Adapt, acquire, diffuse, learn: Filipino online English tutors as intercultural bricoleurs

Abstract

Since 2010, the Philippines has been one of the largest contributors of workers to the increasingly global industry of remote English language tutoring. In this nascent and growing industry, Filipino online English tutors are employed by online platforms as independent contractors where they instruct students on a piece-meal basis. This article draws on interviews with 11 Filipino online tutors to discuss the various strategies that Filipino online English tutors deploy to successfully navigate their encounters with students whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own. We suggest the notion of *intercultural bricolage* to make sense of online tutors' self-acquired strategies for retaining students and succeeding as online tutors despite the various difficulties encountered with this type of remote work. While the notion of intercultural bricolage applies to the practices of many offline language teachers as well, we highlight how elements unique to online teaching—including lesson-by-lesson contracts—make intercultural bricolage an indispensable component of tutors' success on online language teaching platforms.

Keywords: Intercultural communication; online tutoring platforms; OTPs; Philippines English; intercultural bricolage

Adapt, acquire, diffuse, learn: Filipino online English tutors as intercultural bricoleurs

Responding to the enormous demand for English around the world, a burgeoning industry for online English tutoring emerged in the 2010s. Although the broader global industry for English language instruction has existed for decades (Gray, 2012), the period from 2010 to 2020 saw the rise of a robust ecosystem of *online tutoring platforms* (OTPs) that directly connect language tutors and language learners for one-on-one private tutoring (Author and X, year 1). OTPs essentially act as digital intermediaries; they connect students and teachers to each other but do not hire their teachers as full-time employees (Author, year 2). As a result of OTPs, students located anywhere can learn from teachers located anywhere (Authors, year 2).

OTPs have been the beneficiary of rapidly rising internet connectivity around the globe. In 2008, less than a quarter of households globally had Internet access, but this percentage more than doubled by 2018 (International Telecommunications Union, 2020). The quality of Internet increased during this time as well; between 2015 and 2020, 4G coverage doubled (International Telecommunications Union, 2020), meaning that more people are now able to conduct bandwidth-heavy video conferencing—a crucial requirement for real-time online language tutoring. The increasing accessibility of the Internet beyond the borders of high-income countries has not only brought new English learners online, but it has also expanded the pool of potential tutors since individuals can now teach from anywhere in the world—so long as they have a broadband Internet connection.

Because OTPs facilitate interaction between students and tutors from around the world, they have given rise to a range of intercultural interactions between students and teachers. By intercultural interactions, we refer to interactions between individuals who have been socialized in saliently different environments, particularly in terms of their linguistic, national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (Jackson, 2014). The interactions between students and tutors on OTPs represent an understudied form of digitally mediated

intercultural communication. This article examines how Filipino tutors navigate these intercultural encounters and draws attention to the specific strategies that tutors employ in their efforts to successfully navigate these encounters. We focus in particular on how various strategies emerge at the intersection of: 1) tutors' management of students' varied expectations; 2) the specific affordances of OTPs; and 3) tutors' own curiosity—and stereotypes—about other national cultures. In this article, while we acknowledge that tutors' and students' cultural differences (in terms of differences in ethnicity, religion, schooling, etc.) do affect their interactions, we are particularly interested in tutors' *perceptions* of the role of cultural differences (including the differences that tutors observe between themselves and their students, as well as between students of different nationalities). In focusing on tutors' perceptions of cultural differences rather than seeking to identify *actually existing* cultural differences, we seek to avoid making unnecessarily essentialist claims about culture. On the contrary, we draw attention to how nation-centric understandings of culture that reduce culture to neat "national" categories reify stereotypes and obscure the important role of power in contouring intercultural communicative exchanges (Piller, 2012).

In this article, we examine the various strategies that Filipino tutors adopt—or understand themselves as adopting—in order to succeed on OTPs. We theorize these ad-hoc strategies via the notion of the *bricoleur*. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's (1962) original articulation of the term, Reilly (2009, p. 376) describes the figure of the bricoleur as "one who tinkers with the material at hand." Likewise, we argue that Filipino online English tutors are *intercultural bricoleurs*: creative individuals who draw on their limited resources in their efforts to pick-up skills, satisfy students, and ultimately earn a living via OTPs. While language teachers in offline contexts also engage in intercultural bricolage, we argue that intercultural bricolage is particularly important for online tutors because they face additional pressures that offline teachers do not. These additional pressures are related to the affordances of OTPs

(particularly the use of student-generated ratings) as well as online tutors' comparative lack of teacher training. However, in explicating the notion of intercultural bricolage, we highlight that it is an inherently ambivalent concept, and that it is not inherently positive or negative. For example, while the tutors we interviewed are savvy and resourceful, they also rely on a variety of stereotypes in their attempts to navigate lessons with students from different national backgrounds. The findings of this study contribute to the nascent scholarship on OTPs as well as the literature on language teacher development in digital contexts.

(Online) language teacher development

The topic of language teacher development has been discussed extensively for decades (Schulz, 2000). The literature notes the perennial issue of the high prevalence of non-trained teachers of English in the industry—a phenomenon that persists despite widespread awareness of the importance of pedagogically qualified instructors (e.g., Henrichsen, 2010). In this vein, research stresses the importance of professional standards in English teaching (Liyanage et al., 2015) as well as the provision of additional training and support for novice English teachers (e.g., Farrell, 2012). Research also discusses the importance of language teachers' acquiring intercultural competence (e.g., del Rosal et al., 2017). However, most studies have focused on teachers' acquisition of intercultural competence through training programs, such as telecollaboration (e.g., Üzüm et al., 2020) or study abroad (e.g., Macalister, 2023). Less research has considered what sort of strategies emerge spontaneously among online teachers, particularly in the context of OTPs. Research has highlighted, however, that trained facilitators are crucial to intercultural communication (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Ware & Kramsch, 2005).

Many of the tutors on OTPs lack formal training as teachers (Authors, year), let alone training in dealing with students from different cultural backgrounds than their own. Instead of emphasizing pedagogy, OTPs stress to their tutors the importance of satisfying their

students (i.e., the customer). For example, when the first author of this article was being onboarded as a teacher for a major OTP in the Philippines that catered to Japanese students, virtually no attention was devoted to productively navigating intercultural conflict. Instead, the onboarding process emphasized never asking personal questions about the students and incoming tutors watched videos that instructed teachers on how to facilitate a class if they encountered sexual harassment or extremely rude students. While teachers in all contexts are expected keep their students happy, and sexual harassment certainly occurs in offline settings, tutors on OTPs are under additional pressure to mollify clients for reasons linked to OTPs' business model. For example, on OTPs, students can easily swap tutors because tutors are often contracted on a "per lesson" basis (Authors, year). Indeed, a study of one OTP found that 40% of learners continuously seek out new tutors (Xia et al., 2022). In addition, receiving low ratings in any of the post-lesson evaluations can have disastrous effects for tutors on OTPs, as they may receive fewer bookings or have their pay garnished by the platform (Authors, year).

Because many online tutors—including more than half of the participants in this study—lack either prior experience teaching or a college degree, and due to the fact that OTPs provide scant training in intercultural conflict resolution, tutors' evolving pedagogy is based in large part on their own experiences interacting with their students. Further, while 4 of the 11 participants in this study either have TEFL certificates or some experience dealing with foreigners as a result of having worked in the Philippine's call center industry (see Table 1), many online English tutors enter the industry lacking both training as teachers and experience interacting with people from foreign cultural backgrounds. Rather than requiring tutors to have a teaching license or other form of certification to prove their qualifications, many OTPs require only that their instructors demonstrate fluency in the target language in order to sign up as a tutor. For example, to qualify to teach on the popular "italki" platform,

tutors do not need any pedagogical certifications, but instead merely need to demonstrate that they possess C1-level proficiency in the language they wish to teach (italki.com, n.d.).

Instructing students from multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds poses challenges to teachers in general (Gay, 2015). These challenges are arguably magnified in the context of OTPs However, as attested to by participants' accounts and the first author's experiences, most OTPs provide little (if any) guidelines or instructions for dealing with learners from different backgrounds. In addition, because tutors rely heavily on customer-based ratings from their students—which can determine tutors' levels of compensation as well as their likelihood of finding new students—tutors are essentially forced to try and avoid any conflicts with their students if they want to be successful on OTPs (Authors, year). Thus, while intercultural conflict has been identified as an opportunity for critical reflection and growth for both parties, (e.g., Fisher-Yoshida, 2003; Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005), OTP tutors' short contracts may incentivize them to avoid conflicts in order to keep their jobs.

OTP tutors in the Philippines

Due to its history of colonization by the US, as well as the continued importance and status of the English language post-independence, the Philippines has emerged as one of world's leading suppliers of OTP labor (Kobayashi, 2021; Martinez, 2022). For example, in 2021, the platform 51Talk was reported to have had more than 30,000 active Filipino tutors (Manila Bulletin, 2021) and another company, RareJob, claims 15,000 Filipino tutor (RareJob.com, n.d.). At the same time, the Philippines is also a popular destination for English learners, especially for those from other Asian countries, such as Korea (Jang, 2018). As a result of the Philippines' history of colonization and continued cultural proximity to the United States, Filipinos are in a somewhat unique position: they are recognized as highly proficient speakers of English yet are simultaneously perceived of as being less proficient than so-called native speakers (Lockwood, 2012).

The attractiveness of Filipino English tutors on OTPs—like their compatriots in the call center industry—can be interpreted as being due less to their high proficiency in English than to their affordability in comparison with individuals from high-income countries such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand, etc. (Jang, 2018; Kobayashi, 2021; Lorente & Tupas, 2013). Crucially, although the Philippines is one of the top suppliers of online English tutors worldwide (Liu, 2018), Filipino English speakers occupy a tenuous and uncertain position within the global hierarchy of English tutors (Martinez, 2022; Authors, year). Most of the extant research on Filipino online English tutors focuses on language ideologies and stereotypes about Filipino instructors that position them as less legitimate instructors of English in comparison with White native speakers (e.g., Litman, 2022; Martinez, 2022; Tajima, 2018). In other words, much of the extant research on Filipino online English tutors considers stereotypes *about* them. In contrast, little research has considered online *tutors'* stereotypes, or what strategies *the tutors* believe are necessary to succeed instructing their foreign students (i.e., students not from the Philippines). Further, little research has considered the experiences of Filipino teachers themselves, with Kobayashi (2023, p. 11) concluding that "it is critically important to have Filipino English teachers' voices heard and to understand their perceptions of English teacher identity." Therefore, this study proceeded from the following broad research question:

RQ: *How do Filipino OTP tutors feel about their experiences instructing students from foreign backgrounds and what strategies do they see as necessary for successfully instructing these foreign learners?*

This article purposely avoids providing normative assessments as to the quality of the participants' teaching. Instead, by theorizing tutors' cultural knowledge and intercultural competencies as a form of *intercultural bricolage,* this article focuses scholarly attention on both the creativity the tutors display in their encounters with students and on the limits of

their ad-hoc acquisition of cultural knowledge and improvised techniques for navigating intercultural conflict.

Methodology

Participants and recruitment

This study draws on interviews conducted with 11 Filipino English tutors in 2020 as part of a broader study about the experiences of Filipino tutors on OTPs (Authors, year). Five tutors participated in follow-up interviews conducted several months later. These follow-up interviews focused specifically on the participants' experiences with students. All interviews were conducted via synchronous online video chat by the first author, who then transcribed the interviews and translated them from Tagalog to English. Participants were recruited from two Facebook groups dedicated to online English teaching, and all participants were employed on OTPs. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that the interviews were being conducted as part of an academic study. Information about each of the participants, including their age, level of education, as well as the nationality of their students, is provided in Table 1.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The study adopted an interpretive phenomenological approach. Broadly speaking, interpretive phenomenology is concerned with individuals' lived experiences and how individuals understand and make sense of these experiences (Givens, 2008). Theoretically grounded in phenomenology and social interactionism, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a specific qualitative research approach that strives to provide an insider's perspective of participants' experiences while simultaneously recognizing that the researcher can neither directly nor completely understand participants' lived experiences (Smith, 1996).

A hallmark of IPA is engaging in what is called the *double hermeneutic* whereby the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their own

experiences (Smith, 2011). Usually, data consists of participants' accounts that have been collected through semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2011). The analysis is inductive and iterative, involving detailed analysis of participants' various concerns, claims, and understandings (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is particularly appropriate for this study because the study attempts to highlight how participants understand their own strategies for navigating the complex intercultural encounters occasioned through instructing on OTPs.

Both authors independently read each interview and made initial notes about each participants' interview(s), including identifying themes within the interviews relevant to the research question. Then, the authors met to discuss and compare the findings and to discuss relevant themes within and across participants' accounts. In coding the data, we were particularly interested in the role that cultural differences—as perceived by the participants-—played in contouring the tutors' understanding of their experiences instructing students from different cultural backgrounds. In identifying the themes included in this article, we remained cognizant of Smith's (2011) suggestion that an important criterion for assessing quality in articles using IPA is whether identified themes are clearly explicated and supported sufficiently with extracts from the data.

Authors' identities

Before moving on to a discussion of the findings, it is important to address how this study's motivation, methodology, and analysis are all directly informed by our identities. The second author is an (often) White-passing American man. The first author is a Filipino woman, born, raised and educated in the Philippines. Crucially, the first author has extensive experience with OTPs. In 2019, the first author gave more than 300 hours of lessons to primarily Chinese and Japanese students on one of the Philippines' largest OTPs. The first author's insider status as an online English tutor proved crucial for establishing rapport with the tutors and eliciting discussion of pertinent issues.

Figure 1: Participants' demographic information

Name	*Location*	*Age*	*Gender*	*Years of experience*	*Teaching background*	*Call center background*	*Education*	*Nationality of students*
Angelica	Northern Europe	30s	Woman	14	Yes	Yes	College graduate	Philippines, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Denmark, Russia, Lithuania, Poland
Julia	Pangasinan, Philippines	30s	Woman	13	Yes	No	College graduate	Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Spain
Nicole	Cebu, Philippines	20s	Woman	9	Yes	Yes	Some college	Philippines, Japan, South Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Russia, Spain Romania, Poland, Ukraine, France
Lea	Metro Manila, Philippines	30s	Woman	8	No	Yes	College graduate	Japan, South Korea
John Paul	Metro Manila, Philippines	30s	Man	5	Yes	Yes	Some college	Philippines, Japan, Thailand, Russia, Poland
Jenny	Benguet, Philippines	30s	Woman	5	No	No	Some college	China, Japan
Ana	Pangasinan, Philippines	20s	Woman	4	Yes	Yes	Some college	Philippines, Japan, South Korean, China, Hong Kong, India Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia Belarus, Russia,

								Romania, Spain, Brazil, Turkey
Christine	Rizal, Philippines	20s	Woman	3	Yes	No	College graduate	Taiwan, Korea
Mariel	Cagayan, Philippines	30s	Woman	1	Yes	No	Master's degree	Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Malaysia
Bella	Metro Manila, Philippines	20s	Woman	1	Yes	No	College graduate	Japan, China, Thailand
Bea	Laguna, Philippines	40s	Woman	1	No	No	College graduate	China

Results

We present our findings around the following four themes, or "strategies," that we identified in participants' discussion of their interactions with students: *adapt to the students; acquire the language*; *diffuse the conflict*; *learn from the experience*. We first present these four themes and then present a fifth theme that we identified throughout the data. These themes are not meant to represent the whole of the participants' experiences working on OTPs. Indeed, other salient themes emerged in interviews with the same participants (Authors, year). However, the five strategies identified above relate directly to the research question, which addresses Filipino tutors' experiences instructing students from foreign backgrounds.

Adapt to the students

The interviews revealed that Filipino OTP tutors feel they need to be able to *adapt* to the various students they encounter. One reason that adaptability emerged as such a salient theme in the interviews is because tutors highlight that students differ considerably in what they expect from instructors. Tutors related that students' expectations vary in terms of feedback, instructional material, assignments, and even the level of rapport that teachers are

expected to demonstrate. This situation is complicated by the fact that students from different cultural backgrounds also differ in their expectations of what constitutes good student-teacher rapport or what constitutes adequate feedback. Tutors often discussed the need to adapt in terms of cultural differences and their perceptions about students from different countries. Although most of the tutors primarily instructed students from just a few countries, most had also taught students from a wide variety of national backgrounds (see Table 1). For example, John Paul, a teacher in his 30s from Manila with experience teaching students from five different countries, mentioned having to adapt to teaching for his "serious" Japanese students versus his "laid back" Russian students. When asked directly whether he adjusted his teaching style to accommodate students' different national backgrounds, John Paul answered emphatically: "100%, it's very important." He elaborated:

> Not only [do I adjust my] teaching style but—as well as—my *personality* [...] I change it all the time depending on who I'm speaking with—you know, nationality and also depending on their culture.[1]

Here, John Paul related how he adapted pedagogically and how he purposefully changed his own mannerisms depending on the cultural background of his students. Another tutor, Ana, a woman in his her 20s with students from more than a dozen countries, expressed similar sentiments. Noting the specific changes she adapted for instructing students of different nationalities, Ana explained:

> For Japanese students I become more formal because they like conversations and lessons that are done in a formal way. And for my Thailand students—students from Thailand— they want me to teach in a very *slow* manner, so I adjust my *pacing*. And for students from Korea, I actually become more patient—like, I adjust my patience.

Interestingly, Ana was not instructed by her OTP to make the adjustments mentioned in the quote above. Nor did Ana possess prior experience interacting with people from Japan,

Thailand, or Korea. Instead, Ana's adjustments and strategies were techniques she developed based on her interactions with her students on the platform.

The rest of the teachers were similarly adamant that they needed to adapt both their behavior and teaching style for students of different (national) backgrounds. For example, Bella, a woman in her 20s from Manila, highlighted that she adapted her behavior for her Japanese students:

> I try to adjust, especially talking about my opinions […] Japanese people are more conservative [...] they're also different from other Asian countries, like Chinese people.

Although participants often spoke about differences between their students' national cultures, some participants also said that they needed to be able to adapt to other types of differences as well. For example, Ana spoke with some pride about the varied backgrounds of the Japanese students she instructed.

> Most of my students from Japan are professionals, they are engineers, some are CEOs, some are owners of big businesses. And I have encountered an Instagram model before, and also a vlogger...like in one day, I could talk to someone who like is a CEO—like, *big* personalities.

Here, Ana highlights the variety in her students' occupations and seems to feel some pride in her ability to interact with students of evidently prestigious backgrounds. However, tutors also felt that the diversity of their students posed challenges as well. Angelica, the tutor with the most experience teaching, bluntly summarized the situation:

> While you're keeping your kids busy, [you're] a nanny, and then for business people, you know, you're—you're like the virtual assistant. Yes—so you're also like their *shrink*, because they tell you their problems, their stresses, the issues that they cannot talk [about] to their other half.

Similarly, Julia, a college graduate with 13 years of experience teaching, related the importance of adapting her teaching style when instructing children: "you need to be sensitive. You need to know—at least learn a bit—about child psychology." Angelica's and Julia's comments underscore the fact that OTP tutors often see themselves serving in roles beyond that of merely a language instructor.

Of course, language teachers in a variety of contexts must display competencies beyond the narrow purview of language instruction. Further, adaptability is a crucial skill for English instructors in most contexts and is not unique to OTP tutors. Afterall, teachers of English in a variety of offline contexts also find themselves with students in their classrooms who represent a variety of national and cultural backgrounds (e.g., O'Neal et al., 2008). Nonetheless, *adaptability* takes on particular importance in the context of OTPs due to certain affordances unique to these platforms. For example, unlike teachers in most offline contexts, tutors on OTPs are tutoring students directly one-on-one, which likely heightens students' expectations that teachers instruct them in ways appropriate to that specific student. Further, OTP tutors are forced to concern themselves far more with their students' satisfaction in the very short-term, since students can literally switch tutors at the literal click of a button—something rarely available to students in offline contexts. That is, students in offline courses may have little option but to stick with their teacher for the duration of a course, which may often last weeks. In contrast, learners on OTPs can move between tutors—and platforms—easily. Finally, the repercussions of failure to adapt are more urgent in the context of OTPs because most platforms use a system of student-generated ratings, and just a few poor ratings can result in lower pay or less visibility to potential students on the platform (Author, year).

Acquire the language

Learning their students' home language was another prominent strategy that tutors discussed employing to succeed as online language tutors. Many of the tutors noted that they

had acquired at least basic competence in their students' first language. Tutors reported that learning their students' languages aided in maintaining rapport with students from foreign cultural backgrounds. For example, Ana explained:

> Most of my students are beginner. So when they go to my class—like when a Japanese student goes to my class, if they don't know what to say, they will just stare at me. So instead of just staring at me, I ask them—for example, I would ask them "*Konnichiwa, watashi no namaewa, Ana des*" [Hello, my name is Ana]. So they would say, "*ah, Nihongo*!" [Ah, Japanese]. And I would say "*Nihongo wo sukushi hanashimasu*" [I can speak a little Japanese]. They appreciate that—if you speak a little Japanese—like, for example, you want to say "wait a minute" and they don't understand "wait a minute" [so] I say to them "*Chotto matte, chotto matte ku de sai*" [wait, please wait] […] The students are very appreciative when you speak a little Japanese.

Unspoken by Ana in the quote above is the implication that Ana's Japanese students' appreciation for her efforts will also translate into high ratings and continued lessons. Ana was also trying to learn Mandarin in order to communicate with her students from Taiwan. In her efforts to learn her students' home languages,

Other tutors were similarly dedicated to learning the languages of their students. For example, Angelica used the Korean language in her lessons as a strategy for improving rapport with students:

> I taught myself Korean. Just a little bit, you know? For kids, right? So especially, I had kids, like, okay: "Twinkle, twinkle—*banjjak banjjak jageun byeol*" [twinkle, twinkle, little star].

As evidenced in the quote above, Angelica used a popular Korean nursery rhyme to help her built rapport with the Korean children she instructed. Another tutor, Lea, with students from

Japan and Korea, directly discussed how acquiring her students' home language helped her to build a better relationship with her students:

> I learned Korean expressions from Korean dramas and Korean songs […] And yeah, so yeah, I think that the expressions using their native language—you learning their language, [them] hearing you use their language—is a good way to build rapport or connection with your students.

Tutors also discussed acquiring their students' languages in terms of their own curiosity. For example, Julia explained:

> I use some words like, you know, some simple words in *hangul* because I'm also interested in learning the language—*Hangul* is the Korean language. So if, let's say, I translate, and I'll say, "oh, that's delicious—it's "*ma-shee-ta*" [delicious].

In this quote, Julia frames her use of the student's language as not only a way to develop rapport with students, but also an opportunity for her to *learn*—reflecting another theme that we identified from the data. Here it should be noted that Julia appears to believe the Korean word for the Korean alphabet (*hangul*) refers to the Korean language itself—demonstrating the potential limits of the ad-hoc language acquisition practiced by tutors on OTPs.

John Paul discussed how the act of learning from students served an important role in building rapport with his students. He explained:

> I used to learn about [the language] first—before, right? But now I don't. Because that, you know, instead of learning something [now] I just *ask*—then it becomes a *conversation*."

By directly asking his students questions about their language, John Paul believed he was able foster a more interactive environment. In addition, John Paul explained that he also taught students his native Tagalog:

> We usually would exchange [language] and yeah, it becomes actually very interesting, on my end and also on the students' end... it makes them very receptive, because… it's kind of like you're talking to their heart or something.

Learning their students' languages was in fact only one aspect of the broader intercultural exchange that tutors on OTPs engage. However, in addition to building rapport—which is challenging in an online context—these exchanges also introduce tutors to foreign languages and cultures (see the section titled "learn from the experience").

One tutor, Julie, discussed how she built rapport with her students via learning about non-linguistic aspects of the student's background:

> Let's say, if I talk to my adult students from Taiwan, and when somehow I know what's going on in their country—let's say if they've recently had their elections and so on—then they could know—they feel at ease that I also learned or read about something—right?— related to their country, their culture. So it puts them at ease.

Educating themselves about their students' languages and cultures was seen by most tutors as necessary to succeed on OTPs. Crucially, tutors are not compensated by the platforms for learning about their students' languages or cultures. Thus, learning about their students' cultural backgrounds is something tutors take upon themselves as means to either improve their pedagogy, broaden their own horizons, or both.

Diffuse the conflict

Like online English tutors in other contexts (e.g., Author, year), some of the participants had encountered belligerent students and sexual harassment. However, in addition to these instances of direct conflict, participants also related having to carefully navigate less obvious forms of conflict. Many of these conflicts can be characterized as *intercultural conflict*, which Ting-Toomey and Oetzal's (2001, p. 17) define as "emotional frustration [...] between a minimum of two parties from two different cultural communities in

an interactive situation." We use the term intercultural conflict to refer to disagreements and discomforting situations that tutors identify as occurring as a result of students' and tutors' differing political, religious, and personal viewpoints.

Undoubtedly aware of the ease with which intercultural conflict can arise between students and tutors, many platforms directly instruct their tutors not to discuss topics such as religion or politics. On some platforms, tutors are provided country-specific warnings; for example, on one Chinese platform, tutors have related that they are warned by trainers to stay away from the "Three T's": Taiwan, Tibet, and Tiananmen. However, despite the prohibition on discussing controversial issues, many tutors find themselves pushed by students to discuss these issues with their tutors. This creates tension that tutors must then struggle to diffuse. Ana explained:

> We will always talk about Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Barack Obama, the Chinese President, about the North Korean president. [Students] have a lot of things to say about [these issues] so it's really hard to deal with them.

Given that politics is a contentious topic that some platforms directly forbid tutors from discussing, tutors are placed in a difficult position. Another tutor, Stella, shared her approach for diffusing conflict when political discussions grow tense:

> There will be times where some of my students would have their thoughts about, about let's say about our president—Duterte—and also thoughts about their presidents. So as much as possible I try not to share my thoughts on it—my strong thoughts on it—because they have their own perceptions. And I'd like to hear out first what they think instead of sharing what my thoughts are.

In the quote above, Stella admits that she actively suppresses her own opinions in the interest of avoiding conflicts. However, this can be difficult, especially in cases where students will specifically seek agreement from their tutors. For example, multiple tutors discussed Chinese

students directly seeking tutors' verbal acquiescence to their assertion that various disputed territories around the world rightfully belong to China.

Nicole, a tutor with experience instructing students from more than a dozen countries, described the art of finding a new topic when conversations drifted into contentious areas:

> We're teachers, we masterfully craft this idea of how you can change the topic without realizing that you change the topic, right?

However, while most tutors unsurprisingly mentioned feigning agreement or changing the topic when the discussion becomes contentious, some tutors noted that they also try to directly challenge their students in an effort to force the students to confront their prejudices. Ana explained:

> Sometimes, when I'm talking to students from Japan, they would say something bad about Korea… that's the one of the most difficult parts of teaching, it's *negotiating* with your students—and making them understand that there are individual differences and also strengths and weaknesses of different countries.

As illustrated by the quotes above, tutors related the tension of navigating around a variety of hot-button issues. While most tutors related that they try to avoid conflict, others (e.g., Ana) actively counter their students, encouraging them to interrogate their stereotypes. However, as we highlight in the Discussion, the economic realities of being an OTP tutor means that tutors face significant risk to their continued employment if conflicts erupt in their classes.

Learn from the experience

Despite the potential for conflict and the pressure to adapt to students' different cultures, ages, motivations, and language levels, all the tutors expressed appreciation for the opportunities that working on OTPs provided them in terms of expanding their cultural knowledge and learning about foreign places and people. A quote from Julie summarizes a sentiment that was widely shared among the tutors:

> I've also *learned* a lot from my students, especially the adult students, because we just don't talk about, you know, the material, we talk about, sometimes just general things or, you know, they talk about news in *their country*, or politics. And since I also read world news, so *we exchange ideas*. So I think for me, it's also like a *learning experience*, right? It's like a *cultural exchange* for me.

Another tutor, Ana, shared that despite some extremely bad experiences—including sexual harassment—she felt happy teaching online. Ana focused on how much she had learned from her experience teaching online:

> It has been very colorful and meaningful… I learned that there's no way I can change their culture. So what I do is whenever I meet a new person from different countries, I learn and try to embrace the person they are outside the classroom. I respect their culture…[and] I adopt the good traditions that they have in their culture.

Later, Ana summarized her experiences working as an OTP tutor: "You learn how to be more respectful of the cultural differences. And you also learn how to be very patient."

It is not necessarily surprising that the tutors mentioned having learned from their experiences teaching. However, it is important to note that the tutors chose to frame their experiences in terms of learning even when their discussion of interactions with students highlighted stressful experiences that could have easily been interpreted more negatively. For example, in an excerpt above, Julie framed potential disagreements over politics—a topic with high potential for the type of conflict that tutors are instructed to avoid—as a learning opportunity. Likewise, Ana's statement "I learned that there's no way I can change their culture" indicates her frustration at what she identifies as cultural difference. In summary, "learning from the experience" is a strategy that allows tutors to shrug off uncomfortable experiences and reframe the difficulty of working on OTPs as a positive experience.

Filipino online tutors' strategies as intercultural bricolage

Viewed in the aggregate, we suggest that the tutors' acquisition and deployment of the four strategies identified above can be conceptualized as a form of *intercultural bricolage*. In turn, we suggest that tutors themselves are *intercultural bricoleurs*. Like the bricoleur, the Filipino tutors we interviewed acquire bits and pieces of linguistic, cultural, and pedagogic knowledge via their lessons and through informal self-study. This knowledge is not only perceived by many tutors as one of the major benefits of working on OTPs, but tutors also deploy this knowledge in order to build rapport and diffuse conflicts. Crucially, OTP tutors must diffuse conflict and maintain rapport *constantly* as a result of continuous evaluation and the ease with which students may seek out new instructors. That is, unlike teachers in most offline contexts, whose students are "stuck" with them over the length of multiple lessons or a course, OTP tutors are in constant danger of losing students, having their pay deducted, or even being fired because of a single unsuccessful lesson (Authors, year). As a result, their bricolage takes on an added sense of urgency.

The notion of intercultural bricolage acknowledges that OTP tutors are often forced to "make do" with very limited resources. However, we do not intend to uncritically celebrate tutors' intercultural bricolage; due to the ad-hoc and informal nature of their acquisition, tutors can acquire information that is misleading or sometimes simply incorrect. For example, one of the tutors who best exemplifies the figure of the intercultural bricoleur, Julia, mistakenly understood the Korean word for "Korean alphabet" as referring to the "Korean language" (quoted above). While this mistake is a relatively benign example of tutors' misunderstandings about students' home languages and cultures, other tutors embraced more problematic national stereotypes about their students. For example, Julia claimed that unlike Japanese learners, who she believes "learn effectively when they see something," Koreans are intrinsically predisposed to aural learning—a somewhat bizarre claim she supported by reference to the popularity of K-pop. Other statements demonstrated the tutors' embrace of

essentializing national stereotypes. Some of these stereotypes were positive, as when John Paul described Japanese students as "always on time, and very respectful" and Nicole asserted that "Russians like history." Other stereotypes were negative, including Ana's stereotype that "Chinese people, they tend to have very, like, they have a very small patience." Of course, even positive stereotypes can prompt negative reactions from group members who encounter them (Siy & Cheryan, 2013), and stereotypes, once formed, are not easy to overturn (Ladegaard, 2020). The participants' reliance on stereotypes reflects one potential downside of tutors learning through intercultural bricolage rather than through pedagogically informed instruction.

Discussion

Because online tutors must compete with other tutors for piecemeal teaching gigs, the industry perversely incentivizes tutors to avoid conflict, even when doing so means relying on essentialist stereotypes or incorrect information. Tutors on OTPs are dis-incentivized from any type of conflict—even conflict that might lead to potentially improved intercultural understanding—because student complaints can cost tutors their jobs directly. Further, low post-lesson ratings from students can seriously damage tutors' ability to attract future students (Author, year). Thus, while research acknowledges that "[when] cultural misunderstandings and conflicts are defined as problems to be avoided, opportunities to learn are also avoided" (Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005, p. 75), tutors are forced to avoid difficult—but potentially fruitful—conversations if they want to keep their jobs.

In this article, we have applied the notion of intercultural bricolage to OTP tutors' practices. However, we do not intend to imply intercultural bricolage applies only to online tutors. After all, teachers in virtually all contexts acquire and deploy a variety of ad-hoc skills through the execution of their duties. Nonetheless, we suggest that the notion of *intercultural bricolage* is an especially apt term to the practices of tutors on OTPs. OTP tutors not only

often lack training in language instruction, but many are also from non-Western countries and thus occupy an amorphous position as "discounted natives" in the global online English teaching industry (Authors, year). As a result of the comparatively few resources they have at their disposal, OTP tutors, like the bricoleur, must "tinker with the material at hand" (Reilly, 2009 p. 376). Indeed, our participants' very act of choosing to participate in the global online market for language teaching—often without any prior training or even a university degree—reflects a bricoleur's determination to make do with the material at hand. However, it is important to highlight that the notion of intercultural bricolage is inherently ambivalent; it reflects the creativity and agency of the tutors while also leaving room to acknowledge the fact that what tutors "learn" about their students is often inaccurate. As reflected in the quotes above, in acquiring their abilities "on-the-go," many tutors pick up incorrect information and many rely on problematic stereotypes to help them navigate their lessons.

One obvious way for OTPs to help their tutors is for companies to offer more robust intercultural training for the instructors they hire. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to happen because most successful OTPs take an extremely laissez-faire approach to teacher training and lesson content—choosing instead to let student evaluations eliminate "bad" tutors. Decreasing the weight OTPs place on student evaluations and employing pedagogically qualified peer assessors would be one potential answer to this problem. However, using student evaluations rather than peer evaluations helps save OTPs money, so it is difficult to see how the status quo can be challenged.

This study has largely ignored how tutors' tenure on a platform influences their intercultural bricolage. While the more experienced tutors often seemed to display higher proficiency in their students' languages (e.g., Angelica and Julia), it is not clear whether this was linked to the amount of time they have spent as OTP tutors. Future studies should

specifically explore how tutors' tenure on OTPs shapes their intercultural bricolage, as well as how tutors' perceptions and stereotypes change over time.

Conclusion

This study has examined language tutors' experiences acquiring and deploying self-acquired strategies in the rapidly expanding and understudied context of OTPs. Specifically, we have identified four strategies that tutors on OTPs utilize to facilitate their lessons. Further, we suggest the concept of intercultural bricolage, which we believe can serve as a helpful lens for making sense of tutors' ad-hoc competencies and strategies for navigating interactions with students from diverse backgrounds. Regardless of whether students or tutors leave their encounters with more developed intercultural understanding, the interactions among students and tutors on OTPs represent a crucially important site of intercultural communication for the hundreds-of-thousands of people worldwide who take lessons on OTPs. Thus, for better or worse, many language learners around the world will continue to be instructed by intercultural bricoleur tutors whose pedagogy and conflict resolution strategies are heavily influenced by both the affordances of OTPs and the tutors' financial imperative to retain students.

References

Author, A. (year 1)

Author, A. (year 2)

Authors, A & Authors, B. (year)

Block, D., Gray, J., & Holborow, M. (2012). *Neoliberalism and applied linguistics*. Routledge.

Gay, G. (2015). The what, why, and how of culturally responsive teaching: International mandates, challenges, and opportunities. *Multicultural Education Review, 7*(3), 123-139.

Gray, J. (2013). Neoliberalism, celebrity and 'aspirational content' in English language teaching textbooks for the global market. In D. Block, J. Gray & M. Holborow (Eds). *Neoliberalism and applied linguistics* (pp. 91-118). Routledge.

Italki (n.d.) "What are the language requirements for teaching?" Retrieved on October 10th, 2021 from https://support.italki.com/hc/en-us/articles/206352078-What-are-the-language-requirements-for-teaching-

Farrell, T. S. (2012). Novice-service language teacher development: Bridging the gap between preservice and in-service education and development. *TESOL Quarterly, 46*(3), 435-449.

Fisher-Yoshida, B. (2005). Reframing conflict: Intercultural conflict as potential transformation. *Journal of Intercultural Communication, 8*(1), 1-16.

Friedman, V. J., & Berthoin Antal, A. (2005). Negotiating reality: A theory of action approach to intercultural competence. *Management Learning, 36*(1), 69-86.

Friginal, E. (2007). Outsourced call centers and English in the Philippines. *World Englishes, 26*(3), 331-345.

Givens, L. (2008) Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. In L. M. Givens (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods.* SAGE.

Henrichsen, L. (2010). Basic training and resource connections for novice ESL teachers. *Journal of Adult Education, 39*(2), 11-23.

International Telecommunications Union (2020). Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2020. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Dashboards/Pages/IFF.aspx

Jang, I. C. (2018). Legitimating the Philippines as a language learning space: Transnational Korean youth's experiences and evaluations. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 22*(2), 216-232.

Jackson, J. (2014). *Introducing language and intercultural communication.* Routledge.

Kobayashi, Y. (2021). Japanese English learners' perceptions of Filipino teachers' online English lessons: Implications for global Englishes research. *RELC Journal,* 00336882211061629.

Kobayashi, Y. (2023). Relationships between young/older Japanese women and Filipino/Western English teachers: Age, gender, ethnicity and English-speaker status. *RELC Journal*, 00336882231161850.

Ladegaard, H. J. (2020). Constructing the cultural Other: Prejudice and stereotyping. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication* (pp. 191-203). Routledge.

Litman, R. (2022). "Neutral" vs."pure" accents: the racialization of Filipino and EuroAmerican teachers in China's online education industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Asian Anthropology, 1-14*.

Liu, J. (2018, November). CGTN. "Filipino tutors popular among Chinese English learners". Retrieved from https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d674d334d7a4e30457a6333566d54/share_p.html

Liyanage, I., Walker, T., & Singh, P. (2015). TESOL professional standards in the "Asian century": Dilemmas facing Australian TESOL teacher education. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 35*(4), 485-497.

Lockwood, J. (2012). Are we getting the right people for the job? A study of English language recruitment assessment practices in the business processing outsourcing sector: India and the Philippines. *The Journal of Business Communication 49*(2), 107-127.

Lorente, B. P. (2012). "The making of 'Workers of the World': Language and the language brokerage state" In A. Duchêne & M. Heller (Eds.), *Language in late capitalism: Pride and profit*. (pp. 183-206). Routledge.

Lorente, B. (2013). The grip of English and Philippine language policy. In L. Wee, R.B.H.

Goh, & L. Lim (Eds.), *The politics of English: South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific*, 187-204. John Benjamins.

Lorente, B. P., & Tupas, T. R. F. (2013). (Un)emancipatory hybridity: Selling English in an unequal world. In Rudby, R. & Alsagoff, L (Eds.), *The global-local interface and hybridity*. (pp. 66-82). Multilingual Matters.

Manegre, M., & Sabiri, K. A. (2020). Online language learning using virtual classrooms: An analysis of teachers' perceptions. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 1-16.

Manila Bulletin. (June, 2021). 51Talk unveils Maine Mendoza as its new brand ambassador. Manila Bulletin. https://mb.com.ph/2021/06/03/51talk-unveils-maine mendoza-as-its-new-brand-ambassador/

Martinez, J. C. (2022). A 'new' hierarchy of English teachers: The 'half-native' English teacher as a neoliberal, racialized and gendered subject. *Asian Englishes*, 24(1), 32-49.

Morales, N. J. (2020, March). Online teachers boosting incomes as demand surges due to coronavirus lockdowns. *Reuters*. Retrieved fromhttps://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-philippines-educat/online-tutors-boosting-ncomes-as-demand-surges-due-to-coronavirus-lockdowns-idUSKBN21A0YC

Morikawa, T., & Parba, J. (In press). Diversification, desire, and hierarchization of unequal Englishes on online eikaiwa. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 1 16*.

O'Neal, D. D., Ringler, M., & Rodriguez, D. (2008). Teachers' perceptions of their preparation for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse learners in rural Eastern North Carolina. *The Rural Educator, 30*(1), 5-13. DOI: https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v30i1.456

Piller, I. (2012). Intercultural communication: An overview. *The handbook of intercultural discourse and communication*, 3-18. Routledge.

RareJob. (n.d.). Rarejob Homepage. Accessed on November 4 2022.https://www.rarejob.com.ph

Reilly, M. A. (2009). Opening spaces of possibility: The teacher as bricoleur. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 52*(5), 376-384.

Ruanni, T., & Tupas, F. (2008). Bourdieu, historical forgetting, and the problem of English in the Philippines. *Philippine Studies*, 56(1), 47-67.

Schulz, R. A. (2000). Foreign language teacher development: MLJ perspectives—1916 1999. *The Modern Language Journal, 84*(4), 495-522.

Sercu, L. (2006). The foreign language and intercultural competence teachers: The acquisition of a new professional identity. *Intercultural Education*, *17*(1), 55-72.

Siy, J. O., & Cheryan, S. (2013). When compliments fail to flatter: American individualism and responses to positive stereotypes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 104*(1), 87.

Smith, J. A. (1996). Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology. *Psychology and Health, 11*(2), 261-271.

Smith, J. A. (2011). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Health Psychology Review, 5*(1), 9-27.

Smith, J.A., Flower, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. SAGE.

Tajima, M. (2018). Gendered constructions of Filipina teachers in Japan's Skype English conversation industry. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 22*(1), 100-117.

Ting-Toomey, S., & Oetzel, J. G. (2001). *Managing intercultural conflict effectively*. SAGE.

Tupas, R., & Lorente, B. P. (2014). A 'new' politics of language in the Philippines: Bilingual education and the new challenge of the mother tongues. In *Language, Education and Nation building* (pp. 165-180). Palgrave Macmillan.