

Voices across Borders: Stories of Successful Filipino Teachers in Foreign Lands

Marie Kris V. Valero¹, James L. Paglinawan²

¹Graduate Student, Science Education Department, Central Mindanao University

²Professor, Professional Education Department, Central Mindanao University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500106>

Received: 26 April 2026; Accepted: 01 May 2026; Published: 23 May 2026

ABSTRACT

In an era of increasing global teacher mobility, Filipino educators represent a significant portion of the international skilled workforce, yet their personal narratives of adaptation often remain unheard. This research is vital because it addresses the structural push factors of the Philippine education system while highlighting the professional contributions of Filipinos abroad. A critical research gap exists regarding the nuanced, day-to-day negotiations of identity and success, particularly in diverse host countries during the post-pandemic era. Consequently, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of Filipino teachers abroad, focusing specifically on their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and pedagogical transformations.

Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the researchers conducted semi-structured digital interviews with 12 purposively selected Filipino teachers working in various international settings. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework to identify recurring patterns. Key findings reveal that migration is driven by a pursuit of holistic wellbeing rather than mere financial gain, encompassing safety and professional growth. Participants faced significant hurdles, including linguistic barriers and systemic racism, which they overcame by leveraging a "virtual village" of digital family connections and ethnic solidarity. Furthermore, the study documents a profound evolution of pedagogical identity as teachers shifted from traditional directive styles to student-centered, inquiry-based approaches. Ultimately, success was found to be grounded in "graceful resilience"—a combination of formal credentialing and an adaptive growth mindset. These findings imply that Philippine teacher education must integrate global competencies and flexible pedagogy, while policymakers should develop stronger socio-cultural and emotional support mechanisms for migrant educators. Future research should utilize longitudinal designs to further track the long-term evolution of these professional identities.

Keywords: Filipino Teacher, Teaching abroad, phenomenological study, lived experiences, global education

INTRODUCTION

Filipino teachers have increasingly joined the global flow of skilled educators in recent years (Laxamana, 2026; Learning Gate, 2025; MIJRD, 2026), and the teachers' decisions to work abroad are driven by the motivations of financial security, career growth, and the search for a better teaching and social environment intersect with personal aspirations and family expectations. At the same time, this growing diaspora underscores persistent structural issues in the Philippine education system such as limited

local opportunities, relatively low compensation, and uneven support for professional development that push highly qualified Filipino teachers to seek opportunities overseas (Learning Gate, 2025; USA Inquirer, 2021). Despite the increasing visibility of Filipino teachers abroad, gaps remain in understanding the nuanced, day to day experiences of these educators, particularly in relation to their coping strategies, identity negotiations, and the meaning they assign to "success" in foreign contexts.

Local studies in the Philippines have begun to document these dynamics using qualitative approaches. Laxamana (2026) employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the motivations, challenges, and professional trajectories of beginning Filipino teachers abroad, emphasizing economic and professional drivers alongside intense pressures to adapt to new pedagogical and cultural expectations. Similarly, recent Filipino research on teacher diaspora to the United States shows that improved income and living conditions are key pull factors, while cultural adjustment, student behavior, and personal sacrifices emerge as major stressors that demand resilience from migrant teachers (Learning Gate, 2025). A qualitative exploration of millennial Filipino teachers working overseas also reveals that younger educators pursue teaching abroad as an avenue for adventure, global exposure, and career development, yet confront language barriers, shifting classroom roles, and the emotional weight of separation from family (Teachers' Tales, 2020). These local studies, however, often give limited space to teachers' narrative constructions of success, their comparative reflections on Philippine and host country pedagogies, and their concrete recommendations to aspiring overseas teachers.

International literature on migrant and globally mobile teachers complements the Philippine-based work by showing that transnational teaching careers are shaped by complex interactions between migration policy, labor demands, and teachers' professional identities. Global and regional analyses of overseas teacher recruitment show that high-income education systems increasingly rely on internationally trained teachers to address shortages, while offering mixed experiences of support, recognition, and career progression for those with a migration background (Brunel University London, 2024). Media-based and policy-oriented accounts of overseas Filipino teachers further underline tensions between the economic benefits of migration and the personal and professional costs of navigating language barriers, online and blended teaching demands, and the expectations of both host schools and families back home (USA Inquirer, 2021). However, there remains a paucity of qualitative research that centers Filipino teachers' own voices in narrating success, coping, and adaptation across diverse host countries particularly during and after the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Laxamana, 2026; Learning Gate, 2025). This study addresses these gaps by examining the narratives of successful Filipino teachers abroad, offering a deeper understanding of how they navigate challenges and achieve professional growth in diverse educational contexts.

Research Objectives

This study explored and understand the lived experiences of Filipino teachers working in foreign countries, focusing on their motivations, challenges, coping mechanisms, professional insights, and perspectives on teaching practices across different educational contexts. Specifically, this research aimed to:

1. Explore the motivations of Filipino teachers in choosing to work in foreign countries, including personal, professional, and socio-economic factors influencing their decision.
2. Identify and examine the challenges encountered by Filipino teachers while working abroad, particularly in terms of cultural adaptation, language barriers, and differences in educational systems.
3. Investigate the coping strategies and support systems utilized by Filipino teachers in managing the challenges of teaching and living in a foreign environment.
4. Compare and analyze the differences and similarities between teaching practices in the Philippines and in foreign countries, and to understand how these differences influence teachers' instructional approaches and student learning.
5. Gather and analyze the recommendations of Filipino teachers for those planning to work abroad, including necessary preparations, skills, and mindset for successful adaptation.

Research Questions

This study explored and understand the lived experiences of Filipino teachers working in foreign countries, focusing on their motivations, challenges, coping mechanisms, professional insights, and perspectives on teaching practices across different educational contexts. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the reasons that motivated you to work as a teacher in a foreign country?
2. What challenges did you experience while working as a teacher in another country?
3. How do you cope with the challenges of teaching and living in a foreign country?
4. How do you compare the teaching style in the Philippines with the teaching style in other countries where you worked?
5. What recommendations can you give to Filipino teachers who plan to work abroad?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of Filipino teachers working in foreign countries. Phenomenology is appropriate for this study as it seeks to capture how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences, particularly in relation to migration, professional adaptation, and identity formation. By focusing on participants' subjective narratives, the study aims to provide a rich and in-depth understanding of the complexities of teaching in transnational contexts.

Respondent Selection

The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The participants were Filipino teachers currently employed in foreign countries across various educational settings. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) must be a Filipino teacher, (b) must have at least one (1) year of teaching experience abroad, and (c) must be willing to share their experiences voluntarily. A total of 12 participants were included in the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through written semi-structured interviews conducted via digital platforms such as email and Messenger. The researchers initially contacted potential participants through professional networks and academic affiliations, providing an overview of the study and obtaining informed consent. Written interviews were selected to accommodate participants residing in different time zones and to allow them sufficient time to reflect on their experiences before responding. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions aligned with the research objectives was used to elicit detailed narratives on motivations, challenges, coping strategies, teaching practices, and recommendations. Follow-up questions were provided when necessary to clarify responses and deepen the data.

Ethical Consideration

This study adhered to fundamental ethical principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all personal information was treated with strict confidentiality. Data collected from interviews were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. The study ensured that no harm or discomfort was caused to participants throughout the process.

Data Analysis

The study analyzed the interview data using thematic analysis as proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). The process began with repeated reading of participants' responses to gain familiarity, followed by inductive coding to identify meaningful patterns directly from the data. Similar codes were grouped into categories, which were then developed into broader themes representing the teachers' lived experiences.

Themes were continuously reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data. The analysis followed a phenomenological approach, emphasizing participants' perspectives and meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure rigor, the study applied credibility and dependability measures, including thorough data engagement and maintaining an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The participants in this study represent diverse teaching contexts across different countries and educational levels; however, these variations were not the primary focus of analysis. As such, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of shared experiences rather than representative of all Filipino teachers abroad. Future studies may further explore how specific contexts, such as country of employment or subject specialization, shape distinct adaptation experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reasons that Motivated Filipino Teachers in a Foreign Country (Emerging Theme: Migration as a Pursuit of Holistic Wellbeing)

Migration as a pursuit of holistic wellbeing, reflects a multidimensional understanding of mobility that extends beyond purely economic motivations. While financial stability remains a key driver, the narratives suggest that migration is also a response to perceived socio-environmental decline. Respondent 3's account of leaving due to a "more stable and productive environment" and concerns about "crime, pollution, and safety" illustrates how migration decisions are embedded in lived experiences of insecurity and dissatisfaction. This aligns with the concept of "aspirational migration," where individuals seek improved quality of life rather than mere income gains (Carling & Collins, 2018). Additionally, the influence of family, as seen in Respondent 8's inspiration from a parental legacy and Respondent 12's desire to provide a "better life," reinforces the collectivist orientation typical in Filipino migration patterns. This resonates with literature emphasizing how family expectations and transnational obligations shape migration trajectories (Asis, 2017). Thus, migration emerges not as an isolated decision but as a negotiated process involving economic, social, and moral considerations. Another participant reflected on how initial expectations were reshaped by actual experience:

"Teaching abroad is driven by a desire for professional growth and the challenge of total cultural immersion. While families usually offer a mix of support and worry about the distance, the decision is often inspired by a global community of peers. Many expect a 'working holiday,' but the reality is a demanding full-time job with standard professional responsibilities. Navigating a foreign language also proves harder than expected, especially when handling complex tasks like bills or meetings. Ultimately, the experience trades the initial dream of constant travel for a real, grit-testing lesson in adaptability."

This account highlights the dynamic nature of motivation, where initial aspirations are continuously re-evaluated through lived experience. The contrast between expectation and reality reveals that migration is not only a pursuit of opportunity but also an encounter with unanticipated demands that require adjustment and resilience. Such reflections illustrate that motivation evolves over time, shifting from idealized perceptions to a more grounded understanding of professional and personal responsibilities abroad.

Challenges Filipino Teachers Experience while Working in Another Country (Emerging Theme: Transnational Resilience as a Survival Imperative)

Transnational resilience as a survival imperative, highlights the complexity of adaptation in foreign contexts. Respondents' experiences demonstrate that adjustment is not merely logistical but deeply emotional and identity-shaping. Linguistic challenges, as described by Respondent 3, extend beyond professional settings into everyday survival tasks, illustrating how language proficiency functions as both a communicative and social integration tool. This supports findings by Kim (2017), who argues that language barriers significantly affect migrants' sense of belonging and competence. One participant described how language barriers affected both work and daily life:

"One of the main challenges... was the language barrier. While it did not greatly affect my teaching, it created difficulties in daily activities at the workplace and in the community. Simple tasks such as asking for assistance

or understanding instructions became challenging. Differences in communication styles and workplace expectations sometimes led to misunderstandings.”

This account shows that language barriers go beyond instruction and shape everyday interaction and professional confidence. Communication is not only about language proficiency but also about understanding cultural norms, making adaptation a continuous process of interpreting both language and context. Furthermore, the experience of racism articulated by Respondent 6 underscores the structural inequalities embedded in global labor mobility. The need to “put [their] best foot forward” reflects the pressure to constantly prove professional worth in environments where migrants may be stereotyped or marginalized. This aligns with critical migration studies that emphasize how racialized dynamics shape migrant experiences (Parreñas, 2015). The emotional burden of family separation further compounds these challenges, reinforcing the idea that resilience is not an inherent trait but a process continuously negotiated in response to external pressures.

Coping with the challenges of teaching and living in a foreign country (Emerging Theme: Leveraging the "Virtual Village" and Ethnic Solidarity)

Leveraging the “virtual village” and ethnic solidarity, illustrates how teachers actively construct support systems to mitigate the psychological strain of migration. A participant emphasized the importance of interpersonal and emotional support, particularly through shared cultural connections:

“Living and teaching in a foreign country isn’t always easy, but I’ve learned to cope by building a strong support system and taking care of myself. When I feel homesick or stressed, I stay in touch with my family and keep myself busy with simple routines and hobbies. I also try to manage my time well so I can balance my work and personal life. Having fellow Filipino teachers and a supportive community really helps— they understand what I’m going through, and being around them gives me comfort and a sense of home.”

The presence of co-national peers creates a space where emotional burdens can be expressed without the need for cultural translation. Such environments not only alleviate stress but also reinforce resilience by normalizing the challenges of migration. In this way, coping becomes both an individual and collective process, shaped by the interplay between personal agency and community support.

The reliance on technology, particularly video calls as described by Respondent 7, demonstrates how digital communication sustains emotional connections across borders. This phenomenon reflects the concept of “digital transnationalism,” where technology enables migrants to maintain simultaneous engagement in multiple social fields (Madianou & Miller, 2012). At the same time, the importance of diasporic communities, as highlighted by Respondent 6, shows how shared cultural identity provides both emotional comfort and practical support. The ability to momentarily disengage from the dominant language and interact within a familiar cultural context reinforces a sense of belonging. This is consistent with research indicating that ethnic networks function as critical coping mechanisms for migrants (Ryan et al., 2008). Interestingly, the inclusion of internal resilience, as seen in Respondent 3’s emphasis on individuality and privacy, suggests that coping strategies are not uniform but shaped by personal dispositions and prior socialization. This underscores the interplay between structural supports and individual agency in adaptation processes.

Comparison of the teaching style in the Philippines with the teaching style in other countries (Emerging Theme: The Evolution of Pedagogical Identity)

The evolution of pedagogical identity, captures a profound professional transformation experienced by teachers working abroad. The shift from a teacher centered to a learner-centered approach, as described by Respondent 5, signifies more than a methodological adjustment; it represents a reconfiguration of professional identity. This transition aligns with global educational paradigms that prioritize constructivist learning and critical thinking (Schweisfurth, 2013). The movement from being the “primary source of information” to a facilitator requires teachers to renegotiate authority, classroom dynamics, and instructional strategies. Additionally, exposure to alternative curricular frameworks, such as play-based learning in early childhood education, challenges deeply ingrained pedagogical assumptions formed within the Philippine education system. This process of “instructional inversion” highlights how transnational teaching experiences can lead to professional growth but also demand

significant cognitive and emotional labor. The shift toward differentiated instruction and reduced reliance on summative assessments further reflects broader global trends in education emphasizing inclusivity and individualized learning pathways (Tomlinson, 2014).

These pedagogical shifts have important implications for classroom practice. The transition toward student-centered and inquiry-based approaches encourages greater student engagement, autonomy, and critical thinking. At the same time, it requires teachers to reconsider their role from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of learning. This shift not only affects instructional strategies but also reshapes classroom dynamics, where students become more active participants in constructing knowledge. Such transformations highlight the need for adaptability in teaching practices across different educational contexts.

Recommendations to Filipino teachers who plan to work abroad? (Emerging Theme: Success Foundations)

Success foundations synthesizes the practical and attitudinal factors that contribute to effective adaptation and professional achievement abroad. The emphasis on credentialing and research indicates that technical preparedness remains essential in navigating competitive global labor markets. One participant emphasized both preparation and mindset:

“My recommendation... is to prepare both professionally and personally. It is important to have qualifications like TESOL or TEFL, but also to be open-minded, flexible, and willing to learn. Respecting local culture and maintaining professionalism are important. Filipino teachers should have humility, patience, and confidence.”

This suggests that success abroad depends not only on credentials but also on adaptability and cultural awareness. Professional competence must be combined with openness and continuous learning to navigate unfamiliar environments. Acquiring certifications such as TESOL or IB not only enhances employability but also signals alignment with international standards. However, respondents' insights suggest that technical competence alone is insufficient. The notion of “graceful resilience,” as articulated by Respondent 5, encapsulates a mindset characterized by humility, patience, and openness to learning. This reflects Dweck's (2006) concept of a growth mindset, where challenges are reframed as opportunities for development rather than threats to competence. Moreover, the recommendation to understand cultural norms and legal frameworks underscores the importance of cultural intelligence in facilitating smoother transitions. Together, these insights highlight that success in transnational teaching contexts requires a balance between skill acquisition and adaptive disposition. Participants' narratives reveal a progression from initial expectations and motivations, through phases of adjustment and challenge, toward eventual adaptation and professional transformation. Early expectations of financial gain or ease of work gradually shifted into more complex realizations about professional standards, cultural negotiation, and personal sacrifice. Over time, coping strategies evolved into stable support systems, while challenges contributed to the development of resilience and pedagogical flexibility. This temporal dimension suggests that success among Filipino teachers abroad is not immediate but constructed through continuous adaptation and reflective practice.

Limitation of the study

While the study provides rich insights into the lived experiences of Filipino teachers abroad, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size of twelve participants, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, may limit the breadth of perspectives represented. Additionally, the use of written semistructured interviews, although practical for participants across different time zones, may have reduced spontaneity compared to oral interviews. However, written responses also allowed participants more time for reflection, which may have enhanced the depth and thoughtfulness of their narratives. Despite these limitations, credibility was ensured through careful thematic analysis, iterative data review, and alignment with established qualitative frameworks.

CONCLUSION

This study reconceptualizes Filipino teacher migration as a multidimensional process shaped by the pursuit of holistic wellbeing rather than solely economic advancement. Participants' narratives demonstrate that migration

decisions are embedded in aspirations for safety, professional growth, and improved quality of life, while also reflecting collective family expectations.

The findings further show that challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and emotional strain are not merely obstacles but integral to the process of adaptation. Through engagement with transnational support systems and the development of personal coping strategies, teachers actively construct pathways toward stability and belonging in unfamiliar environments.

A key contribution of this study lies in highlighting the transformation of pedagogical identity, as teachers shift from traditional, teacher-centered approaches to more flexible, student-centered practices. This transition underscores the role of global exposure in reshaping instructional beliefs and classroom dynamics.

Overall, the concept of “graceful resilience” captures the core of teachers’ success abroad, where professional competence is intertwined with adaptability, cultural awareness, and continuous learning. These findings extend existing literature by illustrating how resilience is not inherent but developed through sustained engagement with challenges. The study underscores the importance of integrating global competencies, intercultural readiness, and reflective practice in teacher education, while also emphasizing the need for institutional and policy support to sustain migrant teachers’ wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION

Aspiring Filipino teachers should prepare not only by securing credentials but also by developing cultural awareness and practical knowledge of their host country’s education system, laws, and social norms. Strengthened pre-departure programs are suggested to include socio-cultural and emotional readiness to reduce culture shock. For those already abroad, building both formal and informal support systems is encouraged, such as maintaining family ties through digital communication, connecting with Filipino communities, and joining professional networks. Schools can help by offering mentorship programs to support integration.

Teacher education in the Philippines is advised to embed global competencies, flexible pedagogy, intercultural communication, and reflective practice to benefit both local and international teaching contexts. Policymakers are urged to provide stronger support mechanisms, including professional development, legal assistance, and mental health programs, to sustain teacher well-being. Finally, future research should broaden its scope to cover more countries, teaching levels, and subjects, with longitudinal studies offering deeper insights into how Filipino teachers’ identities and practices evolve over time.

REFERENCES

1. Asis, M. M. B. (2017). *The Philippines: Beyond labor migration, toward development and (possibly) return*. Migration Policy Institute.
2. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
3. Brunel University London. (2024, October 29). Investigating professional experiences of teachers with a migration background. <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/projects/investigating-professional-experiencesof-teacherswith-a-migration-background>
4. Carling, J., & Collins, F. (2018). Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6), 909–926. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384134>
5. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
6. Villahermosa, J. N., Corpuz, G. G., & Comon, J. D. (2025). Intercultural competence and resiliency among Filipino teachers in the state of Alaska. *European Modern Studies Journal*, 9(1). [https://doi.org/10.59573/emsj.9\(1\).2025.12](https://doi.org/10.59573/emsj.9(1).2025.12)
7. Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.
8. Kim, Y. Y. (2012). Cross-cultural adaptation. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Elsevier.

9. Laxamana, R. P. (2026). The lived experiences of Filipino teachers teaching abroad. *Multidisciplinary International Journal of Research and Development*, 5(3), 17–35. <https://www.mijrd.com/papers/livedexperiences-filipino-teachers-teachingabroad>
10. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications. DOI:10.1016/B978-0-12-375000-6.00115-4
11. Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2012). *Migration and new media: Transnational families and polymedia*. Routledge.
12. OECD. (2021). *Teachers and school leaders as lifelong learners*. OECD Publishing.
13. Orbeta, A. C., Jr., & Abrigo, M. R. M. (2013). Managing international labor migration: The Philippine experience. *Philippine Journal of Development*, 38(1–2).
14. Parreñas, R. S. (2015). *Servants of globalization: Migration and domestic work* (2nd ed.). Stanford University Press.
15. Ryan, L., Sales, R., Tilki, M., & Siara, B. (2008). Social networks, social support and social capital: The experiences of recent Polish migrants in London. *Sociology*, 42(4), 672–690. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038508091622>
16. Santoro, N. (2021). The drive to diversify the teaching profession: Narrow assumptions, hidden complexities. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 24(4), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.788299>
17. Teachers' Tales: In-depth exploration on experiences of millennial Filipino teachers abroad. (2020). *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 8(3), 45–60.
18. Schweisfurth, M. (2013). *Learner-centred education in international perspective: Whose pedagogy for whose development?* Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.14425/00.45.70>
19. Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners* (2nd ed.). ASCD.
20. Trust, T., & Whalen, J. (2020). Should teachers be trained in emergency remote teaching? Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 28(2), 189–199.
21. UNESCO. (2023). *Global report on teachers: Addressing teacher shortages and transforming the profession*.
22. USA Inquirer. (2021, October 14). A more complete picture of overseas Filipino teachers. *Philippine Daily Inquirer USA*. <https://usa.inquirer.net/85070/a-morecomplete-picture-of-overseas-filipinoteachers>