

The Lived Experiences of Filipino Assistant Language Teachers in Japan: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry

Venjie Nera Oclaret
Matsuyama City Board of Education
Email address: venjie.oclaret@deped.gov.ph

Abstract— This hermeneutic phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of Filipino Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) teaching English in Japan, focusing on the meanings they ascribe to their professional and personal journeys within a foreign educational and cultural context. Guided by Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, the study employed in depth semi structured interviews with ten purposively selected Filipino ALTs who had worked in Japan for at least one year. Participants were recruited through the JET Programme alumni network and Filipino ALT communities. Data were analyzed using van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach through thematic reflection and interpretation. Five themes emerged: pursuing the Japanese dream; navigating cultural crossroads; constructing professional identity in foreign classrooms; confronting challenges and barriers, including language difficulties, workplace dynamics, microaggressions, and isolation; and finding meaning and fulfillment through personal growth and professional satisfaction. Findings indicate that Filipino ALTs experience a dynamic interplay of hardship and reward. Despite cultural adjustment challenges, ambiguous role expectations, and occasional discrimination, participants developed intercultural competence, resilience, and a strong sense of purpose, viewing teaching as both career and calling. The study contributes to scholarship on migrant teachers and Asian English educators in non-Western contexts, while offering implications for education stakeholders and research globally today.

Keywords— Assistant Language Teacher: English language teaching: Filipino teachers: hermeneutic phenomenology: lived experience.

I. INTRODUCTION

International teacher migration has become increasingly prominent in the context of globalization and growing demand for English language education worldwide. Japan has emerged as a significant host country for migrant educators, particularly those teaching English as a foreign language. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has implemented various initiatives to enhance English instruction, including introducing native and near-native English speakers into classrooms across the country.

Central to these initiatives is the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, established in 1987 to promote internationalization at the grassroots level. According to the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), the JET Programme has hosted over 70,000 participants from 57 countries since its inception. Beyond

JET, numerous private dispatch companies (haken gaisha) also recruit Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), often under different employment conditions characterized by lower salaries and fewer benefits.

The Philippines has increasingly become a source of ALTs for Japan. Filipino teachers bring unique qualifications: proficiency in English as an official language, formal teacher education and licensure, and cultural adaptability. The Philippine educational system produces thousands of licensed teachers annually, many seeking overseas employment due to limited domestic opportunities and desire for better economic prospects.

The experiences of Filipino ALTs remain underexplored in academic literature. While substantial research exists on native English-speaking ALTs from Western countries, considerably less attention has been devoted to ALTs from the Philippines and other Asian countries. This gap is significant because Filipino ALTs occupy a unique position—they are neither native speakers in the traditional sense nor perceived as belonging to the “inner circle” of English-speaking countries, yet they possess formal English education, teaching credentials, and often substantial classroom experience.

Economic considerations are paramount in Filipino teachers' decisions to work in Japan. The average monthly salary for public school teachers in the Philippines ranges from approximately PHP 20,000–30,000 (USD 350–530), whereas ALT positions in Japan typically pay JPY 200,000–300,000 monthly (USD 1,500–2,200). Beyond economics, Filipino teachers are drawn to Japan for professional development, cultural appeal, and international experience.

The concept of “native speakerism”—privileging native English speakers over non-native speakers in English language teaching—has been extensively critiqued in applied linguistics. Scholars including Holliday (2006), Phillipson (1992), and Canagarajah (1999) have challenged assumptions that native speakers are inherently superior language teachers. For Filipino ALTs, native speakerism may manifest in perceptions of linguistic inadequacy or differential treatment compared to ALTs from inner-circle countries.

Previous phenomenological studies on Filipino teachers abroad have provided valuable insights. Sumalinog (2020) explored lived experiences of Filipino ESL/EFL teachers working in various countries, identifying themes related to motivation and professional development. Dante-Ohya (2024)

conducted phenomenological inquiry on migrant Filipino English teachers in Japan, revealing themes of acculturation, classroom management challenges, and microaggressions. Escarda (2024) and Marasigan (2024) investigated Filipino ALTs' experiences working with Japanese teachers at elementary and junior high school levels.

This study builds upon this emerging literature by employing hermeneutic phenomenology to explore Filipino ALTs' lived experiences, utilizing the interpretive framework derived from Heidegger and Gadamer as operationalized through Max van Manen's methodological guidelines.

The increasing presence of Filipino ALTs in Japan represents a significant yet understudied phenomenon. Their lived experiences—personal, professional, cultural, and psychological dimensions—have received insufficient scholarly attention. Previous studies have not always attended to the interpretive, meaning-making dimensions that hermeneutic phenomenology specifically addresses. This study addresses the limited understanding of Filipino ALTs' lived experiences from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective.

This study contributes to phenomenological research in education, literature on migrant teachers, discussions in TESOL regarding non-native English-speaking teachers, guidance for prospective Filipino ALTs, recommendations for educational institutions, and policy implications for both Japan and the Philippines. This study is guided by the central question: What are the lived experiences of Filipino Assistant Language Teachers teaching English in Japan? Sub-questions include:

1. What motivations lead Filipino teachers to pursue employment as ALTs in Japan?
2. How do Filipino ALTs describe and interpret their experiences of cultural adjustment?
3. How do Filipino ALTs construct and negotiate their professional identity?
4. What challenges do Filipino ALTs encounter, and how do they cope?
5. What meanings do Filipino ALTs ascribe to their teaching experiences?

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs qualitative research guided by hermeneutic phenomenology. This approach is appropriate because the research questions focus on understanding experience and meaning, the phenomenon is complex and contextual, and the study aims to give voice to an underrepresented population. Hermeneutic phenomenology, drawing on Heidegger (1962), Gadamer (2004), and van Manen (2014), emphasizes interpretation as inherent to understanding and recognizes that the researcher cannot fully bracket presuppositions. Instead, the researcher brings their horizon into dialogue with participants' accounts, seeking understanding through interpretation.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling identified participants who could provide rich accounts of the phenomenon. Selection criteria

included: (1) Filipino nationality, (2) current or recent employment as ALT (within two years), (3) minimum one year of experience, (4) ability to participate in English-language interviews, and (5) willingness to share experiences. The study included ten participants, allowing for diversity while remaining manageable for in-depth hermeneutic analysis. Recruitment occurred through JET Programme alumni networks, Filipino ALT online communities, professional networks, and snowball referrals.

Data Collection Procedures

The primary method was in-depth, semi-structured phenomenological interviews conducted via Microsoft Forms and video conferencing platforms (LINE or Google Meet). Each participant engaged in one to two interview sessions: an initial interview (60–90 minutes) and follow-up interview (30–60 minutes, as needed). The interview protocol included questions such as: Can you tell me about your journey to becoming an ALT in Japan? Describe a typical day in your life as an ALT. What challenges have you encountered, and how have you dealt with them? What meaning does this experience hold for you?

Data Analysis

Analysis followed van Manen's (1990, 2014) approach to hermeneutic phenomenological analysis:

1. Immersion: Reading each transcript multiple times to gain holistic understanding
2. Identifying significant statements: Highlighting statements pertaining to lived experiences
3. Formulating meanings: Reflecting on meaning within participants' overall narratives
4. Clustering into themes: Grouping related meanings into thematic clusters
5. Developing thematic descriptions: Describing each theme with participants' words and researcher interpretations
6. Integrating themes: Creating coherent description of the phenomenon

Throughout analysis, the hermeneutic circle guided movement between parts and whole, individual narratives and collective phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

In order to adhere to ethical standards, the study ensured informed consent, confidentiality, and the well-being of the participants. Participants received clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and their rights, including voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was ensured through pseudonyms, secure encrypted storage of data, and the removal of identifying details in all reports. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity, allowing participants to limit disclosure or skip questions, and support resources were provided should any discomfort arise. Withdrawal rights were honored throughout the study. Although no monetary compensation was offered, reciprocity was maintained by providing participants with a copy of the study findings and

acknowledging their contribution to knowledge that may benefit future Filipino ALTs.

III. RESULTS

Ten Filipino ALTs participated, representing diverse backgrounds, employment arrangements, school levels, and geographic locations.

TABLE I. Participant Demographics and Profiles

Pseudonym	Years as ALT	Employment Type
Riza	3	JET
Juan	4	JET
Emma	2	JET
Ben	5	JET
Nora	3	Dispatch
Albert	2	JET
Cathy	4	Dispatch
Deo	3	JET
Luz	1.5	Dispatch
Sam	5	JET

Theme 1: Pursuing the Japanese Dream

The first theme captures participants' motivations for becoming ALTs in Japan and the aspirations that drew them to this path. All participants described a constellation of motivations—economic, professional, cultural, and personal—that together constituted what several called their “Japanese dream.”

Economic Aspirations and Family Obligations

Economic considerations emerged as a primary motivator for all participants, consistent with broader patterns of Filipino overseas labor migration. Participants consistently noted the significant income differential between teaching salaries in the Philippines and ALT salaries in Japan.

Riza explained her decision: “In the Philippines, I was earning maybe 18,000 pesos a month. Here in Japan, I earn more than ten times that. It's not just about me, I can send money home to my parents, help with my younger siblings' education. That's a huge responsibility I feel as the eldest.”

Juan similarly emphasized family obligations: “I'm the breadwinner. My father passed away when I was in college, and I've been supporting my mom and sisters since then. Japan was a way to earn enough to actually save something while still sending money home. In the Philippines, your salary is gone before the month ends.”

The ability to send remittances was frequently mentioned. Participants described supporting aging parents, funding siblings' education, contributing to family emergencies, and saving for future goals such as home purchases or business investments in the Philippines.

Cathy, with her background as a public school teacher, provided perspective on the economic differential: “I taught for five years in a public school. Every year we hoped for salary increases, but it was never enough. Here, even as a dispatch ALT with fewer benefits than JET, I earn what would take me three months in the Philippines. That changes everything.”

However, economic motivation was rarely described in purely materialistic terms. Rather, participants framed their

earnings as enabling them to fulfill cultural and familial obligations. The concept of “utang na loob” (debt of gratitude) and responsibility to family emerged implicitly in their accounts.

TABLE II. Participants' Motivations for Teaching in Japan

Motivation Category	Number of Participants Citing	Representative Quotes
Economic/Financial	10	“The salary here changes everything for my family”
Professional Development	8	“I wanted to grow as an English teacher”
Cultural Interest	9	“I've always been fascinated by Japan”
Adventure/New Experience	7	“I wanted to see the world beyond the Philippines”
Career Opportunity	6	“It was a chance I couldn't pass up”

Professional Growth and Career Advancement

Many participants, particularly those with formal education backgrounds, described professional aspirations alongside economic motivations. Ben, with his graduate degree in TESOL, articulated: “I already had a master's and teaching experience. But teaching in Japan offers something different—a chance to see English education from another angle, to develop new methods for teaching English as a foreign language to students whose language is so different from both English and Filipino.”

Sam described Japan as a stepping stone: “Long-term, I want to pursue a doctorate. Working here, I've been able to save for that. But also, the experience itself—teaching in a completely different system, working with Japanese teachers, understanding how they approach education—that's professional development that no seminar in the Philippines could give me.” Several dispatch ALTs mentioned that their initial goal was to gain experience that would qualify them for the more competitive JET Programme or other international teaching positions.

Cultural Fascination and the Appeal of Japan

Almost all participants expressed pre-existing interest in Japanese culture, often cultivated through exposure to anime, manga, Japanese music, or language study. Emma described her lifelong fascination: “Since I was a kid, I watched anime. I studied Nihongo on my own using apps and YouTube. Japan was always this dream place in my mind. When I saw the opportunity to actually live and work here, I couldn't believe it. It was like the dream becoming real.”

Nora, who had studied Japanese in university, explained: “I took Japanese as my foreign language elective. The more I learned, the more I wanted to actually experience Japan. The language, the culture, the food, everything. Teaching here seemed like the perfect way to combine my education background with my love for Japan.” This cultural fascination, while predominantly positive, was sometimes accompanied by idealized expectations that participants later had to reconcile with the realities of daily life in Japan.

Adventure and the Desire for New Experiences

Several participants framed their decision in terms of

adventure and the desire for experiences beyond what was available in the Philippines. Albert expressed this perspective: “I was 25, single, no major responsibilities. I thought, when else am I going to do this? It’s an adventure. I wanted to learn new things about myself, see if I could succeed in a foreign nation, and push myself.”

Luz, as the youngest participant, similarly described: “I didn’t want to just do the expected thing—teach in the Philippines, settle down. I wanted to experience something different while I’m young. Japan was exciting and a little scary, which is exactly what I was looking for.” These motivations for adventure were often intertwined with other factors. Participants described wanting not just any adventure but specifically the adventure of Japan, combining novelty-seeking with cultural affinity.

Theme 2: Navigating Cultural Crossroads

The second theme captures participants’ experiences of cultural adjustment—the process of adapting to Japanese society, learning to communicate in a new linguistic and cultural environment, navigating unfamiliar social norms, and building relationships with Japanese colleagues and community members.

Initial Culture Shock and Adjustment

All participants described some degree of culture shock upon arrival in Japan, though its intensity varied based on prior exposure to Japanese culture and language. Cathy recalled her early days: “The first few months were overwhelming. Everything was in Japanese—signs, announcements, forms. Even simple things like buying groceries or paying bills became challenges. I knew some Japanese words from dramas, but that’s nothing compared to actually needing to function in the language.”

Deo described a sense of disorientation: “In the Philippines, I knew how everything worked. Here, I had to relearn the basics. How do I sort my garbage? What are the rules for my apartment? How do I navigate the train system? It sounds trivial, but when everything is new at once, it’s exhausting.”

Culture shock manifested not only in practical challenges but also in deeper experiences of feeling out of place. Participants described moments of loneliness, frustration, and doubt about their decision to come to Japan. Emma shared: “There was a point, maybe the third month, when I cried almost every night. I missed my family, missed speaking Tagalog freely, missed the warmth and noise of home. Japan can be so quiet, so orderly—beautiful, but sometimes it felt cold.” However, participants also described the culture shock phase as transitional. With time, most developed strategies for coping and began to feel more at home.

Learning Japanese Language and Communication Styles

Language emerged as a central challenge and a key focus of adjustment. While some participants had studied Japanese before arrival, others came with minimal language preparation. Albert, who had no prior Japanese study, described his experience: “I thought English would be enough.

It’s not. Outside the classroom, almost no one speaks English. I had to learn Japanese fast—survival Japanese first, then gradually building up. After two years, I can handle daily life, but conversations with Japanese teachers are still challenging.”

Nora, with university-level Japanese, had a different experience: “My Japanese helped a lot. Teachers were impressed that I could communicate, even imperfectly. It changed how they related to me. But there’s always more to learn—keigo [formal language], regional dialects, the nuances that take years to master.”

Beyond language proficiency, participants described learning Japanese communication styles, which often differ significantly from Filipino norms. Indirect communication, reading unspoken cues (known as *kuuki wo yomu*, reading the air), and the importance of hierarchy all required adjustment.

Ben reflected: “Filipinos are generally direct—we say what we mean, often with humor. Japanese communication is more subtle. You have to pay attention to what’s not said. A ‘maybe’ often means ‘no.’ A pause can speak volumes. Learning to navigate that took time and caused misunderstandings along the way.”

Negotiating Social Norms and Workplace Culture

Adjustment to Japanese workplace culture was particularly salient given participants’ daily immersion in school environments. Participants described navigating hierarchical relationships, understanding expectations for behavior, and adapting to Japanese work styles. Sam, with five years of experience, described the learning process: “Japanese workplace culture is very different. There’s a hierarchy—by age, by position, by seniority. How you speak to someone, how you interact, even where you sit in a meeting room—it all matters. As a foreigner, you’re somewhat outside the system, but you still need to navigate it.”

Riza shared her initial confusion: “I didn’t understand the *senpai-kohai* [senior-junior] system at first. In the Philippines, we respect elders too, but it’s more informal. Here, it’s structured. Who bows first, who pours drinks—there are rules I had to learn, sometimes by making mistakes.”

Participants also described adapting to expectations around work hours, punctuality, and professional appearance. The long hours typical in Japanese schools—often extending well beyond official work times—were noted, though ALTs were generally not expected to match the schedules of Japanese teachers.

Building Relationships with Japanese Colleagues and Community

Despite challenges, participants described gradually building meaningful relationships with Japanese colleagues and community members. These relationships were often cited as among the most rewarding aspects of their experience. Juan described his relationships with JTEs: “It took time, but I’ve built genuine friendships with some of the Japanese teachers. We go out for dinner, talk about our lives—not just work. Those relationships make everything else worthwhile. When you have people who care about you, Japan feels like a second

home.”

Cathy emphasized community connections: “I joined a local taiko [drum] group. It was terrifying at first—I was the only foreigner. But the members welcomed me, helped me learn, invited me to their homes. Through that, I felt part of the community in a way that school alone didn’t provide.”

Relationships with neighbors, local shopkeepers, and community members contributed to participants’ sense of belonging. Several described how small gestures—a neighbor bringing vegetables from their garden, a shopkeeper remembering their name—made them feel recognized and valued.

TABLE III. Cultural Adjustment Challenges Reported by Participants

Challenge Category	Frequency	Examples
Language barriers	10	Daily communication, understanding announcements, bureaucratic procedures
Communication style differences	8	Indirect communication, reading unspoken cues, appropriate politeness levels
Workplace culture	9	Hierarchy, working hours, professional expectations
Social isolation	7	Loneliness, missing family, limited social networks
Practical daily life	8	Navigating systems, bureaucracy, different customs

Theme 3: Constructing Professional Identity in a Foreign Classroom

The third theme explores how Filipino ALTs understand, define, and enact their professional roles within Japanese classrooms. It encompasses their conception of the ALT role, their experiences of team-teaching with Japanese teachers, their pedagogical practices and adaptations, and the particular significance of being Filipino English teachers in the Japanese context.

Understanding and Defining the ALT Role

A consistent finding across all participants was the initial ambiguity of the ALT role. Many arrived with unclear expectations about their responsibilities, only to find that the actual role varied significantly across schools, prefectures, and individual teaching partners. Luz described her confusion: “Before I came, I imagined I would be teaching—you know, actual teaching. But in my first school, I was basically a tape recorder. Say this word. Pronounce this sentence. I barely interacted with students beyond that. It was not what I expected at all.”

Deo had a different experience: “At my school, I have a lot of responsibility. I plan lessons, lead activities, assess students. The JTE sees me as a teaching partner. But I know ALTs at other schools who just stand in the corner and wait to be asked to speak. It’s completely inconsistent.”

This inconsistency was attributed to multiple factors: the attitudes and preferences of Japanese teaching partners, school-level policies, prefectural guidelines, and the ALT’s own initiative and qualifications. Participants with formal teaching backgrounds (education degrees, prior teaching experience) often expressed frustration when their skills were underutilized.

Cathy, a licensed professional teacher, articulated: “I have

a teaching license. I taught for five years in the Philippines. I know how to plan lessons, manage classrooms, assess learning. But sometimes here, I’m treated as if I don’t know anything about teaching—just a native speaker, which I’m not even, technically. It’s frustrating.” Over time, many participants described actively shaping their roles through demonstrating competence, building relationships with JTEs, and advocating for expanded responsibilities.

Team-Teaching Dynamics with Japanese Teachers

Team-teaching was the modal arrangement for ALT work, involving collaboration with Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) in junior and senior high schools or Homeroom Teachers (HRTs) in elementary schools. Participants described a wide range of team-teaching experiences, from highly collaborative partnerships to arrangements where the ALT felt marginalized.

Sam described positive team-teaching: “My main JTE and I plan together every week. We discuss objectives, activities, who will lead what part. In the classroom, it feels like a true partnership—we complement each other. I offer native-like English pronunciation and cultural information about English-speaking nations, while she has curriculum expertise and Japanese language competence.”

Nora described challenges: “Some teachers don’t know how to work with an ALT. They see me as extra—nice to have but not essential. Those classes are hard. The teacher does everything in Japanese, and I just wait for my part, maybe five minutes of the whole class. It doesn’t feel like team-teaching.”

Communication between ALTs and Japanese teachers was identified as crucial for effective team-teaching. Barriers included language differences, limited planning time, and differing expectations about roles. Participants emphasized that successful team-teaching required mutual respect, clear communication, and willingness to adapt from both parties.

TABLE IV. Professional Roles and Responsibilities of Filipino ALTs

Role Aspect	Description	Participant Experiences
Pronunciation model	Providing native/near-native pronunciation for students to imitate	Universal; sometimes felt limiting
Cultural informant	Sharing information about English-speaking cultures	Common; participants contributed Filipino perspectives
Lesson contributor	Contributing to lesson planning and activities	Varied widely; more common for JET ALTs
Classroom manager	Managing classroom behavior and participation	Limited; usually deferred to JTE/HRT
Assistant	Supporting JTE’s lesson as directed	Common, especially for dispatch ALTs
Co-teacher	Equal partnership in lesson planning and delivery	Rare; described as ideal

Pedagogical Practices and Adaptations

Participants described adapting their pedagogical approaches to the Japanese educational context. Many brought teaching methods learned in the Philippines that they had to modify for Japanese classrooms. Ben reflected on pedagogical differences: “In the Philippines, I used a lot of group work, student presentations, interactive activities. Japanese classrooms are more traditional—teacher-centered, textbook-

focused. I had to find ways to incorporate more communicative activities within that structure, gradually introducing what I knew could work.”

Emma described learning from the Japanese approach: “I actually learned a lot from observing Japanese teachers. Their lesson planning is meticulous. Every minute is accounted for. Visual aids are beautiful. There’s a level of preparation I didn’t always see in the Philippines. I’ve taken that into my own practice.” Several participants mentioned the importance of making English enjoyable and accessible for students, particularly at elementary levels where English was relatively newly introduced.

Riza explained her approach: “For kids, English has to be fun. If they’re bored or anxious, they won’t learn. I use games, songs, movements—anything to get them excited about English. Seeing their faces light up when they understand something or when they can actually communicate in English—that’s the best feeling.”

Being a Filipino English Teacher in Japan

Participants reflected specifically on what it meant to be Filipino—rather than American, British, or another nationality—teaching English in Japan. This identity positioning involved both challenges and advantages. Juan discussed perception challenges: “Some people question why a Filipino is teaching English. In their minds, English teachers should be white, should be from America or England. I’ve had comments—‘Oh, you’re from the Philippines, but your English is good.’ As if they expected it wouldn’t be.”

Cathy shared a similar experience: “I’ve been asked if I’m ‘really’ a native speaker. I explain that English is an official language in the Philippines, that I studied in English my whole life. Most people are receptive, but you can tell there’s a preconception that ‘real’ English comes from certain countries.” However, participants also identified advantages to their Filipino identity:

Nora highlighted cultural bridges: “Being Asian helps in some ways. I look more like the students than a white teacher would. I think students sometimes relate to me more easily. Also, I understand the experience of learning English as a second language because that’s my experience too, even though I’ve spoken it my whole life.”

Albert mentioned shared experiences: “The Philippines and Japan have historical connections. Some older people remember the war, but also there’s a lot of cultural exchange—Filipino music was popular here, many Japanese have visited the Philippines. I can talk about those connections, which creates interesting conversations.” Participants described navigating native-speakerism while also finding ways to leverage their unique backgrounds as strengths in the classroom.

Theme 4: Confronting Challenges and Barriers

The fourth theme addresses the challenges and barriers that Filipino ALTs encounter in their personal and professional lives in Japan. While previous themes have touched on difficulties, this theme brings them into focus, exploring language barriers, professional marginalization, experiences of

discrimination and microaggressions, isolation, and concerns about employment conditions.

Language Barriers in Daily Life and Work

While addressed in Theme 2 as part of cultural adjustment, language barriers warrant specific attention as a persistent challenge. Luz described daily struggles: “Even after more than a year, there are still days when I feel lost. A letter arrives in the mail with important information, and I can’t read it. I have to ask for help or use translation apps. It’s humbling and sometimes embarrassing.”

Deo noted professional implications: “In staff meetings, everything is in Japanese. Even if I understand some, I miss a lot. Important information, changes in schedule, announcements—I find out late or not at all. It can make you feel out of the loop, even invisible.”

Participants developed various coping strategies, including language study, use of technology, and reliance on helpful colleagues. However, the language barrier remained a source of frustration for many, particularly those who arrived with limited Japanese proficiency.

Ambiguity and Marginalization in Professional Role

The ambiguity of the ALT role, discussed in Theme 3, manifested for some participants as professional marginalization. Cathy expressed frustration: “Sometimes I feel like I’m not considered a ‘real’ teacher. I’m not included in certain meetings. My input isn’t sought on curriculum decisions. I have a teaching license and experience, but here I’m just an ‘assistant.’ It can feel like my professional identity doesn’t exist.”

Emma described feeling underutilized: “I want to contribute more. I have ideas about how to make lessons better, how to engage students. But there’s not always space for that. Sometimes the expectation is just to follow what the JTE decides. It’s hard when you know you have more to offer.” This marginalization was not universal; some participants, particularly those with supportive JTEs and schools, felt valued as professionals. But the experience of marginalization was common enough to constitute a significant theme.

Experiences of Discrimination and Microaggressions

Several participants described experiences that they interpreted as discrimination or microaggressions related to their nationality, race, or status as foreigners. Juan shared an incident: “Once, at a restaurant, the staff tried to seat us in a separate area, away from other customers. My Japanese friend said it was because we were foreigners. Another time, a real estate agent told me an apartment wasn’t available, but my Japanese colleague called later and was told it was. You learn to recognize it.”

Riza described microaggressions at school: “A teacher made a joke about Filipino ‘maids’—I don’t think she realized how it sounded, or maybe she did. Comments about my English being ‘surprisingly good.’ Questions about whether I eat certain foods. They’re small things, but they add up.”

Participants distinguished between overt discrimination, which was relatively rare, and subtler microaggressions, which were more common. Some attributed these experiences to ignorance rather than malice, but their impact was nonetheless significant. Ben reflected: “I try not to let it get to me. Most Japanese people are kind and welcoming. But there’s definitely a sense that you’re perpetually an outsider, a gaijin. No matter how long you’re here, how well you speak Japanese, you’re always different. That can be tiring.”

Isolation and Loneliness

Several participants described experiences of isolation and loneliness, particularly in the early stages of their sojourn or during difficult periods. Emma recalled: “I mentioned crying every night in the beginning. That loneliness—missing family, friends, everything familiar—it hit me hard. I would video call home, but it’s not the same. You’re in a different time zone, a different world.”

Albert, placed in a rural area, described geographic isolation: “My town is small. I’m the only foreigner. There’s no Filipino community nearby. Finding other ALTs to connect with requires travel. For the first year, I felt very alone. It got better when I made local friends, but isolation is real, especially in the inaka [countryside].”

Participants emphasized the importance of social connections—with fellow ALTs, Filipino communities, and Japanese friends—for combating isolation. Those who were able to build robust social networks described much higher wellbeing.

Employment Conditions and Job Security

Participants employed through dispatch companies raised particular concerns about employment conditions, which often compared unfavorably with JET Programme positions. Nora described her situation: “As a dispatch ALT, I earn less than JET ALTs, get fewer benefits, and have less job security. Every year, we don’t know if our contracts will be renewed. Some schools don’t want dispatch ALTs—they’d prefer JET but can’t get approved. It creates a two-tier system.”

TABLE V. Types of Challenges Encountered

Challenge Category	Examples	Coping Strategies
Language barriers	Daily communication, professional situations	Language study, translation apps, asking for help
Professional marginalization	Exclusion from meetings, underutilization of skills	Building relationships with JTEs, demonstrating competence
Discrimination/microaggressions	Comments, differential treatment	Resilience, seeking support, addressing when possible
Isolation/loneliness	Distance from family, limited social network	Building friendships, Filipino community, online connections
Employment conditions	Job insecurity, unequal benefits	Seeking better positions, advocacy, pragmatic acceptance

Cathy added: “We don’t get the same support. JET has orientations, conferences, a whole support network. Dispatch

companies—some are good, some are terrible. Mine provides minimal support. If I have problems at school, there’s no one advocating for me.”

Even JET participants noted concerns about the temporary nature of ALT positions. JET contracts are limited to a maximum of five years, after which ALTs must leave the program, though some find ways to remain in Japan through other visa arrangements. Juan, approaching his fifth and final JET year, reflected: “I’ve built a life here. Students I’ve taught for years, friendships, a community. But next year, I have to leave JET. Either find another visa, another job, or go home. It’s uncertain. You invest so much, and then you have to figure out what’s next.”

Theme 5: Finding Meaning and Fulfillment

The fifth theme captures the positive dimensions of Filipino ALTs’ lived experiences: the sources of meaning, fulfillment, and growth that they identify in their work and life in Japan. Despite the challenges documented in Theme 4, all participants described profound rewards that made their sojourn worthwhile.

Connection with Students and Impact on Their Learning

The most consistently cited source of fulfillment was the connection with students and the sense of contributing to their language learning. Riza described her joy: “When a student who was shy and wouldn’t speak any English at the beginning of the year stands up and introduces herself in English—that moment makes everything worth it. You see the progress, the growing confidence. That’s why I teach.”

Juan shared a memorable experience: “One of my students wrote me a letter when she graduated. She said I changed her mind about English—it wasn’t scary anymore, and she wanted to keep studying. She thanked me for always encouraging her. I still have that letter. It reminds me why I’m here.”

Participants described building relationships with students over time, watching them grow, and receiving expressions of gratitude and affection. These connections provided emotional sustenance that counterbalanced professional frustrations.

TABLE VI. Sources of Meaning and Fulfillment

Source	Description	Participant Examples
Student connections	Relationships with students, witnessing their growth	Letters from students, breakthrough moments
Personal growth	Development as a person through challenges	Increased resilience, independence, self-understanding
Intercultural learning	Gaining new perspectives on culture and identity	Appreciating both Japanese and Filipino cultures
Professional development	Growth as an educator	Learning new methods, cross-cultural teaching competence
Teaching as calling	Deep sense of purpose and vocation	Feeling destined or called to teach

Personal Growth and Transformation

All participants described personal growth resulting from their experiences in Japan. Living abroad, confronting challenges, and adapting to a new culture were described as transformative. Emma reflected: “I’m not the same person

who arrived two years ago. I've become more independent, more resilient. I can handle things I never imagined I could. Living alone, solving problems in a foreign language, building a life from scratch—it changed me.”

Deo similarly described: “You discover things about yourself when you're outside your comfort zone. I've learned that I'm stronger than I thought. I've also learned my limitations. I understand myself better now than I ever did in the Philippines.” Participants described developing qualities including independence, patience, adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and self-awareness. Several mentioned that the challenges themselves were catalysts for growth—that easy experiences would not have produced the same transformation.

Intercultural Competence and Global Perspective

Living and working in Japan expanded participants' cultural horizons, developing intercultural competence and a more global perspective. Ben explained: “Teaching in Japan, teaching in Korea before that—it's given me a perspective that most people don't have. I understand different educational philosophies, different cultural approaches to learning. I can compare and contrast, appreciate what's unique and what's universal.”

Nora described a dual appreciation: “Being away from the Philippines made me appreciate it more—the warmth, the flexibility, the creativity. At the same time, I've come to deeply appreciate Japanese culture—the discipline, the aesthetics, the attention to detail. I hold both now, and I think that makes me richer.” This intercultural competence was seen as valuable not only personally but professionally, equipping participants to navigate diverse contexts and to bridge cultural differences in their teaching.

Teaching as a Calling

Many participants described teaching not merely as a job but as a calling—a vocation imbued with deeper meaning and purpose. This echoes findings from Dante-Ohya's (2024) study identifying teaching as a “pursuit and a calling.” Cathy articulated this perspective: “Teaching is not just what I do. It's who I am. Even with the challenges here—the low status, the role confusion—I am still a teacher. I still shape young minds. That sense of purpose sustains me through everything.”

Sam similarly expressed: “I believe I'm meant to be a teacher. Japan is just one chapter. But here, I've been able to touch lives, to contribute something. When I think about it that way, the difficulties seem smaller. The meaning is bigger than the problems.” This sense of calling provided resilience against challenges. Participants who framed their work as a vocation tended to describe their experiences in more positive terms and to express commitment to continuing in education, whether in Japan or beyond.

Imagining the Future

Participants shared their visions for the future, revealing how their experiences in Japan fit into broader life trajectories. Luz was still exploring: “I'm not sure what's next. Maybe I'll stay longer in Japan. Maybe I'll go to another country—

Korea, the Middle East. Maybe eventually I'll go home. But I know this experience has opened doors. I have options I wouldn't have had if I'd stayed in the Philippines.”

Juan was committed to remaining: “Japan is home now. I don't see myself leaving. I've built relationships, learned the language, made a life. My goal is to transition to a permanent position, maybe at a university eventually. Whatever it takes to stay.”

Ben was planning the next step: “I'm applying for doctoral programs—some here, some abroad. I want to research English education, maybe focus on non-native English teachers. My experience in Japan has shaped that interest. It's not the end of the story; it's leading somewhere.” Futures were imagined in diverse ways—continuing in Japan, moving to other countries, returning to the Philippines, pursuing further education, transitioning to other careers. Common to all was a sense that their experiences in Japan constituted a meaningful chapter that would inform whatever came next.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Conclusion 1: Filipino ALTs' motivations are multifaceted and culturally grounded. Economic aspirations are paramount but embedded in cultural values of family obligation. Alongside economics, Filipino ALTs are drawn by professional development, cultural fascination, and desires for adventure.

Conclusion 2: Acculturation is an ongoing, formative process. Initial culture shock gives way to gradual adaptation, but challenges persist. Yet this process is formative—through navigating difference, Filipino ALTs develop intercultural competence and self-understanding.

Conclusion 3: Professional identity is negotiated within structural constraints and relational contexts. The ALT role is often ambiguous, and Filipino ALTs may experience tension between self-perception as qualified educators and treatment as assistants. Team-teaching relationships significantly influence professional experience.

Conclusion 4: Challenges are significant but not overwhelming. Language barriers, marginalization, discrimination, and isolation are real and consequential. However, through resilience, coping strategies, and meaning-making, Filipino ALTs navigate difficulties and find value in their experiences.

Conclusion 5: Meaning and fulfillment sustain Filipino ALTs through challenges. Connections with students, personal growth, intercultural development, and teaching as vocation provide fulfillment that sustains participants through difficulties.

Conclusion 6: The Filipino ALT experience contributes to understanding migrant teachers and non-native English-speaking teachers in TESOL contexts. Their positioning—as English teachers from outside the “inner circle” yet with formal English education—offers insights into global English complexities.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to several theoretical discussions:

1. **Hermeneutic Phenomenology:** The study demonstrates the utility of hermeneutic phenomenology for exploring migrant educators' experiences, attending to the interpretive dimensions of being-in-the-world. The findings illustrate how teachers make meaning of their experiences within specific historical, cultural, and professional contexts.
2. **Native Speakerism:** The experiences of Filipino ALTs provide empirical grounding for critiques of native speakerism. Participants' accounts reveal how native speakerist assumptions manifest in practice and how teachers from outside the inner circle negotiate these ideologies. The findings support arguments for recognizing the value of diverse English teachers regardless of national origin.
3. **Acculturation Theory:** The findings align with acculturation research while highlighting the specific dynamics of professional acculturation for migrant teachers. The ongoing, non-linear nature of adjustment and the role of meaning-making in adaptation are underscored.
4. **Teacher Professional Identity:** The study extends understanding of teacher identity construction in cross-cultural contexts. The findings reveal how professional identity is negotiated within structural constraints and relational dynamics, and how migrant teachers manage potential tensions between self-perception and external ascription.
2. **Comparative studies examining Filipino ALTs' experiences in comparison with ALTs from other countries (both inner-circle and outer-circle), exploring similarities and differences in lived experience.**
3. **Quantitative research with larger samples to identify patterns, predictors of satisfaction and challenge, and outcomes such as retention and career development.**
4. **Studies of returning Filipino ALTs exploring how their Japan experiences influence subsequent careers, personal development, and perspectives on education.**
5. **Research on Japanese stakeholder perspectives including JTEs, administrators, and students, to understand the phenomenon from multiple viewpoints.**
6. **Studies examining the impact of Filipino ALTs on students, including language learning outcomes and intercultural attitudes.**
7. **Comparative research on Filipino teachers in other countries to place the Japan experience within the broader context of Filipino teacher migration.**

REFERENCES

- [1] Canagarajah, A. S. (1999). *Resisting linguistic imperialism in English teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- [2] CLAIR (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations). (n.d.). *The JET Programme*. <https://www.clair.or.jp/>
- [3] Dante-Ohya, A. E. (2024). Teaching English in Japan: A phenomenological inquiry on the lived experiences of migrant Filipino English teachers. *International Multidisciplinary Journal of Research for Innovation, Sustainability, and Excellence (IMJRISE)*. <https://risejournals.org/index.php/imjrise/article/view/926>
- [4] Escarda, G. M. C. (2024). Exploring the experiences of Filipino Assistant Language Teachers working with Japanese elementary school teachers. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 13(1), 858-864. <https://doi.org/10.21275/SR24110093813>
- [5] Gadamer, H.-G. (1960/2004). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans., 2nd rev. ed.). Continuum.
- [6] Heidegger, M. (1927/1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row.
- [7] Holliday, A. (2006). Native-speakerism. *ELT Journal*, 60(4), 385-387. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccl030>
- [8] Marasigan, M. C. C. (2024). Investigating the experiences of Filipino assistant language teachers' team-teaching with Japanese teachers of English at the junior high school level. *International Journal of Research in English Education*, 6(2), 335-342. <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i2e.250>
- [9] Sumalinog, G. G. (2020). English language teachers in diaspora: A Heideggerian phenomenology. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 19(11), 254-267. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.19.11.16>
- [10] van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. SUNY Press.
- [11] van Manen, M. (1991). *The tact of teaching: The meaning of pedagogical thoughtfulness*. SUNY Press.
- [12] van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Left Coast Press.
- [13] van Manen, M. (2016). *Pedagogical tact: Knowing what to do when you don't know what to do*. Routledge.

Practical Implications

For educational institutions, the findings highlight the importance of clear role definition, supportive team-teaching structures, inclusive school cultures, and attention to the needs of non-native English-speaking teachers. Practical steps to improve ALT integration and satisfaction can be derived from participants' accounts.

For policy-makers, the findings suggest the value of attending to employment conditions, support systems, and professional development for all categories of ALTs. The two-tier system between JET and dispatch positions raises equity concerns worthy of policy attention.

For teacher educators and professional development providers, the findings indicate needs for cross-cultural preparation, language support, and resources for navigating native speakerist environments.

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study opens several avenues for future research:

1. **Longitudinal studies tracking Filipino ALTs over extended periods to explore how experiences evolve, how challenges and growth unfold over time, and what long-term career trajectories emerge.**