

Lived Experiences of the Filipino English Teachers Abroad: The Drawbacks in Focus

Gino G. Sumalinog

Cebu Normal University
sumalinogg[at]cnu.edu.ph

Abstract: *This paper explored the drawbacks that Filipino English teachers experienced in the different parts of the world, to provide insights to those teachers who are intending to go abroad. A qualitative research design using the Interpretative Phenological Approach (IPA), with its five data analysis steps, was used in this paper. It involved ten Filipino English teachers who are currently employed in private and international schools worldwide. This study used a semi-structured interview which was checked and validated by three research experts. The one-on-one interview and focus group discussion were conducted online due to the social distancing restrictions caused by the present pandemic. Based on the findings, it came out that the Filipino English teachers experienced emotional drawbacks that referred to extreme homesickness towards their immediate family members in the Philippines. They also encountered some cultural drawbacks such as the language barriers brought about by their students' differences in accent and English-speaking proficiency level. In addition, teachers also fell into the trap of psychological drawbacks characterized by burnout and depression. Consequently, foreign teachers like the Filipinos do not always get a seamless teaching experience while employed outside their country.*

Keywords: drawbacks, foreign teachers, Filipino English teachers, lived experiences

1. Introduction

The Philippines' educational system is still in constant change for betterment compared to other established educational systems all over the world. As a third-class nation, the Philippines cannot provide comparable pay to its teachers. As a result, Filipino teachers consider working abroad due to economic reasons. Moreover, teaching in foreign schools has become an option for both experienced and young teachers (Slethaug, 2007).

However, only a few realized that teachers abroad encountered emotional battles every day, such as homesickness for their loved ones (Alghamdi &Otte, 2016; Haligcioglu, 2015). They also encountered new curricula (Altun, 2015). At some point, teachers got shocked by new practices such as differences in values, beliefs, and habits (Haligcioglu, 2015). In addition, teachers experienced discrimination and language difficulties with their students due to cultural differences (Alghamdi &Otte, 2016; Ellwood, 2015). As a result, teachers ended up breaching their contracts and leaving their job in place of their decision to go home to their home country.

Despite unfavorable circumstances, teachers still learn to widen their perspectives and perspective to adapt (Kong, 2020). Teachers become exposed to different classroom approaches and teaching styles (Expatriates Quotes, 2020). Even the unsuccessful classroom lessons could create new things to learn from (Markoulis, 2020) and new cultural habits to adapt to. Walters (2020) stressed that teachers gain new life perspectives. In consonance, Celik (2017) admitted that teaching in a new environment taught teachers how to make a classroom inclusive of all learning types. However, in a study conducted by Medved et al. (2013), they reminded the teachers to take extra care in dealing with cultural differences to offend the learners and keep them interested in learning more. These favorable experiences of the

teachers were often forgotten due to the impact of their negative experiences.

Despite the existing studies that presented the struggles that teachers abroad encountered, there are still more experiences to be discovered, covering the recent years, to fully inform the Filipino teachers. There is still a gap that needed to be delved because little did the aspiring teachers know that going abroad came with risks and drawbacks. With their excitement to earn and help their families, they ventured abroad without enough knowledge of the drawbacks that resulted in frustrations. This research aimed to disseminate information to prepare the teachers, especially that most teachers thought of going abroad as a piece of cake. With this study, they could avoid frustrating experiences that could affect their ways and the job they carry out every day.

2. Materials and Methods

Research Design

In this paper, the qualitative research design, specifically the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, was used to explore the informants' lived experiences. The IPA interprets not only the text from the gathered data, but also the informants' pauses, hesitations, reluctance, and fillers while conversing. This approach intended to get the meaning beyond the conversations that were transcribed (Alase, 2017).

Research Environment

The study was conducted virtually since the ten informants were at schools situated in different parts of the world. These private and international schools where they worked were in Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Cambodia, Singapore, Mozambique, Laos, and Japan. These schools accept foreign English teachers

Research Informants

This study involved ten Filipino teachers handling English courses to English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The length of years they have been in service ranged from two to six years. With this, it was assumed that they have enough experience to share and knowledge to impart. These informants were the ones who decided on the interview time and venue. Their convenience was greatly considered. These teachers had earned degrees in English in the Philippines before they got the teaching position. Ethical considerations were also used in screening the informants.

Research Instruments

Besides the researcher as the main instrument, a semi-structured interview guide was also utilized. The questions were checked and validated by three research and language experts so that the content, as well as the face validity, would be structured well. The questions centered on examining the informants' teaching experiences to provide meaningful eye-openers as to how it was to be foreign teachers. The interview questions were done with the use of skype, zoom, or google meet, depending on the convenience and available resources of the informants.

Data Gathering Procedure

The informants were interviewed individually based on their convenient schedules. After which, a focus group discussion was conducted with the presence of all the informants. The purpose of the focus group discussion was to validate and confirm the understanding of the researchers towards the phenomena that they have shared. The interview and focus group discussion ended when data saturation was reached.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the IPA's five steps such as 1) looking for themes, 2) looking for connections, 3) a table of themes, 4) a master list of themes, and 5) a write-up. These steps were conscientiously followed and adhered to. The steps from one to five were done chronologically so that none of the data was skipped.

3. Results and Discussion

There were varieties of challenges that teachers encountered while teaching in other countries as ESL teachers. Teachers experienced culture shock with their values, beliefs, and habits. Second, they struggle to fit into the teaching situation (Haligcioglu, 2015). Besides, sojourning into foreign soil was a tough pill to swallow, for it came with a bargain. It required the informants' courage and willingness to sacrifice their comfort zones. Despite their enormous motivation to take the risk, they still experienced drawbacks that had significantly affected them during their stay in their foreign work locations. It could be said that the drawbacks could be further classified into emotional and cultural drawbacks.

Theme 1: Emotional drawbacks

Alghamdi &Otte (2016) insisted that teaching abroad is associated with homesickness and psychological battles. From the responses collected, the informants' statements manifested homesickness, which most of them directly

mentioned. They felt nostalgic when they missed a family gathering or badly wanted to see their family members since Filipino did have close family ties. Filipinos embraced their extended families and let them live with them even if each of them already had his or her own family. This feeling could be normal for everyone, but the informants' nostalgia had more profound and more intense emotions since they could not travel back home for years until their contacts expired. Their sadness often took a couple of months or even years. Lisa had a hard time coping against homesickness when she said:

"I struggle coping with homesickness especially during occasions where the family is involved. I always want to go home and be with them.

Similarly, Ani, Greg, and Larry had experienced the same feeling. They tagged their feeling as challenging because they could not quickly go home, and they often missed family gatherings.

"It is challenging to think that I can't be present during the celebrations. Back home, everyone is obliged to attend a family gathering"

"You have to live away from your family and miss the mass gatherings that you were used to even during simple occasions."

"I felt homesick because I had to celebrate a birthday away from them. In my 4 years of being away from them, I am still not used to it."

Besides, Chery and Angel shared the same emotions. However, their feeling of homesickness was focused on being away from their families. They emphasized that the presence of their family members mainly contributed to their sadness. Chery and Angel both recounted:

"It's not easy working away with family. They were my motivators. I miss all of them. I wish I were with them especially during special holidays like Christmas Eve and New Year's Day."

"I even considered going home to the Philippines because I had a terrible start here. I cried every night for almost two months."

Without further explanations, Von and Ariel treated homesickness as a struggle and a challenge too. They both inferred that their stay abroad had negatively affected their work and social life because no matter how happy the people around them were, they still would want their family members' presence. They said:

"Also, feeling homesick is challenging. Every time I see people gathering together, I suddenly remember the happy days I had with my family."

"Feeling homesick is inevitable and challenging. There were times when my tears just fell unknowingly. If only I had enough income back home, I would not come here."

It was very prevalent in the informants' responses that homesickness had hampered their emotional stability as a teacher in a foreign country. The emotion felt seemed familiar to all of them. Not even one of them escaped from this feeling. Homesickness mostly stirred the memory when the teachers remembered the special occasions, gatherings, holidays, and other events where the immediate family members were involved. Indeed, missing the family was normal even to people who only traveled nearby or to local places. In the Philippines, Filipinos were used to the value called "close family ties", for even the extended family resided within the parents' abode. Based on a study, teachers encountered emotional battles every day, such as homesickness for their loved ones every time they felt down, exhausted, and tired (Haligcioglu, 2015).

The inevitability of homesickness needed to be filled as soon as possible to avoid further damage in the roles that teachers played in the classroom. For Nameth (2014), the sojourners, the teachers who were working abroad, must have an attitude such as being welcoming to the intercultural practices and possessing a sense of humor to connect to the people of the host country where they are teaching to get a chance to treat their homesickness socially.

Theme 2: Cultural Drawbacks

Besides the emotional distress the informants have experienced, they also recounted some struggling experiences caused by cultural differences such as language barriers brought about by their students' differences in accent, English speaking proficiency level, and lack of vocabulary. The proficiency of the students could become a problem for many Filipino teachers abroad. Moreover, these teachers, who were not speakers of their students' first language, met difficulties explaining the lessons and translating them from their native tongue to English. Teachers experienced language difficulties with their students due to cultural differences (Alghamdi & Otte, 2016). As Lisa recounted:

"I felt the need to learn Portuguese, so I can translate my lessons to my students. Sometimes, students resorted to using their language when they run out of English words."

Lisa mentioned that she would often translate the words and sentences from English to Portuguese so everyone could understand her. Substituting the English words with their Portuguese terms was giving her a headache since Portuguese was not her first language and she only learned the basic terminologies of Portuguese as part of the hiring process. Teachers felt the challenges when students ran out of words and shifted to their native language (Civin, 2018). According to Sumalinog (2018), students have problems forming sentences because of their limited grammar usage. These realities were true for all second language learners of English worldwide. So, Medved et al. (2013) encouraged teachers to speak slowly to have enough time to process any information. They should use simple words, phrases, and sentences accompanied by proper gestures. The use of pictures was even encouraged. They should understand that learning the second language would be a whole new struggle that each student faced (Sumalinog, 2019). However, schools that hired English teachers abroad do not expect

their teachers to speak their local language. Instead, they are mainly concerned about the teachers' native-like English proficiency. With intelligible English ability, students could slowly grab the thoughts that teachers were communicating. Sadly, there were times when both teachers and students struggle to understand each other.

In the same manner, Angel experienced the same dilemma. She agreed that knowing the first language of the students was necessary to better teaching. Angels said in an interview:

"You need to speak the native tongue of the place so it will become easier for you to teach English. I believe teachers would have the advantage if they know the students' first language, for they have the option to translate and simplify the lesson using the students' language."

Close to Angel and Lisa's concerns, Ariel expressed that simplifying and communicating complicated ideas was his problem too. Sometimes he would use "fragmented English" or simple word translations to make his students learn. According to Ariel

"The challenge was more on finding ways to communicate complicated ideas in the simplest way possible using the learners' mother tongue."

Besides the complications brought about by unfamiliarity with the students' first language, teachers have observed another dilemma to face. Chery and Von directly stated that language barriers such as accent and language competence that covered grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation had also made their teaching tiring. In their responses, they both argued that students were challenging to understand. In the study of Nayak & Sitalakshmi (2010), they found out that students' accent is different from where they lived and previously studied. In addition, the difficulty in using the English language could be worsened by the students' accent since English was foreign to them, their accent was also foreign to the teacher's ears. Moreover, Medved et al. (2013) insisted that it was the accent, not the language that caused the problem in the intelligibility of English. Generally, teachers find understanding accents difficult. These reasons make foreign learners consider themselves less competent as they participate in conversations where English was used as a medium of instruction. Since English was foreign to them, the following: accent, grammar, and pronunciation, contributed to the challenge. This was also true in the case of the informants as observed in their responses. Chery and Von mentioned:

"Most of them struggle with pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar since English is not their first language. I think this is normal to all second language learners."

"It is challenging because of the language barrier like their accent and vocabulary. Their accent is not so intelligible and they have limited vocabulary."

On the other hand, Larry emphasized that students needed enough exposure and drills to boost their will to try using the

language more often. Many students, especially non-native speakers of English feel quite ashamed of their accent, dialect, or command of Standard English, which brings the feeling of inferiority over the English language. Students expressed that their second language made learning difficult and they felt uncomfortable talking in front due to their low competence (Anderson et al, 2012). In consonance, Ani also recounted her experience with the students whose knowledge was only basic to intermediate levels. According to them:

“Our students have a different accent and they lack practice. If only they are in an environment where English is used, they can learn faster. Unfortunately, they are still at their basic to intermediate levels.”

“The students’ English competence was still at the basic level, so they still have more to learn. In short, their English competence level hinders them from carrying out English tasks.”

As for Mary, the students’ inability to use the English language was due to their alphabet system that was different from the English alphabet. The difference also made Jane realize that she would need to study the nature of the learners’ mother tongue. They said:

“Most people do not speak English, and their alphabets are different from the usual. They are still figuring out how to do the tasks using the English language.”

“I think I have to get a little knowledge about it, I guess. I need to learn more about using my students’ language, so I can communicate with them.”

“You have to learn the nature and characteristics of the student’s first language. I see this as a necessity for every teacher who wishes to work abroad and teach as a second language teacher.”

From the verbatim statements, it was clear that students, who were second and foreign language learners, met a struggling cultural experience since language was a cultural component. Low language proficiency could mean low mastery and inadequate ability in using the language. Since both parties, students, and the teachers, came from two different cultures, the teaching-learning process would go through a tough start that might develop through constant interaction.

According to Serin (2017), teaching abroad could result in learning other countries’ cultural habits, and experts agreed that these dilemmas could still be patched. Moreover, Collingridge (2012, as cited in Medved et al., 2013), suggested that teachers should also avoid the use of unknown words, use simple sentences, and minimize colloquial words and slang. In case a teacher resorts to using complicated terminologies, more straightforward terms and definitions must be given. Examples of these are jargon or technical vocabulary words that foreign learners do not

know. Not using slang words may help learners understand discussions and improve their vocabulary. For Ballard (2013), he asserted that familiarity with an accent led to greater comprehension or intelligibility of language spoken with that accent. This familiarity would benefit students as they encounter various English and non-English speakers throughout their academic, personal, and professional lives. Besides, Langan & Johnson (2008) suggested that teachers had to learn at least the students’ language’s basic level. When learners’ abilities, opinions, and experiences were addressed, they became more interested in using the language even in its simplest form.

Slethaug (2012) suggested that professors need to realize that culture directly impacts the way students learn. Even learning how to teach students with a different culture becomes complex, teachers also need to see how their students learn and how they behave in class for teaching to be effective. There is a considerable adjustment to do in a foreign country (Slogoski, 2014). However, for classroom settings, Al-Wadi & Alghazo (2019) insisted that teachers should create a stress-free and conducive environment because such an environment would reduce apprehension to the communication among the learners. Al-Wadi & Alghazo (2019) added that teachers should be mindful not to allow a humiliating situation to arise when an error is committed. Besides the teachers’ effort to solve the problem, Hsiao-ping et al. (2015) suggested that schools must design an orientation about cultural differences and an overview of the academic routine and practices. So that both parties could meet halfway. (Hsiao-ping et al., 2015). For Medved et al. (2013), teachers need extra care in dealing with cultural differences to offend the learners and keep them interested in learning more. Lastly, teachers should not misinterpret the behavior- being passive, which does not help the students.

Theme 3: Psychological Drawbacks

Besides the emotional and cultural drawbacks, teachers also commented that they experienced some psychological struggles that include burnout and depression. These problems affected their daily routines in the classroom. According to Sibal (2018), when teachers sensed that they failed on what they wished they could have done in class, they experienced psychological drawbacks. They call themselves a failure, for they have not controlled and succeeded in the situations in the classroom. They developed anxiety and helplessness that resulted to upset stomach, headaches, and insomnia. Teachers tend to worry too much about the consequence of what they thought to be shortcomings of their duties and responsibilities.

Lisa and Angel noticed that they felt psychological burnout especially when they did not meet the expectations and plans that they had for their classes. They both said:

“When I feel I did not do well in my classes, I felt so tired and helpless, for I am afraid that my students will have a negative evaluation about me.”

“After my class, I feel like a failure. I know that I gave all that I can, but I also know that my students have their limitations. I just can’t be happy that my

students had a hard time learning in my English class."

The responses from Lisa and Angel clearly showed how concerned they were about their performance as teachers. They cared about how the students would evaluate them. As to how they felt, they described burnout as prolonged mental fatigue from the day-to-day psychological struggles that they experienced in their workplaces.

Chery and Von also expressed the same experience. However, theirs were more on the extreme worries that they might not make it to the terminal points of their contracts. They feared that they might be sent back home, for they had bills to pay and plans to do. These teachers had witnessed a friend whose contract was terminated because of depression.

"I face mental battles every day. It was not easy to get depressed especially that a friend of mine was sent back to the Philippines because of depression."

"My friend just left because of depression, and I don't want that to happen to me. However, depression is inevitable since my worries are piling up each time, I fall short of my duties."

Chery and Von's situations were not easy to handle. According to Rodrigues et al. (2020), depression became one of the most common psychological struggles that teachers faced. These teachers got depressed easily because they considered working abroad as a rare opportunity where they bargained their comforts with the hope of earning more to get a greener life. Their worries would sometimes worsen for they thought so much of their financial responsibilities back home that only earnings from working abroad could solve.

In addition, Larry was on the same boat too. He had a fair share of the psychological battles that other teachers went through. He once lost his interest in work and just wished he could fly back to the Philippines, for he had hard times adjusting to his mental state. He was preoccupied with fears and doubts that he might not endure his psychological battles for 3 years. Larry shared:

"Each time I see that my students were getting less learning from me, I think of going back to the Philippines where my family can always comfort me during my dark times. I am just so afraid of failing, for I know I needed the job including all the perks that come with it."

Larry's response showed how much he suffered mentally that he wanted to end all that he had started, but he was caught between giving up and continuing the work due to the benefits that he got from it. For Mary and Jane, their psychological battles even transcended to their family members. They admitted that their family was also affected by how they felt. They had both tried not reaching out to their families, for they sometimes chose to shy away and keep themselves from others. As a result, their families would be asking them how they were doing, for they had been silent and less energetic. They both remarked:

"Psychological battles are normal and you can't take full control of its adverse effects. When it comes, I suddenly become disinterested to open up and talk to people about how I feel even to my family."

"I often lose my excitement, and I just want to keep out of reach."

The verbatim above only proved that when the mind has been disturbed, the body's ability to progress further got affected too. The teachers' energetic selves just got less interest in routines and usual turnabouts. On the other hand, Ariel's psychological battles resulted in rare and occasional violence in the workplace. He admitted that he had engaged in a verbal argument with a colleague. However, he was aware of the root cause of his behavior. He shared:

"I once had a verbal quarrel with a co-teacher because I got so stressed that time. I just lost my patience and I can't control my reactions even to petty things."

Ariel's experience did not represent the entire population of teachers scattered around the globe, but his experience could be true to a good number of teachers. What happened to him coincided with what Schonfeld et al., (2017) mentioned that teachers also experienced burnouts and had a higher risk of violence in the workplace. They sometimes showed some psychosomatic and depressive symptoms. According to Mananay (2019), teachers' negative emotions were normal because of the newness of the environment.

Looking at the common shared experiences of the teachers, it could be said that teaching abroad was not just about the mental sharpness of the content, but also of the psychological stability of anybody who wished to try the life of overseas employees. However, not everyone who flew prepared became successful in their quest for better opportunities. Some of them also experienced failures and drawbacks. It was not able to take note that reasons for depression also depended on the ability of the teachers to cope through the help of their administrators, colleagues, friends, and family members. Depression could affect everyone. It would always be there, so the toughness of the mind could be the key to surviving dark and depressing times.

4. Conclusion

Teachers abroad were not always blessed with memorable and pleasant circumstances. They also experienced emotional drawbacks that pertained to extreme homesickness towards their immediate and extended families, especially during occasions. There were also cultural drawbacks such as language barriers brought about by their students' differences in accent, English speaking proficiency level, and lack of vocabulary. Teachers also became willing victims to psychological drawbacks such as burnouts and depression due to the thought that they failed in meeting their expectations and in letting their students learn more. The lived experiences were detrimental to their job and other tasks entrusted to them as teachers.

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