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Narrative Inquiry of a Filipino ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) in Japan

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Abstract
Even with their qualifications, Filipino ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers) face some unique and intense challenges tied to race, linguistic legitimacy, and social acceptance within Japanese schools and society at large. To substantiate that claim, this study, using a qualitative design and a narrative inquiry method, explored the life and work in Japan of one Filipino ALT based in Osaka under a private dispatched company in partnership with a recruitment agency in the Philippines. It investigated how the participant navigated cultural transitions, role ambiguity, identity formation, and professional challenges in a foreign educational system. The findings, through the five core themes, revealed that while the participant experienced cultural marginalization and role ambiguity, she also demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and pedagogical creativity, contributing meaningfully to the school community. To effectively integrate and empower non-native teachers, it emphasizes the significance of inclusive policies that acknowledge the many backgrounds of ALTs and advocate for structural improvements. It has implications for international teaching programs, school administrators, and educational policymakers who promote equitable and culturally sensitive learning environments in Japan.

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1. Introduction

As the world becomes more globalized, work-related migration is a hallmark of 21st-century life. People, especially from developing countries, leave their homes searching for greener pastures. They bring not only their desires for a better and quality life but also their culture, including language. Many of the migrant workers in developed countries, including Japan, are involved in English language teaching.

In Asia, the movement of educators is striking. The region has seen large-scale intra-regional migration, with skilled professionals from less-developed nations moving to more affluent neighbors like South Korea, Japan, and Singapore [1]. English instructors are especially notable for their mobility. They traverse not only linguistic but also cultural and institutional divides as they take up residence in their host countries. The overall dynamic of migration in Asia makes for a good case study in postcolonial labor practices; the experiences of these mobile professionals serve as a window into the human side of migration.

In Japan, the push for English language education has led to the formation of programs, like the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program, that recruit native and non-native English speakers to fill positions as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs). Although the focus has typically been on sending native English-speaking countries, an increasing number of ALTs now come from countries such as the Philippines, where English is not only an official language but also a medium of instruction. Even with their qualifications, Filipino ALTs face some unique and intense challenges tied to race, linguistic legitimacy, and, quite simply, social acceptance within Japanese schools and society at large [2].

Focusing on Osaka, a prefecture recognized for its industrial economy and burgeoning multicultural demographic, the Filipino ALTs provide a view not only into the changing face of Japan's workforce but also into the way schools in Osaka are reacting to the calls of the multicultural society.

Osaka has one of the largest concentrations of Filipinos in Japan, making it relevant to explore this prefecture as a place where cultural identity, pedagogy, and migration intersect in the lives of Filipino educators and the communities they serve. Yet, how they see themselves and are seen in the local school environment is still underexplored.

Some studies explored the experiences of Filipino ALTs in Japan. For instance, Escarda [3] utilized a phenomenological method to investigate the experiences of Filipino ALTs in Elementary schools in Ibaraki; Marasigan [4] explored the experiences of Filipino ALTs in junior high schools in various parts of Japan using a descriptive qualitative method; Ratunil *et al*. [2] used a case study method to examine the classroom strategies and challenges of a Filipino ALT in Aichi; and San Jose and Refareal [5] explored the experiences of a Filipino ALT in Nagoya City using autoethnography. To date, there is a dearth of qualitative story-driven research centering around the voice and perspective of the Filipino ALT in Osaka prefecture using the narrative inquiry method. Thus, this study aims to provide an in-depth narrative inquiry into the lived experiences of a Filipino ALT in Osaka prefecture to fill that gap.

This narrative inquiry aims to understand the personal and professional journeys of Filipino ALTs in Osaka Prefecture, Japan. Through storytelling, this research highlights how transnational migration, race, and education intersect in the lives of a foreign teacher. The potential significance of this study hinges upon its contribution to the understudied demographic in Japan's English education landscape, the labor that immigrant teachers undertake, and the international integration of teachers who do not look like their students or speak the language of their students. It also holds some significance for policymakers, educational institutions that employ foreign teachers, academicians, and researchers.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design and narrative inquiry as the methodological framework. Narrative inquiry [6] is a method of understanding experience through storytelling. It pays close attention to the stories that people tell, as well as to the kinds of stories that people live. It is especially well suited for studies attempting to get at the personal and professional identities that people inhabit and the transitions and the kinds of meaning-making that people do as they move through time. All of that is quite relevant to the lived experience of the Filipino Assistant Language Teacher in Japan. A rich and contextualized, temporally rooted, account of her journey very likely threw a lot of light on the sorts of personal and professional narratives that the lived experience of the participants in this study told.

2.2 Participant

This research involved one female participant, who satisfied the following criteria using purposive sampling: Filipino national, currently living and teaching in Osaka, holds an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) position in Osaka, has at least three years in the ALT position, and a willingness to participate in the study by sharing in depth her personal and professsional journey in Japan. The participant's experience is a unique yet representative example that sheds light on more general trends in identity negotiation and cross-cultural interaction.

2.3 Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was the semi-structured in-depth interview guide. This was a way to have a conversation with the participant that focused on her personal stories related to migration, teaching, and cultural adaptation. The guide was designed with open-ended questions and used probes in a way that allowed those particular personal narratives to emerge. In addition, the researcher kept field notes and a reflective journal. These were used (and continued to be used) in a way that documented the non-verbal, contextual, and analytical components of the research process.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

Depending on the participant's availability and preference, a series of in-depth, one-on-one interviews were done either in-person or over secure video conferencing systems in order to gather data. Over the course of four weeks, three interviews were done, each lasting between sixty to ninety minutes. With the participants' permission, audio recordings of the interviews were made, and the verbatim transcriptions were then made. To guarantee the validity of the data, the researchers kept in constant contact with the participant for explanation and member-checking purposes.

2.5 Data Analysis

The research adopted Riessman's Thematic Narrative Analysis Framework [7] to dissect the assembled stories. This framework is concerned with identifying themes that reside within the stories' content while holding the narrative's chronology and structure intact. Rather than reducing the data to codes or categories, Riessman's approach is about emphasizing the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participant and retaining the narrative's overall integrity. The analysis unfolded in four stages: reading and rereading the transcripts to become immersed in the narrative; identifying thematic threads that emerged across the narrative accounts; interpreting themes in relation to the cultural, institutional, and historical context of the participant's experiences; and making a coherent narrative representation that weaves together personal, cultural, and structural elements. This framework was chosen for its appropriate fit with the complexity of lived experience and socio-cultural dimensions embedded in the stories told by the migrant teacher.

2.6 Data Trustworthiness

The study complied with the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria established by Lincoln and Guba [8] to guarantee trustworthiness. Triangulation using field notes and reflective journals, extended participation, and member checking all improved credibility. Thick, detailed explanations of the background of the participants and the situation were provided to facilitate transferability, allowing readers to assess its suitability for other contexts. By keeping a thorough audit trail of the study process, including decision logs and analytical memos, dependability was addressed. Through reflexive journaling, in which the researcher recorded biases, presumptions, and emotional reactions during the investigation, confirmability was guaranteed.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

The researchers conducted the study with strict compliance to ethical practices. An informed consent form outlining the study's goals, methods, risks, benefits, and voluntary nature was given to the participant. To maintain anonymity, pseudonym was employed, and all information was safely

kept with limited access. The participant was guaranteed the freedom to leave at any time without facing any repercussions. Given the intimate and possibly delicate nature of the stories recounted, emotional sensitivity was upheld at all times.

3. Result

The narrative shared by the participant, referred to as Joy, revealed a multifaceted journey marked by personal aspirations, cultural negotiation, and professional resilience. The following themes emerged from the data analysis and are presented in a chronological and thematic sequence that mirrors the lived trajectory of her experience.

3.1 "Leaving to Find Greener Pastures": The Migratory Decision

Joy's journey as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in Japan was rooted in a deeply personal quest for greener pastures to improve her life circumstances and support her family back in the Philippines. Her decision to leave her home country was not abrupt but emerged from a combination of financial necessity, professional frustration, and a persistent hope for something more.

"I used to teach in a public school in the Philippines for almost 8 years. I loved my students, I loved teaching. But the salary? It was barely enough. Sometimes I had to take on tutoring jobs in the evening just to afford groceries and send my younger sibling to school."

Joy described teaching in the Philippines as both fulfilling and limiting. While she was passionate about education, the systemic issues – low pay, large class sizes, lack of resources, and limited career growth – left her feeling stuck. She frequently used the word "sacrifice" when describing her early teaching years.

"There were months when I had to choose between paying bills and buying decent food and clothes. I remember one time, I borrowed money from a co-teacher just to buy chalk and bond paper for my class. I really felt bad not only for myself but also for my co-teachers who are in the same situation. That was the moment I said to myself, 'I can't live like this forever.'"

The turning point came when a friend who had previously worked in Japan encouraged her to apply for a teaching position through a dispatch company. Though hesitant at first due to fear of the unknown, expensive placement fee, allowance for two months, rigid processes in obtaining the requirements, and the thought of leaving her family behind, Joy eventually saw the opportunity as a chance to rewrite her future.

"I prayed a lot. It wasn't an easy decision. My mother cried when I told her. But she also told me, 'Anak, if this is what will give you a better life, go. We'll support you.' That gave me the courage."

Joy detailed the application process as both emotionally, mentally, and financially taxing. Preparing documents, attending orientation sessions, and going through interviews while still juggling her job in the Philippines required enormous effort. She traveled from Mindanao to Manila several times to process her documents with the agency located in Makati City. She also faced self-doubt.

"There were times I thought, 'What if they don't accept me because I'm not from a native English-speaking country?' I had this insecurity… that maybe being Filipino wasn't good enough for them. But I kept reminding myself: I am qualified. I have the experience."

The day she received her acceptance email was one of mixed emotions – joy, anxiety, and a sense of duty. She remembered sitting quietly in her room, rereading the message over and over before calling her family.

"My mother cried again, this time, tears of joy. I could feel her joy and I cried with her too. I was excited, but also scared. I didn't know anyone in Japan. I didn't speak Japanese. But I told myself, 'This is it. This is the chance I've been waiting for.'"

The emotional and psychological framework for the remainder of Joy's journey is established by her migration experience. Her departure was motivated by more than just money; it was also about regaining her autonomy, confirming her value as a teacher, and pursuing professional dignity.

"Moving to Japan wasn't solely for work. It was a risky move. I wasn't simply leaving the Philippines; I was making a decision about my future, my development, and myself."

The emotional and familial negotiations that underlie such life-altering decisions are also highlighted by this theme, in addition to the economic incentives that propel many Filipino professionals overseas. The human cost of migration is highlighted by Maria's story, including the sacrifices made, the anxieties faced, and the silent bravery needed to venture into the unknown.

3.2 "Not Quite Native, Not Quite Foreign": Negotiating Identity in the Classroom

Joy's first few years in a Japanese classroom were a time of great expectation and uncertainty. She was well-prepared because she had taught for years and was fluent in English, but she soon discovered that being a Filipino ALT put her in a position of ambivalence where she was neither completely accepted as a native speaker nor completely viewed as a foreigner with the stereotypically "Western" image.

"On my first day, I introduced myself to the students, and one boy raised his hand and said, 'Are you from the Philippines?'" However, why is your English so good? With a smile, I clarified that one of our official languages is English. However, I could sense the room's amazement. It was not merely interest; it was skepticism.

This incident set the stage for other such interactions in which Joy was forced to defend her authority as a teacher and English speaker on numerous occasions. Some students and teachers appeared to have preconceived notions about what an English teacher should sound and look like, notwithstanding her credentials.

"One of my Japanese coworkers casually inquired, "So, do you also teach in Tagalog?" during a teachers' meeting. I smiled courteously, but I was secretly wondering why I would instruct a class of English in Tagalog. Well, they don't even know that our language in the south is not Tagalog. Filipinos are thought to simply mean "not quite English enough. It can be unpleasant at times."

She added that when students found out she had an education degree and previous teaching experience in her native country, they frequently showed surprise.

"They believe that we only come here in search of employment. Additionally, they don't always recognize that we are professionals. "I thought ALTs were only from America or England," remarked one student. I gently corrected her, explaining that English, like its teachers, is a worldwide language."

As Joy negotiated her identity, her appearance and accent also became silent sources of conflict. Although she spoke English fluently and had a neutral accent, she saw that being a native speaker was frequently linked to being Western or white.

"In one of the schools where I was assigned, another young and white ALT was from Canada. We got along great, and he was pleasant. But I saw that he was handled differently. In his presence, the students were more animated. Despite my presence, several teachers would ask him for advice on English. Even though I didn't take offense, I couldn't help but notice."

These incidents made Joy consider the ways in which linguistic and racial hierarchy influenced her relationships in both the staff room and the classroom. But instead of running away, she started to see her position as a chance to question those myths.

"It's a bit challenging, but I began incorporating elements of Filipino culture into my classes. I would use Filipino cuisine, holidays, or values to teach English. A few pupils were captivated. "Sensei, I had no idea the Philippines was so awesome," one student even said to me in Japanese. That gave me the impression that I was bridging cultures rather than merely instructing."

The internal and mental battle to establish herself, she said, never quite disappeared. After winning over many students and coworkers, Joy continued to be conscious of the implicit contrast between herself and ALTs from "native" countries.

"I feel like I'm on a tightrope all the time. With an asterisk, I'm accepted. "You're good for a Filipino," for example. Even though it can be exhausting at times, I persevere. Because if I give up, their doubts will just grow. I wish that they might change their perception of us."

Joy's identity negotiation involved more than just language; it also involved showcasing the competence, professionalism, and dignity of Filipino teachers working overseas. Her story brings to light the subtle but significant kinds of cultural stereotyping and microaggression that non-Western ALTs encounter.

"I don't want to be pitied or praised just because I'm Filipino or I'm different. I just want to be respected as an equal with other ALTs. That's all. Not more, not less."

This theme sheds light on the borderline area that Filipino ALTs frequently occupy in Japanese schools – between representation and invisibility, between awe and skepticism. Examining how language ideologies, country, and race interact to shape classroom dynamics and teacher identity in cross-border settings is made easier by Joy's story.

3.3 "Living Between Cultures": Adapting to Japanese Work and Social Norms

Joy's transition from teaching in the Philippines to working as an ALT in Japan went well beyond pedagogy; it required a profound cultural adjustment, especially regarding Japan's distinctive workplace standards and social etiquette. From vague yet vital communication cues to the pronounced hierarchical structure, Maria said her early experiences felt like walking on eggshells in a space where the rules were rarely stated but always followed.

"I used to think that teaching would be the hardest part, but it wasn't. It was everything outside the classroom that confused me. The meetings, the silences, the expectations. In the Philippines, we speak our minds. Here, people wait or say nothing at all. It made me wonder if I was doing something wrong."

She remembered the initial teachers' conference that she attended, during which she noticed the unspoken pecking order and the cultural premium placed on wa (harmony) and indirectness. She had come ready to present some activity ideas, but held back when she recognized how still the room was.

"I raised my hand to suggest a warm-up game for the next lesson, but everyone just nodded. No one said anything, not even the head teacher. Then, I sat down feeling awkward. I felt confused and wondered if they understood what I said. After that, while walking toward the classroom, one of my Japanese colleagues told me, 'Genki desu ne (you're very energetic). I think it's better to just wait and see first.' I felt embarrassed. Surely, I needed to learn the unspoken protocols in the Japanese workplace."

This interaction underscored how Joy had to readjust her communication style to suit the local context. She worked diligently to learn the norms of Japanese workplace communication, which are very different from the more direct communication style that is practiced in the Philippines.

"In the Philippines, we joke a lot and we give suggestions casually. I observed here that even simple greetings feel formal. I didn't understand at first why everyone was quiet during lunch time. No body talks to me. Later, I learned they just don't want to disturb other teachers because it's also their rest time. So, I realized that it was not personal."

Joy's experience in her first few months carried a recurring theme of social isolation. She often felt unsure of how to interpret her colleagues' behavior—whether she was being excluded, or simply didn't understand the unwritten rules that everyone else seemed to know. She was even uncomfortable with how she communicated nonverbally, and she told me once that she was having to relearn how to be an effective communicator in that way.

"In the Philippines, we're expressive. We use our hands, we nod, we laugh loudly. In Japan, I felt like I had to shrink myself. Speak softer. Bow more. Smile, even when I wasn't sure what was going on. I didn't want to offend anyone."

Despite these challenges, Joy approached her adaptation with openness and curiosity. She described how she began observing her Japanese colleagues more closely, how they spoke, interacted, and even how they organized their desks.

"I started writing things down in a notebook, how they greeted the principal, what they said during cleaning time, how they thanked each other. I treated it like a second curriculum. I was the teacher, yes, but I was also the student."

She also shared moments of breakthrough instances where her efforts to adapt were acknowledged. One such moment came during a school sports day, where she volunteered to help organize a game and stayed after school to clean up.

"The vice principal came up to me and said, 'Joy-sensei, you're very cooperative. Thank you.' It was just one sentence, but it meant a lot. I felt seen, not just as the foreign ALT, but as part of the team."

Still, Joy acknowledged that the balancing act between cultures was emotionally taxing. She often had to code-switch between her Filipino warmth and Japanese reserve, sometimes feeling like she was losing part of herself in the process.

"There were days I'd go home and cry, not because anything bad happened, but because I felt invisible. Or like I was trying so hard to be someone I'm not. But I told myself: 'You're not here to blend in. You're here to bridge.' That gave me strength."

Her journey of cultural adaptation reveals the emotional labor and resilience required to survive—and eventually thrive, in a system where the rules are not always taught but expected to be known. Her narrative offers a deeply human look into what it means to live between cultures, and the quiet strength it takes to keep showing up with grace and professionalism.

"At the end of the day, I'm proud. I didn't just survive Japan, I grew here. I'm still Filipino, still me. But now, I carry two worlds in my heart."

3.4 "Finding My Place": Building Connections and Earning Trust

Although Joy felt uncertain and out of sync with the culture in Japan at first, her story has morphed into one of heartfelt connection and respect. She credits this transformation to an accumulation of small, essentially kind, acts performed by her for the sake of others and by others for her sake. Joy's story has seeped deep into her psyche, and she's transformed along with it.

"I realized early on that I may not win everyone's approval right away but I could win hearts slowly, especially the students'. That's where I started. I wanted them to see that learning English could be fun, and that I was there not just to teach, but to care."

Several instances were shared by Joy, when she used the mentioned tools of creativity and relatability to cross the language and culture divide in her classroom. One of her unforgettable lessons involved teaching English adjectives through Filipino food. Everyone in her class was surprised and delighted to "experience" Filipino food through the adjectives Joy taught.

"I brought pictures of adobo, halo-halo, and lumpia. I instructed them to use English words to describe the food—'sweet,' 'salty,' 'crispy.' They really got into it! One boy asked, 'Sensei, can you bring real lumpia next time?' We all laughed. That was the first moment I felt like I belonged in that class—not just as a teacher but as their teacher."

This type of personalization enabled Joy to create an atmosphere of communion and commonality that led her students to be more self-assured and expressive in English class. She remembers one student, so shy, he hardly spoke in class, who came to her after school. He wanted to show off his English skills. He pulled out his notebook filled with English words he had learned on his own.

"He said, 'I'm practicing because I want to speak with you more.' Almost cried. It was a small thing, but it brought to mind why I came here in the first place: to connect with people and inspire them"

Her connections with students often spilled beyond the classroom. She mentioned being invited to school events, sports days, and even the occasional after-school club activity. One of her favorite memories was joining the students during cleaning time, a daily routine in Japanese schools.

"At first, they looked surprised. 'Eh? Sensei, you're cleaning too?' I said, 'Of course!' I wanted them to see I'm part of the team. One student told me, 'You're the only ALT who helps us clean.' It was a small gesture, but I think it made a big difference in how they saw me."

Joy also began to earn the trust of her Japanese colleagues, not through assertiveness, but through consistency, humility, and quiet dedication. Though language remained a barrier at times, her efforts to speak even basic Japanese were noticed and appreciated.

"One teacher said, 'Joy-sensei, your Japanese is getting better ne.' That made my day. Even if it was just a compliment, it meant they were watching. They were paying attention."

She shared a touching story about a homeroom teacher who, after months of limited interaction, suddenly invited her to co-plan a class activity for the school's cultural festival.

"He said, 'You're good with creative ideas. Maybe you can help?' I was so shocked! And happy. I felt like I was finally being treated as an equal, like my opinion mattered. I gave my suggestions, and he actually used them. That was a big moment for me."

Her collaborative experience marked a turning point in Joy's role, not just as a rotating ALT, but as a valued contributor to the school community. The shift wasn't dramatic, but it was real, felt in the small invitations to help decorate a classroom, join a teacher's lunch table, or weigh in on lesson planning.

"Slowly, the barriers fell. My impression of being just a temporary resident vanished, and I began to develop the sense that I was in a place that could be anything but temporary."

However, Joy was also careful to note that building these relationships took time, patience, and emotional labor. She expressed that trust was not automatic, and that as a Filipino ALT, she often felt she had to work twice as hard to be seen.

"Trust wasn't automatic for me, and I felt like I had to work twice as hard just to be seen. I couldn't simply stroll into the situation and anticipate being embraced. I had to establish my credibility."

In the end, Joy's story of connection was one of earned respect, slow integration, and quiet transformation. Her relationships with students and colleagues weren't merely professional—they were personal, human, and deeply meaningful.

"When students say, 'Sensei, don't leave,' or teachers say, 'I hope you stay next year,' I know I've done something right. I may not be Japanese, but I've found a place here. And that means everything."

3.5 "Still a Stranger Sometimes": Lingering Challenges and Hopes

Although Joy had developed a greater sense of belonging in Japan, she still had moments when she felt like an outsider. "*You know, there are still times when I feel like I'm on the outside looking in, a sense of 'otherness' that kind of is just under the surface of my daily life here*," she said. She figures being an ALT and living in Japan for 14 years gives her some insight into what life is like for a Filipino in Japan. But that doesn't mean it has been a smooth journey. She talked about some of the systemic hurdles that continue to shape the lives of Filipino ALTs and others living in Japan. She also touched on the emotional hurdles that are part of the journey when someone is trying to carve out a space for themselves in a new country.

"Sometimes, even after years of living here, I still feel like a visitor, as if I'm just here temporarily. There's always this invisible line, you know? I can be friendly with everyone, but I don't always feel fully included."

She recounted moments where she remained excluded from conversations in the teachers' room, where her presence was acknowledged with polite smiles, but rarely with genuine inclusion in informal chats or jokes.

"During lunch, I'd sit at the same table as my co-teachers. They'd talk in Japanese, and I'd just smile and nod. Sometimes they'd translate a little for me, but I could tell they were hesitant. I don't blame them, it's hard to always accommodate someone who doesn't speak fluently. But still, it made me feel isolated."

One of the more emotionally difficult moments came during an all-staff meeting where she was unintentionally overlooked for recognition despite contributing significantly to a recent school event.

"I helped choreograph a dance for the English presentation. The students even won a prize. But during the meeting, they

thanked the homeroom teacher and the head of the English department. My name wasn't mentioned. I just sat there, pretending I didn't mind. But inside, it did hurt."

Joy also spoke about the professional ceiling she felt as an ALT, where her role remained fixed regardless of her teaching performance or years of service.

"No matter how well I do, I'm still 'just the ALT.' I don't get evaluated the same way, I don't get promoted. I'm not allowed to lead a class alone, even though I've been teaching for almost a decade. It's like being frozen in place."

These experiences led her to question the systemic limitations placed on non-Japanese, non-Western educators in Japan, especially Filipinos, who often occupy a middle space, not perceived as "native" English speakers, yet expected to meet native-level standards.

"I've met other Filipino ALTs who feel the same. We're grateful for the opportunity, but sometimes we feel like we're stuck in a role that doesn't reflect our full potential. We are not just ALTs, we are professional teachers in the Philippines with lots of training and enough education. It's like we're always proving ourselves, but never quite 'arriving.'"

Beyond the workplace, Joy also described the challenges of life outside the classroom, particularly in terms of housing, health care, and immigration-related anxieties. She remembered a time when renewing her visa became a source of stress.

"I submitted all the documents, but the immigration office still asked for more proof of employment and income. I started to worry, 'What if they don't renew it?' I've built my life here. But one piece of paper could change everything."

Despite these lingering struggles, Joy remained hopeful. Her reflections were filled with a quiet optimism rooted in her resilience, her evolving relationships in Japan, and her belief in the value of her work.

"It's not actually always easy. But I believe we're planting seeds, even if we don't see the full harvest yet. Every time a student smiles at me, every time a colleague listens, I feel like the walls are coming down little by little."

She spoke about her desire to see more support systems for foreign educators, especially those from Southeast Asia, and her hope that Filipino teachers in Japan would be seen not as temporary labor but as partners in education and cultural exchange.

"We're not just here to fill a gap. We bring heart, knowledge, and experience. I hope one day, Japanese schools will see that more clearly and treat us accordingly."

Joy's narrative in this theme captures the complex emotional duality of being both appreciated and sidelined, welcome yet not quite "one of them." Her reflections are a powerful reminder that inclusion is not just about tolerance, it's about recognition, equity, and shared humanity.

"Yes, I'm still a stranger sometimes. But I'm also a bridge. And I believe bridges are worth building, even when the road is long, even when the water beneath is troubled. Perhaps many ALTs, not only Filipinos, are bridges over troubled waters. It may be very challenging while building these bridges, but one day, these bridges will connect many hearts and minds. After that, these bridges are no longer seen as foreign, but a natural part of the entire road system."

4. Discussion

4.1. "A Whole New World" – Initial Culture Shock and Overcoming Language Barriers

Joy's initial encounters with Japan were marked by cultural mismatches and language problems. This is per Oberg's U-Curve theory of cultural adaptation [9]. This theory outlines stages like honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment. Joy was not about to settle for a less-than-perfect existence in linguistically and culturally rich Japan. Hence, demonstrating a cross-cultural adaptation [10], she set out deftly and with determination to conquer the language and to master the intricate indigenous local customs reflecting an ancient culture that folds into modernity in complicated ways.

Recent studies highlight that non-native English-speaking teachers often face similar challenges in new cultural contexts. For instance, in the study of San Jose and Refareal [5], one recurrent topic in the participant's reflections was feeling invisible as a non-native English teacher. Despite his qualifications, he occasionally encountered mistrust from students and teachers who thought that the only people qualified to teach English were native speakers. In another study, Ratunil *et al*. [2] describe the linguistic barrier struggles of a Filipino ALT. One of the main challenges that the participant faced was interacting with Japanese co-teachers and homeroom teachers (HRTs). The participant encountered numerous situations in which the ALT frequently misunderstood what the HRTs intended to happen in the class and left him to interpret it himself. Both studies advocate for professional development initiatives that will help foreign educators in Japan leverage their unique identities and experiences in the classroom.

Joy's experience serves as an example of the value of cultural learning and resilience in reducing culture shock and promoting assimilation into the host community.

4.2 "Not Quite a Teacher" – Navigating Professional Identity and Role Ambiguity

Many educators from Outer Circle countries can relate to the concept of nonnative speaker teacher identity. This is closely tied to the story of Joy and her struggle to identify as a professional in her role as an ALT. According to this idea, teachers could have serious problems with their professional identity because of perceived validity and recognition issues, similar to the way our nonnative speaker colleagues seem to struggle. The Identity Triangle Model [11] offers a glimpse into the framework of the not-quite-understood identity of teachers who are not native speakers. This model highlights the interaction of three dimensions: relational, behavioral, and psychological.

For Joy, as a non-native English speaker, the development of professional identity was not a simple matter. In the psychological domain, she internalized the role of instructor and formed a self-perception that was as close as possible to that of a native speaker of English. Behaviorally, she taught in ways that went well beyond the formal responsibilities of her position and managed her relationships with coworkers and students in ways that demonstrated a high level of competence.

4.3. "Living Between Cultures": Adapting to Japanese Work and Social Norms

Joy's story reflects the emotional struggle of dealing with identification and belonging in a foreign work culture. Her experience illustrates how intercultural competence, as defined by Deardorff [12], is profoundly emotional in addition to being cognitive or behavioral. Through deliberate reflection on her own cultural presumptions as well as those of the country she was staying in, she gained what Byram calls "critical cultural awareness" [13]. Although it comes at a

cost to her sense of self, her need to modify her nonverbal indicators, communication style, and behavior at work emphasizes the experience of code-switching as a social survival tactic.

Joy's narrative aligns well with existing research on foreign educators in Japan. Shen *et al.* [14] and Watanabe and Kanazawa [15] present Japan as a high-context society where group harmony and implicit communication are the norms – an environment that can be disorienting for some Western foreigners. Takeuchi [16] seems to imply that the predicament of non-native-speaking English teachers in Japan, especially teachers from Southeast Asia, is exacerbated by both racial and cultural demands that make their adherence to the aforementioned norms all the more critical. Yet, despite the lack of a readily apparent pathway that might take her from A to B, Joy demonstrates through her narrative that it is possible to adapt to both the demands of the situation and the high-context way of life in Japan.

Ultimately, Joy's experience shows us the problem of international adaptation: she had to change but without sacrificing her identity in order to fit in. Her experience, quiet and still, exemplifies the fortitude it takes to 'live between cultures,' balancing two identities with poise and resiliency. This story adds depth to the discussion of teacher migration and seriously undermines the proposition that effective integration requires cultural oblivion. It encourages a view of adaptation as transformation, where the system ideally changes along with the educator.

4.4. "Finding My Place" – Building Connections and Earning Trust

Joy's way of building relationships typifies relational agency [17, 18], the ability to not just g*et al*ong but work with others to achieve common goals. This is the type of agency one might need to have if one were to build something like a bridge. Joy is a bridge builder. She is a teacher who understands that the work she does, to be effective, must not just be instructive but also relational, connecting her to students in ways that help them connect to English in ways that matter.

Joy's experience indicates that Japanese schools can come to highly value foreign ALTs and treat them as true members of the school community. The study underscores the teaching significance of forming relationships and the emotional intelligence necessary for that task, especially in intercultural situations. ALTs could be better integrated into the professional life of the school if their presence there were more recognized and validated. Some benefits for professional inclusion could accrue from having ALTs and teachers do more planning together, having more informal interactions, and from better team-building.

This finding supports Ratunil *et al.* [2] findings that a Filipino ALT often takes on a dual role of being both an educator and an individual who must push through the marginalization that our cultural and linguistic differences tend to impose. However, where prior studies [4, 3] have noted ALTs' limited agency in making decisions that affect the school, Joy's narrative offers a nice counterpoint. Indeed, somewhat like the study by Ratunil *et al.* [2], Joy's story seems to be one of identity development through social participation. Trust and a sense of belonging do not just happen; they must be cultivated.

The narrative of Joy reminds us that integration is not about blending in but about establishing a connection. It is a two-way street where both the immigrant and the receiving society put in the effort to show up, reach out, and earn the trust of the other through everyday acts of care. This understanding makes the Alt path a more human-centered one. It moves us away from a mechanical understanding of educational success toward a more human-centered one, where relational opportunities play a vital role.

4.5. "Still a Stranger Sometimes" – Lingering Challenges and Hopes

Many migrant educators face the conditional belonging paradox [19], of which Joy's story is a good example. Their outsider status is often made especially clear by systems and cultural frameworks that do not include them, even when they have socially integrated to some extent. This is a good example of what some might call institutional othering [20], when one is included, but only on the surface and only because someone has to include one. Joy is an example of that kind of system. Her story helps us understand what life is like under these conditions.

This theme raises basic issues of equality and recognition in the Japanese education system for ALTs from non-Western cultures who are not from an Anglo culture. Even in the classrooms where they perform nearly at the peak of their potential, the long-term narrative that Joy provides suggests that even the most qualified and seasoned educators can be wrongly undervalued and misrecognized. The narrative also suggests that the education system in Japan can be pretty insular and that misunderstandings can reign even among well-meaning staff. Those well-meaning staff members can make classroom entry and exit very awkward, which is not what one wants to create a good atmosphere for learning.

Joy's experience supports the criticism of the JET Program and associated hiring practices that routinely relegate ALTs to token roles [21, 22]. Her situation mirrors that of Liu's research [23] on female English teachers in Japan's higher education who, despite proper training and credentials, find themselves stuck in a "glass ceiling" that keeps them out of responsible positions in EFL settings. But Joy's story gives us another perspective on all this. She offers a rare and crucial Southeast Asian viewpoint. It adds some diversity to a literature that is often dominated by Western voices. Hearing this voice broadens our sense of not only how linguistic but also how racial and geopolitical hierarchies interact to shape our professional identities.

The thoughts of Joy lead us to a deeper consideration of the notion of belonging. This is about more than just being somewhere; it is about actually and wholeheartedly engaging in the kind of work that earns any person the dignity they should have in a professional setting. Facing persistent difficulties that would seem to discourage most people, Joy keeps a sunny disposition and maintains an optimism that can be somewhat disarming but is always admirable. (It would also seem to be a sign of good mental health that allows one to remain in such a difficult story with some positivity.) Joy believes in the "important-but-gradual transformation (and relational improvement)" signified by her presence as a bridge in the global classroom.

4.6 Synthesis

Joy's story as a Filipino Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in Japan is one of adaptation and overcoming the barriers of a new culture. From her initial shock when she first arrived in Japan, to the language issues she had when trying to make herself understood, it was through active engagement with

the language and culture in which she found herself that she was able not only to survive but to thrive and grow in her new environment. Though Joy indicates that 'Japan is not a fully inclusive society,' she managed to bridge the gaps that existed between her and her working environment through pedagogical and relational agencies.

5. Conclusion

At its core, this study is not only about teaching English—it is about navigating foreignness, earning dignity, and constructing meaning in unfamiliar spaces. Joy's journey as a Filipino ALT in Japan is a microcosm of the broader global movement of labor, culture, and identity in 21st-century education. The dichotomy of "native vs. non-native," "insider vs. outsider," is challenged by her story, which is interwoven with silence, humor, uncertainty, and modest victory. From a philosophical standpoint, this study promotes a pedagogy of presence, which values the teacher's identity just as much as the lessons they impart. Joy becomes a bridge between worlds, despite the fact that she is still a stranger. Her perseverance highlights a subtle reality: every time we educate, we are also learning – about other people, about institutions, and eventually, about ourselves. "I am not alternative, even though I am an ALT. I'm real. "I may be an ALT, but I am not alternative. I am authentic." This study affirms that stories are not just data – they are human lives rendered in words. In listening to those often unheard, we begin to build not just better policies, but better people and better places to learn.

6. Limitations and Implications of the Study

This study includes a single participant but provides valuable insights. It is deeply contextual, and though not generalizable to all Filipino ALTs in Japan or the general population, it does shed light on this particular group. The analysis is certainly influenced by the researcher's interpretive lens. Additionally, the language used during interviews may have impacted the participant's reflections, potentially impacting the depth and cultural nuance of the responses.

It illustrates the necessity of creating culturally resonant support systems for non-Western ALTs in Japan. It recommends the following to make the Japanese school environment inclusive, empathic, and globally aware: orientation, mentoring, and training systems that are current with the school's cultural milieu; job descriptions that clearly delineate the roles and expectations of the ALT; and Boards of Education's mechanisms that consider the international educators talents for the advantage of both the ALTs and schools.

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