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Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics

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Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization



SEA-PLM 2024

Regional Snapshot

Writing in 6 Southeast Asian Countries

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Regional snapshot of the SEA-PLM 2024 writing results
in 6 Southeast Asian countries

March 2026, for public release and communication

This regional snapshot highlights key findings from the SEA-PLM 2024 main survey in the writing domain. It accompanies the public release of the 2024 student writing datasets, and complements the reading and mathematics domain results and contextual data that were released in December 2025.

The writing data have been processed and are released separately from the reading and mathematics datasets and results to allow for further investigation and documentation of issues and implications, thereby maintaining trust and credibility in the SEA-PLM 2024 writing results and datasets. **Consequently, the 2024 writing datasets, indicators and tables of results are not directly comparable with those from the 2019 cycle. Despite limitations in cross-cycle comparability, both the 2019 and the 2024 results remain robust, valid, and reliable for analysing student writing performance within countries and for cross-country comparisons within each respective cycle.**

The writing assessment was administered as part of the SEA-PLM 2024 main data collection in countries that opted to implement this additional module[1]. Informed by the SEA-PLM 2024 Technical Standards, core methodological specifications and outcomes related to sampling, language of assessment, and data collection procedures are broadly aligned with those reported in the 2024 SEA-PLM Main Regional Report for the reading and mathematics domains[2]. However, the methodology features and implications specific to the writing domain, including the writing coding process, quality assurance procedures, and issues related to equating and scoring, are discussed in the annexed technical note. Separate, dedicated analytical reports, including a SEA-PLM 2024 Regional Report on Writing, are currently under development and will complement this regional snapshot with further analysis and insights.

The writing domain in the SEA-PLM programme

Like reading and mathematics, writing is a foundational skill for lifelong learning and necessary for full participation in economic, political and social life. In formal education, writing is a central tool for learning, enabling students to organize and express ideas, demonstrate understanding, and engage critically with content across subject areas. Beyond school, writing underpins effective participation in everyday life, including communication with friends and family, interaction with public institutions, and engagement with civic and administrative processes. In the workplace, even routine jobs increasingly rely on high-level cognitive skills – including written communication – rather than on manual skills. In the digital age, personal and social communication is increasingly conducted in written text, including and increasingly through social media.

Writing literacy in SEA-PLM is assessed through constructed-response tasks that require students to produce extended written texts in response to age-appropriate prompts grounded in authentic, real-world contexts. The assessment encompasses a range of task types and response lengths, including writing single words or short phrases, composing one or two sentences, or producing more extended pieces of continuous text. Each task requires the written response to go beyond merely copying words or the transcription of language. Student performance is evaluated across multiple

[1] The writing domain was optional for SEA-PLM participating countries. It was iimplemented in six countries during SEA-PLM 2024: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam
[2] SEA-PLM 2024 Main Regional Report

dimensions of writing proficiency, including content development, organization, language use, and grammatical accuracy. Student responses are scored using detailed rubrics, unique for each task, included in the coding guides to ensure a high degree of reliability and comparability across languages, scripts, and countries.

The assessment of writing literacy in SEA-PLM differs from the assessments of reading and mathematics. While reading and mathematics items consist primarily of multiple-choice or short open-ended questions, all writing items require students to generate original written responses of varying length and cognitive demand. This feature introduces distinct methodological and analytical considerations, particularly in relation to scoring, quality assurance, and cross-language comparability.

The SEA-PLM 2019 writing test was distinctive as the first regional large-scale, cross-language, and multi-script writing assessment in Southeast Asia. Building on this innovation, the 2024 writing assessment sustains the conceptualization and measurement of writing literacy in multilingual contexts. Additional information on writing literacy, as defined in SEA-PLM 2024, is presented in the SEA-PLM 2024 Test and questionnaire assessment framework (UNICEF & SEAMEO, 2024).

Key reasons for the delay in releasing and reporting the SEA-PLM 2024 writing data and results

Upon initial analysis of the SEA-PLM 2024 results, it was noted that there were unexpectedly high-performance gains in the writing domain, specifically when compared to the results from the 2019 cycle. These gains raised concerns about the validity of time-trend comparisons, prompting a deeper technical investigation undertaken by ACER at the request of the SEA-PLM Regional Secretariat. The SEA-PLM Regional Secretariat decided to delay the reporting of the writing results to conduct this further investigation and to document the issues and implications to maintain trust and credibility in the SEA-PLM 2024 writing results and datasets (see annexed note for more information).

NOTE: The findings affect the comparability of scores, proficiency bands, and indicators across cycles for the writing domain only. The mathematics and reading domains remain valid and comparable across cycles.

Findings:

- Unprecedented score increases: some countries showed gains equivalent to 2–3 years of learning in just five years—an outcome rarely observed in international large-scale assessments. These results were not uniformly observed, suggesting changes and differences in the quality control mechanisms employed in 2019 and 2024.
- Psychometric limitations: despite strong item-level reliability, the overall 2024 writing distribution of results does not align with the 2019 distribution of results.

Potential reasons:

- Changes in coding and quality assurance: the 2024 cycle introduced double-blind coding, daily adjudication, and enhanced training—significantly improving scoring reliability.
- These improvements could have contributed to higher scores, but may also have altered the measurement conditions between and within countries in the 2024 cycle – making direct comparison with 2019 invalid.

Rationale for further investigation:

- Protecting data integrity: releasing results without addressing these issues could lead to misinterpretation and misinformed policy decisions.
- Ensuring fairness: countries deserve results that reflect true student ability, not artifacts of methodological changes.
- Maintaining credibility: SEA-PLM's reputation relies on transparent, technically sound reporting. Thoroughly investigating the methodological adjustments made in the 2024 cycle and contextualizing the writing domain results ensures this standard is upheld.

The writing proficiency scale in 2024

The new SEA-PLM 2024 writing proficiency scale (Figure 1) consists of five proficiency bands, ranging from Band 1 and below to Band 5 and above. Each band describes what children are able to do at that level in writing, independently of the SEA-PLM reading and mathematics proficiency scales[3].

Figure 1: Writing proficiency scale, including the percentage of children in each band across the six participating countries – SEA-PLM 2024

Band and % of students in 2024	Main description of what students can typically do
Band 5 and above 515 points and above Regional average: 5% of students Regional range: 2% to 21% of students	**Write cohesive texts with many ideas and details using a good range of vocabulary** Children can write texts with an introduction, body and conclusion in which ideas are well-related and easy to follow. They can generate numerous relevant ideas and details to produce an elaborated response to a picture prompt. When writing about a familiar setting, they can produce a detailed and personalised description, with many relevant ideas. They can use a good range of vocabulary, including verbs, adjectives and nouns, allowing concepts and details to be clearly expressed, with some sophistication.
Band 4 Less than 515 points to 479 points Regional average: 22% of students Regional range: 7% to 34% of students	**Write clear, detailed texts in various contexts with appropriate vocabulary** Children can produce writing in response to a task with some relevant ideas that are easy to follow and enriched with some original imaginative elements. Their ideas are well related and easy to follow, linked by adequate linguistic devices. They use varied sentence structures, including complex sentences that are grammatically correct, though errors may still be evident. Their vocabulary goes beyond the basic level, effectively conveying detail and adding interest to the description. They demonstrate the ability to spell and form words beyond the basic level, and their punctuation is generally accurate.
Band 3 Less than 479 points to 448 points Regional average: 31% of students Regional range: 16% to 43% of students	**Write simple texts with relevant ideas and limited vocabulary** Children can produce writing related to the task such as describing a picture of a familiar scene, with a logical sequence of simple ideas and some detail. The writing is generally easy to follow, with relevant and varied ideas. Organisation is evident, though linking words are limited. Most sentences are correct and well-formed, but they may be repetitive or contain minor errors. Vocabulary is sufficient to convey a range of concepts but lacks precision. Spelling and character formation are mostly accurate, with errors typically in more difficult words.
Band 2 Less than 448 points to 417 points Regional average: 21% of students Regional range: 11% to 28% of students	**Write basic texts with fragmented ideas and inadequate vocabulary** Children can write texts containing some relevant ideas in response to a task such as describing a picture of a familiar scene. However, the ideas tend to be limited, disjointed, or conflicting, making the text hard to follow. Sentence structure and linking devices are often repetitive. While some simple sentences may be written correctly, others may be incomplete or contain multiple errors. Children at this level can use basic vocabulary, which limits their ability to convey a clear description or complex message. Spelling is mostly correct, but a few errors may be in basic words; punctuation is used inconsistently.
Band 1 and below Less than 417 points Regional average: 20% of students Regional range: 3% to 53% of students	**Limited ability to present ideas in writing** Children can produce descriptions, but content is minimal and superficial, often focusing on isolated features. Sentences may be more like fragments. They are unclear, with missing or confusing elements, inconsistent language, and not many complete or relevant ideas. Vocabulary at this level is very limited, often repetitive, and inadequate for describing a picture. However, children can produce legible handwriting with mostly well-formed letters, and demonstrate some ability to spell basic words.

In the lowest band (Band 1 and below), children have limited ability to present ideas in writing in the tested language of instruction. Children can produce descriptions, but content is minimal and superficial, often focusing on isolated

[3] Note that the writing scale mean is 450 rather than 300 in reading and math

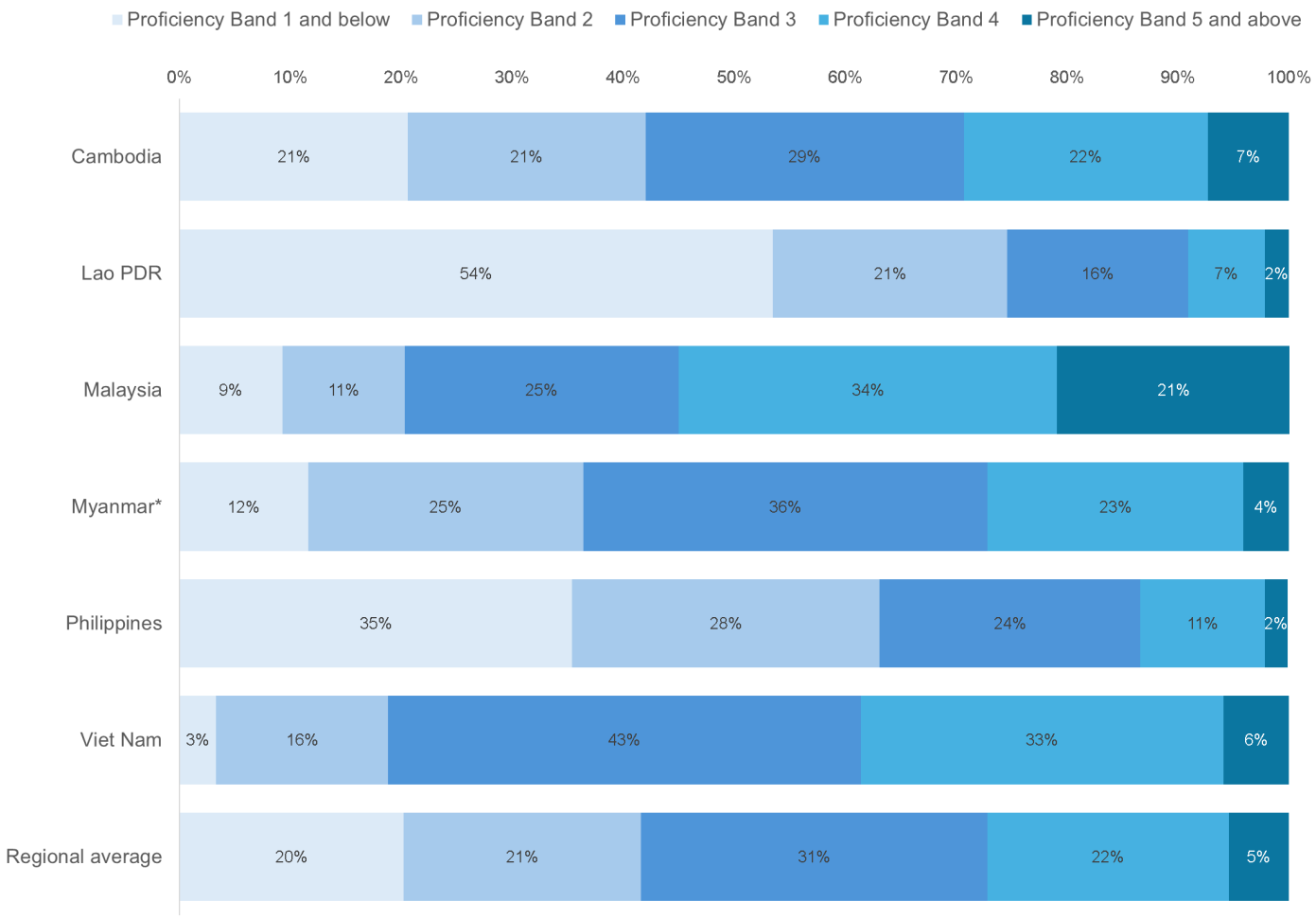
features. Sentences may be more like fragments. They are unclear, with missing or confusing elements, inconsistent language, and not many complete or relevant ideas. Vocabulary at this level is very limited, often repetitive, and inadequate for describing a picture. However, children can produce legible handwriting with mostly well-formed letters, and demonstrate some ability to spell basic words. These skills are typically embedded in national curriculum standards and are expected to be attained by students in Grades 1 or 2.

At the highest band (Band 5 and above), children can write cohesive texts with many ideas and details using a good range of vocabulary in the tested language of instruction. Children can write texts with an introduction, body and conclusion in which ideas are well-related and easy to follow. They can generate numerous relevant ideas and details to produce an elaborated response to a picture prompt. When writing about a familiar setting, they can produce a detailed and personalised description, with many relevant ideas. They can use a good range of vocabulary, including verbs, adjectives and nouns, allowing concepts and details to be clearly expressed, with some sophistication. These more advanced competencies are typically reflected in the national curriculum standards and are expected to be developed by students in Grades 5 or 6.

Figure 1 also presents the regional average and the regional range, which shows the highest and lowest proportion of children observed in each band across the six SEA-PLM 2024 participating countries. Associated scale score cut points are reported for each of the bands.

Some countries had a relatively high proportion of students in the highest proficiency bands, while others had a large share of students in the lowest bands. This situation illustrates the substantial disparities in the writing domains both across and within the six participating countries. This can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Percentage of Grade 5 children in each writing proficiency band, by country, in 2024



* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Writing national average in 2024

The 2024 writing results were set on a new scale. A new set of regional means (450 against 300 for the 2019 writing scale and reading and mathematics scales) and standard deviations (50 against 30 for the 2019 writing scale and the reading and mathematics scales) is applied; **results reported over the writing score scale and proficiency scale are not statistically comparable across the two rounds of assessment.**

Table 1: Writing national average scores in 2024

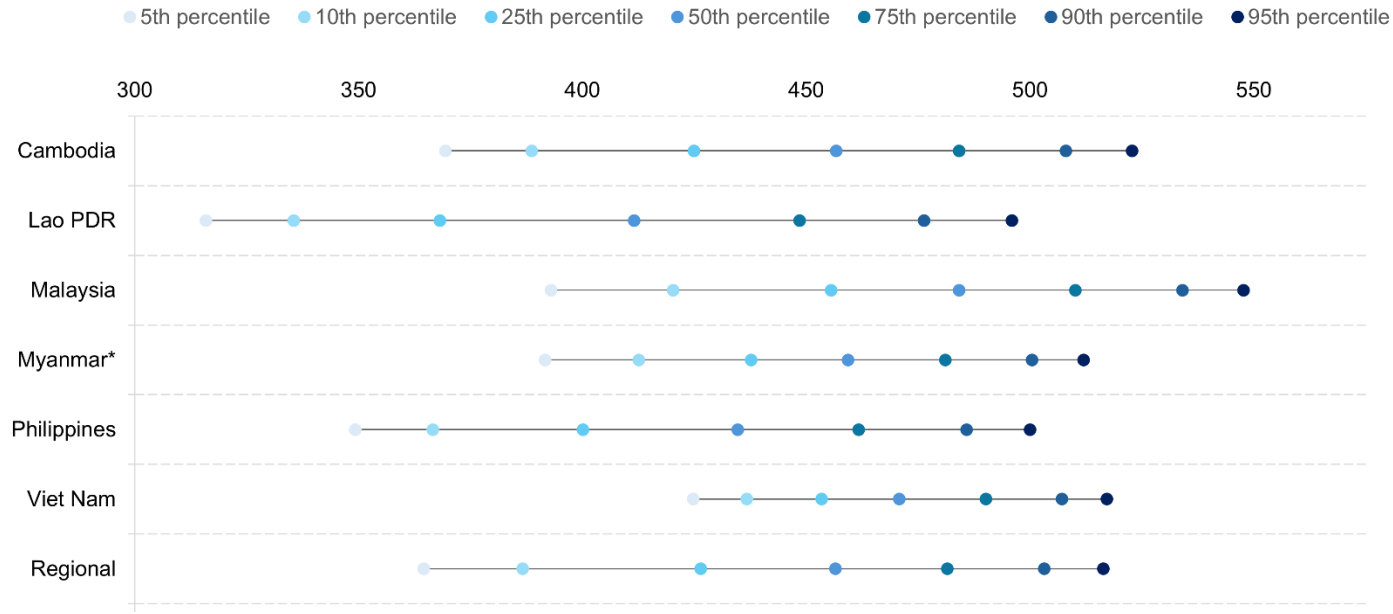
	2024	
Country	**Score**	**SE**
Cambodia	452.8	(1.40)
Lao PDR	408.4	(2.28)
Malaysia	480.1	(1.82)
Myanmar*	457.5	(1.04)
Philippines	430.1	(1.83)
Viet Nam	471.1	(0.90)
Regional	450.9	(0.92)

() Standard errors appear in parentheses.

* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

The national distribution of student writing scores are presented below by percentiles of the scale scores for 2024. It shows the range of scores for the lower extreme (5th and 10th percentiles), the middle half of the students' results (25th, 50th, 75th percentiles) and the higher extreme score (90th and 95th percentiles) for a given country. For example, the 50th percentile represents the middle (median) scale score, meaning half of the students scored above this level and half scored below. The wider the distribution (the bigger the difference between the 5th and 95th percentiles), the larger the spread of scores of students in that particular country, implying very different learning opportunities for children within the country.

Figure 3: Writing national score distribution in 2024

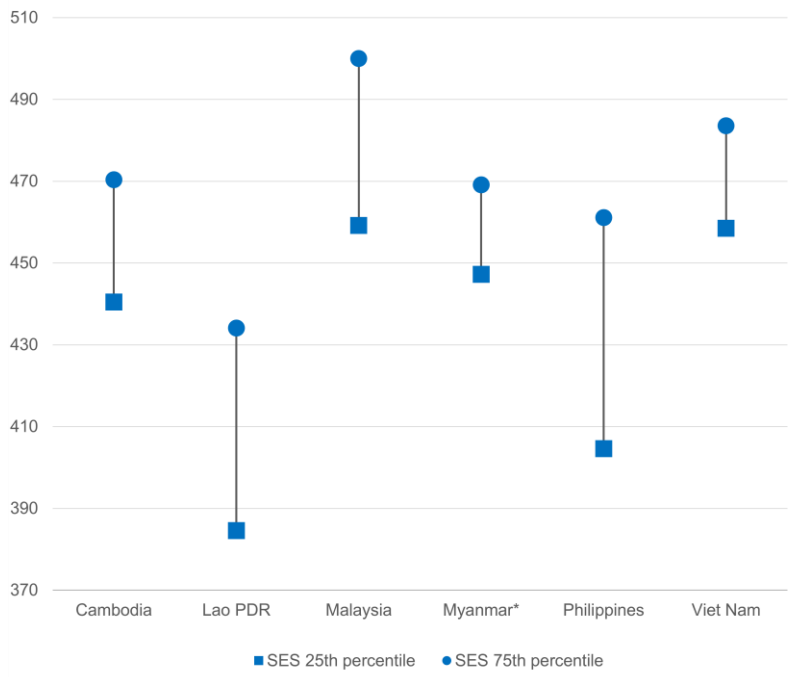


* Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Writing results by socioeconomic status

In the SEA-PLM 2024 cycle, all countries, as with the reading and mathematics domains, students belonging to the lowest SES quartile had, on average, lower levels of achievement in writing compared to students belonging to the highest SES quartile. The magnitude of the difference between the group averages ranges from 22 to 57 scale points, equivalent to one year of learning or more in some cases. The SEA-PLM 2024 results demonstrate the strong impact of family SES on learning outcomes. A similar pattern was also observed in the 2019 cycle. SES remains a strong predictor of learning achievement across the participating countries, regardless of domain.

Figure 4: Differences in average writing by socioeconomic quartiles in 2024

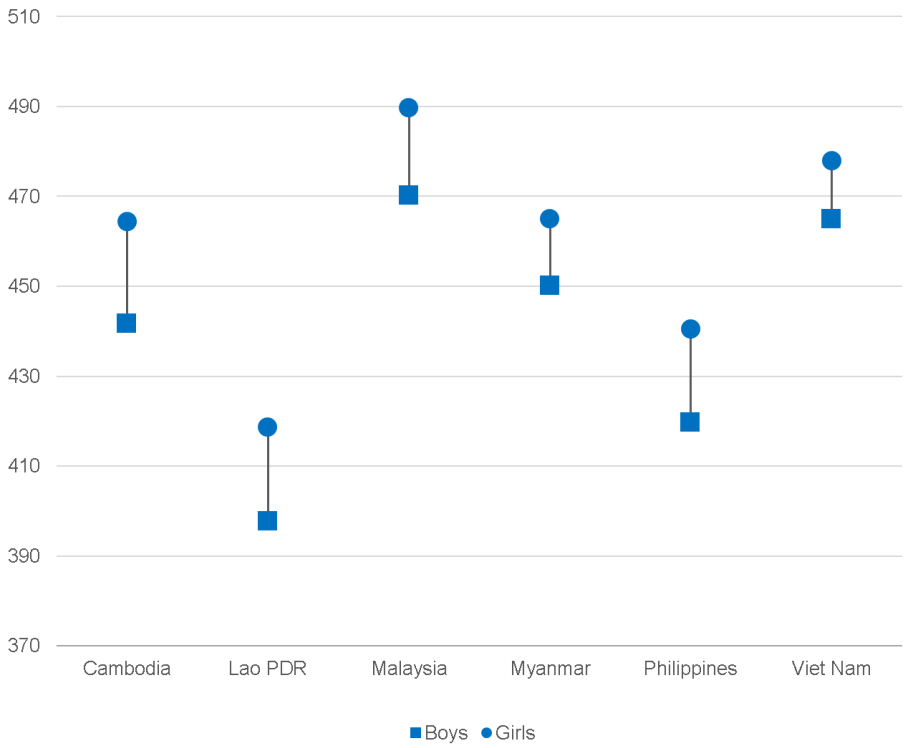


*Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Boys and girls writing results in 2024

This section describes how learning achievement varies among boys and girls in 2024 by comparing the national average and percentage of boys and girls in each of the writing proficiency bands. While the values are not comparable to 2019, similar patterns are observed: as in 2019, on average, girls showed greater average performance than boys (ranging from 13 to 23 scale points) in writing, a pattern that was evident and significant in all countries.

Figure 5: Differences in average writing by gender in 2024

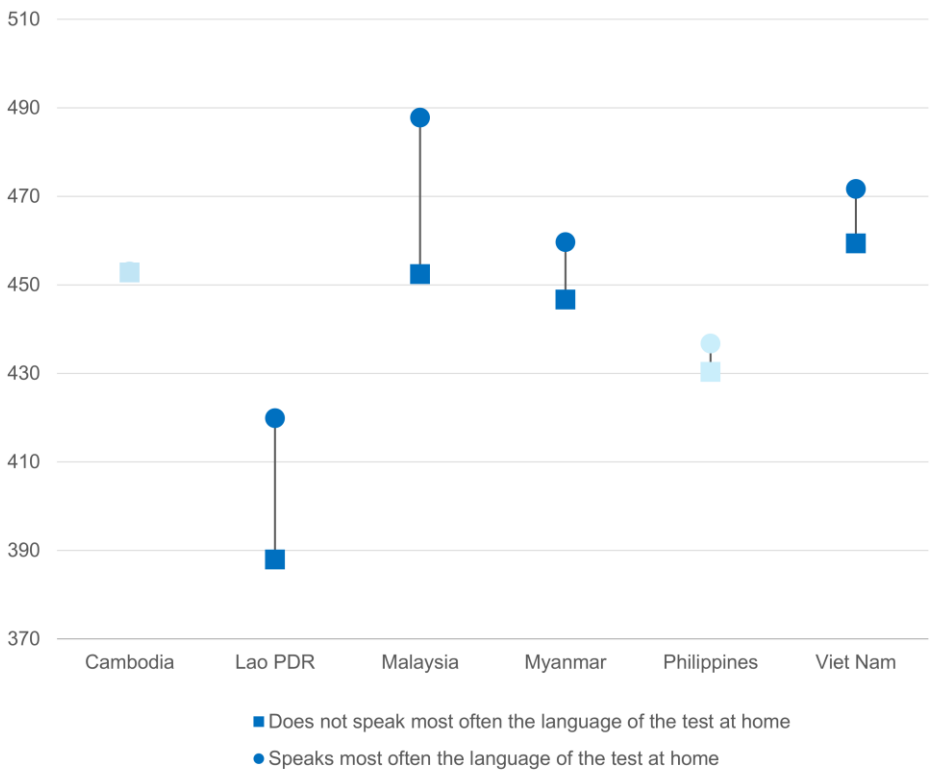


*Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Writing results by language of instruction spoken at home

As observed in 2019 and on average in both the reading and mathematics domains, children who reported that the language of instruction was the same as the language spoken at home outperformed children who spoke a different language at home; this result was statistically significant in four of the six countries. The score difference in writing between those who spoke the language of instruction at home ranged from around 12 to 35 scale points in writing. In the other two countries, there was no meaningful difference.

Figure 6: Differences in average writing scores by language practices at home versus at school, by country in 2024



Note: Markers in light colour indicate that mean differences are not statistically significant.

*Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

Annex 1 – Tables of estimate

Writing 2024										
Country and survey	**Proficiency Band 1 and below**		**Proficiency Band 2**		**Proficiency Band 3**		**Proficiency Band 4**		**Proficiency Band 5**	
Cambodia	20.6%	(0.99)	21.4%	(0.75)	28.7%	(0.86)	22.0%	(0.87)	7.3%	(0.55)
Lao PDR	53.5%	(1.75)	21.1%	(0.95)	16.3%	(0.86)	6.9%	(0.72)	2.2%	(0.41)
Malaysia	9.3%	(0.85)	11.0%	(0.79)	24.7%	(1.08)	34.1%	(1.05)	21.0%	(1.38)
Myanmar*	11.6%	(0.77)	24.8%	(0.90)	36.4%	(0.99)	23.1%	(0.93)	4.1%	(0.38)
Philippines	35.4%	(1.61)	27.7%	(0.92)	23.5%	(1.14)	11.2%	(0.93)	2.1%	(0.40)
Viet Nam	3.3%	(0.45)	15.5%	(0.88)	42.6%	(1.31)	32.7%	(1.11)	5.9%	(0.50)
Regional average	20.2%	(0.72)	21.4%	(0.51)	31.2%	(0.53)	21.8%	(0.56)	5.4%	(0.28)

() Standard errors appear in parentheses.

*Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

	Writing 2024					
Country	**SES 25th percentile**		**SES 75th percentile**		**Difference 75th - 25th percentile**	
Cambodia	440.5	(1.94)	470.4	(2.11)	**29.9**	(1.42)
Lao PDR	384.5	(3.86)	434.1	(3.21)	**49.6**	(1.88)
Malaysia	459.1	(2.44)	500.0	(2.20)	**40.9**	(1.52)
Myanmar*	447.2	(1.90)	469.1	(1.31)	**21.9**	(1.27)
Philippines	404.6	(2.16)	461.1	(2.32)	**56.5**	(1.50)
Viet Nam	458.5	(1.57)	483.6	(1.09)	**25.1**	(1.15)

() Standard errors appear in parentheses, standard errors of differences are provisional.

Significant differences (p<0.05) indicated in bold.

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	Writing 2024					
Country	**Boys**		**Girls**		**Difference Boys vs Girls**	
Cambodia	441.7	(1.80)	464.3	(1.46)	**-22.6**	(1.88)
Lao PDR	397.7	(2.40)	418.7	(2.79)	**-21.0**	(2.54)
Malaysia	470.2	(1.95)	489.7	(1.90)	**-19.5**	(1.59)
Myanmar*	450.0	(1.25)	465.0	(1.19)	**-15.0**	(1.29)
Philippines	419.7	(2.08)	440.5	(2.18)	**-20.8**	(2.28)
Viet Nam	464.8	(0.97)	477.8	(1.08)	**-13.0**	(0.90)
Regional average	442.5	(1.03)	459.6	(1.10)	**-17.1**	(1.12)

() Standard errors appear in parentheses.

Significant differences (p<0.05) indicated in bold.

*Caution is required when interpreting and comparing estimates for Myanmar due to significant changes observed in the composition of the Grade 5 population between the SEA-PLM 2019 and 2024 surveys.

	Writing 2024					
Country	**Does not speak most often the language of the test at home**		**Speaks most often the language of the test at home**		**Difference between speaks most often and does not speak most often**	
Cambodia	452.7	(3.44)	453.0	(1.37)	0.3	(3.24)
Lao PDR	387.9	(3.68)	419.9	(2.43)	**31.9**	(4.04)
Malaysia	452.4	(2.71)	487.7	(1.97)	**35.3**	(2.90)
Myanmar	446.6	(2.53)	459.6	(1.04)	**13.0**	(2.55)
Philippines	430.3	(1.73)	436.7	(3.95)	6.4	(3.54)
Viet Nam	459.3	(5.75)	471.7	(0.94)	**12.4**	(5.93)
Regional average	432.0	(1.52)	466.7	(0.69)	**34.6**	(1.52)

() Standard errors appear in parentheses.

Significant differences ($p<0.05$) indicated in bold.

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