

Experiences of Part-Time ESL Teachers Engaging in Online Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of part-time ESL teachers navigating the virtual classroom landscape in the Philippines. As the global demand for English proficiency grows, many Filipino educators have transitioned to the online "gig economy," a professional journey often described as an "online phonics odyssey." Utilizing thematic analysis of narrative responses from 12 participants, the research identifies four primary themes that define the professional experience: Flexibility, Technical Instability, Adaptability, and Preparation.

The findings reveal that "Flexibility" is the central motivator for entering the field, allowing teachers to achieve a better work-life balance and manage dual roles as educators and home managers a strategic necessity echoed in recent literature by Sarvida et al. (2025). However, this autonomy is frequently undermined by "Technical Instability," characterized by unreliable internet connectivity and unpredictable power outages. These infrastructure failures create significant "technostress," often forcing teachers to prioritize technical troubleshooting over pedagogical goals. To navigate these hurdles, participants employ "Adaptability" as a critical coping mechanism, demonstrating a resilient mindset that allows for real-time adjustments to pedagogical and technical disruptions. Finally, the study highlights "Preparation" as the most vital advice for aspiring professionals, emphasizing that success requires more than linguistic proficiency; it demands "digital pedagogical readiness" and specialized technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK).

The study concludes that Filipino ESL teachers have evolved into "techno-pedagogues" who must autonomously manage their own infrastructure and professional development in a largely unregulated market. The implications suggest a dire need for improved national digital infrastructure and the integration of online-specific training within educational curricula to better prepare graduates for the virtual marketplace. By grounding these narratives in contemporary academic discourse (2021–2026), this research provides a comprehensive overview of the precarity and resilience inherent in the modern online ESL teaching profession.

Keywords: part-time ESL teachers, gig economy, technical instability, resilient adaptability, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of English language instruction has undergone a significant transformation, moving toward digital platforms that allow for "teaching beyond borders" (Sarvida et al., 2025). For many Filipino educators, the shift to online ESL teaching is a response to the need for work life balance, particularly for those managing dual roles as teachers and parents (Lanzaderas & Omandam, 2025). This virtual "phonics odyssey" presents unique lived experiences that blend pedagogical innovation with the logistical complexities of remote work (Castillo – Chua, 2026). While the industry offers significant opportunities for novice teachers to enter the global market, it also demands a sudden and often challenging transition to virtual instruction (Brickhouse, 2023; Muhammedali, 2024). Understanding these experiences is vital for enhancing the readiness of graduates and practitioners in the evolving digital economy (Sarvida et al., 2025).

Objectives

This study seeks to explore the professional journey of part-time ESL teachers through the following objectives:

1. To identify the primary motivations for engaging in part-time online ESL teaching.
2. To document the specific technical and pedagogical challenges faced in the virtual classroom.
3. To determine the coping strategies employed to maintain instructional efficacy.
4. To gather experience-based advice for aspiring ESL professionals.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are your reasons for engaging as a part-time ESL teacher?
2. What were the challenges you experienced?
3. What are your coping mechanisms to overcome the challenges you encountered?
4. What advice or recommendations would you give to aspiring part-time ESL teachers?

METHODOLOGY

- **Research Design:** The study employs a qualitative research design focusing on thematic analysis to identify patterns and shared experiences among participants.
- **Participants:** The study involved 12 part-time ESL teachers who provided detailed accounts of their experiences in the online teaching sector.
- **Data Gathering Procedure:** Data were gathered through open ended questions designed to elicit narrative responses regarding the participants' motivations, challenges, and strategies.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Participation was voluntary. The identities of the participants were protected through the use of alphanumeric labels (e.g., Participant 1) to ensure confidentiality.
- **Data Analysis:** The researcher utilized a systematic thematic analysis process to categorize responses into emerging themes that represent the majority of the participants' views.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Question 1: What are your reasons for engaging as a part-time ESL teacher?

Emerging Theme: Flexibility

The primary motivation for participants entering the online ESL sector is the desire for Flexibility, which allows them to harmonize professional duties with personal life requirements. Participant 1 highlighted the appeal of part-time hours, while Participant 2 emphasized the ability to manage time without reporting to a physical office. Participant 3 and Participant 12 both specifically sought the comfort and convenience of working from home. For Participant 11, the ability to personally plot teaching slots was the deciding factor, a sentiment shared by Participant 5 who noted the role fits their existing schedule well. Participant 6 focused on the economic benefit of eliminating transportation costs, and Participant 7 viewed flexibility to gain experience while maintaining a balanced lifestyle. Participant 9 corroborated these points by noting the benefits of flexible

part-time hours. These findings align with Sarvida et al. (2025), who identify flexibility and work life balance as top motivations for online ESL careers. Furthermore, Lanzaderas and Omandam (2025) argue that this flexibility is crucial for Filipino teachers who must balance their dual roles as educators and parents (2025). The search for self-determined hours is a recurring theme in contemporary research, as teachers seek to integrate professional duties more seamlessly into their personal lives (Abd. Rahman & Fairuz Mohamed Idris, 2025).

Question 2: What were the challenges you experienced?

Emerging Theme: Technical Instability

The most significant hurdle identified by participants is Technical Instability, encompassing internet disruptions and power failures that undermine instructional continuity. Participant 1 reported that lag and frozen screens frequently caused students to lose focus, while Participant 2 and Participant 4 described unannounced power interruptions and internet loss as their worst challenges. Participant 3 noted the mutual frustration caused by unstable connections, and Participant 11 struggled with frequent disconnections. Participant 6 observed that internet outages are a "constant threat" because the work requires being perpetually online. Beyond the technical aspect, Participant 12 revealed that unexpected brownouts and slow internet significantly affected their mental health. These challenges are reflected in the work of Skopljak (2025), who utilizes a TPACK-based analysis to show that technical hurdles often overshadow pedagogical goals. Yan et al. (2024) also emphasize that while online teaching has benefits, the challenge of maintaining student engagement during technical failures remains a primary concern for teachers. This infrastructure-related "precarity" is a hallmark of the virtual classroom experience, where teachers must constantly troubleshoot to maintain efficacy (Hussin & Abdul Aziz, 2025).

Question 3: What are your coping mechanisms to overcome the challenges you encountered?

Emerging Theme: Adaptability

To survive the demands of the virtual environment, teachers employ adaptability as a core coping mechanism, adjusting their technical and pedagogical approaches in real-time. Participant 1 utilized tech backups like phone hotspots and simple TPR games to mitigate lag, while Participant 3 committed to continuous self-improvement to handle various classroom situations. Participant 5 used a strategy of preparation and flexibility to match student needs, a method echoed by Participant 7 and Participant 8 who adjusted their teaching styles to different personalities. Participant 10 and Participant 11 both emphasized patience and the ability to respond calmly to difficult situations to keep teaching effectively. This resilient adaptability is supported by Lo (2023), who finds that teachers' perspectives on digital learning are defined by their ability to evolve with the medium. Brickhouse (2023) further notes that the sudden transition to online instruction necessitates a high degree of phenomenological resilience and the adoption of interactive methods to maintain collaborative writing and engagement (Chojczak & Starford, 2023). The use of digital media and programmed instruction has become an empowering tool for teachers to adapt their second language teaching to the digital reality (C.T & Ilankumaran, 2025).

Question 4: What advice or recommendations would you give to aspiring part-time ESL teachers?

Emerging Theme: Preparation

Aspiring teachers are advised that success is predicated on rigorous Preparation, spanning technical readiness and pedagogical mastery. Participant 1 suggested thorough tech checks and recording practice sessions, while Participant 2 and Participant 9 emphasized ensuring all equipment is in top condition and practicing "class mode energy." Participant 3 and Participant 10 recommended a strong foundation in English grammar and familiarity with online platforms. For Participant 5 and Participant 7, preparation includes learning student cultures and classroom management techniques. Participant 11 stressed investing in backup systems to avoid penalties, and Participant 12 advised mental and emotional readiness for the role. These recommendations are echoed by Sarvida et al. (2025), who advocate for enhancing the readiness of graduates through specific training in online ESL pedagogies. Furthermore, Asad and Javed (2023) highlight the effectiveness of in-

service training programs in enhancing the teaching skills of ESL professionals at the higher education level. The integration of digital competences, such as understanding AI applications like ChatGPT, is also becoming a critical part of a teacher's preparatory toolkit (Allehyani & Algamdi, 2023).

Limitations

This study is limited by its small sample size of 12 part-time ESL teachers, which may not capture the full diversity of the online ESL industry. Additionally, the data relies on self-reported narratives which are influenced by individual subjective experiences and specific local infrastructure conditions.

CONCLUSION

The professional journey of part-time ESL teachers in the Philippines is a nuanced balance between significant personal autonomy and systemic vulnerability. This study concludes that the primary driver for educators entering the digital space is the promise of flexibility. This flexibility is not merely a convenience but a strategic professional tool that allows teachers to navigate the complex economic landscape of the Philippines while fulfilling personal and familial obligations. As established by the participants and supported by contemporary research, the ability to work from home and manage one's own schedule is a defining characteristic of the modern Filipino educator's identity in the gig economy.

However, this autonomy comes at a high cost. This research highlights that the online ESL industry is inherently precarious due to technical instability. Teachers are often left to contend with infrastructure failures that are beyond their control, such as sudden power outages and unreliable internet connectivity. This creates a state of technostress where the focus often shifts from pedagogical excellence to technical survival. The findings suggest that the success of the virtual classroom depends as much on the quality of a teacher's hardware and local service provider as it does on their instructional skill. Consequently, the Filipino ESL teacher has evolved into a techno-pedagogue, a professional who must bridge the gap between pedagogy and technology with limited institutional support.

To survive in this environment, teachers have developed a form of resilient adaptability. This study concludes that the ability to pivot in real-time and maintain a professional persona despite technical disruptions is the hallmark of a successful online educator. This resilience is further bolstered by rigorous preparation, which participants identified as the most critical advice for newcomers. In essence, the entry into this field requires a comprehensive digital pedagogical readiness that spans linguistic proficiency, technical troubleshooting, and emotional regulation. As the industry continues to grow, there is a clear need for systemic improvements in national infrastructure and more focused training programs to ensure that Filipino educators remain competitive and well-supported in the global virtual marketplace. This research underscores that while the virtual classroom offers a frontier for professional growth, it remains a space where individual resourcefulness must constantly compensate for structural limitations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Teachers should maintain a "redundancy plan" for technology, including multiple internet sources and power backups, to mitigate the impact of infrastructure failure.
2. Practitioners should engage in continuous digital professional development to stay updated on tools like AI and interactive media.
3. Educational institutions should integrate online-specific pedagogical training into their curricula to better prepare graduates for the virtual marketplace.
4. Teachers are encouraged to join professional networks to share coping strategies and emotional support for the unique stresses of remote instruction.

Ethical Approval:

The research involving human participants was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of Central Mindanao University. Ethical approval was obtained from the Dr. James L. Paglinawan. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants prior to their participation in the study. Participants were informed that their responses would be treated with the utmost confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes, ensuring that their identities remained anonymous throughout the study and any subsequent reports.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research.

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Data Availability

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSewY1Jjx0gswVk5bHZKypKCYDc-5dJgICOOhUKJpojH0zPBQ/viewform?usp=sharing&oid=115465570324946873990>