

From Chalkboards to Online Platforms: Experiences, Motivations and Challenges of Filipino Teachers Transitioning to Freelance ESL Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences, motivations, and challenges of licensed Filipino teachers transitioning to freelance English teaching. Interviews with six teachers revealed key motivators: financial incentives, flexibility, and autonomy, especially for those with family responsibilities. Challenges included unstable income and unreliable internet, leading many to use multiple platforms. Access to reliable technology improved productivity and reduced stress. Older teachers adapted more easily; younger ones focused on financial gains. Gender and marital status influenced motivations, women prioritized work-life balance, while men emphasized income. Teachers with advanced degrees pursued formal development; others relied on self-learning. Many aimed to expand services and seek international opportunities. The study offers insights and recommendations to support this career transition.

Keywords: freelance ESL teaching; licensed Filipino teachers; motivations for shifting.

1. Introduction

The teaching profession continues to evolve in response to technological advances and shifting societal demands, requiring educators to adapt their roles and practices (Cruz, 2020; Pellegrino, 2017; Perez & Cruz, 2024). One major development is the expansion of education beyond traditional classrooms through online platforms, enabling more independent teaching arrangements such as freelance work (Baitenizov et al., 2025; Saufi, 2025).

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Within this shift, freelance English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching has gained global traction due to sustained demand for accessible English instruction in communication, business, and education (Sama & Dikko, 2025). Filipino teachers have become prominent contributors to this market, recognized for their English proficiency and cultural adaptability (Cruz, 2016). Increasingly, licensed Filipino educators are transitioning to freelance ESL teaching, attracted by opportunities for schedule control, international engagement, and competitive earnings compared to traditional school employment (Lee, 2022; Panaligan & Curran, 2022).

Freelance teaching allows educators to manage workloads and access global learners, sometimes yielding faster financial progression than institutional promotion systems (Pulignano et al., 2025). Remote delivery can also reduce commuting demands and support personal responsibilities (Torres & Ortega-Dela Cruz, 2022; Ramoso & Cruz, 2024; Doria & Ortega-Dela Cruz, 2024). However, this pathway involves notable challenges, including income variability, fluctuating demand, limited employment benefits, and the need for digital pedagogical competence in virtual environments (Bituin Dorado & Alvar Ortega-Dela Cruz, 2024; Cruz, 2020; Torres & Cruz, 2024).

Despite these constraints, freelance ESL teaching is increasingly viewed as a viable professional alternative (Patterson, 2020). Its combination of income potential, scheduling control, and instructional independence has led many educators to weigh its advantages against the relative stability of formal school systems (Bozeman & Gaughan, 2011).

Although research has examined online teaching broadly, the experiences of licensed Filipino teachers transitioning to freelance ESL work remain underexplored, particularly within the Philippines' distinct socio-economic and cultural context. This study addresses that gap by examining their motivations, challenges, and professional experiences

This research also aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). By exploring freelance ESL teaching as an emerging employment pathway, the study contributes insight into alternative education models and evolving labour patterns that shape both educational access and professional opportunities.

Specifically, the study sought answers to the following research questions: (i) What teaching experiences do licensed Filipino teachers report before and after transitioning from traditional classroom teaching to freelance ESL teaching? (ii) What factors motivate licensed Filipino teachers to shift from traditional classroom teaching to freelance ESL platforms? and (iii) What challenges do licensed Filipino teachers encounter during their transition to freelance online ESL teaching?

1.1. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Schlossberg's Transition Theory, and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain the shift of licensed Filipino teachers to freelance ESL teaching. Schlossberg's framework emphasizes how personal characteristics, situational factors, and available support systems shape individuals' capacity to adapt to change (Schlossberg, 1981; Goodman et al., 2006). SDT explains how the fulfilment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs sustains motivation and job satisfaction in freelance contexts, particularly through flexible schedules, skill development, and meaningful interactions with learners (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). These frameworks offer a coherent lens for understanding the psychological, contextual, and motivational dimensions of teachers' transitions to freelance ESL teaching.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory multiple-case design to generate in-depth, contextualised insights into teachers' transitions from traditional classroom teaching to freelance online ESL work. The aim was not statistical generalisation but analytical depth and conceptual understanding, consistent with qualitative inquiry principles (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A small, information-rich sample was therefore considered appropriate, as the study focused on participants' lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and contextual constraints rather than population-level trends.

The multiple-case design enabled cross-case comparison while preserving attention to individual trajectories. This approach supported the identification of both shared patterns and nuanced differences across participants, strengthening the analytic robustness of the findings despite the limited sample size.

2.2. Research Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experience relevant to the study's aims (Palinkas et al., 2015). Six licensed Filipino teachers were selected based on four criteria: (i) possession of a valid Philippine teaching license; (ii) prior employment in formal public or private schools; (iii) current engagement in freelance online ESL teaching (independently or via platforms); and (iv) willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. These criteria ensured that all participants had experienced the transition under investigation and could reflect on both institutional and freelance contexts.

The study was bounded as a qualitative multiple-case inquiry focused specifically on licensed Filipino teachers transitioning from formal schooling to online freelance ESL work. It does not address all freelance teachers or the global ESL workforce, but a clearly defined

subgroup within the Philippine context. This delimitation supported analytic coherence and cross-case comparison.

Although limited to six participants, the sample was appropriate for an in-depth exploratory design. Maximum variation in age, sex, caregiving roles, and career stage enabled meaningful comparison across cases. The goal was conceptual depth rather than statistical representation.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which additional interviews produced no substantially new codes and instead reinforced existing categories. Saturation was assessed at the level of conceptual patterning rather than code frequency alone.

The study seeks analytic insight rather than generalization. Findings are context-specific and not statistically representative; their contribution lies in theoretical or analytic transferability to comparable settings, as supported by the detailed case descriptions provided.

2.3. Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase framework: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Analysis was iterative and reflexive, and coding was conducted manually to enable sustained, close engagement with the data.

The analytic process proceeded in several stages. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure immersion and contextual understanding. Second, line-by-line open coding was conducted, generating inductive codes grounded in participants' language. Third, preliminary codes were grouped into provisional categories through constant comparison within and across transcripts. Fourth, codes were refined, merged, or discarded as patterns became clearer, and higher-order themes were developed. Fifth, cross-case comparison was undertaken to identify convergences and divergences across participants' demographic and professional contexts. Throughout the process, analytic memos and theme matrices were used to document emerging insights, refine conceptual linkages, and maintain coherence across cases. An audit trail was maintained to record coding decisions, category development, and theme revision.

Manual coding was conducted systematically rather than impressionistically. Coding frameworks were reviewed iteratively, and themes were revised until internal consistency and conceptual distinctiveness were achieved. Reflexive memo writing supported critical examination of assumptions and interpretive choices.

Trustworthiness was addressed through multiple strategies. *Credibility* was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, repeated cross-case comparison, and member reflection, whereby participants were invited to clarify or confirm key interpretations when

feasible. *Dependability* was supported by detailed documentation of analytic procedures, including coding iterations, theme development, and methodological decisions recorded in the audit trail. *Confirmability* was enhanced through reflexive journaling and transparent documentation of analytic reasoning, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than researcher predispositions. *Transferability* was facilitated through thick description of participants' demographic backgrounds, institutional histories, and transition experiences, enabling readers to assess relevance to comparable contexts.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were implemented to safeguard participants' rights, privacy, and well-being throughout the study. Prior to data collection, the research proposal was formally presented to and reviewed by the researcher's Guidance Committee, which is designated by the institution to oversee ethical compliance for graduate research. In accordance with institutional practice, ethical approval is communicated through formal verbal endorsement during an official committee meeting rather than through the issuance of a separate written ethics clearance certificate.

All participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and voluntary nature of participation. Written informed consent was obtained prior to interviews, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned and identifying details were removed from transcripts and reports. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. These procedures ensured adherence to institutional ethical standards and protected participants' anonymity and welfare throughout the research process.

3. Results

Participants ranged in age from 28 to 49 and represented diverse family and career circumstances. Most were married and managing family responsibilities, and their educational attainment ranged from bachelor's to master's degrees. These characteristics shaped how participants experienced the transition to freelance ESL teaching, particularly in relation to time management, income needs, and professional expectations.

3.1. Teaching Experiences Before and After the Transition

3.1.1. Traditional Classroom Context

Participants described traditional schools as offering strong pedagogical grounding, sustained student relationships, and collegial collaboration. Close student interaction was a primary source of fulfilment:

“Building strong bonds with my students and seeing their growth gave me a deep sense of purpose” (Teacher 1).

Collaborative planning and peer support were valued, but institutional constraints were prominent. Rigid schedules, administrative workload, and limited resources reduced instructional discretion and increased stress.

“Paperwork took away time I wanted to dedicate to my students” (Teacher 5).

Participants with caregiving roles reported difficulty reconciling fixed schedules with family responsibilities.

“Serving the community as a public-school teacher was rewarding, but it often came at the cost of my own well-being” (Teacher 6).

3.1.2. Freelance ESL Teaching Context

Freelance ESL teaching altered work structure and professional routines. Participants reported control over scheduling and workload, enabling adjustments around personal responsibilities. *“Having control over my time is empowering. I decide how much I work and when” (Teacher 2).*

Exposure to international learners required instructional adaptation and strengthened digital competencies. However, freelance work introduced new constraints. Participants reported income variability, technological disruptions, limited institutional support, and reduced collegial interaction. *“Freelancing can feel lonely without the collaboration I was used to” (Teacher 5).*

Some addressed isolation by joining online communities: *“Joining online forums for freelance teachers gave me a sense of belonging” (Teacher 3).*

3.2. Motivations for Transition

Motivations varied by age, gender, and career stage. Younger participants emphasized income generation and skill development: *“Freelancing allowed me to pursue financial independence while experimenting with new teaching strategies” (Teacher 2).*

Older participants, particularly those with caregiving roles, prioritized schedule control. *“Freelancing gave me the autonomy to manage my time around my children’s needs” (Teacher 1).*

Across cases, three central motivations emerged: schedule control, income potential, and professional growth. *“I decide how many lessons to take and when to take breaks” (Teacher 6).*

3.3. Challenges in the Transition

Participants identified four interrelated challenge areas:

Technological: Platform navigation and unstable internet connectivity disrupted instruction. *“I had to invest in backup mobile data to continue teaching when the main connection failed”* (Teacher 6).

Economic: Fluctuating bookings and platform policies created income uncertainty. *“The inconsistent bookings were stressful, but I learned to manage them by working across multiple platforms”* (Teacher 4).

Pedagogical: Maintaining engagement and assessing learning in virtual environments required adaptation. *“Engaging students virtually is harder than in a physical classroom”* (Teacher 1).

Professional: Reduced access to mentoring and collegial exchange contributed to isolation.

“I missed the camaraderie of working with colleagues” (Teacher 2).

4. Discussions

This study examined the experiences of licensed Filipino teachers transitioning from traditional classroom teaching to freelance ESL work. Findings reveal a negotiation between autonomy, professional fulfilment, and structural uncertainty, shaped by demographic characteristics, career stage, and personal responsibilities. Similar patterns in teacher career mobility highlight the influence of both individual agency and structural constraints on professional decisions (Aguja & Cruz, 2026).

Freelance ESL teaching was appealing primarily because it increased control over time and workload, enabling participants to balance family responsibilities with earning opportunities. Interpreted through Self-Determination Theory, participants' accounts illustrate how autonomy and competence needs drive sustained occupational motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For caregivers, flexible scheduling functioned as a mechanism of professional agency, allowing them to regulate work intensity while maintaining engagement.

Motivations varied across age and gender. Younger participants emphasized experimentation and skill growth, consistent with achievement-oriented career trajectories observed in professional transition research, whereas older participants prioritized balancing work with personal responsibilities (Yan, 2023). Gendered caregiving roles further shaped perceptions of flexibility and income stability, reinforcing evidence on gendered labour dynamics in teaching (Banal & Ortega-Dela Cruz, 2022; Gösenbauer et al., 2025).

Despite its advantages, freelance ESL work introduced vulnerabilities. Participants reported income instability, technological dependence, and professional isolation. Using Schlossberg's transition framework, these factors functioned as situational and support-related barriers; teachers who engaged with online communities or diversified income sources demonstrated greater resilience, reflecting the importance of social and professional support in career transitions (Means, 2018; Schor et al., 2020).

The absence of institutional structures in freelance work has broader implications for teacher retention and system sustainability. While freelancing provides autonomy and potential financial gains, it shifts responsibility for professional development, income security, and well-being onto individual teachers. Such individualization of risk can accelerate attrition from formal education and undermine long-term workforce stability. These findings align with literature emphasizing that supportive working conditions and structured career pathways are essential for retaining qualified teachers and ensuring quality education outcomes (Arnold & Rahimi, 2025; Ortega-Dela Cruz, 2016; Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018). Addressing workload, compensation, and flexibility within formal schools remains critical to mitigating outward transitions to freelance work (McPherson & Lampert, 2025; Stacey et al., 2023).

5. Conclusions

This study examined the experiences of six licensed Filipino teachers transitioning from traditional classroom teaching to freelance ESL work. Findings reveal that personal circumstances, career stage, and structural conditions shape career decisions. Participants were motivated by autonomy, schedule control, and income opportunities. Caregiving teachers prioritized work-life balance, while younger educators focused on financial goals and professional growth, reflecting how rigid workloads, limited compensation, and inflexible structures in formal school's influence movement toward alternative pathways.

Freelance ESL teaching introduced challenges, including income variability, technological constraints, professional isolation, and limited institutional support. Some participants mitigated risks by teaching across multiple platforms, highlighting the precarity inherent in largely unregulated freelance work.

Empirical patterns connect to the Sustainable Development Goals. Flexible scheduling, autonomy, and income generation relate to SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, while participants' online teaching expands access to English instruction, contributing to SDG 4: Quality Education. These links are context-specific and grounded in observed experiences rather than generalizable claims.

Policy and governance implications are accordingly qualified. The shift to freelance teaching reflects structural pressures in formal education rather than individual preference. Addressing workload, recognition, and digital infrastructure may reduce attrition and support career continuity. Hybrid or part-time institutional roles could balance flexibility with support,

while clearer platform governance and professional development opportunities may mitigate vulnerabilities in freelance contexts. Recommendations are drawn from observed patterns and highlight context-sensitive strategies rather than universal solutions.

The study illustrates that structured flexibility, targeted support, and professional recognition can inform sustainable teaching careers. Freelance ESL teaching, viewed as a bounded and context-specific alternative, provides insights for institutional reflection and measured policy responses that foster adaptable, equitable, and resilient education systems.

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