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## Filipino English teachers in Japan: Exploring subject positioning in teaching experiences

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### Abstract

This paper focused on the teaching experiences of Filipino English teachers in Japan. It aimed to find out how the Filipino teachers position themselves and establish their own identities as teachers of English as a foreign language. The first research question sought to find out the roles and responsibilities the Filipino English teachers have in the school. The second question wanted to know the achievements and successes that they have had as teachers in Japan. The third question wanted to find out the challenges that the Filipino English teachers have encountered and how they overcame them. Results showed that aside from a more relaxed and less stressful teaching English as a foreign language task, Filipino English teachers in Japan also serve as cultural ambassadors of the Philippines in their respective classrooms. And although they are usually recognized for doing a very good job, Filipino teachers also face some challenges that stem up from their being non-native English speakers.

**Keywords:** Assistant language teacher; Filipino ALT; English teacher; Positioning Theory; Subject positioning

### 1. Introduction

Positioning Theory is a social theorization that aims to capture the dynamic analysis of conversations and discourses taking place in a social setting (Felix and Ali, 2023). It is rooted in discursive or cultural psychology and focuses on how individuals are positioned in discourses and interactions while constructing, projecting, or negotiating some micro-level identities. Its goal is to understand the nature of social actions and relationships as well as identity work in and through language use by studying how rights, duties, and obligations are distributed among individuals in any social storyline (Hayriye, 2021). Positioning theory began to emerge in the 1980s primarily in the area of gender studies (Positioning Theory Conference, n.d.). It was when Bronwyn Davies and Ron Harre published *Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves* in 1990 that it gained popularity and began to be known as a theory used in various fields of study including education, communication studies, workplace agency, political identity studies, public relations, and strategic communication. Harre (2015) further explained the reason behind the existence of positioning theory in a symposium in Burges and considered three conceptions of social or interpersonal actions: *what you can do, what you do, and what you are permitted or forbidden to do*.

Applying it to the education field, the theory has also been used in understanding teaching and learning processes in the classroom as well as learner and teacher identities constructed in classroom discourse.

However, Hayriye (2021) argued that there has been no comprehensive and systematic analytic framework for positioning analysis that can be applied to discourses of educational contexts yet. In her paper *A framework for positioning analysis: From identifying to analyzing (pre)positions in narrated story lines*, she suggested that having a comprehensive framework could help establish trustworthiness on positioning studies, guide researchers in analyzing

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positioning, and understand and analyze identity work more thoroughly in narrated story lines. As a result, she proposed three layers of analysis: a) story lines and positions, b) relational positioning categories, and c) social consequences.

Meanwhile, Vanassche (2018) claimed that positioning theory has been increasingly drawing educational researchers recently to understand teacher identity and its development over their career. This shows that there is a growing awareness of professional identity as a changing, dynamic, contextual, and relational phenomenon and not just a static and stable core. Having recognized this scenario, researchers have begun to draw on positioning theory to conceptualize and understand identity. This also leads to the steady growth of the body of empirical work using positioning theory as a theoretical and methodological lens.

Felix and Ali (2023) quoted Green, et. al. claiming that positioning theory has been perceived as a tool to capture the complexity of educational action. They further supported it by taking the case of teachers as an example. Through positions, teachers are indicating ways to pursue their rights and duties in relation to certain aspects of social reality. By paying attention to their diverse positional acts, they can identify the speech or acts that they are permitted to say or do. In other words, positioning theory allows one to seek what a person may do or may not do.

Japan is one of the oldest and largest markets for English teaching jobs in the world (International TEFL Academy, 2023) as evidenced by the wide variety of teaching opportunities in public and private schools as well as in after school and English conversation schools. This is the result of the mandate of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) that English be taught in all public elementary, junior high, and high schools. Even adults are also taking English classes online or in language schools throughout the country. According to a report made by the market research firm Statistica (2022), more than 16 million learners, which include both Japanese and non-Japanese citizens currently living in Japan, are actively learning the language.

Filipinos are among those leading recruits of private companies to teach English in Japan, and their numbers have been increasing steadily since the early 2000's (San Jose and Ballescas, 2010). In the same manner, the Philippines also ranks fifth in sending the most number of assistant language teachers or ALTs in the JET Programme, following the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia (JET Programme, 2023).

In her study, Fermin (2020) revealed that remuneration and working conditions are the top motivations of Filipinos to apply for and continue working as ALTs in Japan. This has also provided opportunities for them to still be engaged in the teaching profession while being properly compensated for the services they render. Thus, the experience of working as an ALT is highly valued by Filipino ALTs, and they tend to continue working longer than ALTs from other countries (Sugimoto and Yamamoto, 2019).

However, San Jose and Ballescas (2010) found out in their study that Filipino ALTs under private dispatch companies receive salary differentiation in comparison to the “native speaker” ALTs and those under the JET Programme. Moreover, Balgoa (2019) quoted San Jose and Ballescas that among the challenges faced by Filipino ALTs is not being considered as “native speakers” and having “Asian accents”. This sort of discrimination through “othering” and judging of performance based on the dichotomy of the nativeness-non nativeness is felt by Filipino ALTs around their native speaker colleagues (Balgoa, 2019).

Meanwhile, in their study on the employment issues of Filipino ALTs in Japan, Sugimoto and Yamamoto (2019) claimed that ALTs find it difficult to get into the circle of Japanese teachers, and some feel discrimination to a certain extent. They also pointed out that one factor that causes the difficulty of belonging to the Japanese teachers' community at school is language barrier.

Having all these predicaments and other current and recent situations Filipino English teachers in Japan are facing, this study was conceived to find out how they position themselves as English teachers and as Filipinos working in the Japanese school system.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

This study aims to explore the subject positioning of Filipino English teachers in Japan through their teaching experiences.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the roles of Filipino English teachers in Japan?
- What are their biggest achievements in teaching English as a foreign language?
- What are the challenges that Filipino English teachers in Japan have encountered?

## 1.2. Review of Related Literature

This section offers summaries of some literature sources pertinent to the nature of this study.

The concept of subject positioning emerges from a number of related attempts to move away from essentialist formulations of personhood, which dominated social science thought in the twentieth century in order to conceptualize the person as one who is constructed in the language and social contexts in which he or she lives (Guilfoyle, 2016). It states that people make sense of who they are by locating themselves within culturally circulating discourses and narratives.

Torronen (2001) defined subject position as a construction which, on the one hand, evolves in a specific relation to the audience and to the existing subject positions in a particular context of interaction and which, on the other hand, obtains its meaning by being attached situationally to categories and story lines. This definition suggests that subject positions actually evolve in communication as effects of three elements, namely categories, story lines, and positioning (Torronen, 2001). These three elements that he mentioned are similar to the positioning triangle that was initially proposed by Van Langenhove and Harré (1999), McVee et al., 2011, and Felix and Ali (2023). The positioning triangle is composed of three aspects: positions, speech acts, and storylines—all are fundamental in characterizing the complexity of social acts through positioning theory (Felix and Ali, 2023).

Dumalao and Tepsuriwong (2019) quoted Kreber and Kelchtermans in considering teachers' identity as an important component in the sociopolitical and sociocultural landscape of the classroom in the teachers' professional development. This can be attributed to the idea that the teachers' own professional identities can be rich teaching and learning resources to draw upon and enhance a closer relationship with their students, colleagues, and the communities they belong to.

Martinez-Luengas and Mendez (2022) emphasized the importance of incorporating subject positioning in English language teaching reasoning that subject positioning uncovers the nature of domination as well as the notion of positioning in the sense of power. They quoted Davies and Harre (2007) and Langenhove (1999) saying that adopting a position involves accommodation or resistance in the midst of dilemmatic struggles. Martinez-Luengas and Mendez also made mention of the studies of Chalak and Ghasemi (2017) who focused on subject positions in advanced ELT textbooks' conversations, Yuya (2022) who analyzed how native speakerism influenced a Taiwanese Canadian female assistant language teacher or ALT and Li (2021) who explores teachers' subjective position to give sense to middle school teaching as exemplars of some published works that show how social roles and rules, power, and positioning are intertwined in ELT.

In their study, Dumalao and Tepsuriwong (2019) revealed that the novice Filipino teachers in Thailand experienced challenges in forming their identity and in positioning themselves as professional language teachers. Results also showed that these Filipino teachers struggle a lot in negotiating with the expectations of the society as Filipinos are viewed as non-native teachers. This supports the study of Balgoa (2019) showing that for Filipino ALTs in Japan, the workplace can be fraught with obstacles, hardships, adjustments and to a certain extent discrimination because they are not considered as "native speakers" and because of having an "Asian accent".

Dumalao and Tepsuriwong (2019) suggested international policy makers, school organizations, and stakeholders acknowledge the complexities of teacher identity construction that can give rise to teacher identity conflicts and might cause novice teachers to reconsider their commitment to the teaching profession based on the experiences they have in their workplaces.

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## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to find out how the participants position themselves in their experiences as Filipinos teaching English as a foreign language in Japan. In a semi-structured interview, the respondents have to answer preset open-ended questions that serve as interview guides. These key questions help define the areas

to be explored and allows both the interviewer and interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail (Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E. et al., 2008).

The semi-structured interview approach is flexible and allows relevant information to be further elaborated or discovered during the conduct of the interview that were not previously considered or thought of by the researcher or researchers. Jamshed (2014) suggested that in order to have the data collected more effectively, recording of the interviews is appropriate for the researcher to focus on the interview content and the verbal prompts.

## 2.2. Participants

Four Filipinos teaching English across Japan were purposively chosen and interviewed to gather relevant data. All of them came to Japan as ALTs under the JET Programme. Since its inclusion in the program in 2014, the Philippines has been sending a dramatically increasing number of participants (Bisenio, 2023). The Philippines now ranks fifth in sending the most number of JET ALTs, with a total of 242 as of the last intake (JET Programme, 2023).

One of the participants is now in their fourth year as a prefectural ALT teaching at a senior high and special needs schools in Hokkaido Prefecture. The other three have just graduated from the program last year. After their contracts with JET, one was hired directly by a municipal Board of Education (BOE) in Yamaguchi Prefecture, while one was also hired directly by another municipal BOE in Osaka Prefecture. Both still work as ALTs at elementary, junior high, and senior high schools. Meanwhile, the third respondent now works at an *eikaiwa* school or an English conversation school in Shiga Prefecture. She shifted from being an ALT to being the main teacher in the classroom.

All participants have had experiences teaching in the Philippines before getting accepted to JET.

## 2.3. Data Collection

Data for this study was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with two key informants. All interviews were conducted through an online video conferencing platform for convenience. Conducting semi-structured interviews rather than questionnaires was chosen because face-to-face meetings help the researcher create rapport and trust with key informants, which would encourage them to give detailed, honest accounts of their experiences working as English teachers in Japan. This method also allows the researcher to properly convey his intentions, ask for some clarifications or follow up questions based on the answers, and address any concerns that the research participants may have at the moment of interview.

All interviews were conducted at the agreed time prior to the meeting and were recorded with the expressed consent of the participants. The recorded interviews were then transcribed in verbatim to capture all the words, expressions, including utterances and nuances of the participants. Thus, no questions and answers were paraphrased. But filler words and conversational affirmations were edited out from the interview records.

The interview transcripts were read twice for validation and confirmation to identify the major themes and contents.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

To gather the needed data, the researcher conducted interviews with three Filipino English teachers in Japan. All interviews were conducted online. Three main questions were discussed in the interviews. These questions focused on the experiences of the participants teaching English at a private kindergarten school and at public elementary, junior high, and senior high school in Japan. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. The answers of the participants were analyzed to arrive at the results of this study.

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## 3. Results and discussion

Four respondents were purposively chosen to be interviewed for this study. Their names have been changed to protect their identity. All of them came to Japan as ALTs under the JET Programme. One of them is still working as a JET ALT; two are now hired directly by their respective Boards of Education still as ALTs, and the other one now works at an *eikaiwa* or English conversation school.

Prior to their participation in the program, all of them are licensed professional teachers and have been teaching in private and public schools in the Philippines where they performed other ancillary tasks on top of their classroom teaching responsibilities.

The participants were asked to share their experiences as English teachers in Japan, whether as ALTs or as English conversation teachers. Specifically, they were asked about their roles in the school or schools they are placed in, their achievements or successes so far, and the challenges they have encountered and how they overcame them.

### 3.1. Identity fluidity and flexibility

When asked about their experiences teaching English in Japan, all the participants could not help but compare their roles as EFL teachers with their roles when they were still teaching in the Philippines.

Ana, a high school Mathematics teacher in the Philippines, finds her current role as ALT in Japan less stressful and much easier compared to what she used to do as a teacher back home. She shared:

“My main role is basically to assist a Japanese English teacher in the classroom. I do not prepare the lessons or rate the students’ work. Sometimes, I prepare warm-up activities and fun games for the students or talk about Philippine history and culture, such as Philippine music, foods, or Filipino traditions. As an ALT, my job is more relaxed than what I did as a Math teacher in the Philippines...”

Though she was trained and is used to her role as a mathematics teacher, Ana now enjoys her new roles of being a “games master” and a “cultural ambassador” of her country to her school placements and her local community, which is one of the main roles of a JET ALT. This is taken seriously by some other Filipino ALTs given their limited roles within the Japanese education system (Fermin, 2019). San Jose and Ballecas (2010) also noted that Filipino ALTs are doing their job of promoting multiculturalism inside and outside of the English classroom.

Meanwhile, Jan, a master teacher who also held administrative positions in the Philippines, shared how he adapts his teaching strategies to the level of his Japanese students as compared to what he used to give to his students in the Philippines.

“Definitely, it’s way different from the way we taught in the Philippines. Teaching strategy-wise, there’s a lot of things that are not applicable in the ALT job...because the students’ levels of English could not match the needed skills for the kinds of activities that we used to give.”

Mary, an online English teacher catering young adults to professionals as her students, also shared her overwhelming experience on how she makes a sudden switch of role and strategies in teaching the language to totally different levels of students.

“I used to teach older students. Now I teach at an *eikaiwa*...from babies to senior high school students...[the school] has a particular methodology. More on TPR [total physical response], like every vocabulary there is a corresponding gesture...”

Since her youngest students are about one-year old babies, Mary also performs roles other than being an English teacher, such as feeding the babies and teaching them the vocabulary when they are hungry, leading them to exercise, reading storybooks, among others. She also added that she was sometimes invited by teachers of other subjects to serve as a resource person in several social studies lessons or topics.

The above discourses of the participants only strengthen the claims of Guilfoyle (2016) that people are seen to occupy multiple positions according to the multiple narratives and situations they experience in their lives. It can also be seen that the participants dropped their old roles and embraced the new ones in order to gain their senses of membership to the community or workplace they are currently in (Dumalao and Tepsuriwong, 2019).

### 3.2. Competence and Excellence

The participants also talked about the achievements or successes they have so far in their journey as teachers in a foreigner teaching English in Japan.

Mark, who used to be a volunteer teacher in the Philippines and has been directly hired by the same contracting organization in his JET years, considers his being directly hired by the BOE as his greatest achievement in his career as an English teacher in Japan. He attributed this to his [according to his own perception] performance as an ALT during his participation in the JET Program.

“They [the city mayor, city council, BOE] created a position just for me...it took them a year to create it. The fact that they don’t want to let me go, it means a lot because it seems like we are creating an impact not just in the classroom but also in the community...”

He added that he also was given a “blessing” by the city and BOE officials to start his private *eikaiwa* or English conversation school apart from his ALT job.

“I think that is something because this is a product of your performance as an ALT. Because there are people who noticed your capabilities and abilities, and then they created this for you. Like they outsourced you. And then it started [already]. My *eikaiwa* is going on its first anniversary. It’s for adults.”

In both situations, Mark has cemented his identity as a valuable and effective member of the community as recognized by the organization he belongs to, in this case the officials of the BOE and the city.

Jan, on the other hand, considers his initiative in organizing a cultural exchange program that involves public high schools in his former city placement and a chosen private high school in the Philippines.

“I consider my biggest success is being able to initiate and start the citywide online cultural exchange program which is still on-going even if I’m no longer in that city...high school students in the city [in Japan] with partner schools in the Philippines.”

It is worth noting that just like Mark, Jan has been identified as an important member of the community as the initiator of a big project as he is still part of the organizing committee even if he no longer works for the BOE and JET Programme.

Mary, for her best achievement, shared that at some instances, she was able to involve teachers of other subjects in the English camps that she had organized for students.

“It’s quite funny to see that when I organized English camps for students, some teachers of other subjects also joined. They were among the students who played *Amazing Race* around the school. I just don’t know if they really intended to join or they incorporated the event in their respective classes.”

For Mary, because of her activities, she was able to invite her colleagues to join her classes. Unconsciously, she has established her identity as an organizer of events or activities that not only students but also teachers could join and enjoy.

The accounts of Jan, Mark, and Mary support the claim of Dumalao and Tepsuriwong (2019) that organization and society are the place where teachers construct their own identity and existence. They quoted Lopez (2009) in their observation that through institutions, teachers could realize their significance to the community.

However, the responses of Jan and Mark are in contrast to the result of Dumalao and Tepsuriwong’s study (2019). Some of their participants lamented that they were being judged because of their status as NNES teachers which resulted in injustices and inequality in access to academic resources, salary, development, and treatment.

These results prove that when non-native English speaker teachers negotiate, imagine, and develop their identities, the norms surrounding their practice also prove highly influential upon whether and how they view or position themselves and are recognized as professional members of the ELT community.

### 3.3. Filipino spirit

For the third main topic, the participants were asked to share the challenges that they have encountered in their role as Filipino English teachers in Japan and how they were able to overcome these challenges.

Mark lamented how some of his JTEs seem to not care whether the students are actually learning English or not. He also considers the teaching approaches of the JTEs not effective in teaching EFL as among the challenges he has faced in teaching English in Japan.

“It’s kind of difficult to accept that ‘How are they teaching English like this?’ Obviously not effective. Just for the sake of getting by the day. When you talk to them, they are undermotivated. But they know it. They can admit it to themselves. But they seem to not care.”

In this situation, Mark struggles on how to position himself as an English teacher but can only do so much because he has to consider not bypassing his JTE who is, in all cases of ALTs, the authority in the classroom.

Mark's frustration is validated by Fermin's study (2019) where she claimed that the underutilization of ALTs in English classes is a well-documented problem. She cited the educational policies not clearly stating the roles and responsibilities of ALTs during team-teaching, which often leads to many ALTs being reduced to merely a "human tape recorder" during classes instead of using them as a resource for language or cultural lessons.

For Jan, his biggest challenge is making the students see his job differently.

"My biggest challenge these days is how to make students understand that my role is not just to give them games. I want them to learn practical uses of English. I want them to be enjoying while learning."

As a seasoned teacher, Jan is frustrated that students only see his role as a "game master" who only goes to their English classes to make them play games without actually learning useful English. Mark agreed to this by sharing his observations that some students see English as a "useless subject" and that they only see it as their break period from the other more difficult subjects.

With these different experiences shared by the participants, they all are unanimous in believing that as Filipinos teaching English in Japan, they should still try to find a way to make their lessons as interesting and meaningful as possible.

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#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the interviews, Filipino English teachers in Japan have more relaxed and less stressful tasks in the Japanese classroom. Aside from teaching English, they also serve as cultural ambassadors. From the responses, it can be concluded that Filipino English teachers in Japan care so much about their work, so much that they have been constantly recognized for doing very well. However, they can only do so much about the system and bureaucracy that Japan has been into for the longest time.

This study has some limitations. In choosing the respondents, some factors were not considered. One factor is the teaching background of the teachers before coming to or working as an English teacher in Japan. Those who have no prior teaching experience might have a different perspective from those who have been teaching for quite some time. In the same manner, those who have been working as solo teachers or main classroom teachers might have a different experience as compared to the ALTs. And third, ALTs from private dispatch companies might have different information about their roles and experiences that JET ALTs are not familiar with.

It is therefore recommended that these aforementioned factors be considered in choosing the respondents for future studies as this. The possibility of including Filipino English teachers from other companies and direct hires might give a more comprehensive idea how Filipinos teaching English in Japan establish their identities in their respective work environments.

Furthermore, due to the limitations of this study, it is also recommended for future studies to delve into the perception of Japanese teachers and school administrators on the performance of Filipino English teachers in Japan. This will give current and aspiring Filipino English teachers some ideas on what aspects to improve to become a more effective teacher of English in Japan.

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#### Compliance with ethical standards

##### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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