

“How Did We End Up Here?” Narratives of Filipinos teaching English in Japan

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Abstract

One of the effects of globalization is the emergence of English language teaching becoming more in demand and evolving among English native speakers and non-native speakers. This has paved the way for many Filipinos - originally born and raised in the Philippines - to teach the English language in Japan. This paper, which is based on data from the author's personal experience and participant observation, aims to focus on teacher identity and migration through the narratives of Filipino English teachers who are transients or permanent residents in Japan. The transient teachers are foreign students in Japanese universities who do part-time jobs as English teachers. Similar to other foreigners who become English teachers, there are Filipinos who come to Japan because they are fascinated by the Japanese culture as soft power. Filipinos are the third largest immigrants in Japan consisting of Japanese descendants and those from inter-marriages. How do these Filipino teachers work and adjust to the Japanese system? Although they may have different educational backgrounds, how do they apply their specific expertise and knowledge in English teaching? Why do some of them change careers while others decide to build a career in English teaching?

What do most Japanese know about the Philippines? Surprisingly, the typical answer would be “bananas” and not the known facts such as the 7,107 islands, Filipino and English as the official languages plus the 170 dialects, and Taglish, a mix of Tagalog and English language.

A common debate among scholars tackles the Filipino identity since its history dates back from just a few early immigrants - Negros, Malays, Indians and Chinese (Zaide, 2002). The Philippines, transforming into a “Salad Bowl,” manifests its origin of Filipino language.

The Philippines was a Spanish colony for 333 years from 1565 to 1898. The Spaniards at that time, led by Ferdinand Magellan, lived by the words, “God, gold, and glory” to conquer the island (Zaide, 2002, p. 52-53). Spanish became the official language. Due to this major colonization, the Church is a heavy influence on the State.

During the American period in the Philippines that was briefly interrupted by the Japanese occupation in World War II, the English language was introduced and used in schools

for teaching. If the Americans did not colonize the country, Spanish could have been the official language.

The Filipino Language and Education in the Philippines

Tagalog is the Filipino language but it was officially called Filipino when the Philippine Constitution was changed in the 1960s. The Filipino language also uses the alphabets and is comprised of two phonic syllables. Hence most Filipinos can easily switch to different accents since the Filipino language itself has flexible syllabic words.

Based on the Department of Education Republic of the Philippines, the education program and the official total number of years of education in the Philippines are undergoing some changes (Department of Education Republic of the Philippines, 2013). President Benigno Aquino's current government has started implementing the K to 12 basic education program last school year (Official Gazette, 2013). Before this gradual transition, the average number of years of education in the Philippines is 17 years with 2 years of kindergarten, 6 or 7 years of primary education, 4 years of secondary education and 4 or 5 years of university depending on the course. Education in the Philippines is influenced by Western education except for the school calendar that starts from June until March and the non-existence of Junior high school. Most of the subjects like Math, Science, History and Social Sciences are taught in English so the textbooks are also written in English. Moreover, Filipinos are trained as early as in primary school to participate in discourse; therefore, by the time they reach the university they can easily and actively interact in class debates and discussions.

Not only is English taught in schools but also in some households or television shows. Even though daily conversations are both in Filipino and English, public announcements are mostly made in English; thus children in their formative

years can naturally pick up the language. Still others learn the language through self-study, interest in the language, music and literature in the English language. Undeniably, English fluency in the Philippines has also become a status symbol of good education and breeding.

Fresh off the Boat

The data in this paper is mostly based on participation observation and my personal experience as a Japanese government scholar (Monbusho) and Filipino immigrant of Japanese descent currently working as an English teacher in Japan. It focuses on the narratives of how Filipinos, excluding the Filipino-Americans, have become English teachers in Japan.

Based on their backgrounds and narratives, I have divided them into four categories: foreign students, enthusiasts of Japanese culture, those who are married to Japanese and those who specialize in English teaching as a second language. First, the foreign students who are under scholarships but trying to make ends meet because of the high standard of living in Japan, particularly in the capital, and who are doing part-time jobs in their spare time. Not only do they do it to earn extra cash, but also to have a break from academic life. What is also interesting is that most of them can easily get a part-time job in teaching English whenever their Filipino senior or senpai, who are about to graduate and leave Japan, recommend them to the job. The students or graduates belonging to the Filipino community in Japan have a solid network depending on the field that they are in. Since they intend to pursue a career related to their further studies, they see English teaching as a temporary job.

Similar to other foreigners, there do exist Filipinos actively responding to Japan's soft power. The hardcore Filipino fans of Japanese popular culture initially apply as English teachers to get working visa and enjoy living in Japan. They are fans of animation, manga, Cosplayers, J-pop, Japanese talents or idols. As they enjoy their special interests, they support themselves by

teaching English in Japan that can also be short-term since it serves as a stepping-stone to get into other jobs that are more suitable for them or just to hold over until they decide to go home.

Another category of teachers refers to those who are married to Japanese or foreigners living in Japan. Since there are numerous jobs in English teaching, this has become a primary choice for those who want to have a work-life balance and have more quality time with the family. Given the time and demands entailed, teaching English in Japan may be considered financially rewarding. Some wives of Filipino scholars also seek English teaching jobs to get access to social life with other foreigners living in Japan while augmenting their family income. There are also some cases wherein Filipino mothers are invited by other Japanese mothers to teach English to their children during playtime with other Japanese children.

We also have Filipinos who have post-graduate degrees in teaching English as a second language or related to this field. They usually have more opportunities of getting higher positions or salaries. They have more opportunities to get higher positions and salaries.

The Filipinos admit that they enjoy teaching not only because of its financial rewards compared to teaching in the Philippines but also because of the cultural diversity it offers in the working environment. Moreover, it is not as stressful since the Filipinos learn more about Japanese culture and people through their students. Thus, it becomes a win-win situation for both teacher and student.

In Hindsight

“Being considered as a “non-native” speaker. Some students don’t even know that English is widely spoken in the Philippines. I guess that’s not really my problem and I refuse to be part of other people’s ignorance over cultural diversity and academic competence of other Asian countries. It used to bother me a lot but I just let the end

Okada, Narratives of Filipinos teaching English in Japan product (of teaching) speak for itself.” – an Eikaiwa teacher with 7 years of teaching experience

In the 21st century, the different varieties of English will influence the way teachers view syntax, phonetics, and the importance on the “correct” language (Warschauer, 2000, p.515). The Filipino English accent is distinctly recognizable among Asians with English accents. Because the Filipino language uses two phonic syllables, most Filipinos can easily mimic and adapt to various English accents and even other languages. This is clearly evident in the numerous call centers established by foreign companies in the Philippines. Since the Philippines used to be under the American occupation, the English language is mainly based on American English. On the other hand, some Filipinos, who are familiar with the British English language, are exposed to British pop culture, art, music and literature.

Some Japanese prefer to be taught by Filipinos because their English seems to be easier understood. Since English language is not the native language of Filipinos, the Filipino teachers can explain English grammar to their Japanese students, just like how they learned it in school. Some Japanese, on the other hand, favor native speaking teachers for their own personal reasons.

Interestingly, there are more Filipino women than men teaching English in Japan. Similar to the education in the Philippines, teaching as an occupation in an all girls’ or all boys’ school from kindergarten to primary school caters to women. Being Asian has both its advantages and disadvantages in English teaching in Japan. While some Japanese prefer to have Caucasians as their teachers, some want to have Asians because they feel less intimidated. Sadly, there are still some institutions that allegedly pay Filipinos lower salaries even if they are just skilled and competent.

Most of the respondents can speak and understand basic Japanese conversation skills.

Being an English teacher does not require Japanese language proficiency. However, I would like to point out that being an English teacher has its disadvantages when it comes to social interactions with other Japanese outside of their work. Most Japanese do not have enough opportunities to practice their English so they take advantage of practicing English with foreigners who cannot speak Japanese. Sometimes the foreigners find it difficult to distinguish whether the Japanese are making friends or just trying to practice their English with them.

“In Japan, since English teaching falls under the “service industry”, there are many expectations from English instructors that are different in other countries. Being in the service industry in Japan means putting the “client” first. As the student is a (high-) paying client, everything must be done to satisfy them, which can be frustrating for a teacher. The instructor has no claim to authority at all.” – former Eikaiwa teacher for 3 years

Having mentioned this, it is greatly beneficial for Filipino English teachers who can speak the 3 languages: Filipino, English, and Japanese. These languages can be used separately in their private or public spaces. While Japanese is used in their public space and English in their work environment, Filipino language is used in their private space. It can be less frustrating to teach English to Japanese when the Filipino teachers can understand Japanese as they can customize the lesson to their students’ needs, especially for the beginners. Based on my survey results and participant observation, Filipino English teachers, who are scholars and have formal studies in Japan, are more proficient in the Japanese language.

“On average, the Philippines as an English speaking country is probably not at the top of their (Japanese) minds. When I ask a student to try to guess where I’m from, it’s not unusual for them to guess Singapore.” –

PhD candidate doing part-time teaching at an Eikaiwa for 3 years

The Japanese image of the Philippines still varies - it is not as popular as Thailand or Singapore as tourist destination given the media’s unflattering portrayal of the country as dirty, dangerous, and developing. Although these are quite apparent in Japanese media, some Japanese still think the Philippines is an interesting country, full of beaches, with a lot of warm-hearted, cheerful, English-speaking people. Whether these Filipinos are doing English teaching as a full time or part time job, they subconsciously have a social responsibility to promote the Philippines with its rich history and cultural diversity and, currently, as one of the fastest-growing economies and resilient nations in Asia, despite the corruption and natural calamities.

On the other hand, the Filipino teachers’ image of Japan evolves through their students. They learn how things work in Japanese society because they sometimes get students who are well connected or who may be working in high levels of government, business, or the academe. Moreover, they are educated by ‘ordinary’ students about culture, about how Japanese people relate to each other and to foreigners, and their perception of foreigners.

Conclusion

The journey of every Filipino’s experience in English teaching in Japan is different. Whether the goal is to make a living or earn extra cash, full time or part time, it has become a mutual gain for the teachers to learn about Japan through their students and likewise, the Japanese to learn English through their Filipino teachers. The Japanese- Filipinos’ strong relations is also manifested through this cultural exchange in teaching. For Filipino students who teach part-time, they feel they have gained more from their students, which help them understand the culture and adjust to living as foreigners in Japan. As long as one finds fulfillment in teaching English,

then it becomes a profession for them. For the Filipinos who find the job rewarding, they build a career out of it and excel in it. Depending on what kind of working environment they teach, their educational background, work experience and how they learned English are significant factors to be considered to measure how competent they are as teachers. An organization called Filipino English Teachers in Japan (FETJ) offers support to become competent teachers. Teaching English in Japan with its financial rewards and stability has also become attractive for some Filipinos to migrate whether permanently or temporarily in Japan. However, with the emergence of more affordable and convenient online English learning taught by Filipinos based in the Philippines but owned and managed by non-Filipinos, there is an income disparity. This, however, proves that the field of English teaching in Japan has become more in demand and English learning can become more affordable due to globalization and will continue to be so now that Japan will host the Olympics in 2020.

Notes

This presentation and paper are results of my personal experience as a Japanese government scholar for four years and later, as an English teacher for five years. The data are also based on participant observation, discussions with friends and colleagues, and questionnaires answered by 5 respondents.

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