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Professional Adaptation and Social Mobility Among Non-ELT Specialized Filipino Teachers in Vietnam: A Phenomenological Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Filipino teachers whose undergraduate preparation lies outside English Language Teaching (ELT) increasingly occupy English teaching positions abroad, yet little is known about how they adapt professionally and how they understand the social mobility associated with overseas work. This study explored the lived experiences of non-ELT specialized Filipino teachers working in Vietnam, focusing on their professional adaptation and perceived social mobility. Anchored on Schlossberg's Transition Theory, Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Development Theory, and Mohanty's perspective on education, employment, and socioeconomic mobility, the study employed Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological design. Eleven Filipino teachers with undergraduate specializations outside ELT, teaching English in Vietnam for one to sixteen years, were selected through criterion purposive sampling and participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed through horizontalization, clustering of meaning units into themes, textural and structural description, and synthesis of meanings and essence. Ten themes emerged, spanning economic necessity and family responsibility as catalysts for migration; transition beyond academic specialization; self-directed professional learning; classroom management and diverse learner needs; institutional support and employment uncertainty; cultural adjustment; professional confidence and teacher identity; improved economic circumstances and independence; unequal recognition and career limitations; and teaching as purpose and a foundation for future growth. Professional adaptation emerged as an ongoing, self-directed process of addressing pedagogical content gaps and reconstructing teacher identity, mediated by institutional support, curriculum clarity, and collaboration with teaching assistants. Perceived social mobility was multidimensional and non-linear: overseas employment improved purchasing power, family support, and personal autonomy but remained constrained by contractual precarity, credentialism, and labor-market hierarchies. The essence of the phenomenon was the pursuit of socioeconomic advancement through instructional self-reinvention and resilience within a stratified transnational labor market. The findings informed two proposed toolkits addressing pedagogical adaptation and strategic career and social mobility, with implications for teacher education institutions, host schools, recruitment practices, and pre-departure policy.

Keywords: *professional adaptation, perceived social mobility, non-ELT Filipino teachers, teacher migration, transcendental phenomenology, Vietnam*

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INTRODUCTION

The globalization of education has expanded opportunities for teachers to pursue professional experiences beyond their home countries, requiring them to develop new competencies and adapt to changing professional expectations (OECD, 2023). Within Southeast Asia, Vietnam has become a destination for foreign educators because of its sustained efforts to strengthen English language education, which have increased demand for English teachers in public schools, private language centers, and international schools (Nguyen & Sit, 2025). Filipino teachers have established a presence in this sector, supported by their English communication skills, pedagogical experience, and capacity to work in multicultural environments (Gabe, 2025). Although overseas English teaching has traditionally been associated with graduates of ELT and related disciplines, opportunities have also opened to Filipino educators from other academic backgrounds, including elementary and secondary education, values education, industrial education, and business administration.

For these non-ELT specialized teachers, entering English language teaching in Vietnam involves a transition from their original specialization to a different professional role, as well as adjustment to unfamiliar institutional practices, curriculum expectations, communication styles, and cultural norms. Overseas teaching may also influence how teachers perceive their social and economic positions. Employment abroad can provide opportunities to improve financial circumstances, support family members, and gain international experience, but these opportunities do not necessarily translate into upward mobility, since employment conditions, professional recognition, and access to career opportunities differ across settings (Docot, 2025; Yeh, 2025). Social mobility in this context is therefore best understood as teachers perceived changes in their economic circumstances, social status, opportunities, and quality of life rather than as a uniformly upward trajectory.

Existing studies have examined migration motivations, intercultural adjustment, professional identity, and resilience among Filipino teachers abroad (Castulo et al., 2025; Gabe, 2025; Yeh, 2025), but limited attention has been given to the lived experiences of Filipino teachers whose academic backgrounds are not in ELT and who have transitioned into English teaching positions in Vietnam. Overseas Filipino teachers are often treated as a homogeneous group, overlooking those who entered teaching through alternative career pathways, and few studies have used phenomenological approaches to capture the meanings these educators assign to their experiences.

This study explored how non-ELT specialized Filipino teachers in Vietnam experienced professional adaptation and made sense of social mobility. Specifically, it examined (1) how they described their lived experiences of professional adaptation; (2) how they described their transition from their original academic specialization into English language teaching, including their motivations, expectations, and initial experiences; (3) the professional, instructional, cultural, and institutional factors that facilitated or challenged their adaptation; (4) how they perceived changes in their economic circumstances, professional opportunities, social status, and quality of life; (5) how they experienced the value placed on their qualifications, competencies, and professional identities in the international labor market; and (6) how the textural and structural dimensions of their experiences converged to reveal the essence of the phenomenon. The study did not measure teaching effectiveness, income levels, or objective social class position, but focused on the meanings participants attached to their experiences. Its findings are intended to inform non-ELT and aspiring overseas Filipino teachers, teacher education institutions, recruitment agencies and host institutions, and policymakers, in support of AmBisyon Natin 2040, the Philippine Development Plan 2023–2028, and Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 8.

Literature Review

Professional Adaptation of International Teachers

Professional adaptation is a continuous process through which teachers adjust to new occupational environments, institutional cultures, and professional expectations. It is closely tied to professional learning: Flores (2021) described teacher learning as multidimensional, shaped by context, content, and change, while Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) emphasized that educational practice should draw on continuous learning and

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reflection. In Vietnam, Nguyen and Sit (2025) found that English teachers need sustained and flexible professional development to respond to curricular, technological, and learner changes, suggesting that competence develops through ongoing engagement rather than formal qualifications alone.

For international teachers, intercultural competence is a further dimension of adaptation. Deardorff (2020) described intercultural competence as the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required for effective and appropriate interaction across cultures, which can help teachers build relationships with students and colleagues and integrate into host institutions. Studies of Filipino teachers abroad indicate that overseas teaching may strengthen professional confidence and broaden instructional competence; Gabe (2025) found that Filipino English teachers in Vietnam adapted their teaching methods, classroom management, communication, and assessment practices to local institutional expectations.

Adaptation also involves the reconstruction of professional identity. Nigar and Kostogriz (2025), studying immigrant English teachers, proposed the concept of hybrid professional becoming, in which professional identity is fluid and continually reconstructed through social, cultural, and institutional experiences rather than fixed by prior credentials. This perspective is relevant to teachers who must negotiate the expectations of home and host systems while redefining themselves in new professional roles.

Teacher Migration and Social Mobility

Research on Filipino teacher migration identifies economic motivations alongside professional aspirations. Castulo et al. (2025) found that migration intentions among Filipino early childhood educators were associated with limited career advancement, financial instability, and inadequate institutional support, and that mobility could express professional autonomy and the pursuit of dignity and recognition. Yeh (2025) reported that economic incentives, personal growth, and career opportunities motivated Filipino migrant English teachers in Taiwan, while experiences of discrimination and identity struggles constrained their professional positioning. De Oca and Malaga (2025) similarly found that Filipino teachers who migrated to the United States sought improved living conditions and higher income while encountering cultural adjustment and personal sacrifices.

Mobility does not necessarily guarantee upward occupational movement. Docot (2025) documented how Filipino teachers in China obtained international employment while experiencing racialized valuation, insecure employment, and unequal treatment, and Claro-Azucena (2023) examined the mobility of Filipinos teaching English-mediated subjects in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand. Hunt et al. (2026), in a systematic review of bridging programmes for internationally educated teachers, identified information gaps, limited mentoring, and complex recognition processes as barriers to stable employment after migration. Samia and Calaguas (2026) likewise described both gains and challenges among Filipino teachers who left Department of Education positions to teach abroad.

Mohanty (2016) examined education as an instrument of socioeconomic transformation and intergenerational mobility, showing how educational opportunities influence earning capacity, income distribution, and family mobility. Applied to teacher migration, this perspective suggests that overseas employment may enable educators to translate their education into improved earnings and family support, while the studies above indicate that such mobility is mediated by labor-market hierarchies, credential recognition, and employment conditions.

Career Transition and Non-ELT Teachers

Contemporary careers increasingly involve movement across organizations, occupations, and national boundaries. Sullivan and Al Ariss (2021) reviewed perspectives on career transitions and showed that such movements require adjustments in professional identity, competencies, and aspirations, and Golis (2025) found that the career transitions of expatriate teachers were shaped by workplace conditions, host-country context, and personal circumstances. For teachers, international mobility can expand competencies and career possibilities, especially amid global teacher shortages that have heightened attention to recruitment, retention, and mobility (UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024).

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English language teaching has traditionally required formal preparation in language acquisition, methodology, and assessment, which distinguishes subject-specific pedagogical knowledge from general teaching competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). As demand for English teachers grows, however, institutions have adopted more flexible recruitment that recognizes English proficiency, certifications, transferable competencies, and teaching experience (OECD, 2023). In Vietnam, Ton (2025) found that English teachers exercised professional agency by making context-responsive pedagogical decisions amid reform and digital transformation, while Gabe (2025) observed that Filipino teachers refined their approaches and strengthened their confidence through classroom experience and reflection.

Despite this growing literature, existing studies have largely focused on licensed ELT specialists, expatriate teachers with traditional preparation, or overseas Filipino teachers as a single group. Little is known about how educators with non-ELT degrees navigate the transition into English teaching in Vietnam, develop language-teaching competencies, reconstruct their professional identities, and interpret the social mobility associated with their work. The present study addressed this gap.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on three complementary perspectives. Schlossberg's Transition Theory explains how individuals respond to transitions that alter their roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions through four factors, namely situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2022). It provided a lens for understanding the interconnected transitions participants experienced: migration from the Philippines to Vietnam, movement from their original specialization into English teaching, and adjustment to a different educational system and workplace culture. Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Career Development Theory views career development as a continuing process in which individuals develop and modify their self-concepts and professional identities across life stages and roles (Hartung, 2020; Zacher & Froidevaux, 2021); it helped explain how participants redefined themselves as educators after entering English teaching.

Mohanty's (2016) perspective on education, income distribution, and intergenerational mobility provided a lens for examining how overseas teaching was experienced as a pathway to changes in economic circumstances, occupational opportunities, social status, and quality of life, without assuming that international employment necessarily produced upward mobility. Together, these perspectives explained adaptation to change (Schlossberg), the development of professional identity over time (Super), and perceived changes in socioeconomic position (Mohanty). Consistent with the phenomenological design, they served as interpretive lenses applied after themes had emerged rather than as predetermined coding categories.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. The framework begins with career transition, representing participants' decision to pursue English teaching in Vietnam despite holding undergraduate qualifications outside ELT. This transition leads to professional adaptation, the dynamic process through which participants adjusted to the instructional, institutional, cultural, and interpersonal demands of teaching in Vietnam by acquiring pedagogical competencies, developing intercultural communication skills, and employing coping strategies. As adaptation continued, participants experienced social mobility, reflected in perceived changes in their economic circumstances, professional growth, career opportunities, professional identity, and future aspirations.

The lived experiences of the participants, encompassing the meanings, perceptions, and reflections they attributed to transition, adaptation, and mobility, formed the basis for describing the essence of the phenomenon through phenomenological inquiry. This understanding, in turn, informed the development of a Professional Adaptation and Social Mobility Toolkit intended as a practical guide for aspiring overseas educators, teacher education institutions, educational leaders, and policymakers.

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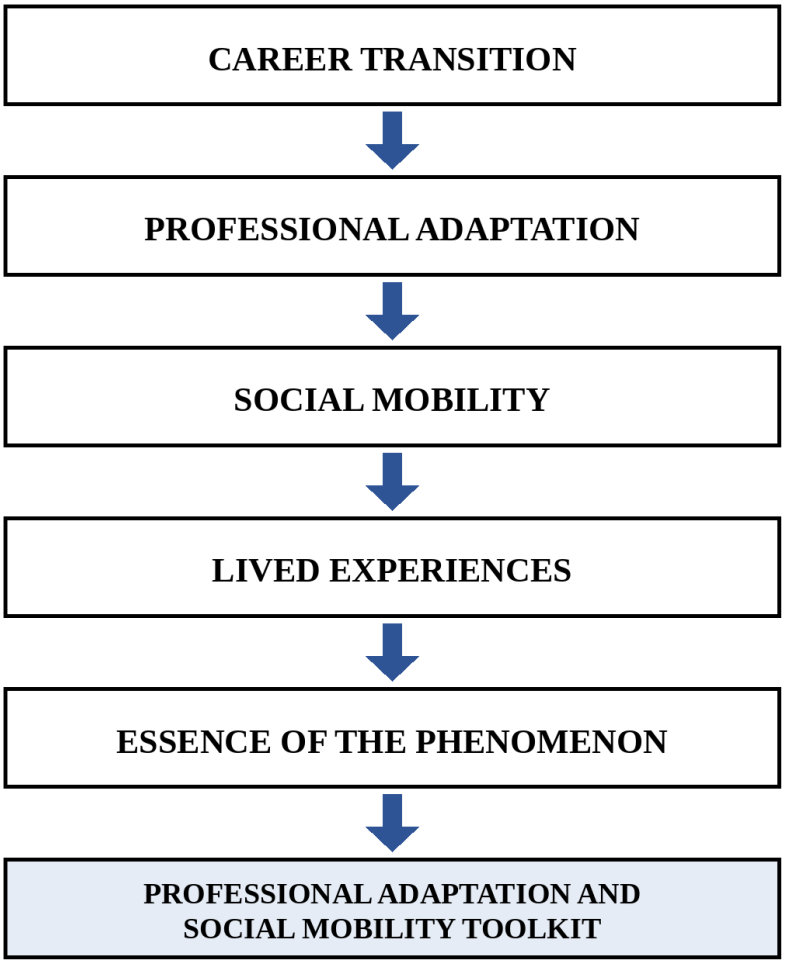


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework of the Study*

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative approach using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological design, grounded in Husserlian assumptions that lived experience and conscious meaning-making are legitimate sources of knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Moustakas, 1994). Rather than measuring variables or establishing causal relationships, the design sought to describe how participants perceived and made meaning of their transition from non-ELT backgrounds into English teaching in Vietnam and to identify the essential structure of their shared experience. The researcher practiced epoché or bracketing throughout, consciously setting aside assumptions about Filipino teachers, overseas employment, and social mobility, and in particular avoided presuming that working abroad necessarily resulted in upward mobility.

Research Locale

The study focused on non-ELT specialized Filipino teachers employed in diverse educational settings in Vietnam, including public schools, private schools, language centers, colleges, universities, and international schools, in major employment hubs such as Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and Dong Nai. Vietnam provided a relevant

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transnational context for examining how educators with non-ELT backgrounds adapted to English teaching responsibilities, navigated unfamiliar pedagogical practices, and negotiated their professional identities. The study did not compare or evaluate specific locations or employers.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Eleven participants were selected through criterion purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria were Filipino citizenship; a bachelor's degree in a discipline other than ELT, English Education, Applied Linguistics, or closely related language programs; current employment as a teacher of English or English-related subjects in a recognized educational institution in Vietnam; at least one year of continuous teaching experience in Vietnam; and voluntary informed consent. Potential participants were identified through the researcher's professional contacts and given an invitation explaining the study's purpose, eligibility requirements, procedures, risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature. Table 1 presents the participants' profiles.

Table 1. *Profile of the Participants (N = 11)*

Participant	Age	Civil Status	Educational Attainment	Previous Work Before Vietnam	Years in Vietnam	Dependents
P01	43	Married	Postgraduate units	DepEd teacher	3	3
P02	46	Single	MA in English Language	University lecturer	14	3
P03	37	Single	Master's graduate	Public school teacher (DepEd)	4	2
P04	27	Single	BEEd	Online ESL teacher; arnis coach	More than 4	0
P05	28	Single	BEEd	ESL teacher in the Philippines	3 years, 10 months	0
P06	40	Married	Bachelor's degree	Outdoor activity assistant/nurse	16	2
P07	36	Married	BS Business Administration	Credit investigator	1	2
P08	43	Single	Bachelor of Secondary Education	Events coordinator	3	3
P09	31	Single	Bachelor's degree; pursuing master's	Government employee	7	2
P10	33	Single	BS Industrial Education	DepEd senior high school teacher	2	0
P11	31	Single	Bachelor of Secondary Education	Part-time university teacher	3	0

Note. BEEd = Bachelor of Elementary Education. All participants held undergraduate degrees outside English Language Teaching; graduate qualifications listed were obtained after or alongside their undergraduate degrees.

Participants were aged 27 to 46 years; seven were single and four were married. Their previous occupations included public school teaching, university lecturing, online ESL instruction, nursing-related work, credit investigation, event coordination, and government employment. Their length of service in Vietnam ranged from one to sixteen years, and six reported having two or three dependents.

Research Instrument

Data were generated through a validated semi-structured interview guide covering participants' motivations, transition into English teaching, instructional and cultural adaptation, workplace experiences, professional identity, and perceived changes in their economic circumstances, occupational opportunities, social status, and quality of life. The guide was validated by three experts and allowed open-ended and probing questions

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to elicit rich descriptions. The researcher served as the principal instrument of inquiry and maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study.

Data Gathering Procedure

After ethics approval and informed consent were obtained, individual online interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes were conducted during participants' off-duty hours. With written consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, checked against the recordings, and verified through member checking. Focused non-participant observations of selected classroom and school environments, documented through descriptive and reflective field notes, were also conducted to complement the interview data. Transcripts were assigned participant codes, de-identified, and stored in password-protected files.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological method. Following epoché, the researcher conducted horizontalization by identifying significant statements describing participants' experiences and treating them with equal value, then removed repetitive or irrelevant statements and organized the remaining statements into meaning units. Meaning units were clustered into themes, which were used to develop textural descriptions of what participants experienced and structural descriptions of how and under what conditions they experienced it. Individual descriptions were synthesized into composite descriptions, culminating in a textural–structural synthesis of the essence of the phenomenon. Schlossberg's, Super's, and Mohanty's perspectives were applied only after themes had emerged.

Trustworthiness was established using the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was supported through member checking, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement; transferability through thick description of participants and context; dependability through an audit trail documenting participant selection, interviews, transcription, coding, and theme development; and confirmability through reflexive journaling, bracketing, and the use of direct participant quotations.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to institutional ethical standards, the Philippine National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research, and the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), and ethics approval was obtained before data collection. Participation was voluntary; participants received a participant information sheet, provided written informed consent, and could decline any question or withdraw at any time without penalty. Risks were minimal and limited to possible emotional discomfort in recalling professional experiences, and participants could pause or discontinue the interview. Participant codes replaced personal identifiers, information that could reveal identities or workplaces was removed, and recordings, transcripts, field notes, and consent forms were stored in encrypted, password-protected storage accessible only to the researcher and adviser.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis yielded ten interconnected themes, summarized in Table 2 with their textural and structural dimensions. The themes are discussed according to the research questions; quotations in Filipino are followed by English translations in brackets.

Table 2. *Emergent Themes and Their Textural and Structural Dimensions*

Emergent Theme	Textural Description: What Participants Experienced	Structural Description: Conditions of the Experience
1. Economic necessity and family responsibility as catalysts for migration	Leaving the Philippines to obtain better earnings, support family members, and improve living conditions	Family obligations, limited perceived domestic earning opportunities, and the pursuit of financial security
2. Transitioning beyond academic specialization	Teaching English despite a background in fields such as Values Education or Elementary Education	Differences between previous specialization and assigned teaching responsibilities
3. Continuous learning and self-directed professional development	Studying grammar, practicing English, observing experienced teachers, and learning through actual teaching	Limited initial ELT preparation and changing classroom demands
4. Negotiating classroom management and diverse learner needs	Managing young beginners, responding to behavior, adjusting methods, and setting boundaries	Language barriers, unfamiliar behavior, differences in age and proficiency, and varying school contexts
5. Institutional support, workplace conditions, and employment uncertainty	Receiving materials and colleague support while facing inconsistent guidance, workload, and uncertainty	School policies, teaching-assistant availability, part-time arrangements, and qualification requirements
6. Cultural adjustment and interpersonal relationships	Building relationships while navigating language and cultural differences	Living and working in a new country, interpersonal support, and practical communication strategies
7. Developing professional confidence and teacher identity	Becoming more flexible, confident, and responsive, and recognizing oneself as a capable teacher	Accumulated experience, reflection, classroom success, and feedback
8. Improved economic circumstances and personal independence	Meeting daily needs, saving, purchasing previously unaffordable items, and supporting family	Overseas earnings, cost of living, employment arrangements, and financial management
9. Unequal recognition, career limitations, and future aspirations	Encountering competition, qualification barriers, and uncertain opportunities while seeking further options	Credential requirements, perceived preference for native speakers, advanced qualifications, and networks
10. Teaching as purpose, resilience, and a foundation for future growth	Finding fulfillment in learners' progress, persevering, and viewing Vietnam as a meaningful life stage	Personal values, professional commitment, reflection, and aspirations for growth

Note. Adapted from the clustered themes of the study.

Lived Experiences of Professional Adaptation

Continuous learning and self-directed professional development

Participants' transition into English teaching prompted continuous, largely self-directed learning to address gaps in grammar, pronunciation, and language pedagogy. P02 realized, "I needed a deeper understanding of grammar rules and language structures," while P06, despite many years in Vietnam, stated, "inaaral ko pa rin siya" [I am still studying it], noting continued uncertainty about whether spoken English was always correct. Participants learned through English-language media, educational videos, observation of experienced teachers, and classroom practice. Formal training was less prominent, particularly for P01, whose predominantly part-time employment limited access to seminars.

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This reliance on self-directed learning reflects views of teacher learning as continuous and context-dependent (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Flores, 2021) and the need for sustained professional development among English teachers in Vietnam (Nguyen & Sit, 2025). In Schlossberg's terms, self-directed learning functioned as a key strategy for managing the gap between prior preparation and immediate instructional demands (Anderson et al., 2022). However, informal learning cannot fully replace structured induction and language-teaching preparation, pointing to the value of formal support for non-ELT teachers.

Developing professional confidence and teacher identity

Participants described a shift from uncertainty toward confidence as they accumulated classroom experience. One participant moved from relying on a prepared script to being able to "follow my lesson plans without depending on script" (P02). P01 described an affirming realization while teaching young Vietnamese learners: "Yes, teacher pala ako" [Yes, I am a teacher after all], adding, "Even though I'm not an English teacher, I'm still a teacher." Confidence grew as participants observed learners' progress and recognized their own capacity to respond to classroom challenges, although they continued to identify areas for improvement.

This development corresponds with Super's view of vocational self-concept as evolving through role exploration and performance (Hartung, 2020; Zacher & Froidevaux, 2021) and with the concept of hybrid professional becoming, in which mobile teachers reconstruct identities that bridge prior disciplines and new roles (Nigar & Kostogriz, 2025). Professional identity was thus strengthened through practice rather than determined solely by academic specialization.

Transition from Original Specialization into English Language Teaching

Economic necessity and family responsibility as catalysts for migration

The decision to work in Vietnam was driven by the desire to improve financial circumstances and fulfill family obligations. P01, a family breadwinner who decided to migrate during the uncertainty following the COVID-19 pandemic, explained, "As a breadwinner of the family, kailangan" [it is necessary], and added, "Kung meron naman mas' good opportunity sa Pilipinas, hindi ako aalis" [If there were a better opportunity in the Philippines, I would not leave]. P07 emphasized better salary opportunities, independence, and international career development. These motivations are consistent with studies identifying limited domestic earning capacity, financial insecurity, and family support as push factors among Filipino teachers (Castulo et al., 2025; De Oca & Malaga, 2025; Yeh, 2025). In Schlossberg's framework, financial strain and breadwinner pressures constituted the situation that precipitated migration, while participants' resilience and commitment to family welfare formed the self-resources that sustained it (Anderson et al., 2022).

Transitioning beyond academic specialization

Participants recognized the difference between their original preparation and their new responsibilities. P02 stated, "So my specialization was elementary education, not English language teaching," while P01, whose preparation was in Values Education, explained, "Kailangan i-review at lalong i-research, kasi hindi pwedeng humarap ka sa bata ng wala kang alam" [I need to review and research further, because you cannot face the children knowing nothing]. Participants drew on existing pedagogical skills such as rapport, lesson structuring, and classroom presence while building subject-specific knowledge in grammar, phonology, and language teaching. This reflects the distinction between general pedagogical competence and subject-specific knowledge in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2014) and the competency-driven, non-linear character of contemporary career transitions (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). Prior non-ELT backgrounds did not invalidate participants as teachers but required complementary preparation in language pedagogy.

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Factors Facilitating or Challenging Adaptation

Negotiating classroom management and diverse learner needs

Participants adjusted to learners whose behavior, age, and proficiency differed from those they had previously taught. P05 recalled a first assignment as a preschool English teacher: "Lahat sila ay zero English" [All of them had zero English], but after four to five months observed learners' progress and became more motivated to understand their needs. P11 learned to balance friendliness with authority, noting that "being friendly is important, but as a teacher ... [there must be] clear boundaries, expectations, and custom rules." Vietnamese teaching assistants helped interpret classroom situations and manage behavior, whereas assignments in public schools without assistants made classroom management more difficult. These experiences mirror Gabe's (2025) finding that Filipino teachers in Vietnam continually adjust their delivery, boundaries, and communication to learners' dispositions.

Institutional support, workplace conditions, and employment uncertainty

Institutional conditions shaped the ease of adaptation. P04 received lesson plans, materials, and equipment from schools, and one participant found that "adjustment is easier because there is a clear curriculum" (P05). However, participants also encountered inconsistent guidance, assignments without teaching assistants, changing qualification requirements, and part-time arrangements. P04 explained, "I don't have full-time, hindi siya sure" [it is not certain], noting that the absence of a fixed monthly salary made saving difficult. In Schlossberg's framework, institutional structures represent support: when predictable, they ease transitions; when fragmented, they shift the burden onto individual coping (Anderson et al., 2022). These findings echo the barriers of unclear requirements, limited mentoring, and precarious employment faced by internationally educated teachers (Hunt et al., 2026).

Cultural adjustment and interpersonal relationships

Participants generally described cultural adjustment as manageable, citing shared Asian values and the respect accorded to teachers in Vietnam. P07 adopted a pragmatic stance: "I just go with the flow ... I will do my part." Outside the workplace, the language barrier persisted, and participants relied on translation applications such as Google Translate and on local peers, while Filipino expatriate networks provided familiarity and emotional support. These accounts reflect Deardorff's (2020) view of intercultural competence as grounded in openness, awareness, and relational adaptability, and Gabe's (2025) observation that cross-cultural adaptation is both challenging and professionally rewarding.

Perceived Changes in Economic Circumstances and Quality of Life

Improved economic circumstances and personal independence

Overseas teaching improved participants' purchasing power, living conditions, and capacity to support their families. P06 described being able to buy previously unaffordable items and to fund a younger sibling's education: "Nakatulong na talaga ako kasi napag-aral ko na 'yung bunso kong kapatid" [I have truly helped because I was able to send my youngest sibling to school]. P02 described becoming more financially responsible through budgeting and managing daily needs. However, P01's ability to save depended on securing enough part-time work, and breadwinner responsibilities made expenses difficult to control.

These gains are consistent with Mohanty's (2016) view of education and employment as instruments of socioeconomic and intergenerational mobility, as participants translated their education into earnings that also supported family members' schooling. Yet the findings distinguish perceived economic improvement from long-term financial security: part-time and hourly arrangements exposed participants to income interruptions during

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term breaks, consistent with evidence that the economic advantages of overseas teaching coexist with sacrifices and uncertainties (De Oca & Malaga, 2025; Samia & Calaguas, 2026).

Value Placed on Qualifications and Professional Identity

Unequal recognition, career limitations, and future aspirations

Although participants were valued for their diligence and rapport with learners, they encountered competition, credential requirements, and perceived preferences for native English-speaking teachers. P01 identified limited professional connections and an incomplete master's degree as constraints: "Siguro I don't have connections ... hindi pa ako tapos ng master's degree ko" [Maybe I don't have connections ... I have not yet finished my master's degree], although P01 also described an employer that began hiring Filipino teachers and recognized their capabilities. P02 described the need to continue improving qualifications, teaching experience, and English proficiency. Participants responded by pursuing graduate studies and teaching certifications and by expanding their networks.

These experiences substantiate accounts of the racialized valuation and occupational stratification of Filipino teachers in Asian labor markets (Claro-Azucena, 2023; Docot, 2025; Yeh, 2025). Mobility was experienced not as unconstrained ascent but as ongoing negotiation between available opportunities, qualifications, perceived labor-market preferences, and personal aspirations, extending Mohanty's (2016) framework by showing that mobility in transnational education markets is non-linear and uneven.

Meaning and Essence of the Phenomenon

Teaching as purpose, resilience, and a foundation for future growth

Participants attached meanings to their experiences that extended beyond salary and career advancement. P09 described seeing learners overcome their fear of English: "Mas minahal nila 'yung English dahil sa akin ... hindi sila natakot sa English dahil sa akin" [They loved English more because of me ... they were no longer afraid of English because of me], concluding, "teaching is my purpose in life." Others used metaphors: P01 described the experience as "a flower," beautiful and meaningful yet temporary, while P02 described it as "a foundation," explaining, "Vietnam is where I really started building my international career."

The textural descriptions show that participants experienced initial pedagogical vulnerability, self-directed reinvention, cross-cultural adaptation, and fluctuating socioeconomic realities. The structural descriptions show that these experiences were conditioned by domestic economic pressures and family obligations, the mismatch between non-ELT preparation and language-teaching demands, school-level resources such as curricula and teaching assistants, contract precarity and labor-market stratification, and cultural affinities and Filipino social networks. Their synthesis reveals the essence of the phenomenon: the pursuit of personal and familial socioeconomic advancement through instructional self-reinvention, resilience, and the reconstruction of professional identity within a structurally stratified international labor market. Adaptation functioned as an enabler of mobility, while perceived mobility remained a negotiated and evolving trajectory shaped by both individual agency and institutional constraints (Golis, 2025; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021).

Proposed Professional Adaptation and Social Mobility Toolkits

Based on the findings, the study proposes two complementary toolkits (Table 3). The Professional and Instructional Adaptation Toolkit (PIAT) addresses English pedagogical content knowledge, classroom management with teaching assistants, scaffolding for beginning learners, and cross-cultural workplace navigation. The Strategic Social Mobility and Career Advancement Toolkit (SMCAT) addresses contract and document verification, financial planning, credential bridging, and well-being and resilience. The toolkits respond directly to the self-directed learning gaps, institutional variability, contract precarity, and credential barriers identified in the themes, and their effectiveness should be established through implementation and evaluation.

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Table 3. *Components of the Proposed Professional Adaptation and Strategic Social Mobility Toolkits*

Component	Core Focus and Tools	Implementation Modality and Stakeholders	Expected Output
Toolkit 1: Professional and Instructional Adaptation Toolkit (PIAT)			
1.1 English PCK bridging module	Diagnostic grammar matrices, IPA pronunciation guides, CLT lesson templates	Pre-departure self-study and micro-teaching; teachers, TEI trainers, TESOL mentors	Individualized language competency plan
1.2 Culturally responsive classroom management	Age-specific routines, non-verbal cue banks, TA collaboration protocols	School onboarding and weekly TA co-planning; teachers, Vietnamese TAs, head teachers	Classroom management and TA protocol
1.3 Differentiated scaffolding for zero-English learners	TPR action cards, concept-checking question banks, visual scaffolds	Quarterly workshops and peer observation; teachers, coordinators, mentors	Differentiated lesson activity bank
1.4 Cross-cultural workplace navigation	School hierarchy etiquette, bilingual school terms, conflict-resolution guides	Pre-departure briefing and host-school seminars; teachers, local faculty, HR	Workplace cultural integration guide
Toolkit 2: Strategic Social Mobility and Career Advancement Toolkit (SMCAT)			
2.1 Legal and contractual verification	Apostille checklist, work-permit and residence-card trackers, contract audit rubrics	Pre-signing clinics and advisories; teachers, licensed agencies, DMW, HR	Contract and document vetting checklist
2.2 Financial planning and remittance	Living-expense matrices, emergency buffer calculators, remittance trackers	Financial literacy webinars and peer circles; teachers, families, advisors	Personal emergency and sustainability plan
2.3 Up-skilling and credential bridging	Graduate education roadmaps, CELTA/DELTA matrices, portfolio builders	Academic mentoring and study cohorts; teachers, graduate schools, ELT associations	Three- to five-year career advancement roadmap
2.4 Well-being and resilience	Schlossberg 4S transition audit, burnout self-checks, peer network maps	Community support circles and reflective journaling; teachers, support groups, counselors	Personal well-being and resilience plan

Note. PCK = pedagogical content knowledge; IPA = International Phonetic Alphabet; CLT = communicative language teaching; TA = teaching assistant; TPR = Total Physical Response; DMW = Department of Migrant Workers. The toolkits are proposed and have not been implemented or evaluated.

CONCLUSION

Professional adaptation among non-ELT specialized Filipino teachers in Vietnam is an ongoing developmental process rather than an immediate outcome. A non-ELT or general education background does not remove the need for subject-specific language-teaching competencies, and adaptation requires continuous self-directed learning, reflection, and a gradual movement from self-doubt to an authentic professional identity. Migration and career transition function as strategic responses to domestic economic pressures and family responsibilities, with transferable teaching skills serving as bridges while English-specific pedagogical knowledge is acquired. Successful adaptation is co-determined by individual resilience and institutional support, including curriculum clarity, teaching-assistant availability, transparent policies, and structured onboarding.

Perceived social mobility is multidimensional, non-linear, and conditioned by employment arrangements. Overseas teaching improves purchasing power, living standards, and the capacity to support family, but does not automatically ensure long-term financial security, and labor-market valuation reflects credentialism and linguistic hierarchies that limit non-ELT teachers' advancement. Beyond financial returns, participants derived professional purpose, autonomy, and confidence, regarding their experience in Vietnam as a foundation for future careers. The

study contributes an in-depth account of an underexplored segment of the international teaching workforce, although its findings reflect the experiences of eleven participants and are not statistically generalizable.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Non-ELT and aspiring overseas Filipino teachers may assess their English pedagogical content knowledge before deployment, pursue recognized credentials such as TESOL, TEFL, or CELTA and relevant graduate study, build emergency savings to buffer contract interruptions, and develop collaborative relationships with Vietnamese teaching assistants.
2. Vietnamese schools and language centers may implement structured onboarding for foreign teachers, ensure consistent teaching-assistant support in large and beginner classes, provide transparent contracts, compensation schedules, and work-permit procedures, and offer in-service training in communicative language teaching and cross-cultural communication.
3. Philippine teacher education institutions may integrate modules on international teaching and cross-cultural pedagogy, offer post-baccalaureate TESOL bridging certificates for non-language majors, and provide realistic career counseling on contracts, labor laws, and credential recognition.
4. The Department of Migrant Workers, in coordination with CHED and DepEd, may enhance pre-departure orientation for teachers on host-country education policies, visa and work-permit compliance, and contract evaluation; policymakers may strengthen domestic career pathways and pursue bilateral credential-recognition frameworks for Filipino teachers in host countries.
5. Future researchers may compare non-ELT teachers across institution types and host countries, conduct longitudinal studies of career trajectories, repatriation, and onward migration, and include the perspectives of school administrators, teaching assistants, and learners.

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