

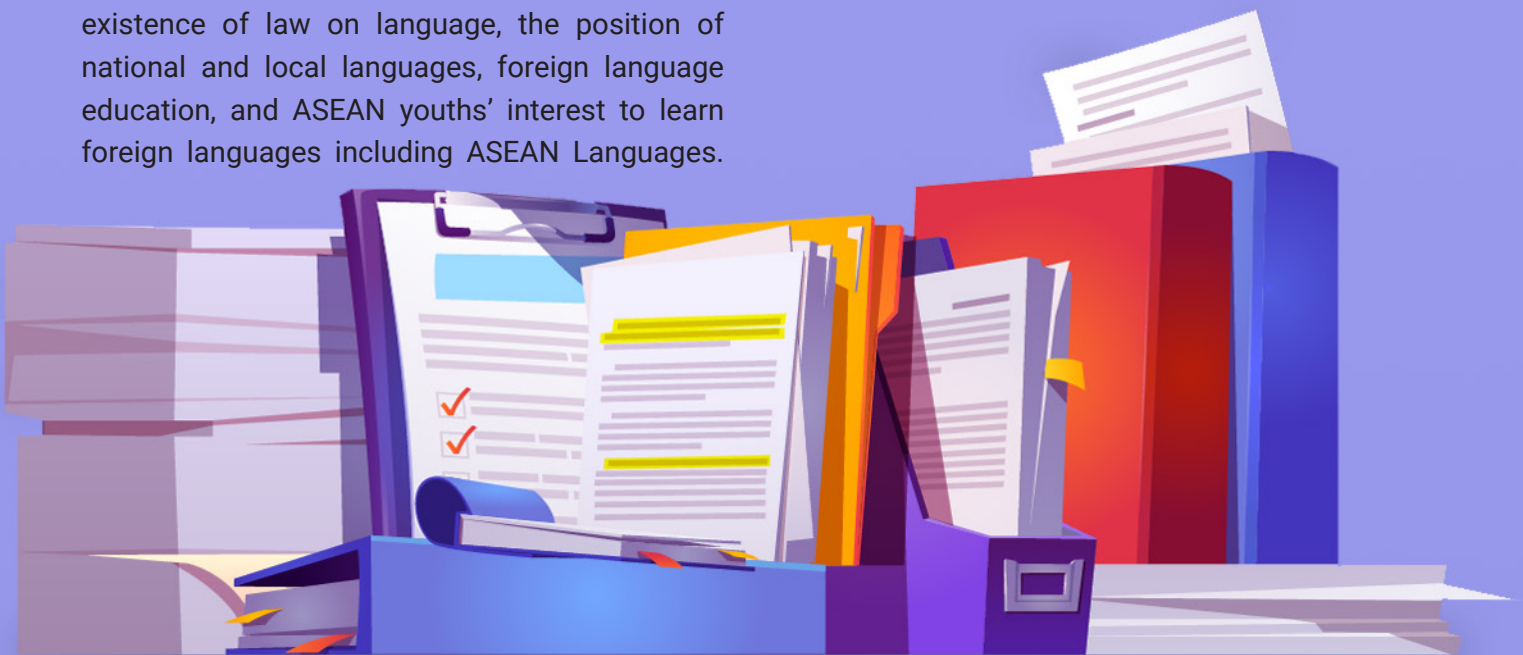


Policy Brief: Language Policy in ASEAN Countries

Executive Summary

This policy research brief reports on the results of a joint study between SEAMEO QITEP in Language (SEAQIL) and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI), conducted from 2021–2023, aiming to identify language policy in all ASEAN countries. The study has been informed by the theory of language policy. The study involved two groups of participants: representatives of experts of language teaching and authorities from different SEAMEO Centres in ASEAN, and 4,219 youths, aged 15-25 from all ASEAN countries. The study used a survey and the data were collected through the use of a questionnaire distributed to the participants. The questionnaire consisted of questions regarding language policy, including the existence of law on language, the position of national and local languages, foreign language education, and ASEAN youths' interest to learn foreign languages including ASEAN Languages.

The results confirm the theory that language policy is a matter of choice as each country has its own policy on local, national, and foreign languages; and that language policy must be announced by the central government and enjoys legal backing as each country has its own law regarding language policy. The study also shows that with the youth's interest to learn ASEAN languages, there is a potential for ASEAN languages to develop in the region. However, this study also reveals that there is no language policy on ASEAN language, which is a shame, as ASEAN is famous for its superdiverse languages. This may be the impact of the fact that ASEAN, as indicated in the ASEAN Charter, has not been concerned with language development and accordingly ASEAN countries do not have commitment to teach and develop



ASEAN languages. It is thus recommended that a language policy, announced at the central government of each country, be established to allow for the development of ASEAN languages in the region, which is to some extent in line with the ASEAN declaration that 2020 is “the Year of

ASEAN Identity” (Thompson & Suchindah, 2023), which marked the shifts in the past two decades from mainly focusing on political and security concerns toward more broadly representing it as an economic and socio-cultural entity and collaborations.

Introduction



Language policy has been a topic of concern for a long time and remains the focus of research over the last two decades and it has been a serious concern of experts of linguistics and pedagogues in different countries in the world until now. Language policy, according to Spolsky (2009, p.1) “is all about choices, if you are bilingual or plurilingual, you have to choose, which language to use”. Language policy has been observed by many writers in different countries (see, Alwasilah, 2013 in Indonesia; Coleman, 2009 in Indonesia, Thailand; Chiatoh & Akumbu, 2013 in Cameroon; Dixon, 2005 in Singapore; Hamied and Musthafa, 2019 in Indonesia; Hayes, 2020 in Thailand and Korea;

Park, 2019 in Korea; Spolsky, 2009, to mention a few). Other writers observed language policy in other countries but cannot be mentioned here. However, despite many studies on language policy in many countries, research on language policy in ASEAN countries as a whole, to the best knowledge of the researchers, has not been conducted. Thus, to fill the gap, this study aimed to identify language policy in ASEAN countries, including foreign and second language education policy, national language, local language and ASEAN youth interests in learning language(s), including foreign languages and ASEAN languages.

Main Results

The main results of the study can be described in several aspects, including language policy: local, national, and foreign language policy, and the potential of ASEAN languages to develop in the ASEAN region as can be from the interest of the youth participants in the study to learn foreign languages, including ASEAN languages.

Firstly, in terms of language policy, this study reveals that each ASEAN country has its own policy on its local, national, and foreign languages. This supports the theory that language policy is a matter of choice, and it is a choice and ideology announced by **the central government**. This can be seen from the fact that every country has its own language policy and the role of the central government is reported to be essential in determining the success of any language policy. The case in Singapore, for example, when Lee Kuan Yew directly led the language policy in Singapore, led to the improvement of Singaporean' language ability and the development of multilingual society (see

made by each government to make the policy successful and that the language policy in all ASEAN countries enjoys constitutional backing that renders its application mandatory, which is critical to the legal frame of language policy. This goes with Chiatoh & Akumbu's (2013) point that for language policy to command national respect and adhesion, it must be legally binding, that is, it must enjoy legal backing.

Secondly, regarding local and national languages, all countries put a strong emphasis on the significance of these languages. Local and national languages are also obligatory languages in the curriculum in all countries. The youths participating in the study also emphasize equal selections for both local and national language in an educational context, especially when they communicate among themselves inside the classroom and outside the classroom. This situation is partly the results of their learning local languages in the previous education level.

Thirdly, turning to foreign language policy, the data show that the status of foreign languages in ASEAN countries' system of education is very strong. The

Dixon, 2005). The data also reveal that every country has its own law on language policy, managing local, national and foreign languages. This suggests that the efforts have been

choice of foreign languages taught is also in line with the previous observations that the best languages to learn are among others: Arabic,





English, French, German, Japanese, and Spanish. The data also support the previous research and observation that English is dominant in every country, that all countries make English the primary foreign language taught at school (Spolsky, 2009). Moreover, the assumption that the earlier the better in learning a foreign language seems to be upheld and can be seen from foreign language education policy which offers foreign language(s) since primary school. However, synthesis in the literature indicates several contradictions in terms of the belief in foreign language learning. Hayes (2020) for example mentions that age is not the only determinant of the success of learning a foreign language. Adults' learners have the potential to be successful in learning a foreign language. It is said that learning a foreign language should be done after the students are strong at their mother tongue literacy.

Regarding ASEAN languages as a foreign language, the data indicate that the experts of language teaching and the authorities in

SEAMEO Centres were not aware of the fact that some ASEAN languages, especially Indonesian, has been taught in schools and universities, and some non-formal institutions in ASEAN countries. The teaching of Indonesian in ASEAN countries is part of the program organised by the Indonesian government through the Centre for Language Strategy and Diplomacy Development, now called Centre for Language Enhancement and Empowerment, The Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in collaboration with The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other institutions, including universities in Indonesia and other ASEAN countries. However, as there has not been any language policy on ASEAN, this effort cannot be seen by many people. This also coincides, again, with the theory that language policy is announced at the central government and should enjoy legal backings. This phenomenon can actually be the result of the fact that ASEAN, as indicated in the ASEAN Charter, has not been concerned with language development and thus ASEAN

countries do not seem to be committed to teaching ASEAN languages. This is a shame as ASEAN countries are famous for their superdiversity of languages.

Fourthly, regarding the foreign languages the ASEAN youths are interested to learn, the results of the study can be seen in table 1 below.

Table 1. Foreign Languages (other than UN Official Languages) Preferences of ASEAN Youths

Language	Number of Responses	Percentage
Korean	1564	40.82%
Japanese	1335	34.85%
German	324	8.46%
Italian	138	3.60%
Hindi	66	1.72%
Other languages	204	5.33%
Total	3631	100%

Table 1 shows that the choice of foreign languages is relevant to what has been revealed by Big Language Solution (2022), University of the People (2023), and The University of

Winnipeg (2023) about languages best to learn, including German, Japanese, Korean, etc. The preference for the language is relevant to the popularity of culture (e.g., Korean) or to communication, education, and travel or tourism purposes and language characteristics with its rich cultural tradition and practical utility (e.g., Japanese).

Finally, all ASEAN languages were voted as a foreign language the youth participants were interested in learning. The three most voted are Thai, followed by Indonesian, and then Malay. This suggests that these languages have the potential to develop in the ASEAN region. The reasons for the choice of those languages are to do with cultural aspects, language characteristics, and education purpose (e.g., Thai), historical aspects and the same linguistic roots, communication, education, and job prospects (Indonesian and Malay). These reasons confirm the observation by Big Language Solutions (2022) the biggest languages are those which have the potential to give an opportunity to the users in terms of academic, economy, and industry sectors.

Recommendations

Based on the findings described above the study recommends the following.

Firstly, a language policy which abides all ASEAN countries to develop local and national languages in ASEAN should be made. For the language policy to be successful, it should be supported by the central government and the leader of the state and should enjoy legal backings. Thus, the enactment of law of language in any country should be controlled by the central government and the leader of the nation or country, as has been modeled by Lee Kuan Yew.

Secondly, for language policy to command national respect and adhesion, it must be legally binding, that is, it must enjoy legal backing. One

of the major legal dimensions of policy is its recognition of minority linguistic rights, which are fundamental human rights and should be respected irrespective of the status of the language concerned. It is therefore a basic right for each child or community to learn in its own language. The law and language policy in each ASEAN country should support the preservation of the local languages, the development of the national language, and the mastery of foreign languages in order to raise the nation's awareness as well as foster identity.

Thirdly, as to foreign language education policy, a comprehensive study should be done on when it should be offered at school. The belief that the earlier, the better should be reconsidered. There should be an effort to make the balance between

the society's mastery of local and national languages and foreign languages. The idea of ASEAN language development actually once was discussed in the Governing Board Meeting of SEAQIL in 2019. This should be followed up. It is said that "Coexistence of foreign and indigenous languages are indispensable in contemporary societies and in the definition of the present linguistic reality in all ASEAN countries. While national languages shall constitute the core of our natural existence by ensuring cultural rooting, foreign languages shall enable the youth to meet the instrumental needs of a global society. The identity and values of a community (including the ASEAN community) shall be defined in terms of the coexistence of these categories of languages" (see Chiatoh & Akumbu, 2013).

Fourthly, as the reasons for the youth to be interested in learning a foreign language are to do with academic, job and communication, and tours-related aspects, these sectors should also be developed to support the development of the ASEAN languages. This also suggests that the collaboration involving multiministries and institutions from different sectors will affect the development of ASEAN languages.

Fifthly, an ASEAN language policy should be collaboratively established among countries in the ASEAN region. The fact that the teaching of Indonesian in different ASEAN countries was not recognised by the expert participants is due to the unavailability of language policy in ASEAN. The choice of language is never a haphazard process and thus this language policy should be carefully thought of and

it should enjoy constitutional backing that renders its application mandatory, which is critical to the legal frame of language policy. Memorandum of understanding discussed in bilateral and multilateral meetings should be made and followed up by the realization of different programs. This measure goes with the declaration that 2020 is the Year of ASEAN Identity (Thompson & Suchindah, 2023) which marked the shifts in the past two decades from mainly focusing on political and security concerns toward more broadly representing it as an economic and sociocultural entity and collaborations. These shifts resulted in the ASEAN's goals of consisting of three pillars: political security, economic, and sociocultural (Thompson & Suchindah, 2023). The third pillar, the sociocultural orientation, is said to aim at establishing more robust active, and mutual collaboration as well as common directions and assistance in the various sectors it encompasses.

Finally, further study should be conducted to find out more detailed language policy and efforts should be made to develop local, national and ASEAN languages and to enhance ASEAN community's capacity on local, national, foreign languages. As for each language to be developed, other factors including communicational frame, legal frame, educational frame, political frame, linguistic frame, ideological frame, theoretical frame, historical frame, economy and industry should support. Thus, collaboration among all related parties should be developed to help enhance the potential of all languages in ASEAN.

Conclusions

The study reported in this policy brief shows that each ASEAN country has its own language policy and law on language. Regarding foreign languages, each country also has its own choices. This supports the theory that language policy is a matter of choice and it is a choice and ideology made by **the central government**.

The language policy in each country of ASEAN enjoys legal backings and emphasises the development of local, national, and foreign languages. The study also shows that the status of foreign languages in ASEAN countries' system of education is very strong and that the assumption on foreign language learning, which

is the earlier the better should be revisited. The youth of ASEAN countries were interested to learn international languages, as well as ASEAN languages. The reasons for their interest to learn those foreign languages vary, with some related to the culture of the language, to the potential for job, academic, and professional opportunities, and to economic and industry advancement. Thus, to develop a language policy, a cooperation among the countries in the region should be made. The youths' interest also suggests the potential for ASEAN

languages to develop and this is in line with the 2020 declaration that ASEAN now is not only concerned with security and political aspects but also economic and sociocultural entity and collaborations. Thus, further study and collaborations should be conducted to find out more detailed language policy and efforts that should be made to develop ASEAN languages and ASEAN community's capacity in language: local, national, and foreign languages to enhance the community's identity and values.

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