

Lived Experience of Filipino Non-Education Graduates Teaching English Language in Southeast Asia

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Dated received: February 28, 2025

Date revised: May 17, 2025

Date accepted: June 15, 2025

Originality: 92%

Grammarly Score: 99%

Similarity: 8%

Recommended citation:

Masa, S.R.L., & Estrellas, J. (2025). Lived experience of Filipino non-education graduates teaching English language in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 3(7), 253-267.

<https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2025.128>

Abstract. This study examined the challenges and coping mechanisms of Filipino non-education graduates teaching English in Laos PDR, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, serving as the foundation for the proposed International Language Exchange Program (ILEP). Using a qualitative research design with a descriptive phenomenological approach, the study analyzed data through Braun and Clarke's (2016) six-step thematic analysis. Eight participants, currently employed in private and international schools across these countries, were selected. Semi-structured interviews, validated by three research experts, were conducted online due to geographical constraints. Findings revealed that common challenges faced by these teachers included limited access to educational resources, lack of institutional support from the Philippine Embassy, and cultural and linguistic barriers stemming from students' diverse accents and varying English proficiency levels. A critical issue identified was their status as "unqualified" due to the absence of a formal Teacher Education degree, making it challenging to employ effective instructional strategies. The study identified key themes: (1) Challenges of Overseas Filipino Teachers; (2) Philippine Embassy Support Initiatives; (3) Coping Mechanisms of Filipino Non-Education Graduates Teaching English; and (4) Insights Gained from Teaching Experiences Abroad. In response to these findings, the International Language Exchange Program (ILEP) was conceptualized to provide professional development, pedagogical training, and institutional support for Filipino educators in ASEAN countries. This research contributes to the discourse on transnational education and migration by shedding light on the lived experiences of Filipino teachers abroad and offering policy recommendations for improving their professional integration and support systems.

Keywords: English teaching; Cultural and language barriers; Overseas Filipino teachers.

1.0 Introduction

English is one of the official languages in several ASEAN countries and has become a key skill in different workforce divisions, as highlighted in Proficiency in English Key to Career Growth in Southeast Asia (2021). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) comprises ten countries—Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam—representing a region of immense linguistic diversity, with over 1,000 languages spoken. Despite this diversity, English has been promoted as the language of education, serving as a lingua franca among political leaders, professionals, and business communities (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2020). As a global language, English fosters a culturally dynamic, economically prosperous, and socially cohesive ASEAN community (Waterworth, 2015).

The high demand for English language proficiency in ASEAN nations has led to an increasing number of Filipino teachers, including non-education graduates, seeking employment abroad. Filipino educators are particularly preferred due to their strong foundation in linguistic structure and deeper understanding of English grammar and syntax (Bautista, 2020). Additionally, the promise of higher salaries and better benefits in ASEAN countries than in local schools in the Philippines has further encouraged migration (Santos, 2023). However, while numerous studies have explored the struggles of overseas teachers, gaps remain in understanding the lived experiences of Filipino non-education graduates teaching English abroad. Many aspiring teachers embark on this journey with little awareness of the risks and challenges, leading to frustrations and difficulties adjusting to foreign educational settings.

The researcher's personal experience as a former International Consultant under the United Nations Program for the Ministry of Education and Sports in Laos PDR provided crucial insights into the realities faced by Filipino non-education graduates teaching in Southeast Asia. This study aims to deepen the understanding of their challenges and coping mechanisms, offering empirical evidence to inform policies on teacher deployment, overseas employment regulations, and institutional support systems. Furthermore, the study's findings serve as the foundation for the proposed International Language Exchange Program (ILEP), which seeks to enhance the professional development of Filipino teachers abroad. By fostering collaboration between Carlos Hilado Memorial State University (CHMSU) and a selected international school from the investigated ASEAN countries, this program aspires to bridge the gaps in teacher training, provide structured pedagogical support, and strengthen institutional linkages for Filipino educators working overseas.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive-phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Filipino Non-Education graduates teaching English in Southeast Asia. The aim was to uncover the essence and structure of their experiences without the researcher's interpretation. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis, a method widely used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2016). Through this approach, the study aimed to offer a deep understanding of the challenges faced by Filipino Non-Education graduates and the coping mechanisms they employed, ultimately shedding light on the essence of their experiences as English language educators abroad.

2.2 Research Participants

The study involved 8 Overseas Filipino Teachers (OFTs) teaching English in government or private schools and to government officials or their children across seven Southeast Asian countries. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, where data were gathered from a readily available group of respondents (Battaglia, 2022). Participants met the following criteria: (1) experience in teaching English in a Southeast Asian country, either in a formal or informal setting; (2) possession of a legal Philippine passport; and (3) involvement in a government program in their host country, either as a teacher or in another educational capacity.

2.3 Research Instrument

This study employed a semi-structured interview with pre-designed and supplementary questions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic and to guide the conversation (Pollock, 2020). Three English language specialists expertly evaluated the instrument using the Eight-Point Criteria for Content Validation by Good and Scates to enhance content and face validity. The interview questions focused on experiences as foreign English language teachers, background and professional qualifications, challenges and issues encountered in teaching English abroad, coping mechanisms to overcome these challenges, personal reflections on their teaching experiences, and recommendations for improving English language instruction in similar contexts.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

The interviews were scheduled based on the participants' availability, considering their work commitments abroad. Given their locations, individual virtual interviews were conducted via Zoom or Google Meet, each lasting one hour to minimize disruptions to their professional and personal activities. To encourage active participation, the researcher explained that the study could serve as a basis for an International Language Exchange Program (ILEP), which might help Filipino English teachers obtain professional teaching qualifications. Participants were also briefed on the rationale and purpose of the study, and they granted

permission for their interviews to be recorded and transcribed. The one-hour duration was designed to collect meaningful insights while respecting the participants' time (Gibson, 2012).

2.5 Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2016) six-step framework to systematically identify patterns and themes from the collected qualitative data. The researcher first immersed herself in the data by transcribing all interviews verbatim and reviewing them multiple times. Audio-video recordings and reflective field notes were also referenced to ensure depth and accuracy. Initial coding was conducted using a structured framework matrix that categorized data into interview excerpts, semantic codes, sub-themes, and significant themes. Key themes emerged by identifying recurring patterns related to participants' experiences, particularly their challenges in teaching English abroad. These themes were refined through an iterative review process, ensuring coherence and alignment with relevant theoretical frameworks. The themes were clearly defined and illustrated with representative participant quotes to enhance credibility. Finally, the findings were synthesized into three significant categories: challenges of Filipino non-education graduates teaching English abroad, coping mechanisms, and insights gained from their experiences. These results informed the development of the International Language Exchange Program (ILEP), which aims to address the identified challenges and provide professional support for Filipino teachers in ASEAN countries.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The researcher adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure all participants' protection, privacy, and well-being. A Letter of Intent was submitted to the selected international schools to secure approval for the participation of English language teachers. Once approval was granted, a separate Informed Consent Form was provided to each teacher, clearly outlining their rights as participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms throughout the study, and all collected data, including interview transcripts, were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. Data were encrypted and stored in a password-protected database to protect privacy, ensuring that any identifiable information was excluded from the final report. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences, and any data they had previously provided would be removed upon request.

Additionally, the participants were aware of potential risks, such as emotional distress when recalling their experiences, and the potential benefits, including contributing to policy recommendations and teacher training programs. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, with scanned copies collected as proof of their agreement. The researcher facilitated access to a professional counselor through an online group support system to address any emotional distress encountered during the interviews. One participant, who had been teaching in Laos for over twenty years, became emotionally overwhelmed while sharing her experiences. In response, the researcher ensured that she received proper emotional support and connection to a counseling professional, for which the participant expressed deep gratitude.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Challenges of Overseas Filipino Teachers

The desire to teach abroad, out of passion or desperation, has provided Filipino teachers with circumstances that test their capabilities. During the interview, the participants presented their various challenges.

Beliefs of Filipino Teachers as English Language Experts

The participants' points of view about the challenging experiences encountered in terms of culture adaptation with the locals of Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia were perceived as not difficult. Accordingly, the participants believed that Filipinos were known to be well-informed, equipped with English language communication skills, and with diverse cultural backgrounds. The three main problems faced by teachers from non-English-speaking countries or NESCs (China, Japan, Thailand, Senegal, Mongolia, Cambodia, and Laos) are inappropriate textbooks, too big class sizes, the school environment, and students' low motivation in learning English (Dejene, 2017). English handbooks, besides teachers or other sources, are one of the sources for students to learn English. Many teachers complain that English textbooks are sometimes unsuitable for students' needs nowadays (as reflected by Japan, Senegal, Mongolia, and Cambodia). Creating a well-prepared textbook based on students' needs takes time and several processes and revisions. One aspect of improving school quality is the contribution of the instructional process (Richards, 2001, as cited in Dejene, 2017). He said that a good textbook

could consistently influence students' achievement. By this statement, it is clear enough that textbooks or coursebooks also include one crucial aspect in improving learning. They can reflect on the Cambodian government's effort to collaborate in developing textbooks that will support a standard textbook for students' needs in learning English.

Filipinos teaching abroad could compete with native speakers as language teachers. Filipinos' clarity in speaking and teaching pedagogy imparts effective learning to students. Teacher Ur mentioned that Thai schools prefer Filipinos to teach the English Language since they use efficient but straightforward teaching methods. This implied that the teaching pedagogy of Filipino teachers in classroom discussions is easier for Thai students to understand, as Cabiladas (2020) pointed out. Filipino teachers in Thailand found a sense of fulfilment whenever they observed that their students could speak, read, or write English. However, one struggle of educators in Thailand was the lack of Systematic criteria for assessing students' progress. Thus, teachers must be vigilant in evaluating or monitoring learners' performance in language learning. Teacher Carer said that at first, she thought teaching English was easy since the language was widely recognized as the universal lingua franca, but this was not the case in the Asian country where she teaches.

Teacher participants of this study shared their experiences and perceptions of teaching the English language in Southeast Asian nations. International schools prefer Filipinos to teach basic English language due to their proficiency in the language. Teacher Ur pointed out that English as a Foreign Language learners learned best with Filipinos since these educators deliver clear teaching methods and approaches. The learners comprehend the English language and practice it effectively. Language educators preferred Non-Native English speakers in various countries. In support of this claim, Mahboob, et al. (2004, as cited by Bautista, 2020) stated that international schools' advertisements reflected the criteria for hiring English teachers: (1) the quality of native language speaking; (2) racial background; (3) age of applicant; (4) qualifications and academic background; (5) gender; (6) nationality; and (7) experiences in teaching.

Considering the religious beliefs in the school where she teaches, cultural standards and belief systems must be her top priority in teaching English, especially contextualizing topic discussions. Culture plays a vital role in language learning. The promotion of cultural understanding establishes better communication. Non-verbal cues, gestures, and facial expressions are worth nothing without anchoring these contexts to linguistic writing and speaking practice (Toppan Digital Language, 2019). Bolhuis & Voeten (2004, as cited in Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018) find that motivated teachers are likely to promote active and functional learning strategies that achieve the best outcome for students. Frenzel et al. (2019) show that displayed enthusiasm significantly affected perceived teacher motivation, enjoyment, clarity, and structure. The high group measured all those indicators with higher enthusiasm than the low group. It means that teacher motivation and enjoyment greatly affect students' motivation. This result supports Radel et al.'s (2010, as cited in Frenzel, Taxer, Schwab, & Kuhbandner, 2019) finding, which reveals that when students learn from a motivated teacher, they can learn with autonomy and high levels of behavior.

Teacher Marine shared that Lao people do not speak English at home. The direct Method is the best strategy he utilizes as it helps improve students' learning through feedback. With the help of other professionals, he was able to improve his style of teaching. Filipinos, being considered part of the "outer circle" and Non-Native English-speaking teachers, are preferred by international schools for economic reasons since they are paid less. Furthermore, Filipino teachers have an edge over Native Speakers because they are more knowledgeable and have a deeper understanding of concepts in the English language (Arva & Medgyes as cited by Bautista, 2020). Teacher Strong was not prepared to teach English abroad. He never imagined how challenging it would be to deal with international students and other foreign instructors when teaching them the English language, especially since he is not a native speaker.

One major problem that Teacher Strong encountered was the way students pronounced English words. Singapore is known as a country composed of diverse language speakers, and the pronunciation of English words is not their strength. To see a clearer picture of Overseas Filipino teachers abroad, Alcibar (2021) discusses that Filipino teachers work abroad in pursuit of personal growth and professional development. Among other reasons, Filipino teachers decide to pursue migration to other countries as a means of promotion. According to Rommel (2021, as cited in Alcibar, 2021), these are the advantages of the migration of Filipino teachers: First,

Filipino educators are intelligent professionals, and through their interaction with students, peers, and colleagues of different cultural backgrounds, they have become ambassadors of promoting the dignity and reputation of the Philippines; secondly, Filipino teachers are equipped with skills to breed students to become globally competent. Most Filipino teachers tend to establish a support system for students and empower them to be effective communicators; lastly, digitalization created a platform for teachers to advance their knowledge and competencies, allowing them to seek professional development through technology as their tool for individual improvement.

Teacher DH, on the other hand, worked overtime since paperwork was an essential part of her duty as an English Language teacher. This doubled her effort as it required a tedious task to prepare teaching materials for her classes. Moreover, Teacher Diamond admitted that teaching children would be easier for her. Malaysian kids were respectful learners, but reinforcement or tutorial was needed to improve their English language proficiency. Therefore, she rendered tutorial sessions and provided students with activities to work on at home.

Based on the 2019 Survey on Overseas Filipinos by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), there is already an estimated total of 2.2 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) abroad from April to September 2019. Fifty-six percent (56%) comprises females, while forty-four percent (44.0%) are males. Of the 2.2 million overseas workers, nine percent (9%) or an estimated 207,000 are Filipino professionals, a primary occupation group that includes OFWs teaching abroad. Filipinos teaching abroad are known for their academic competence, especially in teaching the English language. As a result, Filipino teachers are very in demand, especially in countries that expand their curriculum to include the English language as a subject or a course. Filipino teachers are also known to be great instructors for preschool, music, and physical education (Mapa, 2019).

Competence and Proficiency in the English Language

The participants agreed that Lao, Thai, Viet, and Cambodian students, formal or informal, have positive and enthusiastic attitudes towards English as a medium of the teaching-learning process. The participants thought the Lao and Thai students were generally well-behaved because of their religious background. Buddhists were perceived to be well-disciplined, generous, and respectful, especially to the teachers and the elders. With the Vietnamese and Cambodian students, the participants did not appreciate their attitude towards learning the English language. Teacher Big found Viet students to be overconfident, if not overbearing. The Vietnamese were considered defensive and had a superiority complex over other Southeast Asian country. This was because they were on the frontline against the Americans during the Indochina War in the early 1970s. For them, English is the language of their enemy.

Moreover, most government officials would rather send their children to tutors to learn the English language privately than learn in a formal setting with many other students. With this, tutorials have helped many Filipino teachers with their finances during school breaks. According to Bulawat (2021), teaching and learning English are crucial for the country's development. Teaching English in international institutions provides excellent job prospects, compensation, and opportunities that immerse teachers in a multicultural setting. Bulawat mentioned that Filipinos are among the best English-speaking teachers compared with other Southeast Asians. He further said that Filipino teachers who teach English as a Second Language in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Asian nations face numerous challenges and changes amidst diversity in teaching and learning mechanisms.

Filipino teachers also thought that Thai students were active learners. They were enthusiastic about learning, active in participating in school-related tasks, and not hesitant to speak English with teachers. On the other hand, Lao students were quite shy but enthusiastic about learning the English Language. Thai students' behavior implies a positive attitude toward learning the English language during classes. Filipino Teachers in Thailand motivated their students to learn English through innovative teaching and creating learning materials. Interactive games and collaborative enhancement activities were easy for Thai students to do, and at the same time, they engaged them in learning the English language. Although textbooks were a prevalent practice in academic teaching in Thailand, Filipino teachers established a student-centered approach to teaching the English Language (Ulla, 2018).

Scarcity of Academic Resources

Academic resources for Teacher Big and Teacher Ur in early 2002 were quite scarce, and they could not seem to understand the system of teaching the English language in their country of placement. At first, they both could not speak the Thai and Lao languages. Teacher Ur, who applied as a teacher, was asked by the school's owner to work instead as principal. She had to formulate school policies, and the school system, create the student and teacher handbooks, and create her learning materials to provide for the Lao students in Vientiane. Teacher Big had to use the technique he learned from his former grade school teachers to provide learning materials. Most of the academic materials are textbooks from Cambridge or Singapore. The Filipino teachers must use these academic materials. However, these were not considered valid since Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam were Buddhist, and textbooks were written in their local language or a Buddhist religious and cultural context. Teacher Tech had a better experience using academic resources since he was hired as an International Consultant 2013 in the Lao People's Democratic Republic for the Ministry of Education in the Multimedia program, introducing the Information and Communications Technology for Education (ICT4E). The Research Institute used his expertise in this academic resource for Educational Sciences. He was teaching the Government Officials the English language, as this is a requisite for their promotion. The Lao government officials would be demoted if they did not learn the English language and the use of computers within two years of the start of work in the government.

Demir (2017) finds three main challenges for English teachers when teaching English as a foreign language: student-related, teacher-related, and institutional difficulties. The student-related problem happens when students are not interested in the learning material because it is not in their native language and is not a relevant coursebook. However, this statement is subjective, coming from students who believe that English is difficult. In teacher-related, the most challenging problem is managing the classroom. Some teachers say that because the students lack motivation, the teacher cannot teach the lesson as planned. On the other hand, institution-related refers to classroom size and technological support provided by the school. In other words, Demir's (2017) finding shows that the problems emerge from the motivation itself.

Textbooks are a key component in most language programs. In some situations, they serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom. They may provide the basis for the content of the lessons, the balance of skills taught, and the kinds of language practice the students take part in. In other situations, the textbook may primarily supplement the teacher's instruction. For learners, the textbook may provide the primary source of contact with the language apart from input provided by the teacher. For inexperienced teachers, textbooks may also serve as a form of teacher training that provides ideas on planning and teaching lessons and formats that teachers can use. Much of the language teaching throughout the world today could not occur without the extensive use of commercial textbooks. Learning how to use and adapt textbooks is an important part of a teacher's professional knowledge (Richards, 2001, as cited in Dejene, 2017). However, Filipino teacher-participants of this scientific study cited that not all international schools have enough resources and educational support for students' language learning.

Textbooks are often thought to guide the teacher's daily practice and provide the primary teaching material that students experience (Harwood, 2017). Accordingly, textbooks are expected to affect students' learning progress. For reading comprehension in primary schools, textbooks also affect the students' reading ability. Therefore, it is plausible to expect that a school's textbook choice affects its learning progress in reading comprehension. Moreover, classroom size is among the most challenging cases in China, Japan, Senegal, and Laos. Teaching English will be effectively taught to a few students (Broughton et al., 2003, as cited in Dejene, 2017). Learning English involves four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing- and will be effective if the number of students in the class ranges from 20 to 25. However, this number must be hard for several countries like the above-mentioned countries, where every district only has one school. Even developed countries that are non-NESCs still encounter this problem— having too big a class size. This problem can be solved by implementing various teaching strategies and methods, including supplementary materials, when teaching large classes.

The last emerging challenge is students' motivation to learn the English language. Moreover, education ministries in several countries, such as Japan, Laos, and China, have noticed this as a severe problem. The government and schools implement various programs, collaborating with multiple parties from the university level and even with the NESCs. Learning motivation is the root of ideal teaching and learning activities (Frenzel,

Taxer, Schwab, & Kuhbandner, 2019). Implementing programs such as Assistant Learning Teacher (ALT), Voluntary English Teacher (VET), and collaboration with student interns in the university are expected to spur student motivation in learning and teachers in developing their knowledge in teaching the English language.

Growth in the number of university graduates signifies a fall in terms of quality, and gradually, there is a decline in their status and the economic value of a degree because educational credentials are recognized as commonplace and easier to attain (Tomlinson, 2018). Employers then become more selective and pose a more challenging set of job requirements; thus, there is competition for the graduates. In Australia and Japan, employers tend to emphasize generic and practical skills in recruitment decisions instead of examining only graduates' technical expertise and academic results (Pham & Thompson, 2019; Saito & Pham, 2019). This phenomenon is no exception for Laos, a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Despite many graduates in Laos, they appear to be insufficiently equipped with the skills and knowledge for employment. According to their survey on employers' perceptions of graduates' employment in Laos, key issues are their inadequate skills and work experience, irrelevant qualifications, and low English proficiency. To cope with the shortage of skilled labor, private enterprises imported foreign skilled labor, mainly for high and medium-skilled occupations (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare [MLSW], 2019). This is partly a result of the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, which is accompanied by a policy on skilled labor mobility. The policy is beneficial in facilitating labor mobility to benefit regional economic development, but it puts pressure on local workers. Lao graduates are automatically under increasing pressure. They have to compete with their fellow graduates and foreign workers who seek employment in the Lao labor market, particularly in the private sector. To win the employment battle, Lao students must also invest in their education to acquire distinct knowledge, skills, and competence to build their comparative strength in specialized and optimal skills to attract their prospective employers. Also, they must reach international standards if they wish to replace foreign workers. Their degree needs to be complemented with optimal skills, such as speaking English as a foreign language, communicating, and being adaptable.

Ability to Speak the Local Language

Language contact was significant in the teaching of the English language for Filipino teachers as well as for the students. This was when the Filipino teachers and students of the country of placement interacted and influenced each other. Having close interaction with the students in the school and going to the market to buy food were the best learning experiences for the Filipino teachers to survive in a non-English speaking country. The first-hand experience of the Researcher in 2002, five days after arriving in Laos, was the best example of how language contact becomes very important in surviving the language barrier. When the Researcher attempted to make a call to the Philippines the phone operator would not speak the English language simply because English was the language of their enemy, even if the researcher was already saying "Kh:ory bo:rh ma: en khon Lao, kh:ory khon Philippine. Bo:rh da; i pasa Lao. Ja:o pasa Anggit da:e, dai bo:rh" (I am not a Lao person, I am a person from Philippines. I cannot speak Lao very well. Please, can you speak in English), the Lao phone operator would still not dare speak the English language as all the phones, computers, radio messages were monitored by the Politburo Government of the cerrado con todo comunista Lao. When a Lao teacher, who was passing by, overheard the researcher speaking in Lao and could not get through to the operator, he immediately helped the Filipino teacher and took over the situation. That Lao teacher was a hired National Consultant for Foreign dignitaries. They were considered "rebels" since they were taught the English language by the Americans as "spies" against their government in 1973.

From then on, the researcher studied the local language with the help of local students and other local teachers. This was also true with the rest of the Filipino teachers, whereby they had to learn to speak the local language by repeating the words spoken by the locals and teaching the locals to do the same in English. In the classroom, the Filipino teacher had to give instructions in both languages to become effective. The Researcher and Teachers Big, Tech, and Ur used this strategy, i.e., by giving the instructions in the English language first, saying "Sit down, children," and repeating it in the local language, saying "Nang lung, nik no:rh"; "repeat after me", in Lao "va:w tahm lang kh:ory"; "please listen to me", in Lao "fang kh:ory da:e". These were handy instructions in the classroom. The Lao and Thai languages were quite similar but differed in pronouncing the letters "l" and "r". In the Philippine local dialects, Thai sounded more like "Karay-a" that the Province of Antique speaks, whilst Lao sounds like the "Cebuano" spoken by the Filipinos from Cebu. Thus, a person's English name, i.e., "Sharon", would be spoken by the Lao as "Sah:lon" and the Thai would say it as "Sah:rnon".

3.2 Support of Philippine Embassy

During his time as a teacher in Laos, Teacher Big pointed out the lack of concrete programs the Philippine Embassy provided to Filipino teachers. The Philippine Embassy contributes support by registering Filipinos upon arrival in the country of placement for security purposes. The local government of the country will only support the operation of schools and the foreign teachers teaching the English language if they are not from the Hmong Tribe (rebels and sympathizers of American soldiers). On the contrary, Singapore's educational support was evident in the instructional materials, equipment, and facilities provided to teachers. Teacher Strong mentioned that Singapore has a world-class educational system in terms of teacher-support initiatives.

This is the same sentiment Teacher DH conveyed during the interview. In Thailand, the government has been very supportive of Filipino English teachers. As competent educators in teaching English, the Thai government has provided valuable resources and high-quality educational materials. In Malaysia, Teacher Diamond signified that the government requires Filipinos to have a certificate in Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) to recognize entry-level credentials for teachers of English as a foreign language in Malaysian schools. Although English was introduced in the Higher Education System after the Lao government entered the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1996 (Kounnavongsa, 2015), it remains a new field in terms of research, and the results of the new policies that have been introduced are not yet apparent. Of note is that universities began to include the English language in their curriculum without having conducted a study to ensure its feasibility. In the same way, the English language syllabus is developed by non-expert teachers who base it only on their observation and perception of what they consider to be the needs of their students. Consequently, there is no national strategic plan addressing English language teaching, since university degrees do not include a general plan established by the Government for acquiring a second language.

Teacher Big believes that the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) should be more proactive and deliver support to all Filipino teachers in Southeast Asia. He observed a lack of support, having no program that can help Filipinos qualify for the teaching profession. Higher education institutions (HEIs) and international educators have emphasized linking learning abroad programs to employability (Matherly & Tillman, 2020). This is to ensure that study abroad participation helps graduates be equipped with employability skills and competencies applicable in all sectors of the global economy. Employability skills are a combination of general and transferable skills that might be useful in any workplace in addition to the specific requirements of a job (Suleman, 2018). However, it is not easy to define a complete set of employability skills because the requirements of labor markets differ from country to country. According to Suleman (2018), employability skills include communication, teamwork, IT, analytical and critical skills, learning abilities, and organizing and planning.

Specifically, Lao employers, alongside educational qualifications, wanted graduates to have these kinds of skills, with independence, and timeliness (Del Carpio et al., 2013; MLSW, 2019), and believed these skills are found to be positively developed through studying abroad. According to the Peterson Institute for International Economics (2022), Globalization paved the way for the development of the world's economies, culture, and population through cross-border trade. Through globalization, goods and services, technology, economic investment, Information, and Communication flourished, fostering cooperative arrangements among people in different communities. Teaching the English language in Thailand significantly impacts Thailand's sociocultural, economic, and political development (Amrao & Sirijit, 2020). Filipinos are considered the largest group of skilled workers supplying Thailand's in-demand English language educators. Accordingly, there are about 14,910 Filipino migrant workers in Thailand. In 2010, 65% of the total population were professionals (Cabalidas, 2020). In 2013, Filipinos were the fastest-growing migrant community (Novio, 2014), and 20,000 Filipinos are residing in Thailand, and more than 16,000 are teachers working in different schools.

3.3 Coping Mechanisms

Filipinos are known to be resilient. The following sub-themes explain how overseas Filipino teachers cope with challenges.

Perception of Teachers as Classroom Strategists

Filipino teachers found it quite challenging to teach the English Language in Southeast Asian countries, whose medium of instruction was not English. Nevertheless, seeing and hearing the local students speak English with

their fellow locals gave them a sense of fulfilment. The Filipino teachers were happy when they found that their students learned and could speak, read, or write in English. Teacher Ur used different strategies in teaching the English language. In one of her classes, a naughty student who loved picking on weaker classmates learned to behave when Teacher Ur used multiple intelligence theory through creative and constructive activities.

Filipino teachers interviewed in this study said that approaches and teaching-learning methods are necessary to deliver effective English learning among international students. Since Thai students are participative in classroom discussions, teacher Tech integrates creative and interactive games and collaborative activities to engage learners. However, teachers still learn to widen their perspectives and adapt despite unfavorable circumstances. Teachers become exposed to different classroom approaches and teaching styles (Expat Quotes, 2020). Even unsuccessful classroom lessons could create new things to learn from (Markoulis, 2020) and new cultural habits to adapt to. Walters (2020) stressed that teachers gain new life perspectives, and both authors admitted that teaching in a new environment taught teachers how to make a classroom inclusive of all learning types. However, in a study conducted by Medved et al. (2013), teachers have to take extra care in dealing with cultural differences to avoid offending the learners and keep them interested in learning more. These favorable experiences of the teachers were often forgotten due to the impact of their negative experiences.

Teacher Big, a sports teacher, used his expertise in football to establish rapport with his students, which helped him connect with them and facilitated his rapid acquisition of the local language. Frequent language contact made him highly fluent in Thai and Lao, a skill that significantly increased his salary compared to other Filipino teachers who lacked proficiency in local languages. Many schools in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam prefer Filipino teachers who speak neutral, non-accented English, giving Teacher Big an advantage in securing better opportunities. Like many other Filipino Non-Education Graduate teachers, he downloaded lesson plans from the internet to guide his instruction, compensating for his lack of formal training in pedagogy. These unqualified Filipino teachers often arrive in Southeast Asian countries as tourists and later seek teaching jobs, sometimes through the help of fellow Filipinos who had settled there earlier. Teacher Big's experience reflects the resilience and adaptability of Filipino teachers abroad, demonstrating how skills beyond formal teaching qualifications, such as sports expertise and language proficiency, can help overcome barriers in the competitive field of English language education.

Teacher Tech, employed by an International Agency working with the Ministry of Education of Laos PDR, did not have much of a problem except that he was not fluent in the local language, unlike teachers Big and Ur, who have been in these countries for two decades. Nonetheless, these Filipino teachers generally found a sense of fulfilment when they saw the learners grow and become fluent in the English language. The support system has been the leading factor in why teacher-participants of this study cope with difficulties in engaging English language teaching among diverse-race learners. In teaching international students, Teacher Carer said that a support system from friends and co-teachers helps her cope with the challenges in teaching. Other related challenges EFL teachers face are classroom practice and commitment to teaching (Hayes, 2009, as cited in Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). Accordingly, Hayes says that classroom practice refers to the difficulty of Thai students in learning English because of limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, and no one peer can join in the conversation. Then, commitment to teaching relates to the teachers, which leads to teachers' motivation again.

Instructional Teaching Materials and Methods

Diverse learners demanded that teachers implement creative and innovative means of providing classroom instructions that conform to students' individual differences. Teacher Big believed that a non-text-based curriculum develops self-discovery skills through learning English and other disciplines. Moreover, Overseas Filipino teachers faced difficulties in teaching English to students with diverse cultures and languages. Filipino teachers encountered hardships in Thailand, one of which was the teaching of English, especially in public schools. Students had limited chances to learn English since they did not speak it at home (Cabiladas, 2018). Visual aids were necessary to engage students in language learning. Teacher Marine has to be innovative in using materials in teaching because it is challenging for him to integrate technology such as social media platforms, since the country where he was working imposed strict control of internet access.

In the study of Khafidhoh (2019, as cited by Linde, 2022), students who were not exposed to instructional aids showed less energy and motivation in English classes. In support of this, Hamer & Rohimajaya (2018) claimed

that pupils actively participated in classroom discussions whenever flash cards were used to develop learners' retention. Teacher Marine shared that Lao people do not speak English at home. The direct Method was the best strategy he utilized as it helps improve students' learning through feedback. With the help of other professionals, he improved his teaching style. In addition, Teacher Marine pointed out that Filipino teachers are known to be resilient people. Being resourceful was one exceptional attitude that reinforced their ability to survive working abroad. In teaching international students, teacher Carer said that a support system from friends and co-teachers helps her cope with the challenges in teaching. Teacher Strong did not have problems with Singaporean students compared to the Malaysians and Lao rich kids. Malaysians had behavioral problems, and it would take much patience for him to motivate these learners.

On the other hand, respecting students' culture was Teacher DH's best strategy, just like the other teachers. She uses lectures, readings, and classroom activities suited to cultural beliefs and contextualizes the learners' customs and language. As a classroom strategist, Teacher Big believes there are still more experiences to be discovered, covering recent years, to inform Filipino teachers fully. There is still a gap that needs to be delved into because little do aspiring teachers know that going abroad comes with risks and drawbacks. Excited to earn and help their families, they ventured abroad without enough knowledge of the drawbacks, resulting in frustrations. Teacher Diamond was unique in teaching English. She opted not to speak the students' language but always spoke in English. As a naturalist teacher, she introduces new things that will allow the students to engage and discover their potential. She researched various teaching methods on YouTube or published articles online to grab insights and suggestions from experts on how to deliver her English lessons to international students.

There are pros and cons to using media and technology in language teaching. Amygardner (2022) expressed her sentiment in utilizing instructional media as a facilitating tool to let the students explore the varied world of language learning. Students today are considered "digital natives," who have access to the internet and use language media tools, personalizing the teaching and learning process. However, Filipino teachers must understand that media use has limitations depending on the intended language learning objectives. In social media, for instance, learners tend to deform words and make deviations. Learners may commit mistakes in terms of using slang or acronyms and shortening English words (Fadil, 2021).

Need for Teachers' Training and Qualification

Despite their passion for teaching, teachers were still bound by the profession's quality standards. With this, the participants voiced their concerns about the current status of several overseas Filipino teachers. J. Prospero De Vera III, Chairperson of the Philippine Commission on Higher Education, and Ms. Myca Magnolia M. Fischer, Chargé d'Affaires, a.i. of the Philippine Embassy in Cambodia, signed a Memorandum of Cooperation on the implementation of the "Developing Filipino Global Teachers Program" in a virtual ceremony on 23 October 2020. The program is intended to cater to the varied needs of Filipino teachers in Cambodia, particularly the following: in-service teachers who want to enhance their competencies and their impact in the classroom and beyond, to understand global issues; professionals who are not graduates of the Teacher Education Program and who intend to take the Philippine Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET); graduates of education programs but have not passed the Philippine LET; and accreditation as Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) teachers.

In his remarks, Chairperson De Vera noted the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent impact on Overseas Filipino Workers. He added, "It is therefore imperative that the government does not merely include OFWs in amelioration packages but must create interventions that will allow them to start anew and for those who choose to stay abroad, provide them opportunities to qualify for better employment." Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr. said in his message, "Being professionally competitive in education has taken a whole new meaning, translating to a rapid reset in skills and proficiency. Our Filipino teachers flourish in the Cambodian education system. They are much valued in their communities and loved by their students."

The signing ceremony was "witnessed" by the presidents of the three Centers of Excellence in Teacher Education Program that will carry out the pilot implementation of this program, namely, St Paul University Philippines in Tuguegarao, Cebu Normal University, and the Philippine Normal University. At the Embassy,

Ms. Fischer was joined by some Filipino teachers in Phnom Penh and members of the Teachers Learning Action Guild of Cambodia. CHED intends to expand this professional development program and offer it to Filipinos in other parts of the world.

Teacher Big, as aforementioned, has observed a lack of support from the DFA and has personally helped Filipinos get medical attention, given financial help, and provided refuge to fellow Filipinos stranded or sick in these countries. His experience with his very own sister, who had been in Thailand for seventeen years teaching in a prestigious school, and passed away this year, was the most challenging. He firmly believed that the Philippine government should impose policies and programs to help Filipinos abroad, especially with their medical needs and repatriations.

Teacher Tech had the fewest challenges among the Filipino teachers in these countries since it came later in 2013, when technology was high and fast. For one, he was a technology expert and thus used Google Translate with his communications. He believed that Filipino teachers should use technology to teach the English language to their local learners. He believed that technological tools would make teachers more adept at using them as their teaching strategy. Since Teacher Tech and the Researcher worked with the Ministry of Education in Laos and shared the same expertise and collaborative implementations of programs, both have a better view of the educational system of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. One critical piece of knowledge was the use of legal language. It is most important that Filipino teachers should know the culture and language of the country of placement to become effective and efficient. Thus, the Philippine Embassy should emphasize language and culture learning to the newly arrived Filipino teachers. There should be a Teacher Support program wherein Filipino teachers will be organized for this purpose.

Through an in-depth interview, the teachers, as reflected in Hayes' (as cited in Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018) findings, show they are proud to be English Language teachers. However, only 20% dedicate themselves to a vocation. It happened because of more work for teachers, intensified stress levels, lack of interest in teaching, and an increased number of alienated students at school. Some studies also compare English teaching performance between Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (non-NESTs). Students perceive that NESTs are more competent in teaching reading, speaking, and pronunciation, but do not have cultural knowledge.

Nevertheless, students prefer to be taught writing and grammar by non-NESTs who are sensitive to difficulties (Chun, 2014, as cited in Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). Chun's finding supports Walkinshaw & Thi Hoang Duong's (2012, as cited in Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018) result, which reveals that NEST is better at teaching English in an oral context. However, they cannot understand students' culture. It always creates misunderstandings between teachers and students (Walkinshaw & Thi Hoang Duong, 2012, cited in Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018).

The emerging problems displayed by some previous studies generate tensions with non-NESTs. Because of this, some researchers seek solutions to break the primary issue in teaching language (Hayati, 2010; Rahimi & Zhang, 2015; Serdiukov & Tarnopolsky, 1999; Steyn & Jaroong khongdach, 2016; Todd, Stinson, & Sivakumaran, 2016; Zhang 2013: all are cited in Yu, 2018). Applying videoconferencing, which involves NEST from various native English-speaking countries, can gain more intercultural awareness and ignite discourse strategies to let converse as is (Wang, 2006 as cited in Yu, 2018). As such, applying critical pedagogy to non-NEST can also enhance non-NESTs' awareness of their strengths as bilingual or multilingual speakers and how to properly utilize them in the classroom (Hayati, 2010, as cited in Yu, 2018). Restructuring and sheltering instruction can also be used by non-NEST to teach in a class where teachers use tools such as visuals, supplementary materials, cooperative learning, and hands-on activities to teach (Utami, P. T., 2019). By reviewing some results shown by previous studies, this study also wants to unveil the emerging challenges faced by non-NESTs in some countries like China, Japan, Thailand, Senegal, Mongolia, Cambodia, and Laos, which are non-native English-speaking countries, and how each country is trying to overcome those challenges.

Teacher Ur has the longest stay of work in these countries. She was well-adjusted and attended at least three other schools in Laos. She had been helping many Filipino teachers get teaching jobs and even with houses to stay in. Teacher Ur tried to work on her credentials so she will be vertically aligned with her degrees in college

and graduate school. She would like to write textbooks in the English language in support of the need for Filipino teachers. She also recommended a program wherein Professors from State Universities in the Philippines would have a collaborative program with her International School to deliver support to Filipino teachers and qualify them through the Teacher Certificate Program, review for their Licensure Examination for Teachers, and offer graduate studies in the Master's in Education program. Qualifying Filipino teachers would also eradicate the perennial problem of the "visa run". This was when the three-month tourist visa expired, and they had to exit to another neighboring country to avoid violating the law of the country they were working with.

3.4 Insights Gained

Teacher participants elaborately shared their sentiments about their lived experience teaching English as a foreign language to learners in Southeast Asian Regions. It was inevitable that Filipino educators would experience both positive and negative reflections on their experiences teaching the English language abroad.

Teachers' Competence in Language Teaching Towards Personal and Professional Development

The significant meaning of Filipino teachers' lived experiences revealed the essence of working abroad as a foundation of professional and personal development. The participants realized that prolonged patience, discipline in financial management, and practical communication skills were significant factors that helped them achieve personal and professional development. For fifteen years, Teacher Big never used an agency to help him process the documents needed for work, and one of his reasons was financial constraints. Processing fees that were given to agencies were a big deal to him. According to Teacher Big, Filipino teachers who are working and will be working abroad must practice financial management. Most Filipinos do not know how to manage their finances. Teacher Big emphasized that Filipino teachers need to know how to manage the salary they receive. Connection with politicians and government officials helped Teacher Tech to build good relationships and harmonious communication. Teaching must be a "burning passion" and not just a profession. Teaching English in Laos was a meaningful experience for Teacher Ur. She enjoyed seeing her students learn from her classes.

Teacher Diamond learned a lot from her teaching experiences in Indonesia and Kyrgyzstan. She learned that being patient was the driving force that led her to connect with the learners. Dealing with students' parents was a challenging part of the teaching experience. Parents were the home learning partners and the first-hand circle in the child's language acquisition and learning process. Teacher Carer learned to become more responsible for a child's learning. As a teacher, she believed she needed to be creative and resourceful. She believes that the Philippine Government must allow Non-Education Filipino Graduates to be trained and equipped to become effective English Language teachers abroad. Even though Teacher Strong was not a Licensed Professional Teacher, he was competent in teaching English. Being knowledgeable of the Thai culture and traditions, Teacher DH was able to deliver her lessons well. The challenges encountered by Teacher Diamond made her realize that proficiency in the English language was a skill that not every nationality could attain. Distant Learning Education was the proposed program to help Filipino teachers become qualified in the teaching profession.

Cultural differences were one of the significant problems in language teaching. The problems cited were caused by the language barriers rooted in cultural differences. In learning a language, it was inevitable to separate learning the society's culture. Thus, it was important to have background knowledge in Aural and Oral Comprehension. Further, improving one's reading skills helped develop language acquisition and learning (Wang, 2011).

Researcher's Personal Experiences in Teaching English in Southeast Asian Countries

From 2002 to 2004, the researcher, as United Nations International Consultant to the Ministry of Education for the Politburo Government of Laos PDR, was instrumental in the commencement of the country's international relationship with neighboring states. English is not a spoken language as it is considered the "language of the enemy"; simultaneously, the Lao people remain desperately poor. The younger generation, below forty, cannot understand or speak English. The generation of forty-year-olds and above speaks French. Of only about three million people, two million are living below the international poverty line, and hunger is a widespread problem. From 2010 until 2018, the researcher was sent back to the Lao People's Democratic Republic through the Asian Development Bank Missions as an International Consultant with the Department of Research Institute for

Educational Sciences in Materials and Curriculum Development of the Ministry of Education. This period had an influx of Filipino English language teachers who were not degree holders of the Teacher Education Program. Most of them came as tourists to Thailand and happened to know about the opportunity of teaching. At the same time, some are relatives of Filipinos working with the Philippine Embassy and other companies in Southeast Asia.

The researcher's work with the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports allowed her to meet Filipino teachers and found that most were non-licensed professional teachers. Since their visa is only for tourists, they must do the "Visa Run" every thirty days. They cross the border in Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, China, or Cambodia for exit and entry. The opportunity to earn at least two thousand US dollars monthly as an English language teacher is enough for them to adventure in these third-world countries. These countries' growing need for English language teachers for their government officials and children disregards non-licensed professional Filipino teachers. On the other hand, this kind of condition is detrimental to Filipino teachers. Eventually, more qualified foreign teachers will embark on this endeavor, and International Schools will no longer hire Filipino teachers. They will lose their teaching job opportunities.

4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the participants pointed out that language acquisition is crucial in learning English as a foreign language. With this perspective, the participants emphasized that fluency in the host country's language and familiarity with its culture greatly improved classroom engagement and instructional strategies. Being fluent in the language and having knowledge of the culture improved educators' pedagogies and engaged students with enriched learning experiences. Filipino teachers expressed disappointment due to the "no work, no pay" policy; thus, having no salaries during the summer break is a crucial issue. However, the participants compensated for this constraint through tutorials with students during the break and having good relationships with the students' parents. They believed that this approach was one way of getting recommendations for them to encourage more students to attend their tutorial classes during the summer season.

The study also revealed that there was limited access to educational materials. The teaching resources in school taught the participants how to find alternative ways to reinforce teaching mechanisms. The participants observed that the textbooks' content differs from the curriculum being followed in school. As a result, Filipino teachers find it difficult to revise and improvise classroom discussions. The vocabulary content on the learning materials is unrealistic for the students' native environment. For instance, the context and settings printed in the learning materials do not match the set objectives, making it difficult for the students to comprehend the texts. The textbooks used were either Cambridge or Singapore, and the teachers had to contextualize the lessons according to the learners' religion and culture to properly use legal language in delivering the lessons.

A critical issue raised was the status of 'unqualified' Filipino teachers—those without formal education degrees—who faced challenges in securing stable employment and obtaining legal work permits. Many relied on visa runs or informal arrangements to continue working abroad. Thus, these unqualified Filipino teachers had difficulties identifying techniques to support the teaching of the English language to second-language learners. The local students have behavioral problems in the classroom. However, the participants emphasized that being patient and having spiritual strength had become their solutions in solving the attitude problems of students. In addition, creative and constructive criticism and introducing games or sports have become more effective and therapeutic to the students, transforming them into active and respectful learners.

The Filipino teachers revealed that friends and colleagues had influenced them to work in Thailand, Laos PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The participants mentioned that their former workmates brought other Filipino Teachers to Thailand and Laos for a holiday. However, in the end, they landed as incidental English language teachers. To legalize their work as educators, they had to do the "visa run" every time their visas expired, since most Filipino teachers were not Licensed Professional Teachers or had teaching experience. The study recommends policy interventions to address this, such as collaboration between the Philippine government and host countries to provide legal employment pathways, professional development programs, and accessible certification for non-education graduates. The Philippine Embassy should play a proactive role in assisting teachers, including offering insurance and legal support.

The Researcher recommended that Filipino teachers, whether by chance or by choice, who teach in Southeast Asia, should privately secure an insurance policy for security and health purposes. On the concern of Teacher Big with the Philippine Embassy, it was recommended that the embassy also process insurance for Filipino teachers upon arrival and registration in the country. With the participants' concern about the "unqualified" Filipino teachers, the researcher highly recommended collaborating with the Graduate School of the College of Education, Carlos Hilado Memorial State University, with an International school in Laos PDR, in providing the Teacher Certificate Program and the Master's in Education Program.

Filipino teachers in Southeast Asia need professional development training in language and culture to cope with their responsibilities and suitably apply all relevant pedagogical and cultural knowledge in the government schools they teach. Additionally, on-site language and cultural training programs lasting at least one and a half months are recommended to help Filipino teachers transition smoothly into foreign educational systems. This study concurred with previous studies and offers implications for stakeholders. For one, the study supports Ulla's (2009) work, which stated that the conditions and challenges of being a Filipino teacher of the English language included both positive and negative experiences. The Research Institute for Educational Sciences (RIES) in Laos PDR could explore policies to support Filipino teachers financially during school breaks by providing part-time teaching opportunities, particularly in government offices. This initiative would address financial instability and enhance Filipino teachers' proficiency in the local language, fostering deeper cultural integration. In addition, this will also become an avenue for Filipino teachers to develop their communication skills in the local native language. While this study focused on Filipino Non-Education graduate teachers in Thailand, Laos PDR, Singapore, and Malaysia, future research could extend to other expatriate teacher groups, particularly licensed Filipino teachers, to provide a broader perspective on the challenges and opportunities in teaching English abroad.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The primary author, Sharon Rose Lin T. Masa, conceptualized and conducted this research study. She was responsible for the research design, data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing. As the research adviser, Dr. Jay Estrellas provided critical guidance throughout the study, ensuring the rigor and academic integrity of the research. His expertise in qualitative research and education played a vital role in refining the study's framework, validating the findings, and enhancing the overall quality of the manuscript. Their collaborative effort ensured a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of Filipino Non-Education graduate teachers in Southeast Asia.

6.0 Funding

The financial aspect of conducting the study was personally funded by me, the researcher.

7.0 Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest between the authors in this manuscript.

8.0 Acknowledgement

The researcher sincerely thanks Dr. Jay Estrella, research adviser, for his invaluable guidance and unwavering support throughout this study. Special appreciation is given to Dr. Ramon Lachica, external adviser, for his expertise in qualitative phenomenological research. The contributions of the panel members—Dr. Leizl May C. Tortogo, Dr. Vanessa Judith, Dr. Janet P. Espinosa, and Dr. Elvie S. Samson are deeply acknowledged for their expert insights that strengthened this research. The validation of interview questions was made possible through the expertise of Dr. Rizal Buendia, Dr. Noreen Grace Leduna, and Dr. Cleo Grace T. Hinaut, whose time and effort are greatly appreciated. A special note of gratitude is also extended to Dr. Ma. Cecilia Alimen, who meticulously proofread and edited this manuscript. The researcher is eternally grateful to her son, Dr. Jorge Edward T. Masa, for his encouragement and constant motivation, and to her daughters, Francine Audrey T. Masa and Michelle Hermine M. Brown, whose unwavering love and belief in her capabilities have been a source of strength throughout this journey. Finally, I would like to thank Carlos Hilado Memorial State University (CHMSU) for the institutional support that helped complete this research.

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