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Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (Filipino) Scholars' Journey in the United States of America

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ABSTRACT

Scholars under the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) Program have three important roles: teach the Filipino language and culture, study two courses per semester, and serve as cultural ambassadors of the Philippines in the United States. Exploring the scholars' journey is important in providing future scholars ideas on rewarding and challenging experiences. This qualitative-biographical study focuses on five scholars' (2022-2023 cohort) personal embodied experiences and encounters of learning processes. Using reflective writing, introspection, and journal entries as data collection techniques, the researchers accounted for the journey of every scholar. Results show that scholars' personal embodied experiences include a sense of fulfillment, challenges, and personal and professional growth while their encounters of learning processes are comprised of students' challenges in learning the language, the presence of negative learning behavior, and appreciation of the language and culture taught. Scholars also see Fulbright as platform for global and cultural involvement and self-growth.

INTRODUCTION

Studying and teaching abroad has become more accessible to many young scholars in the Philippines with the availability of many opportunities such as the Fulbright programs. One of them is the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) program, which is sponsored by the United States Department of State Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA). Through this program, different U.S. colleges and universities enhance their foreign language teaching pedagogies and immerse their students to a deeper understanding of people from different cultures (Fulbright Commission, 2023). This program exposes selected scholars to three responsibilities: language teaching, studying, and cultural ambassadorship.

In the Philippines, the Fulbright Commission through the Philippine-American Educational

Foundation (PAEF) chooses young language educators, aged between 23 to 29, to undergo the nine-month program in a U.S. institution, to teach the Filipino language and culture. For the 2022-2023 cohort, PAEF selected five scholars who have been deployed to different universities across the U.S. to teach the Filipino language, study two relevant courses per semester, and represent the country as ambassadors of culture. The selection process for the scholars has always been tedious considering all the required documents, essays, rounds of interviews, and a required TOEFL or IELTS test (Fulbright Commission, 2023).

Fulbright scholars encounter different rewarding and challenging experiences during their program, and these need to be documented for the benefit of future scholars. Perreault and Dimitrova (2022) saw the same necessity in their study, citing that the Fulbright experience is a very important

tool in addressing different global issues that plague the world. Hence, determining ways to improve the Fulbright programs, such as the FLTA, is necessary to identify potential improvements and to give future Filipino scholars and others some ideas on what to consider when they apply for the FLTA program and undergo the nine-month program in the U.S.

In this paper, the researchers discuss their experiences being Fulbright FLTA scholars. They also talked about their reflections on pursuing their scholarship in their respective institutions in different parts of the country. This paper is hoped to provide Filipino academics insights into what FLTA is and what expectations need to be set when undergoing the program. Although experiences vary from one school to another, this biographical paper may still provide important pointers to consider when deciding to apply for the FLTA program and pursue the program after successfully completing the selection process. This paper is also intended to provide the scholars, whose stories and experiences are discussed herein, the voice to share their rewarding and challenging encounters as far as language teaching, studying, and cultural ambassadorship are concerned.

METHODS

This biographical research documents the experiences of Fulbright FLTA-Filipino scholars in the United States of America in 2022-2023. Due to the more personal approaches to eliciting information which consisted of reflective writing and journal entries, the researchers chose to use the biographical method of qualitative research to account for personal and professional experiences in the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program.

Through purposive sampling, five participants were selected for this study. The inclusion criteria

include the following: (a) must be part of the Fulbright FLTA cohort for 2022-2023, (b) must be willing to participate in the study and share information about their Fulbright FLTA experience, and (c) must be willing to share personal information and other details necessary to elucidate data about the research topic.

The Fulbright FLTA scholars come from the states of Washington, Michigan, Illinois, California, and Philadelphia. Each participant was asked to share their experiences through introspection, reflective writing, and journal entries. Ethical considerations were upheld all throughout the data collection process. Therefore, the researchers' opinions are their own and do not represent those of the Fulbright Program or the U.S. Department of State. The data sets were analyzed thematically. Codes were generated from the reflections of each participant and the photovoice responses submitted. Then, core ideas were identified from the codes; and themes were then crafted for each of the participant's experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal Embodied Experiences

Filipino FLTA scholars had personal embodied experiences that allowed them to encounter both rewarding and challenging moments in their journey in the U.S., especially when it comes to their personal and professional growth and teaching in an American classroom. In the autoethnographic study of Aperocho, Lleses, Labicane, Domingo, and Consuelo (2023), they shared their in-depth accounts of their Fulbright journey as FLTA scholars in different academies in the U.S. and emphasized how important it is to document individual experiences for the benefit of future scholars. Presented in Table 1 are the themes with the core ideas that emerged from the biographical accounts of the FLTA scholars.

Table 1. Fulbright FLTA Scholars' Experiences

Personal Embodied Experiences	Determinants/Core Ideas
<i>Fulfillment and Sense of Pride</i>	Scholars felt a sense of accomplishment in their job as teachers, students, and cultural ambassadors in the U.S. They felt proud for representing the Philippines and for sharing about the language and culture through the program.
<i>Personal Growth and Self-Discovery</i>	They were able to discover their strengths and weaknesses. They experienced transformation characterized by independence, adventure, and self-confidence.

<i>Professional Development and Opportunities</i>	The program provided them with more opportunities to explore their professional and academic skills. The Fulbright FLTA program aided in honing scholars' skills in many aspects such as research, communication, and intercultural engagement.
<i>Inevitable Challenges and Struggles</i>	They faced several personal, professional, and teaching challenges. Challenges related to instruction emerged in the journey.

Fulfillment and Sense of Pride. Based on the data elicited from the participants, the FLTA program was fulfilling for the scholars. There is fulfillment because of the sense of accomplishment experienced by the FLTA scholars in doing their duties as teachers of the Filipino language, students of two courses every semester, and cultural ambassadors of the Philippines and the United States. There is also a sense of pride in representing the Philippines in a very prestigious scholarship grant offered by the Fulbright Commission. As Fulbright scholars, the participants felt that there is pride in their being able to serve as selected cultural ambassadors out of the hundreds of applicants for the program. In the study of Ates (2019), fulfillment also emerged having experienced an FLTA scholarship in the United States. Likewise, there was a sense of pride for having represented her country and sharing her culture with the Americans in Michigan. This only shows how Fulbright programs like the FLTA could bring a sense of fulfillment and pride to whoever undergoes the program as it is not only a prestigious scholarship but also a very rare opportunity to act as cultural ambassadors in a fellowship where diversity is celebrated. ProFellow (2018) also cited how FLTA scholar William Mel Paglinawan of the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor experienced personal transformation because of his Fulbright journey, and this gave him a sense of fulfillment after his stint in the USA.

Professional Development and Opportunities. Part of the scholars' embodied experiences are the professional development activities and opportunities that afforded them to experience upskilling and knowledge-deepening. For example, some of the scholars were exposed to training and intensive classes on research and language teaching methodology. The FLTA program also provided them the opportunities to create linkages and networks and form genuine friendships and connections that greatly improved their cultural competence and respect for diversity. This is what

emerged in the interview conducted by Kabir (2022) with Bangladeshi FLTA scholar Rashid who exposed how the FLTA program provided him the opportunities to create friendships through cultural engagements. The African Studies Center of the University of Michigan (2020) also emphasized how the FLTA program provided its scholars the chance to talk about matters like cultural acceptance and respect, and these opportunities are part of what the program could offer to academic communities. ProFellow (2018) also shared how FLTA scholars can get opportunities to access language teaching resources that they could use in their home countries or academic institutions. Access to these opportunities becomes possible because of the networking experienced by the FLTA scholars while on their journeys in the USA.

Inevitable Challenges and Struggles. The scholars expressed that their FLTA journey was also filled with challenges and struggles. For example, they encountered a challenge in terms of adjustments and their mental and emotional impacts. They also encountered struggles in some aspects of their teaching functions such as unclearly defined tasks as a teaching assistant or a primary teacher, instruction, and other personal and professional matters that hindered them from maximizing opportunities and enjoying everything about their journey. In an article by Indiana University Bloomington (2022), the experiences of Mongolian FLTA scholar Purevjav showed how she experienced missing authentic Mongolian products, and this became one of her personal struggles as a foreigner in the U.S. This shows that an FLTA scholar, just like any other international students, would experience personal struggles with adjustments in the new community. In the study of Lally (2022), it was revealed that scholars have different experiences depending on the geopolitical relationship of their host country and home country. Hence, challenges when it comes to life adjustments would always be possible in this matter.

The personal embodied experiences of the Filipino FLTA scholars for 2022-2023 are a mix of rewarding and challenging moments. They experienced rewarding ones personally and professionally. They also felt fulfilled most especially when it comes to teaching, in which struggles also emerged in their language classrooms. The emergence of these rewards and struggles developed the scholars to become more appreciative of the process they had undergone being Filipino FLTA scholars in the United States. Amid all these rewarding and challenging experiences, the scholars felt that the whole experience was fulfilling for having been given the chance to promote the Filipino language and

culture. As UNESCO (2022) expressed, cultural exchanges are important to promote respect and understanding of other cultures.

Encounters of Learning Experiences

FLTA scholars do not only study at an American university but also serve as either teaching assistants or primary teachers. In the present study, three were teaching assistants while two were primary teachers. As teachers in a language classroom, they also observed various student learning experiences. These learning processes involved a mix of both positive and negative circumstances. Table 2 presents the emerging themes with their corresponding core ideas.

Table 2. Fulbright FLTA Scholars’ Encounters of Learning Experiences

Encounters of Learning Processes	Determinants/Core Ideas
<i>Challenges with Linguistic Complexities of the Filipino Language</i>	Scholars’ students experienced problems with Filipino grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Scholars observed potential curricular improvements and instruction-related modifications.
<i>Struggles with Apathy, Participation, and Learning Attitudes</i>	Scholars experienced student apathy, lack of interest in language classes, and misconceptions about language learning. Some students are problematic in terms of attendance, drive, and compliance with academic requirements.
<i>Appreciation of Language, Culture, and Identity</i>	Students appreciate the importance of learning the Filipino language and culture. Scholars observed students embracing their Filipino identity.

Challenges with Linguistic Complexities of the Filipino Language. The FLTA scholars expressed that they observed several learning challenges on the end of their students. For example, the student’s academic performance had been reflective of their difficulties when it comes to Filipino grammar, including sentence writing and speaking the language. Students also had challenges when it comes to producing sounds and pronouncing some Filipino words. In the study of Labicane (2021), Filipino students’ language learning anxieties could be traced back to their fear of committing mistakes and receiving negative evaluations. Although the case with the FLTA classrooms might be different on many levels, one aspect that could be investigated is the students’ fear of committing mistakes as well when it comes to the use of the Filipino language, which, if not second, is a foreign language for a few of the learners.

Students also had issues with the vocabulary used in conversations and sentences. Besides these learning challenges, the scholars also observed how

some aspects of the instruction affected students’ effective learning and comprehension of the grammatical rules. These include the teaching methodology used, the jampacked course topics, and the pace of teaching every topic in class. Pereira, Dionisio, and Sousa (2020), in the same manner, saw that there were opportunities in improving the teaching of Portuguese through the FLTA program. The use of relevant language policies would help address the instruction-related problems that might affect students’ comprehension and capability to learn the target language. In the study of Peker et al. (2020), challenges were also identified in their FLTA journey. These include problems with pedagogy in a language classroom.

Struggles with Apathy, Participation, and Learning Attitudes. The scholars expressed how their classroom interactions opened their eyes to the reality of learning in an American community. Some of the scholars were challenged by apathetic students who showed not having much interest and drive in learning the language. There was also a

lack of participation from some students, and even from the Filipino community, which resulted in a lack of representation during community engagements or activities. Some scholars also expressed how their students had a deviant learning attitude in a language classroom, emphasizing the lack of relevance in learning the language. In the paper of Ulla (2018), it was found that Thai students also showed apathy in learning the English language amidst the Filipino teachers' positive outlook on the instruction. Students' apathy was the top reason why language instruction became difficult for Filipinos in a Thai school. This finding supports the current result stating that FLTA scholars observed how some of their students had the tendency to exhibit apathy in their language classrooms. In an article by Indiana University Bloomington (2022), an FLTA scholar's experience narrated how American education is different from other education systems in the world. In this connection, the difference with student learning attitudes and class participation can also be understood.

Appreciation of Language, Culture, and Identity. One fulfilling experience for Filipino FLTA scholars is seeing their students appreciate the Filipino language and culture and embrace their Filipino roots or identity. Scholars expressed joy whenever they notice their learners engage and show fun while learning the language and culture. They also shared how important it is to be strategic when teaching students to ensure that they see the purposefulness of enrolling in a Filipino class. In this case, the very purpose of the FLTA program is better seen and appreciated by many as it provides scholars the chance to show what cultural acceptance and respect can do in society. UNESCO (2022) reported that cultural exchange programs are very vital in promoting cross-cultural skills in a globalized world. The FLTA program is one good way to open doors for cultural exchanges that matter and allow scholars to promote cross-cultural skills by employing classroom strategies that would make their learners appreciate learning the language and culture as well as embracing their national and local identities.

Overall, the narratives of the five FLTA scholars included in this study show how diverse Fulbright experiences in the U.S. can be. For these Filipino scholars, their encounters in the community

and the classrooms were all contributed to the rewarding and challenging aspects of their journey that also allowed them to undergo self-discovery, transformation, and personal and professional growth. The Language Socialization Theory (Uzum, 2017) underscores that biographical, contextual, and dialogic factors influence a teacher's beliefs and practices. Biographical factors such as the teacher's personal history and professional experience as an English teacher contribute to the teacher's overall understanding of their teaching experience in a community. For the five Filipino FLTA scholars, their experiences as teachers in the Philippines and visiting faculty members in the USA transformed their outlook toward the teaching profession. On the other hand, contextual factors such as their engagement with their students and the available resources honed how they see their own language classrooms, and this may impact their pedagogies and teaching philosophies when they return to their home countries.

Finally, the dialogic factors such as their understanding of the interplay between teaching theories and actual practice also morphed their knowledge of teaching methodologies, especially in foreign language instruction. The challenging experiences and the teaching discoveries they had in their American classrooms would aid them in improving their English language instruction in the Philippines. This is portrayed as one of the benefits of undergoing the Fulbright FLTA program. As Manila Bulletin (2021) narrated about the life of a Fulbright scholar, identity is formed through the whole Fulbright experience; and for the five Filipino FLTA scholars, their journey became helpful not only in promoting the Filipino language and culture but also in shaping their identities as Filipino educators of the English language. As Aperocho and Payot (2022) underscored, young ESL teachers need to continually seek for personal and professional growth, and this FLTA program is one good avenue for young English language teachers to sharpen their skills and attain development through cultural immersion and language instruction in an American classroom.

CONCLUSION

Considering the findings that emerged from the data collection, the researchers offer the following conclusions. First, scholars have personal

embodied experiences that characterize their journey as Fulbright-FLTA scholars in the United States. These experiences are thematically categorized as follows: (a) Fulfillment and Sense of Pride, (b) Personal Growth and Self-Discovery, (c) Professional Development and Opportunities, and (d) Inevitable Challenges and Struggles. Given that the scholars have experienced a journey that is both fulfilling and struggling, they consider their overall experience as rewarding and challenging. The mix of these two made their experience worthwhile as they grew personally and professionally. They also became better language educators by learning how to become decisive, strategic, and more passionate about the line of profession.

Second, being teachers, either assistant or primary, in an American academic institution, the FLTA scholars have commonalities in terms of encounters with learning processes. They encountered students being challenged by the linguistic complexity of learning the Filipino language. They were also beset by struggles with student apathy, lack of participation, and negative learning attitudes. On the other hand, they experienced learning processes in their language classrooms that are positive such as students' appreciating the Filipino language and culture and embracing the Filipino identity.

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