

International Labor Migration of Philippine-born Teachers in East Asia: The Cases of Japan, Thailand and Vietnam as Destination Countries

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東アジアにおけるフィリピン人教師の国際移動 ——受け入れ国日本・タイとベトナムでの事例——

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Many countries today suffer from teacher shortages, resorting to international recruitment to alleviate the problem. As a result, teachers have become one of the most mobile skilled workers in the world. Since the 1980s when Asia began to assume a more important role in economic globalization, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Filipino teachers migrating to the non-English speaking Global South ('South-South migration') and also the wealthy countries in Asia ('South-North migration'). Using data from interviews with Filipino teachers, we examined the migration motivations/aspirations, migration experiences and plans of Filipino teachers in Thailand and Vietnam as a case study of the former and Japan, of the latter.

This study sheds light on how the migrant teachers' behavior is shaped by a complex interconnection of policies, structures and processes in migration that are heavily influenced by the destination's socio-economic conditions, migration history and the local society's perceptions of the English language and foreign teachers. Filipino teachers in the three destinations cited not only high salaries, but also good compensation and self-actualization as their motivations to work overseas and discrimination as non-native English teachers as their major concern. On the other hand, there were essential differences among the teachers in terms of age and educational qualifications, how they deal with changes in the migration policies and unexpected events such as COVID-19 and their plans to either remain or leave the current destination.

The teachers in the three destinations skillfully address the changes in their lives brought about by migration policies, employment circumstances and other factors in the destination and in the process, achieve their economic goals, including providing for their families back home. However, these factors can also constrain them from fully achieving their professional goals. Therefore, the next crucial task is how to align the professional goals of skilled migrant workers with the national goals of the destination countries in recruiting them, which, in the case of Filipino migrant teachers, is to develop a globally competent local workforce.

現在、多くの国々は教師不足問題に直面しており、それを緩和するための方策として外国人教師を受け入れている。その結果、教師たちは世界の熟練移動労働者の中で最も多くの人数を占める1つの職種となっている。経済のグローバル化においてアジアがより重要な役割を果たし始めた1980

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年代以来、英語を母国語としないグローバル・サウス（「南南移動」となる）やアジアの裕福な国々（「南北移動」となる）で働くフィリピン教師の数が劇的に増加した。本研究では、日本を南北移動の事例、そして、タイとベトナムを南南移動の事例として取り上げ、インタビュー方法を用いて、これらの就労先で働くフィリピン教師の海外就労の動機・願望、就労先での経験および将来の計画について調査した。

調査の結果、フィリピン教師の移動行動はホスト国における受け入れの政策や制度、プロセスなどの要素の複雑な絡みあいによって左右されていることがわかった。また、これらの要素はその国の社会経済状況、外国人受け入れの歴史、英語教育と外国人教師に対する地域社会の認識によって大きく影響されていると言える。これらの就労先で働いているフィリピン教師らに共通していることは、海外就労の最も強い動機は単に高収入だけでなく仕事に見合った報酬及び自己実現である。また、最も大きな課題はノンネイティブ英語教師に対する差別であることが明確になった。一方、これら三カ国の間に、フィリピン教師らの年齢層や学歴、受け入れ先の移民（とりわけ労働者）受け入れ政策の変更や新型コロナウイルス感染症などの予期せぬ出来事への対応、将来の計画について、大きな違いが見られる。

ほかの移動労働者と同様に、今回の対象となったフィリピン教師らは受け入れ先の移民受け入れ政策や雇用の条件・状況、その他の要因がもたらした生活への変化にスムーズに対応できているようで、その結果、母国への仕送りを含む経済的目標を達成できていると言える。一方これらの要因には、彼らがキャリア形成の目標を完全に達成することを妨げるものも含んでいる。したがって、次の喫緊で重要な課題は、彼らのキャリア形成の目標と、外国人熟練労働者を採用する際の受け入れ国側の国家目標の両方が達成できるためにどのように調整したらいいのかという問題である。

Introduction

Teachers are regarded as “the single most important factor affecting how much students learn” (World Bank 2021) and therefore, addressing the need for and sustaining the quality of teachers have been central to national educational policies of many countries, regardless of their economic standing. They are ‘knowledge workers’ who not only share information but also nurture critical analytical thinking and develop creativity among students which are critical to sustaining economic development. In light of demographic transformation, rapid technological changes and stronger demand for global talent, many countries today resort to international recruitment to alleviate the teacher shortage problem, thus making them one of the most mobile skilled workers in the world.

Research studies show that the international migration of teachers is closely related to the English language. Bense (2016) surveyed articles on teacher migration in Australia, China, Estonia, France, Great Britain, Japan, Malaysia, the Netherlands and the United States from the period 1996 to 2013 and found that historically, there have been high levels of teacher movements among English-speaking countries and between countries with educational systems based on English as a medium of instruction. The migration of Filipino teachers to the USA or Canada represents such ‘South-North migration’.

Since the 1980s, however, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Filipino teachers migrating to non-English speaking countries in Asia – both in the Global South,¹ like for example, Vietnam, Thailand, Brunei and Myanmar; in what we call the ‘South-South migration’ and the ‘North’ wealthy countries in Asia such as Japan and South Korea. Economic

globalization since the 1980s has raised the demand, especially for teachers who could help train local human resources to cater to the manpower needs of multinational companies and respond to the needs of the global consumer market. Central to this is the active recruitment of foreign-born teachers whose main task is to either teach the English language or teach content courses in English.

Despite teacher migration having far-reaching impacts on the education and the development of human capital in both the sending and host countries, it has attracted less research attention than other skilled workers such as those engaged in health (nurses and doctors) and the science and technology (engineers and IT specialists) sectors. In the case of the Philippines, one of the top five sending countries, past empirical studies were focused on a one-destination country perspective, such as Filipino migrant teachers in the USA (see Hickey, 2018), Japan (see Balgoa, 2019; Fermin, 2020; Sugimoto and Yamamoto, 2019), or Thailand (see Ulla, 2018, 2021; Novio, 2018). Many of these studies also concentrated on the identity of Filipinos as ‘non-native’ English teachers.

This paper aims to contribute to this growing literature on Filipino teachers by characterizing Filipino teachers’ migration behavior in three Asian destinations – Japan, Vietnam and Thailand and identifying the commonalities and differences in their motivations and aspirations to work as teachers overseas, their conditions in the current destination and plans. These three destinations are all non-English speaking Asian destinations, with Japan representing South-North migration and Thailand and Vietnam as the destinations in the Global South. The results of the study provide valuable insights into the future mobility of teachers against the backgrounds of widening income gaps, higher global demand for foreign talents and growing popularity of bilateral and multilateral agreements for a more efficient and stable labor market and improved capability and welfare of migrant workers.

The data used in this study were drawn from individual and group interviews of Filipinos working as teachers in the three countries conducted in Japan (2020-2021), Thailand (2020-2022) and Vietnam (2023). The respondents were selected through purposeful snowball sampling. 26 respondents from Japan, 7 in Vietnam and 22 in Thailand joined the interviews. All respondents from Japan were English language teachers, while those from Vietnam and Thailand either taught the English language or used English as the medium of instruction. Prior to conducting the interviews, ethical approval was obtained from Ryukoku University.

A list of semi-structured questions regarding the teachers’ motivations, their current work conditions, the impact of COVID-19 on them, their medium-term plans and the respondents’ profiles were drafted and used in the interviews in all three destinations. The interviews, conducted in mixed English and Tagalog, lasted between 20 minutes to 1.5 hours and were recorded and transcribed. The data gathered from the interviews were supplemented by vlog testimonies of Filipino content creators who currently work as teachers in the three destinations. The list of questions and the profile of the respondents are available upon request from the

authors. To protect the privacy of the respondents, we use pseudonyms instead of their real names.

1. Overview of Filipino Teacher Migration to Japan, Thailand and Vietnam

1.1 Migration of Filipino Teachers to Japan

While there were some Filipinos, alongside Americans, who taught during the post-World War 2 reconstruction in the 1950s under the supervision of the American GHQ, the employment of Filipinos, particularly as English language teachers, from the Philippines, started in earnest during the ‘bubble economy’ period when the country began to assume its role as an economic superpower and Japanese direct investments dramatically increased in the US, Europe and Asia. It was in 1987 when the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program was established with the aim of “promoting internationalization in Japan’s local communities by helping to improve foreign language education and developing international exchange at the community level (JET Programme website n.d.).” Under this government-sponsored program, foreigners, including Filipinos are sent to schools as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) of English. It is also around the same time that private English language conversation (*eikaiwa*) schools, catering mainly to students, office workers and housewives began to flourish. Today, most Filipino teachers are employed as English language teachers in public schools, private schools, international schools, *eikaiwa* schools, nursery and kindergarten schools and as private tutors. There are also a few who teach content courses in international schools and universities.²

The current strong demand for English language teachers especially in public schools is a result of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology and Sports (MEXT) campaign to enhance the English skills of students from Grade 3 starting in 2020,³ because as the national experts’ committee on English language education emphasized, “as globalization progresses, improving English skills, which is the international *lingua franca*, is extremely important for Japan’s future. Japan should aim for top-class English proficiency in Asia.” (MEXT website, translated to Japanese n.d). This reflects the common thinking in Japan that language competency is key to maintaining its international economic and political position in Asia and the world.

However, there is a lack of comprehensive data on Filipino teachers in Japan because there is no singular professional organization or regulatory board that maintains records of foreign teachers. Specific to ALTs under the JET program, statistics from the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), the organization that oversees the program, show that the number of participants from the Philippines increased from 138⁴ in July 2019 to 242 in July 2023 (CLAIR website n.d.). In 2023, the Philippines ranked fifth in terms of the current number of JET Program ALTs based on nationality, with the United States (2,920), United Kingdom (724), Canada (550) and Australia (247) taking the top four places.

Meanwhile, the Immigration Services Agency (ISA) (E-stat Japan website n.d.) publishes

statistics about the number of Filipino teachers who hold working visas. The number of Filipinos holding an ‘instructor’ visa steadily increased from 256 to 1,735 between 2012 and 2022. This visa is exclusive to teachers whose scope of work is the instruction of language or other subjects in elementary schools, high schools, kindergarten and other schools with official government licenses. On the other hand, those who work in non-formal schools such as *eikaiwa* schools and international kiddie schools must obtain the ‘specialist in humanities or international services’ visa.⁵ Foreigners teaching in universities and colleges are granted the “professor” visa and there are 108 Filipinos with this visa in December 2022.

The ISA data, however, does not accurately reflect the volume of Filipino teachers in the country because it excludes Philippine-born naturalized citizens and holders of visas other than working visas, such as the permanent residents, long-term residents and dependents and spouses of Japanese or Filipino permanent and long-term residents. Teaching English is a popular job for many Filipinos who have connections with Japan through blood relations (such as the *Nikkeijin*) or marriage (particularly the women who came to work and later married a Japanese).

1.2 Migration of Filipino Teachers to Thailand and Vietnam

Over the last decade or so, we have seen the migration of several Filipinos to neighboring countries such as Thailand and Vietnam, a journey towards less-familiar routes within the ASEAN region. This relates well to what Massey (1990) conceptualized as specialized pathways or ‘migration corridors’ that also facilitate the development of migrant networks and feedback processes known as ‘cumulative causation’ that endure spatially and temporally. The policies in these two countries have a structuring effect on migration as labor exporting countries which accelerated overseas employment and mobility. Thus, a shift in migration patterns emerged especially when Thailand and Vietnam are seen as having better employment opportunities compared to the Philippines. Much of the moves are primarily characterized by the migrants’ desire to enter the countries due to the availability of some social capital and with the hope of building their financial and human capital. Based on the outcomes of the research conducted in these countries, there are several similarities in the migration processes and factors that stimulated the move.

Firstly, although the Philippines has formalized its overseas employment program and has continuously expanded its frameworks, this development has not deterred many Filipino teachers from leaving such as through organized illegal channels wherein the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) reports have shown an increasing trend in the number of undocumented or irregular migrants over the years from 2005 to 2013. The number more than doubled in 2012 and possibly, the trend continued until today.⁶ Secondly, despite the absence of a bilateral agreement between the Philippines and the destination countries, Thailand and Vietnam, concerning the hiring of skilled workers, several Filipino teachers departed as ‘tourists’ through the ASEAN’s visa-free policy. These are generally considered to be less

costly and less time-consuming compared to the procedures established by the Philippine government.⁷ Estimates by experts revealed that there could be more than 30,000 Filipinos in Thailand; more than half are undocumented or in irregular status compared to only 15,000 accounted for in 2017 (Statistica website n.d.), thereby circumventing the long-established and institutionalized migration system in the Philippines.

Indeed, macro-structural factors considerably affect migration processes and the intentions of overseas Filipino teachers. In 1999, Thailand made it a requirement for all students in primary school to study English and expanded its plan to transform its English language curriculum in the decade that followed. This led to the recruitment of more foreign English-speaking teachers; some through its government-to-government cooperation programs to improve English proficiency among Thai students and through direct hiring. As Thailand aims for internationalization, it has witnessed a growing number of private and international schools as well as a rising demand for foreign teachers, both non-native and native English speakers. A steady rise in the trend was also observed from 2008 to 2012 (Thailand Ministry of Labour website n.d.) where Filipinos in the teaching sector comprised the highest proportion compared to those in Japan, the UK, India and China.

The establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 also stimulated an overhaul of the English curriculum across schools under Thailand's "English for All" Project in the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). The Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) involved by some ASEAN countries in the services sector also created the need for better English communication in the country. In 2017, the number of foreigners holding working permits for professional and skilled occupation stood at more than 136,542 (Harkins 2019); a small portion of which are foreign teachers. As reported by Bangkok Post in 2021, foreign teachers working in 922 public and private schools in the country numbered 6,129; the highest proportion comprises 2,667 teachers from the Philippines, 558 from the UK, 465 from the US, 237 from China and 160 from South Africa.

Similarly, the promotion of Vietnam's *Doi Moi* in the 1980s and 1990s paved the way for more foreign investment and international scientific collaboration that required improved English proficiency among overseas Vietnamese students. Its membership in WTO in 2007 and the establishment of the AEC in 2015 further highlighted the importance of learning English as local and diplomatic missions increased and multinational companies became involved in key national projects. Consequently, demand for English Education from primary to tertiary levels grew while facing a corresponding shortage of qualified English teachers (Vietnam Insider 2021). Current records show that Vietnam has more than 93,000 foreign workers in the country; out of which, about 10,000 were granted and re-issued work permits by the Department of Labor (Mihn Duc 2022).

A thriving migration industry composed of illegal recruiters and teaching agencies also plays a prominent role in facilitating the movements of Filipinos in both countries. For example,

some placement agencies provide government and private schools with foreign teachers. Interviews with Filipino teachers confirmed this finding. Hiring of Filipino teachers through placement agencies in Thailand and Vietnam has flourished but with some issues of racial discrimination, insecure work arrangements and lower-than-expected salaries. Some cases of Filipinos illegally recruited for work in Thailand were also reported within the Filipino community as they were accommodated for a few days upon arrival in Bangkok, after which, the recruiter could no longer be found. Several travel agencies in Thailand also facilitate the extension of visas across the borders for foreign workers and tourists that allow them to reenter the country.

2. Motivations for migration

Following our framework of analysis, the research clearly illustrates the different structural forces that actively shape the migration process and the kind of pattern that has developed over the last decade or so regarding the movement of Filipino teachers in the three countries. Furthermore, the movement is also viewed as an individual choice whereby the migration aspiration of the teachers is to improve their economic status. This is also reinforced by their level of education, age, network connections at the destination and the geographical proximity of the countries. Results from the research conducted by the authors show that in these three countries, female teachers comprise the majority of those interviewed, with only one male teacher respondent for Vietnam, four for Thailand and five in Japan.

The study also illustrates that there are differences in terms of the demographic characteristics of the migrant teachers studied in the North and Southeast Asian destinations. While the ages of the teachers studied in Thailand and Vietnam were in the working age group of 25-54 and all have achieved tertiary education, the respondents in Japan belong to an older age group (with three aged more than 60 years old) and have varied educational backgrounds. Of the 26 respondents interviewed, ten had postgraduate studies, of whom three have a PhD degree obtained from a university in Japan. On the other hand, five of them, all of whom came to Japan to work and later married at a young age, did not have a college degree. The migration history of Filipinos in Japan partly explains why the age and educational background of teachers in this country are more diverse.

A significant gap in teacher salaries between the Philippines and the three countries has propelled the teachers to explore opportunities overseas. For example, in the Philippines, the entry-level salary of a public school teacher is 27,000 pesos (around US\$480) per month in 2023.⁸ In contrast, the basic salary of respondents who are full-time teachers in Japan ranges approximately from 170,000 yen (US\$1200) to 320,000 yen (US\$2,150), depending on the work setting, type of employment (contractual or regular, full-time or part-time), academic background and English teaching qualifications (TESOL or TEFL).⁹ Moreover, the hourly salary in *eikaiwa* schools starts at about US\$15 per hour. On the other hand, the ALTs in public

schools under the dispatch system and those who work in *eikaiwa* schools and international nursery (kiddie) schools generally earn less than direct-hired ALTs and teachers in private schools and universities.

The kinds of benefits that the teachers receive, for example, housing subsidy, car rental subsidy and transportation allowance, also vary depending on the negotiation with the employer. The number of days of paid leave is usually based on the number of years working in the same school. On the other hand, deductions include health insurance, pension, employment insurance and income and residence taxes. Many respondents complained about the high cost of living which includes expensive house rent and car maintenance. The amount they can save from their salary largely depends on whether they work in the city or the countryside, the type of employment contract (dispatch or direct hire, regular full-time, contractual full-time or part-time, monthly or hourly waged) and work setting (public school, private schools, *eikaiwa*, etc.).

On the other hand, in Vietnam, full-time Filipino teachers of English or those teaching in English in schools receive a basic salary of approximately US\$600 to 1,000 in family-run or local language schools with a small number of students and between US\$1,000 to 2,000 in public schools and language schools with branches nationwide, net of taxes. Respondents noted that Filipinos normally are offered less than native English speakers. However, as more and more Filipinos seek job opportunities in Vietnam, the salary range has lowered because some new teachers agreed on as low as US\$600-800 salary per month. In some cases, the low salary is augmented with free housing, free lunch and/or transportation allowance. While in Japan, the labor law requires employers to contribute to the health insurance and retirement pension of their foreign workers, in Vietnam, employers are not required to do so. Some respondents interviewed did not have health insurance and relied on personal savings or support of friends when they needed to pay for medical expenses; or refrain from seeking medical attention even if they needed to do so.

Similarly, our research revealed that the salaries of Filipino teachers in Thailand were considerably higher compared to what they earned or could earn in the Philippines. However, salaries would generally depend on the type of school the foreign teachers are employed in, their educational level, experience and origin country. Generally, non-native speakers of English like those coming from the Philippines in government schools and in some private schools, for example, are offered around US\$700, while in international schools, some teachers can receive double or triple the amount. Qualified Filipino teachers who have a master's degree or Ph.D. can expect to receive higher than those teaching at primary or secondary levels at government and private schools. Native speakers of English (NES), on the other hand, earn much more than non-native speakers like the Filipinos; in some instances, despite the NES's lower qualifications. Some Thai schools also offer less than US\$600 to applicants despite their educational level and experience, perceived as exploitative and discriminatory practices of some schools against Filipinos. Regardless, the respondents still viewed migrating to Thailand for work as a much

better option than teaching back home in the Philippines. Like Vietnam, some schools in Thailand also offer their foreign teachers other incentives like free accommodation and transportation. Unlike Vietnam, Thai employers are required to provide insurance benefits in the form of Social Security membership and/or private medical insurance.

In all three destinations, many teachers augment their earnings from regular daytime and weekday jobs by mentoring students after school hours and on weekends. For example, in Japan, *eikaiwa* schools pay 2,000 to 3,000 yen (roughly US\$14 - 25) per hour, while English language centers or private tutorials in Vietnam and Thailand can earn teachers about US\$15 to 25 an hour. During summer and school breaks, teachers in the three destinations are invited to facilitate English camps, an incentive for the teachers to earn more and obtain better training.

Considering the high cost of living in Japan, there seems to be no remarkable difference in the net earnings (less of living expenses) among the respondents in the three countries. The salary range is also wide, with those highly paid receiving twice or even thrice as much as those who are lowly paid. Interestingly, many respondents in the three destinations emphasized that it was not the salary per se, but rather, “the salary that compensates for the work efforts” that mattered in the decision to leave the Philippines.

This can be better understood in the context of “the *chronically overworked* state of public-school teachers in the Philippines” (Esguerra 2018) whose tasks are not limited to teaching but also non-teaching activities such as administrative duties and paperwork/reports regarding student guidance, budget, disaster response and health. They are also assigned to implement various government programs, such as feeding, population census and election, among others (David et.al. 2019). In poor areas in the Philippines, teachers sometimes buy school supplies and food for the children, pay for the reproduction of teaching material and write the contents of the textbook verbatim on the blackboard because students cannot afford to buy it. Respondents who had experience with teacher workload congestion in the Philippines claim that it is “*a lot easier* to become a teacher overseas” because they do not need to bother about the non-teaching tasks and availability of ready-made lesson plans, free school supplies and photocopy of teaching materials and use of computers and other learning devices.

3. Migration Experiences of Filipino Teachers

3. 1 Job satisfaction and discrimination in Japan

In this section, we describe how the teachers feel about their job and the factors affecting it. We particularly note the impacts of workplace recognition, career advancement, positive work environment with employers and coworkers and discrimination on the respondents’ job satisfaction.

Based on the interviews, the respondents in Japan were found to be more satisfied with teaching than their previous occupations. Compared to other jobs that Filipinos usually land in Japan, such as factory work, care work, or retail, the salaries of English teachers are generally

higher. However, many respondents shared that the recognition and respect they get as teachers, rather than the salary, was their source of joy and contentment to remain in the profession. This is especially true for those who came to Japan as descendants of Japanese (*Nikkeijin*) and women who first worked as entertainers and eventually married Japanese.

The importance of self-esteem and self-actualization for these teachers is echoed by Ms. Claire (female, 60s), a *Nikkeijin* who quit her job as a supervisor in a big company in the Philippines to settle in Japan with her Filipino husband and their relatives in the mid-2000s. She recalled her frustration at her first job as a packer in a vegetable company:

Every day, I was crying! I did not contact my friends in the Philippines for a long time because of my *pride*. Later on, when I was asked by friends what my work was in Japan, I told them (about) quality control (*of vegetables, to see if there is any worm in there!*). In the Phil, I was a quality control officer checking on goods from China. (Claire, female, 60s)

For her, the job as an English teacher is something that is not only financially rewarding but also a source of pride as a foreigner. She was proud to say she became the *pambala*, a Filipino word for ‘the face of the company’ or someone sure to win, of her dispatch company whenever it needed to have someone perform a demo lesson before the BOEs (Board of Education of a city or a prefecture). Eventually, she was directly hired as an ALT in a public school and together with the founder and president of an association of Filipino English teachers, she trains Filipino wives who aspire to be English teachers in Japan. They advise them to be proud of being teachers:

So this is us, Filipinos. This is our consolation. We can be looked *down*, but we can also be looked *up* as English teachers of the world! Not many people here are called *sensei* (the Japanese word for a teacher), not all Japanese are bowed down like the teachers. (Claire and Nicola, female, 60s)

Most respondents, however, experienced discrimination from the Japanese, which they believed was due to their skin color and the Japanese ‘fixation’ with American and/or British English. For example, Ms. Katherine (female, 50s), pointed out that the Japanese are “prejudiced in thinking that Caucasians are always correct in the way they pronounce a word, even if there are different ways of pronunciation.” Criticisms about their pronunciation sometimes originate from their colleagues. Jake (male, 30s) was embarrassed when a ‘white’ teacher sarcastically posted a question on their Facebook group page: “Who was that person in the record who *sounded like an Indian man from the cave?*”, referring to his voice recording of an English examination. After that humiliating experience, he persevered to improve his

pronunciation and grammar and enrolled in an MA Program in TESOL. “That’s my dream actually, *to be treated the same*.”

Prejudice due to race and color can also be initiated by the student’s parents. For instance, a Filipino *eikaiwa* teacher in Japan who grew up in the United States and spoke like an American recalled several instances when parents preferred a Caucasian teacher over him even though both delivered a trial (demonstration) lesson using a similar lesson plan. His Japanese supervisor apologetically explained that it was not because of his teaching style, but “because the parents want their children to be taught by Caucasians” (Carlo, male, 30s).

Respondents from Japan cited the lack of job stability as another major source of dissatisfaction. In Japan, the employment contract of English teachers, except those hired by private elementary or high schools, is inked annually. Moreover, the renewal of contracts of ALTs employed through a dispatch company depends on the negotiation/agreement between the dispatch company and the local Board of Education (BOEs). Recently, many BOEs have preferred outsourcing ALTs from a dispatch company to reduce cost and the burden of managing teachers. This practice is done through bidding that begins two to three months before the start of the school year. The dispatch company can therefore confirm the hiring of its ALTs only after the announcement of the decision of the BOE, which is usually only a month (at the earliest) before the end of the teachers’ current contract.

The lack of autonomy in the classroom, as well as the slow or lack of career progression and professional growth, are other sources of dissatisfaction cited by the respondents, especially the ALTs. Regardless of whether they are directly hired by the BOE, outsourced from a dispatch company, or employed under the government-sponsored JET program, it is extremely difficult for foreign nationals to obtain a tenured job in public schools (Nakajima et al. 2021). Prefectures hire them only as contractual full-time instructors, which prevents them from assuming any administrative position like head teacher or principal. Moreover, Filipino teachers in Japan complained about limited training to hone their teaching skills. Big dispatch companies and *eikaiwa* schools usually conduct orientation at the beginning of the school year, but there are no regular training programs. Unless planning to move to another workplace, there is a weak incentive to obtain a teaching certificate because it is considered more of a qualification to be hired as a teacher, rather than something that will lead to a job promotion.

Japan respondents who hold higher academic qualifications (a PhD but not necessarily in linguistics or language education) therefore prefer to work in private schools as regular teachers with higher salaries, more opportunities for training and promotion and autonomy in the classroom. Jake (male, 30s) who left his job in a public school to assume a regular full-time job in a private school was happy with his decision because

When I was there (public school), they just treated me as an assistant so at that time, they didn’t consult me about anything. They just used (me) as a *tape recorder*. I could

neither say no to (the Japanese) teachers nor give comments to make the class more effective. (Jake, male, 30s)

He is now happy with his new job because he is better paid and no longer has the word *assistant* in his job description. “I don’t need to get approval from anyone on how to do my job. I’m also more connected with my students because I have my own *gakunen* (homeroom class).”

Notably, labor law violations did not appear as a major issue for many of the respondents in Japan. Among the respondents, only two complained about the delay in the disbursement of salary and non-renewal of contract. This suggests that, rather than legal labor and visa issues, the treatment by co-workers, the job content and general discrimination are the sources of dissatisfaction among the Filipino teachers in Japan.

3.2 Employment Conditions and Irregular Status of Teachers in Thailand and Vietnam

In this section, we discuss the employment conditions of the teachers and how this is largely dependent on their visa status. The lack of a proper working visa has made several Filipino teachers vulnerable to mistreatment by employers such as low salaries and lack of job security.

Arriving as tourists and looking for a job afterward is a prominent trend among Filipino teachers in Thailand and Vietnam. From the analysis of interview data in Thailand, it can be said that having a university education is a huge factor in obtaining a job upon arrival in these countries. However, some teachers had to engage in unskilled or less-skilled jobs to meet their family obligations back in the Philippines and maintain the regular transfers of money while waiting for a better one that matches their expectations. The persistence of financial insecurity, in terms of fluctuations in income and unstable employment terms due to irregular status also compelled some Filipino teachers to take up any type of job like domestic work and maintenance jobs which generally do not provide a work permit, particularly in the early stage of the migration journey. To remain working in the country, they had to do regular border runs¹⁰ to Cambodia, Laos, or Myanmar and tried to obtain a 30-day extension of stay in Thailand upon reentry. As Girlie, a 30-year-old female teacher narrated:

I did a 30-day exit to Laos and Cambodia before I got my working visa, Non-B. A van would pick us up at the waiting area to bring us to the border between Thailand and Cambodia. Other Filipinos had to drive to the border themselves. Nowadays, it is very strict at the borders in Thailand. (Girlie, female, 30s)

The ‘border run’ is a thriving business led by travel agencies that provide regular day trips for many foreigners across the border and generally without problems with police or

immigration officials. In Vietnam, since there is no law limiting the number of times a visa can be issued at the border and the requirements to get a work permit have become more complicated and stricter, some Filipino teachers rely on border runs to continue working illegally in Vietnam. Flora (female, 50s) acknowledged that it is illegal to continue working without a proper visa and work permit stating, “It should not be like that – that you are a tourist and working but most Pinoys (Filipinos) here do it. They come to Vietnam as a tourist and work and do their visa runs.” As irregular workers, they bear the risk of being arrested and deported and of receiving poor treatment from employers. They are also prone to being harassed or victimized by employment agencies and even fellow Filipinos. One respondent who was working while on a tourist visa was “scammed by a Filipino” whom she paid for a promise to process the work permit. However, she did not report the case to the police for fear of being reported as a working tourist.

In both countries, not only the irregular Filipino teachers resort to border runs but also some regular or documented teachers as well. Some teachers in Thailand who were interviewed had been unfairly terminated or faced uncertain or exploitative conditions in their schools which resulted in the cancellation of their Non-Immigrant B visa and work permit within seven days. As a consequence, they needed to do a border run to re-enter Thailand.

The teachers interviewed in Thailand and Vietnam also highlighted some issues in schools that they experienced such as immediate termination of contracts, pay gaps and absence of medical insurance or social security benefits even before the pandemic. In the study conducted by Chuchuen et al (2017) in Thailand, the authors revealed that foreign teachers face various issues in the school such as lack of motivation and incentives, low or non-payment of salary, inadequate support received from the administration and those around them and lack of understanding about Thai language and culture. Although Thailand’s Labor Protection Act B.E. 2541 stipulates that every employee is entitled to workers’ benefits, while those who were laid off after being employed for 120 days can obtain severance pay, several teachers interviewed were unaware of their rights.

The same problems were also cited by respondents in Vietnam. One respondent reported that some public schools lay off foreign teachers within six months of employment “to avoid paying taxes. Some teachers will just be shocked that they no longer have classes – schools do not help the affected teachers” (Flora, female, 50s). In addition to this, Filipino teachers who came as tourists found it difficult to legalize their work and stay because of the *ever-changing and stricter policy* that includes compliance with a long list of requirements, both from the teacher (teaching experience, university degree in education and TESOL) and the employer. Respondent Norma (female, 50s), a Filipino co-owner and principal of an international school said that one of her teachers was denied three times for the temporary residence certificate (TRC) and work permit because the immigration rules were modified thrice *within just 1 week*.

Irregular migrants experience the bulk of these impacts as they are invisible both in the

host country and the origin country. As they are not accounted for, it is difficult to track them. They are also afraid of being apprehended or being returned and banned from coming back. The current circumstances or conditions they have been facing such as their irregular status means they have no access to social security and health insurance benefits and are more likely to be in exploitative conditions like low wages, increased workload without proper compensation and termination without notice. Based on this study, insufficient financial means to support their family and the additional burden of having to do border runs have exacerbated their already insecure situations.

3.3 Impact of COVID-19 on the Teachers' Circumstances

ILO (2020) has highlighted the significance of the impact of the pandemic on jobs worldwide, revealing that migrants are the most affected. Travels within and across borders in Japan, Thailand and Vietnam, for instance, have been substantially curbed which shifted the way people work to mainly virtual mode. The unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has also altered the different trajectories of many migrants (Ullah, Faraha and Chatteraj 2021), not only for the unskilled but also for skilled workers, with severe consequences. Likewise, Filipino teachers in Japan, Thailand and Vietnam were affected in various ways as governments in these countries established restrictive measures to mitigate the health impact of the pandemic.

How did the pandemic affect the teachers' experience of migration in Thailand and Vietnam? As travel restrictions in the countries were in place, visa processing for newly hired teachers in Thailand and Vietnam was also delayed. Consequently, visa runners were unable to cross the borders to obtain an extension of stay but had to rely on the help of the Philippine Embassy and the Thai Immigration Bureau. Moreover, those who required a Non-Immigrant Visa to process the work permit in the Philippines, Laos, or Cambodia were delayed, creating insecurities and worries concerning their migrant status. Several repatriations were also organized by the Philippine Embassy; however, some teachers opted to stay where they were during the onset of the pandemic for fear of not being able to return to their work. Anxiety, stress, inconvenience, changes to work arrangements, inability to remit to their families and accumulated debt/loans were some of the serious challenges experienced while in the host country during the pandemic.

According to one male respondent, he has been in an irregular-regular-irregular status for some time due to many unexpected events while in Thailand:

I had a dependent visa when I first arrived because my wife was already working then in the province. We have 3 kids but separated after and she left me alone in Thailand. I used to work without a working visa after my non-immigrant O¹¹ visa expired. I exited to Cambodia and Laos several times to extend my stay which allowed me to work continuously – the school also let me work without a work permit and necessary visa.

To address the issue of being an irregular or unregistered worker, some Filipinos resort to returning home temporarily or paying an agent to process a visa that will allow them to stay but not work in Thailand, as emphasized by Leo.

Because of COVID-19, it is *impossible* for irregular Filipino workers to get an extension at the borders. Some Filipinos went back to the Philippines, but they will come back when the pandemic is over. I just paid US\$1,200 to an agency for a Voluntary Visa this year for one year for me to stay legally but I am not supposed to work with this visa. I have no choice but to work. It is risky but I need to send money to my kids, pay for my online studies and loans.

Teachers in Vietnam faced a similar situation during the pandemic. Clearly, COVID-19 has reinforced pre-existing insecurities faced by several teachers in Thailand; pay disparities due to discrimination, lack of or absence of career opportunities and being stereotyped as less qualified than other nationalities are realities several teachers have been facing. Lack of awareness about labor rights and inadequate protection mechanisms perpetuate exploitation against teachers. Thus, the pandemic has paved the way for other forms of exploitation against some Filipino teachers to take place.

On the other hand, based on our interviews in Japan, Filipino teachers were treated quite well, although there were isolated cases of mistreatment especially during the first few months after the outbreak, which was also the season when employment contracts were renewed. Although a total lockdown was not imposed, schools were suspended for about three months so that teachers who were hired on an hourly basis or through a dispatch company did not receive any salary. Rina (female, 30s) and Kurt (male, 30s) who were both contractual teachers with a dispatch company, complained of not receiving any salary until June and had to rely on government cash allowance and loans. In contrast, those who were directly hired by BOEs and private schools continue to receive their regular salary.

The Japanese government played a big role in alleviating the condition of foreign workers, including Filipino teachers, during the pandemic. In Japan, all residents, regardless of nationality, visa status and period of stay in the country, were given 100,000 yen each in June 2020. It also subsidized 60% of the salary of employees of all business establishments and provided longer-term, interest-free loans to households whose income abruptly and significantly decreased during the pandemic. Under certain conditions, the local government could also pay for the house rent of up to three months (could be extended to nine months) of those who could no longer afford to do so. The Immigration Bureau also relaxed some of its requirements for visa renewal.

The negative economic impact of the pandemic on Filipino teachers in Japan was weaker compared to Vietnam and Thailand. However, based on our study, many of the teachers

suffered from anxiety and emotional stress because of their lack of Japanese language proficiency. All official information and notices related to the pandemic (including the appointment schedule and availability of vaccines), were initially published in Japanese and the English version was issued much later. Applications for government benefits were written in Japanese and must be filled out in Japanese. Their experiences during the pandemic made them realize the importance of learning the local language, especially if they want to stay in Japan until retirement age.

4. Expectations and Plans for the Future

Considering the expectations and motivations, their job satisfaction, as well as the problems and issues that Filipino teachers encounter in the three destinations, the next relevant question is whether they wish to stay in this same destination, return to the Philippines, or move to the next destination. In the case of nurses who are also categorized as skilled workers, some tend to take up stepwise migration in which they move from one “transit” destination to the next and then to the final destination (Carlos 2013, 2014).

In the three countries studied, most respondents intend to stay in the same destination for at least a few more years. For many, going back to the Philippines is not an option. About 90% of the respondents in Japan aspire to work in this country for various reasons. Understandingly, the permanent- or long-term residents (most of them women in their 40s and 50s who are married to a Japanese and have built families in Japan) intend to live with the family in Japan and teaching for them is one of the best options (see discussion above on job satisfaction). Interestingly, even those who currently hold a working visa with a prescribed allowed period of stay and are relatively young (in their 30s) also wish to live and work in Japan for as long as they can. One respondent, when asked what would make her leave Japan (for another country or the Philippines), answered curtly “I already made up my mind to stay. *It is no longer a question.* I want to live long term here, I want to retire here.” (Leslie, female, 30s)

Meanwhile, in Vietnam and Thailand, the respondents seem to have a shorter time frame concerning the length of their intended stay in the country. These two countries are perceived as places that provide socioeconomic mobility as the teachers can gain experience while earning more than they used to back home and diversify or expand their business skills and talents as emphasized by several respondents. Others intend to find overseas work and ensure that they achieve their goals before leaving, thus making Vietnam and Thailand the transit countries in their stepwise migration behavior. For instance, one female teacher interviewed in Vietnam planned to save money and then manage a business in the Philippines or finance her move to the next destination which could be Japan, China, Canada, or UAE (Dubai). During the interviews in Vietnam, some respondents expressed a strong interest in finding a job in Japan and Korea.

Planning to stay put in the current destination for a few more years appeared to be

prevalent among respondents from Thailand. This can be realized by improving themselves professionally through taking additional school credits in education through online studies, or the Philippine-based schools in Bangkok. A few others prepared their TOEFL/TEFL examination at the time of the interview. According to them, having the necessary credentials in education will enable them to obtain a teacher's license valid for five years instead of the temporary two years from the Teachers' Council of Thailand, thus providing employment security and better salaries for a longer period of time. Most of those interviewed have no plans of returning to the Philippines but some might move to another country after some years of working in Thailand.

Common to respondents in the three countries was the strong preference for destinations near the Philippines. They found the proximity between the two countries convenient when it comes to visiting families back home and the cheap cost of travel. A few respondents cited this as the reason for not planning to return to the Philippines soon.

5. Summary and conclusions

This study has shed light on how migrant teachers' behavior is shaped by a complex combination of policies, structures and processes in migration, which in turn are heavily influenced by the destination's socioeconomic conditions, migration history and the local society's perceptions about English language education. Most Filipino teachers cited not only high salaries, but also good compensation and self-actualization as their motivations to work overseas and stay in the current destination at least in the medium term. Discrimination from the locals and foreign colleagues emerges as a major concern, which teachers feel they can overcome only through collecting qualifications for teaching and language proficiency or keeping quiet about it.

There are also vital differences among the teachers in the three destinations. The age and educational qualifications of those in Japan are more varied. In contrast to teachers in Thailand and Vietnam, many teachers in Japan desire to work in Japan for as long as they can. Another difference is with the way they deal with immigration policies that affect the way teachers can keep their legal status and their jobs in their destination. The border-runs allow teachers in Vietnam and Thailand to work as irregular migrants and shift to other jobs. In Japan, on the other hand, holders of working visas were very careful to comply with the job-content restrictions imposed by the type of visa. Lastly, the teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic were also different. Compared to Thailand and Vietnam, Japan appeared to have better addressed the economic needs and legal status issues of the teachers.

Like many other Filipino migrants worldwide, the teachers enhanced their economic needs and those of their families and achieved, to some extent, self-actualization or professional recognition. Furthermore, the teachers in the three destinations were able to skillfully navigate and address the changes in their lives brought about by migration policies, employment

circumstances and other factors. Although the changing migration policies in Thailand and Vietnam often altered some of the teachers' status, they employ different mechanisms to remain in the country, moving through different paths or statuses while trying to be as regular as possible, situating some of them in and out of regularity even in later years. Filipino permanent and long-term residents in Japan, on the other hand, find the English teaching profession as an effective means to secure their position in Japanese society.

It must be noted however, that while economic goals are achieved, at least in the short term, the evolving migration policies in the destination countries, could also substantially constrain the migrant teachers from fully achieving their professional goals. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some teachers in Thailand took up less remunerative work to fulfill their roles as breadwinners. In the case of Japan, most migrant teachers are employed as ALTs on an annual employment contract. Therefore, the next crucial task is how to align the professional goals of skilled migrant workers with the national goals of the destination countries, which, in the case of Filipino migrant teachers, is to develop a globally competent local workforce in the destination.

Notes

- 1 Here, we define the 'Global South' as countries whose economies are not yet fully developed and which face challenges such as low per capita income, excessive unemployment and a lack of valuable capital. For a list of the countries in the Global South, see the World Population Review (n.d.)
- 2 In the past ten years, there is also an increase in the market for online English learning, where Filipinos based in the Philippines offer virtual private English tutorials to students from different parts of the world.
- 3 Under the latest reform, implemented in the school year 2020, students in Grades 3 and 4 are now required to take up English language activities 1-2 times a week.
- 4 The data for July 2019 includes all categories – ALTs, Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs) and Sports Exchange Advisors (SEAs). Based on the general trends, most of the Filipino participants are ALTs.
- 5 The 'specialist in humanities/international services' visa is more flexible than the 'instructor' visa in terms of the type of work/activities that the teacher is allowed to undertake. For example, a Filipino with an 'instructor' visa is not allowed to teach in colleges and universities, even as a part-time teacher.
- 6 As of this writing, the CFO website has not updated its statistics on OFWs. The most updated numbers are for 2013.
- 7 Every departing Filipino worker is required to present the Overseas Employment Certificate (OEC) which should be obtained from the POEA after submitting all the required documents such as an employment contract, accomplished pre-departure orientation for first-time overseas contract workers and other documents.
- 8 All exchange rates are as of 15 September 2023.
- 9 The salary for public school teachers is aligned with the Salary Standardization Law (SSL) of 2019, with the increase distributed in four chances, the last one of which was in the school year 2023. Teachers in private schools usually receive less (PhilStar Global website 17 July 2023)
- 10 'Border run' (or visa run) is a common practice among foreigners who want to stay longer in a

destination by “resetting” the allowed period of stay by exiting at the border as in the case of Filipinos. For some other nationalities, applying for the same visa category (usually a tourist visa) can also be done at the border.

- 11 The non-immigrant O visa is granted to visiting immediate family members of a Thai national.

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