

COMPARING READING COMPREHENSION PERFORMANCE OF INDONESIAN AND MALAYSIAN JUNIOR SECONDARY STUDENTS: A QUANTITATIVE COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

While extensive research has explored literacy policies in Southeast Asia, empirical cross-national comparisons of reading achievement at the junior secondary level remain scarce. This study addresses this gap by comparing the reading comprehension proficiency of eighth-grade students in Indonesia and Malaysia. Employing a comparative quantitative design, the research was conducted at SMP Negeri 6 Purworejo, Indonesia, and SMA Al-Falah Batu Talam, Malaysia, during the 2024/2025 academic year (N = 68). Data were elicited through a validated 25-item multiple-choice test focusing on descriptive and report texts. Independent samples t-test results revealed a significant performance disparity ($t(66) = 4.38, p < .001$), with Indonesian students ($M = 89.53, SD = 11.73$) significantly outperforming their Malaysian counterparts ($M = 70.24, SD = 22.74$). The calculation of Cohen's d (1.066) further confirmed a large effect size. These findings suggest that higher proficiency in the Indonesian cohort is associated with standardized literacy practices and teacher-led "reading corners," whereas the lower, more heterogeneous performance in the Malaysian religious school is attributed to a "crowded curriculum" and limited English exposure. This study underscores the critical role of institutional focus and contextualized instructional materials in shaping literacy outcomes, providing a baseline for pedagogical interventions in specialized secondary education.

Keywords: Comparative Study, Cross-National Education, EFL Contexts, Junior Secondary Students, Reading Comprehension

INTRODUCTION

English serves as the primary global language, playing a vital role in international education and economic exchange (Dash & Gandhi, 2022). However, as (Reynolds et al., 2022) argue, English proficiency is no longer just a functional skill but a critical determinant of academic mobility and career readiness in the 21st century. Despite this global consensus, a significant disparity remains in how students—particularly in developing Southeast Asian nations—navigate complex English texts. This shift in priority necessitates a deeper examination of reading comprehension, not merely as a mechanical skill, but as a gateway to global participation.

In the field of English teaching, reading comprehension is an active process of meaning construction. Informed by Schema Theory (Anderson, 2013) and the Construction-Integration model (Kintsch, 2013), reading is viewed as the construction of a mental model that bridges textbase information with the reader's background knowledge. This high-level integration is essential for capturing deeper meaning; however, its development is not universal. As (Ellis, 1994) argues, the success of this integration is heavily contingent upon the intensity of language exposure—a factor that varies significantly within Southeast Asian classrooms (Widiati et al., 2023). This point serves as the foundation for the present study, as it reflects the researcher's interest in conducting a comparative analysis between two countries, namely Indonesia and Malaysia, in order to better understand the differences in their literacy development, particularly in relation to language exposure and educational practices.

This theoretical concern is further supported by empirical evidence, which reveals a significant disparity in reading achievement between the two nations. International assessments, such as PISA 2022, indicate that Indonesian students consistently score below the OECD average. As (Sitorus et al., 2024) observe, these students struggle specifically with drawing conclusions and identifying references—tasks that directly mirror the high-level 'integration' described by Kintsch (OECD, 2023).

Consequently, the gap in literacy is not merely a matter of limited vocabulary knowledge, but rather a deeper issue related to students' inability to construct a coherent and meaningful understanding of a text, often referred to as a situation model, especially when their exposure to the language is still insufficient and limited. This lack of consistent linguistic exposure makes it difficult for learners to connect ideas, interpret context, and fully comprehend what they read.

While Indonesia continues to face these fundamental challenges in integrating cognitive and linguistic processes in reading comprehension, its neighboring country, Malaysia, presents a contrasting example, where students benefit from higher levels of language exposure as a result of systematic and nationwide educational policy interventions that actively promote the use of English in learning environments.

Conversely, Malaysia generally demonstrates higher reading literacy scores, supported by robust bilingual policies such as MBMMBI and the Dual Language Programme (DLP). Unlike previous initiatives like PPSMI, (*Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematika dalam Bahasa Inggeris*), introduced in 2003. PPSMI was a bold, mandatory nationwide initiative to teach Science and Mathematics entirely in English (Ahmad et al., 2012). The current DLP framework is idiosyncratic in its execution, aiming to provide students with more sustained and integrated exposure to English through Science and Mathematics (Binti et al., 2025; Rachel, 2025; Suliman et al., 2019).

However, a synthesis of recent literature suggests that structural exposure does not always equate to psychological readiness. High national performance in international assessments does not necessarily reflect uniform student engagement across all levels. As (Chua & Sulaiman, 2021) and (Rupiwin & Shah, 2021) observe, despite these systemic efforts, many Malaysian students—particularly at the primary and lower secondary stages—still face significant psychological barriers such as low motivation and language anxiety. This

indicates that while the "exposure" (Ellis, 1994) is present, the affective filters of the students may still hinder the "integration" process described in Kintsch's model. This psychological tension in Malaysia provides a sharp contrast to the pedagogical shifts occurring in its neighboring counterpart, Indonesia.

While Indonesia is currently shifting its approach through Kurikulum Merdeka to boost literacy, Malaysia is focusing on sustaining its established bilingual environment (Khaizaar & Hidayat, 2022; Montori & Sumilat, 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of these frameworks is often mediated by classroom language choice. A synthesis of recent evidence suggests a divergence in classroom practice: in Indonesia, the frequent reliance on the first language (L1) often limits students' cognitive engagement with English texts. As (Kohi, 2020) and (Sundari & Febriyanti, 2021) observe, teachers prioritize L1 for translation and classroom management—a practice that, while providing emotional comfort, is strongly correlated with low language competence.

This creates a 'pedagogical trade-off' between the two nations. While using L1 in Indonesia helps students feel more comfortable, it simultaneously limits their ability to build the deep "situation models" required for complex texts. In contrast, Malaysia's immersion-heavy model provides more regular practice with difficult text structures, yet as previously noted, it risks inducing the language anxiety highlighted by (Chua & Sulaiman, 2021). Consequently, both nations face a unique set of barriers: Indonesia with its "L1 dependency" and Malaysia with its "affective barriers" despite high exposure."

However, while these localized challenges are well-theorized, there is a lack of direct empirical evidence comparing how these divergent factors actually manifest in student performance. These differences highlight a clear divide between linguistic constraints—such as vocabulary depth—and systemic factors, including curriculum standardization and language exposure (Damayanti et al., 2025; Hidayat et al., 2024; Laroya & Baga, 2025).

Despite these well-documented socio-linguistic and curricular factors, a synthesis of current literature reveals a significant 'empirical void.' Direct comparisons of reading comprehension at the eighth-grade level remain remarkably scarce (Liu, 2024; Rusydiyah et al., 2023). Most existing studies, such as (Zein et al., 2020), focus predominantly on general literacy policies or primary education. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how junior secondary students—who are at a pivotal stage of cognitive development and transition toward more complex "integration" (Kintsch, 2013)—perform under these contrasting pedagogical frameworks. By providing a direct numerical and contextual comparison between SMPN 6 Purworejo and SMA (*Sekolah Menengah Agama*) Al-Falah Batu Talam, this study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical policy analysis and actual classroom achievement.

This study addresses the identified empirical void by providing a direct comparative analysis between SMPN 6 Purworejo, Indonesia, and SMA (*Sekolah Menengah Agama*) Al-Falah Batu Talam, Malaysia. By focusing on eighth-grade students—a group navigating a critical cognitive transition in literacy—this research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of reading comprehension achievement among eighth-grade students in the selected Indonesian and Malaysian schools?

2. Is there a significant difference in reading comprehension scores between students in these two educational contexts?

By prioritizing these numerical comparisons, the study establishes a clear empirical baseline for understanding how varying degrees of language exposure and curricular frameworks (EFL vs. ESL) impact actual literacy performance in Southeast Asian rural secondary education.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a comparative quantitative design to examine reading comprehension differences between two distinct educational contexts. A cross-sectional approach was utilized to gather empirical data, allowing for a direct statistical comparison of student performance under the Indonesian *Kurikulum Merdeka* and the Malaysian *DSKP* frameworks. This design focuses on identifying pedagogical gaps in non-urban districts, ensuring the comparison centers on systemic factors rather than socio-economic extremes (Field, 2013).

Participants

The participants consisted of 68 eighth-grade students ($N_{\text{(Indonesia)}}=34$; $N_{\text{(Malaysia)}}=34$) selected through purposive sampling. The schools, SMP Negeri 6 Purworejo (Indonesia) and SMA Al-Falah Batu Talam (Malaysia), were selected as representative secondary schools in rural/semi-rural districts. In both settings, the researcher had a sustained presence as a visiting teacher and intern from February to March, providing deep contextual insight into the students' daily academic environment. While the sample size is localized, it provides sufficient inferential power for identifying specific pedagogical trends in comparative education (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

It is imperative to clarify the nomenclature of the educational institutions involved to ensure a fair comparison. While 'SMA' in the Indonesian context refers to *Sekolah Menengah Atas* (Senior High School, Grades 10–12), the school in the Malaysian context, SMA Al-Falah Batu Talam, stands for *Sekolah Menengah Agama*. The participants from this school were in Form 2 (Tingkatan 2), which is the direct academic equivalent of Grade 8 (Kelas 8) in Indonesia's SMP Negeri 6 Purworejo. Both groups consist of students aged approximately 14 years old who are in their second year of secondary education. This alignment ensures that the comparative analysis of reading comprehension is based on equivalent cognitive development and years of formal English instruction, thereby maintaining the internal validity of the study.

Instruments

The primary instrument was a 25-item multiple-choice reading comprehension test comprising four distinct texts: two report texts (general facts about animal species and specific objects) and two descriptive texts (one focusing on a specific landmark and one on a personal pet). To enhance cultural relevance and student engagement, the texts featured

landmarks familiar to both cultures, such as the *Monas* (National Monument) and the *Petronas Twin Towers*.

The test items were developed based on Barrett's Taxonomy to ensure they met the cognitive requirements for junior secondary students, ranging from literal recognition to inferential comprehension. To address content validity, the instrument was reviewed by senior English lecturers. While no major structural revisions were required, the experts emphasized the need to calibrate the linguistic difficulty to the junior secondary level. Consequently, the researcher refined the vocabulary to ensure it was challenging yet accessible. The final instrument demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .902.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted through a paper-based format in both locations. In the Malaysian school—a religious-based institution where mobile phone use is restricted—paper-based testing was mandatory, while in Indonesia, it was chosen to maintain consistency with previous established research protocols. Students were allotted 60 minutes to complete the test. The researcher personally supervised the sessions to ensure independent work. Although a minor numbering anomaly occurred on the third page of the printed test (skipping from item 13 to 17), the researcher immediately clarified the sequence to the students, ensuring no confusion or disruption to their cognitive flow during the examination.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25. Following a Shapiro-Wilk normality test, which indicated a non-normal distribution ($p < .05$), the Mann-Whitney U test was applied to determine statistical significance. To measure the practical magnitude of the difference, Cohen's *d* effect size was manually calculated (Cohen, 1988). Proficiency levels were further categorized into five tiers based on (Arikunto, 2019) classification to provide a comprehensive overview of the students' reading performance.

Beyond obtaining formal institutional consent, the study adhered to the principle of 'Beneficence'—ensuring that the research process provided a positive experience for the participants. Given the rural and religious-based nature of the schools, cultural sensitivity was paramount. For instance, in Malaysia, the researcher coordinated with the school's religious authorities to ensure that the testing schedule did not conflict with prayer times or religious observances. To ensure Informed Assent, the researcher explained the purpose of the study in the students' primary language (Indonesian/Malay) to guarantee full comprehension of their rights. The provision of fortified milk in Indonesia and handmade snack packages in Malaysia was not merely a token of appreciation, but a strategic effort to build a 'low-anxiety' environment. This approach directly addresses the Affective Filter concerns mentioned in the introduction, ensuring that the students approached the test with a positive mindset, thereby increasing the reliability of the performance data.

Trustworthiness and Researcher Role

In comparative educational research, the 'observer effect' can often skew results, particularly when students feel intimidated by a foreign researcher. To mitigate this, this

study prioritized Trustworthiness through Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation. Unlike traditional 'one-day' data collection visits, the researcher maintained a sustained presence in both academic environments from February to March 2023. In the Malaysian context, the researcher functioned as a teaching intern, participating in faculty meetings and assisting in daily classroom activities. In Indonesia, the researcher served as an extracurricular English instructor.

This immersion allowed the researcher to establish a high degree of rapport with the participants. By the time the formal test was administered, the students viewed the researcher as a familiar pedagogical figure rather than an external evaluator. This sustained presence serves as a form of ecological validity, ensuring that the data collected reflects the students' natural academic performance. Furthermore, the researcher maintained a 'Reflexive Journal' to document classroom observations, such as the frequency of L1 usage in Purworejo and the levels of student participation in Batu Talam. These qualitative insights were used to triangulate the numerical findings, providing a richer, more 'thick description' of the pedagogical landscape in these two rural districts.

Procedure and Ethical Consideration

Strict ethical protocols were followed to protect the participants' rights and ensure data integrity. Formal permission was obtained from the school administrations and classroom teachers in both countries. In Malaysia, the researcher was integrated into the teaching staff during an internship, while in Indonesia, the researcher served as an extracurricular English instructor. This dual role facilitated a high level of trustworthiness and rapport with the students.

Participation was entirely voluntary. Students were explicitly informed that the test results were for research purposes only and would not affect their formal academic grades or school standing. To maintain anonymity, all data were coded and treated with strict confidentiality. As a token of appreciation for their participation, students in Malaysia received handmade snack packages (wafers and sweets), while students in Indonesia were provided with fortified milk drinks.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study, divided into descriptive analysis, score distribution based on proficiency levels, and inferential statistical analysis to address the research questions.

Descriptive Analysis of Reading Comprehension Levels

To address the first research question, descriptive statistics were calculated to describe the students' reading comprehension levels in both educational contexts. The summary of the data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Reading Comprehension Scores

No	Student's Country	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Min	Max
1	Indonesia	34	89.53	11.73	56	100
2	Malaysia	34	70.24	22.74	32	96

Table 1 reveals a notable difference in reading proficiency. Indonesian students achieved a higher and more consistent mean score (M = 89.53, SD = 11.73) compared to their Malaysian counterparts (M = 70.24, SD = 22.74). The standard deviation in the Malaysian group is nearly double that of the Indonesian group, indicating a higher level of heterogeneity in reading readiness among students at SMA Al-Falah Batu Talam.

Score Distribution and Classification

To provide a clearer picture of students' performance beyond the mean scores, the data were categorized using (Arikunto, 2019) classification. This breakdown allows for a more granular understanding of the achievement gaps.

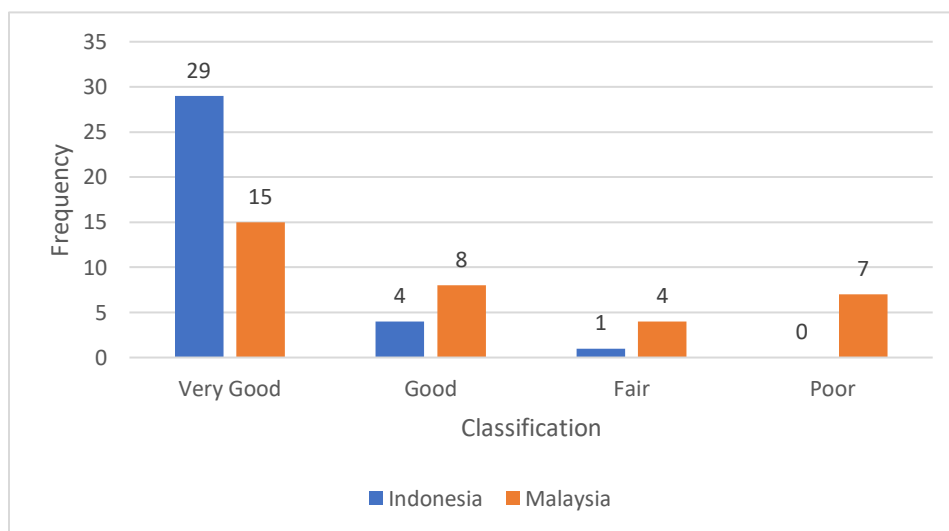


Figure 1. Distribution of reading comprehension proficiency levels

As illustrated in Figure 1, the disparity is stark. While the majority of Indonesian students (85.3%) are situated in the 'Very Good' category, the Malaysian cohort exhibits a fragmented distribution with a significant portion (20.6%) falling into the 'Poor' category. This suggests that while top-tier students in both schools perform similarly, the bottom-tier in the Malaysian context struggles significantly more with the tested descriptive and report texts.

Inferential Analysis

A normality test using the Shapiro-Wilk method indicated that the scores for both Indonesia ($p < .001$) and Malaysia ($p = .002$) were not normally distributed. Consequently, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed as a robust non-parametric alternative.

Table 2. Summary of Mann-Whitney U test results

Group	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Indonesia	43.99	1495.50	255.50	0
Malaysia	25.01	850.50		

The Mann-Whitney U test confirmed a statistically significant difference in reading comprehension between the two groups ($U = 255.50$, $Z = -3.979$, $p < .001$). Indonesian students obtained a significantly higher mean rank (43.99) than Malaysian students (25.01). Furthermore, to provide a more rigorous interpretation beyond null-hypothesis significance testing, Cohen's d was calculated to measure the effect size. The manual calculation yielded a value of 1.066. According to (Cohen, 1988) criteria, this represents a large effect size ($d > 0.8$). This indicates that the difference in reading performance between the two schools is not merely a statistical artifact but represents a substantial practical difference in educational outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The results unequivocally demonstrate that eighth-grade students at SMPN 6 Purworejo, Indonesia ($M = 89.53$, $SD = 11.73$) significantly outperformed their counterparts at SMA (Sekolah Menengah Agama) Al-Falah Batu Talam, Malaysia ($M = 70.24$, $SD = 22.74$), with a large effect size ($U = 255.50$, $Z = -3.979$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.066$). Notably, 85.3% of Indonesian students achieved "Very Good" proficiency, compared to only 44.1% of Malaysian students, while 20.6% of the Malaysian cohort fell into the "Poor" category. This substantial disparity inverts national PISA trends (OECD, 2023) and underscores the influence of localized pedagogical contexts over broad policy frameworks.

These findings provide empirical validation for (Kintsch, 2013) Construction-Integration model, particularly the critical role of "situation model" construction in reading comprehension. Indonesian students' consistently high performance and low variability ($SD = 11.73$) suggest effective integration of textbase propositions with prior knowledge, likely facilitated by Kurikulum Merdeka's structured literacy scaffolding and teachers' strategic L1 use for classroom management (Sundari & Febriyanti, 2021).

The culturally familiar Monas text may have further activated relevant schemata (Anderson, 2013) enabling seamless inference-making. Conversely, the Malaysian cohort's fragmented distribution and high heterogeneity ($SD = 22.74$) align with (Ellis, 1994) exposure hypothesis tempered by affective barriers. Despite DLP's immersion policy

providing structural exposure (Suliman et al., 2019) 20.6% "Poor" performance indicates that psychological factors—such as language anxiety in a religious immersion setting (Chua & Sulaiman, 2021) may disrupt the integration process. The Petronas Twin Towers text, while culturally relevant, likely demanded higher inferential processing that exposed underlying readiness gaps among lower-performing students.

This study's counterintuitive results challenge the dominant narrative of Malaysian superiority in Southeast Asian literacy (PISA 2022) while corroborating localized critiques of both systems. Indonesia's success echoes recent Kurikulum Merdeka gains in rural literacy (Khaizaar & Hidayat, 2022) where L1 dependency paradoxically serves as a cognitive scaffold rather than a hindrance. Malaysia's underperformance, however, validates (Rupiwin & Shah, 2021) observation that systemic exposure does not guarantee uniform psychological readiness, particularly in semi-rural religious schools where English practice may be deprioritized.

The large effect size ($d = 1.066$) exceeds typical EFL/ESL comparisons (Liu, 2024) suggesting that rural school micro-contexts—curriculum execution, teacher rapport, and text familiarity—exert stronger influence than national policies. This "pedagogical trade-off" (L1 comfort vs. immersion anxiety) hypothesized in the introduction finds direct empirical support.

The statistical disparity observed in the Malaysian cohort, where 20.6% of students fell into the 'Poor' category, can be deeply contextualized through the unique socio-linguistic challenges faced by Orang Asli (indigenous) learners. Recent research on (Aeinisya et al., 2026) suggests that while Orang Asli students often possess high levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation—driven by future employment goals—they remain one of the most educationally marginalised groups.

In the context of the 34 students at SMA Al-Falah Batu Talam, the eight indigenous participants likely faced a significant 'Language Anxiety' barrier that hindered their reading performance. As highlighted in the referenced case study, even when motivation is high, emotional and linguistic challenges often obstruct confidence and cognitive participation. When applied to Cognitive Load Theory, this anxiety functions as an 'Affective Filter' that consumes the working memory capacity needed for text integration. Therefore, the lower reading scores among these students are not necessarily a reflection of low aptitude or lack of effort, but rather a result of the complex interplay between their multi-layered linguistic background (L3/L4) and the psychological pressure of navigating a culturally distant academic language. This underscores the urgent need for culturally responsive pedagogy to bridge the achievement gap in rural Malaysian secondary education.

Several limitations temper the generalizability of these findings. First, the purposive sample ($N = 68$) from two rural schools limits extrapolation to urban or national contexts. Second, the one-shot paper-based design captures a snapshot rather than developmental trajectories. Third, potential cultural bias in text selection (Monas vs. Petronas) may have advantaged Indonesian students. Finally, the absence of qualitative data (e.g., think-aloud

protocols) precludes deeper insights into cognitive processes. Future studies should employ mixed methods and larger, randomized samples.

CONCLUSION

This research provides a critical empirical examination of reading comprehension achievement between eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 6 Purworejo, Indonesia, and SMA Al-Falah Batu Talam, Malaysia. The findings conclude that there is a statistically significant difference in performance, with Indonesian students ($M = 89.53$) notably outperforming their Malaysian counterparts ($M = 70.24$) with a large effect size ($d = 1.066$). This result is counterintuitive to national PISA trends, suggesting that in rural or semi-rural educational settings, localized pedagogical factors often outweigh broad national policy successes.

Furthermore, the study confirms that the institutional nomenclature of SMA Al-Falah (Sekolah Menengah Agama) is an academic equivalent to Indonesia's SMP (Grade 8/Form 2). The performance gap observed is deeply intertwined with the demographic composition of the Malaysian cohort, where 20.6% of students—primarily those from Orang Asli (indigenous) backgrounds—fell into the 'Poor' category. These learners face a 'triple-linguistic barrier' where the transition from native tribal languages to academic English creates a severe cognitive 'processing bottleneck.' While motivation among these students may be high, as supported by current literature on Malaysian K9 schools, their performance is frequently obstructed by high 'language anxiety' and a heavy 'Affective Filter.' In the Indonesian context, the high and consistent scores indicate that Kurikulum Merdeka's emphasis on literacy, combined with strategic L1-scaffolding, provides a stable 'situation model' for students in rural areas.

Generally, this research moves the body of scientific knowledge forward by demonstrating that linguistic immersion policies (such as the DLP) require psychological and cultural readiness to be effective. It contributes to the Cognitive Load Theory by identifying the 'triple-linguistic barrier' as a significant factor in working memory overload for indigenous learners in Southeast Asia.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged to avoid over-generalization. First, the small sample size ($N = 68$) from two specific rural schools means the results may not represent urban or national trends in either country. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data only captures a snapshot of performance rather than long-term development. Finally, the study was limited to descriptive and report texts; hence, the findings may differ when applied to other genres like narrative or argumentative texts.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are offered to enhance literacy outcomes in these contexts: For Educators: Teachers in rural and religious-based schools should move beyond a 'one-size-fits-all' immersion approach. In Malaysia, particularly in schools serving indigenous populations, there is an urgent need for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy that validates students' multi-layered linguistic backgrounds to reduce cognitive

load. In Indonesia, teachers should continue to use L1 as a scaffold but gradually introduce more 'direct-thinking' activities to foster long-term fluency.

For Policy Makers: Educational authorities should provide more targeted support for rural schools that navigate diverse linguistic landscapes. Policies like Malaysia's DLP should include transitional linguistic support for L3/L4 learners to prevent 'working memory overload' during English-medium instruction.

For Future Researchers: To bridge the remaining 'empirical void,' future studies should employ qualitative or mixed-methods approaches, such as think-aloud protocols or classroom discourse analysis. It is also recommended for future researchers to expand the sample size to include various types of schools (urban vs. rural) and examine a wider range of text genres to provide a more holistic view of comparative literacy.

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