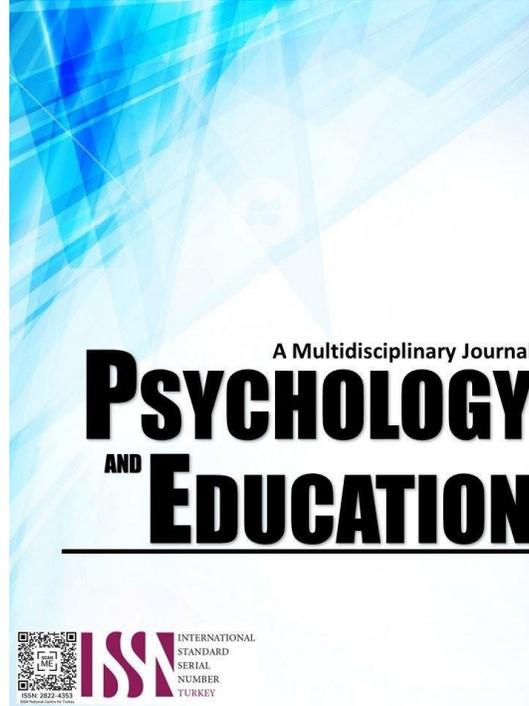


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Teachers' Cultural Experiences in the Special Program in Foreign Language

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Abstract

This study explores the cultural experiences of teachers in the Department of Education's (DepEd) Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL), focusing on their lived experiences, the challenges they face, and the strategies they use to develop culturally responsive learning experiences for their students. The study uses a hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology to shed light on the experiences of six (6) participants currently teaching Chinese (Mandarin), German (Deutsch), and Japanese (Nihongo) at two public high schools in Quezon City, Philippines. From the data collected through interviews emerge seven (7) themes: educator experience and development; cultural exposure; external support; classroom diversity and socio-cultural barriers; resource limitations; student-centered instructional practices; and cultural integration. Results show that prior teaching experience, immersion programs, and innovative tactics enable teachers to provide culturally responsive lessons. However, limited resources and support pose significant challenges. Recommendations include encouraging students to explore their interests and engage in cultural activities, urging parents to support language learning and cultural appreciation, and promoting continuous professional development and collaboration among teachers. School administrators are advised to strengthen support systems and create conducive learning environments. And for future researchers to expand the study to other contexts, include student perspectives, assess long-term effects, and include quantitative methodologies to enhance the understanding of cultural experiences within the program.

Keywords: *culturally relevant pedagogy, lived experiences, special program in foreign language, hermeneutic phenomenology, international cultural education*

Introduction

In alignment with the Department of Education's (DepEd) Basic Education Development Plan (BEDP) 2030 and the MATATAG agenda, the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) was introduced to equip Filipino students with competencies in various foreign languages as part of their 21st-century skill development. The program aims not only to enhance linguistic proficiency but also to promote cultural understanding, recognizing the intrinsic link between language and culture. Since its expansion in 2017, SPFL has included Chinese (Mandarin), French, German (Deutsch), Japanese (Nihongo), Korean, and Spanish in its curriculum (Department of Education, 2017).

High school teachers who implement the SPFL play a pivotal role in bridging cultural divides and fostering students' intercultural competence. Their personal cultural experiences, both within and beyond the classroom, significantly shape their teaching approaches and the effectiveness of cultural transmission. Understanding these experiences is essential to uncovering the challenges and successes of promoting foreign languages and cultures in a predominantly Filipino educational environment. Research shows that a teacher's cultural background influences their pedagogical choices. For instance, Wu (2017), as cited in Wang and Yang (2023), found that Mandarin Chinese educators' cultural awareness affected classroom instruction and student engagement. Similarly, Pinheiro et al. (2025) emphasized how educators' cultural roots impact their adaptation of curricula and assessments, supporting the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy. Integrating foreign cultures into the Philippine curriculum presents both opportunities and challenges. Teachers must navigate cultural gaps, challenge stereotypes, and create engaging and contextually relevant learning environments. Their experiences offer valuable insights into the realities of cross-cultural education and the development of responsive teaching methodologies.

This study explores the cultural experiences of high school teachers implementing the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) in the Philippines. It investigates how educators perceive, interpret, and convey foreign cultures within their classrooms. These insights are crucial for informing educational policy, enhancing teacher training, and advancing the goals of international cultural education in public schools.

Research Questions

The purpose of this Hermeneutic Phenomenological study was to explore the cultural experiences of the Special Program in Foreign Language Teachers at two Public High Schools in Quezon City. At this stage in the research, the cultural experiences were generally defined as the personal, professional, and educational experiences that teachers had, shaping how they understood, valued, and used both their own culture and the culture of the language they taught. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of the teachers teaching under the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL)?
2. What are the challenges faced by high school teachers in implementing the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL)?

3. How do teachers under the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) develop culturally responsive learning experiences?

Literature Review

Recent literature highlights the inseparable relationship between language and culture in foreign language instruction, a concept central to the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) implemented by the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) since 2009. Initially introduced in Spanish, the program expanded to include Mandarin, Nihongo, French, German, and Korean, with eligibility limited to junior and senior high school students who demonstrate English proficiency. The success of the program depends heavily on teacher training and support, with DepEd collaborating with international cultural institutions such as the Japan Foundation, Goethe Institut, and Confucius Institute to strengthen teachers' capabilities through regular training and national conferences.

A significant component of effective foreign language teaching is teachers' cultural understanding. Studies such as Wu (2017) and Garcia (2018) underscore how teachers' cultural exposure—primarily through international experience—can enhance their ability to transmit cultural knowledge meaningfully. In cross-cultural settings, however, teachers may face dissatisfaction and challenges if their training or cultural awareness is insufficient. In the Philippine context, challenges identified include a lack of authentic teaching materials, insufficient training, and time constraints, leading to disjointed implementation of intercultural content in classrooms (Ayunon & Haloc, 2021; Eleccion, 2024).

The integration of language policies into public education reflects a broader goal of intercultural competence and global citizenship. Yet studies argue that more focus is needed on teachers' actual experiences navigating these changes (Jingyi & De Dios, 2024). Moreover, the development of culturally responsive teaching practices is crucial. Research by Pinheiro et al. (2025) and Wu (2023) highlights how teachers' cultural assumptions and use of authentic materials can shape inclusive and effective instruction. Localized teaching approaches, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, have proven effective in integrating culture and addressing pedagogical challenges (Pamintuan, 2021).

Finally, studies such as Gonzales (2010, as cited by Boco & Gaytos, 2025) emphasize that Filipino students are highly motivated by cultural understanding and personal growth, suggesting that culturally integrated instruction enhances engagement and learning outcomes. Together, these findings highlight the need to understand how teachers' cultural experiences shape their pedagogical strategies within the SPFL framework.

Methodology

Research Design

To gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of high school teachers implementing the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL), the researcher employed a qualitative research design. This approach enables the exploration of complex social phenomena through detailed, context-rich accounts drawn from participant narratives (Creswell, 2014; Gregar, 2023). Through interviews and classroom observations, the study gathered firsthand insights to construct a holistic view of how teachers experience and navigate cultural instruction in foreign language education.

Specifically, the study adopted a hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology, grounded in Heidegger's (1962) philosophy and further developed by scholars such as Friesen et al. (2012) and van Manen (1990). This phenomenology recognizes the researcher's interpretive role in co-constructing meaning from participants' lived experiences. This approach is particularly suited to investigating how educators perceive, interpret, and respond to cultural dynamics in their pedagogical practices.

The philosophical foundation of this study is ontology, which explores the nature of reality as multiple, subjective, and shaped by individual experience. In this framework, reality is understood as being constructed through one's interactions with one's environment. Crowther and Thomson (2020) emphasize that hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to uncover the meaning of being through the reflective interpretation of lived experiences. This approach aligns with this study's objective of understanding how SPFL teachers navigate cultural integration in the classroom. By embracing these interpretive and ontological assumptions, the research aimed to produce a nuanced account of the teachers' experiences, revealing the cultural insights, strategies, and challenges that shape their work within the SPFL program.

Participants

A total of six (6) high school teachers were purposively selected to participate in this study. Each participant had 1 to 12 years of experience teaching under the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL). Accessing the two participating public schools posed no significant difficulty, as both institutions fostered a generally welcoming environment that facilitated entry, participant recruitment, and data collection. The selection criteria were as follows: Participants must be licensed educators currently employed in a public high school during the academic year 2024–2025; they must have at least one year of teaching experience in the SPFL program; they must hold a graduate degree in Education; they must provide informed consent and express willingness to participate in the study.

This study employed purposive sampling, a nonprobability sampling method selected for its alignment with the study's objectives (Crossman, 2020). Also referred to as subjective, judgmental, or selective sampling, this approach enabled the researcher to deliberately

choose participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the implementation of the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL).

Procedure

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of high school teachers in the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL), the researcher gathered data through multiple qualitative methods: in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and photo-based documentation. These triangulated sources enriched the data and enhanced the study's trustworthiness.

A total of six (6) participants participated in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews to explore their teaching practices, perceptions, and challenges in implementing culturally relevant pedagogy. The interview protocol was divided into two parts: the first collected personal and professional information to confirm participants' eligibility; the second focused on curriculum planning, instructional strategies, implementation, and assessment practices. To ensure instrument validity, the researcher conducted trial interviews with two qualified public high school teachers who were not part of the study sample. Additionally, the interview guide was reviewed by the researcher's academic adviser, who holds a Doctorate in Education and Public Administration.

Classroom observations were conducted to document teaching strategies, student engagement, cultural integration, and classroom dynamics in real-time. Using structured observation notes, the researcher recorded participant behaviors, interactions, and contextual elements during actual class sessions.

Visual data complemented verbal and observational findings. With permission, the researcher collected photographs capturing teaching activities, student participation, and outputs that illustrated cultural learning. These images served as reflective and contextual evidence of pedagogical practices.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this study were analyzed using a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach as articulated by Max van Manen (1990) and further explained by Zahavi (2020). This methodology emphasizes the interpretive nature of understanding lived experiences by integrating both descriptive and reflective elements to uncover the essence of a phenomenon. The researcher followed van Manen's six research activities as a framework for analysis:

Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience. The inquiry began with the researcher's genuine interest in understanding the lived cultural experiences of SPFL teachers. This commitment formed the foundation of a meaningful and ethically grounded investigation.

Investigating Experience as We Live It. Rich, detailed descriptions were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and photograph-based documentation. These methods aimed to preserve the participants' experiences in their raw, unfiltered form.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Reflection. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and interpret deeper meanings within participants' narratives, moving beyond surface-level accounts to reveal the underlying structures of their experience.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Writing. Writing functioned as a method of analysis, allowing the researcher to reflect, revise, and clarify interpretations. Through iterative drafting, the emergent themes were refined to capture the essence of the phenomenon accurately.

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation to the Phenomenon. The researcher remained consistently focused on the core research question, maintaining an ethical and empathetic stance that honored the participants' voices and perspectives.

Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole. The analysis involved an interplay between individual narrative elements and the overarching experience, ensuring coherence and depth in the portrayal of participants' lived realities.

This methodological approach facilitated a nuanced and holistic understanding of how teachers experienced and enacted culturally responsive teaching within the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL).

Results

Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study distilled the qualitative data into seven central themes, twenty-four categories, and 136 initial codes. These themes captured the dynamic interplay between cultural pedagogy, teacher identity, institutional support, and classroom realities, offering meaningful insights into how teachers navigate SPFL implementation and strive to create culturally responsive learning environments.

Table 1. *Lived experiences of the teachers in the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL)*

<i>Issue being probed during interviews</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Lived experiences of the teachers in the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL)	Educator experience and development Cultural exposure External support

Theme 1: Educator Experience and Development

This theme captured how teachers' prior training, practical classroom encounters, and professional journeys informed their approach to culturally responsive teaching.

Previous Teaching Experience. Teachers' foundations in English instruction enhanced their ability to manage foreign-language content and to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy, aligning with Ladson-Billings' concept of cultural competence.

Practical Experience. Activities such as demo teaching and contests served as platforms for teachers to refine their strategies and adapt to culturally diverse contexts through feedback and peer interaction.

Varying Degrees of Adaptability. Teachers experienced a spectrum of adjustment processes, from initial difficulty to successful adaptation, demonstrating resilience and the importance of cultivating intercultural awareness—supported by findings from Furyanto and Rochmawati (2025).

Learning and Growth. Teachers pursued continuous development through seminars, training, and peer discussions, viewing cultural competence not as innate but as a skill to be cultivated. This is consistent with Yao and McWha-Hermann's (2025) emphasis on self-reflective learning environments.

Professional Commitment. Many teachers pursued graduate studies and language proficiency certifications, reflecting a strong sense of identity and a duty to their role as cultural educators. This further supports the notion that professional development is deeply linked to cultural responsiveness.

These categories highlighted that SPFL teachers are not only instructional facilitators but also cultural mediators who navigate diverse challenges and responsibilities with an ongoing commitment to growth, adaptability, and inclusion.

Theme 2. Cultural Exposure

The study identified cultural exposure as a vital element shaping SPFL teachers' lived experiences. This theme revealed that teachers developed greater cultural sensitivity and awareness as they engaged with the complexities of teaching foreign languages within diverse cultural contexts. Their ability to recognize cultural nuances influenced how they designed lessons, interacted with students, and navigated classroom dynamics. Moreover, experiences of cultural immersion—such as attending cultural events, engaging with native speakers, and participating in school-based international programs—enhanced their teaching authenticity and cross-cultural competence.

Cultural Sensitivity. Teachers demonstrated the ability to compare and contrast Filipino and target cultures, using this awareness to guide respectful, relevant instruction. Codes such as comparing cultures, connecting meaning, and polite or offensive indicated a deliberate effort to contextualize cultural content for students. This aligns with Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2014) framework of cultural competence, which emphasizes understanding both one's own and others' cultural contexts (as cited by Abdalla & Moussa, 2024).

Cultural Immersion. Firsthand experiences, such as immersion events, cultural booths, and interactions with native speakers, enabled teachers to move beyond textbook knowledge. These opportunities empowered them to model genuine intercultural engagement, supporting students in developing similar competencies. This further reflected the cultural competency principle, positioning teachers as the first learners and cultural bridges in the educational environment.

These categories illustrated that cultural exposure is not peripheral, but central to SPFL teaching. It enriches educators' pedagogy, enhances student engagement, and reinforces the importance of respectful, participatory cultural learning in language education.

Theme 3. External Support

External support played a critical role in shaping SPFL teachers' lived experiences by enriching instructional quality and promoting cultural competency. This theme encompassed two key categories, which provided the structural and social reinforcement necessary for effective foreign language and culture education.

Partner Institute. Collaborations with institutions such as the Confucius Institute (CI-AUF), Goethe-Institut, and Japan Foundation Manila (JFM) provided teachers with vital resources, including updated curricula, native-speaking experts, professional development, and access to authentic cultural materials. These partnerships served as conduits between local classrooms and global educational standards, equipping teachers with the tools to deliver culturally enriched and pedagogically sound instruction. This aligns with Gay's (2018) view of culturally competent educators as individuals who understand themselves and others in intercultural settings (as cited in Franco & Bradshaw, 2023).

Community Building and Knowledge Sharing. Codes such as community, sharing of insights, and benchmarking reflected the value of professional collaboration. Teachers benefited from forums, workshops, and informal exchanges where they could reflect critically on their practices and develop collectively responsive strategies for teaching culture. These professional communities not only promoted shared learning but also reinforced cultural responsiveness and emotional support among SPFL educators. As Gay (2018) emphasizes, teachers deepen cultural understanding through self-reflection and collaboration, thereby strengthening their ability to navigate

multicultural classrooms effectively.

Overall, external support systems—both institutional and peer-based—were vital enablers of cultural competence, empowering teachers to refine their pedagogies, manage cross-cultural challenges, and contribute meaningfully to the SPFL learning environment.

Table 2. *Challenges teachers faced in implementing the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL)*

<i>Issue being probed during interviews</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Challenges teachers faced in implementing the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL)	Classroom diversity and socio-cultural barriers Resource limitations

Theme 4. Classroom Diversity and Socio-cultural Barriers

The study revealed that high school teachers implementing the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) encountered multidimensional challenges, stemming from both classroom diversity and institutional limitations.

Class Demographics and Student Background. Teachers managed classes with varying student numbers, including transfer students unfamiliar with the foreign language or culture. This diversity required differentiated instruction and flexible classroom strategies to ensure inclusivity and equity. Such logistical complexity aligns with findings by Yao and McWha-Hermann (2025), who stressed the impact of demographic and contextual variability on instructional delivery in multicultural settings.

Student Preferences and Autonomy. Students' selective interest in content often limited their engagement with unfamiliar cultural material. While autonomy can foster motivation, it may also hinder intercultural learning when students avoid content that challenges their assumptions. Teachers had to balance respecting student agency while guiding exposure to essential cultural perspectives—a dynamic also noted by Yao and McWha-Hermann (2025) in their work on learner acculturation.

Family and Community Influence. External biases—particularly from parents or community members—sometimes discouraged students from embracing foreign languages or cultures. These attitudes, rooted in stereotypes or nationalist views, created barriers to inclusive, globally oriented education. This challenge mirrors the observations of Furyanto and Rochmawati (2025), who emphasized the role of socio-cultural resistance in limiting students' intercultural openness.

These underscore that SPFL teachers are not only language instructors but also cultural negotiators, navigating diverse student needs, varying levels of motivation, and external pressures to deliver meaningful and inclusive cultural education.

Theme 5. Resource Limitations

The study found that resource limitations significantly hindered the effective implementation of the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL), exposing teachers to a complex web of structural and institutional challenges.

Time Management and Curriculum Constraints. Teachers struggled with limited instructional time, especially since SPFL classes were often not integrated into the regular schedule. This made it challenging to cover content comprehensively or sustain student engagement. Students had reduced opportunities for meaningful exposure to foreign languages and cultures, reinforcing the perception that these subjects were secondary. These challenges align with Yao and McWha-Hermann's (2025) findings on institutional structures limiting access to intercultural learning.

Resource Constraints and Workload. Teachers frequently operated without their own classrooms, reliable materials, or modern teaching aids, compromising continuity and instructional quality. Combined with heavy workloads, these issues reduced the time available for lesson planning and differentiated instruction. Such findings echo Furyanto and Rochmawati's (2025) work, which emphasized how inadequate infrastructure hampers equitable intercultural education.

Professional Development and Training Needs. Many participants reported insufficient training and uncertainty about reliable cultural resources, which undermined their confidence and preparedness to teach. The lack of targeted professional development left teachers without the tools needed to teach both language and culture effectively. These gaps reinforce the call by Yao and McWha-Hermann (2025) for continuous, culturally responsive teacher training.

Institutional Support and Leadership. A lack of administrative backing—both moral and financial—emerged as a significant barrier. Some principals showed little engagement or understanding of the program's unique demands, leading to reduced morale and limited institutional support. This aligns with Furyanto and Rochmawati's (2025) assertion that strong leadership is essential for embedding intercultural programs within school systems.

These categories show that SPFL teachers operate within constrained educational environments, where limited resources, inadequate training, and weak institutional support threaten the sustainability and effectiveness of intercultural language education.

Table 3. *How teachers in the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) develop culturally responsive learning experiences*

<i>Issue being probed during interviews</i>	<i>Themes</i>
How teachers in the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL) develop culturally responsive learning experiences	Student-centered instructional practices Cultural integration

Theme 6. Student-Centered Instructional Practices

Teachers intentionally blended traditional techniques (e.g., memorization, oral drills) with creative approaches (e.g., group work, code-switching) to deliver adaptive and inclusive instruction. This pedagogical flexibility aligned with Yao and McWha-Hermann's (2025) framework for culturally adaptive teaching.

Traditional and Creative Teaching Techniques. Teachers used diverse instructional strategies to increase engagement and collaboration, fostering cultural respect and academic success. Peer-to-peer activities and inclusive classroom management promoted mutual understanding.

Traditional and Creative Resources. Instruction was enriched through multimodal materials, including textbooks, charts, videos, and digital tools, ensuring that lessons were both informative and accessible. These findings supported Furyanto and Rochmawati's (2025) call for greater diversity of resources in intercultural education.

Student Engagement. Teachers fostered motivation through activities that aligned with students' interests and cultural identities. As Jensen (2022) affirms, student-centered learning enhances both academic performance and emotional well-being, especially in diverse classrooms.

Student Achievement and Practical Application. Real-world tasks, such as contests and performances, boosted student confidence and language fluency. Teachers used recognition and incentives to encourage effort, a practice validated by Helal & Hassan (2025), who emphasized the role of motivational reinforcement in academic outcomes.

Opportunities for Growth. Teachers exposed students to scholarships, global exchanges, and career pathways, cultivating long-term motivation and global readiness. These aspirations aligned with Yao and McWha-Hermann's (2025) emphasis on preparing learners for multicultural participation.

These categories showed that SPFL teachers strategically designed culturally responsive and student-focused learning environments, enabling students to engage deeply with language and culture while building academic confidence and intercultural competence.

Theme 7. Cultural Integration

The study highlighted Cultural Integration as a core pillar in the development of culturally responsive learning experiences within the SPFL. Teachers connected language instruction with authentic cultural content through partnerships, experiential practices, and a broader emphasis on appreciation and inclusion, enriching both academic learning and intercultural competence.

Cultural Partnerships. Collaborations with Nihongo partners, Chinese volunteer teachers, and cultural institutions gave students direct exposure to native speakers and artistic practices, making learning interactive and immersive. These partnerships not only improved language fluency but also enhanced socio-political awareness, in line with the findings of Yao and McWha-Hermann (2025) on the transformative impact of immersive, real-world cultural learning experiences.

Cultural Practices and Events. Teachers incorporated tangible cultural elements—such as tea ceremonies, festivals, paper cutting, and traditional songs and dances—to facilitate hands-on cultural immersion. These events helped students connect abstract knowledge to concrete experiences and fostered both academic engagement and social understanding. This instructional approach is aligned with Furyanto and Rochmawati (2025), who stress that experiential, culturally embedded learning promotes both cognitive development and intercultural empathy.

Cultural Appreciation and Broader Learning. Teachers enhanced inclusivity by localizing foreign concepts, using realia, and encouraging community-based cultural exchanges. Strategies such as discussing cultural differences and promoting dialogue nurtured respect for diversity and empathy. These practices reflected Yao and McWha-Hermann's (2025) inclusive education framework, which links culturally relevant instruction with the development of global citizenship and social responsibility.

These categories show that cultural integration in SPFL instruction is not ancillary but central to fostering meaningful, reflective, and socially responsive learning environments. Through immersive and inclusive methods, SPFL teachers successfully bridged language instruction with global cultural understanding.

Elements of Life-world

The study employed Max van Manen's (1990) five life-world existentials—corporeality, temporality, spatiality, relationality, and materiality—as a conceptual lens (as cited by Zahavi, 2020) to interpret the lived experiences of teachers under the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL). These elements interwove to reveal how SPFL teachers navigated complex realities in multicultural classrooms.

Corporeality (Lived Body). Teachers used their physical presence—voice, gestures, and performance—as active tools in language instruction. Activities such as oral drills, dance, and poetry illustrated how the body served as a bridge for linguistic and cultural expression, reinforcing the physical nature of intercultural teaching.

Temporality (Lived Time). Time constraints emerged as a central challenge, limiting lesson depth and cultural immersion. Teachers

also reflected on their own professional evolution, transitioning from initial difficulty to eventual confidence—highlighting teaching as a time-bound journey of growth and adaptation.

Spatiality (Lived Space). Many teachers lacked permanent classrooms, relying on borrowed or rotating spaces, which disrupted continuity and limited cultural ambiance. The gap between ideal learning spaces and actual conditions revealed how spatial dynamics directly shaped instructional efficacy.

Relationality (Lived Human Relations). Teachers extended their role beyond instruction by building community partnerships and engaging in collaborative knowledge-sharing. These human interactions fostered empathy and cultural understanding, underscoring the social nature of SPFL education.

Materiality (Lived Things). Tangible cultural items like maps, calligraphy tools, and traditional garments served as experiential learning aids. These objects helped students engage sensorially with foreign cultures, reinforcing the idea that cultural learning is as much physical as it is cognitive.

The life-world elements offered a rich, multidimensional understanding of how SPFL teachers embody, experience, and enact culturally responsive pedagogy. They underscored the inseparable links between the physical, emotional, temporal, and social dimensions of teaching foreign languages in culturally diverse Philippine classrooms.

Essence

The essence of this study lies in uncovering the layered realities of high school teachers implementing the Special Program in Foreign Language (SPFL)—a role marked by complex intersections of pedagogy, culture, and identity. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, the research revealed how these educators made sense of their work amid multilingual and multicultural demands, institutional challenges, and limited resources. Beyond instruction, teachers experienced personal and professional transformation, with moments of adaptation, fulfillment, uncertainty, and growth shaping their deepening commitment to cultural and language education. Their stories reflected more than instructional strategies—they revealed an evolving identity as cultural ambassadors dedicated to resilience, lifelong learning, and building meaningful cross-cultural connections. Ultimately, the SPFL teaching experience emerged as a journey of human connection, grounded in the pursuit of inclusive and globally conscious learning environments.

Discussion

The findings illuminated how teachers' professional development, cultural exposure, and external support systems shaped their instructional practices, while also revealing the socio-cultural and institutional challenges they faced. Moreover, the study highlighted the innovative, student-centered strategies teachers employed to deliver culturally responsive instruction, offering a nuanced understanding of the resilience and agency of SPFL educators in multicultural classrooms.

The lived experiences of SPFL teachers were shaped by: previous and practical teaching experience, which informed their classroom strategies and curricular adaptability, cultural exposure, such as immersion programs and interaction with native speakers, which enhanced cultural sensitivity and instructional authenticity, and external support, including institutional partnerships and teacher networks, which offered training and a sense of professional community. Teachers consistently demonstrated adaptability, lifelong learning, and a strong sense of cultural ambassadorship, integrating both educational and intercultural goals into their roles.

SPFL teachers encountered a range of interconnected challenges, including: Classroom diversity, with varied student backgrounds, motivation levels, and language competencies. Cultural biases within families or communities occasionally discouraged student engagement in foreign language learning—often due to resource limitations, such as a lack of classrooms, materials, or professional development opportunities. Weak administrative support left teachers without sufficient institutional guidance or encouragement. These factors collectively constrained the full implementation of the SPFL and added stress to teachers already tasked with delivering complex, culturally rich instruction.

SPFL teachers designed culturally responsive learning through: a blend of traditional and creative pedagogies using both textbooks and digital tools, student-centered approaches prioritizing active engagement, differentiated learning, and real-life applications of language and culture, integration of authentic cultural materials, such as performances, food, rituals, and classroom artifacts, cultural partnerships with native speakers and international institutions which brought lived culture into the classroom, and a strong focus on cultural appreciation, encouraging empathy, identity reflection, and global awareness among students. These practices helped bridge language learning with intercultural understanding, creating inclusive, engaging, and globally relevant educational environments.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Teachers' prior experience in English language instruction and practical teaching played a crucial role in shaping their ability to deliver foreign language and cultural content. Their cultural awareness expanded as they navigated differences between Filipino and target cultures. Additionally, external support—such as institutional partnerships and peer collaboration—contributed significantly to their

professional growth and cultural competency. Teachers reported several persistent challenges: limited instructional time and materials, heavy teaching loads, lack of targeted training, and inadequate institutional support. These constraints impeded program delivery and highlighted the need for structural improvements to ensure SPFL's success. SPFL teachers created culturally responsive learning by: merging traditional and creative teaching strategies, leveraging cultural partnerships and authentic classroom practices, and promoting student engagement through interactive, real-world applications. These approaches fostered not only academic achievement but also cultural appreciation, socio-political awareness, and personal growth, reinforcing the value of inclusive, student-centered pedagogy.

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