

DIGITAL DIALOGUES: NARRATIVE POSITIONING OF FILIPINO ONLINE ESL TEACHERS IN DIGITAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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Abstract: This study explores on how Filipino online ESL teachers construct, negotiate, and sustain their professional identity and legitimacy within digital communities of practice with regards to global linguistics-based bias and the precariousness of platform-based labor. The author argues that Filipino online ESL teachers' experiences demonstrate not just adaptability, but also resilience and agency in an increasingly competitive and often inequitable environment in which they teach globally. A qualitative multiple case study methodology was used; semi-structured interview data and classroom observation data were collected and then analyzed using thematic analysis and cross-case analysis. It was found that the teachers' professional identity evolves during "a journey of becoming" as they move from a position of economic necessity to professional commitment and fulfillment. To mitigate challenges including native speaker benchmarking, platform regulation, and technical limitations the teachers use adaptive professionalism, perform accountability, and cultivate multirole identities that include relational engagement. The teachers also utilize human capital through certification and social capital through peer networks and relationships with students. These findings are interpreted through Positioning Theory, Capital Theory, and Community of Practice Theory; these theories illustrate that the teachers transform structural barriers into opportunities for growth and indicate that relational labor, peer collaboration, and ongoing professional development are essential for creating a more sustainable and equitable online ESL teaching environment.

Keywords: *Digital Communities of Practice, Filipino Online ESL Teachers, Multiple-Case Study, Professional Identity.*

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of global online learning has significantly transformed the global English as a Second language (ESL) industry. This opened an opportunity and challenges for teachers operating within online platforms. Filipino online ESL teachers have emerged as key participants in this globalized teaching workforce due to cultural adaptability, high English proficiency, and pedagogical orientation. However, despite their growing presence, these educators continue to face complex issues related to professional identity, legitimacy, and role negotiation within Digital Communities of Practice (CoPs). The shift from conventional classroom environments to platform-mediated spaces has redefined how professionalism is constructed, performed, and evaluated. In these contexts, teachers must not only deliver instruction but also continuously adapt to student diversity and global standards which raise a pivotal question about how their professional identities are formed and sustained.

Recent studies have examined various dimensions of online ESL teaching, including teacher identity (Ulla et al., 2024) working conditions (Pontillas, 2021), and digital pedagogy (Zhang, 2023). These studies highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of online teaching, emphasizing the adaptability, technological competence, and continuous professional development. However, existing research focuses on isolated aspects of teaching experience, such as skill development or platform conditions, rather than providing an integrated understanding of how identity, legitimacy, and

professional strategies overlap. Moreover, there remains limited attention to how Filipino online ESL teachers specifically negotiate their roles within global environment shaped by the native-speakerism and platform-based evaluation systems.

This knowledge gap suggests a more comprehensive and contextually grounded analysis of Filipino online ESL teachers' professional experiences. While prior research acknowledges the challenges faced by non-native English-speaking teachers, it does not fully explore how these educators actively construct and negotiate their identities across teaching contexts. In particular, there is insufficient exploration how identity is simultaneously shaped by the reflection and professional growth (internal process) and linguistic bias, platform regulation, and technological constraints (external process). Furthermore, the role of digital of Communities of Practice in supporting or constraining identity construction remains underexamined, especially to Filipino teachers who works remotely within highly competitive and decentralized teaching environments.

This study aims to examine the external factors influence their legitimacy, how they negotiate roles in diverse teaching contexts, what external factors influence their legitimacy, and what strategies they utilized to sustain professional growth and career opportunities, and how Filipino online ESL teachers narrate and construct their professional identity within digital Communities of practice. This study contributes to the ESL field by offering a

multiple-case study analysis that integrate professional identity construction, role negotiation, and professional sustainability within a single analytical framework. This provides a more holistic understanding of Filipino online ESL teachers' experiences in the global teaching landscapes.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to examine how Filipino online ESL teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities within digital teaching environments. A qualitative approach was appropriate for capturing participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and meaning-making processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that knowledge and identity are socially constructed through interaction and discourse (Creswell, 2003). In the context of online ESL teaching, professional identity is shaped through engagement with students, adherence to platform policies, and participation in digital Communities of Practice.

A multiple case study approach was adopted to enable in-depth analysis across diverse participant contexts and to identify patterns and variations in identity construction (Yin, 2018). Each participant was treated as an individual case, allowing both within-case and cross-case analysis. This design aligns with the study's theoretical framework, including Positioning Theory, Communities of Practice Theory, and Capital Theory, which collectively explain how identity is negotiated through interaction, participation, and access to professional resources.

Four Filipino online ESL teachers participated in the study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure direct engagement with the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002). All participants were actively teaching English to international students through online platforms and were members of digital Communities of Practice.

The participants represented varied educational and professional backgrounds. Two held bachelor's degrees in education majoring in English, while two held master's degrees in non-education fields (hospitality management and nursing). Teaching experience ranged from one to five years. All participants possessed either a valid teaching license or English teaching certification (e.g., TESOL or TEFL). Each participant was treated as a separate case (Cases A–D).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to provide detailed narratives of their professional experiences, identity construction, and engagement within digital teaching environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted via video conferencing (Tencent VooV) due to participants' geographical dispersion and lasted approximately 30–35 minutes.

Interview questions focused on participants' career trajectories, teaching practices, involvement in Communities of Practice, and perceptions of professional legitimacy. Follow-up questions were used to clarify and expand responses. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. To complement interview data, participants were asked to submit at least ten recorded teaching sessions through a Google Drive. These recordings provided observational data that enabled triangulation and deeper analysis of instructional

practices and identity enactment. All data were anonymized and securely stored.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and cross-case analysis. Thematic analysis involved identifying recurring patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed a systematic process: familiarization with the data, initial coding, categorization of codes, and theme development. The coding framework was aligned with the research objectives and included four major categories: (1) external factors influencing legitimacy, (2) role negotiation and positioning, (3) strategies for professional growth, and (4) identity narration. Coding was conducted manually to allow close engagement with participants' narratives.

Cross-case analysis was then performed to compare findings across the four cases, identifying similarities, differences, and overarching patterns (Yin, 2018). This approach enhanced the analytical depth and allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The study ensured rigor through the criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was established through data triangulation using interviews and classroom observations. Member checking was conducted by sharing transcripts and interpretations with participants for validation. Dependability was maintained through detailed documentation of research procedures and analytic decisions. Confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations in participants' narratives and observed practices rather than researcher assumptions.

Reflexivity was practiced throughout the study. The researcher acknowledged prior experience in online ESL teaching and actively engaged in reflective practices to minimize bias and maintain analytical objectivity.

Ethical standards were strictly followed throughout the study. Participants were provided with informed consent forms detailing the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the research. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were anonymized using pseudonyms, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. Data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. In reporting the findings, no identifiable personal or institutional information was disclosed.

Result, Findings and Discussion

Within-Case Analysis

The within-case analysis profiles each participant's background, education or qualifications, and professional engagement in online ESL teaching. Each case provides an overview of the individual characteristics of the teacher, cross-case analysis allows for a comparison.

Case A: Teacher I

Teacher I is a full-time online ESL teacher from the Philippines who has earned a Bachelor of Secondary Education with a major in English and has been teaching for five years. The teacher also possesses a professional teaching license, as well as certifications in TESOL and TEFL. This represents very formalized preparation for both theory and practice in ESL instruction. This academic training combined with professional certification posits a comprehensive base for instruction in ESL.

As an experienced teacher, Teacher I show a high degree of professional commitment to online teaching as his primary profession. The teacher's full-time involvement in teaching online is indicative of continued participation in digital classroom settings, which would logically contribute to developing consistent teaching methods, knowledge of what is expected from students via platforms, and extended time interacting with a wide variety of students.

Case B: Teacher J

Teacher J is a full-time online ESL teacher who holds a Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English and has one year of teaching experience. Same with Teacher I, the teacher possesses a professional license and has completed TESOL and TEFL certifications, indicating formal qualifications in teaching English as a second language.

Although Teacher J has a limited number of years of teaching experience, the teacher's commitment to being an online ESL teacher full-time demonstrates an early stage of commitment to this particular profession. It is possible for the teacher to have developed sufficient preparation through academic training and certification to work in structured teaching environments; however, the relative shortness of his teaching experience would position him at an earlier stage of developing a professional identity as well as adapting to digital-based teaching settings.

Case C: Teacher M

Teacher M is an online ESL teacher who has been working as a full-time educator for five years and earned a Master of International Hospitality Management. Teacher M does not have a degree in education, unlike Teachers I and J; Teacher M has, however, completed TESOL and TEFL courses to obtain formal training in ESL pedagogy.

The background of Teacher M shows a career transition from a non-teaching field to online ESL teaching. The length of experience and full-time status of Teacher M represent a strong ability to adapt and integrate professionally into the ESL industry. This orientation suggests that through experiences and training/credentials, Teacher M can develop a professional identity.

Case D: Teacher C

Teacher C is a part-time online ESL teacher who holds a Master of Science in Nursing and has two years of teaching experience. Teacher C has completed a TEFL certification, which serves as formal preparation for ESL instruction. As a nurse, in addition to being an online ESL teacher, Teacher C maintains two professions.

Teacher C is positioned differently within this study compared to the remaining participants since Teacher C views the teaching function as supplemental to their primary career as a nurse. This position may affect how much time or priority Teacher C allocates to teaching given her professional obligations as a nurse as well as professional skills such as communication and empathy.

Cross-Case Analysis

The cross-case analysis has taken a holistic approach across the four participants (Teachers I, J, M, and C) to compare the experiences of Filipino online ESL teachers constructing professional identity, negotiating their roles, establishing legitimacy, and sustaining professional development in the context of digital learning environments. Through a comparison across cases, commonalities and differences in the teachers' identity construction have been identified along with the underlying mechanisms that guide those processes.

External Legitimacy Factors Influencing Filipino Online ESL Teachers within Digital Communities

Table 1 shows the four themes identified in the data collected for each case study participant. It also illustrates the definitions for those four themes based on the thematic coding of the narratives of the participants' experiences.

Accent, English Proficiency, and Native-Speaker Benchmarking

Across cases, accent and English proficiency were found to be major external factors influencing teachers' professional legitimacy throughout this study and among all four participants. The cross-case analysis reveals that all participants (Teachers I, J, M, and C) experienced varying degrees of native-speaker comparison with differing intensity. Teachers M and C reported more direct examples of linguistic discrimination from parents and students. Teachers I and J, on the other hand, showed more indirect awareness of these biases and changed their teaching methods ahead of time to fit the global standards. While these differences exist, a common pattern across cases indicates that linguistic identity operates as a gatekeeping mechanism that influences both recognition and economic valuation. The findings show that the use of language ideologies as a primary source for the legitimacy problem lies outside the educational ecosystem found on a platform, specifically the Native English Speaker (NEST) model. These ideas manifest through parent expectations, student feedback, and platform market structures that support accent-based evaluation. For instance, Teacher M said, "Sometimes they comment... 'Filipino teachers are supposed to be only 10 RMB'" (Line 124), which shows how linguistic bias directly leads into economic devaluation. In addition to this, Teacher C stated, "Parents complaining... 'Her accent is very strong'" (Lines 105–106), which shows how accent becomes a primary criterion for evaluation, even more important than teaching ability. These narratives reveal a causal sequence such as native-speaker ideology, accent-based judgment, perceived reduced legitimacy, and economic and professional consequences.

In response to these external pressures, teachers employ strategic self-positioning and compensatory measures. The observation data show that participants changed the way they taught by emphasizing clear articulation, structured lesson flow, and increased student participation. These behaviors were more evident in Teachers M and C, who faced direct criticism, whereas Teachers I and J used more anticipatory techniques by incorporating clarity and increasing student participation into their regular classroom routines. This finding suggests that teachers address linguistic bias through performance-based legitimacy construction, where competence is continuously demonstrated to counteract preconceived assumptions.

Table 1

Summary of External Factors Influencing Filipino Online ESL Teachers

Theme	Case	Interview Excerpt	Observation/Document Evidence
Accent, English Proficiency, and Native-Speaker Benchmarking	Case A (Teacher M)	“Sometimes they comment... ‘Filipino teachers are supposed to be only 10 RMB.’” (Teacher M, Line 124)	Teacher reported encountering comments from parents questioning the value of Filipino teachers compared to native speakers.
	Case B (Teacher C)	“Parents complaining... ‘Her accent is very strong.’” (Teacher C, Lines 105–106)	Teacher described receiving feedback focused on accent rather than teaching quality.
	Case C (Teacher J)	“Sometimes parents compare us with native speakers.”	Teacher explained that comparisons with native speakers affect expectations of pronunciation and language norms.
Platform Rules and Company Standards as Legitimacy Gatekeepers	Case A (Teacher I)	“Rules help teachers create structure and consistency... they push me to stay professional and organized.” (Teacher I, Lines 86, 91)	Teacher strictly followed the platform’s lesson flow, including greeting, vocabulary introduction, guided practice, and feedback within the required time frame.
	Case B (Teacher C)	“We need to follow the same format... so the child will not get confused.” (Teacher C, Lines 114, 116)	Teacher used standardized teaching slides and followed the required platform structure to ensure continuity for students who might transfer to another teacher.
	Case C (Teacher J)	“If we don’t follow the format, it can affect our evaluation.”	Teacher carefully monitored lesson timing and adhered to platform guidelines to avoid negative ratings.
Technological & Environmental Limitations	Case A (Teacher C)	“When the computer turns off, I apologize and extend the time... so they won’t think I’m irresponsible.” (Teacher C, Lines 154, 157)	Teacher extended lesson time and repeatedly apologized after experiencing technical interruptions during the session.
	Case B (Teacher I)	“I go to an internet café so I can continue my lesson.” (Teacher I, Line 139)	Teacher relocated to a public internet facility to ensure stable connectivity during scheduled lessons.
	Case C (Teacher J)	“Sometimes the internet becomes slow when the weather is bad.”	Teacher experienced brief delays in lesson transitions due to unstable connection.
Credentials and Training Requirements	Case A (Teacher M)	“TESOL and TEFL certificates... give you confidence... those without them feel insecure.” (Teacher M, Line 170)	Teacher displayed TESOL certification on professional profile and referenced training strategies during the lesson.
	Case B (Teacher J)	“If you want to teach... you have to attend trainings... those are really important certificates.” (Teacher J, Lines 148–149)	Teacher applied structured instructional strategies learned from training programs during lesson delivery.
	Case C (Teacher I)	“Many platforms require certificates before accepting teachers.”	Teacher completed required TESOL training to qualify for multiple teaching platforms.

Thus, the causal process encompasses external bias, strategic adaptation, performance reinforcement, and identity negotiation as an adept non-native professional.

Cross-case analysis further shows that all teachers resist linguistic marginalization, but the way they do it depends on their

experience and exposure. Teacher I and Teacher M, who had more experience, were more confident in repositioning themselves through pedagogical expertise and consistent performance, whereas less experienced teachers like Teacher J and Teacher C showed stronger sensitivity to external judgments, often expressing the need to prove their competence more clearly. This shows that

professional identity negotiation in relation to accent is not uniform but is influenced by experience, confidence, and how often they are exposed to bias.

These findings reveal that native-speakerism is an interactional force that shapes teachers' professional trajectories rather than abstract ideologies. While previous studies have focused on the psychological effects of bias against non-native English-speaking teachers (Jung & Choe, 2024; Wong, 2022), this study highlights the interactional force of native-speakerism. The current findings indicate that linguistic bias works as a structural form of social inequality, affecting not only professional recognition but also remuneration and access to opportunities. Furthermore, while earlier research tends to frame teachers as passive recipients of bias, the cross-case analysis highlights their active agency in resisting and negotiating these constraints through strategic instructional performance and identity reconstruction demonstrating how they adapt their teaching methods and personal narratives to challenge the stereotypes and assert their professional value.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), which posits that teachers are externally positioned based on students' linguistic expectations but can reposition themselves as competent professionals through classroom interaction and discourse. The Communities of Practice Theory of Wenger (1998) further explains how engagement in global teaching communities can help teachers to show competence and gain legitimacy despite existing prejudices. From the lens of the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986), accent is used as a form of symbolic capital by native speakers, while Filipino teachers compensate by accumulating other forms of capital, including pedagogical expertise, relational engagement, and cultural competence. These alternative forms of capital enable teachers to sustain their professional identity and career progression within an unequal global system.

The cross-case analysis shows that accent and native-speaker benchmarking function as structural constraints but also as catalysts for strategic identity construction. Filipino online ESL teachers do not passively accept marginalization; rather, they actively negotiate their legitimacy through performance, adaptability, and relational engagement. This positions them as resilient professionals working within and pushing against unjustified and inequitable global language hierarchies.

These findings provide a basis for recommendations for online ESL platforms to enact institutional interventions to reduce linguistic bias, including awareness programs for students and parents, revised evaluation criteria that prioritize pedagogical effectiveness over accent, and policies that promote the legitimacy of diverse English varieties. It is essential for creating a more equitable professional environment by addressing the native-speakerism at the structural level. Recognizing linguistic diversity supports Filipino teachers' legitimacy and aligns with the realities of global English use, where communicative competence extends beyond native-speaker norms.

Platform Rules and Company Standards as Legitimacy Gatekeepers

The ESL teaching platforms have emerged as primary means across various cases, controlling the legitimacy of professionals and shaping both instructional practices and the way Filipino online ESL teachers construct and perform their

professional identity. The cross-case analysis reveals that all participants (Teachers I, J, M, and C) operated within highly structured environments defined by standardized lesson formats, strict scheduling systems, and performance-based evaluation mechanisms. However, differences were observed in how teachers navigated these institutional constraints. Teachers I and M, who had more experience, found it easier to meet platform expectations because they see compliance as part of being professional. In contrast, Teachers J and C exhibited more deliberate and sometimes constrained adaptation, indicating that institutional alignment is a learned and progressively internalized process. Despite these variations, all cases reflect a shared condition in which professional legitimacy is contingent upon adherence to platform-defined standards.

The findings indicate that identity construction in this context is triggered by institutional control mechanisms, including standardized teaching protocols, algorithmic evaluation systems, and performance ratings. These structures establish clear expectations that teachers must follow to maintain employment and professional standing. For instance, Teacher I explained, "Rules help teachers create structure and consistency... they push me to stay professional and organized" (Lines 86, 91), highlighting how institutional guidelines function as behavioral regulators. Similarly, Teacher C stated, "We need to follow the same format... so the child will not get confused" (Lines 114–116), illustrating how standardization ensures continuity but also constrains instructional flexibility. These accounts demonstrate a causal sequence, such as platform rules and evaluation systems, behavioral regulation, compliance-driven performance, and identity formation as an institutionally aligned professional.

The observational and contextual evidence further reinforce these patterns, showing that teachers consistently adhered to platform-prescribed lesson structures, managed time strictly, and utilized standardized materials. In all cases, teachers monitored pacing carefully to ensure it aligned with required formats, even when student needs required flexibility. Differences, however, emerged in execution. Teachers I and M demonstrated more fluid integration of institutional requirements into their teaching, suggesting internalized compliance. In contrast, Teachers J and C showed more visible effort in maintaining alignment, indicating that compliance initially operates as a conscious strategy before becoming embedded in professional practice. These findings suggest that institutional expectations are not merely external constraints but become internalized components of professional identity over time.

Cross-case comparison also reveals that platform rules function as both enablers and constraints. On one hand, teachers acknowledged that standardization promotes consistency, quality assurance, and organizational clarity. On the other hand, these same structures limit pedagogical autonomy and increase performance pressure. Teachers across cases recognized that even minor deviations from prescribed formats could negatively impact ratings and job stability, particularly within algorithm-driven evaluation systems. This creates a professional environment where compliance directly links to economic survival, reinforcing the importance of adhering to institutional expectations.

These findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that platform governance operates as a mechanism of identity regulation rather than merely a system of operational control. While Pontillas (2021) highlights the prevalence of strict

accountability systems in online ESL teaching, the present analysis reveals that these systems do not only shape working conditions but actively define what counts as “professionalism.” Furthermore, while previous studies often frame standardization as beneficial for instructional quality, the cross-case findings reveal a more complex dynamic in which standardization simultaneously supports and constrains teaching practice. Thus, professionalism is not entirely self-defined but is institutionally constructed and continuously negotiated within platform ecosystems.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), where teachers are positioned by platforms as accountable professionals whose competence is measured through adherence to rules and standards. Compliance becomes a key mechanism through which teachers position themselves as credible and reliable. From the lens of the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986), adherence to institutional standards functions as a form of symbolic and professional capital, where positive ratings, consistent performance, and student rebooking enhance teachers’ credibility and economic opportunities. Additionally, the Communities of Practice Theory of Wenger (1998) suggests that these institutional norms are reinforced through participation in shared teaching environments, where teachers learn to align their practices with accepted standards.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that platform rules and company standards serve as defining structures of professional legitimacy in the online ESL industry. Teachers construct their professional identity through strategic compliance, balancing personal teaching approaches with institutional requirements. This process demonstrates a dynamic negotiation between autonomy and accountability, where both performance and regulation shape professionalism.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms adopt more balanced and supportive governance systems. While maintaining necessary standards, institutions should incorporate more flexible evaluation frameworks that recognize instructional effectiveness, student engagement, and contextual teaching practices. Additionally, increasing transparency in evaluation criteria and reducing overreliance on rigid metrics may help alleviate pressure on teachers. By balancing accountability with professional autonomy, platforms can foster more sustainable and empowering environments that support both teacher development and instructional quality.

Technological and Environmental Limitations

In all of the cases, technological and environmental limitations emerged as critical structural factors affecting the professional legitimacy and identity negotiation of Filipino online ESL teachers. Cross-case analysis reveals that all participants (Teachers I, J, M, and C) experienced challenges related to internet instability, power interruptions, and limited infrastructure; however, differences were observed in how these challenges were managed. Teachers I and M demonstrated more resource-intensive strategies, such as relocating to alternative teaching spaces or securing backup connectivity, while Teachers J and C relied more on immediate compensatory actions such as extending lesson time and adjusting instruction. Despite these variations, all cases consistently position technological stability as a fundamental condition for maintaining professional credibility.

The data indicates that technological challenges are triggered by infrastructure limitations and the technology-dependent nature of online ESL teaching, where uninterrupted connectivity is essential for lesson delivery. Platform evaluation systems exacerbate these disruptions by equating smooth lesson execution with professionalism. As a result, teachers experience pressure to maintain continuity regardless of external conditions. This leads to preserving their professional image through compensatory and adaptive responses. As Teacher C explained, “When the computer turns off, I apologize and extend the time... so they won’t think I’m irresponsible” (Lines 154–157), while Teacher I noted, “I go to an internet café so I can continue my lesson” (Line 139). These responses establish a clear causal pathway such as infrastructure limitations, risk of perceived unprofessionalism, compensatory actions (e.g., extending time, relocating, apologizing), and preservation of credibility and trust.

Cross-case comparison further highlights differences in the level of resource access and adaptive capacity among teachers. Teachers I and M, who had better access to other resources, were able to use proactive strategies like getting backup devices and moving to more stable places. In contrast, Teachers J and C relied more heavily on reactive strategies, addressing disruptions as they occurred. This contrast suggests that professional resilience is shaped not only by individual effort but also by access to technological resources, reinforcing disparities within the online ESL workforce.

The observational and contextual evidence further support these findings, showing that teachers actively prepare for potential disruptions by testing internet connections, setting up contingency plans, and adjusting their teaching environments. These practices indicate that managing technological limitations is not incidental but constitutes a routine and strategic component of professional practice. Teachers consistently demonstrate preparedness and adaptability, reflecting an ongoing effort to align their performance with platform expectations despite external constraints.

These findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that technological limitations function not only as operational challenges but also as determinants of professional legitimacy. While Pontillas (2021) highlights the challenges of maintaining reliable technology in home-based ESL teaching, the present analysis shows how these limitations directly affect identity construction and perceptions of professionalism. Zhang (2023) also highlights disparities in technological access, a point further supported by the cross-case differences observed in this study. The findings contribute by illustrating that professionalism in online ESL teaching is partially contingent upon external infrastructure, thereby complicating traditional notions of teacher competence.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), where teachers actively position themselves as responsible and committed professionals through corrective actions during disruptions. By apologizing, extending lesson time, and seeking alternative solutions, teachers negotiate their identity in response to contextual challenges. The Communities of Practice Theory of Wenger (1998) further explains how teachers develop adaptive strategies through shared experiences and knowledge exchange within professional networks. Additionally, the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986) highlights how access to reliable technology functions as a form of material and professional capital, influencing teachers’ ability to maintain consistent performance and credibility.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that technological and environmental limitations are significant structural constraints that shape professional identity, performance, and legitimacy in the online ESL industry. Teachers continuously negotiate these challenges through resilience, adaptability, and strategic resource management, highlighting the complexity between individual agency and structural conditions.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms implement equitable and transparent policies to address technology-related disruptions. Establishing standardized protocols for documented connectivity issues, providing technical support systems, and adjusting evaluation criteria to account for external limitations can enhance fairness. Additionally, investment in infrastructure support and resource accessibility may reduce disparities among teachers, particularly by ensuring that all teachers have access to reliable internet connections and necessary teaching tools. By addressing these structural challenges, platforms can create more equitable, sustainable, and supportive professional environments for Filipino online ESL teachers.

Credentials and Training Requirements

In all cases, formal certifications and training programs were important external markers of professional legitimacy. They shaped how Filipino online ESL teachers build their credibility and sustain their careers in the global ESL market. Cross-case analysis reveals that all participants (Teachers I, J, M, and C) recognized TESOL and TEFL certifications as essential qualifications; however, variations were evident in how these credentials influenced their professional identity. Teachers I and M, with longer teaching experience and multiple certifications, demonstrated stronger confidence and more stable professional positioning. In contrast, Teachers J and C exhibited a more transitional orientation, where certifications functioned as aspirational tools for career entry, validation, and upward mobility. Despite these differences, all cases converge on the understanding that professional legitimacy is increasingly credential-driven rather than solely performance-based.

Market competition, institutional hiring requirements, and perceived linguistic bias within the online ESL industry trigger the pursuits of certifications, according to the data. Teachers face an environment where qualifications serve as visible indicators of competence, especially when competing with native English-speaking teachers. This external pressure generates a response in which teachers actively invest in certifications to strengthen their credibility. As Teacher M explained, “TESOL and TEFL certificates... give you confidence... those without them feel insecure” (Line 170), demonstrating how credentials directly influence self-perception and professional confidence. Similarly, Teacher J noted, “If you want to teach... you have to attend trainings... those are really important certificates” (Lines 148–149), indicating that certification operates as an entry requirement rather than an optional enhancement. This establishes a clear causal pathway, such as market and institutional demands, pursuit of certification, increased confidence and employability, and identity construction as a qualified professional.

The observational and contextual evidence further supports these findings, showing that certifications extend beyond symbolic recognition and actively shape teaching practices. Across cases, teachers incorporated structured pedagogical strategies associated with formal training, including scaffolding techniques,

pronunciation modeling, and student-centered instruction. Teachers also prominently displayed certifications in their professional profiles, which showed students, parents, and platform administrators that they were qualified. There were differences between the cases in how well the teachers integrated what they learned. Teachers I and M used training-informed strategies more naturally, which suggests that they had internalized their pedagogical knowledge. On the other hand, Teachers J and C used these strategies more intentionally and in new ways, which suggests that they were still learning. These patterns suggest that certification contributes not only to external validation but also to the internalization of professional teaching standards.

Cross-case comparison also shows that certifications protect people from structural inequalities, especially native-speakerism and bias based on the accent. Teachers across cases perceived credentials as objective evidence that could counter subjective judgments about linguistic background. In this context, certifications serve as a form of professional security, enabling teachers to assert legitimacy in a competitive and often biased market. However, the findings also reveal an underlying tension: while certifications enhance opportunities, access to training is uneven due to financial constraints. This creates a stratified professional landscape in which teachers with greater access to resources are better positioned to accumulate credentials and advance their careers.

These findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that certifications are not merely tools for skill development but function as institutionalized gatekeeping mechanisms that regulate entry, recognition, and advancement in the online ESL industry. While Ulla et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of continuous training for competitiveness, the present analysis shows that certification operates as both an enabler and a structural requirement, reinforcing inequalities among teachers with differing access to resources. Furthermore, the findings deepen current understandings by illustrating how certifications influence not only employability but also identity construction, shaping how teachers perceive themselves as legitimate professionals.

These patterns align with the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), where teachers use certifications to position themselves as competent and credible educators within interactions with students, parents, and platforms. Credentials function as discursive and symbolic resources that support claims to professionalism. From the lens of Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986), certifications represent forms of institutional and cultural capital that enhance teachers’ professional value and competitiveness. Teachers who accumulate these forms of capital gain greater access to opportunities, recognition, and economic stability. Additionally, Communities of Practice Theory (Wenger, 1998) explains how participation in training programs and professional learning networks contributes to identity development, as teachers acquire, refine, and apply pedagogical knowledge within shared professional contexts.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that certifications and training programs serve as key mechanisms through which professional legitimacy is constructed, displayed, and sustained in the online ESL industry. Teachers strategically invest in credentials to navigate market demands, counter biases, and enhance career opportunities. This process reflects a broader shift toward credential-based professionalism, where formal qualifications increasingly define professional identity and recognition.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms and educational institutions expand equitable access to certification and professional development opportunities. Providing subsidized or free TESOL and TEFL programs, as well as accessible training workshops, can reduce disparities and support teacher advancement. Additionally, integrating certification pathways within platform systems may help standardize professional development while ensuring inclusivity. By investing in teacher training and reducing barriers to access, platforms can foster more equitable, competent, and sustainable professional environments for Filipino online ESL teachers.

Negotiating Professional Roles of Filipino Online ESL Teachers Across Diverse Teaching Contexts

Table 2 reveals the three themes and corresponding descriptions derived from the analysis of participants’ narratives.

Adaptive Professionalism in Varied Platforms and Strategic Pedagogical Changes

Across cases, Filipino online ESL teachers negotiated their professional identity through a process best described as adaptive professionalism, wherein instructional practices are continuously modified to align with platform expectations while simultaneously responding to diverse learner needs. Cross-case analysis reveals

both convergence and variation in how this adaptability is enacted. Teachers I and M, with more extensive teaching experience, demonstrated more routinized and anticipatory adaptation, efficiently balancing platform requirements with student-centered strategies. Conversely, Teachers J and C exhibited greater situational and reactive adaptation, modifying their teaching methods in response to immediate dynamics of the classroom and student engagement. Despite these differences, all cases reflect a shared professional condition where identity constantly negotiate between institutional structure and pedagogical flexibility.

Platform standardization requirements and student variability primarily trigger adaptive professionalism, according to the data. Platform-imposed lesson structures, performance expectations, and continuity requirements serve as external constraints that necessitate alignment. For example, Teacher C explained, “We need to follow the same format... so the child will not get confused if they transfer to another teacher” (Lines 116–117), illustrating how institutional expectations compel teachers to standardize their instructional delivery. Simultaneously, student engagement and learning needs function as immediate triggers for pedagogical adjustment, requiring teachers to deviate from rigid structures. Teacher C further noted, “I just wake them up... then when they’re engaged, ‘Okay, let’s go back to your book’” (Lines 162–163),

Table 2

Summary of Negotiating Professional Roles of Filipino Online ESL Teachers

Theme	Case	Interview Excerpt	Observation/Document Evidence
Adaptive Professionalism in Varied Platforms and Strategic Pedagogical Changes	Case A (Teacher C)	“We need to follow the same format... so the child will not get confused if they transfer to another teacher.” (Teacher C, Lines 116–117)	Teacher followed the platform’s structured lesson sequence and used standardized materials required by the company.
	Case B (Teacher C)	“I just wake them up... then when they’re engaged, ‘Okay, let’s go back to your book.’” (Teacher C, Lines 162–163)	Teacher adjusted pacing and used informal conversation to re-engage a distracted student before returning to the lesson.
	Case C (Teacher J)	“Sometimes I adjust the lesson if the student is too fast or too slow.”	Teacher modified explanations and pacing to match the student’s proficiency and participation level.
Negotiating Multirole Identity	Case A (Teacher I)	“You are not just being a teacher... but also a friend toward your students.” (Teacher I, Lines 34–35)	Teacher used informal conversation and personal encouragement to build rapport with the student before beginning the lesson.
	Case B (Teacher C)	“She’s not just a teacher... she’s a friend to me and my family.” (Teacher C, Lines 184–185)	Teacher maintained long-term rapport with a returning student, referencing previous lessons and family experiences.
	Case C (Teacher J)	“Sometimes I share Filipino culture with them so they understand more about our country.”	Teacher introduced cultural examples and stories during the lesson to explain vocabulary and context.
Emotional Labor and Professional Boundary	Case A (Teacher M)	“You have to always be patient with your students... even when they’re annoying.” (Teacher M, Line 71)	Teacher maintained a calm tone and encouraging demeanor even when the student repeatedly made mistakes or became distracted.
	Case B (Teacher M)	“I don’t get angry in the classroom as much anymore... I need to set a standard.” (Teacher M, Lines 102, 87)	Teacher responded to incorrect answers with supportive feedback rather than visible frustration.

Case C (Teacher I)	“Positive feedback strengthens the connection between teacher and parents.”	Teacher consistently praised student effort and acknowledged improvement during lessons.
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Demonstrating how real-time classroom interaction prompts strategic shifts in teaching approaches. These patterns reveal a consistent causal sequence, such as platform demands and learner variability, instructional tension, strategic adaptation, and identity formation for a flexible professional.

The recorded teaching sessions reinforce these findings, showing that adaptive professionalism is enacted through concrete teaching behaviors. Across all cases, teachers adjusted lesson pacing, simplified explanations, scaffolded learning tasks, and incorporated interactive prompts to sustain engagement. However, differences emerge in execution. Teachers I and M displayed fluid transitions between structured and flexible teaching modes, suggesting internalized adaptive expertise. In contrast, Teachers J and C showed more deliberate and visible adjustments, indicating that adaptive professionalism develops progressively with experience. These observations indicate that adaptability transitions from a deliberate strategy to an embedded professional competency.

Cross-case comparison further reveals that teachers operate with a repertoire of shifting professional roles rather than a fixed identity. Participants moved between roles such as instructor, facilitator, motivator, and mentor depending on situational demands. This role fluidity was more pronounced in cases with diverse learner interactions (e.g., Teacher C), while more experienced teachers (I and M) demonstrated more seamless integration of these roles. This indicates that adaptive professionalism is not merely about instructional adjustment but involves identity multiplicity, where teachers continuously reposition themselves to maintain both instructional effectiveness and student engagement.

These findings challenge the assumption in existing literature that adaptability is simply a desirable teaching trait. While studies such as Ulla et al. (2024) and Pontillas (2021) describe adaptability as a necessary response to technological change and learner diversity, they tend to treat it as a generalized competence. The present cross-case analysis demonstrates that adaptability is instead a structurally induced and interactionally negotiated process, shaped by the dual pressures of platform standardization and student-centered demands. Moreover, while prior research emphasizes flexibility as empowering, the findings here suggest that it also reflects a form of constrained agency, where teachers must continuously adjust within predefined institutional boundaries. Thus, adaptability functions both as a professional resource and as a response to systemic limitations.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), as teachers continuously reposition themselves in response to shifting classroom and institutional contexts. Teachers position themselves as flexible and responsive professionals capable of navigating competing demands. At the same time, the Communities of Practice Theory by Wenger (1998) explains how adaptive strategies are refined through participation in shared practices and accumulated experience. Through repeated engagement, teachers develop a repertoire of strategies that support both learning and professional growth. From the lens of the Capital Theory of

Bourdieu (1986), adaptive teaching strategies can be understood as pedagogical capital, where the ability to manage diverse learners and comply with platform expectations enhances teachers' credibility and competitiveness within the global ESL market.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that adaptive professionalism is a core mechanism of identity construction among Filipino online ESL teachers. It is simultaneously shaped by structural constraints, enacted through pedagogical practice, and refined through experience. Teachers' ability to balance standardization with flexibility allows them to sustain both professional legitimacy and instructional effectiveness in a highly dynamic teaching environment.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms move beyond rigid standardization and provide structured support for adaptive teaching practices. Professional development programs should include training on managing diverse learner needs, flexible instructional design, and real-time decision-making strategies. Additionally, institutional systems should recognize the cognitive and emotional demands of continuous adaptation, as excessive flexibility without support may lead to teacher fatigue. Supporting adaptive professionalism not only enhances instructional quality but also contributes to sustainable teacher development and well-being within the global online ESL industry.

Negotiating Multirole Identity

Across cases, Filipino online ESL teachers negotiated a multirole professional identity that extends beyond traditional language instruction, encompassing roles such as mentor, friend, coach, and cultural guide. Cross-case analysis reveals both shared patterns and differences in how these roles are enacted. Teachers I and M, with more extensive teaching experience, demonstrated more intentional and strategic role expansion, integrating relational and instructional functions seamlessly. In contrast, Teachers J and C exhibited more emergent and situational role negotiation, where relational roles developed gradually through repeated interaction with students. Despite these differences, all participants engaged in role diversification, indicating that multirole identity is a common and necessary adaptation within the online ESL teaching environment.

The findings show that multirole identity is primarily triggered by the need for student retention, engagement, and relational continuity in platform-based teaching systems. In contexts where teachers heavily rely on rebooking and positive evaluations, purely instructional competence does not provide enough support for professional stability. As a result, teachers expand their roles to build stronger interpersonal connections with learners. This is evident in Teacher I's statement, "You are not just being a teacher... but also a friend toward your students" (Lines 34–35), which reflects a deliberate shift from a purely instructional identity to a relational one. Similarly, Teacher C reported that students and families perceive teachers as more than instructors: "She's not just a teacher... she's a friend to me and my family" (Lines 184–185). These narratives illustrate a causal sequence, such as market demands for retention, the need for relational

engagement, role expansion, and identity transformation into a multirole professional.

The class recording further confirms that this multirole identity is enacted through classroom practices. Across all cases, teachers used informal conversation, humor, encouragement, and cultural sharing in their lessons to build relationships and keep students interested. However, differences emerge in execution. Teachers I and M demonstrated more fluid integration of relational and pedagogical roles, embedding encouragement and cultural references naturally within instruction. Teachers J and C, on the other hand, made more obvious efforts to establish rapport with their students, often using direct conversational strategies to do so. These variations suggest that multirole identity evolves with experience, transitioning from intentional strategy to embodied teaching practice.

Cross-case comparison also highlights that multirole identity functions as both a pedagogical approach and a strategic career mechanism. Teachers consistently linked relational engagement to increased student loyalty, repeat bookings, and long-term engagement. This indicates that role expansion is not solely driven by cultural inclination but is also shaped by the structural realities of platform-based teaching. While all participants emphasized the importance of building relationships, more experienced teachers (I and M) framed this as a professional strategy, whereas less experienced teachers (J and C) often described it as a natural outcome of teaching interaction. This distinction suggests that multirole identity is progressively recognized not only as a teaching style but also as a form of professional positioning within a competitive market.

These findings extend and challenge existing literature. Previous studies of Galope (2024) and Sabidalas and Esparar (2022) describe Filipino teachers as naturally relational and culturally responsive, often framing multirole identity as an inherent characteristic. The current findings corroborate this viewpoint; however, they also reveal that multirole identity is deliberately constructed in response to platform labor conditions and evaluation systems. Thus, relational engagement is not purely cultural but is also economically and structurally motivated. Furthermore, while earlier research emphasizes the benefits of relational teaching for student engagement, it tends to overlook how this role expansion may blur professional boundaries and increase emotional demands on teachers. Consequently, the findings characterize multirole identity as both a benefit and a potential source of professional stress, requiring careful negotiation.

These patterns align with the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), as teachers actively position themselves not only as instructors but as mentors and companions in the learning process. Students and parents reciprocally position teachers as trusted figures, reinforcing this expanded identity. The Communities of Practice Theory by Wenger (1998) elaborates on the development of identity through relational interactions, wherein teaching practices and interpersonal engagement are interwoven. From the lens of Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986), relational engagement and cultural sharing function as forms of social and cultural capital, enabling teachers to build reputation, attract students, and sustain career opportunities within the global ESL market.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that multirole identity is a hybrid construct shaped by cultural disposition, pedagogical practice, and market-driven demands. It reflects teachers' ability to integrate instructional expertise with relational engagement, allowing them to maintain both teaching effectiveness and professional sustainability. This identity is not static but continuously negotiated through interaction, experience, and institutional conditions.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms adopt a more holistic evaluation framework that recognizes relational and cultural contributions alongside instructional performance. Training programs ought to incorporate techniques for building rapport while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries to prevent emotional overextension. Recognizing multirole identity as a legitimate and valuable component of teaching practice can enhance teacher well-being, strengthen student engagement, and promote more sustainable professional development in the online ESL industry.

Emotional Labor and Professional Boundary

Filipino online ESL teachers performed considerable emotional labor in construction and maintaining their professional identity, especially in rating-driven and closely monitored educational settings. Cross-case analysis reveals both shared patterns and variations in how emotional regulation is enacted. Teachers I and M, with more teaching experience, demonstrated more controlled and internalized emotional management, treating emotional regulation as a professional norm embedded in their teaching practice. In contrast, Teachers J and C exhibited more effortful and conscious emotional control, particularly when dealing with challenging student behavior or maintaining engagement. Despite these differences, all participants consistently performed emotional regulation, indicating that emotional labor is a structural and unavoidable component of online ESL teaching.

The findings indicate that emotional labor is primarily triggered by platform-based evaluation systems, student behavior, and the need to maintain positive professional visibility. The reliance on student ratings, feedback mechanisms, and rebooking systems creates a context in which teachers' professional success is directly tied to how they are perceived by learners and parents. As a result, teachers regulate their emotional expressions to align with expectations of patience, positivity, and composure. This is evident in Teacher M's statement, "You have to always be patient with your students... even when they're annoying" (Line 71), which reflects the necessity of suppressing negative emotional responses to maintain professionalism. Similarly, Teacher M noted, "I don't get angry in the classroom as much anymore... I need to set a standard" (Lines 102, 87), illustrating how repeated exposure to evaluative pressures leads to the internalization of emotional control as a professional standard. These patterns reveal a causal sequence that includes evaluation pressure and student interaction, emotional regulation, sustained positive image, and formation of identity as a composed professional.

The observation from recorded teaching sessions further supports these findings, showing that emotional labor is enacted through consistent behavioral patterns across cases. Teachers maintained calm and encouraging tones, redirected disengaged students constructively, and provided supportive feedback even in challenging situations. Differences emerge, however, in the degree of effort required. Teachers I and M demonstrated more seamless

emotional regulation, suggesting that such practices have become internalized through experience. In contrast, Teachers J and C displayed more deliberate emotional management, indicating that emotional labor is initially a conscious strategy that gradually becomes integrated into professional identity. This progression suggests that emotional regulation evolves from surface-level performance to deeply embedded professional habit.

Cross-case comparison also highlights that emotional labor involves a continuous negotiation between authenticity and professional expectation. While teachers strive to maintain genuine connections with students, they simultaneously regulate their emotional expressions to meet platform standards. This creates a conflict for teachers because they have to balance their internal emotional states with how they are expected to be act outside. More experienced teachers (I and M) appeared to manage this tension more effectively, framing emotional regulation as part of professional discipline. In contrast, less experienced teachers (J and C) showed greater sensitivity to this tension, particularly when dealing with difficult interactions. This indicates that emotional labor is not only a behavioral practice but also a cognitive and affective process shaped by experience and context.

These findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that emotional labor is not merely an inherent aspect of teaching but a structurally reinforced requirement within platform-based education systems. While previous studies emphasize the role of emotional regulation and self-presentation in shaping teacher identity, they often frame these as individual competencies (Kahveci, 2021; Kim, 2021; Sabidalas & Esparar, 2022). The present findings reveal that emotional labor is systematically produced by evaluation mechanisms, visibility demands, and market-driven expectations, making it both a professional necessity and a source of strain. Furthermore, while earlier research highlights the benefits of positive emotional engagement for student learning, it tends to underexplore the cost of sustained emotional regulation, particularly in environments where teachers are continuously monitored and evaluated. Thus, emotional labor emerges as both a form of professional capital and a potential site of emotional exhaustion.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), as teachers position themselves as patient, composed, and supportive professionals through their emotional expressions. Interactions with students, parents, and platform systems reinforce these positions. From the lens of the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986), emotional regulation is a type of professional and symbolic capital. Keeping a positive attitude makes teachers more credible, visible, and likely to be rebooked. Additionally, the Communities of Practice Theory by Wenger (1998) suggests that emotional norms are reinforced through participation in shared teaching environments, where teachers learn and internalize expected forms of professional conduct through interaction and experience.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that emotional labor is a central mechanism of identity construction among Filipino online ESL teachers. It is structurally driven, behaviorally enacted, and continuously negotiated across teaching contexts. Teachers' ability to regulate emotions and maintain a positive professional image enables them to sustain credibility and career stability, but it also introduces ongoing demands that shape their professional experience.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms formally recognize emotional labor as a core component of teaching work rather than an invisible expectation. Institutions should implement support systems such as training in emotional regulation, stress management programs, and clear guidelines on maintaining professional boundaries. Additionally, evaluation systems should consider the emotional demands placed on teachers and move toward more holistic assessments of teaching performance. Supporting teachers' emotional well-being is essential for sustaining both professional identity and instructional effectiveness. By acknowledging emotional labor as legitimate work, platforms can foster more sustainable, equitable, and humane professional environments in the online ESL industry.

Career Advancement Strategies of Filipino Online ESL Teachers in Digital Teaching Environments

Table 3 reveals the five themes about the career advancement strategies and corresponding descriptions derived from the analysis of participants' narratives.

Table 4

Summary of Career Advancement Strategies of Filipino Online ESL Teachers

Theme	Case	Interview Excerpt	Observation/Document Evidence
Continuous Training and Certification and Market-Responsive Skill Development	Case A (Teacher M)	“TESOL and TEFL certificates... affect you by giving you confidence.” (Teacher M, Line 70)	Teacher displayed TESOL certification on professional profile and referenced strategies learned from training during lessons.
	Case B (Teacher I)	“I see myself focusing on test preparation... KET and IELTS.” (Teacher I, Lines 142–144)	Teacher incorporated exam-style questions and structured practice activities during lessons.
	Case A (Teacher C)	“They wanted to choose you... ‘I don’t want anyone else.’” (Teacher C, Lines 45–46)	Teacher interacted with returning students and referenced previous lessons, showing familiarity and rapport with learners.
Building Social Capital Through	Case B (Teacher J)	“When my students rebook my slots... I feel respected and valued.” (Teacher J, Lines 94–95)	Teacher received repeated bookings from the same students across several weeks.

Student Relationships	Case C (Teacher M)	“When students improve, parents recommend you to others.”	Teacher received referrals and positive feedback from parents about student progress.
Digital Networking and Peer Collaboration	Case A (Teacher I)	“Posting in Facebook... many teachers shared practical tips... big improvement.” (Teacher I, Lines 67, 70)	Teacher participated in Facebook teaching groups where colleagues shared strategies and solutions for classroom challenges.
	Case B (Teacher J)	“We have a group chat... someone could help us real-time.” (Teacher J, Line 51)	Teacher consulted peers through group chat during teaching preparation and lesson planning.
Professional Self-Presentation and Branding	Case A (Teacher M)	“Look and present yourself professionally... avoid anything that might affect your reputation.” (Teacher M, Line 87)	Teacher maintained a professional appearance during lessons and used a structured communication style in teaching sessions.
	Case B (Teacher C)	“Posting ESL content.” (Teacher C, Line 94)	Teacher shared teaching tips, educational posts, and ESL-related content on social media platforms.
Observational Self-Improvement	Case A (Teacher M)	“Watch your own classes... when you cringe... try another method.” (Teacher M, Line 156)	Teacher reviewed recorded lessons and identified areas for improvement in pronunciation modeling and pacing.
	Case B (Teacher C)	“Learning is a lifelong journey... I need to continue to improve myself.” (Teacher C, Lines 138–139)	Teacher applied adjustments in subsequent lessons based on previous teaching reflections.

Continuous Training and Certification and Market-Responsive Skill Development

Across cases, continuous professional training and market-responsive skill development emerged as central strategies for career advancement, shaping how Filipino online ESL teachers sustain employability and competitiveness in the global ESL market. Cross-case analysis reveals that all participants (Teachers I, J, M, and C) actively engage in professional development; however, differences are evident in how these strategies are operationalized. Teachers I and M demonstrated a more strategic orientation toward specialization and long-term career positioning, while Teachers J and C exhibited a more developmental trajectory, using certifications and training as mechanisms for entry, skill-building, and professional stabilization. Despite these variations, all cases consistently position continuous learning as non-negotiable for career sustainability.

The data indicates that the pursuit of training and certification is triggered by market competition, platform expectations, and the need for differentiation in a saturated teaching environment. Teachers work within a system where visibility, student retention, and employability are closely tied to demonstrable expertise. This pressure leads to a strategic response in which teachers invest in both formal certifications and specialized skills aligned with market demand. As Teacher M explained, “TESOL and TEFL certificates... affect you by giving you confidence” (Line 70), indicating that certification functions as both a psychological and professional resource. Similarly, Teacher I stated, “I see myself focusing on test preparation... KET and IELTS” (Lines 142–144), demonstrating a deliberate shift toward niche specialization. This establishes a clear causal pathway that includes competitive market conditions, the need for differentiation, investment in certification and specialization,

enhanced confidence, increased visibility, and improved employability.

Cross-case comparison further reveals that specialization serves as a key differentiating factor in career advancement. Teachers I and M, with more experience, demonstrated targeted skill development in high-demand areas such as test preparation and structured instruction, suggesting a proactive approach to aligning with global ESL trends. In contrast, Teachers J and C focused more broadly on foundational training and general teaching competence, indicating an earlier stage of professional development. This contrast highlights a progression from general competence (entry stage) to strategic specialization (career advancement stage), suggesting that professional growth involves both accumulation and refinement of skills over time.

The observational and contextual evidence further reinforces these findings, showing that professional development is actively integrated into instructional practice. Across cases, teachers applied structured pedagogical techniques learned from certification programs, including scaffolding strategies, pronunciation drills, and targeted vocabulary instruction. Also, teachers prominently displayed their certifications in professional profiles and took part in training workshops and webinars. These practices indicate that certification and training are not merely symbolic but function as applied professional resources that directly influence teaching effectiveness and classroom interaction.

These findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that continuous professional development operates not only as a means of skill acquisition but also as a strategic mechanism for career positioning and market adaptation. While Ulla et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of ongoing training for competitiveness, the present analysis highlights how teachers actively align their skill development with specific market demands, such as exam

preparation and learner specialization. Moreover, the results corroborate the assertions of support Al-Jarf (2013) and Mula et al. (2025), who define teaching as a lifelong learning process, while also expanding this viewpoint by demonstrating how such learning is influenced by external market forces and platform expectations.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986), where certifications and specialized skills function as forms of human capital that enhance teachers' professional value and competitiveness. Teachers who continuously invest in skill development accumulate capital that increases their employability and earning potential. Additionally, the Communities of Practice Theory of Wenger (1998) explains how professional identity develops through participation in collaborative learning environments. Teachers actively participate in training programs, peer discussions, and online communities to share and refine knowledge, thereby contributing to both skill development and identity construction.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that continuous training and market-responsive skill development are essential strategies for sustaining career mobility and professional relevance in the online ESL industry. Teachers strategically invest in certifications and specialization to navigate competitive pressures, enhance credibility, and secure stable employment opportunities. This reflects a broader shift toward adaptive, skill-driven professionalism, where career advancement depends on the ability to continuously align competencies with evolving market demands.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms and educational institutions prioritize accessible and market-aligned professional development programs. Providing subsidized certification opportunities, specialized training modules (e.g., test preparation, young learners, digital pedagogy), and mentorship initiatives can support teachers at different stages of their careers. By strengthening access to continuous learning and aligning training with industry needs, platforms can enhance both teacher competitiveness and instructional quality, contributing to a more sustainable and equitable online ESL ecosystem.

Building Social Capital Through Student Relationships

In all of the cases, Filipino online ESL teachers said that building social capital with student and parent was a key way to keep their jobs and move up in their careers. Cross-case analysis indicates that all participants (Teachers I, J, M, and C) actively engaged in relationship-building practices; however, differences were evident in how these relationships were leveraged. Teachers C and J demonstrated stronger reliance on student loyalty and rebooking as primary indicators of success, while Teachers I and M integrated relational engagement with broader professional strategies such as instructional quality and long-term student development. Despite these variations, all cases consistently position relationships as a critical resource for securing stability in a gig-based teaching environment.

The absence of stable institutional support and the reliance on student-driven evaluation systems within online ESL platforms trigger relationship-building. In a context where employment is largely dependent on student bookings, ratings, and parental feedback, teachers are compelled to establish strong interpersonal connections as a means of sustaining their careers. This structural condition leads to a strategic response in which teachers intentionally cultivate rapport, trust, and familiarity with learners and their families. Teacher C said, "They wanted to

choose you... 'I don't want anyone else'" (Lines 45–46), and Teacher J said, "When my students rebook my slots... I feel respected and valued" (Lines 94–95). These statements demonstrate that rebooking is not merely a preference but functions as validation of professional competence and relational success. This establishes a clear causal pathway that includes platform dependency on student feedback, the need for consistent bookings, intentional relationship-building, increased loyalty, validation, and job stability.

Cross-case comparison further demonstrates that relational strategies develop based on experience and professional maturity. Teachers C and J, who are relatively earlier in their careers, relied more heavily on emotional engagement and rapport-building to secure repeat bookings. In contrast, Teachers I and M demonstrated a more integrated approach, combining relational engagement with instructional effectiveness and long-term student progress. This suggests a developmental trajectory in which teachers move from relationship-building as survival strategy to relationship-building as strategic professional capital, reinforcing both identity and career advancement.

The observational and contextual evidence further supports these findings, showing that relational engagement is actively embedded in teaching practices. Across cases, teachers referenced previous lessons, acknowledged student progress, and personalized interactions based on learners' needs and interests. Teachers also reported that positive learning experiences often lead to parental recommendations and extended learning commitments. These practices indicate that relationships are not incidental but are deliberately cultivated and maintained as part of professional practice. Through these interactions, teachers transform classroom experiences into long-term professional opportunities.

These findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that relational engagement functions not only as emotional support but also as a market-driven survival mechanism in online ESL teaching. While Mula et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of interpersonal communication in fostering effective learning environments, the present analysis highlights how these relationships generate tangible economic and professional benefits, including rebooking, referrals, and reputation building. Furthermore, the findings deepen current understandings by showing that relational work is strategically performed in response to structural conditions rather than being purely intrinsic to teaching.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986), where relationships function as social capital that can be converted into professional opportunities such as stable bookings and positive reputation. Teachers who successfully build and maintain relationships accumulate valuable capital that enhances their employability. Additionally, the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999) explains how teachers are positioned by students and parents as trusted and competent educators through expressions of loyalty and appreciation, which teachers internalize as validation of their professional identity. The Communities of Practice Theory of Wenger (1998) further supports this argument by illustrating how identity develops through participation in relational interactions, where meaning and belonging are co-constructed through engagement with learners.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that building social capital through student relationships is a strategic and necessary practice for sustaining professional identity and career stability in the online ESL industry. Teachers actively invest in relational engagement to navigate unstable working conditions, transforming interpersonal connections into professional resources that support long-term employability.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms recognize relational engagement as a key indicator of teaching effectiveness and career sustainability. Implementing systems such as referral incentives, loyalty-based rewards, and recognition of long-term student progress can validate teachers' relational work. Additionally, integrating relational competence into evaluation frameworks may provide a more holistic understanding of teaching quality, which is crucial for effective learning. By acknowledging the value of relationship-building, platforms can create more supportive professional environments that enhance teacher satisfaction, improve student outcomes, and promote sustainability in the online ESL industry.

Digital Networking and Peer Collaboration

Across cases, digital networking and peer collaboration emerged as essential mechanisms for professional development, knowledge construction, and identity formation among Filipino online ESL teachers. Cross-case analysis reveals that all participants (Teachers I, J, M, and C) actively engaged in digital communities; however, differences were observed in the intensity and purpose of participation. Teachers I and J demonstrated more active engagement in online platforms such as Facebook groups and messaging applications, frequently seeking and sharing teaching strategies. In contrast, Teachers M and C exhibited more selective participation, utilizing digital networks primarily for targeted problem-solving and resource access. Despite these differences, all cases consistently position digital communities as critical substitutes for traditional institutional support systems.

The data indicates that engagement in digital networking is triggered by the absence of immediate collegial support and the need for real-time solutions in a decentralized teaching environment. Unlike traditional schools where teachers can consult colleagues face-to-face, online ESL teachers often work independently, creating a gap in professional support. This condition generates a response in which teachers actively seek digital communities to compensate for this isolation. As Teacher I explained, "Posting in Facebook... many teachers shared practical tips... big improvement" (Lines 67–70), while Teacher J noted, "We have a group chat... someone could help us in real-time" (Line 51). These accounts demonstrate that digital communities function as responsive, real-time support systems. This establishes a clear causal pathway such as professional isolation, need for immediate support, participation in digital communities, access to shared knowledge, improved teaching practices, and increased confidence.

Cross-case comparison further highlights variations in how teachers utilize these networks for professional growth. Teachers I and J relied heavily on peer interaction for continuous learning and immediate problem-solving, indicating a more collaborative and interactive engagement style. In contrast, Teachers M and C demonstrated more strategic use of digital communities, accessing specific resources or insights when needed rather than engaging consistently. This suggests a progression from dependency on peer

support (early-career stage) to strategic and selective engagement (experienced stage), where teachers develop the ability to independently evaluate and apply shared knowledge.

The observation and contextual evidence further reinforce these findings, showing that knowledge acquired through digital networks is directly applied in teaching practice. Across cases, teachers reported using shared lesson materials, instructional techniques, and engagement strategies obtained from online communities. Classroom interactions reflected these practices, with teachers implementing new approaches to scaffolding, questioning, and student engagement. This indicates that digital collaboration is not merely informational but functions as an applied learning system that enhances instructional effectiveness.

These findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that digital community's function not only as spaces for resource sharing but also as dynamic environments for collective problem-solving and professional identity construction. While Al-Jarf (2015) emphasizes the role of online forums in supporting teacher development, the present analysis highlights how immediacy and accessibility transform these platforms into real-time support systems that directly influence teaching practice. Furthermore, the findings deepen current understandings by showing that digital networking serves cognitive and affective functions, addressing both professional and psychological needs of teachers.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns strongly align with the Communities of Practice Theory of Wenger (1998), where digital groups function as authentic communities in which members share experiences, negotiate meaning, and co-construct knowledge. Participation in these communities enables teachers to develop both competence and a sense of belonging. From the lens of the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986), digital networks represent forms of structural social capital, providing access to valuable resources, information, and opportunities that enhance professional advancement. Additionally, the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999) explains how teachers position themselves as collaborative and resourceful professionals through active participation in these communities while simultaneously being positioned by peers as knowledgeable contributors.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that digital networking and peer collaboration are indispensable strategies for dealing with the difficulties of online ESL teaching, enabling teachers to compensate for isolation, enhance instructional competence, and sustain professional identity. Teachers strategically utilize these networks to access collective expertise, remain informed about industry trends, and adapt to evolving teaching demands.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms and educational institutions formally recognize and integrate digital communities into professional development systems. Establishing partnerships with existing networks, supporting moderated online forums, and providing structured spaces for peer collaboration can enhance knowledge sharing and professional growth. Additionally, recognizing the role of digital communities in supporting teachers' psychological well-being may contribute to improved retention and job satisfaction. By institutionalizing and supporting these networks, platforms can create more connected, responsive, and sustainable professional environments for Filipino online ESL teachers.

Professional Self-Presentation and Branding

Across cases, professional self-presentation and digital branding emerged as strategic mechanisms for career advancement and professional visibility among Filipino online ESL teachers. Cross-case analysis shows that all participants (Teachers I, J, M, and C) were actively managing their digital presence. However, there were differences in how intentional and sophisticated they were. Teachers M and I demonstrated more deliberate and controlled branding practices, emphasizing professional image, credibility, and consistency. In contrast, Teachers J and C exhibited more emergent forms of self-presentation, focusing on maintaining professionalism and gradually building an online presence through content sharing and profile management. Despite these variations, all cases consistently position digital self-presentation as essential for attracting and retaining students in a highly competitive online market.

The data indicates that professional branding is triggered by the visibility-driven nature of online ESL platforms and the reliance on profile-based evaluation by students and parents. In digital teaching environments, learners often select teachers based on profile information, ratings, and online presence rather than direct interaction. This condition creates a need for teachers to strategically manage how they are perceived. Because of this, teachers work to improve their professional image by updating their profiles, sharing content, and controlling their online behavior. Teacher M stressed the importance of being aware of your brand, saying, "Look and present yourself professionally... avoid anything that might affect your reputation" (Line 87). Teacher C, on the other hand, talked about creating content as part of branding, saying, "Posting ESL content" (Line 94). These responses establish a clear causal pathway that includes factors such as platform visibility and competition, the need for positive perception, strategic self-presentation and branding, increased credibility, and student attraction and retention.

Cross-case comparison further demonstrates that branding practices develop alongside with professional experience. Teachers M and I demonstrated a more refined approach, consistently aligning their online image with professional standards, highlighting certifications, and maintaining a coherent digital identity. Teachers J and C, on the other hand, were still working on their strategies. They were focused on staying professional while slowly looking for ways to make themselves more visible. This suggests a progression from basic professional presentation (early stage) to strategic digital branding (advanced stage), where teachers intentionally position themselves within the global ESL market.

The observational and contextual evidence further reinforce these findings, showing that teachers actively maintain updated profiles, showcase certifications, and share instructional content to enhance visibility. Across cases, teachers utilized digital platforms to communicate expertise, including posting teaching tips, lesson materials, and educational insights. These practices indicate that digital identity is not passively formed but actively constructed and continuously managed as part of professional practice.

These findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that digital self-presentation functions not only as identity expression but also as a market-oriented strategy for professional differentiation and opportunity generation. While Kim (2021) emphasizes the role of digital storytelling in identity construction,

the present analysis highlights how branding is shaped by platform dynamics and competitive pressures. Furthermore, the findings reveal that professional identity is increasingly tied to visibility and reputation in digital spaces, where teachers must actively manage their image to remain competitive.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), where teachers position themselves as competent and trustworthy professionals through deliberate self-presentation. Teachers influence their perception by curating their digital identity, impacting how students, parents, and platform stakeholders view them. Additionally, the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986) explains how digital branding functions as symbolic capital, enhancing recognition, credibility, and professional value. Teachers who effectively manage their online presence gain visibility, which can lead to opportunities like increased bookings and career advancement. The Communities of Practice Theory of Wenger (1998) further supports this argument by highlighting how digital platforms serve as spaces where teachers share expertise, engage with peers, and reinforce their professional identity through participation.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that professional self-presentation and branding are critical strategies for navigating the visibility-driven structure of the online ESL industry. Teachers actively construct and manage their digital identities to enhance credibility, attract learners, and sustain professional growth. This reflects a broader shift toward performance-based and visibility-oriented professionalism, where success depends not only on teaching competence but also on how that competence is presented and perceived.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that teacher education programs and online ESL platforms integrate digital branding and ethical self-presentation into professional development initiatives. Providing training on profile optimization, content creation, and online professionalism can help teachers strengthen their visibility and competitiveness. Additionally, guidelines on ethical digital behavior can support teachers in maintaining a consistent and professional image. By equipping teachers with the skills to manage their digital identity, institutions can empower them to take control of their professional narrative while enhancing career opportunities in the global online ESL market.

Observational Self-Improvement

Across cases, observational self-improvement emerged as a core strategy for sustaining professional competence and long-term career growth among Filipino online ESL teachers. Cross-case analysis indicates that all participants (Teachers I, J, M, and C) engaged in reflective practices through reviewing recorded lessons; however, differences were observed in the depth and purpose of reflection. Teachers M and I demonstrated more systematic and critical reflection, using recorded sessions to evaluate instructional effectiveness and refine teaching strategies. Conversely, Teachers J and C exhibited developing reflective practices, focusing on identifying immediate areas for enhancement and gradually building reflective habits. Despite these variations, all cases consistently position reflection as an essential component of continuous professional development.

The data reveals that observational self-improvement is triggered by performance-based evaluation systems, recorded

lesson accessibility, and the need for continuous adaptation in a competitive teaching environment. Online ESL platforms often provide recorded sessions, while student feedback and ratings create pressure for consistent improvement. These conditions lead teachers to engage in self-evaluation as a proactive response to maintain and enhance their performance. As Teacher M explained, “Watch your classes... when you cringe... try another method” (Line 156), indicating a reflective cycle of evaluation and adjustment. Similarly, Teacher C stated, “Learning is a lifelong journey... I need to continue to improve myself” (Lines 138–139), emphasizing the internalization of reflection as a professional mindset. This establishes a clear causal pathway such as evaluation pressure and access to recorded lessons, engagement in self-reflection, identification of instructional gaps, refinement of teaching practices, and improved competence and confidence.

Cross-case comparison further shows that reflective practice develops alongside experience and professional maturity. Teachers M and I demonstrated deeper levels of metacognitive awareness, critically analyzing pacing, clarity, and student engagement and implementing targeted improvements in subsequent lessons. In contrast, Teachers J and C engaged in more surface-level reflection, focusing on correcting observable mistakes and improving immediate instructional delivery. This suggests a progression from reactive reflection (error correction) to strategic reflection (intentional pedagogical refinement), indicating that reflective competence develops over time and contributes to professional expertise.

The observational and contextual evidence further support these findings, showing that teachers actively reviewed lesson recordings to evaluate classroom interaction, instructional clarity, and student responsiveness. Across cases, teachers identified missed teaching opportunities, adjusted explanations, and experimented with alternative strategies to enhance learning outcomes. These practices demonstrate that reflection is not merely evaluative but functions as an active mechanism for instructional improvement and professional growth.

These findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that reflective practice operates not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a self-regulated strategy for maintaining competitiveness in a performance-driven industry. While Mula et al. (2025) emphasize the role of reflection in improving instructional effectiveness, the present analysis highlights how reflection is shaped by platform structures, such as recorded lessons and evaluation systems. This study reinforces Al-Jarf's (2013) emphasis on the importance of self-directed learning through teachers' independent engagement in reflective practices. The findings further demonstrate that external influences and internal sustenance shape reflection, bridging structural demands and personal agency.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), where teachers position themselves as reflective and proactive professionals through continuous self-evaluation and adaptation. Reflection allows teachers to reconstruct their professional identity based on experience and performance. From the lens of the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986), reflective practice contributes to the accumulation of human capital as teachers refine their skills and pedagogical knowledge through ongoing self-directed learning. Additionally, the Communities of Practice Theory of Wenger (1998) suggests that reflective insights may be shared and

validated within professional communities, further strengthening identity and competence through collective learning.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that observational self-improvement is a critical strategy for sustaining instructional quality, professional identity, and career competitiveness in the online ESL industry. Teachers actively engage in reflective practices to adapt to evolving teaching demands, enhance their effectiveness, and maintain professional relevance.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms provide structured support for reflective practice, including accessible tools for recording and reviewing lessons, guided reflection frameworks, and peer feedback systems. Implementing mentorship programs and collaborative review sessions can further enhance the depth and effectiveness of reflection. By institutionalizing reflective practice, platforms can support teachers' continuous development, improve instructional quality, and promote long-term professional growth and confidence among Filipino online ESL teachers.

Construction Professional Identity in Digital Teaching Contexts

Table 4 reveals the four themes and corresponding descriptions derived from the analysis of participants' narratives. It presents the findings related to how Filipino online ESL teachers construct and narrate their professional identities within digital teaching platforms and online Communities of Practice. The analysis is based on participants' narratives gathered through semi-structured interviews and examined using thematic analysis and cross-case analysis. Through these narratives, teachers shared how they interpret their roles, responsibilities, and experiences while navigating the global online ESL industry. The themes that emerged from the data highlight key dimensions of digital identity construction. These themes collectively illustrate how Filipino online ESL teachers develop and maintain their professional identities while participating in digitally mediated teaching environments.

Professional Identity as a Journey of Becoming

Across cases, professional identity among Filipino online ESL teachers emerged as a progressive and experience-driven process rather than an immediate or fixed outcome. While participants entered online ESL teaching under different circumstances, a shared trajectory was evident in which initial engagement, often driven by necessity, gradually transformed into a sense of professional commitment and purpose. Teachers M and C, in particular, illustrated how entry into online ESL teaching was largely unplanned and influenced by external pressures such as employment constraints and shifting work conditions. Teacher M explicitly stated, “I had no option but to become an ESL teacher... But eventually, I started to enjoy it... I know I'm fulfilling my purpose as an ESL teacher” (Lines 15–16), while Teacher C described teaching as “a learning journey... I'm enjoying the experience of teaching” (Lines 3 and 7). In contrast, Teachers I and J, who possess formal educational training in English, entered the profession with stronger pedagogical foundations; however, they likewise underwent a process of adjustment as they adapted to digitally mediated teaching environments.

The transition from economic necessity to professional commitment was not simply gradual but was facilitated by specific reinforcing experiences consistently observed across cases.

Repeated positive student feedback, active learner engagement, and expressions of appreciation functioned as immediate validation of teaching competence. In addition, rebooking and continued student retention served as concrete indicators of instructional effectiveness, reinforcing teachers’ sense of value within the platform-based environment. Successful teaching moments such as effectively guiding students toward correct pronunciation, improving comprehension, or sustaining engagement further strengthened teachers’ confidence and professional self-concept.

These experiences acted as critical turning points, transforming teaching from a temporary or necessity-driven activity into a meaningful and internally valued profession.

The classroom observations also demonstrated how teachers enacted this evolving identity through their instructional practices. Teachers demonstrated increasing confidence through behaviors such as scaffolding, adaptive pacing, and consistent encouragement. For instance, one teacher guided a student through.

Table 5

Summary of Construction Professional Identity of Filipino Online ESL Teachers

Theme	Case	Interview Excerpt	Observation/Document Evidence
1. Professional Identity as a Journey of Becoming	Case A (Teacher M)	“I had no option but to become an ESL teacher... But eventually, I started to enjoy it... I know I’m fulfilling my purpose as an ESL teacher.” (Teacher M, Lines 15-16)	Teacher guided student through pronunciation; slowed pace; repeated words; provided encouragement: “That’s okay, we’ll try it together again.”
	Case B (Teacher C)	“It’s a learning journey... I’m enjoying the experience of teaching.” (Teacher C, Lines 3, 7)	Teacher used gestures, visual cues, and voice modulation while explaining vocabulary; frequently praised student: “Excellent reading!”
	Case C (Teacher M)	“Teaching students from different countries taught me to adjust my approach and learn from each lesson.”	Teacher provided scaffolding, structured lesson flow, and examples; guided student toward correct answers with encouragement.
2. Professionalism as Performance and Accountability	Case A (Teacher M)	“Being professional means being punctual, reliable, and presentable... not ‘Filipino time’.” (Teacher M, Lines 34, 41)	Teacher started lesson on time, followed lesson plan closely, maintained clear structure, and checked student engagement regularly.
	Case B (Teacher I)	“I maintain my professionalism... provide quality lessons and timely feedback.” (Teacher I, Lines 73-74)	Teacher consistently monitored student responses, gave immediate corrections, and ensured clarity in instructions; used visual aids and verbal cues to maintain lesson quality.
	Case C (Teacher M)	“I always make sure my students get the best experience... even if it means extra preparation.”	Teacher reviewed lesson materials before class, customized examples for students, and followed up on prior feedback; ensured all tasks were completed accurately and timely.
3. Relational Identity Through Student and Parent Recognition	Case A (Teacher M)	“I feel respected when my students do their homework... when I get full support from parents.” (Teacher M, Lines 130–131)	The teacher checked the student’s homework at the beginning of the lesson, praised the student for completing the task, and briefly acknowledged a message sent by the parent about the student’s progress.
	Case B (Teacher C)	“They will tell you, ‘I don’t want anyone else.’” (Teacher C, Line 46)	During the session, the teacher warmly greeted a returning student and referenced previous lessons, demonstrating familiarity and continuity in their interaction.
	Case C (Teacher J)	“He got full points in the PET test... that’s the reason I’m still here.” (Teacher J, Line 31)	The teacher congratulated the student for improved test performance and encouraged the student by highlighting how their effort led to progress.
	Case A	“When people criticized me... I	Teacher carefully monitored student

4. Challenging but Adaptive Identity	(Teacher M)	reflected... I need to set a standard.” (Teacher M, Lines 64–65)	responses during the lesson and corrected errors with structured feedback, demonstrating deliberate teaching strategies.
	Case B (Teacher I)	“Rules help teachers create structure... they push me to stay professional and organized.” (Teacher I, Lines 86, 91)	Teacher followed platform guidelines closely, including structured lesson delivery, time management, and clear instructional procedures.
	Case C (Teacher J)	“Feedback from students helps me adjust how I teach.”	Teacher modified explanations and examples during lessons based on student responses and engagement levels.

Pronunciation exercise by slowing down the lesson, modeling responses repeatedly, and offering reassurance such as, “That’s okay, we’ll try it together again.” In another case, teachers used voice modulation, gestures, and interactive questioning, frequently reinforcing student performance with praise such as “Excellent reading!” Meanwhile, structured scaffolding techniques were observed as teachers guided learners step-by-step toward correct answers. These observable practices indicate that identity transformation is not only cognitive but also performative, as confidence and competence become visible through teaching strategies.

Cross-case differences further highlight that experience influences the stability of identity formation. Teachers I and M, both with five years of teaching experience, demonstrated more established professional identities characterized by structured instructional approaches, consistent engagement strategies, and higher levels of confidence. In contrast, Teachers J and C, with fewer years of experience, exhibited ongoing identity development marked by experimentation, adjustment, and stronger reliance on external validation. This suggests that while identity transformation is consistently triggered by affirming teaching experiences, its depth and stability are shaped by sustained engagement over time.

These findings extend existing literature by identifying the specific mechanisms that drive identity development. While Jung and Choe (2024) and Ulla et al. (2024) conceptualize professional identity as dynamic and evolving, they do not fully explain what facilitates the transition from initial participation to professional commitment. The present analysis demonstrates that identity construction is not only continuous but also event-driven, shaped by recurring moments of validation, success, and interaction within the teaching process. From a theoretical perspective, the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999) explains how teachers construct identity through interaction, as positive student responses position them as competent professionals, which they gradually internalize. The Communities of Practice Theory of Wenger (1998) further supports this argument by suggesting that identity develops through participation in shared practices, where repeated engagement fosters a sense of belonging. The Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986) highlights that accumulated pedagogical skills, communication strategies, and digital competencies function as forms of professional capital that reinforce credibility and identity.

The cross-case analysis shows that Filipino online ESL teachers’ professional identity is shaped by experiential validation, reinforced by social interaction, and progressively stabilized by ongoing teaching practice. Identity is not simply acquired but

constructed through repeated cycles of teaching, feedback, reflection, and adaptation, highlighting the central role of lived experience in shaping professional identity within digital teaching environments.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that supporting teachers’ identity development should be a priority for online ESL platforms and institutions. Teachers thrive when given opportunities to grow, reflect, and connect with others, according to the findings. Therefore, structured professional development such as mentoring, peer observation, and collaborative learning spaces can play a pivotal role in strengthening teachers’ confidence and professional identity. Creating supportive environments that value skill development and relational engagement can help Filipino online ESL teachers continue their journey of becoming while enhancing the overall quality of online education.

Professionalism as Performance and Accountability

Across cases, professionalism among Filipino online ESL teachers emerged as a strategic and performative construct, shaped not only by internal teaching values but also by external accountability systems and global expectations. While all participants emphasized punctuality, reliability, instructional quality, and adherence to platform standards as core indicators of professionalism, cross-case analysis reveals that these behaviors are not merely routine practices but deliberate performances aimed at establishing legitimacy within a highly competitive global market. Teachers I and M, both with extensive teaching experience, demonstrated consistent and structured enactment of professional behaviors, while Teachers J and C, though less experienced or differently positioned (e.g., part-time), similarly adopted these standards, indicating that professionalism is a shared expectation across varying levels of experience and employment status.

A key pattern across cases shows that professionalism is causally driven by perceived evaluation pressures and the need to counteract negative stereotypes, particularly those associated with Filipino identity in global contexts. Teacher M’s statement, “Being professional means being punctual, reliable, and presentable... not ‘Filipino time’” (Lines 34, 41), alongside Teacher I’s assertion, “I maintain my professionalism... provide quality lessons and timely feedback” (Lines 73–74), illustrates a conscious effort to align with international standards while distancing from culturally embedded stereotypes. This indicates that professionalism functions as a corrective and defensive mechanism, where teachers actively reshape how they are perceived by students, parents, and platform stakeholders. Rather than being purely intrinsic, professional behavior is therefore triggered by external scrutiny, rating systems,

and global competition, compelling teachers to consistently demonstrate competence and reliability.

The classroom observation further reinforces that professionalism is enacted through visible and consistent teaching practices. Across all cases, teachers demonstrated punctual lesson initiation, structured lesson delivery, and continuous monitoring of student engagement. In one case, the teacher began the session on time, followed a clearly organized lesson sequence, and maintained consistent interaction to ensure comprehension. In another, the teacher provided immediate feedback, clarified instructions, and utilized both verbal and visual cues to sustain lesson quality. Similarly, teachers prepared materials in advance, customized instruction based on learner needs, and ensured task completion within the allotted time. These patterns indicate that professionalism is not only narrated but operationalized through routine instructional behaviors, making it observable and measurable within digital teaching environments.

Cross-case comparison further reveals variation in the intensity and stability of performative professionalism. Teachers I and M, with longer teaching experience, demonstrated more internalized and stable professional practices, suggesting that repeated exposure to platform expectations leads to habitual professional performance. In contrast, Teachers J and C exhibited professionalism as a more conscious and effortful practice, shaped by ongoing adaptation and learning. This suggests that while professionalism is universally performed, its degree of internalization evolves over time, transitioning from deliberate effort to embedded professional habit.

These findings extend existing literature by highlighting the causal relationship between accountability systems and identity performance. While Pontillas (2021) identifies the role of strict evaluation systems in shaping teacher behavior, the present analysis demonstrates that these systems do not merely regulate performance but actively produce a form of identity where professionalism becomes a strategy for survival and recognition. Similarly, Zhang (2023) emphasizes the importance of aligning with global teaching standards, but the findings further reveal that such alignment is not neutral; rather, it is shaped by implicit biases and competitive pressures that require teachers to continuously prove their legitimacy in a landscape where their professional identity is constantly scrutinized and evaluated.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns can be understood through the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), where teachers position themselves as competent, reliable, and globally competitive professionals through their actions and discourse. Their consistent performance of professionalism reflects an ongoing negotiation of identity within evaluative and interactional contexts. At the same time, the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986) explains that punctuality, instructional quality, and reliability function as forms of professional capital that enhance teachers' credibility and economic opportunities. By consistently showing these skills, teachers build up symbolic value that makes them more competitive in the online ESL industry.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that professionalism among Filipino online ESL teachers is not merely a set of standards but a strategic, performance-based response to structural pressures, evaluation systems, and global expectations. It is simultaneously an internal commitment and an externally driven necessity, enacted through consistent teaching behaviors and

reinforced through platform-based accountability. This highlights that professional identity in online ESL teaching is deeply intertwined with performance, where credibility is continuously negotiated and sustained through visible adherence to high standards.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online teaching platforms move beyond purely evaluative frameworks and provide balanced support systems that recognize both performance and teacher well-being. While accountability structures are necessary for maintaining instructional quality, excessive pressure to sustain high performance may contribute to emotional strain and professional fatigue. Therefore, structured training, mentorship programs, and reflective feedback mechanisms should be implemented to support teachers in developing sustainable professional practices. Recognizing teachers not only for measurable outcomes but also for effort, growth, and adaptability may foster a more equitable and humane professional environment, ultimately strengthening both teacher retention and instructional quality in the online ESL industry.

Relational Identity Through Student and Parent Recognition

Across cases, professional identity among Filipino online ESL teachers was strongly constructed through relational validation, where recognition from students and parents functioned as a primary source of professional affirmation. In contrast to traditional educational settings where institutional structures provide formal recognition, participants consistently relied on interpersonal interactions such as student engagement, parental support, and repeated class bookings as key indicators of their effectiveness and professional worth. This pattern was evident across all four cases, although the degree of reliance on relational validation varied depending on experience and employment context. Teachers I and M, who had been teaching for a longer time, were surer of their professional abilities, but they still valued relational affirmation. On the other hand, Teachers J and C, who had less experience or only worked part-time, relied more on feedback from students and parents to evaluate their own competence.

The absence or limitation of formal institutional validation within platform-based teaching environments causally shapes relational identity, as revealed by a critical cross-case pattern. Because online ESL teachers operate in decentralized systems where performance is often reduced to ratings and bookings, teachers turn to visible and immediate forms of interpersonal feedback to assess their professional success. Statements from participants highlight this dynamic. Teacher M noted, "I feel respected when my students do their homework... when I get full support from parents" (Lines 130–131), while Teacher C emphasized student loyalty, stating, "They will tell you, 'I don't want anyone else'" (Line 46). These responses indicate that recognition is not abstract but experienced through concrete interactions, such as completed tasks, consistent attendance, and expressions of preference. Such experiences act as validation triggers, reinforcing teachers' perception of themselves as competent and valued educators.

The recorded teaching sessions further support the centrality of relational processes in identity construction. In all cases, teachers consistently recognized student progress, praised completed work, and maintained supportive interactions with students who were coming back. Teachers also pointed out

students' achievements and celebrated milestones during lessons, which made the classroom a positive and encouraging place to learn. These practices indicate that relational engagement is not incidental but intentionally cultivated as part of instructional strategy, suggesting that teachers actively invest in building connections that sustain both learning and professional identity.

Cross-case comparison also reveals variation in how relational identity is internalized. Teachers I and M demonstrated a balance between internal confidence and external validation, indicating that relational feedback reinforces an already established professional identity. In contrast, Teachers J and C relied more heavily on student and parent recognition as primary indicators of success, suggesting that relational validation plays a more foundational role during earlier stages of identity development. This variation highlights that while relational identity is present across all cases, its function shifts from foundational to reinforcing as experience increases.

These findings extend existing literature by emphasizing the causal role of relational feedback in identity construction, rather than treating relationships as secondary aspects of teaching. While studies such as Sabidalas and Esparar (2022) and Pontillas (2021) acknowledge the importance of relationships in teacher satisfaction, they do not fully explain how interpersonal recognition becomes a central mechanism for constructing professional identity in digitally mediated environments. The present analysis illustrates that relational identity is not merely a byproduct of teaching but a fundamental framework through which teachers assess competence, legitimacy, and professional worth.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns can be explained through the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), where students and parents position teachers as competent and trustworthy through expressions of appreciation, loyalty, and continued engagement. These positions are then internalized by teachers, shaping their professional self-concept. Communities of Practice Theory by Wenger (1998) further supports this argument by suggesting that identity develops through participation in shared interactions, where ongoing engagement with learners fosters a sense of belonging and professional meaning. Additionally, Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986) highlights that student loyalty, parental trust, and rebooked classes function as forms of social capital, providing both symbolic recognition and tangible career benefits that contribute to professional sustainability.

The cross-case analysis demonstrates that relational identity among Filipino online ESL teachers is socially constructed, interaction-driven, and sustained through continuous cycles of engagement and validation. Professional identity is not solely self-defined but co-constructed through reciprocal relationships, where teachers invest effort in supporting learners and, in return, receive recognition that reinforces their sense of purpose and competence. These dynamic highlights the central role of interpersonal interaction in shaping professional identity within online ESL teaching environments.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms move beyond reliance on numerical rating systems and implement more comprehensive recognition frameworks that acknowledge relational contributions. Systems that highlight student progress, long-term learning outcomes, and teacher-student relationships may provide more meaningful validation of teaching

effectiveness. Additionally, recognizing relational engagement as a core component of teaching may enhance teacher motivation, retention, and instructional quality. Platforms can make Filipino online ESL teachers' work environments more supportive and long-lasting by valuing both teaching skills and personal connections.

Challenging but Adaptive Identity

Across cases, Filipino online ESL teachers constructed their professional identity as fundamentally adaptive, shaped by continuous exposure to evaluation systems, institutional expectations, and student feedback. Cross-case comparison reveals differences in the emergence and sustainability of adaptability among all participants. Teachers I and M, who had been teaching for longer, had more stable adaptive strategies. They saw feedback and institutional demands as normal parts of their professional practice. In contrast, Teachers J and C, with fewer years of experience or part-time engagement, displayed more reactive forms of adaptation, where feedback and external pressures played a stronger role in shaping immediate teaching adjustments. Despite these variations, a consistent pattern across all cases indicates that adaptability is not optional but a structural requirement of survival and success in the online ESL industry.

The data shows that adaptive identity is triggered by external evaluation mechanisms, particularly student feedback, platform rating systems, and institutional rules, which function as continuous sources of pressure. These triggers compel teachers to engage in reflective practice and behavioral adjustment. For instance, Teacher M explained, "When people criticized me... I reflected... I need to set a standard" (Lines 64–65), illustrating how negative feedback acts as a catalyst for self-evaluation and improvement. Similarly, Teacher I stated, "Rules help teachers create structure... they push me to stay professional and organized" (Lines 86, 91), indicating that institutional expectations serve as guiding frameworks for professional conduct. These responses demonstrate a clear causal sequence. The sequence includes external pressure, reflective response, strategic adjustment, and identity reinforcement. Rather than resisting these pressures, teachers reinterpret them as mechanisms that guide professional growth.

The data from recorded teaching sessions further confirm that adaptive identity is enacted through instructional behavior. Across cases, teachers demonstrated continuous monitoring of student responses, structured lesson delivery, and real-time instructional adjustments. When students encountered difficulty, teachers modified explanations, provided additional examples, or adjusted pacing to ensure comprehension. These practices were consistently observed among all participants, although more experienced teachers (I and M) executed these adjustments more seamlessly, while less experienced teachers (J and C) displayed more deliberate and effortful modifications. This distinction suggests that adaptability evolves from conscious effort to embedded professional practice.

Cross-case patterns also reveal that adaptability operates as both a response to constraint and a form of agency. While all teachers function within highly regulated environments characterized by ratings, performance metrics, and platform expectations, they do not passively conform. Instead, they actively reinterpret these constraints as opportunities to refine their teaching. Teachers consistently emphasized learning from

criticism, improving instructional strategies, and maintaining professional standards. This indicates that identity construction involves a continuous negotiation between external demands and internal professional aspirations, where teachers exercise agency through reflective practice and self-regulation.

These findings extend existing literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of adaptability as a causally driven and interactional process. While previous studies emphasize that teacher identity evolves through experience and technological change, they often describe adaptation as a general outcome rather than examining the specific mechanisms that produce it (Galope, 2024; Kahveci, 2021). The present analysis demonstrates that adaptation is not merely a response to change but is systematically triggered by evaluative structures embedded within online teaching platforms. Moreover, while prior research highlights the pressures associated with platform-based teaching, it tends to frame these pressures as constraints. In contrast, the findings here show that teachers actively transform these pressures into resources for professional growth, thereby reframing adaptability as both a coping strategy and a form of professional agency.

From a theoretical perspective, these patterns align with the Positioning Theory of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), where teachers position themselves as reflective and improvement-oriented professionals in response to feedback and evaluation. Feedback from students, parents, and platforms serves as a discursive mechanism through which teachers reassess and reconstruct their professional identity. Additionally, the Capital Theory of Bourdieu (1986) explains how adaptive practices contribute to the accumulation of professional capital. Teachers who successfully respond to feedback and maintain high standards enhance their credibility, visibility, and economic opportunities within the platform-based market. Furthermore, the Communities of Practice Theory of Wenger (1998) suggests that adaptive identity is reinforced through participation in shared practices, where teachers learn from experience, peer interaction, and ongoing engagement with the teaching community.

The cross-case analysis reveals that Filipino online ESL teachers structurally induce, behaviorally enacted, and continuously negotiated adaptive identity. Adaptability is a key part of a teachers' professional identity because it helps them stay relevant, credible, and effective in a highly competitive and evaluation-driven setting. The ability to reinterpret feedback and institutional pressure as opportunities for growth allows teachers to transform challenges into pathways for professional development.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that online ESL platforms shift from purely evaluative feedback systems toward development-oriented support structures. Feedback systems should focus on giving helpful advice instead of just measuring performance. Structured programs like peer observation, mentoring, and reflective practice sessions could help teachers become even better at adapting. Supporting reflective and adaptive practices not only strengthens professional identity but also promotes resilience and long-term sustainability, which are essential for teachers to thrive in challenging educational environments. By fostering environments that balance accountability with support, platforms can enable teachers to navigate professional pressures while maintaining continuous growth and engagement.

Conclusion

This study examined how Filipino online ESL teachers construct and negotiate their professional identity within digital Communities of Practice through a qualitative multiple case study approach. The findings revealed that professional identity is not fixed but continuously developed through lived experiences, social interactions, and engagement with institutional structures. Across cases, teachers demonstrated a trajectory of identity formation that begins with situational entry into online ESL teaching and evolves into a more stable sense of professional commitment. This progression is facilitated by specific triggers, including student feedback, repeated teaching experiences, and the acquisition of professional certifications.

The study further established that professionalism in the online ESL context is highly performative and shaped by accountability systems embedded within digital platforms. Teachers consistently align their practices with global standards, positioning themselves as competent and reliable educators in a competitive international market. At the same time, professional identity is strongly influenced by relational validation, as recognition from students and parents serves as a primary source of affirmation and motivation.

The findings highlight that identity construction occurs within structural constraints, including native-speaker bias, institutional regulations, and technological limitations. These external factors significantly shape teachers' professional legitimacy, requiring them to continuously negotiate their position through adaptive strategies. Teachers demonstrated resilience and agency by engaging in continuous professional development, leveraging digital networks, and cultivating strong relationships with learners.

Grounded in Positioning Theory, Communities of Practice, and Capital Theory, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how professional identity is socially constructed, negotiated, and sustained in digital teaching environments. The study underscores that Filipino online ESL teachers are not passive participants in the global ESL industry but active agents who strategically construct their professional identity despite structural challenges. These findings provide new insights into the intersection of identity, globalization, and digital labor in education, offering important implications for policy, platform design, and teacher professional development.

In the conclusion, the results and discussion are summed up, and the research goals are mentioned. Based on these two things, new ideas were made, which are the main points of the study's findings.

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