

# ASEAN, English, and testing

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With the ASEAN Economic Community approaching fast, English, as the language of communication in ASEAN, is growing in importance. The increasing role of English, however, puts some ASEAN countries, including Thailand, at a disadvantage.

The ten countries of ASEAN fall into two groups where English is concerned. In four of the countries, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, English is an official or working language and is widely encountered and used in the country. In the other six ASEAN countries (Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam), English is a foreign language with its use largely restricted to universities, large businesses and the tourism industry.

These differences in the status of English are reflected in the English language proficiency levels of the general population of the countries. For example, on TOEFL, Singaporeans score an average of 99, whereas Thais score 74 and Laotians 60. Similarly, on the English First English Proficiency Index, Malaysia is rated as having a high level of general English proficiency, whereas Indonesia and Thailand are rated very low.

These differences in the status and general proficiency levels of English suggest that we should also see differences in the approaches to English language education in the two groups of countries. One way of examining whether such differences exist is to investigate the assessment practices in different countries since these reflect the reality of education better than, say, policy statements which can bear little resemblance to what actually happens in classrooms.

While we might expect differences in assessment practices in different countries, one way in which they are very similar to each other is that nearly all of the ASEAN countries have very testcentric education systems. In eight of the ten countries (Cambodia and Myanmar are the exceptions), there are regular, national-level, high-stakes exams that dictate the future opportunities of test-takers. Typically, these include primary school exit exams and university entrance exams. Bearing this similarity in mind, I will examine the English language assessment practices of Singapore and Thailand as representative of the two groups of countries.

In Singapore, the high-stakes exams are intended to encourage social mobility with students gaining opportunities based on their abilities, rather than their backgrounds. The exams include a wide range of tasks meant to allow test-takers to exhibit their abilities as much as possible. For instance, the Primary School Leaving Examination includes, among other tasks, paragraph writing and a spoken conversation component that accounts for 20% of the overall score. Such progressive practices are enhanced by a government-backed move towards what are called holistic assessment practices. These are intended to reduce the reliance on exams by including scores from classroom performances. For primary school students, these might include tasks such as role-plays and show-and-tell activities.

In Thailand, although students are faced with a similar number of high-stakes exams as in Singapore, all the exams are exclusively multiple-choice. This means that aspects tested are restricted to reading, grammar and vocabulary, while listening, speaking and writing are

largely ignored. This pattern does not apply only to national exams. A survey of secondary school English language assessment practices found that, on average, over half of the marks for school course grades were derived from multiple-choice tests.

These differences largely hold across all of the countries in the two groups in ASEAN. For instance, the Malaysian university entrance exam includes extended writing and two speaking tasks, whereas the national-level exams in Indonesia and Vietnam are nearly all multiple-choice. With such a clear pattern of differences, we need to consider whether they matter.

Exam formats have two key impacts: they influence how people perceive the role of English, and they affect how teachers teach. Multiple-choice exams focus on knowledge of the language meaning that English is viewed as an academic subject to be studied for tests. In turn, this leads to English being taught as a set of knowledge to be memorised. The more open exam formats, such as extended writing and conversations, on the other hand, focus on using the language. English is then viewed as a tool, not a set of knowledge, and the teaching emphasises actually using the language in and outside of the classroom.

The nature of the relationship between the status of English in a country and the dominant assessment practices is unclear. Is it because English is widely used that exams can focus on language use, or does having exams that focus on language use make it more likely that the language will be widely used? Whatever the relationship, for the six ASEAN countries where English is a foreign language, a change to more use-oriented high-stakes exams could have major benefits. While such a change will not be easy, it is actually far more straightforward for ministries of education to implement than most suggested proposals to improve general levels of English proficiency, and, for example, Thailand could learn from Malaysia's experience to reduce the problems in implementing the change. With changes in assessment practices, in the long term general English proficiency levels will improve and the six English as a foreign language countries would be at less of a disadvantage in ASEAN.

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