

Unveiling the Stories of English as a Second Language (ESL) Teachers

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Abstract — The research entitled Unveiling the Stories of English as a Second Language (ESL) Teachers was conducted with 10 teachers from 5 selected schools of the Bay Sub-office in Laguna, using a purposive sampling. The research problem and objectives focused on providing answers to the questions referring to how the second language teachers narrate their significant experiences, the core narratives that emerged from the significant experiences, the meanings that were drawn from these core narratives, and the proposed insights that can help improve the instructional experiences of teachers of ESL teachers. The researcher used a qualitative research design that indicates narrative inquiry, gathered data from the information provided by the participants, using an in-depth interview with open-ended and structured questions. The interviews were transcribed, and narrative analysis was executed as a method to describe the stories of the teachers involved. Themes such as learners' lack of skills, the use of different approaches, differentiated activities, teachers' essential characteristics, and teachers' positive traits were thoroughly dissected after the significant experiences were highlighted, while inductive analysis that shows how the themes emerged and conceptualization were given to provide more descriptions and comprehensive explanations to the results. Moreover, upon the findings, the researcher enumerated and proposed ways in order for teaching experiences of Second Language Teachers to be improved, such as training, professional growth, research engagement, and teachers' collaboration, which the teachers of Bay Sub-office, including the learners, especially the struggling learners, will benefit. Other proposals the researcher would like to be implemented on the part of the teachers, aside from the ways aforementioned above, are: reduced workload, digital literacy training, learning communities, and differentiated instruction. Improving the teaching performance of English teachers in elementary schools requires a holistic approach that addresses both pedagogical skills and the specific challenges of teaching young learners.

Keywords — *English as a Second language, ESL teachers, narrative analysis, qualitative design*

I. Introduction

The acquisition of skills in using English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is a rewarding experience. Filipinos, known for their proficiency in teaching English as a second language, have attracted learners from non-English-speaking countries such as South Korea,

Taiwan, and Vietnam. This trend began around 2012, when demand for English teachers in the Philippines increased significantly, as reported by a 2012 BBC Business article titled "End of the University as an English Institution of the Philippines."

One key reason international students choose the Philippines is its affordability and the strong teaching abilities of Filipino educators. As digital platforms gained prominence—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic—many ESL teachers transitioned to online instruction, expanding their reach and applying their teaching skills to foreign students. This shift also allowed teachers to enhance their proficiency through practice and experience.

Becoming an effective English teacher requires dedication, education, and training. Not all teachers are inherently confident or skilled in grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation, but these can be improved through ongoing professional development. The current study, "Unveiling the Stories of English as a Second Language (ESL) Teachers," explores the experiences of selected teachers and their journey toward becoming effective instructors using English as the medium of instruction.

The study revealed that effective teachers are those who are well-trained, knowledgeable, and prepared. Their shared insights informed the best practices and recommendations disseminated among teachers at Bay Central Elementary School, ultimately benefiting learners as well. Teachers emphasized the importance of regular practice, active use of English in conversation, and exposure to reading, listening, and visual materials to improve vocabulary and grammar.

Numerous resources are now available online to support teachers' professional development, and many schools offer training and workshops to help reskill educators. The ability to communicate fluently in English remains a key advantage for non-native speakers, particularly in Asian countries such as Taiwan, South Korea, China, Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam, where English is increasingly used for education and business.

This study draws on Dearden et al. (2018), who explored EMI implementation in non-native English countries. In the Philippines, subjects like Math, Science, TLE, and English are taught in English, despite it being a second language. This supports a macro-level approach, where English is viewed as a global language bridging different cultures.

At the micro level, Wen et al. (2018), Pun and Thomas (2020), highlight how teachers' confidence and language challenges impact their classroom performance. Many Filipino teachers are conscious of their grammar or accents, which can affect their self-assurance in teaching. Social context also plays a role, as the Philippines offers a supportive environment for English instruction, with competent teachers and a strong ESL presence.

Despite English being a second language in the Philippines, most teachers are capable and confident. This aligns with Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, which is an individual's belief in their ability to succeed. Teachers must have the courage to face fears, embrace new

experiences, and overcome challenges to become effective educators.

However, not all English teachers are equally equipped—some rely on their first language (e.g., Tagalog) during instruction, while others struggle with grammar or pronunciation. Accent, stress, and intonation also influence how effectively teachers engage students.

Through this research, the stories of ESL teachers in the Bay Sub-Office were documented, highlighting how they handle diverse learners, navigate challenges, and adapt to various learning needs. These insights are valuable for both new and experienced teachers.

To contextualize the global use of English, the study uses Kachru's (1985) Concentric Circles Theory, which categorizes English use into three circles:

1. Inner Circle – Native English-speaking countries (e.g., UK, USA, Australia), considered norm-providing. This aligns with the micro-level, which focuses on individual interactions.
2. Outer Circle – Former British colonies like India, Singapore, and the Philippines, where English is used as a second language in formal settings. This connects with the meso-level, involving communities and institutions.
3. Expanding Circle – Countries like China, Germany, and Russia, where English is taught as a foreign language for international communication. This corresponds to the macro-level, involving large-scale societal patterns and globalization.

Understanding these circles helps identify how English is spread and used across countries. The study emphasizes that Filipino teachers, though non-native speakers, possess the skills, confidence, and self-efficacy to effectively teach English, positioning the Philippines as a key player in the global ESL landscape.

Literature Review

The effectiveness of teachers in imparting knowledge and skills largely depends on their training, experience, and subject mastery. Proficient educators—especially in teaching English—must be well-versed in their subject to deliver quality instruction. One cannot teach what they do not know.

To support this research, several relevant topics were explored: teacher self-efficacy, classroom language proficiency in EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction), pedagogical challenges, learner motivation, teacher wellbeing, and teacher engagement with research.

According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to perform tasks, distinct from general self-confidence. Studies show that high teacher efficacy is linked to stronger commitment, resilience, and motivation to support learners. Teachers with high efficacy embrace challenges and persist through setbacks. In contrast, those

with low efficacy avoid challenges, focus on negative outcomes, and often lose confidence in their abilities (Cherry, 2020).

Teachers must be flexible and willing to accept new responsibilities, even if unfamiliar. While taking on tasks outside their expertise may be challenging at first, doing so leads to growth, confidence, and professional competence. Success in unfamiliar roles becomes a significant achievement, highlighting the importance of trying before rejecting new opportunities. Continuous learning is essential not only for teachers' growth but also for providing up-to-date knowledge to students.

Bandura's concept of self-efficacy is central to understanding teacher motivation. Teachers with high self-efficacy show greater perseverance, openness to challenges, and commitment. Their beliefs can be strengthened through mastery experiences, observing others, encouragement, and emotional regulation (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020a). Teacher education programs should prioritize these sources to boost efficacy and performance.

Modern teaching now relies on multimedia and technology, which enhances engagement but also presents challenges—especially for those not fluent in English or not tech-savvy. Nonetheless, using technology is now a core expectation in 21st-century education.

In the Department of Education (DepEd), elementary teachers are often assigned to subjects or roles beyond their specialization—such as coordinator duties or teaching unfamiliar subjects. Despite limited training, teachers are expected to adapt, relying on self-study, creativity, and resourcefulness to meet these demands. Flexibility, therefore, is not just a skill but a necessity in the teaching profession. Some teachers struggle to teach English effectively, especially when it is not their area of specialization. When assigned English lessons without sufficient training or background, they often resort to using Filipino or code-switching, which limits learners' ability to develop English language skills. A lack of proficiency in grammar and vocabulary among teachers affects the quality of instruction and impairs students' ability to learn English as a second language.

In contrast, teachers with strong foundations, proper training, and experience are more effective and proficient in using English as a medium of instruction (EMI). As English continues to grow as a global language of instruction, EMI is being implemented at all educational levels—from primary school to university. However, studies have identified several challenges, including low English proficiency among both teachers and students.

According to Alloush et al. (2020), English plays a key role in global communication and education, but its use must be balanced to avoid undermining native language development. Chen (2020) found that EMI can improve English and subject comprehension but may negatively impact native language skills. Similarly, S. Lee (2021) found that while EMI students improved in English, those taught in their mother tongue had better understanding of scientific concepts. Overall, while EMI supports English language acquisition, it must be implemented ~~carefully to ensure students also grasp subject content and maintain native language proficiency~~.

In the Philippines, several subjects—such as Science, Mathematics, and TLE—are taught in English at the elementary level, even though most Filipino learners are not native English speakers. While the curriculum requires English as the medium of instruction, many teachers resort to using Tagalog translations due to limited proficiency. This highlights a major challenge: most subject teachers are not English majors and may lack the fluency needed to teach effectively in English.

Teachers face difficulties expressing concepts and delivering lessons in English, especially when not trained in the language. As Macaro (2020) and Macaro et al. (2021) point out, effective English-medium instruction (EMI) requires more than general proficiency; it involves specific language skills suited for classroom teaching.

To address this, the Philippine Department of Education administers an English Proficiency Test for all teachers, regardless of specialization. Globally, countries like Australia, Canada, and the UK require international tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, or TOEIC for foreign teachers, with minimum scores (e.g., IELTS Band 7) needed for employment.

Beyond language proficiency, effective English-speaking teachers also need strong communication, organizational, and interpersonal skills. Proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing is essential for both teaching and engaging with students, parents, and peers. Good communication also involves simplifying complex ideas, showing empathy, and motivating students—key to successful EMI teaching.

The global rise of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is largely driven by university internationalization strategies aimed at attracting international students and enhancing the English proficiency of local learners (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020). In Europe, EMI programs emerged in response to initiatives like Erasmus, promoting English as the academic lingua franca.

English is a widely used second language in the country, making it a hub for international students—particularly from countries like Taiwan, Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand, Japan, and China—to study English. Filipino teachers not only help foreign students improve their language skills but also benefit personally, gaining teaching experience, enhancing their own proficiency, and contributing to cultural exchange and global collaboration.

Despite these advantages, EMI presents challenges, especially for non-native English-speaking teachers. Studies (Yuan et al., 2022; Dang et al., 2021; Pun & Thomas, 2020) show that many EMI teachers struggle with effective pedagogy, often relying too heavily on language proficiency while lacking knowledge of learner-centered and interactive teaching strategies (Richards & Pun, 2022b). These pedagogical gaps hinder classroom engagement and student understanding.

Learners who grow up in non-English-speaking environments often lack foundational awareness of the language's importance, which can lower motivation and comprehension. Teachers must therefore adopt modern pedagogical methods and technology tools to better

engage students and improve learning outcomes. As Loveless (2020) notes, fostering a supportive and inspiring classroom environment boosts both student and teacher performance.

Teachers in public elementary schools face significant challenges teaching English, primarily due to students' low language proficiency. Many learners struggle with reading, with some classified as non-readers or reading below frustration level, making it difficult for them to understand lessons taught in English. This leads to boredom, lack of motivation, and reduced classroom engagement.

Contributing factors include limited exposure to English at home, as most families use their first language. Some learners, however, benefit from access to technology where they can hear and practice English, aiding their language development.

To address these challenges, teachers must be engaging, motivated, and resourceful, using classroom management strategies, instructional materials, and a positive attitude to spark learners' interest. Teacher performance and passion are crucial in encouraging students to learn.

Research by Custodio & O'Loughlin (2020) and Coady (2020) stresses the importance of teachers understanding English learners' (ELs') cultural backgrounds and academic gaps. Under ESSA policy, schools are held accountable for the progress of ELs, highlighting the urgency of effective instruction.

Moreover, teacher self-efficacy is essential in supporting student success (Kim & Shin, 2021). Confident teachers help students build emotional awareness, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal relationships, all of which contribute to academic achievement. According to Banegas (2020) and Tsui's framework, assessment should be integrated into instruction and not treated separately, enhancing overall teaching effectiveness.

Teaching English, especially as a second language, presents numerous challenges, particularly in public schools where students often lack foundational language skills. Teachers experience stress, anxiety, and pressure from heavy workloads, unannounced observations, and the need to teach in a language they may not be fluent in. Despite this, teacher well-being, self-efficacy, and a positive mindset are crucial for effective instruction and student engagement.

Positive Psychology emphasizes the importance of teacher well-being, joy, and motivation in fostering productive learning environments. Teachers who feel confident, healthy, and supported can better inspire and motivate students, even in difficult teaching contexts.

Research and continuous learning play vital roles in improving teaching strategies. Reading educational research—whether in print or digital form—enhances teachers' content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and ability to engage learners. However, time constraints, paperwork, and lack of research skills often limit teachers' ability to engage in research.

Despite these barriers, research-informed teaching helps educators update their methods, shift away from traditional practices, and meet the needs of 21st-century learners. Engaging in

research also supports professional growth, particularly for novice English teachers or those seeking to improve their classroom practices.

Ultimately, the study underscores the need to explore the lived experiences of second language teachers to better understand their challenges and share effective strategies. Doing so can lead to more confident, competent educators—and better learning outcomes for students.

Statement of the Problem

The study aimed to unveil the stories of the English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers of the Bay Sub-office in Laguna.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do the English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers narrate their significant experiences?
2. What themes emerged from the significant experiences of the selected ESL teachers?
3. Based on the findings of the study, what may be proposed to improve the teaching experiences of the ESL Teachers?

II. Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design specifically the narrative inquiry. Since 2020, Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly's seminal work, *Narrative inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (2000), has continued to influence a diverse array of qualitative studies across various disciplines. Researchers have applied their narrative inquiry framework to explore lived experience in contexts such as education, healthcare, and social justice. As defined by Clandinin et. al (2000) as cited in *Exploring Teachers' Narratives: Challenges and Strategies for Enhancing the Teaching Process* by Fevzi Dursun et. al (2025). This study delved into the stories of ten (10) Second Language Teachers, from five (5) medium schools in Bay Sub-office by centering educators' personal stories, the research identified key challenges and strategies pertinent to effective teaching practices. The co-participants were chosen purposively following these criteria: They must have at least 5 years of teaching experience in English, preferably with highest degree attained such as Doctoral Degree or Masteral Degree, in addition to Bachelor's Degree aligned to English as specialization, ages range from 32 - 55 years old, and a classroom observation with an overall proficiency rating of at least 7, including an Individual Performance Commitment and Review Form (IPCRF) rating with outstanding or Very Satisfactory (VS). During the gathering of data, the researcher sought approval from the concerned authorities and executed the interview with the second-language teachers. After the permit was granted by the Principal and Public Schools District Supervisor, the researcher personally interviewed 10 selected teachers for 30 to 45 minutes per participant. The researcher obtained participants'

personal consent and approval for the study, and also provided them with information about its purpose and benefits to the teachers and learners. In addition to this, the privacy and confidentiality of the personal lives of selected English teachers were protected. Thus, the comprehensive and meaningful contributions of the lived experiences of English teachers will serve as best practices that can help other English teachers, and those who are just beginning teaching, improve their performance. For data analysis and interpretation of data, the researcher applied the Transcription, Coding, and Thematization using the method of inductive data analysis, after the researcher had interviewed with the co-participants.

III. Results and Discussion

The dissertation explored and unveiled the stories of English as second language (ESL) teachers. The experiences of the ten participants surfaced several challenges and strategies in teaching English as a second language:

1. The stories shared by the teachers highlighted the difficulties they encounter in teaching English. Among these challenges are handling non-readers, addressing learners with reading difficulties, limited vocabulary knowledge, and lack of comprehension across different levels of English. Teachers also struggle with managing diverse learners, translating the medium of instruction, and helping students who are unable to express their ideas effectively. In addition, some teachers find it difficult to sustain student motivation and to adapt their teaching methods to suit the needs of varied learners. To cope with these challenges, many teachers develop their own strategies and solutions tailored to their students' needs. Common practices include conducting remedial classes, using integrated activities, providing a supportive learning environment, implementing reading interventions, and introducing varied activities. Teachers also shared the strategies they apply in class, such as traditional theme writing, group activities, and collaboration with colleagues during LAC (Learning Action Cell) sessions. Teaching English as a Second Language requires tremendous effort. Teachers must continuously improve their weaknesses and enrich their skills through training and education to enhance their competence. A strong foundation in English equips them to face the inevitable challenges that arise in the classroom. However, since unpredictable situations often occur, teachers must embody essential values and attitudes such as patience, passion, compassion, positivity, hard work, dedication, and resilience. They must also be willing to embrace challenges and engage in research to refine their practice. Each teacher-participant in this study has a unique story, shaped by their experiences in the profession. Their years of service have contributed to the kind of educators they have become. The qualities they exhibit include self-improvement, personal growth, adaptability, effectiveness, efficiency, enthusiasm, eagerness, openness to lifelong learning, and generosity. Despite the problems they encounter, the participants were

able to maximize their strengths and expertise. They shared not only their challenges but also their ideas and insights on how to deal with struggling learners, demonstrating both their commitment to the profession and their dedication to student success.

2. The themes emerged from the significant experiences of teachers which include; the learners' lack of skills, the use of different approaches, differentiated activities, teachers' essential characteristics and teachers' positive traits.
3. The researcher concluded several proposals to improve the teaching experience of ESL teachers, including training, professional growth, research engagement, and collaboration on best practices. These were drawn from the challenges and strategies shared by the participants. The proposals are focused on the Improving the Students' Reading Difficulties – Teachers reported issues such as non-readers, limited vocabulary, lack of comprehension, and varying levels of English proficiency.; Approaches for Struggling Learners – Strategies included remedial classes, the Marungko approach, translation into Tagalog, integrated activities, supportive learning environments, and reading interventions.; Differentiated Activities – Teachers applied methods such as interactive games, theme writing, phonics, simplified vocabulary, and group activities to address learner needs.; and Essential Teacher Characteristics – Participants highlighted patience, passion, compassion, positivity, dedication, and openness to research. They also valued continuous learning, personal growth, generosity, determination, and enthusiasm. Through inductive analysis, these themes emerged organically, reflecting the lived experiences of teachers. Their stories showed both the challenges of teaching English as a second language and the proactive strategies and attitudes that shape their practice. Ultimately, the participants demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and a strong commitment to helping learners succeed despite difficulties.

IV. Conclusion

The experiences of the teacher-participants reveal that teaching English as a second language is a demanding yet deeply rewarding endeavor, marked by persistent challenges such as addressing non-readers, limited vocabulary, and varying levels of comprehension among learners. Despite these hurdles, teachers demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability through the use of remedial classes, reading interventions, differentiated activities, and collaborative strategies. Central to their effectiveness are core values—patience, passion, dedication, and a commitment to continuous growth—which empower them to respond to their students' needs with empathy and innovation. From these lived experiences, key themes emerged, including learners' lack of foundational skills, the application of varied instructional approaches, and the importance of essential teacher traits. These findings underscore the dual nature of ESL teaching: the presence of significant instructional gaps and the strength of teacher-driven solutions. As a result, the study proposes targeted interventions such as ongoing

training, professional development, research engagement, and shared best practices to further enhance teachers' competencies. Ultimately, the participants' stories highlight their unwavering commitment to student success and their vital role in improving English language learning through dedication, resilience, and reflective practice.

V. Recommendations

The study recommends several key strategies to enhance the teaching experience of ESL educators. First, professional development programs should be strengthened by providing targeted training in remedial reading, vocabulary-building, differentiated instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy, and reflective teaching practices through workshops, mentoring, and advanced certification opportunities. Second, collaborative teaching and peer learning should be encouraged by institutionalizing regular Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, where teachers can share best practices, co-develop lesson plans, and reflect on challenges together, fostering a supportive growth culture. Third, inclusive and engaging instructional practices must be promoted, incorporating theme-based learning, group activities, multilingual support, and scaffolded interventions to address diverse learner needs. Fourth, teacher well-being should be prioritized by offering counseling, recognizing achievements, and cultivating a positive school culture that values patience, dedication, and passion. Fifth, a structured mentorship program should be developed to support new teachers through guidance from experienced educators, sharing strategies, and encouraging continuous improvement. Finally, regular feedback mechanisms should be institutionalized, enabling administrators to provide constructive feedback through observations and student input, helping teachers set goals and shape their professional growth. These recommendations reflect the challenges and insights shared by the participants and aim to empower ESL teachers with the resources, mindset, and community needed to thrive, ultimately benefiting both educators and their learners.

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