

Cross-Cultural Journeys: The Lived Experiences of SEA-Teacher Exchange Participants

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600401>

Received: 04 June 2026; Accepted: 09 June 2026; Published: 25 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural teacher exchange programs offer pre-service teachers' opportunities to immerse themselves in diverse educational settings, enhancing both personal and professional growth. The Southeast Asia (SEA) Teacher Exchange Program allows Filipino student-teachers to experience teaching in neighboring countries, promoting intercultural competence, adaptability, and a global perspective on education. This study explored the lived experiences of SEA-Teacher exchange participants, focusing on their pre-departure motivations, initial impressions, teaching and learning experiences, cultural adjustment, and personal and professional growth. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to capture the essence of participants' experiences. Six student-teachers enrolled in Bachelor of Secondary Education (major in English and Science) and Bachelor of Physical Education programs at Pangasinan State University–Bayambang Campus during the second semester of Academic Year 2024–2025 were purposively selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using Colaizzi's method, ensuring the emergence of rich and nuanced descriptions of participants' experiences. Findings revealed that participants were motivated by the desire to gain international teaching experience, broaden their worldview, and strengthen their professional skills. First impressions were characterized by excitement, curiosity, and a sense of belonging, while teaching experiences highlighted the need for adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and innovative instructional strategies. Cultural adjustment involved navigating differences in language, customs, and classroom norms, fostering resilience, empathy, and open-mindedness. Participation in the program significantly contributed to personal growth, intercultural understanding, and professional development, shaping participants into reflective, inclusive, and globally minded future educators. The SEA-Teacher Exchange Program serves as a transformative platform for pre-service teachers, enhancing intercultural competence, pedagogical skills, and personal growth. These findings underscore the value of international teacher exchange programs in preparing educators for increasingly diverse and interconnected learning environments.

Keywords: Cross-cultural exchange, intercultural competence, personal growth, professional development, SEA-Teacher program

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, globalization has significantly influenced educational systems around the world, resulting in increasingly diverse classrooms where students and teachers interact across cultural, linguistic, and national boundaries. As education continues to evolve within this global context, teacher education programs are expected to prepare future educators who can effectively respond to multicultural learning environments. Scholars emphasize that developing intercultural competence among teachers is essential for promoting inclusive teaching practices and fostering understanding among learners from diverse backgrounds (Dzerviniks et al., 2024; Tovar-Correal & Pedraja-Rejas, 2025).

One strategy widely implemented by higher education institutions to develop these competencies is participation in international exchange and academic mobility programs. These programs provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to immerse themselves in different cultural and educational contexts while

engaging in teaching experiences abroad. Research indicates that study abroad and international practicum experiences positively influence teachers' intercultural competence, global awareness, and reflective teaching practices (Huang et al., 2023; Okken et al., 2022). Through these experiences, participants are able to observe diverse pedagogical approaches, understand cultural variations in classroom interactions, and reflect on their own beliefs about teaching and learning.

In the Southeast Asian region, the Southeast Asian (SEA) Teacher Exchange Program has become an important initiative that promotes collaboration among teacher education institutions. The program enables pre-service teachers to participate in teaching internships in neighboring countries, allowing them to experience different educational systems and cultural environments. Studies suggest that participation in the SEA-Teacher Program enhances pedagogical competence, communication skills, adaptability, and professional confidence among pre-service teachers (Mahyawi, 2025). Additionally, intercultural teaching experiences help participants develop a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and strengthen their readiness to teach in global and multicultural contexts (Wibowo et al., 2024).

Intercultural competence is widely recognized as a critical element in modern teacher education. It involves the ability to communicate effectively and interact appropriately with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Scholars argue that teachers who possess intercultural competence are better prepared to create inclusive classrooms and support students' cultural identities in the learning process (Gazioğlu & Güner, 2021). Furthermore, exposure to cross-cultural environments encourages educators to adopt culturally responsive teaching strategies that enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (Suharni et al., 2025).

Beyond professional learning, international exchange experiences also contribute to personal transformation and worldview development. Immersion in a foreign cultural setting often challenges individuals to reconsider their assumptions, values, and perspectives about other cultures and societies. Studies show that cross-cultural teaching experiences support identity development and promote greater appreciation for diversity among pre-service teachers (Wang & Ren, 2024). Moreover, systematic reviews on study abroad programs indicate that such experiences foster independence, resilience, and intercultural communication skills, which are essential for professional and personal growth (Zhou et al., 2025).

Despite the increasing recognition of international teacher mobility programs, many existing studies focus primarily on measurable outcomes such as competence levels, program effectiveness, or skill development. While these findings are valuable, there remains a need for deeper qualitative exploration of participants' lived experiences. Understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of their cross-cultural journeys can provide more meaningful insights into how international teaching experiences shape teachers' identities, beliefs, and practices. Qualitative research focusing on lived experiences allows scholars to capture the emotional, cultural, and professional dimensions of participation in exchange programs.

Anchored in this context, the present study explores "Cross-Cultural Journeys: The Lived Experiences of SEA-Teacher Exchange Participants." Specifically, the research aims to understand how participants navigate teaching in a foreign cultural environment, manage cultural adjustments, and experience personal and professional growth throughout the program. By examining participants' narratives, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on international teacher education and intercultural learning.

Ultimately, this research highlights the transformative potential of cross-cultural immersion in shaping globally competent educators. As education systems continue to respond to the demands of globalization, understanding the lived experiences of SEA-Teacher participants can provide valuable insights for improving teacher education programs and strengthening international academic collaborations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically using a phenomenological approach to explore and understand the lived experiences of SEA-Teacher exchange participants. Phenomenology is particularly

suitable for understanding personal and professional experiences from the participants' own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2023). This design allowed the researchers to delve into the subjective, nuanced, and culturally embedded experiences of teachers navigating cross-cultural teaching and learning contexts.

In this study, the phenomenological approach allowed the researchers to focus on how the participants described their cross-cultural journeys, adjustments, and personal and professional development while participating in the exchange program. Through in-depth narratives, the study sought to uncover common themes that reflect the essence of their experiences as pre-service teachers immersed in a different cultural and educational environment.

Subjects of the Study

The participants of this study were six SEA-Teacher exchange participants enrolled at Pangasinan State University – Bayambang Campus during the Second Semester of Academic Year 2024–2025. These participants were selected from the Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) program majoring in English and Science, and from the Bachelor of Physical Education (BPEd) program. All participants had completed their participation in the SEA-Teacher Exchange Program in Southeast Asian host institutions (Indonesia and Malaysia) prior to the conduct of this study. As pre-service teachers, they had firsthand experiences of teaching, interacting with students and educators, and adapting to the culture and educational practices of their host countries. Their insights provided valuable information in understanding the cross-cultural experiences of exchange participants.

Sampling Procedure

This study utilized purposive sampling in selecting the participants. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research when participants are selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. This approach ensured that the participants could provide rich, relevant, and detailed accounts of their cross-cultural journeys (Palinkas et al., 2020).

In this case, the criteria for selection included: (1) being an official participant of the SEA-Teacher Exchange Program, (2) being enrolled at Pangasinan State University – Bayambang Campus, and (3) willingness to share their experiences related to the exchange program. The researchers intentionally selected participants who were able to provide rich and meaningful descriptions of their cross-cultural experiences, ensuring that the data gathered would directly address the research objectives of the study.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that focused on participants' experiences before, during, and after their participation in the SEA-Teacher Exchange Program. The questions explored themes such as cultural encounters, teaching experiences, personal growth, professional development, and challenges encountered during the program.

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and reflections while still guiding the discussion toward the objectives of the study. Follow-up questions were also asked when necessary to clarify responses and to obtain deeper insights into the participants' experiences. This approach enabled the researchers to collect detailed and meaningful narratives from the participants.

Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researchers sought permission from the concerned academic office and obtained the consent of the participants to take part in the study. Once permission was granted, the researchers coordinated with the selected participants and scheduled individual interview sessions at a convenient time and setting.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing participants to openly share their experiences and reflections regarding the SEA-Teacher Exchange Program. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data. The researchers also took notes during the interviews to capture important details and observations.

After the interviews, the recorded responses were carefully transcribed and organized for analysis. The researchers reviewed the transcripts multiple times to ensure that the participants' responses were accurately represented and that important insights were not overlooked.

Data Analysis Procedure

The interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences. The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve familiarity and immersion in the data. Significant statements related to cross-cultural experiences, teaching, personal growth, and professional development were extracted and highlighted.

These statements were then formulated into meanings, carefully reflecting the participants' intentions and perspectives. Similar meanings were clustered into themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the shared experiences of the SEA-Teacher Exchange participants. The researchers returned to the original transcripts to validate the themes, ensuring that the interpretations were grounded in the authentic voices of the participants.

Finally, the themes were synthesized into a rich, descriptive narrative that conveyed both the commonalities and nuances of the participants' experiences. Relevant participant quotations were included to support and illustrate each theme, providing transparency and depth. This method allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how the SEA-Teacher Exchange influenced participants' personal, professional, and intercultural development, while maintaining fidelity to their lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the conduct of this study. The researchers ensured that participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the research before the interviews were conducted. Each participant was asked to provide informed consent, confirming their willingness to participate and allowing the researchers to record the interview.

To protect the privacy and identity of the participants, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. Participants' names were not disclosed in the study, and instead, pseudonyms or interviewee numbers were used when presenting their responses. The data collected were used solely for academic and research purposes. The study also adhered to respectful and culturally sensitive practices during interviews and data interpretation, aligning with ethical standards for qualitative research (Orb et al., 2021).

Furthermore, participants were given the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point if they felt uncomfortable. The researchers also ensured that the information shared by the participants was treated with respect and sensitivity, particularly when discussing personal experiences and cultural perspectives. By adhering to these ethical standards, the researchers ensured that the study was conducted responsibly and respectfully.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Pre-Departure Expectations and Motivations

The analysis of participants' narratives reveals that their pre-departure expectations and motivations were shaped by a blend of personal aspirations, professional ambitions, prior exposure to intercultural experiences,

and a strong desire for growth. These motivations were further supported by intentional preparation strategies that enabled them to navigate the anticipated challenges of living and teaching in a foreign context.

A dominant theme that emerged was the long-standing aspiration for international exposure and self-development. Several participants described how their interest in exchange programs began as early as high school and gradually evolved into a clear professional goal. One participant shared, *“I want to see how much growth as an individual and a future professional I would become when I join programs like SEA Teaching programs.”* Another participant recounted how witnessing visiting exchange teachers inspired a personal dream to participate in a similar program. These narratives highlight the powerful role of early exposure in shaping students’ global aspirations. Research supports this finding, emphasizing that international education experiences contribute to identity formation and global citizenship development among pre-service teachers (Bista & Glass, 2020; de Wit, 2020).

Closely linked to this is the desire to enhance professional competence and teaching effectiveness. Participants viewed the SEA-Teacher Exchange Program as an avenue to gain firsthand experience in diverse educational systems, improve pedagogical skills, and benchmark international practices. One participant expressed curiosity about *“how foreign countries implement their curriculum,”* reflecting a critical and comparative orientation toward education. Another emphasized the importance of understanding classroom management, pedagogy, and cultural values across Southeast Asia. This aligns with findings that international teaching experiences significantly contribute to the development of reflective practitioners who can adapt teaching strategies to diverse learning environments (Reimers & Chung, 2020; OECD, 2021).

Participants were also motivated by a strong interest in cultural immersion and exchange. Their responses reflected a desire not only to learn from the host country but also to share Filipino culture and values. One participant articulated this by stating, *“I wanted to go beyond the walls of my own classroom and see how other countries approach learning and teaching.”* This mutual exchange underscores the concept of intercultural learning as a two-way process. According to UNESCO (2021), such engagements foster intercultural competence, empathy, and respect for diversity – key attributes of globally competent educators. Similarly, Dearthoff (2020) emphasizes that intercultural competence develops through meaningful interaction, reflection, and openness to difference.

Another noteworthy finding is the role of intrinsic motivation and personal challenge. Participants expressed a desire to test their capabilities, step out of their comfort zones, and fulfill long-held dreams. This reflects what recent literature describes as *“transformative motivation,”* where individuals engage in international experiences not only for academic gain but also for personal growth and self-discovery (Jones & Brandenburg, 2020).

In terms of preparation, participants demonstrated a holistic and proactive approach encompassing academic, emotional, logistical, and cultural readiness. Academically, they reviewed subject content, teaching strategies, and lesson planning frameworks aligned with both local and international standards. Emotionally, many participants emphasized the importance of maintaining flexibility, resilience, and a positive mindset. One participant noted the need to *“embrace uncertainty and remain adaptable in a foreign environment,”* highlighting the emotional demands of intercultural engagement. These findings are consistent with research indicating that emotional preparedness and adaptability are critical predictors of successful cross-cultural adjustment (Ward & Bochner, 2021).

Cultural preparation also emerged as a key strategy. Participants actively sought knowledge about their host countries’ customs, traditions, and languages to ensure respectful and effective interaction. One participant shared, *“I researched the weather, currency, language, and cultural norms of every host country.”* This level of preparation reflects intercultural sensitivity and a willingness to engage responsibly with the host community. Studies affirm that pre-departure cultural training enhances intercultural competence and reduces culture shock among exchange participants (Byram, 2021; European Commission, 2020).

Additionally, institutional support mechanisms, such as pre-departure orientations, played a significant role in preparing participants. These programs provided essential guidance on expectations, cultural etiquette, and

practical concerns, thereby increasing participants' confidence and readiness. Research highlights that structured pre-departure interventions significantly improve participants' adjustment, engagement, and overall success in international programs (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

Overall, the findings suggest that participants entered the SEA-Teacher Exchange Program with clear, purposeful motivations and a strong foundation of preparation. Their expectations were not limited to academic achievement but extended to personal transformation, cultural understanding, and professional growth. This combination of intrinsic motivation and deliberate preparation underscores the transformative potential of international exchange programs in shaping globally competent, reflective, and culturally responsive educators.

First Impressions and Cultural Encounters

The findings reveal that participants' first impressions of their host countries were largely characterized by feelings of familiarity, warmth, and cultural curiosity, which played a crucial role in easing their transition into a new environment. Despite initial anxieties, most participants experienced a sense of belonging early on, largely influenced by the hospitality of the host community and perceived cultural similarities between Southeast Asian countries.

A salient pattern in the data is the immediate sense of familiarity and cultural closeness. Several participants described how their host countries felt surprisingly similar to the Philippines in terms of people, climate, and social interactions. One participant shared, *"I immediately felt at home... Indonesia and Philippines were cousins."* Another echoed this sentiment by noting that it *"felt as though I had never left the Philippines."* These accounts suggest that regional proximity and shared cultural traits within Southeast Asia contribute to smoother cross-cultural transitions. This supports the idea that cultural distance significantly influences adjustment, with individuals adapting more easily in culturally similar contexts (Hofstede, 2021; Ward, 2021).

At the same time, participants' early experiences were marked by a mix of excitement and uncertainty. Emotions such as curiosity, anxiety, and gratitude were commonly expressed, especially during the first few days of settling in. One participant described feeling *"wondering, grateful, friendly, anxious,"* capturing the emotional complexity of entering a new cultural environment. These findings align with contemporary research on intercultural transitions, which highlights that initial stages of cultural immersion often involve both enthusiasm and psychological adjustment (Kim, 2020).

Another significant theme is the impact of hospitality and welcoming practices in shaping positive first impressions. Participants consistently described their hosts – teachers, students, coordinators, and local community members – as warm, accommodating, and supportive. One participant noted, *"The local coordinators warmly welcomed us... making me feel instantly at home despite the language barrier."* Similarly, another shared that they were treated *"like we are a real family,"* highlighting the depth of relational connection established early in the experience. Such findings emphasize the role of host communities in facilitating intercultural adjustment. According to UNESCO (2021), inclusive and welcoming environments are essential in fostering intercultural understanding and meaningful exchange.

Participants also encountered notable differences in educational environments, which sparked both admiration and reflection. Observations of well-equipped classrooms, technologically supported instruction, and government-provided student support (e.g., free meals) left strong impressions on some participants. These experiences prompted comparisons with the Philippine education system and reinforced the value of international exposure for broadening perspectives on educational practices. Research indicates that exposure to diverse school systems enhances teachers' ability to critically reflect on their own contexts and adopt innovative practices (Reimers & Chung, 2020; OECD, 2021).

In terms of interactions with students, teachers, and the local community, participants reported overwhelmingly positive and meaningful experiences. Students were described as respectful, eager, and curious, while teachers were supportive and collaborative. One participant shared, *"The students were polite, respectful, and genuinely interested in learning about the Philippines."* Another highlighted how interactions were *"natural and*

smooth... they never treated us like outsiders.” These accounts underscore the importance of interpersonal relationships in intercultural learning. Positive social interactions not only reduce feelings of isolation but also foster deeper cultural understanding and mutual respect (Deardorff, 2020; Byram, 2021).

However, language differences emerged as both a challenge and an opportunity for growth. While some participants experienced minimal difficulty due to the use of English as a medium of instruction, others had to adjust their communication strategies by simplifying language and relying on nonverbal cues. One participant noted the need to use “easy words and basic grammar structures” to facilitate understanding. This highlights the adaptive strategies employed by participants in navigating linguistic barriers. Studies show that such challenges can enhance communicative competence, creativity, and empathy in teaching diverse learners (Kirkpatrick, 2020; British Council, 2021).

An interesting insight from the findings is the emergence of mutual cultural recognition and shared identity. Participants frequently noted similarities between Filipino and host cultures, often engaging in comparative conversations that fostered connection rather than division. One participant described moments of shared realization, such as saying, “We have that in the Philippines too,” which strengthened intercultural bonds. This reflects a non-ethnocentric approach to cultural exchange, where differences are appreciated while commonalities are celebrated. Such experiences align with global competence frameworks that emphasize empathy, openness, and the ability to engage constructively across cultures (OECD, 2021; Teichler, 2020).

Overall, the findings suggest that participants’ first impressions and early cultural encounters were largely positive and transformative, shaped by hospitality, cultural familiarity, and meaningful interactions. While initial anxieties and language barriers were present, these were quickly mitigated by supportive environments and shared cultural values. These experiences highlight the importance of intercultural exposure in fostering not only professional growth but also deeper human connection and understanding.

Teaching and Learning Experiences

The analysis of participants’ narratives reveals that their teaching experiences in the host schools were dynamic, adaptive, and deeply shaped by intercultural interaction. Across accounts, participants highlighted similarities in student behavior, the need for flexible teaching strategies, and the central challenge of language differences. These experiences not only influenced their instructional approaches but also deepened their understanding of culturally responsive teaching. A key finding is the recognition of shared learner characteristics across cultures. Despite being in a different country, participants observed that students in the host schools exhibited behaviors similar to Filipino learners – being both playful and capable of serious academic engagement. One participant noted, “*Teaching in Indonesia made me realize that the students there are just like Filipino students. They know when to have fun and when to learn.*” This insight reflects the universality of certain learner traits, suggesting that while cultural contexts differ, foundational aspects of student engagement remain consistent. Such observations align with research emphasizing that effective teaching begins with recognizing both the universal and culturally specific dimensions of learners (Gay, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2021).

At the same time, participants encountered distinct cultural and institutional practices that shaped classroom dynamics. Students were frequently described as respectful, disciplined, and attentive, reflecting strong cultural values toward education and authority. In addition, exposure to structured routines, government-supported programs, and well-equipped classrooms prompted participants to reflect on differences in educational systems. These experiences are consistent with global studies highlighting how cultural norms and policy contexts influence classroom behavior and learning environments (OECD, 2021; Reimers, 2020).

A central theme that emerged was the importance of culturally responsive and adaptive teaching strategies. Participants consistently modified their instructional approaches to accommodate language differences and cultural expectations. For instance, one participant shared, “*Since not all of them could speak or understand English well, I spoke slowly, used simple words, and added gestures to make my instructions clearer.*” Another emphasized the use of games, songs, and dances to make lessons engaging and accessible. These strategies

reflect key principles of differentiated instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy, where teaching is tailored to learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Hammond, 2020; Tomlinson, 2021).

Participants also demonstrated the use of experiential and interactive learning approaches, particularly in overcoming communication barriers. Activities such as folkdance instruction, group games, and visual-based tasks facilitated engagement and comprehension. One participant highlighted how shared cultural elements enhanced learning: *"This shared cultural element made the learning experience more enjoyable and fostered a deeper appreciation of our similarities."* This finding underscores the value of culturally relevant content in promoting meaningful learning experiences. Research suggests that integrating students' cultural backgrounds into instruction enhances motivation, participation, and learning outcomes (Banks, 2020).

However, the language barrier emerged as the most significant challenge in the teaching-learning process. Participants frequently reported difficulties in delivering instructions, eliciting responses, and ensuring comprehension among students with limited English proficiency. One participant shared, *"Some students had difficulty understanding English... I used body language, visual aids, and peer translation."* Another noted the need to rely on translation applications and simplified language structures. These experiences reflect the realities of teaching in multilingual contexts, where communication extends beyond verbal language. Studies on English as a lingua franca highlight that teachers must employ multimodal strategies, such as gestures, visuals, and repetition, to facilitate understanding in linguistically diverse classrooms (Kirkpatrick, 2020; British Council, 2021).

In addition to language challenges, participants encountered cultural and contextual constraints that required sensitivity and adaptability. For example, restrictions related to physical contact in teaching dance required one participant to modify instructional methods, relying more on demonstration than physical guidance. Similarly, managing varying student behaviors across grade levels, from energetic younger learners to reserved older students, required flexibility in classroom management strategies. These findings highlight the importance of intercultural competence in navigating diverse classroom norms and expectations (Dearnorff, 2020; Byram, 2021).

Another notable insight is the role of relationship-building in facilitating learning. Participants emphasized that establishing rapport with students helped overcome initial barriers and increased engagement. Simple actions such as smiling, conversing during breaks, and showing genuine care were effective in building trust. One participant observed that once students felt comfortable, they became more participative and eager to learn. This finding is supported by literature emphasizing that positive teacher-student relationships are fundamental to effective teaching and learning, particularly in multicultural settings (Marzano, 2020).

Furthermore, participants demonstrated reflective and comparative thinking regarding educational practices. Observations about curriculum differences, particularly the integration of English language instruction, prompted critical reflection on both host and home systems. Such reflections indicate the development of a global perspective, where teachers learn to evaluate and adapt practices across contexts. This aligns with research suggesting that international teaching experiences foster reflective practice and professional growth by exposing educators to diverse pedagogical frameworks (UNESCO, 2021; Teichler, 2020).

Overall, the findings suggest that teaching in a cross-cultural context required participants to become adaptive, reflective, and culturally responsive educators. While challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences were evident, these were addressed through creative strategies, empathy, and collaboration. The experience not only enhanced their teaching skills but also reinforced the importance of inclusivity, flexibility, and cultural awareness in the teaching-learning process.

Cultural Adjustment and Adaptation

The lived experiences of the SEA-Teacher participants reveal that cultural adjustment was a gradual, reflective, and deeply interpersonal process shaped by openness, respect, and continuous learning. While participants initially encountered unfamiliar practices, their ability to adapt was largely influenced by their willingness to embrace differences and build meaningful relationships within the host community.

A dominant pattern across narratives is the role of open-mindedness and cultural sensitivity in managing adjustment challenges. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of observing, listening, and respecting local customs. One participant shared, *“It truly required maximum understanding and tolerance... showing respect for their culture, traditions, and way of life.”* This highlights how participants approached their experience not as passive observers but as active cultural learners. Such findings align with intercultural competence frameworks, which stress attitudes of openness and curiosity as foundational in navigating cross-cultural environments (Deardorff, 2020; Byram, 2021).

Participants also demonstrated behavioral adaptation to cultural norms, particularly in areas related to gender roles, dress codes, and religious practices. Adjustments such as modifying clothing choices, adhering to classroom protocols, and respecting prayer schedules were common. One participant reflected, *“I always used slacks... since some classrooms have carpets and you have to leave your shoes outside.”* These adjustments illustrate how cultural learning extends beyond cognitive understanding to embodied practices. Research suggests that successful intercultural adaptation involves both internal (attitudinal) and external (behavioral) adjustments, enabling individuals to function effectively in new cultural contexts (Kim, 2020).

Another significant finding is the influence of host community support and hospitality in easing the adjustment process. Participants frequently described the warmth and kindness of teachers, students, and local residents as instrumental in helping them adapt. One participant noted, *“The warmth and hospitality of the people made it easier to adjust.”* Others highlighted how local “buddies” and community members provided guidance, translation assistance, and emotional support. This reinforces the idea that intercultural adaptation is not solely an individual effort but a relational process shaped by social interactions. Studies on international mobility programs emphasize that supportive host environments significantly enhance participants’ cultural integration and well-being (UNESCO, 2021; de Wit, 2020).

Despite these positive experiences, participants also encountered specific challenges in adapting to cultural practices, particularly in relation to food, language, and environmental conditions. Food emerged as a recurring difficulty, especially due to differences in taste preferences such as spiciness. One participant shared, *“Even when I requested meals that were ‘not spicy,’ their version of mild still turned out quite hot.”* This highlights how everyday practices like eating can become sites of cultural negotiation. Similarly, the prevalence of smoking in public spaces was identified as a concern, especially for participants with health sensitivities. These findings are consistent with research indicating that adjustment difficulties often arise in daily living aspects, which require both physical and psychological adaptation (Ward, 2020).

Language differences also played a role in shaping cultural adjustment. Although primarily discussed as a teaching challenge, limited shared language also affected social interactions and initial comfort levels. However, participants overcame this through non-verbal communication, peer support, and gradual immersion, reflecting adaptive communication strategies in multilingual settings (Kirkpatrick, 2020).

Importantly, participants identified several enriching aspects of the host culture, which contributed to their personal and professional growth. These include strong respect for teachers, disciplined student behavior, deep religious commitment, and a pronounced sense of community. One participant expressed admiration, stating, *“The most enriching part was seeing how respectful and disciplined the students were.”* Another highlighted the cultural value of hospitality, describing it as something “everywhere” in the community. These experiences fostered a deeper appreciation for diversity and reinforced shared human values such as kindness, respect, and interconnectedness. Literature on global education underscores that exposure to diverse cultural practices enhances empathy, cultural awareness, and global citizenship among participants (Reimers, 2020; OECD, 2021).

Moreover, participants demonstrated reflective comparison between host and home cultures, which is a key outcome of intercultural experiences. Observations about differences in student discipline, government support systems, and cultural practices prompted critical reflection on their own educational and societal contexts. This comparative perspective aligns with transformative learning theory, where exposure to new environments challenges existing assumptions and leads to perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2020).

Another noteworthy insight is the development of resilience and adaptability. Participants described learning to “accept,” “embrace,” and even “love” unfamiliar practices, such as early morning prayer routines or strict cultural norms. This reflects a shift from initial discomfort to eventual acceptance and appreciation. Such adaptive processes are consistent with studies showing that intercultural experiences enhance individuals’ coping skills, flexibility, and emotional resilience (Holliday, 2021).

Overall, the findings indicate that cultural adjustment among SEA-Teacher participants was not merely about overcoming challenges but about transformative engagement with diversity. Through openness, respect, and meaningful interactions, participants were able to navigate cultural differences, appreciate new perspectives, and develop intercultural competence. These experiences highlight the value of international exchange programs in preparing future educators to thrive in increasingly diverse and globalized educational contexts.

Personal and Professional Growth

The findings reveal that participation in the SEA-Teacher Exchange Program served as a transformative experience, significantly shaping both the personal identities and professional trajectories of the participants. Their narratives demonstrate that immersion in a cross-cultural environment fostered deeper self-awareness, challenged preconceived beliefs, and strengthened their commitment to becoming globally competent educators.

A salient outcome of the experience is the development of enhanced intercultural awareness and expanded worldview. Participants consistently described how living and teaching in a different cultural context broadened their perspectives on diversity, human relationships, and education. One participant reflected, *“This experience really changed how I see the world... kindness, respect, and understanding go beyond language and nationality.”* This shift illustrates the development of global-mindedness, where individuals move beyond ethnocentric views toward a more inclusive understanding of cultural diversity. Such findings are supported by studies emphasizing that international mobility programs cultivate intercultural competence and global citizenship among pre-service teachers (Reimers, 2020; OECD, 2021).

Closely related to this is the emergence of personal growth characterized by independence, adaptability, and empathy. Participants highlighted how navigating unfamiliar environments required them to step out of their comfort zones, leading to increased resilience and self-reliance. One participant shared, *“I became more independent, patient, and open-minded... I learned to step out of my comfort zone and see challenges as opportunities to grow.”* These experiences reflect the process of transformative learning, where exposure to new contexts leads to shifts in personal beliefs and attitudes (Mezirow, 2020). Furthermore, the emphasis on empathy and understanding underscores the role of intercultural encounters in fostering emotional intelligence and social awareness (Deardorff, 2020).

Another important dimension of personal growth is the reconstruction of cultural perceptions and reduction of stereotypes. One participant candidly acknowledged a change in perception, stating that prior assumptions about a particular religious group were challenged through direct interaction: *“I used to think... but Indonesians... are one of the best people.”* This highlights how authentic intercultural experiences can dismantle biases and promote more nuanced understandings of others. Literature on intercultural communication affirms that meaningful contact with diverse groups is critical in reducing prejudice and fostering mutual respect (Bennett, 2020; Byram, 2021).

In terms of professional development, participants reported significant growth in their teaching philosophy, instructional competence, and readiness to handle diverse learners. Exposure to different educational systems and practices encouraged them to reflect on their own pedagogical approaches and identify areas for improvement. One participant noted, *“The experience opened my eyes to different perspectives, systems, and innovations in learning.”* This aligns with research suggesting that international teaching experiences enhance pedagogical knowledge and encourage reflective practice among pre-service teachers (Hattie, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2021).

Participants also developed a stronger orientation toward culturally responsive and inclusive teaching. Many emphasized the importance of understanding students' backgrounds, adapting instruction, and building meaningful relationships in diverse classrooms. One participant expressed, *"It made me realize how important it is to build a genuine connection with students... and appreciate the diverse backgrounds of my students."* This reflects the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, which highlight the need for teachers to align instruction with students' cultural contexts (Gay, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Furthermore, the program fostered reflective and critical thinking about educational systems. Through interactions with educators and exposure to different curricula, participants gained insights into effective practices that could be adapted to their home context. For instance, one participant observed the strong emphasis on foundational subjects in another country and recognized its potential relevance to addressing learning gaps in the Philippines. Such reflections demonstrate the development of comparative and analytical skills, which are essential for continuous professional growth (UNESCO, 2021).

Another notable outcome is the strengthening of professional identity and lifelong learning orientation. Participants expressed increased motivation to pursue further studies, refine their teaching strategies, and remain open to continuous improvement. The experience encouraged them to view teaching not merely as a profession but as a dynamic and evolving practice that requires adaptability and innovation. This aligns with contemporary views on teacher development, which emphasize lifelong learning and reflective practice as key components of effective teaching (Hargreaves, 2020).

Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of flexibility and preparedness in diverse teaching contexts. They recognized the need to develop multiple strategies to address varying classroom situations and learner needs. This adaptability is a crucial competency in global education settings, where teachers must respond to diverse linguistic, cultural, and academic challenges (Hammond, 2020).

Overall, the findings suggest that the SEA-Teacher Exchange Program significantly contributed to the holistic development of participants as globally competent educators. The experience not only enhanced their teaching skills but also reshaped their values, attitudes, and perspectives toward diversity and education. By fostering intercultural understanding, reflective practice, and professional growth, the program prepares future teachers to navigate and contribute meaningfully to increasingly diverse and interconnected educational landscapes.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of SEA-Teacher exchange participants as they engaged in cross-cultural teaching and learning in their host countries. The findings revealed that their initial encounters were marked by excitement, adjustment, and meaningful interactions with students, teachers, and the local community. These experiences helped participants appreciate cultural similarities and differences, fostering greater openness, respect, and intercultural understanding.

Moreover, the exchange program contributed significantly to the participants' personal and professional growth. It strengthened their independence, adaptability, and confidence, while also shaping their perspectives as future educators who value inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and continuous learning. Exposure to different teaching practices and educational systems encouraged them to become more reflective and globally minded teachers.

Overall, the SEA-Teacher Program served as a transformative experience that expanded participants' worldviews and reinforced the importance of cross-cultural exchange in teacher education. The findings highlight the value of international teaching experiences in preparing educators who are responsive to diverse learners and capable of teaching in an increasingly interconnected world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that teacher education institutions continue strengthening and expanding international exchange programs such as the SEA-Teacher Program. Providing

enhanced pre-departure orientations, cultural preparation, and institutional support can help participants adjust more easily and maximize their learning experiences. Universities may also strengthen partnerships with host institutions and schools to ensure meaningful engagement, mentorship, and collaborative learning opportunities for future participants. Integrating global and intercultural perspectives into teacher education curricula can further prepare students for teaching in diverse and multicultural environments.

In addition, future SEA-Teacher participants are encouraged to approach the program with openness, adaptability, and a willingness to learn from different cultures and educational practices. Actively engaging with students, teachers, and the local community can deepen their understanding of intercultural teaching and learning. Future researchers may also conduct further studies exploring the long-term impact of the program on participants' teaching practices and professional development to better understand how international experiences shape globally competent educators.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researchers would like to express their sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions who made this study possible. First and foremost, we extend our heartfelt appreciation to the SEA-Teacher exchange participants who generously shared their experiences, insights, and reflections. Their willingness to tell their stories greatly contributed to the depth and meaning of this research.

We are also grateful to the faculty members and administrators of Pangasinan State University – Bayambang Campus for their support and encouragement throughout the conduct of this study. Lastly, we acknowledge the guidance of our mentors and the support of our families and colleagues, whose motivation and understanding inspired us to successfully complete this research.

Conflict Of Interest

The researchers declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the conduct and publication of this study. The research was carried out independently, and the findings presented are based solely on the data gathered from the participants.

Furthermore, the researchers confirm that there were no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could have influenced the results or interpretation of the study. All information was collected, analyzed, and reported with honesty, transparency, and academic integrity.

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