Education and Learning Experiences of Language Assistants in Spain, 2019-2024

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	Background. Cultural exchange for teachers thrives when educators are supported by intentional professional growth opportunities, which is why this study explores how core professional development (PD) strategies shape the development of Filipino Language Assistants in Spain. **Methods.** This study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational design to examine the personal growth and professional development of teachers participating in a cultural exchange program concerning their passion for teaching. The researchers developed instruments to measure PD strategies, personal growth, and teaching passion. A total of 83 Filipino Language Assistants (LAs) in Spain were selected through simple random sampling. The data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. **Results.** Findings indicated that LAs recognized professional development, personal growth, and passion for teaching as evident in their participation in the program. No significant differences in these outcomes were found across age, gender, length of teaching experience, or program tenure. However, the PD strategies of mentoring, networking, collaborating, and reflecting emerged as key contributors to teachers' professional growth and passion for teaching. **Conclusion.** The study underscores the importance of continuous professional development in sustaining teachers' passion. Although PD may not be a primary component of the cultural exchange program, the Ministry of Education should consider integrating structured PD opportunities so that the program can be more successful. Embedding these four core strategies into future programming is essential for enhancing teacher growth, development, and long-term commitment to the teaching profession.

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing participation of Filipino educators in cultural exchange programs reflects a significant trend in Philippine education, and it becomes a powerful catalyst for professional growth, offering transformative opportunities to enhance pedagogical skills, cultural competence, and career advancement. Since 2008, the Philippine Embassy in Spain has brought together 2,530 Filipinos to participate in the Language and Culture Assistance Programme of the Spanish Ministry of Education to promote intercultural enrichment among students and teachers (Convocatorias del Ministerio de Educación, Formación Profesional y

Deportes / Acción educativa exterior, 2025). Similarly, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) offers exchange programs to its educators because the US believes that through this program, educators can build friendly and peaceful relationships with hundreds of countries through academic, cultural, and professional exchanges. Not only is the program available in the US, but other countries like Spain, Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, Canada, Australia, France, India, Mexico, and South Korea also offer a cultural exchange program to their students and professionals. Experiencing a different culture through educational and cultural exchange programs can help teachers deepen their understanding of themselves and those around them, including expanding their knowledge of foreign cultures, strengthening international relationships, and developing global citizenship (Bureau of Educational Affairs Exchange Program, n.d; Horn & Fry, 2013; Linder & McGaha, 2013; Hee, Byun, Kim, E., Kim, H., Jae-Eun, Purnomo, Ngo, 2013).

This study involved developing oneself and one's profession through a cultural exchange program; hence, the researchers used the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) of David A. Kolb as the conceptual framework of this study. This theory states that if learners engage in hands-on experiences and reflection like the cultural and exchange program, they gain a better understanding of what they are learning, a broader view of the world and an appreciation of community, insight into their skills, interests, passions, and values, opportunities to collaborate with diverse organizations and people, positive professional practices and skill sets, self-confidence and leadership skills which are implications of personal growth and professional development. However, the researchers recognized the limitations of ELT in this study, especially in the professional development of language assistants. So, researchers also used the Professional Development System Theory Cycle of Malilin and Laurel (2022) to thoroughly discuss the relationship among cultural exchange programs, teachers' personal growth and professional development, and passion for teaching. The Professional Development Framework is designed to create new skills and knowledge throughout career paths, duties, and other teaching-related jobs. It provides a professional development system consistent with standard guides and high-quality teaching and services implementation programs.

While existing literature has explored teacher attrition, retention, and intercultural competence development, such as in Intercultural Exchange Among Global Teachers: The Case of the Teaching Excellence and Achievement Study Abroad Program (Paik et al., 2015) and Increasing Teachers' Intercultural Competences in Teacher Preparation Programs and through Professional Development: A Review (Romijn et al., 2021), there remains a notable gap in research specifically focused on Filipino Language Assistants (LAs) in Spain. To date, no known studies have examined how these educators engage in professional development strategies, experience personal growth, or sustain their passion for teaching within the context

of Spain's Language and Culture Exchange Program. According to the advisor from the Ministry of Education in Spain, there has been limited scholarly attention given to understanding the developmental outcomes of LAs in this cultural exchange setting. This study addressed this critical gap by investigating the intersection of PD strategies, personal and professional growth, and teaching passion among Filipino LAs, offering new insights into the role of cultural exchange in shaping teaching trajectories. The study also investigated whether significant differences exist in these variables when grouped by demographic factors. Furthermore, it tested for significant relationships among PD strategies, personal growth and professional development, and passion for teaching. Three null hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 significance level: There is no significant difference in the PD strategies, personal growth and professional development, and passion for teaching of the respondents when grouped according to their profile; there is no significant relationship between the LAs' ratings in their PD Strategies and personal growth and professional development and passion for teaching; and there is no significant relationship between professional development and passion for teaching.

2.   METHODS

2.1.   Research Design

This study employed a descriptive correlational research design, in which the researchers used statistical tests to describe and measure the degree of association or relationship between two or more variables. The researchers analyzed all respondents as a single group and obtained participant scores for each variable. The numerical data received from the respondents served as the basis for determining the degree of association among the variables.

2.2.   Respondents and Sampling

The researchers employed a non-probability sampling technique to ensure that the sample accurately represented Spain's Filipino Language Assistant population. The researchers used a simple random sampling technique to choose the respondents. The target participants of the study were Filipino Language and Culture Assistants with at least 3 months of experience as Language Assistants in Spain under the Ministry of Education. Former Language Assistants could also participate, provided the gap was not more than five years, as the validity of professional development certificates typically lasts three to five years (Professional Teaching Certificate Renewal, 2023). The Language Assistants who were non-education-related course graduates were excluded since this study addressed the personal growth and professional development and passion for teaching of teachers. Other nationalities were also excluded. The number of participants was determined based on the sample size calculation

The computation result was approximately 83, indicating that the study's sample size was 83 ($n \approx 83$). Thus, this study required 83 Language and Culture Assistants in Spain to participate in the survey, and they were chosen randomly, regardless of their regional placement, using a random number generator.

2.3. Validity and Reliability of Instrument

The research instruments underwent validity and reliability checks. Experts examined content, construct, and face validity in this field. Furthermore, the researchers conducted a concurrent reliability test to examine the instrument's reliability. Cronbach's alpha was used to compute reliability coefficients. It was calculated by correlating the score for each scale item with the total score for each observation and then comparing that to the variance for all individual item scores. The reliability test yielded excellent results (0.92) for personal growth and PD of the teacher's survey, good results (0.80) for passion for teaching, and good results (0.89) for PD Strategies. The survey only assessed the language assistant's experience in the Language Assistants Program, personal growth and professional development, and passion for teaching.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

The researchers observed the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 and took precautions to protect participants' information privacy and confidentiality. The researchers did not obtain any unnecessary personal data. Moreover, the researchers ensured that the respondents were adequately informed about the importance of participating in the study and that their identities remained anonymous while performing the survey. Participants were asked to sign the informed consent form and the data privacy consent form provided by the researchers first before they could answer the survey.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Language Assistants' Profile

Table 1. Distribution of Participants in terms of their Characteristics (n=83)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
24-26	34	40.96
27-29	29	34.94
30-34	13	15.56
35 and above	7	8.43
Sex		
Female	68	81.93
Male	15	18.07
Length of Service in Teaching		
0-2	9	10.84
3-5	37	44.58
6-10	34	40.96
11 and more	3	3.61
Number of Year/s as a Language Assistant in Spain		

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	20	24.10
2	42	50.60
3-5	21	25.30

Table 1 shows that most LAs are in their early adulthood, primarily female, with 3-10 years of teaching experience and at least two years of experience as LAs in Spain. The results affirm that early adulthood (ages 20–40), like most participants in Spain's Language Assistant Program (LAP), seek growth, new opportunities, and international experience. The majority are women (81.93%), reflecting both the gender imbalance in Philippine teaching, where women dominate primary and secondary education, and global trends in teacher migration. Historically, teaching's feminization has roots in societal views linking women's "maternal instincts" to teaching, although this perspective undervalues the profession's skill and expertise of women. A key finding is that most participants are neither novices nor veterans; only 10.84% are novices, while 3.61% are in the leadership stage. 44.58% are in the growth stage (3–10 years), gaining solid skills and responsibilities, and 40.96% are in the advancement stage, already well-established in their careers and seeking strategic development. This profile shows that LAP is pursued mainly by teachers who already have substantial classroom experience and are motivated to expand their professional horizons abroad. Lastly, half of the participants have two years' LAP experience, influenced by ministry renewal policies that now limit participation to two years. Despite these limits, many seek to continue through other programs, motivated by the desire to deepen experience and enhance teaching skills in Spain.

3.2. Language Assistants' Rating of Four PD Strategies, Professional Growth and Professional Development, and Passion for Teaching

Table 2. Distribution of Participants in terms of their PD Strategies, Personal Growth and Professional Development, and Passion for Teaching (n=83)

Indicators	Mean	Description	Standard Deviation
Mentoring	2.90	Evident	0.65
Networking	3.32	Evident	0.46
Collaborating	3.43	Evident	0.52
Reflecting	3.50	Evident	0.38
Overall PD Strategies	2.63	Emerging	0.30
Personal Growth & PD	3.32	Sufficient	0.48
Passion for Teaching	3.54	Passionate	0.31

LAs rated their overall experience with mentoring, networking, collaborating, and reflecting as evident. However, even if all the PD strategies are evident, the overall result of the PD strategies is emerging. On the other hand, LAs rated their overall personal growth and professional development as sufficient. While they rated their overall passion for teaching as passionate. The Language Assistant Program (LAP) in Spain offers Filipino LAs valuable opportunities for cultural immersion, classroom experience, and personal growth, but its professional development strategies—mentoring, networking, collaboration, and reflection—remain informal and inconsistently applied due to the lack of clear guidelines, structured

training, and defined roles. Mentoring occurs organically through coordinators and partnered teachers, who offer advice and support both in and out of school. However, LAs desire more proactive, regular, and constructive engagement. Networking is naturally stronger, fuelled by shared culture, social activities, and online communities, while collaboration is effective in classroom co-teaching yet varies depending on individual teacher initiative. Reflecting is the most evident PD element, as living abroad prompts LAs to reassess their teaching practices, career goals, and personal growth, fostering adaptability, confidence, and problem-solving skills. However, the program's focus appears to favor personal growth over rigorous professional skill-building, with lower ratings for training quality and teacher competence development. Despite challenges such as student misbehavior and limited mentoring structures, many LAs report that the experience reignites or strengthens their passion for teaching, enhances intercultural competence, and builds resilience—attributes deeply tied to their identity and values.

3.3. Significance of PD Strategies, Personal Growth and Professional Development, and Passion for Teaching when grouped according to LAs' Profile

Table 3. Distribution of Test Statistics (Mean at Test Statistics) on the Professional Development Strategies, Personal Growth and Professional Development, and Passion for Teaching when grouped according to the LAs' Profile (n=83)

Indicators	Test Statistics (F/H or T/U)			
	Age	Sex	Teaching Experience	Years of Experience as LA
Mentoring	1.81ns	-0.62ns	1.14ns	0.48ns
Networking	0.36ns	424ns	1.51ns	0.13ns
Collaborating	2.12ns	503ns	0.20ns	0.12ns
Reflecting	0.96ns	472ns	2.41ns	1.03ns
Overall PD Strategies	1.39ns	-0.34ns	0.62ns	0.72ns
Personal Growth and PD	3.41ns	378ns	0.28ns	0.57ns
Passion for Teaching	0.78ns	455ns	1.12ns	0.60ns

Legend: ns   not significant

The statistical analysis shows that neither age, sex, prior teaching experience, nor the number of years in Spain significantly differs language assistants' (LAs) engagement in mentoring, networking, collaboration, reflection, personal growth and professional development, or passion for teaching. Across all demographics, LAs consistently view mentoring as essential, especially when adapting to a new educational system and culture, and benefit from guidance throughout their careers. Networking is active at all ages, sexes, and experience levels, supported by both in-person and online professional and social communities. Collaboration is evident regardless of background, with LAs and partner teachers sharing ideas, resources, and strategies to improve student learning. Reflection is also universal, shaped more by individual commitment and institutional culture than by demographic factors. Personal growth and professional development are perceived as

sufficient but remain similar across groups. Passion for teaching is consistently high, with motivation driven by intrinsic values rather than demographic differences. Overall, the findings highlight that effective PD strategies should be inclusive, continuous, and tailored to individual needs rather than determined by age, sex, or experience, as professional growth and enthusiasm for teaching remain constant across all groups.

3.4. Significance of PD Strategies and Personal Growth and Professional Development; PD Strategies and Passion for Teaching

Table 4. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (Pearson's r) between PD Strategies and Personal Growth and Professional Development (n=83)

Variable		PD Strategies				
		Mentoring	Networking	Collaborating	Reflecting	Overall PD Strategies
Personal Growth and PD: Passion for Teaching:	Pearson Correlation	0.51***	0.36***	0.59***	0.41***	0.63***
		0.41***	0.34***	0.65***	0.58***	0.64***
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001

Legend: ***   highly significant at 0.05 level

The correlation analysis shows that all four professional development (PD) strategies—mentoring, networking, collaborating, and reflecting—are positively and significantly associated with Language Assistants' (LAs) personal growth, professional development, and passion for teaching, though to varying degrees. Mentoring has a moderate positive relationship with growth and passion, enhancing skills, confidence, instructional practices, and career opportunities through guidance, feedback, and shared expertise. Networking's correlation is weaker but still significant, suggesting that professional and emotional support from peers, both in and out of school, can modestly boost growth and passion. Collaborating shows the strongest relationships, with a strong link to passion and a moderate-to-strong link to growth, indicating that shared planning, co-teaching, and exchange of best practices are powerful drivers of development and motivation. Reflecting also demonstrates a moderate positive effect on both growth and passion, enabling LAs to assess and refine their teaching critically. Overall, the combined use of all four PD strategies shows a strong correlation (r=0.64) with both growth and passion, reinforcing that no single strategy is sufficient on its own. LAs who actively engage in all four are more likely to excel professionally and maintain a high passion for teaching.

3.5. Significance between Personal Growth and Professional Development and Passion for Teaching

Table 5. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (Pearson's r) between PD Strategies and Passion for Teaching (n=83)

Variable		Personal Growth and PD
Passion for Teaching:	Pearson Correlation	0.59***
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001

*Legend: ***   Highly Significant at 0.05 level*

Participation in the Language Assistant Program can reignite or strengthen teachers' passion for teaching by expanding their knowledge, pedagogical skills, and professional competencies. This passion drives LAs to seek further qualifications, such as graduate studies, education units, or teaching certification in Spain or abroad. It inspires some to transition into full-time teaching roles. The program's exposure to diverse classrooms, cultures, and professional development opportunities builds confidence and readiness for the evolving demands of education. For some, it has been a transformative awakening of a dormant desire to teach after years outside the profession, and even opening doors to scholarships, such as graduate studies. Research supports these outcomes, showing that passionate teachers actively engage in professional learning, collaboration, and continuous skill-building to sustain their enthusiasm and effectiveness, ultimately benefiting both their careers and their students.

DISCUSSION

Most language assistants (LAs) in Spain were in their 20s when they applied, which aligns with global data showing that educators working abroad are typically in their late 20s to mid-30s. This reflects early adulthood as a key career exploration phase when individuals seek new opportunities, further education, and diverse experiences (Brule & Skinner, 2020). Moreover, most LAs were female (81.93%), reflecting trends in Philippine education where women are higher in number—88% in primary and 71% in secondary education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024). This is also consistent with broader patterns in international labor migration, where Filipino women have outnumbered men in overseas deployments since 1992 (Asis, 2020). Historically, the feminization of teaching was shaped by economic needs and gender roles that equated teaching with maternal instincts (Rodriguez, 2021; Rodriguez & Fitzpatrick, 2014). Scientific studies have further shown that women exhibit higher emotional responsivity that fits the character of a teacher, due to biological caregiving adaptations (Moore, Simpson, Coudé, Grigaityte, Iacoboni, Ferrari, 2014). Regarding LA's teaching experience, most participants had prior 3-10 years of experience in teaching, falling within the career growth and advancement stages. This is the stage where educators seek more growth, professional development, and greener pastures. This suggests that teachers join cultural exchange programs to gain more experience and advance professionally and financially. Regarding their tenure as LAs, half had two years of experience, corresponding with the Ministry of

Education's renewal priorities that favor first- and second-year participants. Despite the limitations on renewals, many LAs expressed strong interest in extending their stay, often seeking placement in alternative programs like BEDA and UCETAM to continue gaining skills and teaching exposure in Spain.

The Language Assistant Program (LAP) in Spain reveals that while professional development (PD) strategies—mentoring, networking, collaborating, and reflecting—are evident, they still lack formal structure and clear guidelines. Mentoring occurs informally through coordinators and partner teachers who assist with academic and daily life matters of LAs, yet expectations around mentoring vary due to its undefined nature. The literature emphasizes that mentoring should involve structured, intentional guidance for effective teacher growth (Hayes & Mahfouz, 2020) and that programs without clear frameworks tend to produce inconsistent outcomes (Rhodes, 2024; Art of Mentoring, 2023). Networking, while more fluid and less reliant on structure, is vital in helping LAs cope with homesickness and expand social and professional circles, supported by literature on social behavior and Filipino sociability (Scroope, 2017). Collaboration, since mandated by the ministry, is more consistent in the program due to clearer expectations (Evans, 2023). Evidence shows that co-teaching improves both LA and mentor practices (Carty & Farrell, 2018). Reflection is the strongest PD strategy among the four, supported by Farrell's (2015) five-stage model and research linking reflection to personal growth (Suphasn & Chinokul, 2021). Although PD is evident, Language Assistant Programme (LAP) participants rate it as emerging only due to limited training and weak implementation. Ultimately, LAP fosters substantial personal growth and professional development, and passion for teaching—boosting LAs' confidence, adaptability, and cultural awareness.

The findings show that age, sex, teaching experience, and program participation do not significantly differ in Language Assistants' (LAs) engagement in professional development (PD) strategies—mentoring, networking, collaborating, and reflecting. Mentoring remains essential for teachers across all demographics. Even older and more experienced LAs expressed a continued need for guidance, aligning with Utsumi and Kizu's (2006) assertion that age does not affect the necessity for mentorship. Similarly, networking is widely practiced by LAs of all ages and backgrounds through online platforms and in-person social groups, echoing findings by Poulin (2014). Collaboration, too, is not restricted by demographic factors, as supported by Eschler (2016) and Hargreaves (2019), who found that collaboration levels are shaped more by school culture than age or experience. Reflective practice is equally essential and unaffected by variables like sex or tenure, as emphasized by Berkeley's Center for Teaching & Learning (2024) and Suphasn et al. (2021). Studies (e.g., Fabelico & Afalla, 2020; Yang, 2021) also show that passion for teaching is consistent regardless of LA's profile. Due to limited structural support, PD strategies are still rated as "emerging" in the program. Nonetheless, the

literature consistently confirms that mentoring, networking, collaboration, and reflection are vital for all teachers, and schools should implement inclusive, structured PD programs for all, regardless of demographic characteristics.

Moreover, the study found strong and statistically significant correlations between professional development strategies—mentoring, networking, collaborating, and reflecting—and both personal growth and passion for teaching among Language Assistants (LAs) in Spain. Mentoring was linked to enhanced confidence, instructional practices, and career progression, consistent with findings from Mathipa and Matlabe (2015) and Bowman (2013), who emphasized its institutional and individual benefits. Networking showed a weaker yet significant correlation,supporting research by Talafian, Lundsgaard, Mahmood, Shafer, Stelzer, & Kuo (2023) and Eva (2022), which highlighted how collegial social support—both academic and emotional—fosters teacher resilience and development. Collaboration demonstrated the strongest link to both personal growth and passion, echoing research by Khasawneh, Alsarayreh, Ajlouni, Eyadat, Ayasrah, & Khasawneh (2023) and Smith, Ralston, Naegele, & Waggoner (2019), who found that collaborative teaching enhances pedagogy and motivation. Reflection also showed moderate positive correlations, reinforcing the role of critical analysis in professional advancement, as discussed by Reach & Teach (2024), Medill (2024), and Rickey & Wisehart (2024). Overall, a strong correlation (r = 0.64) was observed between the combined use of all four PD strategies and both growth and passion, confirming that holistic engagement in structured PD activities is essential for teacher development, consistent with Frias (2024), Moè (2016), and Mart (2018).

Finally, the findings show that participation in the Language Assistant Program (LAP) in Spain enhances teachers' passion for teaching by increasing their knowledge, pedagogical skills, and professional competencies. This growth fuels a desire among language assistants (LAs) to pursue graduate studies, obtain teaching credentials, or transition into full-time teaching roles, whether in Spain, the Philippines, or elsewhere. The program empowers them with the confidence to navigate the complexities of diverse educational settings. These experiences reflect what Rahman Khan (2020) described as teachers' passion, which drives them to update their skills and energize their classrooms. Similarly, Sauku (2015) emphasized that passionate educators actively pursue professional development and collaboration to sustain their professional engagement. Together, these studies underscore that passion for teaching motivates teachers to grow and supports long-term professional commitment and instructional excellence. It can also be inferred that a passion for teaching propels educators to engage in professional development activities, such as PD strategies, to enhance their teaching effectiveness and commitment to the profession. Thus, it is important for educational institutions to foster a supportive environment that integrates mentoring, networking, collaborating, and reflecting as integral components of professional culture.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that age, sex, length of service, and teaching tenure do not significantly affect teachers' engagement in professional development (PD) strategies such as mentoring, networking, collaborating, and reflecting. These strategies support teachers' growth and development, and passion for teaching, regardless of demographic background or experience. Mentoring builds confidence and supports continuous learning; networking and collaboration strengthen professional communities; and reflecting helps educators improve their practice. However, for PD strategies to be effective, they must be supported by clear structures and expectations. Moreover, teachers who continue to grow professionally tend to stay passionate about teaching. This passion is not tied to demographics but is driven by personal commitment, values, and motivation. Schools should actively promote inclusive PD programs that support teachers at all career stages.

The findings also reinforce Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, showing that hands-on, real-world experiences like cultural exchange programs deepen teachers' understanding of their profession and personal growth. Similarly, the Professional Development System Theory supports the idea that professional development enhances job satisfaction, skill development, and long-term career engagement. Institutions that integrate structured models can better support teachers in becoming confident, reflective, and effective professionals.

Finally, the researchers conclude that continuous personal and professional growth is essential for sustaining a teacher's passion for the profession. Although professional development (PD) may not currently be a central focus of the cultural exchange program, the findings underscore the need for the Ministry to prioritize it as a core component. By intentionally integrating the four key PD strategies—mentoring, networking, collaboration, and reflection—the program can move beyond cultural exposure to become a transformative experience that strengthens teaching practice, supports long-term professional growth, and fosters enduring passion for education.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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