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Competency Disparities: Dissecting the English Proficiency Mapping across Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This study aims to map the English proficiency index across ASEAN member countries and analyze the structural factors causing competency gaps between 2021 and 2025. Employing a descriptive-comparative method with a literature review approach, this study analyzes secondary data from the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) of eight Southeast Asian countries selected via purposive sampling. The results demonstrate a sharp macroeconomic polarization in linguistic competency. Malaysia and Philippines secure the top tier within the "High Proficiency" cluster (scores >550), driven by long-standing institutional integrations. Conversely, Indonesia experiences chronic educational inertia, remaining stagnant in the "Low Proficiency" cluster with a weak Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 0.27% (scoring 466 to 471). This wide gap (up to 110 points against Malaysia in 2025) imposes a substantial opportunity cost on Indonesia's macroeconomy, decreasing the marginal productivity of human capital, restricting cross-border digital trade, and weakening regional competitiveness. Strategic curricula restructuring towards standardized communicative methods (CEFR) is urgently required to resolve this structural barrier

Keywords: Proficiency, English language, Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

1. Research Background

In an increasingly integrated era of globalization, a nation's position within the global supply chain is no longer determined solely by its natural resource endowments, but rather by the quality of its human capital. A pivotal indicator in assessing this quality is English literacy. As the primary *lingua franca* of international interaction, English has transcended its role as a mere communication tool to become a vital economic infrastructure. For developing nations, nationwide English proficiency serves as a catalyst to bolster workforce competitiveness in the global market and propel service sectors, such as tourism and information technology, to compete on a broader scale. Without adequate linguistic competence, a country risks economic isolation and falling behind in the adoption of global innovations. Consequently, the standardization and enhancement of English competency are no longer merely elective curricular choices, but rather a national strategic imperative to ensure sustainable economic growth and fortify geopolitical positioning on the global stage.

English proficiency, among other metrics, can be quantified using proficiency indices widely adopted across various countries, including those in the Southeast Asian region (Roinah, 2022). The 2016 EF EPI survey revealed that Indonesia ranked 80th globally; while positioning itself above Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, it lagged significantly behind its neighboring peers with a score of 471, whereas Malaysia and the Philippines recorded substantially higher achievements (Firdausi & Patria, 2019). This evidence underscores a pronounced competency gap within the Southeast Asian region, where Malaysia and the Philippines consistently secure top-tier positions (Damayanti, 2019). Recent data substantiates this trend, demonstrating that by 2025, Malaysia maintains its vanguard position, closely trailed by the Philippines.

The subpar English proficiency level in Indonesia warrants profound scholarly attention. The English Proficiency Index surveys by EF indicate that by 2025, Indonesia placed 80th out of 123 countries, representing a decline from 2019 when it ranked 61st out of 100 countries, compounded by a score contraction from 51.58 in 2018 to 50.06 (Suparti, 2020). This trajectory detrimental to Indonesia's strategic interests, considering that globalization establishes international language mastery—specifically English—as an indispensable benchmark. Accordingly, this study provides a comprehensive comparative overview of English proficiency across Southeast Asian nations while elucidating the implications of these competency disparities on global competitiveness and socio-economic advancement (Muslimin, 2020). The findings of this research are expected to serve as empirical baseline data for policymakers to formulate educational directives aimed at mitigating this widening gap.

2. Research Objectives

This study aims to map the English proficiency index across various member states of the ASEAN Economic Community and to identify the determinant factors underlying inter-regional competency disparities (Roinah, 2022).

3. Research Contributions

The findings of this study are projected to offer theoretical contributions to the development of adaptive English curriculum models designed to reinforce workforce competitiveness in the regional market (Purnamasari, 2023). Universally, the anticipated contributions are detailed as follows:

This research makes a significant contribution to various parties, starting from undergraduate students to related institutions and future researchers. For undergraduate students, this study presents an in-depth evaluation of the correlation between English language proficiency and professional career readiness amid the ever-changing dynamics of the global job market (Harahap et al., 2022; Hidayat, 2024). Meanwhile, for related institutions, this research offers an empirical evaluative framework that can be used to design more inclusive training programs and optimize resource allocation for the creation of equity in the quality of language education at the national level (Bacus & Trasmil, 2025; Lemana et al., 2025). Finally, for future researchers, this study not only serves as a comprehensive reference for expanding the literature in the field of language education, but also provides valuable methodological insights for comparative studies related to cross-border literacy policies in the Southeast Asian region.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive-comparative design integrated with a literature review approach, utilizing secondary data derived from the annual EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) reports spanning 2021 to 2025. While the target population encompasses all 11 Southeast Asian nations, a purposive sampling technique was deployed, resulting in a final sample of 8 countries. Singapore was excluded due to its status as a native-like English-speaking nation, whereas Brunei Darussalam and Timor-Leste were omitted due to data unavailability on the official index database. Subsequently, data analysis was executed descriptively by calculating mean scores obtained from the source data. To illuminate the trends of proficiency disparities, the collected data were evaluated through absolute score comparisons (e.g., Indonesia's 466 points versus Malaysia's 581 points) and regional rankings (Firdausi et al., 2020). The metrics evaluated include the average EF EPI scores and regional rankings, guided by the following score conversion parameters:

Table 1. Score Conversion Metric

Score Range	Category
599 – 550	High
549 – 500	Moderate
499 – 450	Low
Below 450	Very Low

Source: Processed Data

In addition to the band-score conversion, the researchers calculated the annual percentage change by dividing the period-over-period score differentials by the initial baseline value to assess the precise velocity of score fluctuations across each period.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section elucidates an advanced analysis of the secondary data compiled from the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) reports across the 2021–2025 longitudinal window. The exploration is directed at dissecting the macroeconomic-linguistic landscape of the eight sampled Southeast Asian nations, identifying the determinant structural factors behind these competency gaps, and projecting the strategic implications of Indonesia's stagnant literacy growth trajectory on its global competitiveness.

Results

The empirical secondary data encompasses the absolute scores and regional rankings of eight Southeast Asian nations, excluding Singapore (classified as a native-like/predominantly English-speaking territory), alongside Brunei Darussalam and Timor-Leste due to missing metrics in the EF database. A comparative summary of the five-year performance fluctuations is consolidated in Table 2.

Table 2. EF English Proficiency Index Scores in Southeast Asia (2021–2025)

Countries	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Indonesia	466	471	473	468	471
Malaysia	562	581	568	566	581
Thailand	419	416	416	432	402
Filipina	592	569	597	570	569
Vietnam	486	500	505	500	500
Laos	445	461	461	339	461
Myanmar	429	444	450	457	444
Kamboja	423	390	421	408	390

(Source: Secondary Data Processed from EF EPI Annual Reports (2021–2025))

Based on the EF EPI conversion standards, scores falling within the 550–599 range signify "High Proficiency," 500–549 denote "Moderate Proficiency," 450–499 reflect "Low Proficiency," and scores below 450 are classified under "Very Low Proficiency." Table 2 reveals a clear performance stratification: Malaysia and the Philippines firmly occupy the *High* cluster; Vietnam hovers around the lower threshold of the *Moderate* cluster; Indonesia and Laos (in specific years) are entrenched in the *Low* cluster; while Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia predominantly populate the *Very Low* cluster.

To sharpen the analytical insights regarding the extent of Indonesia's acceleration deficit relative to regional growth epicenters, a direct comparative calculation was conducted to observe the absolute score differential (gap) against Malaysia—a neighboring country with comparable geoeconomic characteristics. The quantitative gap structure is detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Score Gap Analysis: Indonesia vs. Malaysia

Years	Indonesia Score	Malaysia Score	(Gap) Absolute	Comparative Category
2021	466	562	96	Low vs High Proficiency
2022	471	581	110	Widening Disparity
2023	473	568	95	Slight Contraction (Malaysia)
2024	468	566	98	Score Contraction
2025	471	581	110	(Indonesia) Return to Peak Disparity

(Source: Analytical Data Processing Results)

To complement these empirical findings, the Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) was calculated to measure the velocity of linguistic competency transformation within representative nations from each cluster. The indicative growth trajectories are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Estimated Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of ASEAN English Scores (2021–2025)

Countries	Baseline Score (2021)	Terminal Score (2025)	Net Point Delta	Estimated CAGR
Indonesia	466	471	+5	0,27%
Malaysia	562	581	+19	0,83%
Vietnam	486	500	+14	0,71%
Myanmar	429	444	+15	0,86%

Source: Secondary Data Calculations and Processing (2026)

Discussion

Comparative Dynamics of English Proficiency in Southeast Asia

The analytical visualization derived from Table 2 exposes a stark macroeconomic-linguistic polarization within the ASEAN region. The Philippines and Malaysia assert their dominance as top-tier markets, consistently generating robust scores that exceed the 550 thresholds. The absolute advantage sustained by these two neighboring nations is fundamentally linked to their historical socio-political trajectories and the seamless integration of national education policies that enforce English as the primary *medium of instruction* across formal educational institutions from primary up to tertiary levels.

From a macroeconomic perspective, the stable high performance of the Philippines—peaking at 597 in 2023—and Malaysia’s steady acceleration to 581 in 2025 align linearly with their massive global market share in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), knowledge process centers, and transnational service hubs. Widespread functional English proficiency among the public functions as a vital non-physical infrastructure that diminishes transaction costs, facilitates rapid technology transfer, and augments domestic attractiveness for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Global industries view national language proficiency not as an administrative ornament, but as a critical determinant of local labor productivity.

Position, Relative Stagnation, and Educational Inertia in Indonesia

Conversely, Indonesia’s empirical profile presents a highly contrasting narrative. Indonesia remains ensnared in a "Low Proficiency" trap, characterized by annual score fluctuations that exhibit chronic stagnation between 466 and 473. Although a marginal nominal increase of 5 points occurred from the 2021 baseline (466) to the 2025 terminal year (471), the real competency gap separating Indonesia from regional frontrunners (Malaysia and the Philippines) remains profound, spanning 100 to 110 points (as documented in Table 3).

This phenomenon signifies deeply embedded structural blockades within the Indonesian pedagogical ecosystem—a condition identified in educational theory as educational inertia. The growth rate calculations in Table 4 show that Indonesia’s competency acceleration crawls at a mere 0.27% per annum. This figure lags significantly behind Vietnam (0.71%) and even Myanmar (0.86%), both of which demonstrate responsive upward mobility from lower baselines. This inertia reflects a systemic curricular failure to transition English language instruction from a passive, theoretical-grammatical memorization subject into an active, functional instrument of communication. Consequently, the vast majority of graduates from domestic higher education institutions face communicative paralysis when confronted with global corporate demands, thereby suppressing the vertical mobility of Indonesian human capital in climbing international managerial echelons.

Inequality Volatility and Underperforming Regional Anomalies

Regional trend analysis also captures extreme spatial-methodological anomalies, most visibly in the quantitative performance of Laos. In 2024, Laos's score suffered a massive contraction, plummeting to a critical low of 339, before undergoing a radical rebound to 461 in 2025. Within comparative research paradigms, such high volatility is typically triggered by two primary vectors: severe sampling bias introduced by the testing institution, or emergency national policy interventions involving a total restructuring of the language curriculum that immediately altered the test-taking cohort in sub-urban locales.

Meanwhile, Thailand and Cambodia consistently occupy the lowest tiers of regional competency, with scores heavily stagnating below the 430 thresholds. This reality uncovers a fundamental paradox for economic structures heavily reliant on tourism services. Thailand, which relies significantly on international hospitality and leisure revenues for foreign exchange, faces growth ceilings due to low global language literacy among its population. This communication barrier imposes an *invisible ceiling* that restricts value-added progression within their hospitality sectors. Tourism services struggle to transition from low-cost mass tourism segments into high-yield, luxury/high-end ecosystems due to the lack of high-value professional interactions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that a sharp polarization and global linguistic competency gap characterize ASEAN member states throughout the 2021–2025 period. The Philippines and Malaysia have solidified their superior status within the High Proficiency cluster (scores >550), which correlates linearly with superior human capital competitiveness.

In stark contrast, Indonesia exhibits chronic educational inertia; its national English proficiency is caught in a Low Proficiency trap, with stagnant score oscillations hovering between 466 and 473. Indonesia's sluggish acceleration is evident from its meager CAGR of 0.27%, substantially outpaced by peer nations like Vietnam (0.71%) and Myanmar (0.86%). This developmental lag culminates in an absolute deficit of 110 points against Malaysia by 2025.

According to Score Gap Analysis, Indonesia vs. Malaysia to break the shackles of educational inertia and accelerate international language literacy to optimize economic competitiveness, this study formulates several evidence-based strategic recommendations:

To enhance national language education and future academic inquiry, a two-pronged approach targeting both policy and research is required. First, educational policymakers must systematically overhaul the national English language curriculum orientation by adopting internationally benchmarked measurement frameworks, specifically the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), while decisively shifting the pedagogical paradigm away from passive-theoretical grammatical memorization toward a problem-based, active functional communicative approach. Consequently, to build upon these systemic changes, future researchers are encouraged to expand the scope of investigation by executing micro-level mixed-methods analyses to explore intra-regional English competency disparities (urban vs. sub-urban) within Indonesia, while also integrating specific econometric variables to quantify the elasticity of language proficiency relative to local labor absorption rates within multinational corporations.

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