

The Roles of Multilingualism in Enhancing the Relationship between ASEAN and South Korea

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to analyse a very common phenomenon in Malaysia, namely multilingualism, and provide evidence of how multilingualism could enhance the relationship between the ASEAN countries and South Korea. A survey of 50 Malaysian students was conducted to assess their proficiency in and knowledge of ASEAN and Korean languages, and a series of interviews was conducted with the same group of students. The results of the survey showed that 92% of respondents were multilingual, able to speak Malay, English, and at least one other language, indicating that multilingualism is a widespread phenomenon here in Malaysia. The majority of the respondents agreed that multilingualism improved their problem-solving skills, led to greater academic success, boosted career prospects, helped them understand cultural differences, enhanced their self-esteem, and expanded their social networks. Normalising multilingualism could be a simple way of enhancing the relationship between the ASEAN countries and South Korea. This can be achieved through the exchange of expertise, student exchange programmes, and through educational institutes. It is hoped that this study will provide policymakers with foundational ideas on how multilingualism could bridge the gap and enhance relationships between countries.

Keywords: Multilingualism, benefits, relationship, ASEAN countries, South Korea

Introduction

The Southeast Asia region comprises eleven countries, namely Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam. According to the ASEAN Secretariat (2008), ten of these countries, excluding Timor-Leste, formed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, in 1967. In 2022, Timor-Leste was finally recognized as the 11th country at the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits and Related Summits in Cambodia. ASEAN is not a military pact, but a regional organization with the aim of establishing economic cooperation and political cooperation, and social and cultural links (Keling et al., 2011). Apart from that, ASEAN tries to safeguard mutual interests and develop regional solidarity as well as promoting regional peace and stability (Gyngell, 1983). The collaboration between these 11 countries not only strengthens the relationship but also enhances the preservation of each country's culture.

Southeast Asia is a region of wonderful linguistic diversity, with over 1,200 languages spoken by 655 million people across this large, geographically and culturally diverse area (Maliwat, 2021). However, according to Enfield and Comrie (2015), there are only around 600 distinct languages spoken in this region. Despite such differing claims about the number of languages, there is agreement on one thing, and that is that Southeast Asia is known for its language diversity. Indeed, within

Malaysia itself, 134 languages are spoken, of which 112 are indigenous and 22 non-indigenous. In 2007, ASEAN rather unofficially declared English to be its sole official language (Crocco and Bunwirat, 2014). Even though this region is the home of literally hundreds of spoken languages (Goddard, 2005), English is still the official language. Over the past few decades, many Southeast Asian governments have promoted English language education as a linguistic pathway for developing human capital and improving the global economic competitiveness of their nations (Lee, Hamid and Hardy, 2020).

Some concerns have been raised regarding this policy. For example, according to Kirkpatrick (2017), if this policy of teaching only the national language plus English is maintained in Southeast Asia, people who would otherwise have become multilingual will likely be bilingual in the future, with proficiency only in the national language and English. This means that although Southeast Asian people are capable of speaking more than two languages, because of government policy, they will be stuck with only two. This is already the case as more and more Southeast Asian people are capable of speaking Korean alongside their native languages and English. According to Shim (2013), the Korean Wave syndrome in Southeast Asia has become stronger than anywhere else in the world. For some communities, the national language is also the native language. However, for others, 'national' and 'native' may be different languages. Take Chinese Malaysians, for example. Although Malay is their national language, their native language is Chinese. Hence, they can speak Chinese, Malay and even English.

Currently, most sectors in Malaysia emphasise the importance of English language skills while also upholding the Malay language as the national language. Previously, English was excluded from the governmental and educational domains, as it symbolized the exact opposite of self-government and freedom from colonial rule (Wong, 1973). However, according to Kärchner-Ober, Mukherjee and David (2011), English was reintroduced when the former prime minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, introduced a new policy that emphasised the importance of being highly proficient in English in order to achieve the nation's goal of becoming a fully developed country by 2020. English also plays an important role in the Malaysian educational system. According to Gill (2002), Article 152 of Malaysia Federal Constitution designated English as the second language in Malaysia, after Malay, which is the national language of the country. It is taught as a compulsory subject, and students are required to pass it in order to further their studies. With this emphasis on learning English, most people have lost interest in learning other languages, thinking that English will provide them with more benefits.

The fact that English is the official language of ASEAN could potentially have a negative effect on the region. One consequence could be that it has the effect of influencing society to focus solely on mastering the English language. While both ASEAN countries and South Korea are currently in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership era, it is important to find common ground to further strengthen the relationship from both sides. The ability to speak the same language could be a key factor in enhancing the relationship between ASEAN countries and South Korea. Although mastering English is beneficial, it is also useful to learn other languages. In fact, being multilingual confers a wide variety of benefits and previous studies offer evidence to support this claim.

The Utilisation of Multilingualism: the One with the Many

The term 'multilingualism' refers to the use of three or more languages and is distinguished from 'bilingualism', which is the use of two languages (Aronin, 2019). According to the European Union (2022), 'multilingualism' is understood as the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives. Many studies have investigated the benefits of multilingualism in various fields. Given its growing importance in modern society, according to Cenoz (2013), multilingualism has attracted increasing attention in applied linguistics, as can be seen in the titles of journals, articles, books and academic conferences. At the same time, within applied linguistics, the study of multilingualism has been approached from different perspectives, as will be seen in this section.

First of all, we will be focusing on the use of multilingualism in the political field. In European countries, multilingualism is not only an expression of all of a country's cultural identities, but it also helps to preserve democracy, transparency and accountability (European Union, 2022). One way to

ensure that multilingualism is the norm for the population as a whole is by making sure that no legislation can enter into force until it has been translated into all the country's official languages. It is also claimed that multilingualism offers benefits in the education field. According to Okal (2014), the use of multilingualism in education among other things fosters the creation and appreciation of cultural awareness, adding academic and educational value, enhancing creativity and encouraging adjustment in society as well as an appreciation of local languages. This all supports the argument that multilingualism does indeed have many benefits in various situations. This study therefore aims to analyse how multilingualism can contribute to enhancing the relationship between the ASEAN countries and South Korea.

Various inventions that have been introduced in the field of medicine are designed to take multilingualism into account, one of them being an advanced medical chatbot which addresses crucial healthcare communication challenges. According to Himel, Hasana, Salsabil and Islam (2024), this groundbreaking idea aims to improve the effectiveness and availability of healthcare services by introducing an intelligent, multilingual chatbot. This technology enables patients to communicate with doctors from diverse linguistic backgrounds through an automated language translation model, eliminating language barriers and extending healthcare access to rural regions worldwide. It incorporates the benefits of multilingualism into a machine in order to improve human life. Although some may not agree with the use of machines in the field of language, we have to admit that these technologies have contributed a lot to human development.

In fact, the use of multilingual tools is also being adopted in the field of environmental study preservation. Decision-support tools have been created primarily in the English language, leading to significant linguistic problems for assessors who are not native English speakers and who must convey outcomes to local stakeholders. For example, the Aquatic Species Invasiveness Screening Kit (AS-ISK), a decision-support tool that conducts screenings and communicates outcomes in 32 languages, was developed in order to ease the situation (Copp et al., 2021). In summary, multilingualism has proven beneficial across various sectors, and it is important to analyse its true potential as a bridge for strengthening the relationship between the ASEAN countries and South Korea.

According to the ASEAN-Korea Centre, 2024 is a special year as it marks the 35th anniversary of ASEAN-Korean Dialogue Relations, with anticipation of the elevation of the ASEAN-Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, as well as the 15th anniversary of the organization's establishment. This study was conducted to commemorate these events, with the aim of strengthening the relationship between the ASEAN countries and South Korea from the perspective of multilingualism. Previous studies have shown that multilingualism is a powerful tool that can be beneficial across many sectors. The objectives of this study are to determine the current situation of multilingualism among Malaysian students, as well as their thoughts on this phenomenon. This study will also offer suggestions on how multilingualism can be expanded across ASEAN countries. The next section describes how this study was conducted.

Methodology

In this study, a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, was employed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The quantitative data were collected through a survey conducted with Malaysian students to assess their proficiency and knowledge of ASEAN and Korean languages. The survey was also designed to gather an overview of the respondents' thoughts on the advantages of being multilingual. According to de Leeuw, Hox, and Dillman (2008), a survey can be seen as a research strategy in which quantitative information is systematically collected from a relatively large sample taken from a population. Samples were collected using a technique known as convenience sampling, which is a process of collecting data from a research population that is easily accessible to the researcher (Rahi, 2017). A total of 50 students from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) was selected as the sample for this study. The inclusion criteria for the sample included being a Malaysian citizen, currently residing in the country,

and either currently studying or having previously studied at UKM. The exclusion criteria eliminated individuals who were unable to understand English, as the survey was written in this language.

The same group of students was then interviewed to assess their thoughts on enhancing the relationship between countries. Best and Kahn (1995) stated that the interview is, in a sense, an oral questionnaire in which, instead of writing a response, the subject or interviewee provides the needed information orally and face-to-face. This study uses a standardised interview method, one which has a series of questions designed to elicit specific responses or answers from respondents (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). The questions are typically specific and offer a fixed range of answers, making them relatively quick and easy to administer, as respondents simply place a tick in a box for the answers selected. According to Bryman (2012), this type of interview tries to ensure that each respondent has to respond to the same questions in the same order. The interview focused on six benefits of being a multilingual person, and each respondent was asked for their thoughts on each point. The answers available for each question ranged from 'totally agree' to 'totally disagree,' and respondents were allowed to choose only one answer.

Malaysia and Multilingualism: The Diverse and the Multi

Malaysia is a multilingual and multi-ethnic state boasting around 140 different historical languages (Lewis, Simons & Fennig, 2016). These languages are spoken by a population made up mainly of Malays (54.6%), other Bumiputras (12.8%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians, particularly Tamil Indians (7.3%), and other unlisted ethnic groups (0.7%) (Saw, 2015:64). Despite this great linguistic diversity, Standard Malay is the only official language, while English, originally the colonial language, is considered a second language. According to Coluzzi (2017:210), the position of English is very strong, particularly in many prominent domains such as the mass media, as well as being a preferred language for inter-ethnic communication, particularly among educated people. The results of the survey appear to support the points made above, and respondents included. Individuals from various ethnic groups including Malays, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kadazan Dusun, Murut, Bidayuh, Euroasian and Siamese. Figure 1 below presents the findings of this survey:

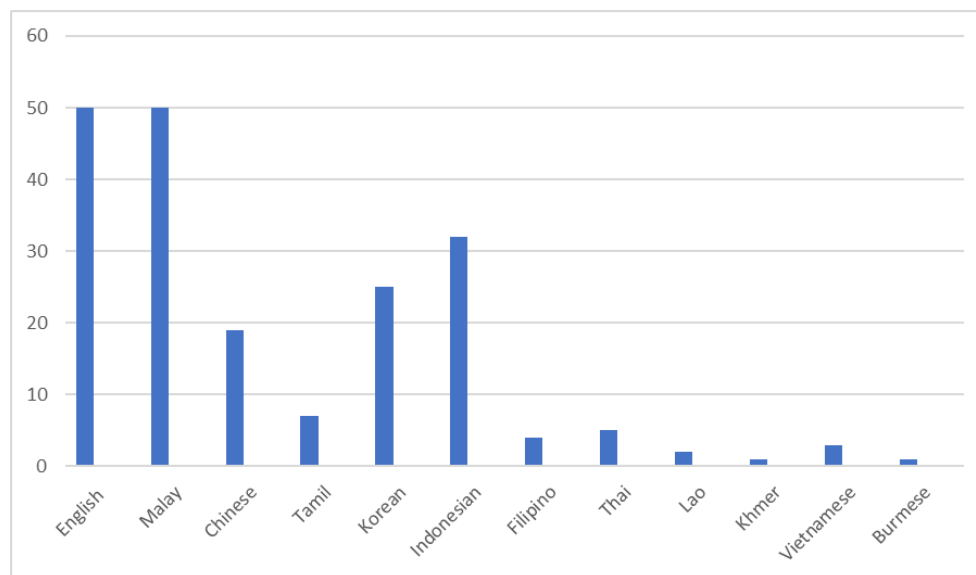


Fig.1. Number of Respondents Able to Speak ASEAN Languages

The six languages with the most speakers are English, Malay, Indonesian, Korean, Chinese, and Tamil, while Thai, Filipino, Vietnamese, Lao, Khmer, and Burmese have fewer speakers. All the students who participated in this survey were able to speak English (100%) and Malay (100%), with levels ranging from professional working to native. This is because Malay is the official language of Malaysia, while English is the most widely used language in the world. Only four of them (8%) were

bilingual, while the rest were capable of speaking English, Malay, and at least one other language. After English and Malay, the next most widely spoken languages were Indonesian (64%) and Korean (50%). 19 of the respondents (38%) were able to speak Chinese while 7 of them (14%) could speak Tamil.

The reason why most of the respondents were able to speak Indonesian is that Malay and Indonesian belong to the same language family and share most of their lexical inventories. Malaysia and Indonesia were colonised by different colonial powers, resulting in different linguistic and socio-cultural landscapes. According to Burhanudeen et al. (2007), the fact that both countries were colonised for an extended period – Indonesia by the Dutch and Malaysia by the British – made it inevitable that Malay would have more borrowings and loanwords from the English language, while Indonesian would owe much of its unique linguistic identity to its Dutch colonial heritage. The widespread acceptance of Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, has resulted in an increase in the number of Korean speakers here in Malaysia. Nowadays, many people are taking Korean lessons as their third or fourth language.

According to Nagaraj et al. (2009) and Saw (2015), ethnic Chinese groups make up around 24.6% of the total population of Malaysia, while Indian ethnic groups make up around 7.3%. Four of the respondents to our survey were ethnic Chinese who were fluent in Chinese, while five were Indian, and fluent in Tamil. However, there are people from other ethnic groups who are also able to speak these two languages. This indicates that proficiency in language is not bound to ethnicity and is something which anybody can develop. Saw (2015) also claimed that 0.7% of the population here in Malaysia belong to unlisted ethnic groups. This includes some of the minority ethnic groups such as the Siamese. The Siamese community originated from Thailand but migrated to Malaysia during the reign of King Rama V Chulalongkorn of Siam, between 1868 and 1910 (Abdul Majid and Ngui, 2018). Two of the respondents to the questionnaire are of Siamese descent, so they are fluent in Thai. However, like Chinese and Tamils, people of different ethnicities are trying to master this language.

Other ASEAN languages such as Filipino, Vietnamese, Lao, Khmer and Burmese do not have a great number of speakers here in Malaysia. However, some of the respondents can speak these languages, indicating that Malaysian citizens have a wide knowledge of ASEAN languages. The interviews which were conducted with the same group of students identified six main points regarding the benefits of being multilingual. Below are some points relating to the various benefits of multilingualism for an individual:

Improving Problem-Solving Skills

One of the benefits of mastering more than two languages is that it improves an individual's problem-solving skills as well as their critical thinking. Around 88% of the respondents chose 'agreed' or 'totally agreed' for this point, while only 12% were neutral about it. A study conducted by Andleeb, Asgher and Zimi (2023) found that bilingual individuals performed significantly better than their monolingual counterparts in terms of both cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills. The ability of a multilingual individual to switch between languages according to the situation can promote cognitive flexibility and increase mental agility. This is particularly beneficial, especially when it comes to problem-solving situations in which multiple approaches may need consideration. Multilingual individuals also have a strong executive function, a mental process that enables us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. According to Alshewiter, Khasawneh and Khasawneh (2024), multilingual people have a better working memory due to the cognitive challenges posed by speaking several languages at once and switching back and forth between them.

In most universities here in Malaysia, a particular language is usually taught together with aspects of the culture of that community. Individuals not only learn about the language itself but are also exposed to different cultural perspectives, which can broaden their thinking and enhance their creativity in relation to problem-solving by bringing a variety of viewpoints to bear. Being multilingual allows individuals to access a broader range of language resources for expressing themselves or addressing problems, which may result in more innovative solutions. To summarise, mastering various languages does have positive effects on someone's brain, as evidenced by improvements in problem-solving skills and creative thinking.

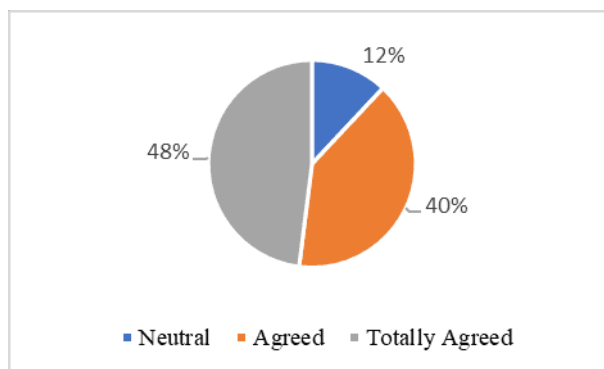


Fig. 2. Improving Problem-Solving Skills and Critical Thinking through Multilingualism

Contributing to Academic Success

Academic success is a dream for every student in the world. Learning multiple languages exercises the brain as well as improving the overall cognitive function, resulting in significant benefits across various academic disciplines. In the survey, 88% of the respondents either 'agreed' or 'totally agreed' with this point, while 10% were 'neutral', and only 2% 'disagreed'. Multilingualism opens up a broader range of academic opportunities. Aside from their major studies, students can access language-related fields such as literature, research, and academic resources in multiple languages. This enables them to expand their knowledge and academic horizons.

Previous studies have also shown that multilingual students often outperform their monolingual peers in academic assessments. For example, a study by Sandamali (2020) of 50 Sri Lankan students found that those who were multilingual scored higher on English tests than their peers. Another study by Calafato and Simmonds (2023) of 191 undergraduate students in France studying English as a foreign language found that they employed similar learning styles and self-regulation strategies in the way they approached non-language subjects. This indicates that multilingual individuals sometimes employ the same learning techniques they use for learning languages to excel in various ways, especially in academic fields. To sum up, learning multiple languages not only opens up a broader range of academic opportunities but helps to develop new learning styles that are applicable to other academic fields as well.

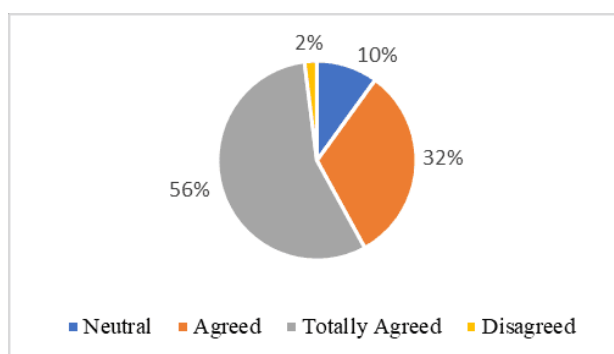


Fig. 3. Increasing Academic Success through Multilingualism

Boosting Career Prospects

Another benefit of being multilingual is that it can boost one's career prospects. 86% of the respondents either 'agreed' or 'totally' agreed with this point, while 8% were 'neutral' and only 6% 'disagreed'. Nowadays, many companies operate internationally and therefore require employees to be capable of communicating effectively with clients, partners and colleagues from different linguistic backgrounds. In Malaysia, for example, there is a huge demand for Chinese-speaking individuals in

the working world. This is because Chinese has become one of the major languages in global business (Che, 2022). In recent years, the Hallyu phenomenon has been well-accepted and has had an instant positive impact on promoting Korean social norms and culture in Malaysia (Jalaluddin and Ahmad, 2011). There is therefore an increasing demand for Korean-speaking individuals in the country. The huge demand for Chinese and Korean speakers in Malaysia is proof that multilingual individuals possess a wider range of career prospects than others.

The boost in career prospects conferred by multilingualism is to be found not only in Malaysia but also in other countries. A study conducted by Pietrzyk-Kowalec (2023) in European Union countries found that multilingual individuals were often preferred by employers, especially in sectors like international business, tourism, and diplomacy, where cross-border interactions are frequent. In Africa, the ability of Africans to communicate with others in their language of competence makes for good relationships and benefits society as a whole (Kame, 2012). Multilingual individuals can pursue opportunities in various sectors, including translation and interpretation services, language teaching or specialization, journalism and media, healthcare, social services, and more. In today's globalised landscape, as technology companies expand into new markets worldwide, there is a significant demand for professionals capable of localising these technologies to suit diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. This presents a promising career path for multilingual individuals.

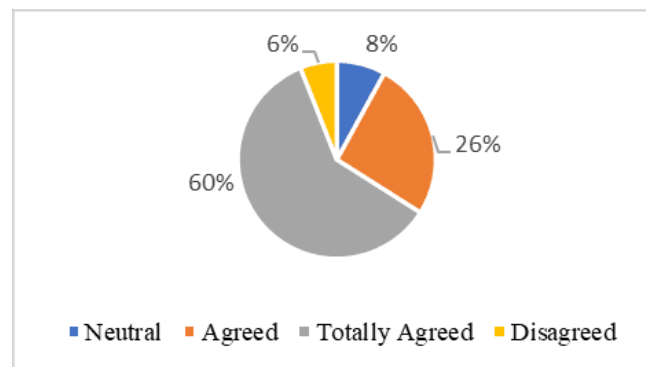


Fig. 4. Boosting Career Prospects through Multilingualism

Cultural Differences

Multilingualism could also be a bridge to understanding cultural differences. According to Drobot (2022), we can increase our awareness of cultural differences through multilingualism and empathise with these differences at the level of language as well as at the level of values and mindsets. 70% of the respondents 'totally agreed' with this claim, 24% 'agreed', while only 6% had a 'neutral' view. The ASEAN countries and South Korea all have culturally diverse backgrounds and speak different languages. Language reflects the values, beliefs and customs of a country's culture. By learning multiple languages, individuals gain insights into the different cultural perspectives embedded within those languages. In addition, speaking multiple languages enables individuals to communicate directly with people from different cultural backgrounds, eliminating any need for intermediaries. This direct interaction fosters deeper understanding and empathy toward that particular culture.

In translation, a challenge arises when dealing with two distinct cultures. Translators frequently encounter difficulties in selecting appropriate methods, especially when translating texts which reflect a particular culture (Cho & Abdul Wahid, 2016). Aixelá (1996) defined this phenomenon as the challenge of 'culture-specific items', underscoring the persistent nature of translation problems in situations which involve two languages and texts. This problem can be mitigated through multilingualism. Learning multiple languages necessitates understanding different worldviews and ways of expressing ideas. Consequently, it fosters the ability to perceive the world from diverse cultural perspectives, thereby reducing challenges in the translation field.

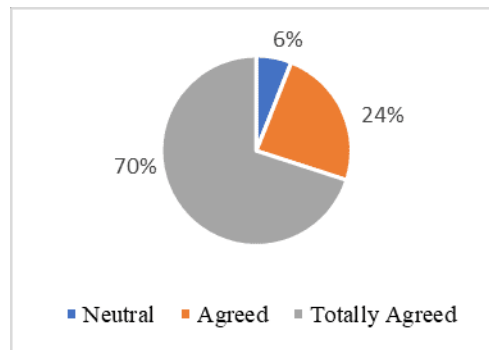


Fig. 5. Understanding Cultural Differences through Multilingualism

Enhancing Self Esteem

Being multilingual can also enhance an individual's self-esteem. 54% of the respondents 'totally agreed' with this idea and 40% 'agreed' while only 6% were neutral on this point. For some people, successfully learning a new language can be a significant achievement. It reflects an individual's ability to set goals, work towards them, and ultimately succeed, which significantly boosts their self-esteem and confidence. In addition, learning multiple languages could also reduce an individual's anxiety levels. A study by Botes, Dewaele and Greif (2020) shows that higher levels of multilingualism are associated with higher levels of enjoyment and lower levels of anxiety in foreign language learners. As well as this, more foreign language learners who perceived themselves to be proficient indicated that they experienced higher levels of enjoyment and lower level of anxiety. Being able to converse fluently in multiple languages enhances one's ability to communicate with a broader range of people. For example, if you are capable of speaking the Korean language, you will be able to communicate with the Korean community. This can lead to increased confidence in social situations, as you feel better equipped to express yourself effectively.

Furthermore, people will be more comfortable with someone who speaks their native language, if they themselves are incapable of speaking other languages. Understanding multiple languages can also help prevent misunderstandings in conversations. When individuals can comprehend the languages being spoken around them, they are less likely to misinterpret the intentions or content of the conversation. This is particularly relevant in situations where someone might feel uncomfortable or suspicious because they can't understand what others are saying. Multilingualism also fosters an atmosphere of inclusivity and understanding by allowing individuals to engage more fully in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. If multilingual individuals can communicate more clearly and develop mutual respect, they will be able to build stronger relationships and foster a sense of trust and harmony within communities. This is particularly crucial, especially in an environment which is home to diverse communities such as the one in Malaysia.

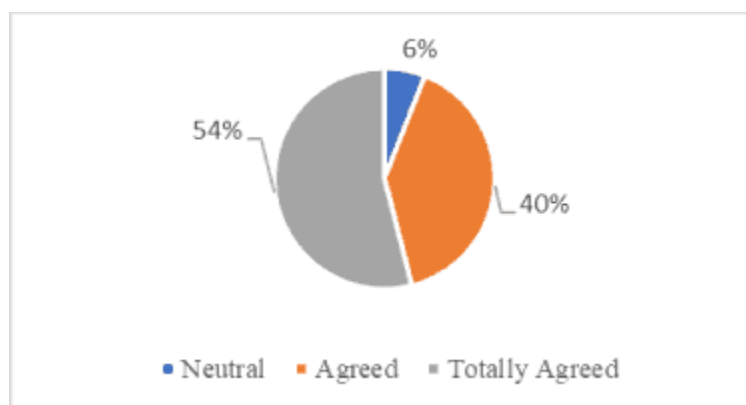


Fig. 6. Enhancing Self-Esteem through Multilingualism

Expanding Social Networks

The final point to discuss relates to how being multilingual can expand one's social network. The ability to speak several languages enables individuals to connect with people from various cultural backgrounds, leading to new friendships, networking opportunities and a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives. 90% of the respondents either 'agreed' or 'totally agreed' with this point, while 8% remained 'neutral', and only 2% 'disagreed' with it. As previously stated, language is deeply intertwined with one's culture. Therefore, the ability to speak a certain language indicates a deep respect for that particular culture and identity. There are many languages spoken throughout Malaysia. The data shows that all the respondents were proficient in Malay, showing their respect for Malay identity as one of the native peoples of this country. However, some individuals were also proficient in other languages such as Chinese, Tamil and various minority languages. This demonstrates respect within the Malaysian community for the identities of other ethnic groups.

In some cases, multilingualism can create a complex social network, as seen in Wondama Bay, Papua, Indonesia. According to Sawaki and Arwam (2018), a new language known as Wandamen emerged as a result of the combination of many languages spoken by the local people and served as a lingua franca. In some cases, communities which have many languages can become segregated according to the language they speak. Instead of segregating the community, speaking multiple languages in Wondama Bay has led to the emergence of new social networks capable of communicating in a unified language. To summarize, multilingualism not only connects people from various backgrounds but can also lead to the formation of new communities.

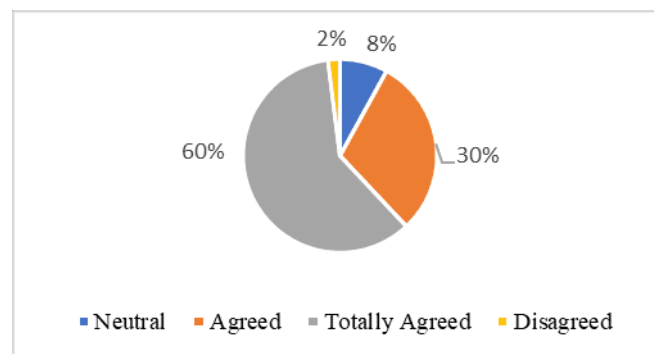


Fig. 7. Expanding Social Networking through Multilingualism

Bridging the Gap between ASEAN and South Korea through Multilingualism: The Unification of Twelve

In the preceding section, the current situation of multilingualism in Malaysia, as well as its benefits for individuals is discussed. Previous studies have shown that multilingualism is beneficial in a variety of sectors, including politics, education, medicine, and environmental studies. In this section, we will discuss how multilingualism can serve as a bridge and enhance the relationship between ASEAN countries and South Korea. The current situation of multilingualism here in Malaysia indicates that it is a widespread phenomenon, demonstrating that many people are capable of being multilingual. In the first section of this paper, we discussed how ASEAN rather unsystematically declared English to be its sole official language despite the great number of languages in the region. While communicating in one language may have benefits, it also undermines the richness of the region's diverse linguistic landscape, considering that there are thousands of other languages in this region.

Choosing a European language as the official language may suggest that these other languages are of lower status. Although choosing English as our official language may be beneficial in many ways, it does not mean that our language diversity should be left to wither. On the contrary, we should embrace this linguistic diversity by sharing languages with each other. Sharing our languages could

create a wider multilingual community across the region, while at the same time bridging the gap between countries. The next section presents some suggestions for expanding multilingualism in the ASEAN region, as well as in South Korea:

Sharing Expertise

Language is a powerful tool for fostering understanding and cooperation among nations in the ASEAN region. Therefore, sharing language expertise within this region can promote better communication, cultural exchanges, and collaboration in various fields such as trade, tourism, education and diplomacy. One way of facilitating this is through the exchange of expertise. Countries in the Southeast Asian region have long engaged in sharing expertise across various fields. For example, Malaysia and Singapore have shared expertise in modern agricultural practices to strengthen bilateral relations and ensure sufficient food supplies for both countries (Abu Yamin, 2023). Furthermore, this region also has strong relationships with other East Asian countries. According to the Prime Minister, Malaysia welcomes the strengthening and increasing of cooperation between ASEAN, Japan and South Korea, especially in the fields of green technology, digital technology and clean energy (Azil, 2023).

However, the sharing of expertise proposed in this study will primarily focus on the diversity of the languages of ASEAN and South Korea and the issues arising from this diversity. The initiative proposed here would mean that individuals from different ASEAN countries and South Korea can teach each other their own languages. South Korea has launched initiatives to spread the Korean language in Malaysia by establishing numerous language institutes such as the King Sejong Institute and Korean Education Centre throughout the country. The establishment of these language institutes has significantly increased the number of Korean speakers here in Malaysia. Students are able to learn the language from native speakers, as most of the teachers are Korean citizens. At the same time, local people have also been trained to become teachers of Korean. This symbiotic relationship benefits not only the Korean language but also the Malay language, as some individuals have been transferred to South Korea to teach Malay. There is a clear commitment to sharing language expertise between Malaysia and South Korea.

Similar initiatives should be taken with other ASEAN languages. The exchange of language expertise between ASEAN countries should be conducted on a larger scale, so that it promotes multilingualism and fosters regional relationships. It cannot be denied that programmes involving the exchange of language expertise may incur significant costs. However, there is an alternative method through which individuals can share their language with others: online platforms. Platforms or apps should be developed to enable people in ASEAN countries to connect with native speakers of other languages for the purpose of learning and practicing new languages. Nowadays, there are various apps for learning foreign languages, such as LinguaLeo, DuoLingo, British Council, Babbel, Busuu and Memrise. However, most of these apps are only for learning European languages, and it is hard to find apps developed for Southeast Asian languages. According to Kruchinin and Bagrova (2021), these apps are dedicated solely to language teaching rather than language practice. It is important for a language to be taught by a native speaker to facilitate learning for the student. An exchange of language expertise could be a simple solution to this problem.

Student Exchange Programmes

An exchange programme allows students from universities in different countries to spend a semester or two in other institutions while taking courses (Atalar, 2020). Students from the “home university” become visiting students in the “host university” for a limited time to increase their international exposure. Participating in an exchange programme can indeed accelerate language learning in several ways. First of all, living in a country where the language is spoken forces you to use it in everyday situations, developing your comprehension and speaking skills. Learning a new language in one’s own country can be challenging since there may be no one to practice with. Exchange programmes provide abundant opportunities to practice speaking with native speakers, which is invaluable for improving pronunciation and fluency.

Both ASEAN countries and South Korea have taken initiatives to promote exchange programmes within their respective regions. Universities have played an important role in this process. In addition to long-term exchange programs (lasting one to two semesters), some universities also offer short-term programmes that last from one week to a month. For example, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU), with the aid of the Temasek Foundation, have organised numerous annual programmes on their respective campuses. However, many exchange programmes focus only on either leadership or economic topics. For instance, the NUS Summer Program in Entrepreneurship focuses solely on the economic aspects, while the Temasek Foundation International Leadership Enrichment and Regional Networking Programme @ NTU focuses solely on the leadership aspects. However, points should be given as there are some cultural aspects, including languages in these programs. Another example is the link between Malaysia and South Korea. To commemorate their relationship, the Ministry of Youth and Sport organises an annual event in which each country sends delegates to learn about leadership in the other.

Exchange programmes are indeed common in the ASEAN region and South Korea. However, programmes focusing solely on learning ASEAN and Korean languages need to be implemented throughout this region. A good example of this is the annual Korean speech contest held by the Sejeong Institute or Korean Education Centre, where the winners will be given a chance to study the Korean language at one of the universities in South Korea. These contests give the winners the chance to enhance their Korean proficiency by studying in the country itself. They are able to immerse themselves in the local culture throughout their stay there. Many universities even organise language-oriented summer programmes which give participants from around the world a chance to learn about the local language as well as the culture. To sum up, a student exchange programme, whether long-term or short-term, is another effective way to enhance multilingualism in the ASEAN region as well as South Korea.

The Roles of Educational Institutes

Educational institutes play crucial roles in promoting the learning of ASEAN and Korean languages in their respective countries. The results of the survey indicated that 80% of the respondents learned their languages at public institutes such as schools and universities. In Malaysia, various universities offer foreign languages as part of their curriculum. However, most of them focus on European languages such as German, French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese. Nevertheless, there are some universities that offer ASEAN languages to their students. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) offer Thai as an elective course which can be taken by any students who wish to learn it.

Institutes can design and teach courses focusing specifically on ASEAN languages. Such courses can be integrated into regular language programmes or offered through specialised language courses. This ensures that students have structured opportunities to learn these languages. The first point discusses the exchange of language expertise to enhance multilingualism in the ASEAN region and South Korea. Educational institutes can also play important roles by hiring qualified teachers who are proficient in ASEAN languages and Korean languages. Among other things, they would teach grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and the cultural nuances associated with each language. Another way educational institutes can contribute to enhancing multilingualism is by conducting research and documenting ASEAN languages. Many institutes employ experts who are skilled in a variety of fields and they should be encouraged to initiate studies such as linguistic research, dialect variations, historical developments, and language preservation efforts. Such initiatives are essential for maintaining linguistic diversity within the ASEAN region and South Korea.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from this study that multilingualism is a common phenomenon in Malaysia. In fact, the ability to speak more than one language is something that most people around the world are capable of developing. There are many benefits to being multilingual, such as improving problem-

solving skills, attaining academic success, having better career prospects and self-esteem, and expanding social networks. In this culturally diverse and multilingual region, we should not perceive it as a disadvantage but rather leverage it to its full potential. Sharing our languages could create a wider multilingual community across the region, while simultaneously bridging the gap between countries. This can be achieved through the exchange of expertise, student exchange programmes, and educational institutions. The questionnaire showed that half of the respondents know Korean, indicating that this language is well-received by Malaysian people. This had led to the establishment of more and more Korean learning centres, which are able to meet peoples' desire to learn this language, thus increasing the number of multilingual people throughout the country. To sum up, multilingualism could be one of the tools that can bridge the gap in the relationship between ASEAN countries and South Korea. To further support this hypothesis, a further study with a larger number of respondents should be conducted.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors confirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 carried out the fieldwork and prepared the literature review. All authors contributed on writing the research methodology and did the statistical analysis and interpretation of the results.

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