

## NAVIGATING GLOBAL STANDARDS IN LOCAL CONTEXTS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF CEFR-ALIGNED ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM IN THE ASEAN REGION

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### ABSTRACT

**Background and Purpose:** The rise of ASEAN as a regional economic bloc necessitates increased language proficiency among its diverse population. Many countries in the region as elsewhere in the world have borrowed the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in meeting these national English language proficiency goals for their citizens. This systematic review investigates the barriers and facilitators to CEFR implementation in the ASEAN context, particularly focusing on their impact on educational outcomes.

**Methodology:** A systematic review was conducted to identify and synthesise peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2017 and 2023. The search, performed in January 2024, utilised Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, and ERIC databases. Articles were screened based on relevance to

CEFR-aligned curricula in ESL/EFL contexts, curriculum content, instructional approaches, textbook adaptations, assessments and teacher and student readiness following the PRISMA guidelines. A total of 40 eligible studies were analysed to identify trends, methodological strengths, and challenges associated with CEFR-aligned curriculum research in ASEAN.

**Findings:** The review revealed that insufficient teacher training on the CEFR hinders its successful implementation, potentially limiting student opportunities for improved communication skills within the ASEAN community, while comprehensive course alignment with CEFR standards emerges as a crucial facilitator. Additionally, the review examines methodological approaches used in the existing research to identify these factors, with interviews and surveys being the most prevalent.

**Contributions:** The study's findings inform stakeholders of crucial areas for capacity building to ensure the CEFR's effectiveness in fostering ASEAN's educational development in a globalised world.

**Keywords:** CEFR, implementation, barriers and facilitators, ASEAN, systematic review.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Goal 4 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes that every child has the right to quality education, which is essential for building a peaceful and prosperous world (United Nations, 2021). The global agenda highlights that limited access to education particularly affects children with disabilities, members of ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups, and those living in rural areas.

To achieve quality education that promotes an inclusive and effective learning environment while preparing students for a globalised world, many countries have adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This framework aims to enhance students' English language skills and align them with international standards. Introduced by the Council of Europe, the CEFR serves as a guide for designing language courses that adhere to these standards. Since its initial publication in 2001, the CEFR has gained recognition in language education across Europe, Asia, and beyond.

The structured levels of the CEFR, ranging from A1 to C2, support both learners and educators by providing a clear roadmap for progress, ensuring that language acquisition is systematic and accommodates diverse learning needs. Additionally, the CEFR enables individuals to access quality education, employment, and social opportunities across linguistic and cultural boundaries, fostering tolerance, understanding, and global citizenship—key components for achieving Goal 4. By promoting comparability and transparency in language qualifications, the CEFR helps reduce barriers to mobility and educational access, particularly for marginalized or underprivileged groups. Harmonizing educational standards with the CEFR can significantly contribute to the SDG vision of quality education for all, equipping individuals to thrive in a diverse and sustainable global environment.

The influence of the CEFR on English curricula has led to a massive alignment of the framework with other countries' English language curricula in recent years, including textbooks, assessments, and teaching approaches. International literature shows that the dimension of curriculum alignment has undergone a massive shift away from locally designed curricula to a CEFR-aligned curriculum that meets international standards (Zakaria & Md Yunus, 2020). In middle-income countries such as the Southeast Asian nations (hereafter ASEAN), this phenomenon is particularly evident. While the tremendous alignment of curricula has led to an increase in global research on the impact and challenges of the CEFR, research on CEFR-aligned curricula in the ASEAN context remains scarce. As a limited number of ASEAN countries have adopted the framework, these contexts and local perceptions may have been given less consideration in research than in European countries. However, with the increasing harmonization of the CEFR across ASEAN countries, it is becoming increasingly important to explore how a CEFR-aligned curriculum can be successfully implemented in this region and be applied in a culturally sensitive and meaningful way.

Thomas and Quinlan (2022) point out that, among other things, it is important to move away from the generic, exclusive inclusion scenario of the CEFR, which perpetuates Anglo-Saxon culture and does not take into account elements such as students' life experiences and the linguistic and cultural diversity of different regions or countries. Researching the CEFR-aligned curricula can provide insights into the linguistic and cultural barriers that both teachers and students, especially those from non-English speaking countries, face in their educational experiences, particularly in relation to teaching materials, methods and school-based assessments that facilitate or hinder the adoption of the framework. Implementation should also recognize and consider teachers' and learners' needs, preferences, thoughts, and emotions, beyond mere adherence to the prescribed curriculum (Alih et al., 2021; Nawai & Said, 2020;

Sahib & Stapa, 2021). Gathering information on both the content and users of the CEFR in the ASEAN context is, therefore, a major challenge and requires the development and application of tools and methods that are reliable, coherent, and representative.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Complexities of Implementing the CEFR**

Several studies have attempted to explore the complexities of implementing the CEFR in the ASEAN region, particularly in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam (Alih et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2023; Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021). These studies aim to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspective through semi-structured interviews and surveys where teachers and students are interviewed or surveyed for their views and experiences. In addition, some researchers have conducted analyses of teaching materials used in the classroom to gather relevant information. However, it remains unclear which methods are most effective and best suited to identify the barriers to and enablers of the implementation of the CEFR. To date, research on the CEFR has tended to focus on the European context (Hulešová, 2022), making it difficult to determine the effectiveness of such methods, particularly in middle- and low-income countries in the ASEAN region.

Mohtar and Sadhasivam (2022) examined methods used in research on problems and challenges in CEFR implementation. The review included studies on the CEFR in both Malaysian and international curricula and included studies published between 2015 and 2022. A coding scheme was used to examine the research design, sample, instrument, and data analysis deployed by the researchers. The authors reported that the researchers' preferred method of analysing data was descriptive statistics, while their primary tool was a combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. They also found that the existing data collection method (e.g., questionnaires and interviews) is insufficient compared to inferential statistics to measure the projection of performance and outcome and that the use of a triangulation process can be conducted to increase the confirmation of results.

In the same year, Bakir and Aziz (2022) conducted a systematic review that examined the effectiveness of CEFR textbooks from teachers' perspectives, but the review was strictly limited to collecting data on the criteria in the CEFR textbooks in Malaysia. The database searches for the review were conducted from 2018 to 2021 and included studies involving primary and non-option English teachers. The authors conducted data extraction and analysis to determine teachers' perceptions of the textbook layout, cultural introduction to the textbook, teaching and learning components, and supplementary materials and resources. The findings

gathered from the review demonstrate that while the layout and design of the textbooks were favourable for the teachers, transnational cultures were found to be prioritised in the textbooks while local cultures were neglected. It was also found that the researchers primarily used quantitative (i.e., survey) and mixed methods research (i.e., survey and semi-structured interview) in collecting data from the participants and respondents.

Renganathan (2023) also conducted a systematic review that examined English language teaching in rural schools in Malaysia after the implementation of the CEFR. The review included literature published in two databases from 2017 to 2020. Newman and Gough's (2020) systematic review process in the context of educational research was used in this review to examine the status and future needs of rural English education. Findings from the review reveal that current educational policies and factors such as lack of student interests and needs, limited resources, and poor parental support hinder the improvement of English language teaching in Malaysian rural schools. The authors found various research methods used by the researchers to gather information from teachers and students, including questionnaires, qualitative interviews, observation, and experiments focusing on classroom interventions.

## **2.2 Distinctions Between Current Review and Past Reviews**

It is imperative to investigate institutional practices to promote the development of inclusive educational processes at all levels—from primary to secondary to tertiary level—to bring about institutional change (Sobchenko et al., 2021). Research within ASEAN countries must also be included in the current examination of the CEFR-aligned curriculum to understand CEFR implementation in developing countries. Only then will the framework reflect the diversity and complexity of language learning essential for achieving equity, such as inclusive education and equal learning opportunities at all educational institutions.

This systematic review aims to provide insights into the study of curricula aligned to the CEFR. In particular, there is no systematic review that summarises qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research that focuses specifically on the ASEAN milieu and the barriers and facilitators to the implementation of the CEFR curriculum. Table 1 illustrates the characteristic combination of features used in the current study to extend the existing research on this topic.

Table 1: Distinctions between current review and past reviews

1	Mohtar & Sadhasivam (2022)	Asian and European	Empirical	Primary, secondary, and tertiary	CEFR-aligned curriculum	2015 to 2022
2	Bakir & Aziz (2022)	Malaysian	Empirical and conceptual	Primary	CEFR-aligned textbooks	2018 to 2021
3	Renganathan (2023)	Malaysian	Empirical	Primary and secondary	CEFR-aligned curriculum	2017 to 2020
4	Current review	ASEAN	Empirical	Primary, secondary, and tertiary	CEFR-aligned curriculum	2017 to 2023

The current review is guided by the following three research questions:

1. Which aspects of CEFR-aligned curriculum have been commonly researched in the ASEAN context?
2. What methodological approaches are employed in investigating the impact of the CEFR-aligned curriculum in the ASEAN context?
3. What are the main barriers and facilitators in adopting CEFR-aligned curriculum in the ASEAN context?

### 3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

This systematic review aims to uncover the trends, strengths, and limitations of CEFR-aligned curriculum research in the ASEAN context to advance further research in this key area. This aim helped determine the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies in the review before initiating a bibliographic search of the databases. Below we outline the inclusion criteria of our review methodology:

1. **Relevance of the topic:** The study addresses the CEFR-aligned curriculum in the ESL/EFL context, which may include curriculum content, instructional approaches, textbook adaptations, assessments, and teacher and student readiness.
2. **Setting:** The study was conducted in the ASEAN region's educational setting (primary, secondary, or tertiary).
3. **Date of publication:** The article was published between November 2017 and December 2023.
4. **Research design:** The article must be empirical and use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed research methods and data. Theoretical proposals, literature reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and scoping reviews are excluded from the review.
5. **Language:** The article is published in English.
6. **Strengths and limitations:** The study should address the benefits and/or challenges for the adoption of a CEFR-aligned curriculum.

A systematic literature search for peer-reviewed articles in English was conducted in January 2024. Three databases were searched, namely Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, and ERIC. This selection was guided by practicality as well as the quality of publications for the review. Taking the research questions into account, 'CEFR' or 'CEFR-aligned' was defined as the most important search term. When selecting the next keyword, the term 'curriculum' was chosen along with other related terms to refine the search. The terms 'Malaysia', 'Thailand', 'Vietnam' and 'Indonesia' were used to narrow the search to ASEAN countries that have either adopted the CEFR or are in the process of adopting it. The final search terms were defined as ((cefr OR cefr-aligned) AND (curriculum OR policy OR material OR textbook OR assessment OR readiness OR approach) AND (malaysia\* OR thailand OR vietnam OR indonesia\*)).

A title search was then conducted in the databases using the above terms reflecting the eligibility criteria. Although the introduction of the CEFR in ASEAN countries began around 2014, research on its impact only became available in late 2017. Therefore, the publication dates were limited to November 2017 to December 2023. The first phase of eligibility screening included a review of article titles and abstracts and the removal of duplicates. The second screening phase included an assessment of the suitability of full texts. Of the 55 articles screened after the removal of duplicates, 40 full texts met the eligibility requirements and were included in this synthesis. Figure 1, based on Page et al. (2021), illustrates the entire./

search and selection results with the reasons for exclusion following PRISMA 2020.

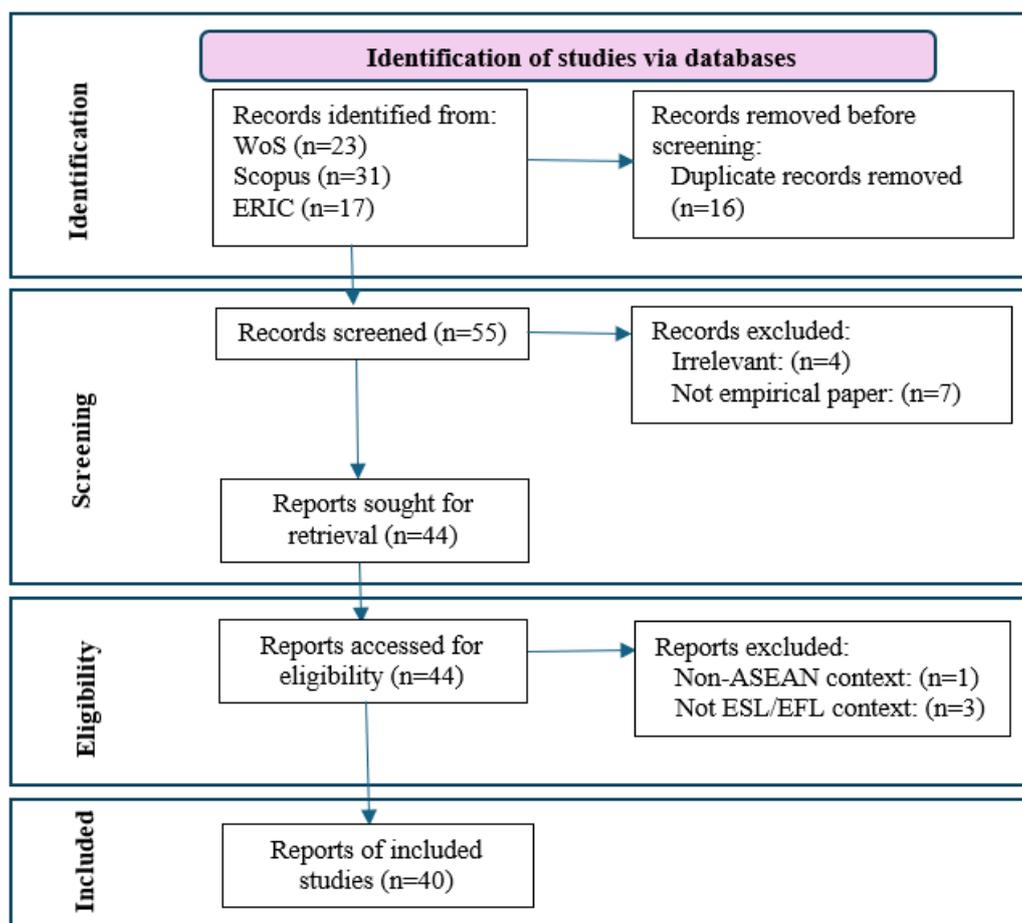


Figure 1: Search and selection of studies

The articles included in this review were reviewed in full text by the first and second authors, who downloaded and stored them in a shared file hosting service. All authors then read each article to record the following general article information: (a) author(s), (b) year of publication, and (c) geographical location or the place where the research was conducted. Methodological characteristics were then extracted from the articles, including (a) the participants, including their number in the study, (b) the methodology used to conduct the study, with particular interest in the methods used to collect the data, and (c) the aspects of the CEFR examined. The researchers then reviewed all recorded information after a third reading of each article.

#### 4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents general article information extracted from the 40 documents included in the review. A summary of this information and some methodological characteristics of each study can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of included articles

1	Ahamat & Kabilan (2022)	Malaysia	$n = 7$ ; primary level; teachers	Materials	Semi-structured interviews
2	Alias et al. (2021)	Malaysia	$n = 5$ ; primary level; teachers	Teaching approaches and assessments	Observations, survey, and guided reflective interviews
3	Alih et al. (2021)	Malaysia	$n = 380$ ; primary and secondary level; teachers	Syllabus, support, materials, and students' readiness	Surveys and semi-structured interviews
4	Aziz & Makhtar (2021)	Malaysia	$n = 109$ ; secondary level; in-service teachers	Materials	Reflective journals
5	Aziz et al. (2019)	Malaysia	$n = 30$ ; secondary level; in-service teachers	Materials	Reflective journals, document analysis, and interviews
6	Azman et al. (2021)	Malaysia	$n = 10$ ; tertiary level; CEFR experts; ESL experts	Assessments	Test validation
7	Baharum et al. (2021)	Malaysia	$n = 197$ ; tertiary level; students	Assessments	Test scores mapping
8	Charttrakul & Damnet (2021)	Thailand	$n = 67$ ; tertiary level; teachers	Syllabus, teaching approaches, and teachers' readiness	Surveys and semi-structured interviews
9	Franz & Teo (2017)	Thailand	$n = 129$ ; secondary level; teachers	Syllabus	Surveys and semi-structured interviews
10	Gopal et al. (2023)	Malaysia	$n = 20$ ; secondary level; students	Materials	Miscue analysis and retelling
11	Jalalian Daghigh & Abdul Rahim (2020)	Malaysia	$n = 0$ ; secondary level	Materials	Document analysis
12	Kaewkamnerd et al. (2023)	Thailand	$n = 20$ (teachers); $n = 850$ (students); secondary level	Syllabus and teachers' and students' needs	Surveys
13	Kaowiwattanakul (2021)	Thailand	$n = 47$ ; tertiary level; students	Teaching approaches	Experiments, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews
14	Lukas et al. (2020)	Malaysia	$n = 52$ , primary level; students	Teaching approaches	Experiments and surveys
15	Mihat et al. (2023)	Malaysia	$n = 40$ , primary level; students	Teaching approaches	Observation

16	Mohamed et al. (2019)	Malaysia	$n = 9$ (validators); $n = 53$ (teachers); primary level	Assessments	Test validation and surveys
17	Muhammad et al. (2021)	Malaysia	$n = 354$ ; tertiary level; students	Syllabus	Surveys
18	Musa et al. (2021)	Malaysia	$n = 801$ (students); $n = 30$ (teachers); tertiary level	Syllabus	Surveys, focus group, and test validation
19	Nguyen & Chung (2021)	Vietnam	$n = 41$ ; tertiary level; pre-service teachers	Teachers' readiness	Surveys and group interviews
20	Nurul Farehah & Mohd Salehuddin (2018)	Malaysia	$n = 331$ ; secondary level; teachers	Syllabus	Surveys and semi-structured interviews
21	Nurul Farehah & Mohd Salehuddin (2020a)	Malaysia	$n = 331$ ; secondary level; teachers	Syllabus	Syllabus checklist
22	Nurul Farehah & Mohd Salehuddin (2020b)	Malaysia	$n = 331$ ; secondary level; teachers	Assessments	Assessment checklist
23	Phaisannan et al. (2019)	Thailand	$n = 36$ ; tertiary level; pre-service teachers	Syllabus, teaching approaches, and teachers' readiness	Surveys and peer interviews
24	Phoolaikao & Sukying (2021)	Thailand	$n = 200$ ; tertiary level; teachers	Assessments and teaching approaches	Surveys and semi-structured interviews
25	Poonpon (2021)	Thailand	$n = 3439$ (primary); $n = 589$ (secondary); teachers	Teaching approaches	Surveys
26	Poonpon et al. (2022)	Thailand	$n = 44$ ; secondary level; students	Teaching approaches	Experiments, surveys, and semi-structured interviews
27	Rajendra & Kaur (2022)	Malaysia	$n = 5$ ; secondary level; students	Teaching approaches	Experiments and reflective journals
28	Selvarajasingam et al. (2023a)	Malaysia	$n = 105$ ; secondary level; students	Teaching approaches	Experiments and observation
29	Selvarajasingam et al. (2023b)	Malaysia	$n = 105$ ; secondary level; students	Teaching approaches	Experiments
30	Shak & Read (2021)	Malaysia	$n = 42$ (students); $n = 3$ (instructors); tertiary level	Assessments	Observation, focus group, and semi-structured interviews

31	Shin & Yunus (2021)	Malaysia	$n = 60$ ; primary level; students	Teaching approaches	Surveys and semi-structured interviews
32	Sidhu et al. (2018)	Malaysia	$n = 55$ ; primary level; teachers	Assessments	Surveys, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis
33	Singh et al. (2021)	Malaysia	$n = 120$ ; secondary level; teachers	Assessments	Surveys and interviews
34	Supunya (2022)	Thailand	$n = 4$ ; primary and secondary level; teachers	Syllabus	Interviews
35	Towns (2020)	Thailand	$n = 6$ ; tertiary level; students	Materials	Document analysis
36	Truong et al. (2021)	Thailand	$n = 2$ ; tertiary level; lecturers	Assessments	Semi-structured interviews
37	Wudthayagorn (2018)	Thailand	$n = 13$ ; tertiary level; CEFR experts	Assessments	Test scores mapping
38	Yang et al. (2023)	Malaysia	$n = 3$ ; primary level; teachers	Materials and teaching approaches	Observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews
39	Yusra et al. (2021)	Indonesia	$n = 7$ (headmasters); $n = 21$ (teachers); $n = 100$ (students); secondary level	Syllabus	Surveys, semi-structured interviews, document analysis
40	Zakaria & Md Yunus (2020)	Malaysia	$n = 36$ ; primary level; students	Teaching approaches	Surveys

Apart from a significantly lower percentage of articles published in 2022 ( $n=4$ ; 10.0%) compared to the previous year 2021 ( $n=17$ ; 42.5%), there was an upward trend in the publication of studies dealing with the alignment of the CEFR in the ASEAN region from November 2017 to November 2021 and from January 2022 to December 2023. Specifically, 2.5% ( $n=1$ ) of the included articles were published in 2017, 7.5% ( $n=3$ ) were published in 2018 and 2019 respectively, and 15.0% ( $n=6$ ) were published in 2020 and 2023 respectively. Several studies were conducted in Thailand ( $n=12$ ; 30.0%), while the smallest number of studies were conducted in Vietnam and Indonesia respectively ( $n=1$ ; 2.5%). More than half ( $n = 26$ ; 65.0%) of the studies were conducted in Malaysia. Of the 40 studies, 38 were conducted in countries with upper-middle-level income economies (i.e. Malaysia and Thailand), while only one study

conducted in Vietnam (Nguyen & Chung, 2021) and Indonesia (Yusra et al., 2021) respectively, which fulfils the criteria of a lower-middle-level income economies (Lim et al., 2023).

The number of participating teachers or instructors in the included studies ranged from two to 4,028, while the number of participating students ranged from five to 801. Most studies (55%) used teachers or instructors as participants, while 32.5% of the studies used students as participants. The articles were also categorised based on the educational level, i.e. primary (i.e. students aged 7-12 years), secondary (i.e. students aged 13–17 years) and tertiary (i.e. students aged 18 years and above). Most studies (n=15; 37.5%) were at secondary level, followed by tertiary level (n=13, 32.5%), and primary level (n=9, 22.5%), while only three (7.5%) studies included participants from both primary and secondary levels.

The articles included in the review dealt with a variety of areas of CEFR implementation. More than half of the studies (n=33) focused on just one area of investigation. These included areas such as materials aligned to the CEFR (e.g., Ahamat & Kabilan, 2022; Aziz et al., 2019; Aziz & Makhtar, 2021; Gopal et al., 2023), assessments aligned to the CEFR (e.g., Azman et al., 2021; Baharum et al., 2021; Mohamed et al., 2019; Nurul Farehah & Mohd Salehuddin, 2020b), teaching approaches (e.g., Kaowiwattanakul, 2021; Lukas et al., 2020; Mihat et al., 2023; Poonpon, 2021) and CEFR-aligned syllabus (e.g., Muhammad et al., 2021; Musa et al., 2021; Nurul Farehah & Mohd Salehuddin, 2018, 2020a; Supunya, 2022). The rest of the studies examined two or more areas including teaching approaches and assessments aligned to the CEFR (e.g., Alias et al., 2021; Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021), CEFR-aligned curriculum, support, materials and student readiness (e.g., Alih et al., 2021), CEFR-aligned materials and teaching approaches (e.g., Yang et al., 2023), CEFR-aligned curriculum, teaching approaches and teacher readiness (e.g., Charttrakul & Damnet, 2021; Phaisannan et al., 2019) and CEFR-aligned curriculum and needs of teachers and students (e.g., Kaewkamnerd et al., 2023).

The most widely used method for gaining insights into the implementation of the CEFR was a combination of surveys and interviews. Of the 40 studies included, nine (22.5%) studies utilised this combination, using different types of interviews such as semi-structured interviews, group interviews, guided reflection interviews, and peer interviews. Another frequently used method was surveys (n = 4), followed by interviews (n = 3) and experiments or checklists (n = 2). In addition to surveys and interviews, other forms of mixed methods approach were used in several studies to obtain an in-depth analysis of the issue through a combination of methods such as reflective diaries, document analysis, experiments, test

validation and observation. Below we summarise the answers to the three research questions, including the implications for practice and considerations for future research:

1. Which aspects of the CEFR-aligned curriculum have been commonly researched in the ASEAN context?

Teaching approaches are the most frequently investigated aspect of the CEFR curriculum in the reviewed studies, reflecting the considerable amount of research that has been conducted globally in the area of CEFR teaching interventions and strategies in recent years (Milliner & Dimoski, 2021; Topal, 2019; Tsai, 2023). Of these ten studies, four focused on the teaching approaches of participants at the primary level (Lukas et al., 2020; Mihat et al., 2023; Shin & Yunus, 2021; Zakaria & Md Yunus, 2020); another four at the secondary level (Poonpon et al., 2022; Rajendra & Kaur, 2022; Selvarajasingam et al., 2023a, 2023b), while the remaining two examined teaching approaches at the tertiary level (Kaowiwattanakul, 2021) and at both primary and secondary levels (Poonpon, 2021). From these studies, there is a need to explore the CEFR-based teaching approaches further in tertiary education, as there is a gap in this area. Limited research on CEFR-alignment at the tertiary level is a concern for Malaysia in particular, where the CEFR curriculum was introduced at this level of education in 2017. Also, there has been limited research on the impact of teaching approaches compared to primary and secondary education (Shak et al., 2022). Furthermore, the studies reviewed show that most of them have examined the procedures for adapting existing educational programmes or assessments to the CEFR standards without examining the impact of the policy on students' language experiences. Researching the effectiveness of CEFR implementation at the tertiary level in the ASEAN context is important to inform curriculum design and instructional practices (Poonpon et al., 2022) that can improve students' language proficiency and communicative competence (Nguyen & Dao, 2021), which is one of the important measures of graduate employability (Medina-García et al., 2020). Employability remains one of the areas of concern in developing countries, as reflected in the *Malaysian Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017*. The document reported that more than half of the graduates (55.8%) from Malaysian universities had a poor command of English, which could potentially leave them unemployed (Ministry of Education, 2012).

The other studies included in the review examined a variety of aspects related to the CEFR curriculum, such as teaching materials and textbooks, tests and assessments, curriculum content, and teachers' and students' readiness to integrate the CEFR into the classroom. In

defining the aspects of language teaching theory and practice, the CEFR is primarily intended as a planning tool to provide greater clarity (Oscarson, 2019). Therefore, it is logical to examine the aspects of the CEFR-aligned curriculum that are closely related to the development of teaching materials and assessment and evaluation, which impact lesson design, such as activity-based teaching activities and developing communicative practice. Only 15% of the studies reviewed were closely related to teaching materials, while 22.5% examined the validity of the customised assessments. By investigating those aspects of the CEFR that relate more closely to its core components, such as assessing the availability and appropriateness of materials for CEFR standards, educational resources can be structured to support students' language development (Abidin & Hashim, 2021; Dooly et al., 2023; Jalalian Daghigh & Abdul Rahim, 2020) and improve their engagement and motivation (Chong & Yamat, 2021), while research on CEFR-aligned assessment can provide valuable feedback to students, guide their language learning progress and ensure accurate assessment of their communicative skills (Alih et al., 2021; Nurul Farehah & Mohd Salehuddin, 2020b). Therefore, this knowledge and understanding should enhance the quality and variety of support they receive in their educational journey.

## 2. What methodological approaches are employed in investigating the impact of CEFR-aligned curriculum in the ASEAN context?

Although English as an international language plays a crucial role in the socio-economic success of the ASEAN region (Oscarson, 2019), the methodological approaches employed in examining the impact of the CEFR-aligned curriculum on maximising the potential of ASEAN diversity is not well represented in the included studies. Instead, most studies have included either teachers or students as participants without considering the perspectives of both groups within the same study, which may significantly influence the findings of these studies. Of the studies included in the review, only four studies addressed the impact of CEFR from both teacher and student perspectives (Kaewkamnerd et al., 2023; Musa et al., 2021; Shak & Read, 2021; Yusra et al., 2021), utilising surveys, focus groups and semi-structured interviews, test validation, document analysis, and observation to elicit significant findings from their perspectives. By attempting to provide crucial insights involving both groups of participants, the authors have emphasised the need to avoid foregrounding teachers while neglecting the crucial perspective of students, as most studies have attempted to do in the past. It is important to note that although the studies in current review did investigate the issue from the perspectives

of secondary and tertiary students, the primary students' perspective were excluded. The results have significantly shown that the students' voice was not equally represented by age and maturity, hindering a comprehensive understanding of the issue. These findings echo the reflections made by Caetano et al. (2020) in their case studies on children's participation in intercultural education where they proposed that children's involvement with decisions made regarding their educational experiences may serve as a motivating factor aiming at increasing their enthusiasm and participation.

Consideration should therefore be given to how to design accessible research that includes students as participants in the design process. Previous studies have identified an imbalance in reporting between teachers and students. It has been recommended that student perspectives be included in the design and development of research on curricula aligned with the CEFR to alleviate this perceived imbalance (Mohtar & Sadhasivam, 2022). It is promising that some of the studies included in the current review have attempted to facilitate meaningful participation from both students and teachers, who ideally should be at the forefront of CEFR implementation. For example, through teacher and student surveys, researchers have found that structured alignment between the relevance of the curriculum and the interests of teachers and students can significantly increase learner engagement and meaningful learning experience through the provision of CEFR-aligned materials and activities that meet the needs of both teachers and students (Kaewkamnerd et al., 2023). The combination of teachers' and students' perspectives has also enabled researchers to establish relationships between students' preferred courses for improving oral communication skills and boosting self-confidence and teachers' beliefs about the essential communication skills required of students (Musa et al., 2021). The use of qualitative research through observation of students' assessment also enabled the researchers to compare the results with the targeted performance descriptors, while post-assessment interviews with instructors conducted sequentially as part of the same study ensured the identification of specific issues faced by instructors in assigning grades during assessments (Shak & Read, 2021).

Although the ways in which data are collected on the implementation of the CEFR in the ASEAN region vary greatly, the way in which the information is interpreted at the stage of analysis can typically be influenced by bias and subjectivity of the preferred method of analysis (Fischer et al., 2020), which in turn leads to different findings and influences the depth of understanding gained from the research (Ullah & Rafiq, 2022). In addition to identifying the methods of data collection, the current review also extracts data on how the studies analysed the data after collection. This identification is crucial to establish links between the data

collection methods and the data analysis methods. Descriptive analysis of the data obtained from the surveys and thematic analysis obtained from the interviews conducted were found to be the preferred methods of data analysis in the included studies. While these two methods are essential to gain insights from the studies, especially to understand the strengths and limitations of CEFR implementation from the participants' perspectives, inferential statistics can contribute greatly for forecasting purposes, which was not utilised by the included studies. Only two studies used inferential statistics, firstly in the form of correlation analysis to demonstrate the correspondence between the institution's language courses and the CEFR-aligned language test (Baharum et al., 2021), and secondly to identify relationships between the knowledge of teachers-in-training and learning strategies (Nguyen & Chung, 2021). Aligning existing language courses such as curricula, teaching materials and assessments with the CEFR standards not only guarantees that students develop essential skills to communicate effectively in real-life scenarios (Marzaini et al., 2023), but also helps to evaluate the effectiveness of current assessment practices (Nurul Farehah & Mohd Salehuddin, 2020b) and should therefore be considered a crucial step towards the successful alignment of the local curriculum with the CEFR standards (Zakaria & Md Yunus, 2020).

In addition, researchers need to conduct in-depth analyses of the resources and textbooks used through document analysis to find out whether the materials aligned to the CEFR are appropriate to the abilities, interests, and cultural sensitivity of local students. The current review shows that the results of research on textbooks aligned to the CEFR are ambiguous when the perspectives of teachers or students as participants or respondents are taken into account. While some studies reported teachers' criticisms of the foreign cultural elements that dominate the selected CEFR textbooks (Ahamat & Kabilan, 2022; Jalalian Daghig & Abdul Rahim, 2020) and the need to include teaching materials that promote local cultures and histories (Aziz & Makhtar, 2021) to create meaningful learning engagement for students, other studies also show that one strength of the imported CEFR textbooks is that they are more appropriate for students' proficiency levels. Gopal et al. (2023), for instance, measured the Malaysian lower secondary learners' reading ability on a CEFR-aligned textbook. The findings revealed that all 20 learners achieved the target descriptor scale B1, indicating that they can read simple texts on topics relevant to their field and interests with sufficient comprehension. Towns (2020) in his study on textbook vocabulary instruction found that textbook rated CEFR B2 was in tandem with the highest number of author-chosen words and student-chosen words, which also fall under CEFR B2, implying their appropriacy to the students' level. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers consider document analyses in

which the selected materials themselves are subjected to linguistic analysis to promote a systematic and standardised selection of resources that focuses on the local context (Shak et al., 2021). Linguistic analysis is not only an effective method to identify the complexity and appropriateness of vocabulary used in textbooks (Sun & Dang, 2020), but also to uncover cultural biases and representations in textbooks, thus helping to promote diversity and inclusivity (Liu et al., 2022).

As shown in Table 2, not many of the included studies used experimental research, making it difficult to determine the relationships between student knowledge and the effectiveness of the implementation of the CEFR. Of the 40 studies included in the review, only six studies used experiments as part of the research design, in the form of pre- and post-tests (Kaowiwattanakul, 2021; Lukas et al., 2020; Poonpon et al., 2022; Rajendra & Kaur, 2022; Selvarajasingam et al., 2023a, 2023b). The use of an experimental design is crucial in educational research as it allows researchers to measure the effects of interventions on specific educational outcomes (Gopalan et al., 2020; Utomo & Maratus, 2021). This assessment echoes the findings of a previous review on the implementation of the CEFR in Malaysia and other European countries, which found that the lack of experimental and non-experimental research contributes significantly to the limited understanding of the effectiveness of the CEFR in both settings (Mohtar & Sadhasivam, 2022). This is a gap in the current body of research that, if addressed, could provide researchers with more reliable results in a controlled setting.

### 3. What are the main barriers and facilitators in adopting a CEFR-aligned curriculum in the ASEAN context?

One of the biggest challenges educational institutions face in the ASEAN region is the question of inclusion in all areas of the CEFR-aligned curriculum (Lee et al., 2023). Despite attempts by the Council of Europe and the European Union to introduce measures to revitalize and promote foreign language education in member states, including ASEAN (Oscarson, 2019), this starting point seems to ignore the enormous diversity that exists in the context of foreign or second language learning. Failure to measure the impact of the CEFR in the ASEAN region can be detrimental to students and institutions. Therefore, it is important to identify the key barriers and facilitators identified in the current study to ensure the policy's success in the future.

The literature analysis revealed consistency between barriers and facilitators at two levels of education (primary and secondary), with some differential factors identified at the

tertiary level. The main barriers are support from authorities (lack of training and understanding of the CEFR), cultural (differences), linguistic (required language level of teachers and students), teachers (lack of motivation and negative beliefs) and practical aspects (lack of time, infrastructures and technology).

In terms of support from the authorities, the findings from the synthesized studies point to insufficient training provided by the government for teachers as the main barrier in the implementation of the CEFR in the ASEAN region. Despite having undergone CEFR training, the lack of understanding of the CEFR in general among teachers in Malaysia inhibits the successful incorporation of the CEFR into their teaching (Alias et al., 2021; Azman et al., 2021; Sidhu et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2021; Uri & Aziz, 2018). The inadequate length of familiarisation training provided for test developers and examiners was cited as a major obstacle in the implementation. In Thailand, Phoolaikao and Sukying (2021), Poonpon (2021), and Supunya (2022) highlighted the partial knowledge of the CEFR among teachers at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. The findings revealed that preservice teachers had a moderate level of understanding of the CEFR, particularly in the teaching and learning domain, while teachers at the secondary level expressed stronger needs for CEFR-based teaching and learning training to improve their teaching skills. These results echo the sentiment expressed by Ahmad Afip et al. (2019) where Malaysian teachers are encouraged to attend CEFR workshops to find support in dealing with issues related to the implementation of the CEFR-based policy in the classroom. In Indonesia, Yusra et al. (2021) found that teachers need more trainings for job-related English, real-life job operation and on-the-job assessment of English language skills. Thus, specific training on the incorporation of innovative and student-centred lessons following CEFR guidelines should be prioritised for teachers to facilitate more effective policy implementation.

With regard to cultural differences, Ahamat and Kabilan (2022), Alias et al. (2021), and Yang et al. (2023) point to the foreign cultural context, which is presented as the main obstacle at the primary level in CEFR-aligned textbooks. At the secondary level, Jalalian Daghigh and Abdul Rahim (2020) found that imported ELT textbooks may have negatively affected Malaysian learners as the textbooks imparted neoliberal ideologies and normalised neoliberal values, undermining local cultural values and beliefs. In addition, research by Aziz and Makhtar (2021) and Aziz et al. (2019) also shows that teachers at the secondary level consider socially and culturally specific words as a crucial element to be included in the CEFR teaching materials to describe students' experiences in the local context. In this regard, the authors suggest that instead of rejecting imported textbooks aligned with the CEFR, teachers should

make efforts and take measures to adapt the foreign content to the local context to make it more meaningful to students. Another desirable solution suggested by the authors is to consider locally developed materials that take more account of the local context so that students can make connections between the lexical items learnt and the real world. Nevertheless, foreign elements should not be completely neglected as their integration can promote intercultural awareness. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2023) postulate that, although the idea seems far-fetched at present, the alignment of a regional framework such as the Common ASEAN Framework of Reference (CAFR) to harmonise an ASEAN version of English needs to be considered in the future.

As for language barriers, students' and teachers' language proficiency level has been recognised as one of the main barriers to the adoption of the CEFR-aligned curriculum in the ASEAN region (Alias et al., 2021; Alih et al., 2021; Chartrakul & Damnet, 2021; Yang et al., 2023). Yusra et al. (2021) claimed that although Indonesian students possessed professional skills that opened up opportunities for ASEAN students' exchange programmes, most could not participate due to their limited English proficiency. The low language level of students was a challenge even before the introduction of the CEFR. Now that the curriculum has been aligned with international standards, teachers are becoming increasingly frustrated as they perceive the CEFR to be far beyond the students' language level, making it difficult for students to understand the content of the lessons. In addition, teachers are required to demonstrate a band higher than that of students, which aggravates the situation, as a government report revealed that prior to the introduction of the CEFR, only half of the teachers in Malaysia had reached the minimum target level of C1 (Cambridge English, 2013). The situation remains unchanged more than five years after its introduction, with the findings of Mohammed et al. (2021) showing that only 53.8% of primary school teachers who participated in their study had reached the required proficiency level set by the Ministry. In Vietnam, Nguyen and Chung (2021) noted that the knowledge of teachers in training was below the level required by the CEFR, hindering its successful implementation. Even in Thailand, only a small percentage of primary and secondary teachers reached C1 and C2 levels (Poonpon, 2021). Therefore, teacher training institutions are advised to consider additional measures to recruit candidates with the right level. It is also advisable to familiarise teachers with the CEFR grid to prepare them for their work as educators.

Lack of teacher motivation was also cited in the studies as a major obstacle to the implementation of the CEFR in primary and secondary education. Fear of implementing change was cited as one of the factors contributing to their lack of motivation, as it entails many

changes, including teaching methods and the implementation of assessments (Alih et al., 2021). Teacher resistance is also cited as one of the challenges in implementing the CEFR curriculum. As teachers were, in some ways, forced to accept and incorporate the new framework into their teaching, it is logical to consider resistance as part of the process (Nurul Farehah & Mohd Salehuddin, 2018). In Thailand, teachers' beliefs that CEFR has little impact on classroom teaching also demotivate them to implement the new curriculum, where the introduction of CEFR was regarded as simply one of the long line of policies implemented by the government which would fizzle out quickly (Franz & Teo, 2017).

On the issue of practicality, the studies found that lack of time was a predominant factor. The excessive workload, including long teaching hours and administrative tasks (Alih et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021) as well as limited contact hours (Franz & Teo, 2017), restrict teachers' time to effectively plan their CEFR-based lessons. Sidhu et al. (2018) found that all ten teachers interviewed in their study cited the heavy workload as their biggest challenge in implementing the CEFR. As they had to prepare various documents in addition to teaching courses, they had little time for effective teaching. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that teachers have more or sufficient time to familiarize themselves with the CEFR so that they can plan and implement teaching strategies adapted to the CEFR to meet the diverse needs of students. In addition, it was found that insufficient resources for teachers to carry out CEFR-orientated activities hindered the implementation. While the new curriculum encourages teachers to incorporate technology into lessons, the lack of facilities such as media devices and rooms forced teachers to spend significant time bringing and assembling their own devices during lessons, reducing time for listening and speaking activities (Alih et al., 2021). Yang et al. (2023) categorised the challenge into two: lack of technological infrastructure and accessibility. It is imperative to note that the ASEAN region consists mainly of low- and middle-income countries, which includes Vietnam (Lim et al., 2023). Therefore, sufficient capital must be provided for educational facilities, especially at the primary and secondary levels, to address infrastructural challenges that jeopardise the success of the policy.

In terms of facilitation, the most common factor is related to the procedures for aligning existing programmes and assessments to the CEFR standards. The comprehensive procedures carried out in aligning courses and assessments to the CEFR have been found to be an important facilitating factor for the success of CEFR implementation in the ASEAN context (Kaewkamnerd et al., 2023; Mohamed et al., 2019; Musa et al., 2021; Shak & Read, 2021). Wudthayagorn (2018), for instance, highlights the effective nature of pre-meeting and training activities before the CEFR mapping in increasing experts' familiarity with the standard setting

process and the CEFR descriptors. He concluded that experts' self-evaluation in terms of readiness to proceed to the subsequent stage of familiarization as well as discussion among experts in the standard setting process are crucial to ensure consistent interpretation of the CEFR descriptors which will ultimately increase validity in judgements of test items. Azman et al. (2021) emphasise that when aligning existing tests to the CEFR standard, it is essential that test developers follow the five interlinked procedures outlined by the Council of Europe: Familiarization, Specification, Standardization and Benchmarking, Standard Setting, and Validation, as they contribute significantly to the justification of the test aligned to the CEFR. Aligning current test results with the CEFR-aligned test results helps institutions, particularly in the tertiary sector, to ensure that they are on the right track when benchmarking their language programmes against the CEFR (Baharum et al., 2021).

Teachers' beliefs were also identified as a crucial factor in the success of the implementation of the CEFR. Despite the challenges associated with implementation, teachers see the change to the curriculum as a positive move by the Ministry. This positive attitude towards the change could ultimately spur teachers to implement the change (Alih et al., 2021). Charttrakul and Damnet (2021) postulate that teachers at the University of Rajabhat view the implementation of the CEFR as a desirable goal that students can achieve during their learning. They found that the standardised nature of the CEFR spectrum, which is perceived as neither too broad nor too specific, further motivates teachers to follow the descriptors of the CEFR. Yusra et al. (2021) reported that Indonesian English teachers from the institutions they studied had positive views on the integration of CEFR and the Common ASEAN Tourism Curriculum (CATC) for English due to intense political support from the national government in providing quality materials and pedagogical training for the teachers.

Another common factor is the implementation of effective teaching methods based on the CEFR in the classroom. Several teaching approaches were developed and utilised such as the use of literature activities (Kaowiwattanakul, 2021), thinking maps (Selvarajasingam et al., 2023a, 2023b) and the integration of technology (Shin & Yunus, 2021; Zakaria & Md Yunus, 2020) which were found to facilitate students' learning experiences and promote understanding of concepts taught in class. For example, the use of Flipgrid at the primary level has proven successful in improving students' vocabulary and giving them more confidence to communicate in English (Shin & Yunus, 2021). Similarly, using reader-response activities at the tertiary level significantly improved students' reading ability and critical thinking skills (Kaowiwattanakul, 2021).

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to provide insights into how the implementation of the CEFR in the ASEAN region has been elicited in previous research to inform future research in this area. The systematic review reveals barriers to and facilitators in implementing the CEFR as well as research gaps and problems in implementing the CEFR at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Although the findings reflect some of the methods identified by Mohtar and Sadhasivam (2022) to examine the impact of CEFR implementation, this study also identifies the barriers and facilitators which are specific to the ASEAN context and highlights common factors that hinder or facilitate CEFR implementation at the three levels of education, as well as the CEFR curriculum measures that are commonly studied in the region. Perhaps the most valuable outcome of this research is the revelation of the methods used to effectively capture the impact of the CEFR. The findings indicate that researchers should include both student and teacher participant perspectives in the research design phase and consider textbook analysis to determine the appropriateness of imported CEFR-aligned materials to ASEAN students' interests and abilities. It is critical that students be given the opportunity to voice their opinions and engage in discussions about their experiences with the CEFR. In terms of barriers, teachers' lack of understanding of the CEFR and insufficient support from the ASEAN governments contribute to impeding the implementation of an effective English curriculum that, if approached carefully, could raise students' skills to the level of international standards, which would increase their global marketability and enable them to draw level with their European counterparts.

Moving forward, policy makers should reflect on the level of support provided to teachers through training, materials, and infrastructure. It is suggested that more effective training and continuous professional development are needed to improve implementation efforts. Teaching materials should also incorporate local culture to encourage student engagement with the content, and teachers should explore more varied teaching methods that align with the CEFR to provide meaningful learning experiences for students. More importantly, the review of the included studies suggests that the governments in the ASEAN region need to reconsider the allocation of funds for the implementation of the CEFR, as the lack of financial resources greatly affects the provision of the necessary support to teachers in terms of training, teaching aids, and the infrastructure provided by the use of technological resources, especially at the primary and secondary levels.

Finally, the findings reported in the review point to areas where CEFR research in the region needs to be prioritized, including greater and more holistic understanding of the impact,

utilizing the perspectives of all major stakeholders and locally sensitive and innovative methodological resources. As CEFR is likely to become an integral part of education in the ASEAN region, it calls for significant attention from educators, researchers and policymakers from all ASEAN countries.

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