the country's representative elaborated:

So, for the primary, first is a low on language education for the primary we based on the Official Dispatch 816, of the MOET about the organization of teaching English and informatics according to the 2018 General Education Curriculum at primary school level. So, national language Vietnam is a compulsory subject in the primary education. So, beside that, English is also, now is, you know, from the Dispatch 816, it's also a mandatory subject in the primary school, but only from grade three to 12, and it's optional for grade one and two. (Day 1, Speaker 3)

The implementation of this policy varies across public and private schools, with private institutions

commonly showing better outcomes due to more resources and better-trained teachers. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, including uneven teacher training quality, insufficient teaching materials, and resource disparities between urban and rural schools. The government has focused on reforms, such as the Vietnam Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP), to improve the assessment of English competencies among students and teachers.

English Language Education Policy in Cambodia

In Cambodia, the language policy for education is defined under the Law on Education, particularly Article 24. The official language of instruction in public schools is Khmer, which is also a fundamental subject in the curriculum. In addition to Khmer, foreign languages, particularly international languages, are included in the curriculum as subjects based on students' needs, ensuring that students are equipped with language skills to meet global demands.

We've mentioned in Law on Education 2007 Article 24 English language was included in primary school as a living language since 2013 from grade 4 to grade 6. . . So, as I mentioned above, we have two main living languages: one is English, and one is French. So, student has their own rights to choose which language which one they like so they can choose from primary to secondary and to higher education so in secondary Khmer is the language of instruction as well while English is used in the class can be used as well in especially in international schools. Yeah, international school or private school teacher they can use English or instruction in the class, for example, mathematics or physics. (Day 2, speaker 5)

The incorporation of foreign languages in Cambodia's education system reflects a strategic commitment to equipping students with the linguistic tools necessary for global engagement. By providing students with the choice between English and French as "living languages," the policy not only supports individual preferences but also acknowledges the diverse cultural and economic opportunities these languages offer. Furthermore, the increasing use of English as a medium of instruction in private and international schools, particularly for STEM subjects like mathematics and physics, underscores the nation's alignment with global educational trends. This multifaceted approach to language education ensures that Cambodia's learners are prepared to participate in international academic and professional contexts while preserving Khmer as the cornerstone of national identity.

English Language Education Policy in Lao PDR

In Lao PDR, English is introduced as a foreign language starting from Year 3 of primary school, with further instruction in Year 5. The curriculum from 2008-2009 outlined the inclusion of English at

these levels as part of efforts to strengthen language skills in the education system.

We support the international language. Now, we update the new curriculum at the primary level already that we accessed English subject into the elementary start from the grade 3. From 2000, 2008 to 2009 it put on the credit program of the it's not from English it's not from here 3 years to upgrade to grade 5 and up to higher education in PDR. On the 2010 Curriculum, English is the first compulsory foreign language for all schools. For special bilingual schools, such as offering French and Lao or Vietnamese and Lao, English is as the second foreign language. (Day 2 Speaker 4)

The speaker added that The Lao government has made efforts to align its education policies with regional and international standards. The Education Law (2015) and its related regulations oversee quality assurance across all levels of education, including English language teaching. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) manages these initiatives, ensuring adherence to national quality standards and promoting teacher training to enhance English teaching methodologies. External assessments of schools occur every five years to monitor educational quality, including language programs.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Many schools in rural and underserved areas face shortages of qualified English teachers and resources. Additionally, disparities in educational access and outcomes are linked to socioeconomic and geographic factors. Addressing these challenges remains critical for improving the effectiveness of English education in Lao PDR.

English Language Education Policy in Timor-Leste

In Timor Leste, the Portuguese and Tetum languages are the official languages of instruction in schools, with English introduced as an additional foreign language to complement these national languages. English is taught as part of the curriculum, especially in higher education and specialized programs, but it has not been integrated into the primary and secondary curricula.

We only have two official Languages. They are Tetum and Portuguese, and English and Tetum are considered as working languages. The reason for that policy is because we look back to the history of colonisation. Education for primary as the government had approved the law number 1428, 2008 law for basic education, it states that Tetum and Portuguese are the two languages of instruction applied for teaching in all education systems from kindergarten level to university level. (Day 1, Speaker 2)

English is emphasized as part of the broader educational framework, particularly in primary education. According to the Law of Education,

students are encouraged to learn a first foreign language, which typically includes English. While English is prioritized for certain academic and professional contexts, there are challenges such as resource availability, teacher training, and the integration of English effectively within the system, given the country's linguistic diversity and historical context. The Timorese Ministry of Education recognizes the importance of English proficiency for global engagement, yet there is an ongoing effort to balance the promotion of national languages with the need for foreign language education, particularly English.

English Language Education Policy in Myanmar

In Myanmar, the National Education Law outlines a clear emphasis on English language education within the primary and secondary education systems. According to Chapter 5, Article 19, English is introduced from the primary school level, emphasizing its importance as a foundational language in education. This aligns with the broader goal of enhancing students' global competency.

The National Education Law 2014 stated that English shall be taught starting from the primary school. So, all of the Myanmar students and school students, so they all will be taught English, starting from the primary school that is the five-year school of age. So, for the teaching of the foreign languages, so it is also directed in the National Education Law 2014, but some private schools teach Mandarin and Indian language . . . So, but in private school, English is compulsory. But the media of teaching is mostly in Myanmar. But in private schools, English is compulsory, and also, they teach in English media and for the ASEAN language. (Day 3, speaker 2)

Additionally, Chapter 7, Article 43 offers flexibility in language of instruction. Paragraph (a) states that instruction can be conducted in Myanmar, English, or a combination of both, providing schools the autonomy to choose the most suitable language(s) based on the context and resources available. These provisions reflect Myanmar's effort to balance the promotion of its national language while integrating English as an essential language for academic and global engagement. However, the successful implementation of this policy faces challenges related to teacher training, resource allocation, and infrastructure.

DISCUSSION

There are several key results of this research which are discussed in more details in this section. These include: the prevalence of English as the main foreign language in ASEAN countries, the use of English as the medium of instruction in both primary and secondary education levels, and the link between English as EMI and bilingualism and multilingualism.

First, English occupies a dominant position in many ASEAN countries' language education policies. As shown by the result, English is designated as the first foreign language by almost all the ASEAN countries, except for Timor Leste and Cambodia. This finding is in accordance with such studies by Spolsky (2009) and Bolton and Bacon-Shone (2020) (see also Astuti, 2023; Hashim & Leitner, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2020; Lee et al., 2023; Zein, 2022). These connections underscore the shared focus on English as a vital part of ASEAN's educational and sociolinguistic landscape while highlighting nuanced differences in policy, implementation, and outcomes. The Three Circles Model by Kachru (1990) can explain this widespread of English: it is a native language in some countries, a second language in others, and a foreign language elsewhere. One of the reasons that English often serves as a high-priority foreign language in ASEAN countries is its perceived utility in regional and international engagement (Hamied & Musthafa, 2019; Kosonen, 2019; Saud & Abduh, 2017).

In addition, the fact that English is taught in many ASEAN countries at the early level of primary school suggests that the belief in "the earlier, the better" for learning a foreign language remains strong. Studies by Dixon (2010) in Singapore and Haji-Othman et al. (2019) in Brunei Darussalam, confirm this belief. However, while this assumption persists, research indicates that early exposure to English does not always guarantee better outcomes (Dixon, 2010; Hayes, 2020; Chiatoh & Akumbu, 2013). Hayes (2020) emphasizes that multiple factors influence whether introducing English in primary schools provides the expected benefits. Although the notion of a "golden age" for language learning has shaped this belief, comprehensive data supporting it has not been compiled into one consistent source (Watzke, 2003).

Another important topic is the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI), which has expanded across Southeast Asia, particularly in countries like Thailand, Vietnam, and to a lesser extent in Indonesia (Gilanyi et al., 2023; Low & Ao, 2018; Widiawati & Savski, 2020). EMI initiatives aim to strengthen global engagement and economic ties, though mixed results have been observed in terms of educational effectiveness. In Singapore, EMI is part of a bilingual policy, with English as the instructional language alongside mother tongues (Bolton, Bacon-Shone & Botha, 2023; Yeng-Seng, 2009). However, there is ongoing debate regarding the educational benefits of teaching in a non-native language, with evidence suggesting that instruction in a weaker language can negatively impact learning outcomes (Spolsky, 2013).

The following are examples of how the challenges of EMI manifest in specific countries and educational contexts. In Vietnam, students

encounter significant challenges in their EMI courses, including difficulties in understanding course content, lectures, subject matter vocabulary, and examinations, as well as active classroom participation (Do, Sellars & Le, 2022; Tuan, 2024). Additional obstacles include insufficient numbers of qualified teachers, low English proficiency levels, educational inequality, and the use of materials deemed irrelevant to student needs (Anh, 2022). In Myanmar, multilingual students in secondary schools and universities located in border regions face inequities in access to educational resources, alongside difficulties with subject-specific vocabulary and subject teachers' inadequate English proficiency (Li, Zheng & Yan, 2023; Zheng et al., 2024). In Thailand, particularly in rural primary schools, the effective implementation of EMI is hindered by a lack of professional knowledge and inadequate support for English usage among teachers (Uthaikun et al., 2024).

The prevalence of English and multilingualism in education policies underscores the political and economic motivations underlying language choices in education. This is particularly evident in Southeast Asia, where English is increasingly adopted as a medium of instruction (EMI) alongside regional and national languages. In the context of ASEAN, the rise of EMI reflects the region's commitment to fostering integration and competitiveness in a globalized world (Chowdhury, 2023; Phan, 2021; Zein, 2024). Countries like Cambodia, Malaysia, and the Philippines exemplify this trend by balancing English instruction with policies that preserve indigenous and national languages. Multilingualism in these contexts is not only a response to economic demands but also a means of promoting cultural diversity and regional identity. Policymakers face the challenge of ensuring that EMI complements rather than supplants local languages, thereby supporting linguistic equity while equipping students with the skills needed for participation in ASEAN's increasingly interconnected educational and professional spaces. This dual emphasis on English and multilingualism highlights a broader regional strategy to reconcile global aspirations with local realities (Hamied & Musthafa, 2019; Ngetich, 2022), and simultaneously reflects the competing interests in these languages.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents the findings of an investigation into English language education policies at the primary and secondary levels in the ASEAN region. The study confirms several aspects of English language education policy that align with previous research. First, all countries in the region have official regulations concerning English language education, which are underpinned by legal

frameworks. These policies are legally binding and announced at the central government level to ensure national respect and authority. Second, the study reveals that English occupies a prominent position across ASEAN countries. It serves as the working language of ASEAN and is the first foreign language in education policies in most countries within the expanding circle, and a second language in countries in the outer circle, according to Kachruvian theory (1990). Third, the widespread teaching of English as a second and/or foreign language at the primary level reflects the prevalent belief that earlier language learning is more effective.

The study also highlights the continued relevance of the language of instruction in foreign language teaching. This research underscores the diverse English language education policies across ASEAN countries, all of which emphasize English as a critical foreign language for global communication and competitiveness. Key findings indicate that all ASEAN countries, except Timor-Leste, have implemented official policies that integrate English into primary and secondary education, either as a medium of instruction or a compulsory subject. English's status varies. In Singapore and Brunei, it serves as the primary medium of instruction, while in countries like Cambodia and Lao PDR, it is a supplementary foreign language. The consistent integration of English reflects its importance in global engagement, though significant variations in implementation and outcomes exist, shaped by political, historical, and socio-economic factors.

Furthermore, the study found that Singapore and Brunei have the most comprehensive bilingual policies, integrating English across all education levels. In contrast, Indonesia and Malaysia exhibit policy shifts driven by political dynamics, while Vietnam's National Foreign Language Project demonstrates a long-term commitment to English education. Timor-Leste, however, prioritizes Portuguese and Tetum, with English playing a peripheral role. Resource disparities, especially between urban and rural areas in countries like Thailand, Lao PDR, and Cambodia, affect the effectiveness of English education, with private institutions generally outperforming public ones.

Future research could explore the long-term impacts of these policies on student outcomes, such as proficiency levels and socio-economic mobility. Comparative studies examining the relationship between policy stability and educational success could provide deeper insights. Additionally, investigating community and teacher perspectives on English education policies, particularly in underrepresented regions, would offer a more comprehensive understanding of their effectiveness and areas for improvement.

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Appendix A

Official Regulation(s) or Law on English Language Education in ASEAN Countries at the Primary and Secondary Levels

Country	Official Regulations or Law on English	Status of English in primary education	Status of English in secondary education
Indonesia	- Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System - Regulation on the Standard of Educational Content (Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture No. 22/2016) - Presidential Decree No. 63 of 2019 - The 2021 curriculum	Optional subject	Compulsory subject
Malaysia	- The National Language Act 1963/67 - The Education Act 1996	Compulsory subject	Compulsory subject
Singapore	- National Bilingual Education Policy (1960 for primary education and 1966 for secondary education)	Working language (medium of instruction)	Working language (medium of instruction)
Thailand	- National Education Policy (2017-2036) about English as the ASEAN language - National Education Statute (1999)	Compulsory subject	Compulsory subject
Brunei Darussalam	- Bilingual education policy (1985) - Multilingual education policy, the SPN 21 education system (2011) - <i>Wawasan Brunei</i> 2035	Compulsory subject and medium of instruction	Compulsory subject and medium of instruction
The Philippines	- 1987 Constitution Section 7 - The K to 12 Basic Education Program - Dep. Ed. Order No. 46, series of 2012 or the Policy Guidelines on the Implementation of the Special Curricular Programs at the Secondary Level - The Philippine Qualifications Framework (PQF)	Medium of instruction	Medium of instruction
Vietnam	- Decision No. 16/2006/QĐ-BGDĐT (2006): on curriculum guidelines for integrating foreign languages into the national education system. - Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg (2008) on the national strategy for improving foreign language teaching and learning in Vietnam from 2008 to 2020. - Official Dispatch 816/BGDDT-GDTH (2018) concerning the organization of teaching English and Informatics in Vietnamese primary schools under the 2018 General Education Curriculum. - Circular No. 32/2018/TT-BGDDT on the General Education Program framework, including gradual implementation of English and other subjects across grades from 2020 to 2025	Compulsory subject	Compulsory subject
Cambodia	- Law: Chapter VI: Education, Culture, Social Affairs, Article 67 - The Law on Education (2007); Article 24 on Languages of Teaching and Learning	Compulsory subject	Compulsory subject
Lao PDR	- Law on Education, Article 21: Language used in the education - 2008-2009 Curriculum	Compulsory subject	Compulsory subject
Timor-Leste	There is not any law yet to regulate international language or any other languages used in the country.	Not yet established	Not yet established
Myanmar	- National Education Law Chapter 5, Article 19: English shall be taught starting from primary school. Chapter 7, Article 43, Paragraph (a): Instruction can be in Myanmar or English or in a combination of Myanmar and English.	Compulsory subject	Compulsory subject