



FROM PHILIPPINES TO THE UNITED STATES: REFLECTIONS OF FULBRIGHT FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

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ABSTRACT

Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistants (FLTAs) all over the world play a vital role in teaching language and promoting culture. Every year, the Fulbright Commission sends hundreds of FLTA to various academic institutions in the United States to teach their language and to raise awareness about their culture. For 2022-2023, five Filipino scholars were designated to the states of Washington, Michigan, Pennsylvania, California, and Illinois. This autoethnographic paper reflects these scholars' journey as teachers, students, and cultural ambassadors. Presented herein are their insights on their classroom and community encounters and their overall experience with the FLTA program of the Fulbright Commission. This serves not only as a diary that future FLTA scholars can base on but also a compendium of the scholars' lifeworld that can give the Fulbright Commission with its counterparts in the home country and even the host institutions ideas on potential program improvements in the future.

KEYWORDS: *Fulbright, Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program, exchange programs, autoethnography*

INTRODUCTION

The Fulbright Commission provides opportunities worldwide for scholars to study, teach, and promote culture in the United States. One of these programs is the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) program sponsored by the United States Department of State Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA). This program immerses scholars to a different kind of cultural experience by deepening their understanding of the American culture while teaching their home language and promoting their culture (Fulbright Commission, 2023). For nine or ten months, chosen scholars study, teach, and serve as cultural ambassadors.

Annually, the Philippine-American Educational Foundation (PAEF) selects young language educators, aged between 23 to 29, to undergo the nine-month program in teaching Filipino language and culture in the United States. The 2022-2023 cohort is composed of five scholars assigned to various universities across the U.S. As per the Fulbright Commission (2023), the selection process includes complying with all the required TOEFL or IELTS test.

Scholars experience different rewarding and challenging encounters in their journey in the Fulbright program, and these need to be documented. Perreault and Dimitrova (2022) cites that Fulbright experiences are significant in addressing world issues. This poses the necessity to continually improve programs such as the FLTA to provide future scholars better experiences. Also, documenting the experiences of young language educators will also help in creating a better understanding of the needs for improvement in the field of language teaching (Apercho & Payot, 2022).

In this paper, the researchers discuss their experiences of being FLTA scholars. They talk about their rewarding and challenging experiences and reflect on their overall program journey. This paper is hoped to provide Filipino educators insights on the program and expectations when undergoing this. This paper can provide ideas on what future scholars, even from other countries, a basis that will give them ideas how to best maximize learning opportunities while in the United States.



METHOD

This biographical research documents the researchers' experiences as Fulbright FLTA scholars in the United States of America in 2022-2023. Due to the more personal approaches of eliciting information which consisted of reflective writing and photovoice, the autoethnographic method of qualitative research was used. The reflections included in this paper were based on the researchers' experiences in the Fall 2022 semester only or the first five months of their stay in the U.S. The analyses of the reflections were also based on the Language Socialization Theory of Uzum (2017). Biographical, contextual, and dialogic factors influence a teacher's beliefs and practices. *Biographical factors* include the following: (a) the teacher's personal history, (b) past experience as a learner of other languages, and (c) professional experience as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher in home country. On one hand, *contextual factors* pertain to those in the U.S. educational setting such as (a) teacher's interactions with students and (b) interactions with institutional resources. Lastly, the *dialogic factors* are composed of the teacher's making sense of theory in the practice of teaching such as (a) theoretical knowledge base and (b) the interplay of theory and practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



Figure 1. The Fulbright FLTA Cohort (2022-2023)- Philippines

Ryan in California

Any aspiring Fulbright scholar would have a positive impression about the Fulbright programs such as the FLTA. This is why Ryan sees the FLTA program an opportunity for him to experience international education. He narrated how he was inspired by the experiences of his former professors. Ryan believed that his experience being an FLTA scholar is rewarding in many aspects such as personal and professional. He expressed that the FLTA experience gave him the chance to enjoy travelling abroad and meeting people from various profiles.

One aspect that he loved the most about his FLTA journey is being able to travel around the U.S. and visit different communities. For him, this aspect is insightful as this allowed him to experience new things in life. Ryan also narrated how he was able to take part in professional opportunities that he considered rewarding as well. This taught Ryan important skills useful in his line of work back in the Philippines. Networking is also one of the advantages of having been involved in this kind of professional development activity. He also pointed out how important this chance has been in honing his teaching skills, especially when it comes to considering linguistic and cultural diversities in a language classroom.



Besides the academic and professional growth that Ryan experienced being an FLTA scholar, rewarding teaching experiences are also part of his joys. His exposure to an American classroom allowed him to better appreciate diversity and inclusion. He also became more passionate about teaching the Filipino language. This projects the fulfilling experience Ryan had as an FLTA scholar in California. He appreciated more how fulfilling it is to see learners become more interested in learning the Filipino culture. Also, he saw it as a learning opportunity to have taught with someone in a classroom who has unquestionable expertise in the field of ethnic studies, which is a useful discipline in Filipino language and culture teaching as well.

In a reflective writing, Ryan also shared three instances when he felt that he was at his best in delivering his functions as an FLTA scholar. For him, improving his multimodal communication skills, helping students connect to their roots, and sharing about the mission of Fulbright are rewarding.

Apparently, FLTA experience for Ryan had been so rewarding. As what he shared, his overall experience at his host institution is “very fulfilling and evolutionary.” However, he also expressed some challenges that impacted him as a Filipino scholar. Being foreign to the place where he serves as a teaching assistant (TA), he encountered some difficulties as well. For example, he noticed how students are already knowledgeable of their identities as Filipinos because of their prior exposure in history classes and immersion in various community events. Aside from this, he also observed how challenging it was to communicate with the people around because he has been used to academic English registers rather than the casual ones. He also mentioned that there were problems with student attendance.

Looking closely into Ryan’s personal embodied experiences, it can be gleaned how he had experienced both rewarding and challenging circumstances that molded him to being a better professional. His exposure to these allowed him to better appreciate his journey as an FLTA scholar and see the opportunity for him to build networks, deepen knowledge, and be more aware of his potential improvements as a language educator.

As an FLTA scholar, one primary function is to either serve as a teaching assistant or a primary teaching in a language classroom in a host institution. For Ryan’s case, he served as a teaching assistant, providing help to a primary instructor who takes charge of the Filipino classes. As a TA, Ryan also helps in implementing language- and culture-related programs that help in promoting the Filipino language and culture in the academic community. As a TA, Ryan did encounter some learning challenges as well, as observed in his students’ academic performance and learning progress in class. Ryan noticed how students had a challenging time focusing on their language classes due to their divided attention between work and school. Working at the same time schooling is common in the U.S., so Ryan saw this as rather normal. However, this reality also impacts their wellbeing as students. As a TA, Ryan works closely with his primary teacher and supervisor to ensure that concerns related to student learning would be addressed appropriately.

Ryan employed various means to ensure that problems are easily resolved. Communicating and collaborating with his primary teacher was his primary way in pointing out potential improvements. Another is soliciting feedback from students, which Ryan saw as one effective tool to assure students that they were also given the voice to suggest points for improvement or adjustments as far as language instruction or curriculum is concerned.

Overall, Ryan considers his entire FLTA experience as a platform to build connections. He realized that what Fulbright does is to bridge the gaps among nations, and it has been successful in bringing people more closely to experience more cultural exchanges that truly matter.

Representing the Philippines on the world stage and being a cultural ambassador gives me a sense of pride and honor. The Fulbright FLTA experience has given me an opportunity to explore the world and learn things from a new perspective, yet the most rewarding was being able to show the world the beauty and majesty of my country.

Ryan believes that the entire Fulbright FLTA experience taught him the importance of making authentic connections where understanding and respect are both fostered. In Fulbright, this is what he experienced because he met people along the way that made him see his worth as a language educator and a cultural ambassador of the Philippines. His overall experience manifests a reflection that is heavily based on not only what made him joyful but also on what made him tearful and frustrated. The complement and supplement relationship between what is rewarding and challenging is what Ryan believes to have made his Fulbright journey even more meaningful.

Candice in Michigan

Candice sees the Fulbright Program as a prestigious scholarship opportunity. More than just being an academic platform, Candice considers Fulbright as an avenue to be engaged with people and to foster diversity and inclusion. This was her impression of the FLTA program prior to her application. Her experience as a Fulbright FLTA scholar has been fulfilling as well,



considering that she made friends and was immersed to a totally diverse group which made her appreciate cultural diversity even more.

For Candice, her FLTA experience was a way for her to motivate herself even more to do her best in her Filipino class given that her students work hard not for economic reasons but for cultural and familial purposes. As mentioned, Candice enjoyed the moments when she met wonderful connections and created friendships with these individuals. She felt that she had a strong support system in her journey as an FLTA scholar in Michigan whenever she was around these peers.

Her rewarding experiences were not purely personal as she also had the chance to enjoy a lot of fascinating things when it comes to her professional or academic growth. She narrated how her exposure to American education shaped her research skills as a language educator and how this made it possible for her to establish connections with scholars in the field of linguistics and language education.

Candice noticed the values and attitudes that her professors and classmates showed in class. This made her even more motivated to improve her craft and to connect more with individuals who could help her grow as a professional or an academic. She also noted how her professors' teaching styles created an open room for everyone, especially her, to share insights on concepts discussed in class. For her, these styles fostered critical thinking; and she appreciated this so much.

Candice functions as a primary teacher in the host institution where she was designated at in Michigan. As a primary teacher, it was her role to devise teaching contents for her students to learn the Filipino language and culture. As a primary teacher, Candice enjoyed the rewarding experiences that went with her functions as an instructor.

Since she has a small class, Candice saw this as a chance to form closer academic relationships with her students, giving them much attention in teaching them language and culture. One good thing about this setup that she appreciated was the opportunity to be more innovative and dynamic with the teaching strategies. She was able to implement fun activities that made the class even more meaningful for the students.

Further, Candice shared about three instances where she felt that she did well in her functions as an FLTA scholar. For her, these experiences were fulfilling. The first one was her speaking engagement with two other FLTA scholars to promote Filipino language and culture in a school in Washington State. This speaking event allowed Candice to share her insights on Visayan culture. As an FLTA scholar, she felt that this was one way for her to promote her local culture as well. Another fulfilling event that Candice shared was a forum that she considered memorable because of an encounter with one of the attendees. This event was insightful for both Candice and the student, and in this encounter, Candice showed the values that Filipinos possess when it comes to being appreciated. Another concrete example of Candice sharing the Filipino culture to her students was during a special event where *arnis*, a Filipino sport, was taught. Promoting culture is one of the functions of an FLTA scholar; hence, teaching Filipino sports and games is one way to effectively share about the wonderful practices that Filipinos have. Candice sees these events fulfilling not only because she was able to teach the language and culture but also because she touched lives in ways she might have not imagined.

Candice considers her overall FLTA journey "challenging but rewarding," so it is also vital to talk about her challenging experiences. Her challenges dwelt in instruction such as the content, guidance, and materials. First, she talks about how unnatural it had been for her to teach the Filipino language considering that she teaches English back in the Philippines. She shared,

I have always taught English. Participating in the Fulbright program was the first time I had to teach Filipino, my first language. I assumed that it was going to be easy because it was my first language, but I was wrong! Teaching Filipino felt like having to teach someone how to breathe. How do I teach something that comes so naturally to me? Sometimes, students would ask me grammar questions and I wouldn't know how to answer because it had never occurred to me to ever think about the rules governing Filipino.

One challenge that Candice encountered was the difficulty in talking about the Filipino grammar. Although Filipino is her first language (L1), teaching this seemed to be unnatural and challenging on her end as she studied English for her undergraduate degree. For her, getting acquainted with the grammatical rules and teaching them to the students was one of the hard parts being a primary instructor. Aside from this, she also expressed how the absence of a primary instructor became a problem for her because she had no one to guide her as far as Filipino language teaching was concerned. Although Candice shared about having a great support system in the community, she felt that she lacked guidance in teaching Filipino itself. Because of the disparity in time since the last year the language was offered at her school, she found it very challenging to implement a curriculum that was already in effect long time ago and had commenced its implementation only five years after. As an FLTA scholar, Candice saw that the lack of guidance in this aspect made her adjustment to her classroom instruction challenging for her. In relation to this, Candice also considered the lack of enough materials as one of her concerns. The lack of instructional materials such as books that are levelled to the students' language needs was one of Candice's challenges as a primary instructor. Although proper teaching approaches could have been used,



the inappropriateness of teaching and learning materials and references could also impact the quality of learning, impeding language learners from effectively learning the target language, e.g., Filipino. Hence, it is important to properly identify the references to be used in class to ensure that there would be alignment of goals and expected competencies from the language learners.

Candice, reflecting on her overall experience, she felt bittersweet because she was about to end her journey as an FLTA scholar and would be going back to the Philippines. She also felt fulfilled, realizing that she made it to the prestigious Fulbright FLTA program and would be completing it soon. For her, the overall experience of meeting people and communities that she loved so much in Michigan made her stay in the U.S. more rewarding.

Gianinna in Pennsylvania

Gianinna, just like any other professional educators, sees the Fulbright program as a prestigious opportunity. For her, the FLTA program is a way to engage educators to become global citizens through immersing them to another culture. Unlike Ryan and Candice, Gianinna prepared for her application for a long time. This was her mechanism to ensure that she would get a spot in the application process. She believed that her FLTA journey would bring her growth and develop her as a more competent educator in the Philippines. Gianinna saw her experience rewarding because she was able not only to pursue her volunteer works but also to travel in her dream destinations in the U.S. For her, the whole experience was like hitting two birds with one stone in which she got to have other things checked in her bucket list. Her experience served as a door for her to pursue volunteer works in Philadelphia. In fact, she was able to commit her time and service in helping homeless Americans through organizations. This is why she became very active in volunteer works alongside her FLTA functions in her host school. Gianinna had also been invited in numerous speaking engagements that allowed her to share her skills, identity, and culture as a Filipino. Invitations from institutions in the Philippines and the U.S. flourished, so she had numerous platforms to share about her identity.

Her experience in these speaking opportunities sharpened her professional skills as well when it comes to doing presentations, and this became possible because of her FLTA journey that connected her to institutions. Because of these chances as well, she was supplied with the opportunity to talk about her local identity as a Filipina from Marinduque. Apart from these, Gianinna also sees her teaching journey as an FLTA rewarding. She felt that she was lucky because of her hardworking students in an Ivy League school. More than the excellent academic performance showed by her students, the close ties she was able to form with them was one thing she was grateful for.

One fulfilling part in her teaching stint was being able to teach Filipino students and reconnect with their roots. Also, she felt rewarded knowing that she had students from other cultures who also piqued interest in understanding Philippine language and culture. Another aspect of her teaching that made her more fulfilled is the mutualism between her and her class who also made her learn more about the American culture and adjust to the kind of life in Philadelphia.

Giannina also shared more about the rewarding parts of her teaching journey as an FLTA scholar. First, she believes that her role as an FLTA scholar is essential in progressing her students in learning the language and culture. She also finds it rewarding to have been invited in schools in the community and even in New York to discuss Filipino culture. Above all, her volunteer works complement well with her purpose of being a Filipino cultural ambassador in Philadelphia because she got to showcase the compassion and *bayanihan* spirit that Filipino communities possess.

Although Gianinna considers her experience “pleasant and rewarding,” she also had her share of struggles in teaching, especially when it comes to defining her role as either the primary teacher or the teaching assistant. One salient struggle that Gianinna had was with her primary instructor because it was the first time that the institution hosted a Fulbright FLTA scholar for Filipino. Since it was the first time yet, Giannina saw it as rather a potential improvement for future scholars. Since for FLTA scholars, clearly defined functions and scope of work are important, and Gianinna might have not been provided these, hence the struggles in her initial months of teaching in her host school. One good thing that she acknowledged though was the prompt response by her supervisor that resulted in the resolution of the existing confusion and avoidance of future problems as far as teaching was concerned.

Although Giannina sees her FLTA journey challenging because of missing her family so much and hoping that she was enjoying all the opportunities in the U.S. with the people she loves. She also had deep reflection as regards her overall FLTA experience, and this is encapsulated in this statement.

Life as a scholar in the United States comes with its own rewards and struggles. But I chose this photo because I feel that it illustrates my sense of accomplishment and fulfillment with actually being here; of being granted to opportunity to learn and work in a country that holds so much promise for young people like me. I have random moments of reflection where I am struck by thoughts of how I never thought that an island girl raised in poverty would someday be representing her community



and her country and working with an Ivy League university. I am simply just happy to be here, and I am proud of what I have done so far.

Gianinna's experience is fulfilling for her because she realized how she rose from poverty and became an educator given the rare chance to represent the Philippines in a Fulbright program. For her, being an FLTA scholar is such a prideful moment; and she feels so proud for having accomplished this amidst the challenges she had to face before the selection process. She also realized how blessed she was considering that not everyone is given the chance to travel to the U.S. to teach, study, as well as travel.

Cristina in Illinois

Cristina, also called "Tin" by her friends, is an FLTA scholar in the state of Illinois, specifically in DeKalb. She sees her Fulbright experience as something prestigious and well-known to many in the academe. Her impression of the FLTA program led her to thinking that this was a rare chance that not everyone could have in their professional life. In fact, Tin sees the FLTA opportunity life changing. Tin also narrated how this FLTA stint could become one way for her to relax for a while from her burdensome job back in the Philippines. Tin added how enriching she envisioned the FLTA experience would be. She considered this stint as one good platform for her to promote the Filipino language and culture.

Apparently, her impressions of the FLTA journey became a reality when she herself had rewarding experiences on a personal level. First, she noticed how self-discovery became evident in her experience as an FLTA scholar in Illinois. This experience made her somehow realize her struggles adjusting to a new environment as well. The communication issues became apparent for her, but she managed it well by regaining herself and reconnecting with her inner self. After this event, she went back to being productive; hence, she successfully managed an activity that she considered rewarding.

Tin also considers her active involvement in various organizations rewarding as it was one way for her to recharge herself, especially her social battery. For her, appreciation is fundamental in achieving effective work productivity. Apart from her active involvement in curricular activities, she also values her experiences with the American education, having taken two credit courses in the Fall 2022 semester.

Tin also enjoyed her "firsts" while undergoing her FLTA journey. She remembered those times when she really enjoyed trying new things in the U.S. and doing activities that she never tried before. Apart from these experiences, Tin also found belongingness in a totally foreign place. Her community in DeKalb helped her a lot in adjusting to the American culture. She did not have a hard time battling her homesickness because she felt that she had like a home around her. She also mentioned how this support system aided her in addressing her anxiety and other mental health concerns.

Her rewarding experiences did not revolve around her personal life alone as she also had those in her professional or academic life. For example, she mentioned how the FLTA experience helped her a lot in molding her language teaching skills and provided her with various opportunities to share her language and culture. Although Tin admitted that she had no experience teaching the Filipino language back in the Philippines as she is an English language faculty by profession, she was still grateful knowing that the FLTA experience made her more insightful as far as teaching is concerned. She also felt that her journey as a scholar gave her more professional and academic development platforms such as conferences and fora which served as her whetstone in improving her skills. For example, her experience in writing activity proposals was fulfilling.

Aside from the rewarding experiences in her personal and professional life, Tin also acknowledged that she had those in her teaching life. As an FLTA scholar, Tin functioned as a teaching assistant where she worked with a primary instructor in all her Filipino language classes. As a teacher in Illinois, Tin considers the relationships she established with her students very rewarding. Seeing these students grow in the use of the target language was also fulfilling on Tin's part. When asked about her top three teaching experiences where she felt very fulfilled, Tin responded about balance, promptness, and connections. Albeit these, there were also aspects that she considered challenging. Commonly, these were on students' attendance, compliance, and apathy.

Dealing with problematic students, most especially when it came to attendance, was one of Tin's struggles. Considerate and strategic, she used all the means she could have to help the student concerned. However, she found the student to be non-cooperative, hence the failing mark. Apart from this problem, Tin also considers non-compliance to the set academic requirements as one of her challenging experiences. As an FLTA scholar, Tin found this issue an impediment to her performance as a teaching assistant. Assessment and monitoring became a challenge for her, most especially when there were communication issues on the end of the non-cooperative learners. Observably, students' issues in attendance and non-compliance could have been rooted from their apathy in learning the language. Students' apathy was manifested in Tin's class in many shapes such as lack of attention during classes or negative attitudes towards language learning. For Tin, it was a test of her skills as a language educator as she needed to devise ways to sustain fun language learning experiences so as to maintain interest and drive. For her, it was the proper venue to apply her knowledge



and competencies as a professional teacher back in the Philippines.

Amidst the challenges, Tin never failed to see the benefits of her FLTA journey. For her, the teaching and education she experienced in the U.S. with Fulbright had been so insightful; for it opened doors for her to self-discovery and cultural understanding. She thinks of her grant as a chance for her to intensify her love for the Philippines and to take pride of her identity. Because of this journey as well, she was able to segregate things that truly matter from those that do not; and this enhanced her decisiveness and critical thinking in important situations. Above all, she sees this opportunity as a moment for her to always carry the Filipino identity in whatever she does or wherever she goes. As for her, identity is something that must be carried as a person no matter what.

My overall insight/experience as an FLTA scholar in the United States can be represented by this Dandelion. When you blow its seeds off into the air, it disperses and goes everywhere and grows again. Likewise with my experience as an FLTA, this once in a lifetime blow of opportunity took me to several places, showed me a lot of realities on the other side of the globe, made me realize more important things that should matter and strengthened my sense of patriotism. If I were the seeds of this dandelion, I know that I will grow wherever the wind would take me. My FLTA journey equipped me with everything that I need to grow independently and to proudly carry our PH flag with pride wherever I go.

Tin's experiences had been a roller coaster ride for her, considering all the challenges she had to face and the fun times she enjoyed. For her, the overall FLTA journey brought her to places and connected her to relationships. Most of all, it helped her reconnect more strongly to her identity as a Filipino, that no matter where she goes and whatever she does, she will remain the prideful Filipino she is. Tin considers her journey eye-opening as well, having been exposed to cultural differences and various educational issues that beset American academic institutions. Her experience is already fulfilling and worth cherishing as described in her interviews, and this is supplemented by how she saw her challenges as potential points for improvement in the future.

Maico in Washington

The Fulbright program was an enticing scholarship opportunity for Maico, even when he was still a neophyte college instructor. When he heard about the Fulbright FLTA program from his former professors and acquaintances, he saw it as an excellent opportunity where he could apply three of my interests: language teaching, studying, and promoting culture and identity. Fast forward, he became part of the 2022-2023 Fulbright FLTA-Filipino cohort in the United States and was assigned at a university in the Washington State.

Maico's experiences had many rewarding instances. First, he found it rewarding to have finally gone outside of his comfort zone in terms of doing things independently and putting more self-trust in everything that he does. Travelling abroad for the first time was difficult for him, but he had to muster the much-needed courage to survive going to the U.S. Living alone in a community where he was clueless where to go or who to ask was also difficult for him, most especially when going about the daily routines such as grocery-shopping, getting a haircut, commuting, and even roaming around the community. Second, he considered his time as an FLTA scholar very rewarding in the sense that he enjoyed numerous opportunities to discover himself more. For instance, he got more reconnected to his faith by attending Sunday services and engaging in one-on-one and group Bible study sessions. Also, he was able to cater to his artistic side visiting museums and art exhibits, attending fairs, and witnessing orchestra and other theatrical performances in the locality. Lastly, he found joy in solitude. Whenever he did not have work or school, he would just stay in his apartment and enjoy his personal time. His solitude in the apartment and occasional isolation made him understand himself more. Because of this FLTA journey, there has been self-discovery and even reparation from his previous experiences.

As far as professional growth is concerned, he did maximize his break from employment in the Philippines by writing numerous research and presenting and publishing them in reputable peer-reviewed journals. His time in his apartment had always been productive because he was so engaged with research; this developed his writing skills and discovered stratagems to improve my craft in this aspect. He also felt rewarded when he finished his credit courses and got exemplary grades after.

As an FLTA scholar, he was the primary teacher. It felt revealing to him because he was given the liberty to implement whatever he wanted for the class for as long as he was hitting the necessary competencies and proficiency expected of the students at the end of every semester. As a teacher, what he found very rewarding was knowing that he contributed to his students' love for their identity, making them embrace more who they are or what made them fall in love with the Filipino language and culture. While not all his students were Filipinx, most of them used Filipino expressions in their random conversations, became more engaged in their Filipino organization, and incorporated their learning and language skills when they communicate with their Filipino family members or friends. This was very fulfilling on Maico's end, considering that his primary goal was not only to make them speak, write, or understand the language but also to make them embrace the Filipino culture.



Maico's experience also afforded him a lot of things that he would not have imagined accomplishing. For example, because of this stint, he was able to visit other states in the U.S. such as Washington DC, New York, and Illinois. He also had the opportunity to become a resource speaker in numerous events in the university. As a teacher, he felt like his connection with his students was the most rewarding because they had friendship even outside the classroom. He believes that his greatest contribution, so far, is bringing the Filipino identity in a language classroom that he deemed very essential in any language class. He ensured that his students would feel the Filipino identity so that they would not become apathetic in learning and become more interested and driven in finishing the course.

Even though he considers his FLTA journey rewarding and self-recharging, there were also challenging experiences. For instance, he had difficulties in condensing the content in one semester. As much as he would want to dwell in a topic for a week and make sure that his students would become well-versed in that aspect of language, he could not because there was a syllabus that needed to be followed. The pre-designed outline of topics was a bit loaded for him, more for his learners, hence he had a hard time catching up with the remaining topics in the semester. Maico also felt like he was in a community where access to resources was challenging. Although there were nearby Asian markets, it was sometimes difficult to look for Filipino products that could have helped him more in implementing the lessons. This also posed a struggle on his end because he often wanted to innovate, but resources seemed to be inaccessible, unless he purchased them online.

Amidst all these challenges, one good thing though was that he was able to polish his innovativeness and decisiveness on things that necessitated urgent solutions. He used strategies to ensure that student learning would not be affected and that his overall teaching performance was not impacted either. This prompted him to become very resourceful, considerate, and passionate about foreign language teaching. Realistically, this experience taught him to become a better-thinking language educator, ensuring that no matter what, he would remain critical in achieving the competencies his students ought to possess at the end of the semester.

Overall, Maico considers his FLTA experience one of his biggest milestones in life. He shared how he started dreaming to study abroad and ended up being a Fulbright scholar. He narrated,

I remember the times when I was rejected in several scholarship applications; I lost hope. But I kept in mind that God has a reason for everything, including my failures. I kept dreaming, I was never stopped. I kept honing my craft and did what I could to snatch an opportunity that I would treasure for a lifetime. Here I am now, enjoying the gifts of this Fulbright journey. This scholarship was more than just being in New York or Washington DC as this is about fulfilling a dream, enjoying a journey, and learning more about the self. Fulbright is not about the prestige or the credentials, it is about learning new skills, unlearning old habits, and relearning your strengths and weaknesses as a person and a professional.

Maico reflected on how fruitful his Fulbright FLTA journey had become. For him, his experience was transformational as he learned more about himself and discovered a lot of things about the world. Maico considers Fulbright programs to be a whetstone that polishes the scholars' cultural competence and global understanding. It indeed provides *exchanges that truly matter*.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper shows how diverse Fulbright scholars' experiences could become. The experiences shared by the five FLTA scholars from the Philippines elaborate on the future similar experiences that Filipino FLTA scholars can also have, but acknowledging that experiences may be unique, this autoethnographic study can at least provide insights on what to expect and how to overcome challenges in the journey. Based on the scholars' narratives, the researchers recommend that the Fulbright Commission, along with its counterparts in the scholars' home country, be cognizant of the need to improve program experiences such as those related to housing, teaching functions, monitoring, and coordination with the host institutions. It would have been more helpful also for FLTA scholars that host institutions create stronger ties with the community (e.g., Filipino community) to establish a more participatory approach in teaching the language and culture. This paper is also one way to emphasize that the national governments of the scholars' home countries show appreciation for all the efforts of promoting the language and culture through education in the United States, which is one of the ways to foster strong international relations and to promote deeper cultural understanding among nations. The researchers highly recommend that Filipino educators of the English language apply for the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program and be one of the selected ambassadors to promote the Filipino



language and culture on a global level. This is also a call for all other language academics from other countries to make use of this opportunity to showcase their cultures in the United States and to better understand the world through cultural immersions.

DISCLAIMER

The researchers' opinions are their own and do not represent those of the Fulbright Program or the U.S. Department of State.

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