



Teachers Journey Far from the Comfort of the Family: Narratives of Teachers in the Foreign Country

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the narratives of teachers teaching in the foreign countries. Narrative inquiry approach was used in analyzing the data gathered. purposive sampling was used in selecting the informants of the study. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis like MAXQDA in determining the emerging theme from the informants' narrative. Language barrier and cultural differences are the challenges faced by Filipino teachers in handling foreign learners. The strategies employed by Filipino teachers in handling foreign learners are utilizing of different teaching strategies, cultural awareness and compassion. Furthermore, strategies used by Filipino teachers in overcoming homesickness are communicating constantly to their family and getting along with the community. Suggestions of Filipino teachers to aspiring teachers they should have the necessary skills in teaching, be passionate and have a strong personality. Based on the gathered data and result proposed intervention plan suggested to counter the cultural barriers or differences by learning how to speak the language of their students and the community. The findings are useful and significant because it provides narratives of Filipino teachers teaching in foreign countries their challenges, strategies in handling their learners and homesickness and suggestion for aspiring teachers.

Keywords: Filipino teachers' narrative, strategies, foreign learners, language barrier, cultural barriers, proposed intervention plan

Introduction

Teaching is the noblest profession. It is the very reason of producing professionals that contributed to the transformative development of the society. They find a decent living and even promote an image so that respect and higher sense of value will dignify them of how teaching really impact human's lives.

Undeniably, there are many Filipino teachers working as language teachers in the neighboring South East Asian countries, namely: Thailand; Cambodia, Vietnam; and Indonesia. This can be associated by the mere fact that Filipinos have the command of the English language, making them the well-sought teachers in the aforesaid countries. Above all, they are hired because of the dedication in handling diverse learners.

Moreover, Filipino teachers left the country as tourists. Eventually, this is their ticket to finding a teaching job in foreign countries (Novio, 2018). In terms of their teaching strategies, they applied playing English songs for listening, oral spelling for speaking, written spelling for writing, and silent reading. Also, Pictionary was identified as one of the effective methods in teaching English to foreign learners (Cordova, 2018).

Similarly, these Filipino teachers have proven their worth and expertise. Beyond, this, the present study would like to determine the narrative of Filipino teachers especially from the Province of Cotabato who are currently working as English teachers in foreign countries. There may be some similarities of the previous studies, however, these on the communicative competence (Nawamamat & Cedar, 2021), on non-academic constructs (Galang, 2020), and on bilingual education in Thailand (Cabiladas & Soontornwipast, 2020). This motivates the researcher to fill in this gap.

Knowing the experiences of Filipino teachers teaching in foreign countries would serve as a background to those who wish to follow their footsteps. Having the knowledge and skills may be crucial for educational institutions to improve the delivery of learning. Through this, Filipino teachers will strengthen its global status as best teachers.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed at determining the narratives of Filipino teachers working in foreign countries. Specifically, it answered the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by Filipino teachers in handling foreign learners?

2. What strategies do Filipino teachers employ in handling foreign learners?
3. How do Filipino teachers overcome the homesickness?
4. What suggestions can Filipino teachers working in the foreign countries provide to aspiring teachers?
5. What intervention plan can be proposed based on the findings of the study?

Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study was conducted to determine the narratives of the Filipino teachers working in as teachers in different Southeast Asian countries. Their challenges as well as the teaching strategies will be sought. More so, they provided information on their coping strategies especially in overcoming homesickness. However, in this study, informants are limited to Filipino teachers teaching in Thailand.

Method Used

This study is qualitative employing the narratology design. As Creswell and Poth (2016) stated, "Those undertaking qualitative studies have a baffling number of choices of approaches." Qualitative approaches of inquiry are diverse and can be numerous depending upon how they are classified as some classification schemes include 20 plus approaches. Regardless of how they are classified, the traditional 5 approaches are represented, in some fashion, in all classification schemes. These include case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, and phenomenology. This article provide the reader with a better understanding of narrative approach or narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research in which the stories themselves become the raw data. This approach has been used in many disciplines to learn more about the culture, historical experiences, identity, and lifestyle (Herman, 2005). In this study, I allowed the Filipino teachers to narrate their experiences as ESL teachers in Thailand.

Sources of Data

This study used primary sources of data. There were seven (7) informants who participated in the conduct of the study. Seven (7) informants were interviewed through online using Google Meet and Messenger. The responses of the informants were recorded with their consent. Recorded data was transcribed and have the thematic analysis. Presentation of the findings and its corresponding implications was done.

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique used is purposive sampling in the selection of the informants. However, to make it more specific to use the snowball and criterion-based sampling. It is a non-probability sampling method where new units are recruited by other units to form part of the sample. Snowball sampling can be a useful way to conduct research about people with specific traits who might otherwise be difficult to identify (Mujere, 2016). The informant were chosen using the following criteria: a Filipino teacher currently based in Thailand; at least 2 years as a teacher in Thailand; and teaching English subject. There were (7) informants used in this study.

Results and Discussions

Challenges faced by Filipino Teachers in handling Foreign Learners

The first research question determines the challenges faced by Filipino teachers in teaching foreign learners. Two emergent themes were derived from the responses. These are language barrier and cultural difference.

Language Barrier and Cultural Differences. Teachers may face difficulties in effectively communicating with foreign learners. Pronunciation, vocabulary, and cultural difference can impede clear communication and understanding. Teachers need to find ways to bridge these gaps and ensure effective communication with their students. In the contexts of the informants who are handling Thai learners, it is indeed common among them who struggle with English pronunciation due to difference in phonetic system.

It can be noted that Thai language has distinct sounds and phonetic rules that differ from English. Aside from that, even in assessing the learning progress and achievement of foreign learners can be challenging due to language barriers. Traditional assessment methods may not accurately reflect their understanding and abilities.

The narratives of one of the informants provided the idea that language barrier is indeed a challenge for Filipino teachers. In addition, the inability of the children to express in the target language complicated the situation.

"Students spend 12 years of learning English in primary and secondary, but the results are questionable. The highest challenges faced by Filipino teachers included language barrier, insufficient knowledge of English, poorly motivated and lack of responsibility for their own learning, lack of exposure to English language and being too shy to speak English. These problems end to unsatisfactory of learning the English language." Informant 4

In the same vein, language barrier is also viewed by another Filipino teacher who was interviewed in this study. She articulated that:

"I think language barrier, especially if the learners are not familiar with the medium of instruction, it will be frustrating for teachers to teach. Also, culture is a big part of the challenge." Informant 5

Conversely, beyond the problematic issues on language and culture, Filipino teachers even tried to adjust with their personality.

"As a Filipino teacher, the challenges that I face in handling foreign learners are language barriers, cultural differences, and personality adjustment." Informant 6

The language barrier can hinder effective communication between teachers and students. It may make it challenging for teachers to convey information, instructions, and explanations clearly. Students, on the other hand, may struggle to express their thoughts, ask questions, or seek clarification. This limited communication can impede the learning process and lead to misunderstandings.

Aside from that, cultural differences in norms, values, beliefs, and communication styles can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts in intercultural interactions. Lack of awareness or sensitivity to cultural differences may result in unintentional offense, stereotypes, or biases, affecting trust and rapport between individuals or groups.

When students do not have the strong command of the language of instruction, their comprehension of the subject matter may be compromised. They may struggle to understand complex concepts, follow lectures, or discussion, and access instructional materials. This can impact their overall academic performance and hinder their ability to fully engage in the learning process (Lee et al., 2023).

Strategies employed by Filipino teachers in handling foreign learners

The second research question indicates the strategies employed by Filipino teachers in handling foreign learners. They shared that they utilized different teaching strategies, becoming culturally aware, and having the sense of compassion.

Utilization of Different Teaching Strategies. Filipino teachers are said to be dynamic in terms of teaching. Hence, they provided different learning activities to their foreign learners. As teachers working in Thailand, they applied the bodies of knowledge which they learned while they were student interns or practicing their profession in private or public institutions. For example, a Filipino teacher used visuals in letting the learners to have the grasp of the lesson. As mentioned during the interview, she reiterated that:

"It's effective to use visuals, repetition of words, practice simple conversation and know their behaviors are some of the strategies in handling learners." Informant 3

They believed in the importance of collaborative learning. This is effective since learners are provided with activities that they have to perform with. In the interview, it was revealed that:

"In my class, I usually conduct collaborative learning, inclusivity, reflective, Integrative, questioning, review, and giving feedbacks." Informant 4

This is in consonance with the responses of informant 7. A manifestation that Filipino teachers are knowledgeable enough of the subject matter that they are teaching. A student-centered approach was utilized by this teacher. She exclaimed that:

"The strategies that Filipino teachers employ in handling foreign learners are more on active learning like giving lots of activities inside or outside of the classroom, avoiding spoon feed type of class, encourage initiative attitude to allow students to actively participate in the learning process and making assessments fun for students." Informant 7

Incorporating culturally relevant content, perspectives, and examples in teaching strategies promotes cultural sensitivity and inclusion in the classroom. Recognizing and valuing students' diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities fosters a supportive and respectful learning environment for foreign language learners. Exposing foreign language students to a variety of teaching strategies encourages the development and application of effective language acquisition strategies. Through scaffolded instruction, explicit language instruction, and opportunities for language practice and feedback, students acquire strategies for vocabulary acquisition, grammar comprehension, and language production.

It can be noted that students have different learning preferences and styles (Woodeson et al., 2023). Some may be visual learners, while others may learn better through hands-on activities or discussions. By employing a variety of teaching strategies, educators can accommodate these diverse learning styles and ensure that all students have opportunities to engage with the material effectively. In fact, teachers can create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that maximizes student learning outcomes.

Cultural Awareness. Cultural awareness helps teachers recognize and appreciate the diverse backgrounds, values, and beliefs of their students. By valuing and respecting students' cultures, teachers create an inclusive and supportive learning environment where all students feel valued and accepted. In this manner, Filipino teachers showed that they foster positive classroom atmosphere and encourages active participation and engagement.

In concordance, the informant validated this during the interview. The importance of cultural awareness was given enough consideration in teaching.

"To maintain the understanding and communication inside the classroom. Being employed as a teacher abroad, there should be multi-cultural awareness of the diverse learners being aware of the learners' culture just like including learning activities; integrated with their culture that can lead to a more effective teaching." Informant 4

This is also the message of informant 6. She delved into the importance of knowing the language of her Thai learners.

“First, you should learn their language so that when you communicate with them, they can understand you. Second, speak simple English only. Third, be patient. Fourth, love your job.” (Informant 6)

Filipino teachers employ culturally responsive teaching strategies that recognize and leverage the cultural assets, prior knowledge, and learning styles of foreign learners. This may include using storytelling, group discussions, experiential learning, and visual aids tailored to diverse cultural backgrounds.

When foreign learners feel valued, respected, and understood, their overall academic performance improves. Cultural awareness in teaching helps create an environment that fosters student engagement, motivation, and self-confidence. Students are more likely to take risks, participate actively, and succeed academically when their cultural identities are acknowledged and embraced (Boonsuk et al., 2023).

Compassion. Compassionate teachers build trust and rapport with their foreign learners. When students feel that their teachers genuinely care about their well-being and success, they are more likely to open up, seek help, and engage in the learning process. Trust forms the foundation for effective teaching and learning, and compassion plays a significant role in establishing and maintaining trust. Adding to this, teachers uplift and motivate their foreign learners. They celebrate small victories acknowledging effort and providing positive reinforcement.

As mentioned by one of the informants. She said that:

“As the “tender loving care” approach aims to help and support our learners through emotional and social peace by establishing a good atmosphere inside the room. we assist them in their phase of learning by having a one-on-one checking of their activity/assessment on their table or chair.” Informant 1

She further reiterated that:

“As a matter of fact, the learning of the learners is evident because they were able to answer their activity and able to learn the topic. Filipino teachers are patient and persevere to mold foreign learners to be productive citizens of the Kingdom of Thailand. Some Filipino teachers here in Thailand, especially those Education graduates were trained in the Philippines and are able to employ teaching methodologies that are appropriate to the learner's needs.”

She concludes by saying that:

“I am a proud Filipino Teacher because I know to myself that I am the type of person that can easily adapt to the environment specially their culture and way of living. As a social studies teacher, I am bound to promote tolerance of the people from different walks of life I encountered every day. As an experienced teacher in the Philippines, as I teach in the DEPED for 8 years and 1 year at State University, I can say that experience molded me and my learnings from experiences embedded in my heart.”

It should be remembered that teaching can be emotionally challenging profession, both for teachers and students. Compassionate teachers are attuned to the emotional well-being of their students and themselves. They recognize and respond to students' emotional needs, providing a safe space for them to express their emotions, cope with stress, and navigate personal challenges. Compassionate teachers also model self-care and emotional resilience for their students (Imsa-ard, 2023).

Strategies of Filipino Teachers in Overcoming Homesickness

The third research question determines the strategies employed by Filipino teachers in overcoming homesickness. They constantly communicate with their family, and get along with the community.

Constant Communication with Family. This theme solidifies the importance of communication with the family. To Filipino teachers working in Thailand, leaving their family home is one of the most painful decisions that they made. However, because of their desire to free their family from the bondage of poverty, they needed to sacrifice and look into the brighter side of leaving. More so, with the advent of technology it would be easy for them to reach their family and know their situations. It is one way of overcoming homesickness.

One of the informants, highlights the importance of constant communication with family.

“I usually do social media like calling and chatting with my loved ones and families in the Philippines or doing physical exercise to ease my mind on the stress made by the homesickness.” Informant 1

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) often experience feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and separation from their loved ones. Regular communication with their families helps alleviate these emotions by providing emotional support, reassurance, and a sense of connection to their home country and culture. It should be remembered that family holds a strong value in Filipino culture. Constant communication ensures bond between family members despite physical distance (Sumalinog, nd).

Get along with the Community. Getting along with a community in Thailand eases the homesickness among the Filipino teachers. As a matter of fact, there is a Filipino community in Thailand where they could socialize and deal with. Being with them indicates the value of being a Filipino.

In the interview, the narrative of one of the informants indicated the importance of getting along with the community in Thailand to avoid homesickness.

"Homesickness is part of being an OFW, before you leave the country you must put in your mind the fact that you'll be far from your family, relatives and friends. Filipino teachers overcome homesickness by having second family (Friends and Filipino community) here in Thailand." (Informant 3)

For them, having the presence of their colleagues in the job helped them overcome the feeling of loneliness.

"Homesickness is inevitable for Filipino teachers teaching abroad, this is a case-to-case basis, and the answers may vary from person to person but if I were to address this concern, perhaps what helps Filipino overcome homesickness is having a circle on your sphere that you can call a "family". Anywhere abroad, Filipino community has strong forces and being able to get along together, can somehow help aid the homesickness. Also, students, co-teachers, and parents is a part of that circle whom you can call as a family." (Informant 4)

Adding to that,

"I make myself busy but the most effective one is when you have friends in your workplace. They help me cope with homesickness." (Informant 6)

Finally, the same story was shared by the informant especially on adapting to the environment.

"When we leave the Philippines for work, there will come a time when we miss home. As a teacher I should easily adapt the environment so what I've done is to make friends with my co-teachers here in school, when there is a vacant time I explore here in our district, keeping in touch with my family and friends, and always remember your reason why I am working away from my love ones." (Informant 7)

One can attain this by taking initiative to build connections with people in the community. They can do it by attending gatherings, joining clubs or organizations, and participating in community forums. Engage in conversations and show genuine interest in getting to know others. Building personal connections helps create a sense of belongingness and promotes supportive community environment (Asis, 2004).

Suggestions of Filipino Teachers to aspiring teachers

The fourth research question ascertains the suggestions of Filipino teachers to aspiring teachers who wish to work in Thailand.

Have the necessary skills in teaching. Effective teaching skills allow teachers to deliver effective instruction. They have the ability to plan and organize lessons, select appropriate teaching strategies, and adapt their instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners. Effective instruction leads to enhanced learning outcomes and student engagement. One of its important values is that it encompasses classroom management techniques that establish a positive and orderly learning environment. Teachers can create clear expectations, establish routines, and implement behavior management strategies that promote a respectful and focused atmosphere.

Correspondingly, the narrative of one of the informants clearly justifies the importance of skills when planning to become a teacher in Thailand. It was shared that:

"Well, for me, since I was in the Philippines, I already equipped myself with teaching methodologies, molded by teaching experience and shaped by determination. my advice to them, they should prepare themselves for the necessary requirements and qualifications as they work here in Thailand. working here in Thailand is not hard and difficult because a lot of schools can accept you. It only matters how the school compensates and gives benefits to the teachers because the more experienced and the astonishing educational background, they can land a greener and greater opportunity." (Informant 1)

As mentioned by Tsai (2023), teachers working abroad face unique challenges and opportunities. Alongside the foundational teaching skills, they may benefit from developing specific skills to thrive in an international context. As said, teachers working abroad often encountered different educational systems, teaching methodologies, and student populations. The ability to adapt and be flexible is crucial. Teachers should be open to learning new approaches, adjusting their teaching strategies, and accommodating diverse learning needs.

Be passionate. Teaching should be coupled with passion. It is a noblest profession which nurtures the innocent minds. A passionate teacher is someone who can see the value of every learner. They are ready to conquer the impossibilities. As they tried to seek for bodies of knowledge, they are widening their horizons to keep abreast with the trends in education.

Indeed, in the interview, the narrative suggested the importance of strong desire towards the teaching profession.

"Success is a word that is not just external but is something that is deep within. Attaining success in a foreign country can be surely possible if there is what we called commitment, strong desire, leadership roles, life- skills and passion to teach. It takes one to work for it properly and it may take more time, but no one ended up being successful without starting as a beginner. Success depends on how you see things and if you want to achieve success you need to learn to see things in a bigger picture." (Informant 4)

Being passionate about teaching brings inspiration, motivation, student engagement, continuous learning, positive classroom culture, resilience, innovation, and the ability to make a lasting impact. Passionate teachers create an environment where students thrive, develop a love for learning and reach their full potential. Their passion drives them to continually improve their practice and make meaningful difference in the lives of their learners (Li et al., 2023).

Have a strong personality. Working outside the country and away from the family needs an utmost consideration. A teacher should have to have the strong will and determination to face the challenges that lie ahead. It cannot be denied that there will be cultural differences as well as the educational

practices would be new to Filipino teachers. Having the strong personality is a secret to survivability. Without this, a teacher cannot stay longer and would always have the problem with the organization. With the independent mindset, they can make a difference in conquering their dreams and aspirations in life.

The informant suggested this by saying that:

“To achieve success in a foreign country, First, they should know how to be independent, responsible, and patience when it comes to work and students. Second, they should be good in handling stress and toxicity in working environment. Third, they should always be humble and respect everyone. Lastly, be yourself and do good things always.” (Informant 7)

Working abroad often involves adjusting to a new environment, culture, and possibly a different language. A strong personality enables individuals to adapt to these changes and navigate unfamiliar situations with confidence. It helps them embrace new experiences, overcome obstacles, and bounce back from setbacks (Zhang & Hwang, 2023).

Proposed Intervention Plan

Based on the interview conducted, the informant suggested to counter the cultural barriers or differences. During the interview, one of the informants suggested that:

“Study the cultures of Thai people. In this way, Filipino teachers can easily adapt the cultures of Thai people. They will be aware of the practices that should be avoided. So that the only thing they will adjust to is the way they should deliver the instruction to their students.” (Informant 1)

Similarly, the importance of becoming bilingual which means that they need to learn how to speak the language of their students and the community.

“Specialized in speaking English and Thailand language, skillful in using new technologies.” (Informant 2)

The importance of accessing TESOL and TEFL courses has been emphasized in one of the interviewees:

Magbigay ng libreng access para sa mga additional requirements or course kagaya ng TESOL at TEFL kasi ang mga ito ay pinoprovide ng ibang bansana may katumbas na halaga. Para matulungan ang mga guro at masigurado ang kanilang kapalaran, isang magandang hakbang ang government to government hiring para masigurado ang kapakanan ng mga foreign teachers.”

(Give a free access to TESOL and TEFL course since it is provided in other countries with fees. This will help teachers giving them better future as foreign teachers). (Informant 4)

Rationale

Filipinos are known to be flexible in learning cultures and languages. They can easily adapt to the place that they are into. But it can be noted that the Thai language is one of the most difficult languages to learn. It is a tonal language. A shift in the tone of the word or a letter can mean a change in meaning. This is typically different from the English and the Filipino languages.

Therefore, it is necessary for Overseas Filipino Workers who would want to teach in Thailand to embrace the culture as well as the language. Through this, they can easily overcome homesickness and they can fulfill their duties and responsibilities with the highest level of integrity. Even though there is a blatant discrimination between the Native and non-native speakers of the English language, still Filipinos valued their work ethics and the love for teaching.

This proposed intervention plan underscores the importance of learning cultural differences. It is one way of responding to the needs of their learners as well as with their colleagues. Of course, in terms of sustainability they could be able to stay longer and become the asset of the Thai people.

Objective

This proposed intervention plan aims to determine the problems faced by Filipino teachers in Thailand terms of **cultural differences**.

Areas of Concern and Database	Objectives	Strategies	Activities	Time Frame	Persons' Involved	Performance Indicator
Cultural differences	Determine the problems faced by Filipino teachers especially in	Seminars before leaving the Philippines	Involvement in the familiarization of Thai language and culture	Second Semester 2020-2021	Informants Researcher	95%

the aspect of cultural differences	Familiarization of the Thai culture Learn the Thai words and phrases	Speakers
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Summary

This qualitative study employing narratology aimed to explore narratives of Filipino teachers working in foreign countries. Using the purposive sampling, there were 7 teachers who participated in the Key Informants Interview. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings of the study revealed language barrier and cultural differences are the challenges faced by Filipino teachers in handling foreign learners. The strategies employed by Filipino teachers in handling foreign learners are utilizing of different teaching strategies, cultural awareness and compassion. Strategies used by Filipino teachers in overcoming homesickness are communicating constantly to their family and getting along with the community. Suggestions of Filipino teachers to aspiring teachers they should have the necessary skills in teaching, be passionate and have a strong personality. Overseas Filipino Workers who would want to teach in Thailand to embrace the culture as well as the language.

Conclusions

One of challenge face is the identification of the informants, gathering of the data in the midst of quandary. This study made us realized that teaching is the fruition of love, compassion, and determination. These elements strengthened the ability of the teacher to reaching out every learner. It is not always that we have to show concern to a few but we have to always consider the diversity of learners.

Teachers who wish to work in Thailand should have the readiness in all facets of life. They should not go there if their purpose is to fail. As such, they have to always adhere to their dreams as well as the aspirations in life. They always have to remember that not all those who teach in Thailand succeeded in their journey. There are those who failed.

Finally, this paper is a manifestation that Filipinos are strong human force that drive the world's education. With our skills in English, we exemplify that we are worth for international teaching posts. These foreigners looked up into the dedication of Filipino teachers.

Recommendations

There are still a lot of things that this study would like to explore. With its limitations, this study should have to still look into the successes of Filipino teachers in Thailand. It is not always the challenges that should be provided with information. These may provide a motivational factor to those who wish to work as English teachers in Thailand.

In the Southeast Asian countries, it is not only Thailand that hires Filipino teachers. There are also a thousand of teachers in Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. By looking into this aspect, the researchers can conduct separate studies on the lived experiences of Filipino teachers in the aforesaid countries. These will serve as the avenue for change and by supporting those who are considered as vulnerable.

More importantly, this study looks forward that future researchers can conduct a mixed methods study. The themes of the narratives of the informants can serve as the dimensions or variables in testing a relationship and influence. It may provide a different research landscape.

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