

# Opportunities and struggles beyond borders: A phenomenological inquiry into Filipino teachers' overseas experiences

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## Index Terms:

filipino teachers abroad, teacher migration, descriptive phenomenology, lived experiences, coping mechanisms.

**Abstract.** Education remains a vital driver of national development; however, the teaching profession in the Philippines continues to face persistent challenges, including low salaries, heavy workloads, and limited opportunities for career advancement. These conditions have contributed to increasing teacher migration as Filipino educators seek better compensation, improved working conditions, and broader professional growth opportunities abroad. While overseas teaching offers promising prospects, it also exposes teachers to significant personal and professional challenges, including cultural adjustment, language barriers, and emotional strain resulting from separation from family. This study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Filipino teachers teaching abroad, focusing on their motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with eight purposively selected Filipino teachers currently teaching in Thailand and the United States. Using Colaizzi's method of analysis, significant statements were extracted and clustered into themes. The results revealed both positive and negative dimensions of the overseas teaching experience. Positive experiences included holistic personal development, financial stability, enhanced pedagogical competence, and professional transformation. However, participants also reported challenges such as curriculum differences, communication barriers, emotional strain, and cultural adjustment difficulties. Thematic analysis further revealed that teachers relied on coping mechanisms such as family and colleague support, faith and optimism, and active cultural and language adaptation, illustrating resilience and adaptive capacity amid complex transnational teaching realities.

## Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of national development, fostering human capital formation and socio-economic progress. In the Philippines, however, the teaching profession continues to be confronted with persistent structural challenges, including low compensation, excessive workload demands, and limited opportunities for career advancement. These conditions have significantly undermined teachers' job satisfaction and long-term retention within the local education system. As a result, a growing number of Filipino educators are increasingly drawn to overseas employment, motivated by the promise of higher salaries, improved working environments, and enhanced professional growth opportunities (Tantay et al., 2024; Diokno et al., 2020). This trend reflects broader systemic issues within the domestic education sector while simultaneously highlighting the global demand for qualified teachers.

Recent data indicate that approximately 1,500 Filipino teachers migrate annually to pursue teaching careers abroad, with numbers steadily increasing over time (Human Rights Online Philippine, 2024). This outward mobility is largely driven by a combination of economic and professional push factors, including inadequate pay, heavy administrative workloads, and limited institutional support (Real & Flordeliz, 2024; Etor, 2025). At the same time, global labor market dynamics—particularly teacher shortages in countries such as the United States and parts of Asia—create strong pull factors that facilitate international teacher migration (Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Jung & Choe, 2024). While this migration provides

economic benefits through remittances and individual career advancement, it also contributes to the ongoing “brain drain” phenomenon, which poses challenges to the sustainability and quality of education in the Philippines (Sumalinog, 2020; Frianeza et al., 2024).

Beyond economic and professional considerations, the migration of Filipino teachers encompasses profound personal and socio-cultural dimensions. Existing literature reveals that while teaching abroad offers opportunities for financial stability, professional development, and intercultural exposure, it also presents significant challenges. These include cultural adjustment difficulties, language barriers, workplace discrimination, and emotional strain associated with separation from family (Ulla, 2018; Kharod, 2022; Cabiladas & Soontornwipast, 2020). Moreover, migrant teachers often experience a duality of outcomes—simultaneously achieving personal growth and encountering psychological stress, such as homesickness and identity challenges (Cahilog et al., 2023; Dempsey, 2024). Despite these adversities, Filipino teachers demonstrate resilience through adaptive coping mechanisms, including social support networks, cultural integration strategies, and self-regulation practices (Getie, 2020; De Jesus & Adducul, 2024).

Although a growing body of research has examined teacher migration trends and associated challenges, there remains a limited number of studies that deeply explore the lived experiences of Filipino teachers in international contexts using qualitative approaches. Most existing studies focus on macro-level trends or specific challenges, often overlooking the nuanced interplay between motivation, adaptation, and personal transformation. Addressing this gap requires an approach that captures the essence of individual experiences within their socio-cultural realities. Thus, this study adopts a descriptive phenomenological framework to provide a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms of Filipino teachers abroad. By foregrounding their lived experiences, the study aims to contribute to policy development, inform institutional support systems, and enrich the discourse on global teacher mobility and resilience (Uytico & Abadiano, 2020).

## Methodology

This section presents the research design, research environment, participants, research instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis, and ethical considerations of the study.

### *Research Design*

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of Filipino teachers teaching abroad. This approach was appropriate for capturing how participants interpret their professional and personal experiences within foreign educational and cultural contexts.

Eight (8) purposively selected Filipino teachers participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using a validated interview guide aligned with the study objectives and theoretical framework. Due to geographical constraints, interviews were conducted online, allowing flexibility while ensuring depth of responses.

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step phenomenological method, supported by Taguette qualitative analysis software for systematic coding and theme development. This process enabled the identification of significant statements, formulation of meanings, and clustering of emergent themes that reflect the participants’ lived experiences.

### *Research Environment*

The study was conducted from Surigao del Norte State University (SNSU), Surigao City, Philippines, which served as the base for data collection and analysis.

All interviews were conducted online to accommodate participants based in the United States and Thailand. Flexible scheduling and secure platforms ensured confidentiality and convenience. The use of a familiar institutional setting, supported by stable internet and dedicated research spaces, facilitated efficient data collection and helped establish rapport, enabling participants to share detailed and authentic narratives.

### *Informants*

The study involved eight (8) Filipino teachers, with four (4) teaching in the United States and four (4) in Thailand, all from Surigao City, Surigao del Norte. Informants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) currently teaching abroad for at least one year, (b) holding an active teaching contract, and (c) willingness to participate.

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, where initial informants referred other eligible participants. This approach ensured access to relevant individuals and facilitated the collection of rich and meaningful data.

#### *Research Instrument*

Data were collected using a validated semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions on participants' experiences, motivations, challenges, and coping strategies.

The guiding questions included:

- (1) overall teaching experience abroad,
- (2) motivations for working overseas,
- (3) challenges encountered, and
- (4) coping mechanisms.

#### *Ethics and Data Gathering Procedure*

The study adhered to standard ethical protocols, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants were assigned codes (R1–R8), and all data were securely stored. Informants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time or decline any question without consequence. The study posed no significant risks and was conducted without external funding.

Prior to data collection, permission was secured, and participants were recruited through referrals. A Grand Tour Question guided the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted individually via secure online platforms at participants' convenience. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the study employed member checking and audit trails, guided by Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological framework. Figure 1 illustrates the overall research process from data collection to thematic analysis and findings.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method, supported by Taguette software for systematic coding and organization.

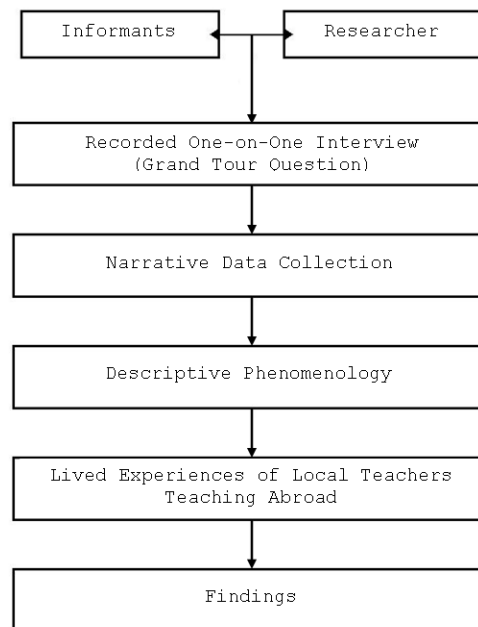


Figure 1. Research Process Flow of the Descriptive Phenomenological Study on Filipino Teachers Teaching Abroad

Following verbatim transcription, transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to achieve data familiarization while bracketing researcher biases. Significant statements were identified and meanings were formulated, then organized into categories, clusters, and overarching themes. These were synthesized into an exhaustive description and fundamental structure of the phenomenon.

To ensure rigor, the analysis underwent expert review and member checking, allowing participants to validate the findings. Direct quotations were used to support emergent themes and preserve authenticity.

All procedures were conducted in alignment with the study's theoretical framework and qualitative research standards.

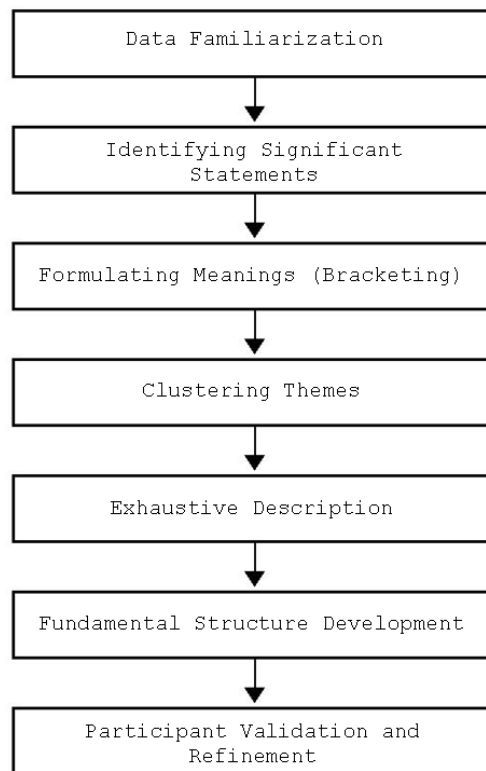


Figure 2. Process of Descriptive Phenomenological Data Analysis Based on Colaizzi (1978)

## Results and Discussion

This SECTION presents the key findings and discussions of the study. The results of the analysis offered insights into the teachers lived experiences teaching abroad, synthesized through a thematic map of the informants' experiences.

To ensure methodological rigor and depth of interpretation, the qualitative data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, Colaizzi's approach supported by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis using Taguette was employed to systematically capture the essence of informants' experiences through a structured process.

The significant statements were coded and tagged, allowing patterns to emerge across informants' narratives. These codes were then clustered into higher-order meanings, which formed the basis for the emergent themes categorized into four major domains: experiences, motivation, challenges, and coping mechanisms that reflects a distinct yet interconnected dimension of how Filipino teachers navigate professional and personal realities while adapting to new cultural and educational contexts abroad.

Figure 3 presents the exhaustive description of the lived experiences of Filipino teachers teaching abroad, integrating all emergent themes into a coherent narrative that captures the totality of the phenomenon. This figure illustrates how individual experiences collectively shape the shared meaning of teaching abroad.

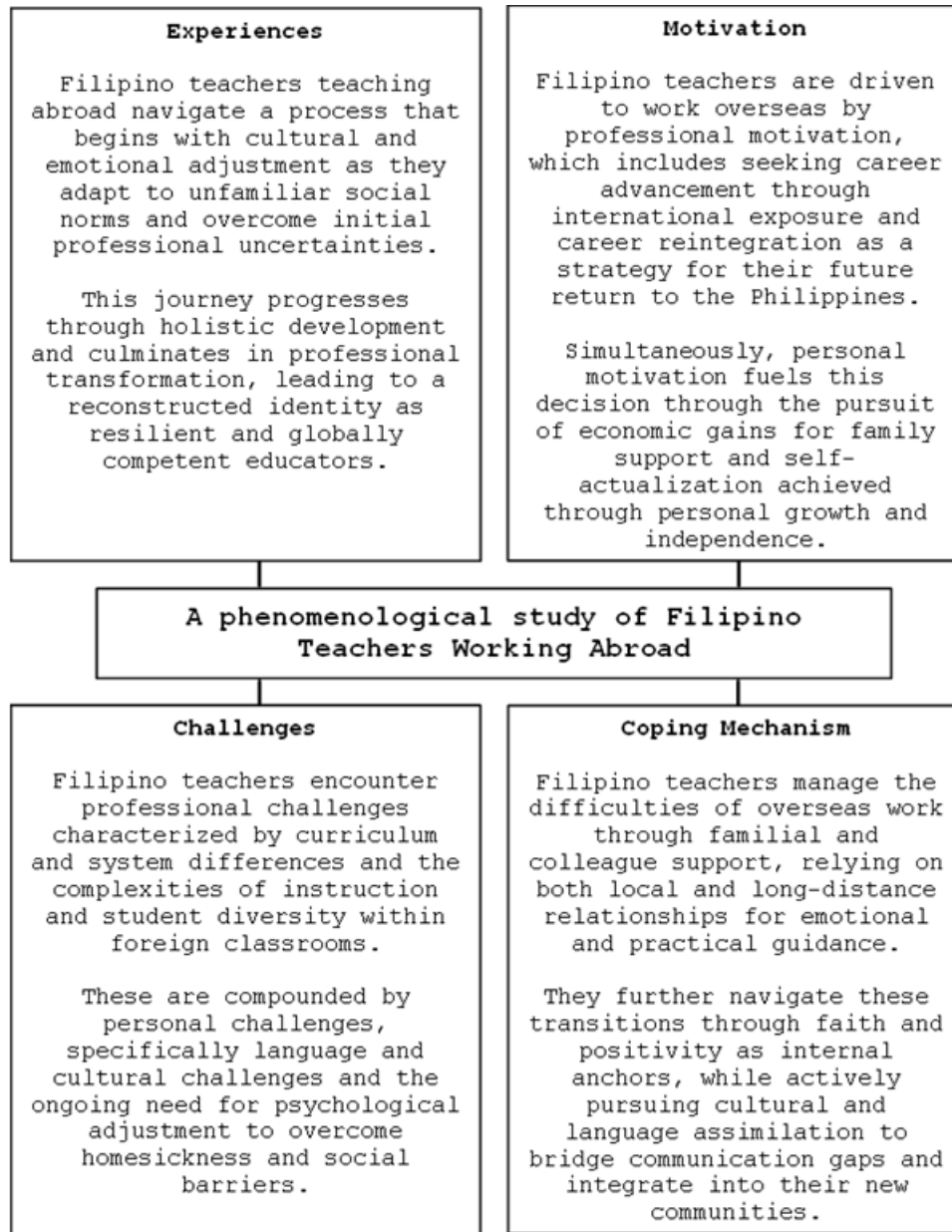


Figure 3. Thematic map of the Lived Experiences of Local Filipino Teachers' Teaching Abroad with Exhaustive Description of the Emergent themes categorizes into experiences, motivation, challenges and coping mechanism

Meanwhile, Figure 4 introduces the thematic map, visually representing the relationships among the major categories such as experiences denote with (+) as positive and (-) as negative, motivation, challenges, and coping mechanisms—and their corresponding cluster themes.

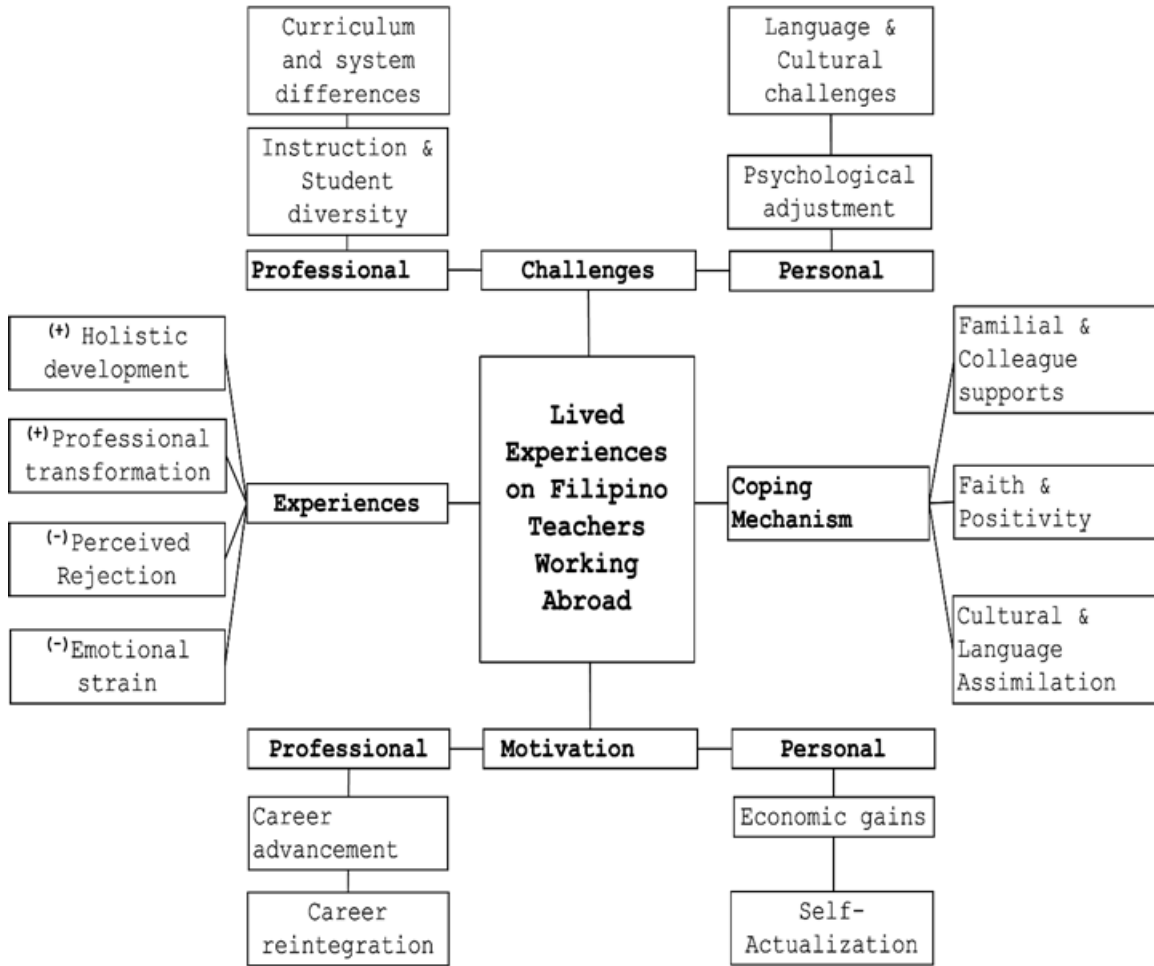


Figure 4. Thematic map of the Lived Experiences of Local Filipino Teachers' Teaching Abroad

Table 1 presents the emergent themes describing the positive experiences of Filipino teachers working abroad, highlighting holistic development, and professional transformation. Filipino teaching abroad facilitates holistic development, as positive personal experiences encompassing personal, financial, social, and spiritual growth. Informants reported increased resilience and well-being, supported by improved financial stability and expanded social networks. This multidimensional growth is evident in the statement,

“I’ve grown in many aspects—personally, professionally, financially, socially, and spiritually” (R1).

Consistent with global literature, overseas professional experiences often foster life-wide development by enhancing adaptability and self-awareness (OECD, 2020).

Furthermore, professional transformation emerged as a positive professional experience defining outcome of overseas teaching. Exposure to international education systems reshaped teachers’ instructional practices, competence, and professional identity, as expressed by one participant:

“My experience abroad didn’t just add to what I already knew—it changed me and my teaching practices” (R8).

This transformation reflects findings that international teaching environments promote reflective practice and professional redefinition (Nguyen & Pham, 2023).

Table 2 shows the negative (-) themes for the experiences of Filipino teachers working abroad. The findings indicate a sense of rejection as negative professional experiences was perceived inferred from informants' descriptions of being ignored, misunderstood, emotionally strained, and disconnected due to communication barriers.

EMERGENT THEME	CLUSTERED THEME
1. Holistic Development	1.1 Personal growth & Financial stability 1.2 Social and spiritual growth
2. Professional Transformation	2.1 Pedagogical growth & Increased competence 2.2 Role redefinition

*Table 2. Emergent themes of the negative (-) experiences of Filipino teachers working abroad.*

EMERGENT THEME	CLUSTERED THEME
1. Perceived Rejection	1.1 Student behavior 1.2 Communication difficulty
2. Emotional adjustment	2.1 Strategic migration; 2.2 DepEd pathway

*Table 1. Emergent themes of the positive experiences of Filipino teachers working abroad.*

This is consistent with phenomenological thematic interpretation with emotional adjustment as negative personal experiences as feeling of anxiety and identity shifts as they transition into unfamiliar educational and social environments. This theme was evident in the narratives of Respondents 2, 3, 7, and 8 as they stated:

“Feeling overwhelmed and questioning their capability due to difficulty understanding instructions and conversations caused by accent and language differences, leading to emotional strain and self-doubt”. (R2)

“Embarrassment and discomfort when unable to communicate effectively with students because of language barriers, which initially affected classroom interaction and authority” (R3).

“Adjusting to fast speech, unfamiliar words, and different ways of addressing students, resulting in challenges in engagement and connection with learners” (R7).

“When students struggled to understand English, requiring double effort in communication and leading to emotional exhaustion and feelings of isolation” (R8).

This period of emotional adjustment is characterized by emotional vulnerability and the need to realign professional practices with host-country norms, as reflected by one participant who stated,

“In the beginning, the work was demanding and required a lot of adjustment—professionally, emotionally, and culturally” (R1).

Such experiences align with recent studies emphasizing that migrant teachers often undergo intense cultural and emotional negotiations during early overseas employment (Benseman & Sutton, 2021).

EMERGENT THEME	CLUSTERED THEME
1. Career Advancement	1.1 Skill development 1.2 Global exposure 1.3 Merit-based employment
2. Career Reintegration	2.1 Strategic migration; 2.2 DepEd pathway

*Table 3. Emergent themes of the professional motivation of Filipino teachers working abroad.*

Table 3 illustrates that Filipino teachers' professional motivation to work abroad is anchored in career advancement and career reintegration. Informants expressed a strong desire for skill development, global exposure, and merit-based employment, reflecting dissatisfaction with perceived limitations in the local education system. One participant emphasized this motivation by stating,

"I wanted to grow professionally—to learn new systems and become a more effective educator" (R1).

This finding aligns with research indicating that educators from developing countries seek international opportunities to enhance professional competence and career mobility (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021).

In addition, teaching abroad was viewed as a strategic pathway for future reintegration into the Philippine education system, particularly within public schools. This forward-looking motivation is evident in the statement,

"I took this opportunity to easily have an item in DepEd" (R8).

Recent studies suggest that overseas professional experience serves as valuable human capital that strengthens employability and career security upon return (UNESCO, 2023).

EMERGENT THEME	CLUSTERED THEME
1. Economic Gains	1.1 Family support 1.2 Financial security
2. Self-Actualization	2.1 Personal fulfillment; 2.2 Life goals & New opportunities

*Table 4. Emergent themes of the personal motivation of Filipino teachers working abroad.*

Table 4 reveals that economic gains and self-actualization are central personal motivations for Filipino teachers working abroad. Financial improvement enables teachers to support their families and secure long-term stability, as reflected in the statement, "The higher salary allows me to support my family and save for the future" (R5). This finding supports existing literature highlighting that financial responsibility toward family remains a dominant driver of overseas employment among Filipino professionals (Asis & Battistella, 2020).

Aside from economic reasons, teachers were motivated by self-actualization, seeking personal fulfillment, independence, and new life opportunities. One participant described this motivation by stating,

"Teaching in Thailand has been one of the best decisions I've made in my career and life" (R3).

This reflects recent research suggesting that international work experiences contribute to identity development and personal growth beyond material benefits (Ortiga, 2022).

EMERGENT THEME	CLUSTERED THEME
1. Curriculum and System Differences	1.1 Policy adjustment; 1.2 Administrative demands 1.3 Assessment systems
2. Instruction & Student Diversity	2.1 Classroom management 2.2 Special education 2.3 Learner diversity

*Table 5. Emergent themes of the professional challenges of Filipino teachers working abroad.*

Table 5 highlights the professional challenges encountered by Filipino teachers abroad, particularly curriculum and system differences and instruction and student diversity. Teachers reported difficulty adapting to unfamiliar curricula, policies, and documentation requirements, which increased workload and stress.

This challenge is illustrated by the statement,

"Everything had to be documented in specific ways, and the system was very different" (R3).

Such findings are consistent with studies noting that institutional differences often pose significant adjustment challenges for migrant educators (Goh & Canrinus, 2020). Additionally, instructional challenges were intensified by diverse learner needs and classroom behaviors, including special education contexts. One participant shared,

"Balancing instruction and behavior management has truly tested my patience" (R7).

This supports literature emphasizing that teaching in culturally diverse classrooms demands heightened emotional labor and adaptive pedagogy (Kelchtermans, 2022).

EMERGENT THEME	CLUSTERED THEME
1. Language & Cultural Challenges	1.1 Cultural differences 1.2 Communication barriers;
2. Psychological Adjustment	2.2 Self-doubt & Homesickness 2.3 Emotional stress;

Table 6. Emergent themes of the personal challenges of Filipino teachers working abroad.

Table 6 presents the personal challenges faced by Filipino teachers abroad, focusing on language and cultural challenges and psychological adjustment.

Communication barriers and unfamiliar cultural norms hinder effective interaction and instruction, as noted in the statement,

“The language barrier was real, and adapting to the culture took time” (R3).

These findings align with research highlighting language proficiency as a critical factor in migrant teachers’ adjustment and classroom effectiveness (Li & Chen, 2021). Psychological challenges, including emotional stress, homesickness, and self-doubt, were also evident. One participant expressed,

“At first, I felt overwhelmed and questioned myself” (R2).

This emotional adjustment reflects the psychological demands of migration, particularly during early adjustment stages (Yeo & Alipio, 2023).

EMERGENT THEME	CLUSTERED THEME
1. Familial & Colleague Support	1.1 Social support 1.2 Professional guidance
2. Faith & Positivity	2.2 Spiritual coping 2.3 Optimism
3. Cultural & Language Assimilation	3.1 Language learning; 3.2 Cultural participation

Table 7. Emergent themes of the coping mechanism of Filipino teachers working abroad.

Table 7 illustrates the coping mechanisms employed by Filipino teachers to manage challenges abroad, including familial and colleague support, faith and positivity, and cultural and language assimilation. Support from family members, colleagues, and administrators played a crucial role in fostering resilience, as highlighted by the statement.

“My family, co-teachers, and administrators helped me endure and enjoy this journey” (R1).

Social support has been widely recognized as a protective factor in migrant workers’ adjustment and well-being (Li & Chen, 2021).

Faith and optimism emerged as significant internal coping resources, providing emotional grounding and hope amid difficulties. This is reflected in the statement,

“I trust in God and have faith that things will get better” (R4).

Studies have shown that spirituality remains a vital coping mechanism among Filipino overseas workers (Yeo & Alipio, 2023). Lastly, cultural and language assimilation enabled teachers to integrate more effectively into their host communities. Active engagement in language learning and cultural participation improved communication and teaching effectiveness, as expressed by one participant:

“I started learning the language and participating in cultural activities” (R3).

This supports findings that cultural immersion enhances professional confidence and classroom interaction (Nguyen & Pham, 2023).

Category	Emergent Theme	Clustered Themes
Experiences (Positive experience)	(Personal experience)	self-doubt; emotional overwhelm
	Adjustment Holistic Development (Professional experience)	personal growth; financial stability; spiritual growth independence; family responsibility pedagogical growth; professional identity work-life balance; teaching effectiveness
Experiences (Negative experience)	Professional Transformation (Professional experience)	Student behavior; discipline  Communication difficulty
	Perceived rejection (Personal experience)	Anxiety Identity shift
Motivation (Professional)	Emotional adjustment Career Advancement	Skill development; global exposure merit-based hiring; fair system strategic migration; DepED Pathway
Motivation (Personal)	Career Reintegration Economic Gains	family support; financial security remittances; sibling support personal fulfillment; life goals
Challenges (Professional)	Self-Actualization Curriculum & System Differences	policy adjustment; documentation assessment systems: policy shift Administrative demands classroom management; special education.
	Instruction & Student Diversity	learner diversity cultural difference
Challenges (Personal)	Language & Cultural Challenges	communication barriers emotional stress; self-doubt & Homesickness
	Psychological Adjustment Familial & Colleague Support	social support; mentorship; professional guidance Social network workplace guidance
Coping Mechanism	Faith & Positivity Cultural & Language Assimilation	spiritual coping; optimism language learning; cultural participation/immersion

*Table 8. Summary of Clustered and Emergent Themes*

Table 8 presents the summary of clustered and emergent themes that describe the informants lived experiences, motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms. The findings reveal that participants' journeys involve a complex interplay of personal growth, professional transformation, emotional adjustment, and resilience.

Collectively, the themes presented in Table 3 illustrate that participants' experiences are characterized by both challenges and opportunities for growth. While adjustment difficulties and systemic differences posed obstacles, the participants' motivations, support systems, and coping strategies enabled them to achieve personal development and professional transformation.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino teachers working abroad, focusing on their motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms using a descriptive phenomenological approach. Data from eight Filipino teachers in Thailand and the United States revealed that overseas teaching offers both opportunities and challenges. Participants reported significant personal and professional growth, including improved financial stability, resilience, and pedagogical competence. However, they also experienced difficulties such as cultural adjustment, language barriers, emotional strain, and professional adaptation to new educational systems. Motivations for migration were primarily driven by economic needs, career advancement, and personal fulfillment.

Despite these challenges, Filipino teachers demonstrated strong adaptive capacity through various coping mechanisms, including support from family and colleagues, faith and optimism, and active engagement in cultural and language learning. The findings suggest that their experiences are characterized by a continuous process of adjustment and transformation, where challenges and coping strategies interact to shape both personal development and professional identity. Teaching abroad ultimately enabled them to become more globally competent while maintaining strong cultural and familial ties.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the Philippine government strengthen teacher retention policies, improve compensation, and enhance career development opportunities. Host countries should provide structured support systems, including cultural orientation and mentoring programs for migrant teachers. Filipino teachers intending to work abroad are encouraged to proactively develop cultural and linguistic competence and establish support networks. Future studies may expand the scope by including larger and more diverse samples to further understand the dynamics of teacher migration.

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## Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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## Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.