

## The Competitive Potential of Two ASEAN Countries: Thailand and Vietnam<sup>\*</sup>

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#### Abstract

The objectives of this academic article were to 1) review Article 1 and Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter in relation to the competitive potential of two ASEAN members (Thailand and Vietnam) particular in regard to education and English ability, and 2) discuss certain conditions concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the two countries. It was found that 1) both Thailand and Vietnam have put in a considerable effort to consolidate the people's English language proficiency, 2) Thai people had some weaknesses, and 3) Vietnamese people carry certain strong and beneficial characteristics. Thus, joining the ASEAN can be better beneficial to Thailand only if Thai people eradicate the weaknesses.

**Key words:** Thailand, Vietnam, English education, ASEAN, competitive potential

#### บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิชาการนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อ 1) ทบทวนมาตรา 1 และ มาตรา 34 ของกฎบัตรอาเซียนที่สัมพันธ์กับศักยภาพทางการแข่งขันของสองประเทศสมาชิกอาเซียน (ไทยและเวียดนาม) โดยเฉพาะจงพิจารณาเฉพาะด้านการศึกษาและความสามารถด้านภาษาอังกฤษ, 2) อภิปรายเงื่อนไขบางประการที่เกี่ยวข้องกับจุดแข็งและจุดอ่อนของทั้งสองประเทศ ข้อค้นพบคือ 1) ทั้งประเทศไทยและเวียดนามได้พยายามอย่างยิ่งในการให้ประชาชนแข็งแกร่งด้านความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษ, 2) คนไทยมีจุดอ่อนบางประการ, 3) ชาวเวียดนามมีคุณลักษณะแข็งแกร่งและเป็นประโยชน์บางประการ ดังนั้นการเข้าร่วมเป็นสมาชิกประชาคมอาเซียนจะเป็นประโยชน์ต่อประเทศไทยมากขึ้นหากคนไทยสามารถกำจัดจุดอ่อนต่างๆได้

<sup>\*</sup> The objective of this article was to present an analysis of the competitive potential of Thailand and Vietnam in relation to the people's English language proficiency

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## Introduction

Thailand and Vietnam share certain similarities yet differ in certain aspects. They share resemblance in being developing countries, agricultural product exporters, populated countries, to name a few. Both countries learn English as a foreign language (EFL) and use the language as a *lingua Franca*— in international business, tourism, for instance. Regarding disparities, one is the fact that Vietnam has suffered from warfare for decades (Wikipedia.org), while Thailand has never. As state members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), both have to be competitive enough to sustain healthily in the community.

This article discussed the conditions and situations Thailand and Vietnam as ASEAN members have to encounter after the establishment of the ASEAN Charter in 2015 (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2007). As an English teacher, the author analyzed only the factors involving education and English proficiency in relation to the two countries' competitiveness.

## ASEAN Charter: favorable or unfavorable

To participate or to not participate in an international organization, a country may gain and lose some benefits. In joining the ASEAN, Thailand and Vietnam are facing certain challenges despite expecting certain benefits (ASEAN Community, 2016; Government Public Relations Department, 2014). Relating to this issue are Article 1 and Article 34 among the 55 Articles of the ASEAN Charter.

### Article 1: Purposes of the ASEAN

'To create a single market and production base which is stable, prosperous, highly competitive and economically integrated with effective facilitation for trade and investment in which there is free flow of goods, services and investment; facilitated movement of business persons, professionals, talents and labor; and freer flow of capital. (p. 4).

To interpret, Article 1 imposed two major challenges on Thailand and Vietnam. One is that the whole community has become a single market and production base since 2015. In this regards, Thailand is assigned as the country coordinator in tourism and air travel (Luenchawee, 2011). The other is that there is the free flow of goods, services, capital, and skilled labor. In particular, it is stipulated that entrepreneurs are eligible to conduct in any ASEAN country the following kinds of business: tourism, aviation, health care, information

technology and logistics. Thus, since 2015 the free flow of labors has been implemented in eleven sectors: tourism, aviation, auto industry, timber products, rubber products, textile, electronic goods, agricultural products, fishery, ICT (Information and Communication Technology), and health care. (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2007).

According to the free flow of labor agreement, individuals holding a skill standard certificate from a member country are eligible to work in any of the ASEAN countries without acquiring a work permit. The free flow, however, is limited to only highly skilled labor in engineering, architecture, survey, medicine, accountancy, nursing, and dentistry (‘Aphinya luan chawī, 2011).

It can be interpreted that the purposes of forming the ASEAN as stated in Article 1 have brought both benefits and concerns to both Vietnam and Thailand. However, it seems to be more advantageous for the Vietnamese labor market. In 2014 Vietnam had 53.7 million labors. The strength of this country is that those who obtained training certificates increased by 20 percent in the last decade (Singapore Management University, 2017). These workers are highly-skilled in utilizing most hi-tech and complex equipment. In other words, the Vietnamese are rather well-prepared to acquire well paid jobs. Currently Vietnamese employees work in various professions in other ASEAN countries. The strength of Vietnam also lines in the minimum wage which is relatively low. Consequently, in 2013 International Finance Corporation (IFC), a World Bank organization, ranked Vietnam the 99th out of 189 countries most convenient countries for investment, and 5th of ASEAN after Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei. Foreign investment in Vietnam has increased subsequently. Besides, Vietnamese business entrepreneurs have successfully established and operated their businesses in other regional countries such as Laos and Cambodia (Government Public Relations Department).

Likewise, joining the ASEAN Community Thailand seems to gain certain benefits. One is that a larger number of domestic workforce can move to ASEAN countries where they can financially earn better. However, the work force who can move freely in the ASEAN countries are only the highly skilled. Thus, the relocation of Thai skilled workforce can be considered as a negative side. In Thailand the number of skilled labor in those desirable fields is literally insufficient for national development. This problem has been realized. The Department of Skill Development, working jointly with the private sector and vocational institutes, has continuously been giving training to the Thai workforce. Over 20,000 skilled workers have been supplied to the labor (ASEAN Community, 2016). One fact is that additional number of skilled

labor is still in need for the Thai economy. Providing this group of workforce moved to other countries for personal financial benefits, to a certain extent Thailand would experience the shortage of human resource.

In contrast, Thailand has an abundant number of less skilled or unskilled labor in different areas: construction, house care services, and textile, to name a few. Similarly, the number of unskilled workforce in Vietnam was the large part of the total of 53.7 million in 2014 (Singapore Management University, 2017). This group of human resources, however, is literally illegible to move freely in the ASEAN countries, according to Article 1.

#### **Article 34: Working Language of the ASEAN**

It is proclaimed in the 2015 ASEAN Charter that: ‘The working language of ASEAN shall be English’ (P.29).

English is stipulated as the official language of the ASEAN according to Article 34. English is spoken widely in four of the pre-existing six members (The Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei) and taught extensively in the other two countries (Indonesia and Thailand). In practice, even prior to the ASEAN Charter declaration, investors from any country use English as the medium of communication in establishing business in ASEAN countries. Article 34 simply emphasized and confirmed the necessity that workforce of all countries be competent in communicating through English.

Thus, whether or not Articles 1 and Article 34 are beneficial to Thailand and Vietnam may involve various factors, the number and size of foreign investment, the people’s education, the peoples’ English language competent, for instance. Since the author is an English instructor, the discussion will focus on the two countries’ education--English proficiency in particular, and the effort put by the government into the Thai English education in coping with the challenge.

#### **Education**

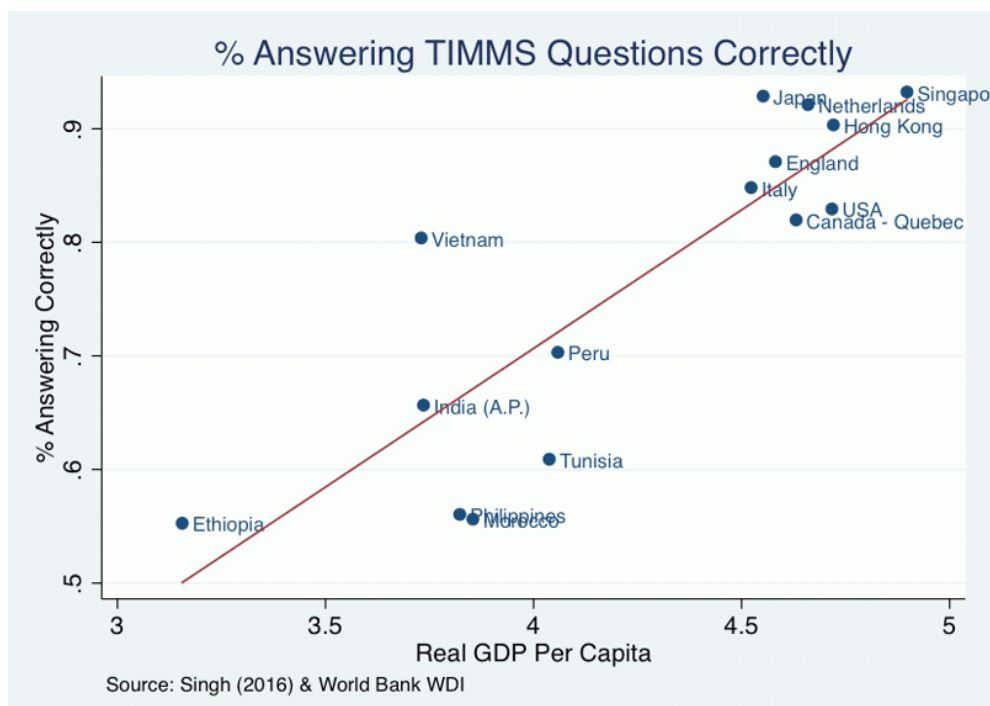
For the progress and development of ASEAN members, the ASEAN Charter established three significance pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Concerning education is the ASCC, of which the blueprint stipulates that human resource development is the first priority to be accomplished in creating the wellbeing of the region’s population (Keng, 2009). Education projects and plans are, therefore, well supported. Since education takes a role in enhancing the free flow of skilled labor, the ASEAN community work cooperatively in encouraging education and vocation standards development to strengthen

the human resource to meet the need of the industrial sectors regionally and globally (churaisiri churak, 2014).

Regarding Thailand, the national education has been administered mainly by the government, although privately owned schools and universities are numerous. All grade schools follow the core curricula designed by the Ministry of Education. Each school, however, is authorized to supplement the core courses with other learning materials for expected learning outcomes. Nevertheless, criticism has been that Thailand is lag behind many other countries in this regard. The quality problem of the Thai education has repeatedly reported (Khom chat luk, 2016). For instance, the educational outcomes measured by national and international standardized tests (Ordinary National Test, or ONET, PISA, Cambridge Test, or TOEIC), as reported by NIETS or National Institute of Educational Testing Service (Public Organization Institute, have always been low (NIETS, 2014); the results were contradictory to the relatively large amount of budget allocated to the national education by the government (Fredrickson, 2015).

The 2005 ONET results showed that the test takers from all basic educational levels: elementary (grade 6), junior high (grade 9), and high school (grade 12), scored under 50 % in all major subjects—Thai language, English, Social Studies, Mathematics, and Sciences. In particular, they scored only 35 % in English, Mathematics, and Sciences (NIETS, 2014). More recently, the 2010 ONET scores of the five major subjects remained lower than 50%. Particularly, the scores in English and mathematics of grade 12 learners were as low as 19.22, and 14.99, respectively (NIETS, 2014)

Compared with the education in Thailand, the Vietnamese education has been run entirely by the government under rigid supervision. It is accepted that due to the political and economic situation they experienced during the past decades, schools in the countries could not be compared to certain countries in the ASEAN in certain regards. However, school performance of this country seemed to have surprised the ASEAN as well as the world community. In 2013, which was the first time Vietnam entered the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Vietnamese students scored higher in Mathematics than all their counterparts from seven developing countries, as shown in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1:** The 2013 Results of Mathematics measured by the Program for International Students Assessment (PISA)

**Source:** <http://www.businessinsider.com/vietnams-students-test-well-and-a-new-paper-has-figured-out-why-2016-7/>

In addition, they scored higher than participants from some other developed countries (Pfeiffer, 2016). Notably, those major subjects as Mathematics, Sciences, and English play a significant role in human resource development of the ASEAN countries. Considering these three school subjects, when compared with Thailand, rather obviously Vietnam is stronger in terms of competitive potential. The Thais' low competent in these three essential areas of knowledge can be a big challenge for the Thai government.

Concerning the English language proficiency, *Education First* (EF) has released regional and global rankings of English language proficiency annually. The ranking consists of five proficiency groups, *Very high proficiency*, *High proficiency*, *Moderate proficiency*, *Low proficiency*, and *Very low proficiency*. The rankings from 2012 through 2017 reflected that roughly the English language proficiency of Thai people has continuously descending. Thailand has fallen into the 'Low' and 'Very Low' proficiency groups. At the global level, Thailand's places on the English proficiency in the EF rankings from 2013-2017 were: 55 (from 60 countries), 48 (from 63 countries), 62 (from 70 countries), 56 (from 72 countries), and 53 (from 80), respectively (EF EPI, 2013; EF EPI, 2014; EF EPI, 2015; EF EPI, 2016; EF EPI, 2017).

Thailand was in the ‘*Very Low Proficiency*’ group for four consecutive years, except the latest ranking (2017) in which she was placed in the ‘*Low Proficiency*’ group. At the regional level, Thailand has also been at almost the bottom of the ASEAN community (EF EPI, 2015; EF EPI, 2016; EF EPI, 2017). It was observed that despite Thailand's booming tourism industry, in 2014 its rank descended drastically, higher than only Cambodia and Laos. Importantly, Thais still exhibit poor English skills in the following years in spite of the country's large investment on education and English education (Fredrickson, 2015).

Compared with Thailand, Vietnam has literally made significant progress at both regional and global levels. At the global level her places in the rankings from 2013 through 2017 were: 28 (from 60 countries), 33 (from 63 countries), 31 (from 70 countries), 31 (from 72 countries), and 34 (from 80 countries), respectively (EF EPI, 2013; EF EPI, 2014; EF EPI, 2015; EF EPI, 2016; EF EPI, 2017). In other words, Vietnam was in the ‘*Moderate Proficiency*’ group almost all through the five years period. When considered meticulously, Vietnam was found making greater progress, except in 2014 when she was placed in the ‘*Low Proficiency*’ group. At the regional level, from the first PISA entry in 2013 Vietnam has always been ranked at the higher place than Thailand. Literally, Thailand has always been ranked almost the lowest among the eight ASEAN countries (Myanmar and Brunei did not enter the ranking); only Cambodia and Laos are ranked lower.

### **Government's attempt against the challenges**

Adhering to the sustainable development philosophy, the Thai government and involving parties have put efforts to human resource development in all aspects and levels—elementary education, vocational education, higher education, and non-formal and informal education. Regarding English education, the current government has aimed to enable grade six graduates to use English in everyday communication (Office of the Basic Education Commission, no date). To reach the goal, several projects and movements have been started: *Center for Native Speaker English Teacher Employment*, *Initiation of English for Integrated Studies (EIS)*, *Mathematics and English Integrated Teaching*, *Electronic Class called the Global Class*, for example.

In addition, The Ministry of Education has launched the 5-year educational plan, consisting of 5 policies, in congruent with the ASEAN 5-year operational plan. Policy 2 stresses the necessity of human resource production. Students, teachers and people of all careers will be encouraged and supported to attain the English language proficiency sufficient for effective international communication. Thai people will also be equipped with information technology

to attain the skills and expertise relevant to the changes in the industry for greater employment opportunities. (*Office of the Education Council, 2007*).

‘ārī rak mī chǎēng (2012) investigated into the outcomes of one of teacher training projects and found positive results. The trained teachers were able to apply most of the experiences in their actual teaching. They had multiple ways to apply the knowledge gained from the training and reported their maximum use of the experiences and knowledge from every training module except *Module 8: Developing additional courses for upper secondary school education level* which was rated at a moderate level. The attempts to develop teachers, students, and other human resources, however, had only partially been operated. The projects to develop English language skills, in other words, have been implemented only in a few *Co-Learning Network Schools* in each *Educational Service Area*. Such seemingly effective projects have not covered and never reached the majority of the students and teachers nationwide (‘ārī rak mī chǎēng (2012).

Most recently, in 2017 the Ministry of Education made an important move concerning the English language learning of Thai people. Beginning from the second semester of 2017 academic year they started to have 5 periods a week for English in the pilot schools (Thai rat, 2016); traditionally, Grade 1 to Grade 3 learners in government-run schools have only 1-2 periods a week for English. To handle the new scheme, the so-called *English Boot Camp* was held in co-operation with the British Council and the *Regional English Training Centers* in four regions covering eight provinces to train teachers to be the English master teachers. 5,100 English teachers from elementary, secondary, and vocational levels participated in the 17 three-week intensive courses focusing on English language skills and communicative approach teaching technique. (British Council, no date). The outcomes are still expected.

### **Educational related issues**

It can simply be assumed from PISA reports that Vietnam is standing on a better position in terms of benefit acquisition from participating in the ASEAN Community than Thailand (Pfeiffer, 2016). A question was raised ‘What have played a role in Vietnamese’s success in its school system?’ All of the efforts made by the government and non-government sectors may or may not yield promising outcomes depending upon two factors: peoples’ characteristics and the quantity and quality of the access to information technology. Motivated by the PISA 2013 results that Vietnamese students outperformed those from some affluent countries, The World Bank carried out a research to find out the factors contributing to the



country's success in English education. Cultural characteristics and educational investments were found to have played a significant role (Facts and Details, no date)

It is known that culture partly shapes people's characteristics, pride, self-esteem, perseverance, discipline, etc. For the Vietnamese, cultural differences have shaped the characteristics of Vietnamese school system, instructors, and students. Vietnamese students have been accepted for their exceptional diligence. In addition, the Vietnamese put high value to education. Their laboriousness together with the positive perception towards education are witnessed in the learners' discipline and devotion to their study. Occurrences of absence from school, being late for school, and skipping classes were rather low. Only 9 % of the Vietnamese students were reported having experienced skipping classes, while the Thai learners having 18 per cent (Pfeiffer, 2016).

Aside from diligence and perception towards education, discipline is another indicator for educational success. The average *Discipline index* of Vietnamese and Thai students were 0.36 and 0.07, respectively (Pfeiffer, 2016). The students' perseverance is shown not only in their discipline but also on their concentration. In general, Vietnamese students were serious in their schoolwork, spending more time weekly studying outside the classroom than those in some other developing countries (Facts and Details, no date).

Different from the Vietnamese, the Thais are notoriously known as being passive, poorly participating in class discussions, responding only to questions directed to, and rarely volunteering to answer questions (Deveney, 2005). This observation is congruent with the study by Ngammuk (2011). Among the 8 fundamental moral characteristics under investigation (politeness, generosity, honesty, unity, cleanliness, discipline, diligence, and frugality), Thai undergraduate students were below average in discipline and diligence. However, they were found notably above average in frugality (Ngammuk, 2011).

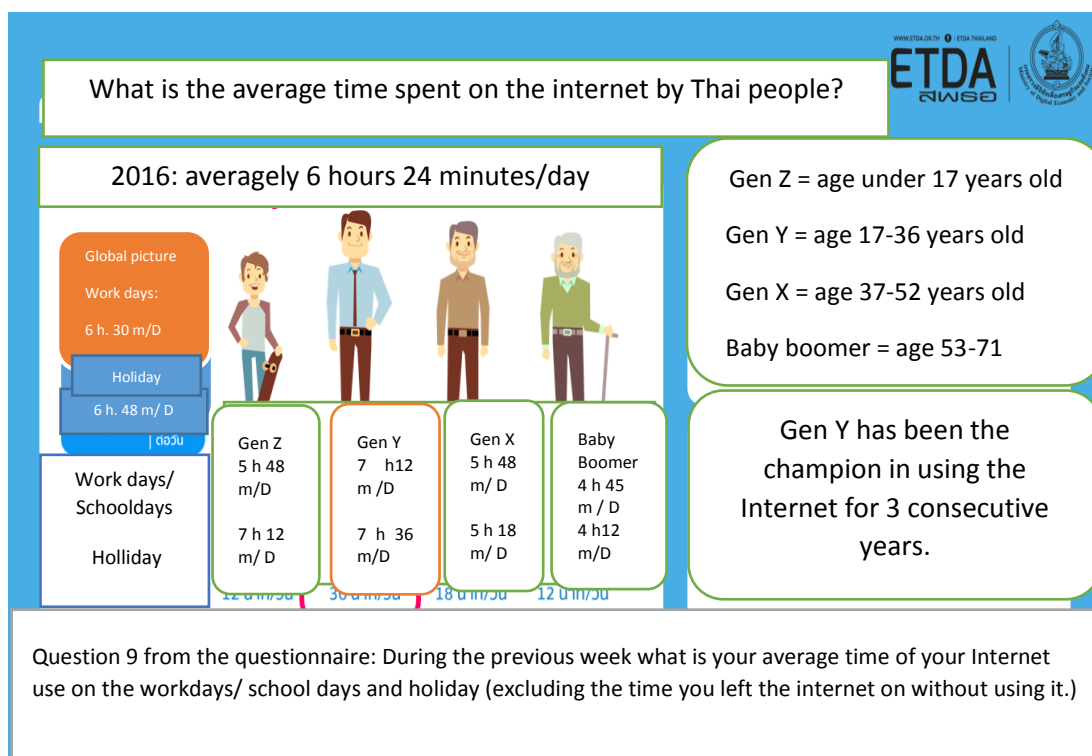
Besides the cultural factors adhering to people, the investment for educational development of each country plays a role in the people's competitive competence. In this globalized world, access to the internet plays a crucial role in a country's development of almost every facet. Analogically, the internet is the largest library of this planet. According to Word Bank, Vietnam has a lower level of economic development than some countries in the ASEAN community. The country has fewer schools in the cities and more in villages and small towns. In terms of the investment, the cumulative investment for education of the country was 6,969 USD, PPPs, approximately half of that of Thailand (13,964 USD, PPPs). Contrary to its low GDP, however, Vietnam seems to invest in education more than the other developing

countries, especially in purchasing computers and installing internet (World Bank, 2016, cited in Thaitribune, 2016). Schools nationwide in Vietnam are equipped with adequate internet facilities.

Compared with the Vietnamese counterpart, Thailand's expenses on school computers and accessories were greater. In 2017 the Ministry of Education launched the '*High Speed Internet*' Project in order to equip all schools in the country with the technology (Khom chat luk, 2017). However, the access to school internet in Thailand is still questionable in remote areas. It has been reported that certain problems related to the internet access were found at the practical level leading to the school children internet inaccessibility.

Nonetheless, access the internet through mobile phones may seem to be a promising alternative. There were 90.7 million mobile phone subscribers in the first quarter of 2017 (Veedvil, 2017), while the country's population in 2017 was 65,931,550 (Zcooby, 2017). However, those who had access the internet through their mobile phones was 47.5 % of the population (ETDA. 2017 a) or only about 32 million in 2017. Those who did not have Internet access could be both children and adults. In other words, a number of school aged children may not have access to the internet.

For those who have the advantage of having easy internet access, the behavior of their internet access is a concern, however. In 2017 *Electronic Transactions Development Agency (Public Organization)*, or ETDA, conducted a survey asking 25,101 questionnaire respondents. It was found that Thai people averagely spent 6 hours and 24 minutes a day on the internet (ETDA, 2017b).



**Figure 2:** Average time spent on the Internet by Thai people of different age ranges

**Source:** English translation from the Thai version from *Thai Electronic Transactions Development Agency (Public Organization) ETDA*

Considering the different age ranges of users, Gen Y users (aged between 17-36 years) spent the longest time, 7.12 hours a day on weekdays and 7.36 hours on weekends. Gen Z (aged younger than 17 years old) spent 5.48 hours daily on weekdays and 7.12 hours on weekends.

As these two groups of population involve education and work, their behavior in accessing the internet is worth considering. The five top most popular activities on the internet were social media, information search, e-mailing, online television and music, and online shopping, at 86.9%, 86.5%, 70.5%, 60.7%, 50.8%, respectively. Regarding information search, the figure was rather high. However, it is questionable what information those mobile users mostly searched for and the amount of time they devoted to knowledge acquiring.

## Conclusion

Upon examining the factors potentially contributing to the Thailand and Vietnam's competitive potential in the ASEAN and world communities through the analysis of people's English language proficiency, characteristics and the conditions imposed by Articles 1 and Article 34 (the former stating the AEC's purposes, and the latter the official language), a few questions remain: Question 1 'Will Thailand and Vietnam be comparably competitive to reach the wellbeing addressed in the ASEAN Charter?'; Question 2 'Would Thai people be comparable in terms of competitive potential in this regional community?'; and Question 3 'Are the workforce of the under-and developing countries in the ASEAN community, including Vietnam and Thailand, ready to seek jobs in more affluent ASEAN countries?'.

Having considered the conditions imposed on Vietnam and Thailand by Article 1 and Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter, together with each country's internal factors, Vietnam seems to be able to move forward and acquire ample benefits from joining the ASEAN community. Thailand, on the other hand, still has to put tremendously more efforts in order to exist healthily in this regional and global communities. Viewing from an English teacher's perspective, English proficiency of Thai people needs to be elevated urgently as the English proficiency of Thai people has been unexpectedly low (Limtrairat & Aksornjarung, 2015). Ultimately, Thai people, especially those in the working-age group need to eradicate the notoriously known characteristics aforementioned to be more competitive. We expect to see Thai students be more perseverant and determined in their intellectual endeavor and have more willingness to face obstacles and hard work; they have to be more disciplined; and they must learn to live realistically on their own economic status, i.e. they should be careful with spending and learn to save up on a regular basis if they are not considered as having affluent families, in particular.

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