

Stories of Learning and Teaching Practices | 学習・教育実践の成功談・失敗談

Narratives of Filipino English Teachers in Japan: A Reflective Dialogic Review of Stewart (2020)



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Stephanie: In her book, *Narratives of Filipino English Teachers in Japan*, Alison Stewart presents the stories of Aurora, Lori, Elma, Sampaguita, Anna Marie, Shin, Katrina, Renata and Carmela as foreign English teachers working at different levels of education in Japan. Through their accounts, Stewart delves into the notion of teacher identity and how it is affected by the community in which they belong.

Prumel: I think that Stewart is bold in adopting an “identity politics perspective” (p. 26) to explain the central theme of the book, language teacher recognition. Stewart suggests that recognition involves a very strong attachment to the background the Filipino teachers were born into, as well as other attributes such as language identity, gender and social class that are both inscribed and ascribed to them. She effectively presents the stories of the interviewees to argue that feelings of prejudice and pride are fundamental to identity. I find her interviews successful in eliciting these emotions from the interviewees. In her analysis, she portrays the organization Filipino English Teachers in Japan (henceforth FETJ) as a driving force for social activism that merits recognition and acceptance. As Filipino teachers with shared cultural identity with the interviewees, Stephanie and I will include our emic view or insider’s interpretation (Creswell, 2014) of the narratives which may be disparate from Stewart’s perspectives.

Stephanie: My name is Stephanie Lim. I have been working as a lecturer in Miyazaki, Japan for three years. I am Filipino-Canadian—born and raised in the Philippines, but my family moved to Vancouver when I was a teen, so I feel like I grew up in the Philippines, and became an adult in Canada. I identify strongly with both national identities. I have firm cultural roots in my birth country, and I have internalized values shaped by my Canadian experience.

Prumel: I am Prumel Barbudo, a lecturer at universities in Yokohama and Tokyo. Just like Stephanie, I was born and raised in the Philippines. I moved to Tokyo several years ago to do some research on teacher development under the Japanese Government Monbukagakusho (MEXT) Scholarship. Working as an English teacher abroad, I have always been proud of my Filipino heritage. I grew up as a “probinsyano” (Filipino slang which loosely translates as “country boy”), so my ex-urban, semi-conservative values are deeply shaped by my Ilokano regional ethnicity, which intersects with my professional and personal identities.

Stephanie: All the teachers interviewed presented diverse and compelling narratives of their respective teaching journeys. Certainly, many of the stories shared and analyzed in the book resonated with us as fellow Filipino language teachers in Japan. In this discussion, however, we would like to focus on three aspects that stood out to us from the stories: teaching path, discrimination, and Native English Speaking Teacher (NEST) and Non-native English Speaking Teacher (NNEST) identities.

Teaching Path

Stephanie: Shin, Katrina and Carmela were clear that teaching in one form or another would be their profession. Shin stated that it was his childhood dream, while Katrina and Carmela expressly pursued a degree in education.

Meanwhile, for Lori, Sampaguita and Anna, it appears that they arrived at teaching rather fortuitously as they studied Medicine, Business and Computer Science at university. However, one point is consistent among everyone, and that is it took a while, having had to overcome significant personal and professional obstacles, before they were able to establish themselves as English educators in Japan. What was your teaching path like as you moved from the Philippines to Japan?

Prumel: My bachelor's degree was in Secondary Education, major in English, and my master's degree was in English Education. In the Philippines, the English department in my university hired me after graduation and while doing this, I passed the licensure exam for professional teachers. I decided to move to the public high school system after a year. I had the privilege to be promoted to a position called "Master Teacher I," which means I had more senior roles such as conducting a mentoring program for other English teachers. When I moved to Japan, I worked at all levels of Japanese education, teaching both adults and children in public and private institutions. It was a struggle for me to start all over again in a foreign land but I worked my way through to become a university lecturer. I love the teaching profession. I have been enjoying this for over 18 years and I could not see myself doing other work. What was yours?

Stephanie: I have been teaching for almost nine years, three of which here in Japan. Like Renata, I never thought I would be in academia. Growing up, I did not like school, but when I was at university, I learned to appreciate it thanks to some of my professors who I felt taught with great passion and kindness. That was when I began imagining myself as a Psychology teacher. For the most part, though, I was unconvinced that it could happen because, at that time, it seemed like getting into graduate school was daunting and arduous. Also, I am quite introverted, and I did not think my personality would be suitable. However, a few months after completing my Bachelor's, I enrolled in the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program as I was unsure about what to do with my Psychology and International Relations degree. Fortunately, I was hired at a private language school in Vancouver not long after graduating from the program. In my five years there, I realized how singular a profession English teaching is. Among other things, I found it remarkable that people from all over the world, who have highly diverse backgrounds, could converge in our small classroom and connect with each other. I do not think there are many fields which can facilitate this kind of rich cultural exchange. It has allowed me to forge valuable friendships with some of my students, with whom I keep in touch with to this day, and I have really come to appreciate that aspect of this work. In my third year of teaching, I went back to school to get my Master's degree in Teaching English as an Additional Language (TEAL), which then led me to my current position at Miyazaki International College.

Discrimination

Stephanie: In Chapter 4, Sampaguita said she "does not experience or sense any discrimination against her as a Filipino in Japan" (p. 112). She received assistance from Japanese authorities when she needed it, and she stated that her coworkers have been appreciative of her work (p. 112). Similarly, Elma said she is aware that there is discrimination, but believes it can be overcome if you prove yourself to be better at your work than others (p. 93). As Stewart points out, Elma achieved this by garnering distinctions that recognize her as one of the best teachers at her workplace (p. 93). Have you ever experienced discrimination as a foreign English teacher here in Japan?

Prumel: I have not experienced overt discrimination directly from native English speakers or even Japanese teachers and administrators. However, I believe it still exists in the workplace and in our discourses. In the language teaching industry in Japan, we almost always equate the term discrimination to "negative discrimination," which is basically the poor treatment of a teacher because of his background, especially his mother tongue. However, "positive discrimination" is evident in the Japanese workplace too and affects the lives of all English teachers here. It usually favors teachers who come from Inner Circle countries (Kachru, 1992) where English is used as the primary language such as the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. One specific example even until today is that the job advertisements of English schools require candidates to be "native" English speakers from Inner Circle countries.

Upon deeper reflection, based on my recent experiences, discrimination often comes from fellow Filipinos, not from some explicit behavior or discourse from other nationalities. Having said this, I think it is also imperative to address discrimination with this specific Filipino organization in question. Having dealt personally with the interviewees myself, I noticed firsthand that some teachers exhibit a Filipino socio-cultural trait called "*kanya-kanya*" or self-centeredness. Specifically, when job opportunities come, some of them deliberately withhold information so only a few

or only members of the organization know about it, hence, fewer competition. This is primarily a manifestation of “circles within circles” (Martin, 2014) and is a harmful practice in the language teaching community.

Stewart is right to interpret that FETJ primarily caters to the professional, social, and sometimes political concerns of Filipino teachers in Japan. While this maybe so, there needs to be a more truthful representation of who we are as a community. I somehow feel FETJ is a platform where there is a mirage of Filipino values and hard work being projected, but it does not necessarily speak for other modern Filipino English teachers in Japan. Also, it has recently become a business enterprise whose programs are driven more by money-making activities than social activism. Therefore, there is a dire need to represent other Filipino teachers in Japan and not just the already established ones. What about you? What is your experience with discrimination, if any?

Stephanie: Like Sampaguita, I can say that I have not actually felt discriminated against because of my identities. I do not think that it has set me back professionally. I do recognize that it is a reality many minority teachers face, not only here in Japan. I also acknowledge that I inhabit this liminal space; my hyphenated national identity most probably affords me certain privileges. Having said that, I do feel like I have to prove myself as a teacher. Citing Morgan (2004), Stewart points out that, as language teachers, “our identities are ‘on show’ to learners and the people who hire us” (p. 192), so because I look a certain way, I feel there is an initial invisible barrier I need to overcome to get the full confidence of my employers and students. Whenever I enter a classroom for the first time, I feel like I am subjected to this automatic evaluation. I am unsure if this stems from my own insecurities given my age and experience. Nevertheless, that feeling does arise, but the good news is that I think I feel it less as I teach more.

With regards to the “kanya-kanya” mentality within FETJ, as I do not have first-hand experience with the group or other Filipino teachers in Japan in general, I cannot speak much about it specifically. In any case, I do understand this trait you are referring to as I have witnessed some form of it at different points in my life. It truly can be detrimental to everyone involved. As it pertains to us, however, if the larger goal is to elevate the image of the Filipino English teachers in Japan, then this issue within the community needs to be addressed directly and meaningfully. I do recognize that this is definitely easier said than done as everyone would have to acknowledge and accept that it is a legitimate point of contention in the first place.

NEST/NNEST Identity

Stephanie: When asked about her identification as NEST or NNEST, Renata asserted that she “do[es]n’t want labels” (p. 168). I understand where she is coming from as these categorizations are not straightforward. In my case, for speaking, I consider Cebuano as my native tongue. However, I cannot write formally in Cebuano or in Tagalog (Filipino languages), so if I were hard pressed to choose, I would say my first language for writing is English. As for reading and listening, I feel English, Cebuano, and Tagalog are my “first languages.” I think this is true not only for me, but for many people who grew up in the Philippines as the various Filipino languages are more often than not used simultaneously and/or interchangeably with English. Overall, however, I do identify as NNEST, but perhaps part of the hesitation some teachers may have when it comes to these labels arises as a result of this internal/personal, somewhat imprecise linguistic distinctions, even within ourselves. What do you think about the NEST and NNEST distinction?

Prumel: This dichotomy is simplistic but I still believe that these terms should be considered in meaningful discourse. This is not to say that I am complicit to perpetuating stereotypes about native and nonnative English speakers. On the contrary, having a demarcation between the terms “native” and “nonnative” to identify the teachers is the first step in recognizing that these all backgrounds matter. Misrecognition of these subjective terms alone may further marginalize those who identify as such. What should be forsaken is what Stewart mentions in Chapter 1 and the Introduction, which is *native speakerism* (Holliday, 2005, 2018) or the ideology that native speakers are better suited to teach English because they come from the Inner Circle countries. Another ideology that should be condemned is *linguicism*, or the preference for native English speakers (p. 24). There have been many attempts, even at recent international teacher conferences, to use terms such as “multilingual teachers,” “intercultural teachers,” and the like. Using these alternative terms achieves a superficial goal: It simply euphemizes the real problem that conflicts and forms of discrimination usually start in what we know, believe, and think or simply “cognition” (Borg, 2003) as manifested in our discourses and behaviors. Therefore, I do not see a huge problem in using the terms “native” and “nonnative,” however subjective they are, as they can help expose the disbenefits of the ideologies behind them.

Different types of World Englishes have now been intellectualized and as a result, we should have more tolerance to different varieties of the language. As a lingua franca, English is not anymore just owned by speakers from the Inner Circle countries. As Professor Ryuko Kubota (2001) of the University of British Columbia once mentioned, we, as nonnative speakers, also take ownership of the English language. However, in Japan, the misconception that the ideal teacher of a language is a native speaker of that language is still pervasive. This labeling is deeply ingrained in our professional communities, and we can start to change this by asserting ourselves and showing others that regardless of background, first and foremost, we are all English teachers. All experiences are valid, and ethnicity, race, or color should not be a factor in being an effective English teacher. Sure, nonnative speakers may have issues with their linguistic confidence, but if you qualify and can deliver, then nobody should discriminate against you in any form.

Stephanie: Agreed. I would also like to include age, gender and sexuality to those dimensions you mentioned. Indeed, it is wonderful that there are institutions like Renata's workplace that value the various identities of teachers and see them as assets. Arguably, it would be better for students, teachers, and institutions as a whole to recognize that diversity in English language teaching, and in life in general, is an advantage.

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