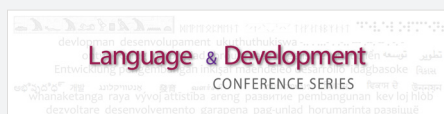


Real-life language: comparing student writing skills in the SEA-PLM

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Contents

What is SEA-PLM?	1
Literacy focus;long-term goal	2
Language of testing	2
Writing assessment design:complexities and challenges	3
Scoring the writing tasks	6
Measuring student proficiency in writing	8
How did students perform?	10
Key features of student writing – simplified	12
What does the data show about language policy?	13
Conclusion	15
References	16

What is SEA-PLM?

In 2013, research into the impact of national and international assessment programmes on education policy, particularly policies regarding resource allocation and teaching and learning practices in developing countries, found that: 'The absence of a regional assessment covering developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region is noteworthy' (Best, et al., 2013:65). The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) now fills that void, and is a new comparative learning assessment programme, designed by and for countries in Southeast Asia. It provides robust evidence to answer the vital question of how children in Southeast Asia perform against regional measurements in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of primary school. The results of the first round of the SEA-PLM main study were released in December 2020.

The programme aims to generate reliable data and evidence for monitoring student learning outcomes across and within countries. It will also provide an understanding of what factors help or hinder effective learning along children's school journeys in participating countries. SEA-PLM 2019 measures achievement in Grade Five, considered an appropriate age to check for development of basic learning and competencies. One important aim of the assessment is to promote cross-border exchange on learning and education policies and to help countries to identify, prioritise and address educational challenges in important policy areas, such as curriculum development, resource allocation, teacher training, classroom practices and planning at both national and sub-national levels. To keep the assessment relevant, the SEA-PLM programme is designed so that children's achievement can be measured over time through subsequent cycles of assessments; SEA-PLM 2023 is the next intended cycle of SEA-PLM.

After field trials in 2017, the SEA-PLM main survey was implemented at the end of the 2018–19 school year. Six countries from the region were involved: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines and Vietnam.

Surveys were conducted to gather contextual information about the students being assessed. The results of these surveys enable research into other educational questions through regional comparison of learning environments, children's experiences, school practices and specific issues such as whether students' mother tongues are the same as the language of instruction at their school. Participating countries are now better able to monitor the profile of disadvantaged sub-groups of children and schools at the end of primary years by exploring equity related to this contextual information and learning achievement.



Literacy focus; long-term goal

The SEA-PLM Assessment Framework adopts a 'literacy orientation', focusing on literacy and numeracy skills that students will need for life and for study beyond primary school. This means that writing assessment tasks reflect real-life tasks that students need to perform to communicate effectively in writing, in their own languages. The intention is for the research to be extended down to early primary years and up into lower secondary over future iterations. So, with the development of a single progressive scale for each of the learning domains (or subjects), SEA-PLM data can be examined in relation to the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 4.1 set in 2015 by

the United Nations General Assembly, and intended to be achieved by the year 2030.

The SDG 4.1.1b indicator defines minimum proficiency in reading and for mathematics. Unfortunately, however, there is currently no minimum proficiency level defined for the skill of writing by the SDGs. Each country involved in SEA-PLM is therefore encouraged to decide on its own minimum proficiency level for student writing literacy, taking into account their curriculum, the opinions of their literacy experts, and the achievability of the goal that they decide to set.

Language of testing

The SEA-PLM assessment of Writing Literacy is particularly novel. There has never been a cross-language writing instrument administered across the Southeast Asian region. Indeed, there have been very few other international assessments that have attempted to directly compare writing literacy across multiple languages. The source versions of all SEA-PLM

2019's assessment materials were prepared in English. Tests and questionnaires were administered in the official language(s) of instruction in Grade Five in each country, as determined by each Ministry of Education in collaboration with the SEA-PLM Secretariat. The table below presents the final list of test languages by country.

Countries	Language(s) testing
Cambodia	Khmer
Lao PDR	Lao language
Malaysia	Chinese, Malay, Tamil
Myanmar	Myanmar language (Burmese)
Philippines	English
Vietnam	Vietnamese

Table 1: SEA-PLM 2019 language(s) versions per participating country

An external translation company was employed to translate all assessment materials and questionnaires, then they were adapted to each country's context. Quality assurance measures ensured that the same level of difficulty was maintained across the various

translated versions. The quality of the assessments and the translation were trialled in each participating country, and monitored and approved by each country, then verified by an external body using standardised procedures.

Writing assessment design: complexities and challenges

In defining the construct, to make clear what we were aiming to assess, test developers at ACER had to create a **framework**, or test design, that would allow us to compare student performance across languages. There were many things to be considered such as linguistic and cultural differences in terms of producing written texts, as well as teaching and learning styles and community values. The main task was to gather evidence about what students could do, in terms of writing, rather than collecting evidence of their technical knowledge of areas such as formal grammar. Therefore, students were required to produce writing during the assessment, rather than answering multiple-choice questions about grammar, for example, a method used in some countries. Before designing the assessment, ACER Test developers asked these key questions:

1. What is writing?
2. What are suitable **tasks** that would apply to writers of all languages?
3. What are the main features of writing, **regardless** of language?
4. What aspects of writing might **not** be able to be assessed in a variety of languages?
5. In what **contexts** should the writing tasks be set?

Responding to the key questions:

1. What is writing?

The definition of **Writing** developed was:

Writing literacy is constructing meaning by generating a range of written texts to express oneself and communicate with others, in order to meet personal, societal, economic and civic needs.

It is important to note that this practical, literacy focus means that the emphasis is on creating *meaning for communication*. As such, efforts such as copying slabs of text or even single words without imparting meaning are not valued as much as efforts where students create individual meaning by thinking and combining words together to produce original text, however brief.

2. What are suitable tasks that would apply to writers of all languages?

In answer to this question, test developers concluded that the following **tasks** would apply to students writing in any of the languages:

- Narrative. For example, writing a story in response to a picture (a sample is provided later in this paper). See Figure 1 below.
- Descriptive. For example, describing a well-known event or experience in writing.
- Persuasive. For example, giving an opinion on something in writing, from something quite simple, like a preference, through to an issue that could involve more complexity.
- Instructional. For example, writing sentences in logical order, about how to do a familiar task.
- Transactional. For example, writing to achieve a common, real-life task such as writing a note that contains information.
- Control text structure and organisation. Different text types have different structures. Effective writers select a suitable organisational form for the particular writing task. For example, if writing a recipe, they will start with a set of ingredients and then describe or list a sequence of steps. If writing a narrative, they know that, conventionally, they will start with an orientation, follow this with a complication and end with a resolution.
- Manage coherence. Good writers are able to structure texts so that the links between ideas are clear. They produce a logical progression of ideas that express meaning, as well as through writing features such as reference, and lexical features such as discourse markers and connectives. Good writers use paragraphing to group ideas around a central topic or use other means, such as headings, to show the relationship between ideas.

These tasks are not unusual for student assessments of writing. However, an extra one was added to provide access to the test for lower-performing students. This was:

- Labelling. For example, writing a word to correspond to a picture of a basic and well-known item.

3. What are the main features of writing, regardless of language?

Given the literacy focus of the writing tasks, our research suggested that the main abilities that could be compared across languages were to assess if the student producing the writing could:

- Generate ideas. Writing tasks typically require the creation, selection and crafting of ideas. The quantity and quality of the ideas, and their suitability for the task, are parts of this skill. The type of ideas will vary from one text type to another. For example, in story writing (narrative), developing characters and the sequence of the story are important. In persuasive writing, the logic, relevance and persuasiveness of the argument are important. In descriptive writing, the relevance of the details and the richness of the picture created for the reader as well as the completeness of the description are all important.

- Use vocabulary. Writing involves knowledge of words and an understanding of how they can be used in specific contexts. Good writers utilise a wide vocabulary to present ideas precisely and concisely. They choose words that suit the purpose, audience and context of their writing. A broad vocabulary allows writers to present arguments effectively and to give life to descriptive or narrative writing.
- Control [of] syntax and grammar. Good writers produce grammatically correct, meaningful sentences and use a range of syntactic structures. They link ideas with a variety of cohesive devices and use sentence structures suited to the writing task.

(SEA-PLM, 2019 Assessment Framework (1st ed):35–39)

4. What aspects of writing might not be able to be assessed in a variety of languages?

Prior to SEA-PLM, we did not yet know whether certain language-specific features, such as spelling, character formation/handwriting, punctuation and register, could be compared across languages. We decided to call these aspects of writing: 'Other language-specific features'.

The original hypothesis about these features was ‘that the criteria anticipated to be language specific will show more variation in item functioning between languages than other criteria’. This means that, following psychometric analysis, we would expect to see greater differentiation of functioning in these specific items (written responses) between the various language groups. Indeed, some of the field trial results indicated that this hypothesis may be correct, so any items showing great differentiation were not included in the main study. After the main study was conducted, the data showed that cross-language comparisons of writing literacy capacity in terms of language-specific features are possible, using generic criteria for scaling. The information gained from the language-specific features items was therefore able to be used when developing the band descriptors that are shown below in Table 4 below. This ‘language-specific features’ aspect of writing could be a fruitful area for future detailed research when comparing writing between various languages.

5. In what contexts should the writing tasks be set?

As described in an earlier large-scale international assessment framework, albeit for a different domain, ‘the learning of individual students is set in overlapping contexts of school and out-of-school learning, which are both embedded in the context of the wider community that comprises local, national, supra-regional and international contexts’ (Fraillon, et al., 2013:25). In the SEA-PLM, a context is the situation within which the writing task is likely to take place. One of the main purposes of the defined contexts is to ensure that the tasks cover a broad range of the situations in which students need to write, and a broad range of the purposes and audiences for writing. The SEA-PLM programme uses three contexts: personal contexts, local contexts, and wider-world. Here are some generalised examples of the contexts as they relate to writing tasks.

Context	Example of related task
personal	Letter to a friend. Request to a cousin. Reasons for a choice.
local	Note to a teacher. Advertisement for a local event. Description of a well-known place or activity.
wider-world	Reasons for a decision to participate. Persuasive argument about a global issue.

Table 2: Examples of writing tasks in relation to contexts



Scoring the writing tasks


In the SEA-PLM writing assessment, students must write something for every task. This is different to many other tests where multiple choice questions are used to assess students' knowledge of grammar, punctuation and spelling, for example. The writing section presents tasks requiring students to produce a written response. Then *criteria* with differing

numbers of *score points* are applied to the students' written responses. To illustrate this, a sample writing task and sample criteria are presented in the next section.

Consider the sample narrative writing task below in Figure 1, and criterion A in Table 3.

Brothers' Race

Use the picture to help you write a story. Write as much as you can.



One day, Kai challenged his older brother to a race.

Figure 1: Example of narrative writing task

In terms of context, this type of writing task would suit all children in the Southeast Asian area for a few reasons. Most children are familiar with the concept of a race between siblings or friends. This does not differ for urban or rural children, rich or poor, and no special equipment is needed. In addition, the image helps students understand the context. Details such as clothing are adapted in the task illustrations where advised by the expert groups in each country.

Students' writing in every country is assessed by trained markers in response to the prompt about two brothers having a race. For example, they might assess the writing on various features such as ideas, sequencing of events and vocabulary. One of these features, Table 3 below, shows how the marker would assess Criterion A, the ability of the student to *sequence the events and whether they make sense* (coherence) in their story, Brothers' Race.

Criterion A	Score	Description
Sequence of events / coherence	0	No sense of sequence
	1	Some sense of sequence but not consistent or always clear
	2	Series of narrative events in sequence that makes sense

Table 3: An example writing criterion with scale score points

Students who are not able to show any sense of sequence in their writing would score zero. Score point 1 represents a partial demonstration of the skill, while score point 2 represents a full demonstration of the skill of writing that shows a sequenced series of events that makes sense in the narrative context. This same task could

also be marked against other criteria as well. For example, markers could rate the student's writing in terms of its ideas, as they should pertain to a narrative task, using a criterion called story elements, as shown in Table 4 below.

Criterion B	Score	Description
Story elements	0	Evidence of a response but no relevant information is included
	1	Ideas are present but not a narrative
	2	Ideas are linked into a narrative

Table 4: Example of a score criterion

The focus in this criterion is not on the number of ideas, but on whether students are able to demonstrate the ability to link their ideas into a narrative. Students who *only describe the picture* of the brothers' race, for example, would be likely to receive a score of 1.

Each writing task may be assessed for a range of criteria. For example, a labelling task may only assess the ability of the student to *use vocabulary*. Can the student write the word in their language of instruction for a given picture? In contrast, an everyday communication task, such as writing a note, might be assessed according to three criteria such as *controlling text structure and organisation* and two of the other language-specific features, such as *spelling and handwriting/character formation*.

Each specific criterion may contain up to four score points. This technique of assessing writing provides SEA-PLM countries with a large, focused and detailed amount of information about what their students can actually do in terms of producing writing in their language of instruction

Measuring student proficiency in writing

The SEA-PLM proficiency scale for writing literacy is below, in Table 5. The scale includes eight bands of proficiency, ranging from Band 1 and below to Band 8 and above. The proficiency within each band describes what student writers can do. For instance, in the lowest band (Band 1 and below) students have only limited ability to present ideas in writing. Students who are in the higher bands have demonstrated varying proficiencies in writing literacy skills, with those in Band 8 and above able to write cohesive texts with detailed ideas and a good range of

appropriate vocabulary. Students in the higher bands are therefore working towards meeting the SEA-PLM definition of writing literacy (see above). The percentages in the left column show what percentage of **children across all the participating countries** are represented in each band. For example, across the region, only five per cent of students in participating countries are in Band 8, meaning that they can write cohesive texts with detailed ideas and a good range of appropriate vocabulary.

Band and percentage of students	Description of what students can typically do
<p>Band 8 and above</p> <p>346 points and above</p> <p>5%</p>	<p>Write cohesive texts with detailed ideas and a good range of appropriate vocabulary</p> <p>Children can produce texts that draw on a wider-world context, with relevant, detailed and sometimes imaginative ideas. They can write texts with an introduction, body and conclusion in which ideas are well related and easy to follow. For example, they can provide a clear overall description of a detailed image. These children can write using a polite, formal style and a good range of appropriate vocabulary, with a degree of sophistication.</p>
<p>Band 7</p> <p>338 to less than 346 points</p> <p>4%</p>	<p>Write clear, detailed texts in various contexts with adequate vocabulary</p> <p>Children can produce texts that relate to wider-world, local and personal contexts, expressing ideas that go beyond mere description to include some persuasive or evaluative aspects. Ideas are well related and easy to follow, using sentences that are varied in structure and often correctly formed. They can produce some complex sentences, but these may contain errors. When writing about a personal context, for example about a favourite activity, they can use vocabulary that goes beyond the basic, to produce some interesting descriptive elements.</p>

Band and percentage of students	Description of what students can typically do
<p>Band 6</p> <p>327 to less than 338 points</p> <p>9%</p>	<p>Write simple texts for a range of purposes with above basic vocabulary</p> <p>Children can produce texts that relate to local and personal contexts, presenting simple writing with some supporting details. They can produce sequenced writing that a reader can follow easily, but they are still learning to use linguistic devices to create cohesion within their texts. At this level, children's vocabulary is basic and beyond; it may be adequate to convey the detail of a message, for example, in a short, formal note.</p>
<p>Band 5</p> <p>316 to less than 327 points</p> <p>14%</p>	<p>Write non-cohesive basic texts for a range of purposes, using simple vocabulary</p> <p>Children can write texts such as notes, descriptions and narratives in a range of contexts, with well-controlled handwriting. They can communicate ideas in simple writing, obviously related to the task, with some attempt at detail. Their ideas are generally expressed in a logical sequence that is relatively easy to follow but may not be adequately linked with connecting words, or may lack an introduction or conclusion. A description of a detailed image, for example, may describe a range of elements in the picture with some detail but not comprise an integrated whole. Sentence forms are generally simple and may be repetitive or may be more complex but contain errors, although children can form correct question forms, and punctuation is usually correct. They can use vocabulary that is sufficient to convey a range of concepts but that lacks precision or clarity.</p>
<p>Band 4</p> <p>306 to less than 316 points</p> <p>14%</p>	<p>Produce limited writing, conveying simple ideas with basic vocabulary</p> <p>Children can produce limited writing related to the task, presenting simple ideas but lacking elaboration or detail. In a task such as writing basic instructions, they can present a process clearly, using 3 or 4 well-formed but simple sentences, and use the correct form of imperative language for instructions. Basic vocabulary may limit children's ability to convey detail at this level.</p>
<p>Band 3</p> <p>296 to less than 306 points</p> <p>14%</p>	<p>Produce very limited writing, with simple, insufficient ideas and limited vocabulary</p> <p>Children can produce limited writing relating to personal or local contexts. Ideas may be very simple, irrelevant or incomplete. They may be disjointed so that the text is difficult to follow. In writing a simple story, for example, there may be some sense of sequence, but it is not consistent or always clear. Children at this level display some competence in using a polite style, and can form questions. Children can produce simple or repetitive sentences that use repetition of pronouns or nouns to link ideas. Their handwriting is legible, with most letters (or characters) well-formed. Basic vocabulary at this level is inadequate to convey a good description or may be repetitive.</p>

Band and percentage of students	Description of what students can typically do
<p>Band 2</p> <p>287 to less than 296 points</p> <p>10%</p>	<p>Produce very limited writing, with fragmented ideas and inadequate vocabulary</p> <p>Children can write in a limited way. Ideas can be unclear, irrelevant, limited or consist of fragments only. These children may be able to write 1 simple correct sentence, or produce incomplete sentences or sentences containing many errors and inconsistent punctuation. Sentence structure is likely to be repetitive. Children’s vocabulary at this level is basic and inadequate to convey a clear message or is very repetitive.</p>
<p>Band 1 and below</p> <p>less than 287 points</p> <p>30%</p>	<p>Limited ability to present ideas in writing</p> <p>Children may be able to produce a few sentences with very limited content. When trying to describe a picture, for example, they may focus on only a few isolated features or produce extremely general ideas. They can produce some imperative language, but it is inconsistent. The limited range of vocabulary accessed by students in this band would be inadequate to describe a picture. Words used are likely to be basic and repetitive.</p>

Table 5: SEA-PLM writing described proficiency scales for region

How did students perform?

Student performance varied greatly across each of the six SEA-PLM countries. Each country displayed their own unique level of student ability in writing, which depends on a multitude of factors, including relative wealth and the condition of many aspects of the education system. It is important to note that these results are a snapshot of the performance levels in 2019, and student ability will develop and hopefully improve with dedicated actions to improve the teaching of writing in each country. As shown in the left-hand column of Table 4 above, approximately nine per cent of students who sat SEA-PLM 2019 performed at band seven and band eight or above, the highest two bands. The middle four bands have similar proportions of

students in them; approximately 62 per cent of all students fall into one of the middle bands. Below this, 30 per cent of students averaged out across the SEA-PLM participating countries are in the **lowest** band for writing literacy.

Looking in detail at the outcomes for each participating country, the estimated percentage of students from each participating country in each band of the proficiency scale is shown below in Table 6. Looking at this graph, we can see that in three of the six countries almost half of the students are performing **below** Band 2 of proficiency. These students have only limited ability to present ideas in writing.

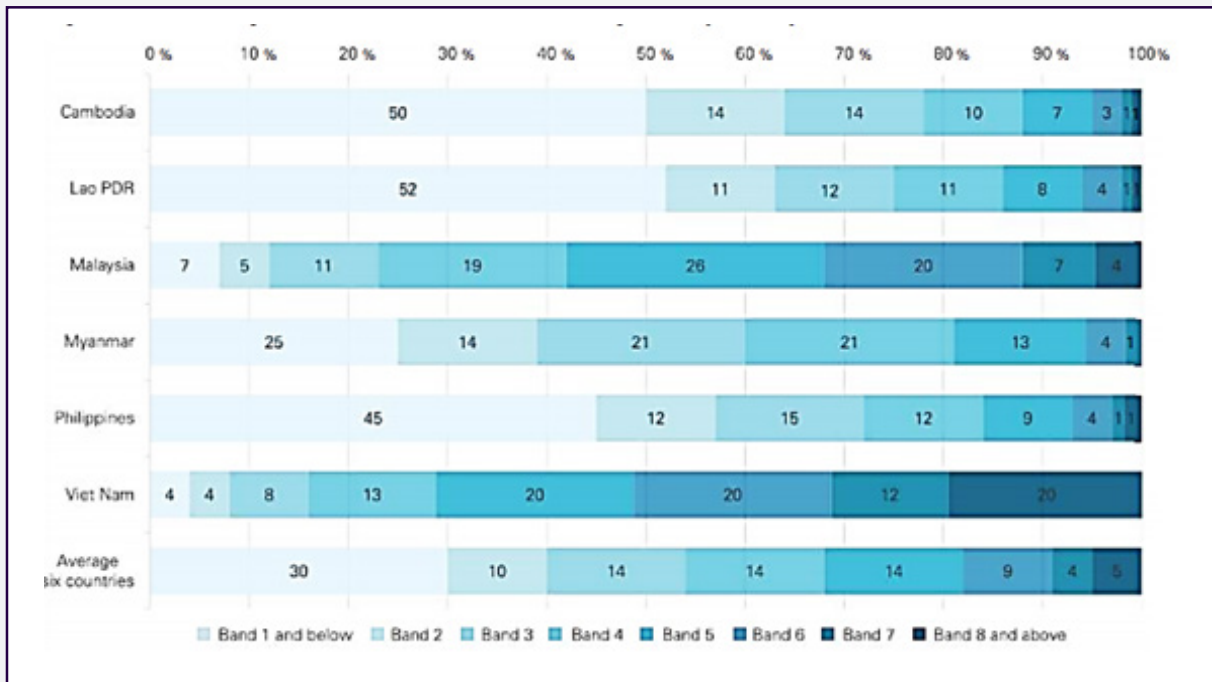


Table 6: Percentage of Grade 5 children in each writing band, by country (SEA-PLM, 2019 Main Regional Report:51)

For the People's Democratic Republic of Lao in particular, with 52 per cent of students displaying limited ability to present ideas in writing, it appears that intervention at a systemic level is likely to be required in order to raise the level of proficiency in writing for the end of primary education. At a classroom level these students probably require tasks that are achievable and pitched at their level to allow them to work on basic writing skills, before they are asked to perform tasks above their level. In contrast, for Malaysia and Vietnam, further work is recommended in order to provide more information about where the higher-performing students are in their learning, so that future policy and intervention can continue to support the progress of those students. In terms of the classroom, it may be the case that students at the higher level require tasks that provide increased challenge and more scope for experimenting and developing fluency in writing.

Looking at the participating students spread across three broad sections rather than the more detailed bands, some generalised features of their writing proficiency in the important areas

of ideas, form (includes text structure, organisation and coherence) and vocabulary are shown below in Table 7. The green box represents features displayed by students in the top two bands, seven and eight. The yellow box contains features generally displayed by student writers in bands four, five and six. The orange band contains general features shown by students in the three bottom bands, one, two and three. The features shown are broad generalisations, but do reflect the situation for writing proficiency across participating countries in the region.

Key features of student writing – simplified

ideas	form	vocabulary
Relevant detailed imaginative wider-world context	Easy-to-follow range of styles correct, varied sentences	From beyond basic to some sophistication

10 per cent of all students

ideas	form	vocabulary
Simple, relevant, some detail. Local and personal contexts	Logical but not cohesive	From basic and limiting to basic and beyond

38 per cent of all students

ideas	form	vocabulary
Simple, incomplete, insufficient, fragmented unclear, irrelevant, limited. Personal or local contexts	Hard to follow, unclear, simple, repetitive	Basic, inadequate to convey a clear message, repetitive

52 per cent of all students

Table 7: Percentage of Grade 5 children in region simplified key features of writing ability

Considering the simplified and generalised **key features** above, we can see that, even after five years of schooling, more than half of participating students in the region are in the orange section, the lowest bands: one, two and three. These students could only produce limited writing, with simple ideas and basic vocabulary in the SEA-PLM assessment. These students are

falling far behind, unlikely to catch up, despite being near the end of their primary education. As **communication** is an important 21st century skill, the need for improvement in writing skills across the region is vital.

What does the data show about language policy?

As previously mentioned, many surveys were attached to the SEA-PLM 2019 assessment, including one to gather data about the language of testing and the main language spoken by students at home. This information was then correlated with test scores for all subjects across the countries. In Cambodia and Vietnam, approximately 90 per cent of children reported speaking the language of the test at home compared to 60–80 per cent in Laos PDR, Malaysia and Myanmar. In the Philippines,

however, less than ten per cent of children reported speaking the language of the test at home. This is shown in Table 8 below. It is important to note, however, that these figures only relate to children who are in schools, and where those schools participated in the SEA-PLM sampling, so the details of children speaking less-familiar languages, who may be in remote areas and not attending schools, are not reflected in the SEA-PLM study.

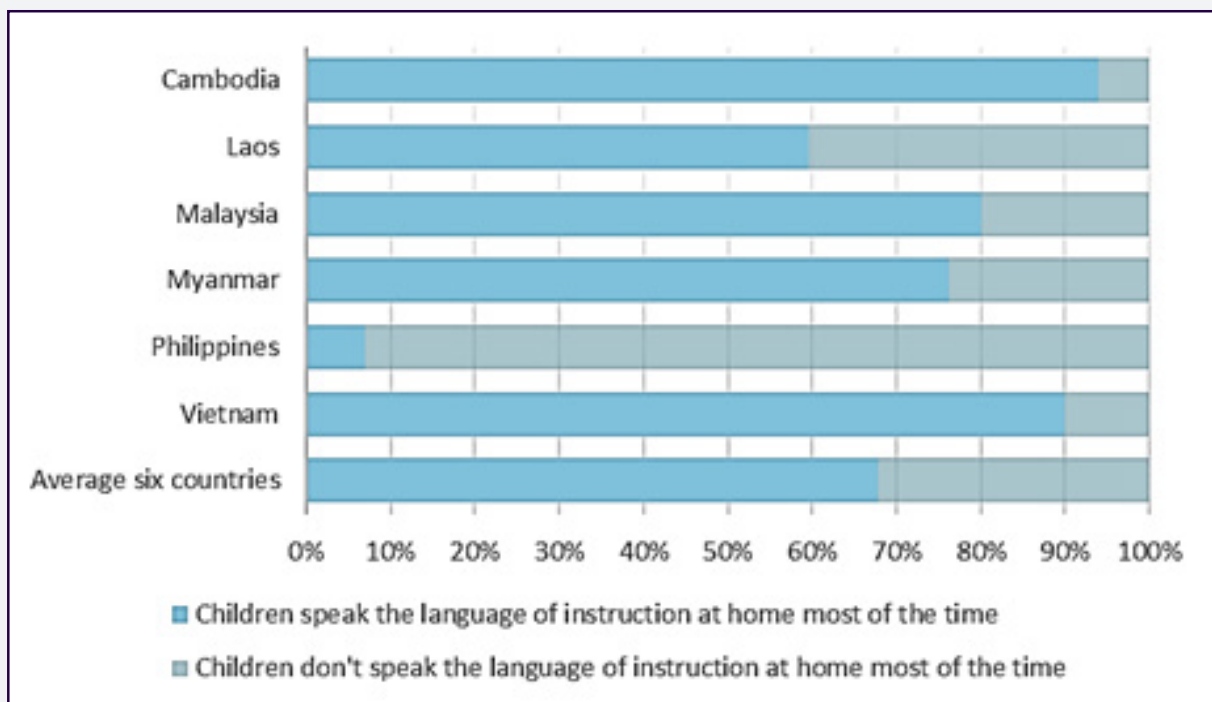


Table 8: Percentage of children by language of instruction spoken at home (SEA-PLM, 2019 Main Regional Report:72)

Across five of the six participating countries, on average, children who reported that the language of instruction (and of the test) was the same as the language spoken at home, outperformed children who spoke another language, on average, in all domains as presented in Figure 2 below. The effect was most pronounced for writing performance in generally lower-performing countries, with increased scores by 10–20 points when the language spoken at home was the same as the language of instruction.

Learning outcomes are affected by a whole array of factors that go beyond that of the school environment. The socio-cultural context of the

different countries involved in SEA-PLM means that many countries in the region are made up of populations with hundreds of national languages. The complex discussion between mother tongue and/or the adoption of a common language of instruction continues to be fiercely debated. However, it is no surprise that when students are assessed in a language different to their mother tongue, they perform under disadvantaged circumstances. The results of SEA-PLM 2019 suggest that countries that have longstanding, consistent and effectively implemented national language policies have seen better outcomes in student writing as well as in other subjects.

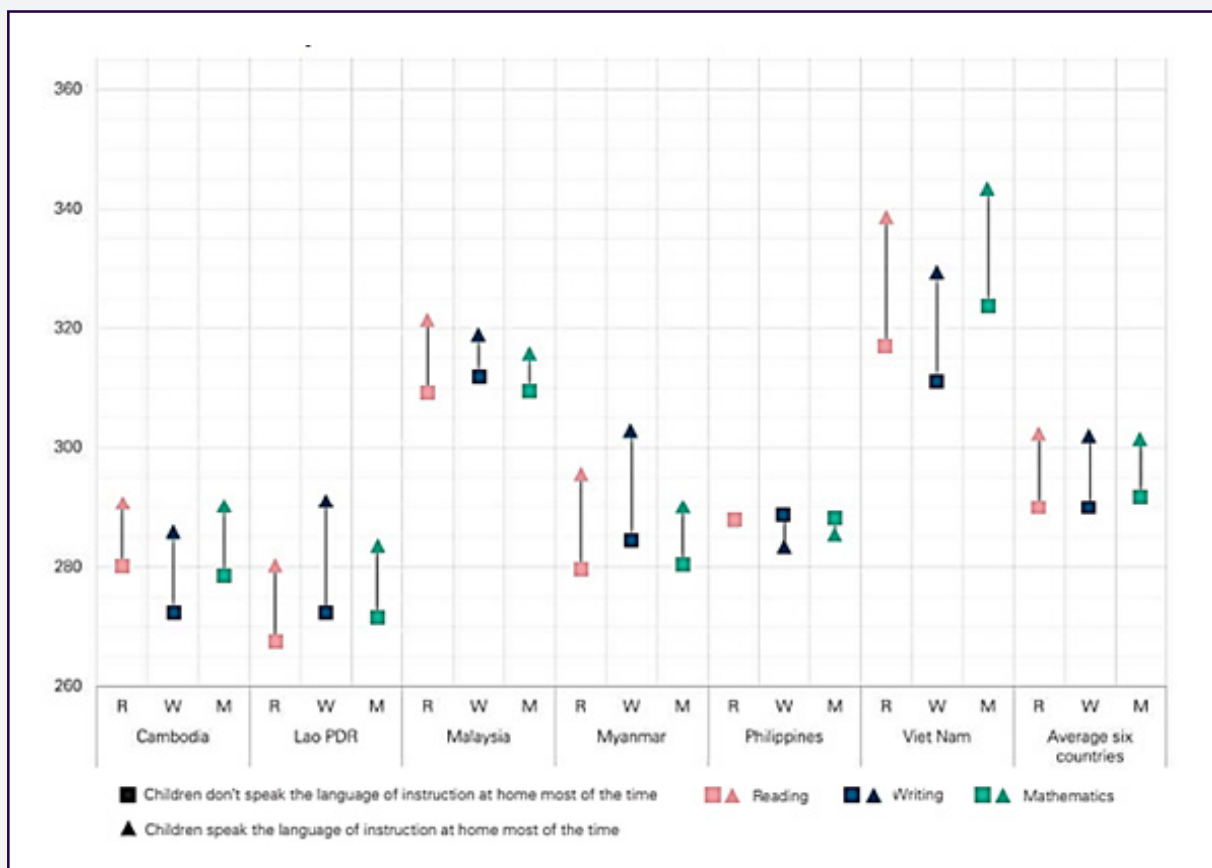


Figure 2: Differences in average reading, writing and mathematics scores by whether the language of children who spoke the language of instruction (SEA-PLM, 2019 Main Regional Report:72)

Conclusion

SEA-PLM is the first large-scale assessment of its kind, designed to reflect Southeast Asian students' contexts, and assess their skills in writing, reading, mathematics and global citizenship after five years of primary schooling. The writing assessment in particular is of note to educational researchers, as there have been very few international assessments that have attempted to directly compare writing literacy across multiple languages. As the ability to write is a fundamental skill needed by all people, many students face a life of disadvantage, political exclusion and economic deprivation without learning how to write to a proficient level. There is, of course, wide variation in student abilities across the SEA-PLM participating countries. What gives rise to concern, though, is the overall achievement level of writing skills across the SEA-PLM participating countries. In an effort to improve the writing literacy skills in the region, educators and

policymakers need to understand what children can actually do, before they can develop meaningful interventions. One of the important outcomes of the assessment, the SEA-PLM described proficiency scales in writing, are an important tool that can contribute to a commonly defined understanding of student development in the region.



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