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Lead or Assistant? The Lived Experiences of Foreign English Teachers Navigating Role Ambiguity in Taiwanese Co-Taught Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how Filipino Foreign English Teachers (FETs) experience and negotiate role ambiguity in Taiwanese co-taught classrooms, particularly regarding instructional responsibilities, professional well-being, and collaboration with local teachers. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was employed involving ten purposively selected Filipino FETs from Taiwanese public schools. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method. Four interconnected themes emerged: structural hierarchies and textbook rigidity restricted instructional autonomy; unclear responsibilities contributed to professional self-doubt and psychological pressure; pedagogical differences involving translation, classroom management, and curriculum implementation complicated instructional coordination; and open communication, mutual respect, and shared planning strengthened collaborative relationships. The findings revealed that effective cross-cultural co-teaching among participants depended on clearly negotiated responsibilities, complementary professional expertise, and shared instructional ownership rather than rigid task divisions. The study recommends establishing explicit co-teaching guidelines, structured onboarding programs, protected collaborative planning time, and professional development emphasizing intercultural communication and instructional coordination. Its limitations include the small purposively selected sample, reliance on self-reported experiences, and exclusion of local teachers' perspectives and direct student learning assessments. Nevertheless, the findings provide practical insights for strengthening institutional support and collaborative teaching practices within Taiwan's bilingual education initiatives. The study potentially contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by informing educational quality, supportive working conditions, and long-term educational and institutional sustainability.

Keywords: *Bilingual Education, Co-Teaching, Descriptive Phenomenology, Filipino Teachers, Role Ambiguity, Taiwan, Teacher Collaboration*

1. INTRODUCTION

Taiwan's Bilingual 2030 policy has expanded opportunities for foreign and local educators to collaborate in strengthening English language education. Through the Taiwan Foreign English Teacher Program (TFETP), qualified international teachers, including Filipino educators, have been recruited to support communicative English instruction and intercultural learning (Ministry of Education, 2022, 2026). Although co-teaching is intended to promote shared instructional responsibility and professional collaboration, its implementation varies across schools. Recent studies have documented unequal classroom roles, limited collaborative planning, and differences in instructional authority that may prevent teachers from functioning as equal pedagogical partners (Kim & Moodie, 2026; Lin & Wu, 2025; H.-H. Wang, 2026). Role ambiguity becomes particularly significant when foreign English teachers (FETs) encounter unclear expectations regarding lesson planning, classroom management, curriculum implementation, and instructional decision-making. Such uncertainty may affect professional confidence, teacher well-being, and collaborative effectiveness (Hsieh et al., 2025; Macovei et al., 2023). Responding to these concerns, the present study employs a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of ten Filipino FETs in Taiwanese co-taught classrooms, focusing on their professional roles, pedagogical challenges, interpersonal negotiations, and experiences of collaboration.

Research Problem

Despite the expansion of bilingual education in Taiwan, discrepancies remain between the intended collaborative nature of co-teaching and its actual classroom implementation. Kim and Moodie (2026) demonstrated that English-language co-teaching may operate along a continuum ranging from limited cooperation to fully integrated instructional collaboration. Similarly, H.-H. Wang (2026) identified structural constraints within Taiwan's foreign English teacher program, including insufficient co-planning time, institutionalized role divisions, and unequal instructional responsibilities. Recent research further indicates that bilingual teaching practices are shaped by school-level expectations, professional autonomy, available resources, and differences in pedagogical approaches (Lin & Wu, 2025; Luo, 2026). These conditions may generate uncertainty regarding who should lead instruction, provide linguistic support, manage learners, and participate in curriculum decisions. Studies of teacher well-being also identify role ambiguity as a relevant occupational concern, while research in Taiwan emphasizes the importance of professional autonomy and institutional support for teacher self-efficacy (Hsieh et al., 2025; Macovei et al., 2023). Although contemporary research has examined bilingual policy implementation and co-teaching practices, further understanding is needed of how Filipino FETs personally experience and negotiate role ambiguity within Taiwanese classrooms. The central research problem concerns how these teachers interpret unclear professional expectations, respond to structural and pedagogical tensions, and develop collaborative relationships with their local teaching partners.

Assumptions of the Study

The study proceeds from the assumption that co-teaching experiences are shaped by the interaction of institutional expectations, professional identities, pedagogical practices, and intercultural relationships. Because classroom collaboration involves negotiated responsibilities, teachers may experience and interpret similar institutional arrangements differently (Kim & Moodie, 2026; Lin & Wu, 2025). The study further assumes that participants can provide meaningful descriptions of their professional experiences through reflective interviews. Consistent with descriptive phenomenological inquiry, these accounts are approached as context-dependent experiences requiring careful interpretation, reflexivity, and attention to participants' own meanings rather than predetermined judgments (Thomas & Sohn,

2023; Tavakol et al., 2026). These assumptions guide the investigation without predetermining its findings.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to explore and describe the lived experiences of Filipino Foreign English Teachers navigating role ambiguity in Taiwanese co-taught classrooms. Specifically, it seeks to examine how participants perceive and understand their instructional duties and professional responsibilities; describe the classroom tensions and uncertainties arising from ambiguous roles; explore the psychological and pedagogical challenges associated with unclear instructional boundaries; identify the strategies teachers employ to negotiate responsibilities and strengthen collaboration with local co-teachers; and develop a comprehensive description of the essential experiences characterizing cross-cultural co-teaching partnerships. These objectives are consistent with contemporary phenomenological inquiry, which emphasizes the systematic exploration and description of lived experiences (Tavakol et al., 2026).

Theoretical or Conceptual Basis

The study is informed by three complementary perspectives: role ambiguity, collaborative co-teaching, and teacher agency. Role ambiguity concerns uncertainty surrounding professional expectations, responsibilities, and authority. Macovei et al. (2023) identified role ambiguity and relational competence as significant considerations in teacher efficacy, school connectedness, and subjective well-being. This perspective provides a basis for understanding how unclear classroom responsibilities may shape foreign teachers' professional confidence and experiences. Collaborative co-teaching emphasizes the extent to which educators share instructional planning, classroom participation, and decision-making. Kim and Moodie (2026) conceptualized English-language co-teaching along a continuum of collaboration, while H.-H. Wang (2026) demonstrated how institutional arrangements can constrain collaborative practices in Taiwanese schools. These studies provide a conceptual basis for examining whether Filipino FETs function as instructional leaders, assistants, or collaborative partners. Teacher agency concerns educators' capacity to make professional decisions and adapt their practices within institutional and sociocultural conditions. Lin and Wu (2025) highlighted how Taiwanese teachers negotiate policy expectations while adapting instructional approaches to local classroom realities. Hsieh et al. (2025) further identified professional autonomy and development opportunities as important resources associated with bilingual teacher self-efficacy. Together, these perspectives support an examination of how institutional structures, professional uncertainty, and interpersonal collaboration shape the participants' experiences. They serve as interpretive concepts rather than predetermined thematic categories, preserving the descriptive phenomenological orientation of the study.

The study is primarily aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), particularly the promotion of effective teaching practices, professional development, and quality learning environments. By examining how Filipino foreign English teachers negotiate classroom responsibilities and collaborate with local educators, the research provides context-specific insights that may inform teacher induction, collaborative lesson planning, and institutional support systems. These implications are consistent with SDG 4's emphasis on improving educational quality and strengthening the supply and professional capacity of qualified teachers (United Nations Statistics Division, 2025b). The study also has a secondary alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) through its consideration of professional role clarity, occupational well-being, and supportive working conditions for internationally recruited teachers. Understanding the challenges associated with unclear

responsibilities may inform organizational practices that recognize educators' professional contributions and support healthier workplace relationships (Macovei et al., 2023; United Nations Statistics Division, 2025a). In terms of sustainability, the research contributes principally to educational, institutional, and socio-economic sustainability by generating evidence that may support more coherent teaching partnerships, culturally responsive professional relationships, and continuity in bilingual education programs. These are potential practical contributions rather than outcomes directly measured or established by the study.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design within an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm to explore how Filipino FETs perceived and negotiated professional responsibilities, classroom challenges, and intercultural teaching relationships. This approach emphasized participants' subjective experiences within their institutional and sociocultural contexts. Reflective bracketing was employed to minimize researcher preconceptions and prioritize participants' descriptions of their experiences (Thomas & Sohn, 2023; Tavakol & Sandars, 2025).

Research Locale or Study Setting

The study was conducted in selected public elementary and junior high schools in Taiwan implementing bilingual education and foreign English teacher initiatives. These institutions were situated across urban, suburban, and rural districts, where Filipino FETs collaborated with local Taiwanese English or homeroom teachers in delivering English instruction. The settings represented different classroom arrangements and institutional expectations within Taiwan's bilingual education system.

Participants or Data Sources

Ten Filipino FETs were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience in Taiwanese co-taught classrooms. Participants were required to be actively teaching alongside local Taiwanese educators, possess an undergraduate degree in education or a related discipline, have at least one academic year of teaching experience in Taiwan, and demonstrate the ability to articulate their professional experiences. The participants had approximately two to four years of teaching tenure and varied academic qualifications. The sample prioritized detailed experiential accounts rather than statistical generalizability, consistent with qualitative sampling considerations (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Research Instruments or Materials

A researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide served as the primary data-gathering instrument. It contained open-ended questions examining instructional responsibilities, role-related challenges, professional adjustment, classroom collaboration, and strategies for negotiating responsibilities. The instrument was evaluated by three independent experts specializing in qualitative methodology, bilingual education, and teacher development. A pilot interview involving two qualified Filipino teachers excluded from the final sample was conducted to assess the clarity and adequacy of the interview questions. The semi-structured format allowed participants to describe their experiences while enabling the researcher to explore emerging concerns (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025).

Data Gathering Procedure

Following ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Cebu Technological University–Danao Campus, participants received information about the study and provided

informed consent. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over two months through Zoom and face-to-face sessions, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked against the original recordings. Participants subsequently reviewed their transcripts to verify the accuracy of their accounts, following a member-checking procedure intended to strengthen qualitative credibility (McKim, 2023). Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant identities.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive phenomenological method, as discussed by Tavakol et al. (2026). The process involved repeatedly reading the interview transcripts, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing meanings into thematic clusters, developing an exhaustive description, identifying the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and returning the synthesized findings to selected participants for validation. Reflective bracketing was maintained during analysis to limit researcher assumptions and preserve attention to participants' experiences (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). The analysis identified recurring experiences of structural hierarchy, psychological uncertainty, pedagogical differences, and collaborative role negotiation.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Cebu Technological University–Danao Campus before data collection. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, interview procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality safeguards, and right to withdraw. Digital informed consent was secured before interviews, and audio recording was conducted only with explicit permission. Participant anonymity was protected through pseudonyms, while interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored to maintain confidentiality and prevent unauthorized disclosure.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Main Findings on Role Ambiguity in Taiwanese Co-Taught Classrooms

3.1.1 Navigating Structural Hierarchies and Textbook Rigidity

Participants reported that institutional hierarchies, prescribed textbooks, and unequal instructional responsibilities restricted their classroom autonomy. Some FETs were assigned secondary roles while local teachers-controlled textbook-based instruction. Participant 1 explained that in four of their sixteen classes, their responsibility was primarily to assist the local teacher. Participant 3 described the partnership as a division between "Front End" and "Back End" responsibilities, while Participant 9 reported unexpected lesson changes that reduced their participation to classroom management. These experiences reflected limited involvement in instructional planning, lesson delivery, and decision-making. These findings suggest that institutional arrangements and curriculum requirements can constrain meaningful collaboration when teaching responsibilities are not jointly negotiated. Kim and Moodie (2026) identified instructional arrangements ranging from limited assistance to integrated co-teaching, while Wang (2026) documented segmented teaching responsibilities and structural constraints in Taiwanese bilingual classrooms. Similarly, Sia and Chern (2023) emphasized the interaction between institutional policy and teachers' classroom practices. Together, these studies support the interpretation that effective co-teaching requires institutional conditions that enable shared professional participation rather than rigid task allocation.

3.1.2 The Psychological Toll of Role Ambiguity

Participants experienced professional uncertainty, diminished confidence, and emotional pressure arising from unclear classroom responsibilities. Participant 2 questioned their value when local teachers appeared capable of conducting lessons independently, while Participant 6 reported hesitation in initiating classroom activities. Salary differences also contributed to perceived performance pressure and guilt, as Participants 3 and 10 described expectations that higher compensation should correspond to greater instructional contributions. Participants additionally experienced awkward classroom interactions when neither teacher was certain when to lead or intervene. These experiences indicate that role ambiguity affects teachers beyond instructional efficiency by creating uncertainty about professional identity, perceived competence, and workplace expectations. Macovei et al. (2023) identified role ambiguity as a relevant factor in teachers' subjective well-being and relational experiences. Similarly, Hsieh et al. (2025) examined the importance of professional autonomy and organizational resources in Taiwanese bilingual teachers' self-efficacy. The findings therefore highlight the relevance of clearly communicated responsibilities, professional recognition, and supportive working relationships to the participants' experiences of co-teaching.

3.1.3 Managing Pedagogical Dissonance and Student Disengagement

Participants identified differences in teaching philosophies, language use, classroom management, and curricular expectations as sources of instructional tension. Participants 7 and 8 described uncertainty when local teachers immediately translated English instructions into Mandarin, interrupting their preferred instructional sequence. Participant 5 reported differences in approaches to student discipline, while Participant 1 observed declining learner engagement during repetitive, worksheet-based lessons and consequently adjusted instructional content to address students' learning needs. These experiences demonstrated how pedagogical disagreements influenced classroom coordination and prompted instructional adjustments. The findings underscore the importance of coordinating language support, teaching strategies, and classroom management within bilingual instruction. Chien (2024) demonstrated how Taiwanese teachers adapted pedagogical practices to local classroom contexts through collaborative approaches, while Graham (2024) identified specific professional competencies required for bilingual team-teaching partnerships. Luo (2026) also documented challenges associated with bilingual lesson planning in Taiwan. Accordingly, the participants' difficulties with translation and instructional pacing are best understood as problems of pedagogical coordination rather than evidence that first-language support is inherently ineffective.

3.1.4 Achieving Synergy Through Open Dialogue and Collaborative Ownership

Participants described improved co-teaching relationships when responsibilities were clarified through communication, mutual respect, and shared planning. Participant 9 emphasized that discussing concerns openly helped resolve earlier misunderstandings, while Participant 6 reported greater confidence in sharing instructional responsibilities following regular lesson discussions. Participant 4 recognized the importance of complementary professional strengths, and Participant 7 described local teachers as valuable linguistic and cultural partners. Participant 10 further indicated that participation in curriculum planning and decision-making strengthened their sense of instructional ownership. These findings suggest that professional collaboration develops when teachers actively negotiate responsibilities and recognize each other's instructional expertise. Wu (2024) demonstrated the relevance of co-planning time and jointly led instruction to English-learning outcomes in Taiwanese elementary classrooms, while Graham (2024) emphasized the competencies required for productive bilingual team teaching. Wang (2026) likewise identified planning time and institutional support as important conditions influencing collaborative practices. The present findings reinforce the value of open

communication, reciprocal professional recognition, and shared instructional decision-making in developing more balanced co-teaching relationships.

3.2 Essential Structure of the Lived Experience

The collective experiences of Filipino FETs revealed a process of professional adjustment characterized by movement from structural constraints and role uncertainty toward more collaborative teaching relationships. Initially, participants encountered restricted instructional autonomy, unclear task divisions, and pedagogical disagreements that contributed to self-doubt and classroom tension. Differences in textbook implementation, translation practices, discipline, and perceptions of professional contribution intensified these difficulties. Through intentional communication, flexible role negotiation, and participation in curriculum planning, participants described more constructive relationships with their local teaching partners. This essential structure reflects the interaction of institutional expectations, professional identity, pedagogical adaptation, and interpersonal collaboration. The findings are consistent with Kim and Moodie's (2026) conceptualization of co-teaching as varying in the extent of instructional collaboration and with Wu's (2024) evidence concerning the importance of joint planning and shared teaching. Overall, the study indicates that participants experienced effective cross-cultural co-teaching not simply as a division of classroom tasks, but as a negotiated professional partnership characterized by mutual trust, shared instructional ownership, and a common commitment to student learning.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed that the lived experiences of ten Filipino Foreign English Teachers (FETs) in Taiwanese co-taught classrooms were shaped by structural hierarchies, unclear instructional responsibilities, pedagogical differences, and evolving professional relationships. Institutional expectations and rigid textbook requirements frequently restricted teachers' instructional autonomy, while ambiguous role boundaries contributed to professional self-doubt, psychological pressure, and uncertainty in classroom participation. Differences in teaching approaches, language translation practices, and classroom management further complicated instructional coordination. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated professional adaptability by negotiating responsibilities, communicating openly, and participating in collaborative lesson planning. These experiences highlighted the importance of mutual respect, professional recognition, and shared instructional ownership in developing productive cross-cultural teaching partnerships. Overall, the findings suggest that effective co-teaching among the participants depended not merely on dividing classroom responsibilities but on establishing clear expectations, recognizing complementary expertise, and maintaining collaborative professional relationships within Taiwan's bilingual education context.

Based on the findings, Taiwanese educational institutions and school administrators should strengthen institutional guidelines defining the instructional responsibilities, decision-making authority, and expected contributions of foreign and local English teachers. Schools should establish structured onboarding programs that clarify professional expectations, classroom procedures, curriculum requirements, and culturally responsive teaching practices. Regular and protected collaborative planning sessions should be encouraged to facilitate coordinated lesson preparation, timely communication of instructional changes, and equitable participation in classroom activities. Foreign and local teachers should jointly determine appropriate strategies for English instruction, Mandarin translation, classroom management, and student engagement to minimize pedagogical disagreements and improve instructional coherence. Administrators should also promote professional dialogue and recognize the complementary linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical competencies of both teaching partners. Furthermore, professional

development activities should emphasize collaborative teaching strategies, intercultural communication, and constructive conflict resolution. Future investigations may examine co-teaching experiences across additional educational settings and include local teachers' perspectives to develop a broader understanding of collaborative instructional practices.

The study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design involving ten purposively selected Filipino Foreign English Teachers working in Taiwanese public schools. Consequently, the findings reflect participants' context-specific experiences and are not intended for statistical generalization to all foreign teachers or bilingual education institutions. Data were primarily obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted within a two-month period, making the analysis dependent on participants' retrospective accounts and personal interpretations. The study focused on foreign teachers' perspectives rather than directly examining local teachers' experiences or systematically measuring student learning outcomes. Future research may involve more diverse participants, additional educational settings, and complementary data collection methods to strengthen the transferability and contextual understanding of the findings.

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