



Beyond the Binary: A Critical Analysis of ESL and EFL Distinctions in Contemporary Global Contexts

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Abstract: This paper examines the binary limits of the English as Second Language (ESL), the common paradigm which used by English-spoken countries and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) where habituated in non-English speaking countries, in Southeast Asia., This remains a contested choice, given the region's linguistic diversity and complex postcolonial histories, even as English continues to function as a practical lingua franca across these settings, which together create multilingual environments that resist neat categorisation. ESL typically refers to learning English in situations where it holds official status in government, education, and media, while EFL typically refers to the academic learning of English, regardless of the wider language environment. Nevertheless, evidence from Singapore, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia suggest that these definitions fail to accurately reflect classroom realities, where translanguaging, the flexible use of learners' full linguistic repertoires, digital contact, and multilingual practices dominate everyday communication. Public Policy researchers have highlights tensions between the global demand for English and the safeguarding of local identities, with uneven results linked to teacher preparation, curriculum aims, assessment systems, and resource distribution. Analytic perspectives from World Englishes, English as a lingua franca, translanguaging pedagogy, and complexity theory support a continuum model of language use, and this study therefore calls for language planning, teacher certification, and assessment frameworks that recognise multilingual competence as flexible, functional, and context-dependent in regional and global communication.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, English as a Second Language, Southeast Asian Contexts, Translanguaging, Englishes



1 Introduction

Southeast Asia offers a timely case study for English education because English functions as the official lingua franca of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) community. It also intersects with postcolonial identities and varied multilingual practices that shape daily communication and schooling (Kirkpatrick, 2020). With a total population of about 690 million across ten nations, the region displays extreme linguistic diversity (Lee et al., 2024), which makes the conventional ESL/EFL labels (English as a Second Language; English as a Foreign Language) increasingly unhelpful for describing lived classroom practice and wider language use. In simple terms, ESL usually refers to learning English where English has an official or widely used role in society, while EFL refers to learning English in setting where it is taught mainly as a school subject and has limited use in everyday public life. In many Southeast Asian settings, this neat split does not match reality because students move between first language, regional lingua franca, national languages, and English in flexible ways within the same day. Current educational evidence shows a gap between policy designs and classroom realities, including uneven learning outcomes and variable teacher preparedness, which reflect deeper tensions between global expectations for English and the safeguarding of local linguistic identities and community needs (Yarrow et al., 2024). These tensions are not only about achievement data but also about access, curriculum aims, assessment practices, and teacher education systems that must serve complex multilingual ecologies.

Despite a growing body of scholarship that questions this binary, ESL/EFL still functions as an administrative label that structures both programmes and expectations. In policy and institutional practice, the binary is operationalised through (i) medium-of-instruction decisions, that is, choices about the language used for teaching; (ii) curriculum aims and time-on-task allocations, namely the intended learning outcomes and the amount of instructional time assigned to them; (iii) teacher certification and deployment, meaning qualification requirements and staff placement; and (iv) assessment regimes that privilege particular domains and skills, or testing systems that prioritise certain language areas and competences. In Southeast Asia, these mechanisms are visible in shifts towards English-medium instruction in parts of higher



education and schooling. At the same time, ‘foreign language’ curricular framing continues to position English as a bounded subject with exam-driven outcomes. This, in turn, produces persistent policy–practice gaps where learners’ everyday multilingual and digital English use is treated as irrelevant to their learning (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017; Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020; Anh, 2022; Canh, 2024). The potential harm, therefore, is not that every classroom explicitly adopts a philosophical binary, but that binary labelling drives mismatched educational designs. In practice, resources, teacher preparations, and assessments are often aligned to an idealised context type rather than to local language ecologies, which can leave linguistically diverse learners underserved and widen inequities across schools and regions (Yarrow et al., 2024; Rusdiansyah et al., 2025).

Tian et al. (2020) argue that such rigid categories should be dismantled because they conceal the actual conditions of language use and learning, especially when communities are exposed to flexible patterns of English use across various settings, such as school, work, media, and migration. Regional differences in outcomes, teacher quality, and policy implementation are harder to interpret when oversimplified labels obscure local language histories, community language hierarchies, and everyday multilingual practice (Rusdiansyah et al., 2025). Recent reforms and classroom innovations in Vietnam demonstrate how rapidly changing contexts expose the limitations of fixed labels, and necessitate frameworks that integrate sociolinguistic context, intensity of contact, and domains of language use over time (Anh, 2022). Against this background, the present study asks two related questions that test conventional assumptions in English education: first, what clear distinctions, if any, remain between ESL and EFL when they are examined through a holistic lens that attends to policy, practice, and language ecology; second, what structural constraints in curriculum, assessment, teacher preparation, and resource allocation make the ESL/EFL binary insufficient for present-day educational systems that support equitable learning in complex multilingual settings?



2 Literature Review

2.1 Historical Development of ESL and EFL Distinction

The ESL/EFL distinction developed through identifiable pedagogical and sociopolitical stages, with each stage playing out unevenly across Asian settings due to colonial histories, national language planning, and regional integration producing different domains of English use (Kirkpatrick, 2020).

Stage 1: Grammar-Translation and institutional classification (late-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century). English was commonly treated as an academic subject tied to literacy, examinations, and elite schooling, and administrative systems increasingly classified learners as to whether English functioned inside public life or mainly inside classrooms. In Asian education systems influenced by colonial and postcolonial governance, these routines hardened into durable labels that still structure curriculum and resourcing (Bunrosy & Vireak, 2024).

Stage 2: Structural and target-language orthodoxies (mid-twentieth century). Methodological orthodoxies that favoured exclusive target-language use and “context-appropriate” norms reinforced the idea that language learning contexts were separable types, encouraging institutions to treat ESL and EFL as different pedagogical objects rather than points on a continuum (Littlewood & Yu, 2011).

Stage 3: Communicative and task-based reforms (late-1970s onwards). Communicative approaches shifted emphasis from knowledge of grammatical rules to interactional use, but Asian policy reforms often encountered entrenched exam regimes and uneven teacher preparation, exposing how the binary fails to predict what learners can do with English outside the classroom (Anh, 2022).

Stage 4: Regional and global rescaling of English (1990s onwards). English expanded as a lingua franca for mobility, higher education, diplomacy, and commerce, including ASEAN’s institutional use of English, which increased out-of-class English functions even in places still labelled “EFL” (Kirkpatrick, 2020).

Stage 5: Flexible multilingual, digital, and AI-mediated ecologies (2000s to present). Translanguaging and complexity perspectives reframe English learning as



adaptive development within multilingual repertoires rather than movement between fixed categories, while virtual exchange, pervasive digital contact, and AI tools expand input and interaction in nominally EFL environments, further eroding a stable ESL/EFL boundary (Wei, 2017).

The institutionalisation of the ESL and EFL distinction arises as education systems seek to organise language teaching with clear categories for administrative and classroom purposes, so that methods, classes, and assessments can be managed consistently. Bunrosy and Vireak (2024) discover that traditional approaches, including the Grammar-Translation Method, become embedded into institutional routines that separate contexts according to the social role English plays, which produce durable labels that still shape curriculum policy and administrative decisions. This development matches broader trends in education towards systematic classification, helping authorities map curricula, set teacher-training and certification standards, align assessment procedures, and direct resources across diverse classrooms. Littlewood and Yu (2011) argue that the theories developed in this period emphasise exclusive target language use within a defined context and continue to shape how institutions conceptualise language learning. Yet recent scholarship perspectives remain adequate for today's globalised, multilingual conditions, where mobility, digital communication, and mixed-language communities blur the line between second-language and foreign-language contexts.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations

Jenkins (2015) notes that Kachru's Three Circles Model, while central to World Englishes thinking, no longer captures today's global patterns of English use. The Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles compress highly varied sociolinguistic realities and leave the borders between categories vague, primarily where mobility, migration, and digital interaction produce hybrid repertoires and shifting norms. Critics, therefore, argue that students and users routinely draw on features across circles, so rigid membership can obscure how English is practised in multilingual settings at school, at work, and online. Zein (2022) claims that English as lingua franca research redefines English as a multilingual strategy that draws on speakers' plurilingual repertoires. This view challenges older ideas about a single target variety, which long supported the ESL and



EFL split. Linked to this, translanguaging theory, shaped by the work of García and Wei (2015), emphasises fluid language use where speakers combine resources to make meaning, so multilingualism is seen as a resource for learning rather than a source of interference.

From a critical applied-linguistics perspective, these categorisations are political because they naturalise the distinction between those whose English is legitimate, and remedial, reproducing native-speaker ideologies and colonial hierarchies (Zein, 2022). These frameworks converge on a specific practical claim: when English use is treated as either ‘societal’ (ESL) or ‘classroom-only’ (EFL), curricula and assessments are designed around monolingual targets and idealised exposure conditions, which misidentifies what learners can do in multilingual interaction and what skills teachers can realistically cultivate. A continuum model is justified here not as a fashionable relabelling exercise, but as a better match between (a) domains of use, (b) intensity of contact, and (c) institutional constraints that shape learning trajectories over time.

2.3 The Binary Model

The ESL/EFL binary is a categorical model used to sort English-learning contexts into two types based on the perceived social positioning of English. In “ESL” contexts, English is treated as societally embedded: it holds official or institutional functions and is assumed to be available across multiple public domains (education, administration, media, commerce), creating substantial opportunities for use beyond the classroom (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). In “EFL” contexts, English is treated as societally external: it is framed as a school subject with limited public functionality, so learning is assumed to depend mainly on formal instruction rather than everyday interaction (Si, 2019). In practice, the binary operates as an administrative shorthand that links “type of context” to expected curricula, teacher preparation, and assessment arrangements (Bunrosy & Vireak, 2024).

2.4 Critiques of the Binary Model

Recent scholarship offers more precise critiques of the ESL/EFL binary, arguing that it does not describe real multilingual classrooms well across sociolinguistic,



postcolonial, pedagogical, and assessment contexts. Bailey et al. (2025) suggest that translanguaging approaches challenge monolingual ideologies in schools, which favour one dominant language and treat students' wider linguistic repertoires as a deficient. From a postcolonial perspective, researchers point out that binary labels can conceal ongoing linguistic imperialism. Meighan (2023) reports the ongoing presence of colonial habits and native speaker idealisation in English-language teaching because these orientations discourage the use of students' home languages. Pedagogically, the binary fails to capture the translanguaging practices that students develop naturally, even when institutions attempt to limit them, since multilingual students employ flexible, cross-linguistic strategies that transcend neat categories (Yang, 2025). Current classroom conditions, therefore, reveal a basic tension between official monolingual policies and teachers' everyday practices since those practices recognise that multilingual approaches support learning, especially for lower-proficiency students (Wei, 2017). Taken together, these studies indicate that the ESL/EFL split oversimplifies how languages interact in learning and so limits our understanding of multilingual language development.

2.5 Emerging Alternative Frameworks

Recent alternative frameworks rethink language learning and argue for flexible and nuanced frameworks that move beyond the ESL/EFL binary labels and take into account how learning unfolds in real-world settings. Through an ecological lens, a learning environment is akin to an ecosystem, in which social, technological, institutional, and individual factors influence one another across time and space. These factors include technological affordances such as devices and platforms, social networks among peers and families, institutional policies that shape practice, and the individual agency of student choices (Zhao et al.). For example, a student may alter their vocabulary while talking on the phone, asking a cousin for help in a family chat, following school guidance on homework timing, or conversing with friends. Studies also show that learning several languages at the same time can strengthen cognitive resources and metalinguistic awareness through complex developmental processes that unfold gradually, rather than all at once (Huang et al., 2022). In this view, classrooms function as hybrid spaces where English is neither purely a second language nor a foreign language, but one semiotic

resource within wider translingual practices of meaning-making. Such a view helps teachers and students see language repertoires as connected rather than separate, which reduces unhelpful either/or thinking. These frameworks support person-centred approaches that respect individual specificity. They also permit careful transfer across settings through analytic generalisation. The review identifies recurring mechanisms across studies and states the boundary conditions under which they hold (for example, domains of use, intensity of English contact, policy regimes, and digital affordances).

3 The ESL and EFL Binary: Holistic Analysis of Distinctions

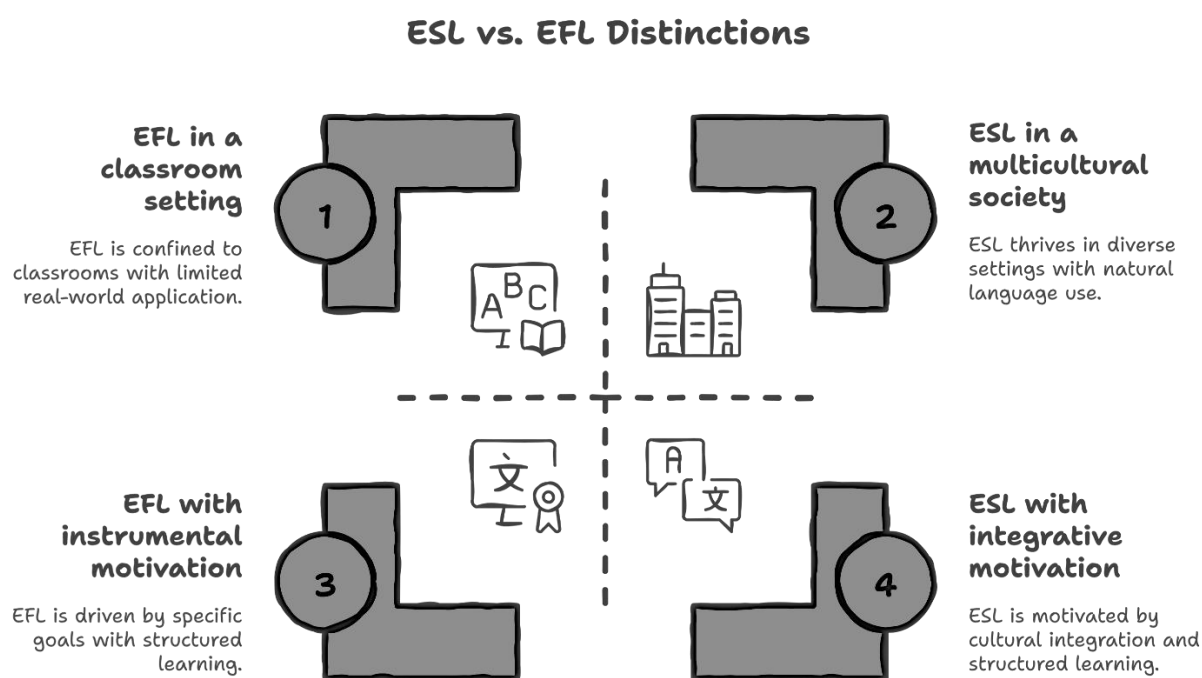


Figure 1 ESL vs. EFL: Core Distinctions

Figure 1 provides a schematic baseline of the conventional ESL/EFL contrast, summarising the prototypical assumptions that official status and everyday domains of English use (public institutions, media, workplace) co-vary with quantity of exposure and typical learning conditions. In this paper, the figure is used as a reference point rather than an endpoint: the subsequent analysis tests these bundled assumptions against evidence from Southeast Asia, showing that the underlying variables often separate and form gradients, which is why binary labels can distort curriculum planning, teacher preparation, and assessment decisions.



3.1 Definitional Framework: ESL and EFL

ESL courses take place where English has official or co-official status and is used in government, education, media, and commerce, so students encounter English in daily life and further acquire it through immersion with rich input and complex systems. These settings often reflect colonial histories and language policies that institutionalise English. Globalisation further reinforces the value of English for education, mobility, and employment, which helps explain generally positive attitudes and often integrative motivation. Because English is used in everyday communication, students may develop higher fluency, stronger pragmatic competence, more effective repair strategies, greater translinguaging ability, and less fossilisation, while English-medium instruction in universities shows how high-level competence can be crucial for study and work (Karabay & Durrani, 2024; Shao & Rose, 2024). In EFL contexts, English usually has limited official status, and most learning takes place in classrooms with relatively restricted use beyond school. In many such settings, policy confines English to academic purposes, even where learners encounter it through media, work, or online conversation. As a result, motivation is often instrumental, learning is more formally structured, and competence may depend more on explicit knowledge than fluent pragmatics use, as reported in classroom-based secondary and higher education settings (Roose & Qadir, 2025). Yet, identity concerns are not confined to EFL settings: in many ESL environments, the institutional dominance of English can also raise concerns about language shift, marginalisation of local languages, and unequal symbolic capital.

ESL contexts are settings where English has official or co-official status and is used in government, education, media, and commerce (Kachru in Jenkins, 2015). As learners encounter English beyond school, they typically receive sustained and varied input through everyday interaction as well as formal instruction. Many ESL settings also reflect colonial histories and language policies that institutionalised English; as a result, public attitudes towards English may be more supportive and its domains of use broader. This sustained exposure often supports more integrative motives, because English is needed for routine participation in community life. Consequently, learners may develop higher fluency, stronger pragmatic competence, and more effective repair strategies, and they



may translanguage as they draw on their full repertoires. English-medium instruction in higher education illustrates how advanced proficiency can become critical for study and work (Karabay & Durrani, 2024; Shao & Rose, 2024).

By contrast, EFL contexts usually assign English limited official status and confine most learning to the classrooms. In many such settings, English expands through globalisation rather than direct colonial institutionalisation, so policy often treats it mainly as an academic subject, while resistance may be stronger where English is seen as potentially discouraging or displacing local languages. In this context, learners are often motivated instrumentally by examinations, credentials, and employment, so instruction tends to prioritise explicit knowledge and structured practice over sustained everyday use. This can limit pragmatic development, increase the risk of fossilisation, and contribute to subtractive bilingualism, where English expands at the expense of institutionally unsupported local languages (Roose & Qadir, 2025).

3.2 Contextual Variables Analysis

This section identifies the main contextual variables that shape ESL-EFL classifications and shows how these variables support the article's broader argument that the binary is historically produced, policy-driven, and insufficiently responsive to multilingual realities. The following subsections examine sociopolitical drivers, domains of use, education system indicators, medium of instruction, and their downstream effects.

1. **Sociopolitical drivers.** Wiens et al. (2019) show that sociopolitical factors shape ESL/EFL distinctions through colonial history, language planning, and economic goals. These forces determine the institutional status of English and the domains in which it is expected to function within national education.
2. **Where English is used.** In countries with limited colonial exposure, governments may still adopt English for strategic reasons, but they often restrict its role to academic and instrumental functions (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). In such contexts, English use is largely confined to classrooms and to specific professional or high-stakes purposes, rather



than routine everyday interaction. This restriction changes the intensity and type of contact learners have with English, and it alters typical developmental pathways.

3. **Education system indicators.** The education system provides the most visible evidence of the divide. Policies on the language used for classroom teaching, teacher preparation frameworks, and resource allocation show what a state is prepared to fund, normalise, and assess. They also indicate how strongly English is positioned as a language of learning rather than only a subject of learning.
4. **Medium of instruction as the key variable.** Medium of instruction is central because it structures both exposure and necessity. In many ESL settings, subjects are taught through English across the curriculum, making English the main academic language for content learning. In many EFL settings, English is typically taught as a discrete subject and is not the routine medium for science, history, or mathematics (Si, 2019).
5. **Downstream effects.** These policy choices shape curriculum aims, assessment priorities, and student motivation. They also influence staffing, materials, and classroom time-on-task. The result is that ESL–EFL distinctions reflect histories, policies, and economies at least as much as they reflect classroom techniques or teacher preferences.

3.3 Linguistic and Cognitive Distinctions

Language acquisition in ESL and EFL settings differs because students receive different amounts and types of input, and Complex Dynamic Systems Theory helps explain why these differences matter over time (Si, 2019). In ESL settings, naturalistic exposure provides frequent, varied input, many chances to negotiate meaning, and ongoing feedback from everyday communication, so developmental trajectories tend to be richer and more flexible over time. In EFL classrooms, input is more limited and carefully planned, which can narrow opportunities to practise forms and functions in real situations. Motivation patterns align with these conditions: ESL contexts commonly support integrative motivation, since students use English to join community life, while EFL contexts more often support instrumental motivation that targets exams and



specific academic or professional goals (Joseph & Devi, 2025). Interlanguage development also shows contrasts, as continuous interaction in ESL promotes regular error noticing, repair, and refinement, which can reduce fossilisation and raise ultimate attainment. In EFL, fewer authentic exchanges may allow persistent features to remain, so fossilisation is more likely, and progress can level off earlier. The building of a multilingual repertoire follows different paths as well, as ESL environments often value multiple languages in society and therefore support additive bilingualism, whereas EFL environments may require extra institutional support to prevent loss of confidence or narrowing of resources.

4 Contemporary Challenges to the Binary

4.1 Globalisation and Digital Communication

A first contemporary challenge to the binary between ESL and EFL is globalisation and digitally mediated communication. Digital platforms have reshaped how people encounter and use English (Joseph & Devi, 2025), creating constant opportunities for multilingual interaction that cut across the traditional ESL/EFL divide and produce everyday online contact zones, that is, routine digital spaces where users from different linguistic backgrounds interact and negotiate meaning. Within social media ecosystems, global English varieties coexist, and users negotiate meaning through hybrid linguistic practices that combine standard and non-standard forms, so norms are co-constructed rather than set in advance. Current evidence indicates that only 4% of English interactions worldwide now involve solely L1 speakers (Eberhard et al., 2023, as cited in da Costa & Rose, 2024). This figure highlights the scale of English as a lingua franca in digitally mediated settings and the routine nature of mixed-proficiency communication. The situation is visible in online gaming communities, since players create new conventions through teamwork, which requires fast coordination between participants from different language backgrounds. O'Dowd (2021) reports that educational technology has widened access as well because Massive Open Online Courses and virtual exchange programmes provide English-medium learning while introducing students to multiple English varieties and practical intercultural strategies that they can use immediately.



4.2 Supranational Language Policies

The regional integration in Asia has reshaped language policy by placing English at the centre of cooperation, with ASEAN adopting English as its official working language and creating strong demand for competence across member states (ASEAN, 2013, as cited in Kirkpatrick, 2020). This shift makes the old ESL and EFL categories less clear, as countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia must manage classroom foreign language teaching while also responding to the diverse regional uses of English discussed above. Consequently, policy responses now blur conventional boundaries. Zein (2017) suggests that governments should balance the drive for English proficiency with the protection of regional identity, utilizing multilingual frameworks that value national and local languages alongside English and promote additive learning rather than replacement. As a regional comparison, in Europe, Brexit has forced a rethinking of policy. In addition, the African Union's integration agenda is increasingly using English to support cross-border cooperation; however, Ojong and Addo (2024) report that the implementations are challenging in predominantly francophone and lusophone regions where English functions as a foreign language and where teacher supply, resources, and access are uneven.

In Southeast Asia, ASEAN's adoption of English as the official working language intensifies demand for cross-border communicative competence while national systems often retain 'foreign language' curricular framings. This tension helps explain why ESL/EFL labels become unstable in practice: English is simultaneously a school subject, a regional working language, and a digitally mediated lingua franca, so domains of use expand without uniform institutional support for teacher development, materials, or assessment change (Kirkpatrick, 2020; Yarrow et al., 2024). The broader implication is that other regions with supranational mobility and English-medium higher education pressures may exhibit comparable label-instability, but this paper's empirical focus remains Southeast Asia.

Yaseen and Alnakeeb (2023) illustrate through a comprehensive bibliometric review that incorporating artificial intelligence into language learning marks a significant paradigm shift, unsettling the traditional ESL and EFL divide, as digital tools alter how students access input and practice communication in and beyond the school setting.



Machine translation now provides instant support for meaning-making, reshaping motivation and blurring the line between formal instruction and authentic interaction, as students can test choices, compare alternatives, and notice form–meaning links while they work. AI tutoring systems build personalised pathways that are not limited by place or time, so students in EFL settings far from major centres can receive adaptive input and tailored feedback that once belonged mainly to ESL environments with many teachers and frequent contact with proficient users. Advances in natural language processing have transformed automated assessment and feedback by using algorithms that analyse student output in terms of phonology, lexis, grammar, discourse, and pragmatics. Recent work suggests that these systems can accommodate diverse English varieties while supporting pedagogically robust, evidence-informed practice (Yousefpoori-Naeim, 2023). They provide timely, actionable feedback aligned with stated learning objectives and assessment criteria, rather than enforcing a single native-speaker norm. As a result, they work whether students operate within ESL or EFL frameworks. Voice recognition has widened access to pronunciation training by giving immediate and objective information about phonological accuracy and rhythm, so students can build oral proficiency without relying only on native-speaker models or immersion. Yousefpoori-Naeim (2023) argues that the current applications, such as Duolingo’s adaptive sequences and focused pronunciation apps, now enable more autonomous development.

4.3 Demographic and Social Changes

To illustrate how language revitalisation movements are increasingly positioning English as both a potential threat and an essential tool for indigenous and minority language communities, Tao (2019) presents their findings from their research on the Global Englishes intervention. Arguments about linguistic imperialism, therefore, need to be balanced with the practical requirement for students to operate across local and global spheres. From an equity lens, many communities still lack fair access to high-quality English teaching, as distance, limited resources, and weak cultural alignment continue to block opportunities and strain local linguistic ecologies when multilingual support is scarce. Protecting culture thus requires a careful balance between global communication competence and local identity. The balance is strongest when



pedagogy treats English as additive rather than a replacement within the linguistic repertoire. Such additive approaches can help students move with confidence across languages and cultures, and they keep a clear focus on context and audience for each task (Rengur et al., 2025). However, an additive orientation and routine code-switching, that is, alternating between languages within or across interactions, do not in themselves eliminate language-loss concerns: heritage-language attrition can still occur when domains of use narrow, literacy is under-developed, and institutional support is weak. Code-switching in everyday life may signal multilingual competence, but it can also coexist with gradual reduction in heritage-language range and accuracy over time, so maintenance requires sustained opportunities for high-function use and literacy alongside English.

5 Case Study: Southeast Asian Contexts

5.1 Regional Linguistic Diversity

Since Southeast Asia is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world, as explained by Kirkpatrick (2020), it encompasses many prominent language families and forms complex multilingual ecologies. For example, Indonesia is home to more than 700 different languages, and most speakers operate across layered repertoires involving local languages, Bahasa Indonesia, , the national language, and varying degrees of English exposure shaped by region, schooling, media, and work. In this kind of multilingual ecology, English cannot be cleanly classified as either ‘second’ or ‘foreign’ in a single, uniform way, so the ESL/EFL labels oversimplify how English is learned and used across the country. In practice, English takes on multiple roles: it is an official language in both Singapore and the Philippines that shapes schooling, media, and public administration. It functions as the working language of ASEAN for meetings, documents, and cooperation, and it serves as a growing lingua franca for trade, higher education, tourism, and cross-border research (Kirkpatrick, 2024; Yarrow et al., 2024). These present-day patterns are rooted in colonial legacies that created different language hierarchies across the region. Under British rule, Singapore and Malaysia institutionalised English-medium schooling and English use in the civil service. Under American governance, the Philippines made English co-official with Filipino and



embedded it across the curriculum, whereas Dutch administration in Indonesia prioritised Dutch and later Bahasa Indonesia as the national language, keeping English peripheral for much of the twentieth century. More recently, economic globalisation, digital connectivity, and regional mobility have expanded the role of English in business, higher education, and technology.

5.2 Country-Specific Analysis

In Southeast Asia, some countries demonstrate how English can function as a fully institutionalized language within national systems for education, government, and daily life. In Singapore, the government's bilingual education policy means students are taught in English as well as their mother tongue, such as Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil. It has helped students achieve very high results in international exams. Additionally, it has also led to the development of Singlish, a local variety of English that mixes words and structures from different languages spoken in the country, which changes how people see English identity, and even challenges old ideas of native-speaker standards (Hashim & Leitner, 2020; Lee et al., 2023; Lim, 2024). In the Philippines, English is protected by the constitution and is used across schools, TV, newspapers, and official documents. English language skills are becoming increasingly important for gaining admission to good schools and securing jobs, so individuals who speak English often have better chances than those who do not. That creates social divisions, as families with more money can often afford better English education, and students from poorer backgrounds may struggle to catch up (Tupas, 2024).

Contemporary reforms in EFL have spread quickly, but the outcomes have not been the same across all countries. In Vietnam, the national Foreign Language Project aimed to help students use English for everyday communication, but progress was constrained by shortages of well-trained teachers, uneven teacher preparation, and low levels of speaking and listening skills among graduates (Kirkpatrick, 2020; Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020; Tran & Tanemura, 2020). These problems made it difficult for students to transition from classroom-based knowledge to real-world communication, resulting in many students struggling to speak or understand English fluently outside of school (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020; Canh, 2024). Thailand experienced similar issues after trying to shift from grammar-focused teaching to communicative methods, but many teachers



lacked confidence and stuck to traditional approaches like grammar translation and exam preparation. These shortcomings caused gaps between policy and practice, where students got better at reading and writing but struggled with speaking and listening (Kaur et al., 2016). Hashim and Leitner (2020) and Thamtanajit (2022) also note that many parents responded to these problems by paying for private lessons, as exams were still a significant focus in schools.

5.3 Challenging the Binary in Practice

In Southeast Asia, language learning is increasingly understood as taking place in hybrid spaces that do not fit neatly into either the ESL or EFL categories, since multilingual students often draw on translanguaging strategies that combine English with their heritage languages in both academic writing and everyday communication, challenging pedagogical models that assume languages should remain separate or monolingual (Storheil & Iversen, 2024). Informal digital exposure also plays a significant role, as students acquire English through online interactions, gaming, and social networks, which reshape patterns of use and competence across the region. Sociolinguistic research indicates that only a tiny proportion of global English communication, about 4%, occurs between first-language speakers, showing that most encounters involve multilingual practices where code-switching reflects normal communicative ability rather than a deficit (Fouser, 2007; Joseph & Devi, 2025). ASEAN's choice of English as its working language has further extended demand for regional communication skills that combine formal academic English with localised varieties suited to business, education, and diplomacy, highlighting how functional competence now depends on flexibility across contexts.

6 Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications

1. The ESL/EFL binary should be replaced by a continuum account of “English-learning context” defined by shifting configurations of status, domains of use, and contact intensity across offline and digital spaces, because



multilingual ecologies produce hybrid conditions that do not behave like stable categories (Hiver et al., 2022).

2. Theoretical models of proficiency need to move from monolingual, native-speaker benchmarking towards multilingual interactional competence, where English operates as a flexible resource within repertoires and where legitimacy is grounded in intelligibility and strategic meaning-making rather than membership in fixed “circles” or “contexts” (Jenkins, 2015).
3. Explanations of learning outcomes should be framed as complex dynamic processes, displaying nonlinearity, variability, and context sensitivity across time, which weakens deterministic assumptions that “ESL causes success” or “EFL causes limitation” and instead foregrounds interacting constraints and affordances within systems (Hiver et al., 2022).

6.2 Pedagogical Implications

1. Replace ESL/EFL placement logic with continuum-based diagnosis and curriculum design.

Plan programmes around observable variables (domains of use, medium of instruction, density of interaction, digital contact) so objectives and materials fit local language ecologies rather than inherited labels (Hiver et al., 2022). Link this to community-grounded needs analysis and assessment, so that “context” is evidenced in tasks and outcomes, not assumed from national classifications (Weidl & Erling, 2025).

2. Make translanguaging and ELF-informed interaction the core classroom method and assess it explicitly.

Treat learners’ repertoires as instructional resources and design tasks that require strategic switching, negotiation of meaning, and audience-sensitive choices, as these are the competencies emphasised in translanguaging and lingua franca accounts of English use (Wei, 2017). Align assessment with intelligibility, pragmatic effectiveness, and functional multilingual performance rather than monolingual purity, which the binary tacitly rewards (Zein, 2022).



3. Rebuild teacher education and resourcing around equity, anti-native-speakerism, and digitally expanded contact.

Prepare teachers to enact culturally sustaining pedagogy and to resist colonial language ideologies that delegitimise local varieties and learners' languages (Idrus & Sohidi, 2023). Sustain this through structured preservice pathways and professional learning communities and integrate AI-mediated feedback and tutoring as access-extending tools that reduce the "authentic input" gap often attributed to EFL conditions (Wiens et al., 2019).

7 Conclusion

The study concludes that:

1. The ESL/EFL binary does not adequately explain English education in Southeast Asia because multilingual ecologies and postcolonial and regional dynamics produce hybrid contexts.
2. Classroom realities are shaped by translanguaging, code-switching, and informal digital exposure, so English learning extends beyond formal instruction.
3. Policy aims often diverge from practice due to constraints in teacher proficiency and preparation, curriculum design, and assessment systems that prioritise grammatical accuracy over communicative competence.
4. Supranational integration and technological change further blur conventional ESL/EFL boundaries by expanding the domains and modes of English use.
5. Language planning, teacher education, and assessment should move beyond monolingual assumptions and support equity-focused, additive multilingual approaches aligned with local context and global communicative demands



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