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Beyond the Degree: Why ELT Graduates Do Not Pursue Teaching Careers*

Diplomanın Ötesinde: İngilizce Öğretmenliği Mezunları Neden Öğretmenlik Kariyerine Yönelmiyor?

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Abstract: This multiple case study explores why English Language Teaching (ELT) graduates in Türkiye, despite completing teacher education programs, chose not to pursue the teaching profession. Drawing on the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice (FIT-Choice) framework, the research investigates how personal motivations, experiences within teacher education programs, and personality traits interact with broader systemic and labor market factors to shape career decisions. Nine participants, accessed through snowball sampling, were categorized into three groups: anti-teaching, undecided, and pro-teaching, based on their initial commitment toward the profession. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and analyzed through content analysis. Findings indicated that although many participants expressed strong motivations and self-efficacy beliefs, their decisions were influenced by concerns about job insecurity, inadequate salaries, lack of autonomy, and a mismatch between their expectations and the realities of teaching. The study highlights the importance of addressing both individual and structural factors that discourage graduates from pursuing teaching. It offers insights for teacher education programs and policy-makers working to enhance teacher recruitment and retention strategies.

Keywords: ELT graduates, initial commitment, teacher education, teaching profession.

Öz: Bu çoklu durum çalışması, Türkiye'de İngilizce Öğretmenliği (ELT) programlarını tamamlamış olmalarına rağmen öğretmenlik mesleğine girmemeyi tercih eden mezunların gerekçelerini incelemektedir. "Öğretmenlik Mesleğini Tercih Etme Nedenleri" (FIT-Choice) kuramsal çerçevesinden yararlanılarak, kişisel motivasyonlar, öğretmen yetiştirme programlarındaki deneyimler ve kişilik özelliklerinin, daha geniş sistemsel ve iş gücü piyasasına ilişkin etkenlerle nasıl etkileşim içinde kariyer kararlarını şekillendirdiği araştırılmıştır. Kartopu örneklem yoluyla ulaşılan dokuz katılımcı, öğretmenlik mesleğine yönelik başlangıçtaki bağlılık düzeylerine göre üç gruba ayrılmıştır: mesleğe uzak duranlar, kararsızlık yaşayanlar ve öğretmenlik yapmayı düşünenler. Veriler, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmış ve içerik analizi yöntemiyle çözümlenmiştir. Bulgular, birçok katılımcının yüksek motivasyona ve öğretme becerilerine dair yüksek öz yeterlik inançlarına sahip olmalarına rağmen, iş güvencesi eksikliği, yetersiz maaşlar, mesleki özerklik eksikliği ve öğretmenliğe dair beklentiler ile gerçekler arasındaki uyumsuzluk gibi faktörlerin kararlarını etkilediğini ortaya koymuştur. Çalışma, mezunların öğretmenliği tercih etmeme nedenlerinin hem bireysel hem de yapısal boyutlarının dikkate alınması gerektiğini vurgulamakta; öğretmen yetiştirme programları ve eğitim politikaları için öğretmen temini ve meslekte kalıcılığı güçlendirmeye yönelik önemli çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Başlangıç motivasyonu, ELT mezunları, öğretmen eğitimi, öğretmenlik mesleği.

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Introduction

The teaching profession has become increasingly complex and demanding due to various factors, including changing societal dynamics, technological improvements, and increased parental expectations. These changes have exacerbated the pressures on teachers globally and have led to a growing body of research exploring the motivations and career trajectories of teachers (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005; Watt & Richardson, 2008). Over the past few decades, significant attention has been paid to the motivations of pre-service teachers and their reasons for choosing this profession (e.g., Altunoğlu et al., 2022; Başöz, 2021; Eren, 2017; Glutsch & König, 2019; Öztürk Akar, 2012; Suryani, 2021; Uygun & Karakaş, 2023; Yöney & Mirici, 2025). These studies indicated that individuals enroll in teacher education programs and choose teaching careers for both intrinsic reasons, such as a passion for teaching or the desire to contribute to society, and extrinsic reasons, including job security and social recognition.

Despite the increasing number of individuals completing teacher education programs annually, both globally and in Türkiye, a significant number either do not start teaching at all or leave it within the first few years (Çakır et al., 2024; Gökten Bayrak, 2023; Ingersoll et al, 2014; Moses et al., 2019). Prior research suggested that many novice teachers perceive teaching as a temporary job while preparing for alternative careers, such as civil service (Ramachandran et al., 2006), or view it as a "steppingstone" or an "exploratory" career instead of a lifelong career journey (Lindqvist et al., 2014; Mtika & Gates, 2011). This trend is further heightened by the modern job market, which offers a wide range of alternative career paths with higher salaries, better status, and greater opportunities for career development (Alam & Asmawi, 2024; Hahs-Vaughn & Scherff, 2008; Johnson & Birkeland, 2004).

Although previous research studies have paid extensive attention to pre-service teachers' perceptions and beliefs about pursuing a teaching career (Başöz, 2021; Uygun & Karakaş, 2023), much less is known about those who complete teacher education programs but ultimately decide not to become teachers, particularly in Türkiye. Existing research has largely focused on pre-service teachers, whose career intentions are often still forming and may change over time. This focus leaves a significant gap in understanding the motivations and experiences of graduates who make a conscious and finalized decision not to start the teaching profession (Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). Examining this group is significant because it allows for a clearer and more grounded

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understanding of the factors shaping career decisions after graduation.

By focusing on graduates who never started teaching, this research contributes to a less examined aspect of teacher education. It explores the initial motivations for enrolling in teacher education, the experiences gained throughout their training, and the role of individual personality traits in shaping post-graduation career decisions. The focus is on graduates of English Language Teaching (ELT) programs in Türkiye. It can be argued that ELT graduates, in particular, have access to numerous alternative career paths, such as translation, human resources, international commerce, and other fields that value strong foreign language skills. Furthermore, English language teaching is a subject area where teacher shortages are particularly significant in Türkiye (Damar, 2018; Eren & Tezel, 2010; İnci & Yıldız, 2019), making it a critical focus for understanding teacher retention issues.

Although ELT is one of the areas with the most significant teacher shortages in Türkiye (Damar, 2018; İnci & Yıldız, 2019), many qualified graduates still opt for different career paths. By exploring the reasons behind this phenomenon, the study seeks to inform strategies aimed at improving teacher recruitment and retention in this vital field. To reflect the diversity of views, participants were grouped based on their initial commitment to teaching: the anti-teaching group, the undecided group, and the pro-teaching group. This categorization enables a refined exploration of the varying factors influencing career decisions among graduates. By focusing on this underexplored area, particularly in the Turkish context, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of why some ELT graduates ultimately choose alternative career paths and to inform policies and practices designed to enhance teacher recruitment and retention. In order to achieve this aim, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Why do ELT graduates choose alternative career paths rather than pursuing a career in teaching?
    a. What initial motivations do ELT graduates report for enrolling in teacher education programs?
    b. How do ELT graduates' experiences in teacher education influence their perceptions of teaching and their decision not to choose teaching as a career?
    c. How do personal characteristics and self-perceptions shape ELT graduates' orientation toward or away from the teaching profession?

Theoretical Framework

The FIT-Choice framework introduced by Watt and Richardson (2007) provides a multidimensional explanation of how individuals decide to become teachers. The model includes altruistic motivations along with intrinsic motivations, "ability-related beliefs", and "demand" and "reward" aspects of the profession, all of which relate to choosing teaching as a career (Watt et al., 2012). The sequencing of the FIT-Choice model starts with the more distant "socialization influences" such as past learning and teaching experiences, and is followed by task perceptions, self-perceptions, values, and fallback career. Task perceptions include "task demand" and "task return" as key concepts. While task demand is related to the expertise required and the heavy demands of teaching, task return is related to the rewards like high social status and salary. According to the model, perceiving teaching as highly demanding may deter individuals from pursuing the profession, unless these demands are offset by anticipated benefits such as status or compensation.

Next, self-perceptions emphasize individuals' perceived teaching ability, which positively correlates with the decision to become a teacher. The model outlines three types of values: intrinsic value that relates to the personal satisfaction gained from teaching; personal utility value, associated with practical benefits such as job security, time for family and job flexibility; and social utility value, which reflects the desire to contribute to society and make a social impact. The social utility value aligns with altruistic motivations to choose teaching as a career. The fallback career aspect refers to the idea that some individuals may enroll in teacher education programs simply because they could not get into their first option but chose teaching as a fallback option (Watt et al., 2012).

Utilizing the FIT-Choice model as the theoretical framework for this study is significant because it offers a solid lens to understand why some English language teachers who completed a teacher education program chose not to pursue teaching. Adapting the framework into the current study could shed light on participants' experiences, beliefs, and perceptions regarding the model's components. For instance, how participants perceive the tasks and values associated with teaching, or whether teaching was considered a fallback option, can offer critical insights into their career decisions. By aligning the theoretical framework within the field of ELT in Türkiye, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper exploration of teacher career pathways and inform strategies to enhance retention and recruitment in the profession.

Since its introduction, the FIT-Choice model has been widely used across different countries to examine teacher motivation (e.g., König & Rothland, 2012; Lin et al., 2012). Studies in Türkiye similarly report that pre-service teachers' motivations align with FIT-Choice dimensions, particularly intrinsic value, social value, and job security (e.g, Başöz, 2021; Çelen, 2022; Topkaya & Uztosun, 2012; Uygun & Karakaş, 2023). Building on this, several studies also discuss teaching as a potential fallback career or second-choice major for some pre-service teachers, highlighting the role of lower initial commitment in later career decisions (Bilim, 2014; Uygun & Karakaş, 2023).

Although the FIT-Choice framework was originally developed and used as a quantitative model to explore motivations for choosing the teaching profession, in the present study, it was not used as a measurement tool, but rather as a guide to interpret the participants' narratives. Using the FIT-Choice framework in the current study is meaningful because its core constructs align closely with the phenomenon being investigated. The model offers a structured way to examine how individuals' initial motivations, perceived abilities, value orientations, and fallback career considerations shape their career choices. In this study, the FIT-Choice framework informed the development of interview questions and supported the interpretation of the data, functioning as an analytical lens rather than a predefined coding scheme.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

The current study aims to explore why ELT graduates do not pursue a career in teaching after graduation. A case study "provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories of principles"

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

Initial commitment	Participant	Sex	Age	Current Job	Educational Level
Anti-teaching group	P1	Male	28	Data analyst	Master
	P2	Male	33	IT specialist	Master
	P3	Female	33	Marketing	Master
Undecided group	P4	Female	30	Translator	Bachelor
	P5	Male	32	HR	Bachelor
	P6	Female	32	Yoga instructor	Master
Pro-teaching group	P7	Female	33	Corporate trainer	Bachelor
	P8	Male	34	Instructor	Master
	P9	Female	42	Faculty member	Doctorate

(Cohen et al., 2018, p.376); it aims to understand a phenomenon within its particular circumstances. It can be described as the "detailed examination of a small sample" (Tight, 2010, p. 337, as cited in Cohen et al., 2018, p. 375). A multiple case study, in particular, enables the researcher to examine several cases to identify similarities and differences across them, offering a richer and more comparative understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In line with the research aim and given the three participant groups classified based on their initial commitment to teaching, this study adopted a multiple case study research design (Creswell, 2007).

The participants were nine individuals who graduated from ELT programs in faculties of education in public universities in Türkiye. Participants were accessed through snowball sampling (Creswell, 2007). The snowball sampling method was chosen because the targeted participant group constitutes a hard-to-reach population with no accessible list or registry. The researcher, an English language teacher who also never taught after graduation, had prior contact with a few potential participants. During data collection, these individuals were asked to refer others who might provide insightful perspectives on the research topic. Snowball sampling was particularly appropriate for this study, as it involved a specific group that cannot be easily located through conventional sampling strategies. It enabled the researcher to identify information-rich cases through existing social networks. Table 1 below presents the demographic characteristics of participants.

As shown in Table 1, particular attention was paid to participants' initial level of commitment to the teaching profession in order to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, perceptions, and beliefs regarding their decision not to pursue teaching after graduation. Ultimately, three individuals were selected from each of the three commitment groups (the anti-teaching group, the undecided group, and the pro-teaching group), resulting in a total of nine participants. All participants graduated from ELT programs in faculties of education at public universities in Türkiye and never worked as teachers in any formal or informal teaching positions after graduation. Participants were graduates of four different public universities, all of which are widely regarded as prestigious institutions and consistently ranked among the top universities in Türkiye. Three participants held bachelor's degrees, five held master's degrees, and one held a doctoral degree. Among the nine participants, there were four males and five females, with ages ranging from 28 to 42 (mean age = 33). Participants' current occupations varied across educational and non-educational fields, including roles such as IT specialists and faculty members.

Ethical guidelines were followed throughout this study. Ethical approval was obtained from Middle East Technical University Applied Ethics Research Center with Protocol No. ODTUIAEK-2024, on 22.11.2024. Participants were assured that their responses would be confidential, shared only with the researcher, and that their identities would remain anonymous. Informed consent forms were signed before the data collection.

Data Collection

Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggest that to understand the perceptions participants assign to their personal experiences, rich and non-directive interviews must be conducted. For the current study, semi-structured interviews were used, offering both structure and flexibility to explore participants' perspectives in depth. Interview schedules were developed in accordance with Cohen and colleagues' (2018) guidelines. Research objectives, the FIT-Choice theoretical framework, and the literature review were translated into specific questions aligned with the study's goals. To promote detailed and authentic responses, the interview schedules included open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate freely. In designing the questions, efforts were made to ensure clarity and neutrality by avoiding complicated terms or questions that might confuse respondents (Arksey & Knight, 1999). Since Turkish was the participants' first language, both the interview protocols and the interviews were conducted entirely in Turkish.

The schedules included demographic questions (e.g., age, marital status, current profession) and open-ended questions exploring participants' reasons for entering teacher education programs, prior beliefs about the teaching profession, the education they received, their academic performance, personal characteristics, any intention to drop out during their studies, and their reasons for not pursuing careers in teaching. To finalize the interview protocol, expert feedback was obtained from a professor in educational sciences with expertise in both teacher education and qualitative methods. Necessary revisions were made based on this feedback. A pilot study was then conducted with a graduate of an ELT program who never entered the profession to test the length and clarity of the interview. Based on the pilot, the interview schedule was finalized. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with nine participants. Interview time and location were determined based on participants' preferences to foster comfort and rapport. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. Moreover, interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Data Analysis

Before analyzing the data, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. Before analyzing the full set of transcripts, one interview was selected for its depth and representativeness. To ensure inter-coder reliability, the researcher initially coded this selected transcript, and then an expert in the field was invited to independently code the same transcript. This process enabled a comparison of the codes and categories identified by both coders, helping to assess the reliability of coding. Inter-

coder agreement was calculated using percentage agreement, based on the proportion of coding decisions on which both coders assigned the same codes. This comparison resulted in an agreement rate of 98% between the researcher and the expert, indicating a high level of consistency. Following this, the researcher proceeded with the content analysis (Creswell, 2014).

The analysis began with a careful examination of the interview transcripts, in which each sentence was reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. During this process, individual statements were assigned one or more codes. This step was repeated in cycles until the researcher observed that no new categories were emerging. Following the initial round of coding, all codes were compiled in Microsoft Excel. A separate worksheet was used for each participant, allowing for the systematic placement of coded excerpts. This method helped organize similar expressions under relevant codes and facilitated comparison across cases.

Next, a master Excel sheet was created to include each code from each participant in one place, allowing for a clearer view of the relationships and connections between them. From this point, recurring words, phrases, behavioral patterns, ways of thinking, and significant experiences were identified and grouped into broader categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). These categories were further refined into overarching themes based on shared characteristics. To enhance visual clarity and focus, a color-coding system was used to differentiate the emerging categories. As the analysis progressed, these broader themes were refined and reshaped to provide a more consistent and coherent interpretation of the data.

In this study, the researcher employed several strategies concerning the trustworthiness of the research, drawing on the criteria established by Guba and Lincoln (1982). To establish credibility, expert feedback was sought during the development of the interview schedule and revisions were made; accordingly, a pilot study was also conducted to refine the process. During data collection, in-depth and comprehensive interviews were carried out to gather rich information. To ensure transferability, the research process was described in detail, including the study's context, purpose, background, participant characteristics, data collection procedures, data analysis steps, and the interpretation of findings, allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives. Negative or discrepant information was also included in the findings to reflect the diversity of views. Dependability was maintained by carefully designing and executing each step of the research process, and confirmability was ensured through the explicit clarification of the researcher's role in the study, which allowed for self-reflection and transparency throughout the research procedures (Creswell, 2014). The researcher has a background in ELT, which provided contextual familiarity with the field, but also required reflexivity throughout the research process. In order to address potential bias, the researcher remained consciously reflective during the data collection and analysis, not to be affected by prior assumptions. Particular attention was paid to ensure any interpretations were grounded in the data and participants' own accounts, rather than the researchers' own experiences or assumptions.

Findings

The findings are presented in the following sections under the following themes: reasons for enrolling in the teacher education program, perceptions about the teaching profession, education received in the teacher education program, personality characteristics, and reasons for not pursuing a teaching career. Table 2 provides an overview of the findings regarding the themes and categories.

The findings indicated that participants' reasons for enrolling in teacher education programs varied across groups. Participants in the anti-teaching group explained that pursuing a teaching career had never been part of their plans. Instead, they enrolled in ELT programs primarily due to the reputation of the universities that housed the faculty and the belief that graduating from a prestigious institution would open doors to alternative job opportunities. They described the teacher education program as a "steppingstone" toward other professions. For example, one participant explained:

> *I thought it would be easy to shift to another profession because it was a reputable university, and also, English Language Teaching department graduates are sought after in the job market. (Participant 2)*

Similarly, Participant 3 noted that her mother was an alumna of the same university and that the university's reputation had a major part in her decision.

Table 2. Overview of the findings

Themes	Categories
Reasons for enrolling in the teacher education program	Institutional/instrumental motives
	Subject related motives
	Altruistic/value-based motives
Perception about the teaching profession	Societal value and moral meaning of teaching
	Perceived demands and working conditions
	Perceived person-job fit
Education received in the teacher education program	Positive academic experience
	Practicum-based disillusionment
	Teacher autonomy and school culture
	Observations of teacher motivation
Personality characteristics	Perceived fit with teaching related traits
	Personality traits
Reasons for not pursuing a teaching career	Career advancement and professional growth
	Salary, workload, and working conditions
	Relationships with parents and administrators
	Commercialization and status of teaching
	Reasons for Enrolling in the Teacher Education Program

Participants in the undecided group gave similar reasons for enrolling, such as the prestige of the university, liking English, and the potential for alternative career pathways. However, their orientation toward teaching was more open-ended. For instance, Participant 4 shared:

At the time, I thought that I liked the subject matter, so maybe I could do it [become a teacher], let's see. And if I didn't want to do it after graduation, I thought maybe I could do private tutoring or just change my profession completely. (Participant 4)

Another participant stated:

I was not sure about becoming a teacher before, but it was a good university and I liked English. So I thought maybe I wouldn't teach younger kids, but I could work in high schools or with adolescents. I was not sure. (Participant 5)

In contrast, participants in the pro-teaching group entered teacher education with the clear intention of becoming teachers. They expressed a desire to contribute to society, finding meaning in helping learners, and believing that teaching aligned with their personal strengths. For example, Participant 8 noted:

This was my second university. I previously graduated from a business college. But I did not just want to work for money; I wanted to be beneficial. I wanted to do something meaningful. I wanted to help students learn something. It was very valuable for me. (Participant 8)

Another participant also emphasized the "sacred" nature of the teaching profession and believed she had a natural aptitude for it. She believed that she was, in a sense, "destined" to become a teacher: "I am inclined to and skilled in teaching others, transferring knowledge, I wanted to use these skills. I wanted to do something meaningful and valuable" (Participant 7).

Overall, these findings suggest that enrollment decisions were shaped less by an intrinsic desire to teach and more by institutional prestige, openness to alternative career paths, and for some, a sense of personal suitability for teaching. This indicates that students may enroll in ELT programs with diverse, and sometimes uncertain professional intentions, which can later influence their career trajectories.

Perceptions About the Teaching Profession

Interestingly, when participants were asked about their views of the teaching profession before graduation, individuals from all three groups, regardless of their initial level of commitment, shared similar thoughts and beliefs.

All participants acknowledged the importance of teachers and the societal value of teaching, while also recognizing its challenges, such as high workload, emotional demands, and insufficient compensation. A few illustrative quotes are provided below:

I always thought it's a very meaningful job, but at the same time, a very difficult one—not just as a profession, but as a mindset. You see many different teachers, from kindergarten to university, because most of your life is spent at school. Teachers are the occupational group you encounter the most. They have a responsibility like disciplining kids at the K–12 level, and they are in a role similar to a 'classroom parent.' I couldn't see that in myself. (Participant 1)

I actually believed that teaching may not be for me; I had a feeling like that. But I valued the profession; it's almost a "sacred" job. (Participant 4)

I always thought that teaching is a sacred job, but at the same time, I thought it's a "doable" job. Everyone used to say that it's easy, it has three-month holidays and teachers do not teach many classes. So, I wanted to believe that teaching is a stress-free job. But at the same time, in my heart, I had a feeling that teachers are overworked and underpaid. Still, I valued teachers and the teaching profession, so I always had positive thoughts about it. (Participant 8)

As seen in the examples above, all participants expressed a belief in the societal value of teachers, even though their willingness or ability to see themselves in that role varied based on their initial commitment. Participants in the pro-teaching group continued to identify strongly with the profession, while those in the anti-teaching and undecided groups acknowledged its importance but questioned their personal fit, emotional suitability, or capacity to meet its demands.

These findings suggest that positive perceptions of teaching were widespread across all participants, yet such perceptions did not necessarily translate into professional commitment or career choice. This indicates that valuing the profession and envisioning oneself within it are most likely distinct processes shaped by self-perceived fit and perceived work conditions.

Education Received in Teacher Education Program

Participants were asked about their university education to explore whether their experiences during teacher education influenced their perceptions of the profession.

Regardless of their initial commitment to teaching, all participants believed they had received a high-quality education. For instance, one participant from the anti-teaching group stated that the program was strong and that he could have become a great English language teacher if he had chosen to (Participant 1).

Although participants expressed satisfaction with the overall academic quality of their programs, their university experiences, particularly during the practicum, shaped their attitudes toward teaching in different ways. Several sub-codes emerged from their accounts, including positive academic experience, practicum-based disillusionment, lack of teacher autonomy, and observations about teacher motivation. Illustrative examples are presented below:

The university education was good; it helped me develop a mindset and understand what kind of teacher I wanted to be. I liked all of the classes I took; it was helpful and fun at the same time. (Participant 9)

During the practicum, one of the schools was very disadvantaged in terms of the students' economic backgrounds. The teacher was very dedicated—one day, she told the students they were the future doctors and engineers. And one student replied, 'Teacher, the future doctors and engineers are studying in private schools now, not in these desks.' The children's awareness of their disadvantages really upset me. In another school, which was public but in a wealthier area, there was a girl who collected garbage on the streets. Other families didn't want their kids to play with her. I tried to include her during classes so she could make friends. But the teacher told me that parents would not like that. Then I realized teachers have no autonomy. They constantly have to worry about how parents will react. I wasn't already fond of the idea of teaching, but what I saw during the practicum completely changed my mind. (Participant 3)

I had doubts in my heart about becoming a teacher, and during the practicum, became sure it wasn't for me. The

school environment—it's like adults controlling adolescents. I don't want to say it felt like jail, but in a sense... it did. And when I started the practicum, I thought, 'I used to want to escape this system—am I really going to return to it?' It was a feeling like that. (Participant 1)

Idealistically, I actually valued the profession. It's a very significant job. I always respected my teachers as a student. But at university, my perspective changed. I realized many people were only doing it for the money, without real dedication. When I saw that, my perception of teachers changed. (Participant 5)

As illustrated through these direct quotations, university experiences, particularly the teaching practicum, had a substantial impact on participants' developing attitudes toward teaching. While participants in the pro-teaching group felt the program helped shape their emerging teacher identity, those in the anti-teaching and undecided groups developed increasingly negative feelings. For many, the practicum solidified doubts and confirmed that teaching might not be the right path.

Participants were also asked about their academic performance to assess whether academic success had any bearing on their career decisions. All participants considered themselves good or very good students. However, many believed that academic performance or GPA was not a reliable predictor of one's likelihood of becoming a teacher, or of becoming a "good" teacher. One participant, who had previously graduated from a business program, explained:

Yes, I was a successful student. But I don't think that matters. I was a good student when I studied business administration, but I wasn't successful in my previous job because it didn't make me happy. I think someone with a lower GPA could still be a great teacher. (Participant 8)

Finally, participants were asked whether they ever considered dropping out of the program once they realized they did not want to become teachers. As expected, participants in the pro-teaching group reported that they had never thought of dropping out due to their strong initial commitment. Interestingly, most participants in the anti-teaching group also stated that they never considered leaving the program. For example:

I already knew I would not become a teacher. But I did not really think about dropping out either. The courses were fun, I had fun. I thought that at least I could use this as a steppingstone to other professions. (Participant 2)

Only one participant in the undecided group reported considering dropping out:

I started to realize in my sophomore year—especially during senior year and the practicum— that maybe I wouldn't become a teacher. I thought about dropping out, but I didn't want to do that in my freshman year because I hadn't seen what the later years were like. But you know, in Türkiye, you prepare so much for university entrance exams—I didn't want to go through all that again. So, I stayed. But if we had the practicum in freshman year, I would definitely have thought about dropping out. (Participant 5)

These findings *suggest that while academic coursework generally supported participants' confidence and skills, the practicum played a decisive role in shaping their long-term professional orientations. For many participants, real-school experiences, rather than university courses, most strongly influenced their sense of professional fit, autonomy, and future career intentions.*

Personality Characteristics

Although it might be difficult for individuals to evaluate themselves in terms of personality traits and how these may have influenced their career decisions, participants were asked to reflect on the possible role of personal characteristics in their choice not to pursue teaching. As expected, perceptions varied across groups.

Participants in the pro-teaching group believed that they possessed the qualities necessary to become "good" teachers, such as patience, empathy, and communication skills. For instance, one participant said: "I have all the qualities necessary for teaching. I love teaching. I am a bit impatient, but I think it would not affect my teaching skills." (Participant 7)

Participants in the anti-teaching group expressed more diverse perspectives. One participant believed he had all the right qualities for teaching but simply did not want to pursue the profession, whereas another believed that her personality had directly influenced her decision. They explained:

Actually, when you think about it, I have all the qualities to become a teacher. I am very patient, I love teaching something to others, like transferring knowledge, and I am good at it. At my job right now, I prepare the newcomers, I kind of teach them. I believe that I would be a great teacher. But I just did not want to be a teacher. (Participant 2)

The fact that I am very ambitious and competitive… The job I am doing now, one of my drivers is to advance my title. It charms me more than the salary. I work very hard, but then I get my promotion. Everyone and a half year, I got promoted. It compensates for my efforts. I think a person should not become a teacher if they have such ambitions. Because teaching will not fulfill them, and the consequences will harm children. (Participant 3)

Participants in the undecided group generally believed that their personality traits played a significant role in their decision not to pursue teaching. They emphasized that certain characteristics are essential for teachers, such as patience, teamwork, and adaptability, and expressed doubt about whether they had these traits. For example:

It might be related to my personality. I am a very free-spirited person; the hierarchical structure at schools might have repulsed me. I am not the kind of person that can be a part of such a system. I am not very good at teamwork either. I am very good at private tutoring. I taught a kid, for example, for a while, and he became very successful in English. But I would not want to work in a hierarchical environment where I have to report to other people at school. (Participant 5)

Teaching definitely requires patience. When you are working with children or adults, because adults act like children in classrooms, too. You need to be patient. Some people are very slow learners compared to others; when you deal with those people, you cannot give up, you need to be patient. I was not sure that I am that patient. (Participant 4)

As these excerpts illustrate, participants commonly believed that teachers need to be patient, capable of teamwork, committed to the profession, adaptable, and comfortable working within hierarchical structures. While possessing these traits does not automatically mean one will choose teaching, the absence of such qualities was widely seen as a factor influencing the decision to pursue alternative careers.

These findings suggest that participants' self-perceived personality characteristics played a meaningful role in their career decision-making. While some felt aligned with the emotional and interpersonal demands of teaching, others viewed their ambition, independence, or low tolerance for hierarchical structures as incompatible with the profession, shaping their choice to pursue alternative career paths.

Reasons for Not Pursuing a Teaching Career

The fndings indicated that there are several reasons for ELT graduates not to pursue teaching careers. The following section presents the findings based on participants' initial commitment levels to the profession.

The Anti-teaching Group

Data analysis revealed several reasons why participants in the anti-teaching group chose not to pursue teaching. A key factor was the desire for clearer career advancement. Although they acknowledged that teachers can develop professionally, they viewed teaching as a monotonous profession that would not satisfy them in the long run. One participant explained:

I did not want to teach the same things over and over again. I did not believe that I would be able to develop myself personally and professionally if I became a teacher. Of course, teachers can improve themselves, but in its essence, it's always the same thing. Always grammar, always speaking... That's why I did an MBA. Right now, I am working at an IT company, and I can even change my position in the company. I would not be able to do this in teaching. (Participant 2)

Another participant, whose mother is a retired teacher, explained that although she admired her mother's dedication, she feared she would not be able to commit herself in the same way. She emphasized her ambition, competitive nature, and the emotional toll of systemic inequalities:

I had many dilemmas, actually. There were times when I felt I could be a good, idealistic teacher. But to be honest, I chose to be more selfish—because I'm the kind of person who is either all in or all out. I would have dedicated myself to teaching, but I know I can't change the whole education system. I'm also someone who picks fights, who doesn't stay quiet, who can't tolerate injustice. If I were a teacher, my whole career would revolve around arguing with people, and that would wear me down. So I chose to fulfill my ambitions, not my spirituality. (Participant 3)

All three participants also emphasized low salaries and poor compensation as major reasons. They believed that the workload – income imbalance was unacceptable.

Honestly, the salary... I know under what circumstances teachers are working. Many of my friends became teachers. Right now, I work much less than they do, I'm less bored, and I earn far more. I'm more comfortable. They're overwhelmed—with students, with administrators, with parents. (Participant 1)

Participants believed that teachers face heavy workloads and that their salaries are barely enough for basic living expenses. They argued that by choosing alternative career paths, they made better decisions than their peers who became teachers. For this group, the decision not to teach was strongly tied to a desire for career mobility, personal ambition, and higher compensation, suggesting a fundamental mismatch between their expectations of professional growth and the structural limits of teaching.

The Undecided Group

Participants in the undecided group cited several reasons for not pursuing teaching. A major factor was the negative experiences with administrators and parental interference. They described how parents often overstep boundaries and communicate inappropriately with teachers. For example:

The parent involvement… I see my cousins' WhatsApp group chats. Parents text teachers… 1 am-2 am… It's not for me. Parents have no sense of time; they think of something and believe it's okay to text to the whole class at 1 am. (Participant 6)

Another participant highlighted issues with administrative hierarchy and loss of autonomy:

... Also, the administration. The school principal, the vice-principal... The hierarchical system is upsetting to me. I would want to have autonomy in my class. But during the practicum, I saw that they are interfering with everything, even with the irrelevant things. I have many friends who became teachers, they are overwhelmed, they are not happy at all. (Participant 4)

Similar to the anti-teaching group, participants in the undecided group also cited low salaries, poor working conditions, and long working hours as critical factors. For example:

Actually, after graduation, I applied to a private school. But the working hours and the salary were so funny; I decided that I did not want to do that. The interview I had was very disrespectful. It did not go well. They offered me a salary that would definitely not compensate for the 7-days-a-week hard work and irrelevant extracurricular responsibilities. I would not be able to pay my rent with what they offered me. I asked myself, how could I possibly work in unhealthy conditions and be unhappy and not even able to pay the rent? I thought that if I have to be exhausted, at least I should live in luxury and not worry about my rent. (Participant 4)

The undecided group's decisions appeared to crystallize after realizing the "realities" of the profession, with parental pressure, administrative control, and inadequate working conditions pushing them away from teaching despite initial openness.

The Pro-teaching Group

Interestingly, participants in the pro-teaching group, despite their strong initial commitment, ultimately decided not to teach as well. A shared reason was the realization that their idealistic expectations did not align with the realities of the education system. They expressed disappointment at how school administrators failed to support teachers and instead treated students and parents like "customers". One participant argued that the administrators do not value teachers at all (Participant 7). Another participant added on that point and argued that, particularly in private schools, administrators and parents do not actually prioritize education, rather they focus on the "looks" and that this mentality does contradict the participants' own understanding of education. One of the participants said:

Right now, at my new job [in a university setting], I can wear casual clothes, even active wear. But in private schools especially, administrators put pressure on you to "look good", they make teachers wear heels or put on make-up.. This attitude is not for mee; it contradicts my understanding of teaching and education. (Participant 8)

Participants also emphasized low compensation, lack of job security, and the commercialization of education:

Because I would have to work so much and earn little... And the lack of job security…You work at a private school for two years, and they suddenly say goodbye to you next year, because they want to give even less salary to a new graduate. I am very bothered that education has become a "business" for many people. It is not for me. Although I would love to help children and teach them, I could never work under these circumstances. (Participant 9)

For this group, disillusionment stemmed not from teaching itself, but from the institutional and economic conditions surrounding it. Their strong initial motivation was ultimately outweighed by structural issues such as job insecurity, lack of respect, and commercialization.

Discussion

This study provides significant insights into faculty of education graduates' career choices after graduation, focusing on ELT graduates in Türkiye. Rather than treating graduates as a homogeneous group, taking initial commitment to the teaching profession (anti-teaching, undecided, and pro-teaching) as an analytical lens allows for a more nuanced understanding of how individual motivations interact with institutional, economic, and cultural conditions to shape career decisions. Importantly, the findings draw attention to a form of pre-entry attrition that remains largely invisible in teacher education and retention research, which predominantly focuses on early-career teachers. By examining graduates who never start the profession, this study highlights a critical but underexplored stage in the teacher career continuum.

The FIT-Choice framework (Watt & Richardson, 2007) offered valuable guidance in interpreting participants' beliefs and values. The findings were consistent with the model regarding the intrinsic, altruistic, and personal utility considerations of participants' narratives. However, the model's exploratory power was further strengthened when contextual factors specific to the Turkish education system, such as lack of job security, low professional status in society, and the working conditions in private schools, were also taken into account. In line with previous research highlighting the need to contextualize motivational models (Sardana et al., 2021), this study indicated that career decisions cannot be fully understood through individual-level constructs alone. Instead, the results suggested that models like FIT-Choice need to be considered together with broader person-environment fit and job demands-resources in order to fully explain why some well-prepared graduates decide not to pursue the profession.

Contrary to previous research studies in Türkiye that often highlight parental expectations and collectivist motivations as key drivers of choosing teaching (e.g., Balyer & Özcan, 2014; Öztürk Akar, 2012; Yüce et al., 2013), this study found that participants generally cited more pragmatic reasons for enrolling in faculties of education, such as the university's reputation and their aptitude for the English language or teaching. Recent studies with pre-service teachers in Türkiye similarly emphasized instrumental motives, competition in the labor market, and institutional reputation (Uygun, 2023). This may reflect a broader generational shift in career decision-making, influenced by a competitive and uncertain labor market and the relatively high market value of English. In addition, the centralized university placement system prioritizes university entrance exam scores over alignment between candidates' professional aspirations and program goals, increasing the likelihood that some students enroll in ELT programs without a clear intention to teach. In this respect, the choices of participants echo patterns found in other countries undergoing educational reforms driven by global economic pressures and marketisation (Verger et al., 2016).

The findings indicated that, regardless of the initial commitment levels, the teaching profession is perceived as emotionally, mentally, and physically demanding, while in return, salary, job security, and autonomy were perceived as insufficient. These findings align with international literature describing teacher dissatisfaction and attrition under performance-oriented and accountability-driven systems (Day, 2008). In the Turkish context, these concerns were particularly strong due to centralized policies, limited autonomy, and lack of job security in private schools (Gökten Bayrak, 2023). For English teachers, in particular, the contrast between being in high demand and facing poor working conditions and low professional status made the profession appear even less attractive. Therefore, participants seemed to reject not the social value of teaching itself but teaching as it is currently structured and rewarded in the Turkish education system.

Interestingly, participants often expressed strong confidence regarding their teaching skills; however, self-efficacy beliefs did not ultimately lead them to start the profession. This result contradicts previous studies that suggest a positive correlation between self-efficacy beliefs, positive attitudes towards teaching, and intention to teach (e.g., Demirtaş et al., 2011; Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Kula, 2022; San Martín et al., 2024). In this study, challenges within the broader system, such as low pay, heavy workload, and limited autonomy, appeared to outweigh personal beliefs in teaching ability. This suggests that even high self-efficacy may be insufficient when structural conditions and institutional support are perceived as inadequate, indicating that career decisions cannot be explained solely by individual-level psychological constructs. However, given the qualitative nature and limited sample size of the study, this pattern should be interpreted as illustrative rather than generalizable.

Similarly, the results showed that even high intrinsic motivation and a genuine passion for teaching did not necessarily lead ELT graduates to start their teaching careers. This reflects a disconnect between individual motivation and realities of the profession, which is also noted in studies on commitment and early-career attrition, where some graduates never start teaching despite strong initial intentions (Lindqvist et al., 2014; Rots et al., 2012). The present study extends this literature by showing that such a disconnect can emerge even before graduates formally start the profession, particularly through practicum experiences and increased awareness of labor-market conditions. In this sense, the practicum can be considered not only as a bridge into teaching but also as a critical screening phase, during which professional aspirations may be abandoned. This finding underscores the importance of preparing future teachers not only with pedagogical knowledge but also with realistic insights into school environments, employment conditions, and possible career pathways.

Concerns about personal utility value were evident across all three groups. Factors such as long working hours, low salaries and limited salary progression over time, and an imbalance between professional and personal life, particularly in private schools, were cited as significant concerns. Recent studies have shown that excessive workload, blurred work-life boundaries, and limited career prospects are among the strongest predictors of teacher stress, burnout, intentions to leave, and career switching (Alam & Asmawi, 2024). In line with these findings, participants in this study seemed to reject

teaching not because they dismissed its social importance, but because structural constraints made it difficult to imagine a sustainable and satisfying life as a teacher. For ELT graduates, the availability of alternative career paths that value their English language skills, such as translation, human resources, or international business, also might lower the cost of opting out of teaching, a pattern that reflects other contexts where teachers move into better-paid non-teaching positions (Alam & Asmawi, 2024). It also contributes to the paradox of teacher shortages co-existing with qualified graduates who never start a teaching job.

Although participants did not always explicitly describe teaching as a fallback career, their narratives suggested that, for some, teacher education functioned a second choice rather than a clearly defined professional aspiration. This resonates with the "fallback career" dimension of the FIT-Choice model and with previous research showing that lower initial commitment to teaching is associated with a greater likelihood of not pursuing the profession (Rots et al., 2012). These findings also highlight the importance of career guidance and greater transparency regarding employment conditions throughout teacher education programs, particularly in contexts where program entry is shaped more by exam scores than by professional aspirations.

Personality characteristics also emerged as influential on participants' decision making. Participants who described themselves as ambitious, independent, or uncomfortable with hierarchical settings felt that teaching would not align with their long-term career goals or work preferences. Others emphasized the need for patience, emotional resilience, and comfort with intensive interpersonal work, and doubted whether they possessed these qualities. These findings reinforce the importance of considering person-environment fit when examining career choices (Kelchtermans, 2017; Tait, 2008) and suggest that teacher education programs might benefit from integrating more explicit reflection on personal identity, personality, and working styles. However, this study also shows that having personality traits well-suited to teaching does not automatically translate into pursuing the profession, especially when structural conditions are perceived as unfavorable.

In summary, while the FIT-Choice framework provided a valuable interpretive lens, the findings point to a more complex interaction of individual, institutional, and cultural influences shaping teaching career decisions. Although the model is most commonly applied in quantitative research, its core dimensions offered a useful structure for qualitatively examining how participants articulated their motivations, values, and constraints in relation to teaching. Participants' narratives reveal how initial motivations, practicum experiences, labor-market conditions, and perceptions of person-environment fit intersect to shape the decision not to start teaching.

The findings also highlight a policy paradox in the Turkish context: despite documented shortages of English language teachers, some well-prepared ELT graduates deliberately remain outside the profession. Addressing these factors within teacher education programs and broader educational policy initiatives, such as improving working conditions, strengthening teacher autonomy, and offering realistic yet supportive socialization into the profession, may contribute to more informed and sustainable career paths for graduates of ELT programs.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. First, the number of participants was limited to nine ELT graduates. Although qualitative research does not aim for generalization, a larger and more diverse sample could have allowed for a broader range of perspectives and further enriched the findings. While the findings are based on a small sample, they still offer rich insights into how qualified graduates make sense of teaching as a career option in contemporary contexts.

Second, although participants graduated from different faculties of education, all were graduates of what they self-reported as prestigious public universities. This may have influenced their access to alternative career paths outside teaching. As a result, their trajectories may be different from the experiences of graduates from less prestigious institutions or from regions with fewer employment opportunities.

Third, participants appeared to possess relatively high levels of cultural and economic capital, which may have enabled them to go into non-teaching careers more easily. Although exact socio-economic data were not collected, their narratives suggest a level of privilege that may be uncommon among many teacher education graduates in Türkiye. This diverges from broader trends in Türkiye, where the teaching profession is often chosen by individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, for whom teaching is often perceived as a stable job that brings steady income (Aksu et al., 2010; Eren, 2017; Eret Orhan & Ok, 2014; Kılınç et al., 2012).

Finally, the study relied on retrospective self-reports, which may be influenced by memory and post-hoc rationalizations. Further studies could explore more diverse samples and longitudinal designs in order to investigate how these influences affect career decision-making among teacher education graduates over time.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that decisions not to pursue a teaching career among ELT graduates in Türkiye emerge across varying levels of initial motivation and commitment. The findings indicate that such decisions cannot be understood solely through individual career interests or commitment levels, but rather through the interaction of personal expectations and experiences within teacher education, particularly during practicum, which reshape how teaching is perceived as a long-term career.

Although intrinsic and altruistic motivations were evident, concerns around job security, workload, pay, and professional autonomy played a major role in shaping career decisions. The contrast between expectations of teaching and experiences during practicum highlighted a clear disconnect between the ideals promoted during teacher education and the realities encountered in school settings. These results indicate that teacher education programs should integrate opportunities for students to critically engage with the practical, emotional, and institutional dimensions of the profession, rather than focusing solely on pedagogical and linguistic competence.

From a policy standpoint, the results underline the need to improve working conditions, employment structures, and the social status of teachers in Türkiye. Such changes are key not only to reducing attrition but also to attracting and retaining individuals who might otherwise choose alternative careers. Rather than focusing only on teacher recruitment strategies, there should be sustained efforts to improve the quality of the teaching profession and eliminate the factors that discourage

teacher candidates from starting the profession in the first place.

Despite its qualitative nature and limited sample size, this study contributes to the literature by focusing on an underexplored group: graduates who complete teacher education programs but never start teaching. Future studies could widen the scope across disciplines or explore how intentions evolve over time through longitudinal designs. Cross-cultural comparisons may also yield insights into how policy and societal structures shape early career decisions. Ultimately, the study calls for a broader view of teacher retention: one that includes those who leave and those who never start. Listening to the concerns of these graduates is essential for building a sustainable and respected teaching profession.

Author Contributions

The author declares that there was no contribution from any other author and that the final version of the manuscript has been read and approved.

Ethical Declaration

This study was conducted with the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Applied Ethics Research Center at Middle East Technical University (Protocol No: ODTUIAEK-2024), dated 22 November 2024.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of the study.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the English language editing stage of this study, the ChatGPT tool was used to a limited extent solely for grammar checking. The accuracy of the text was carefully reviewed by the author, and necessary revisions were made. The author is fully responsible for the content of the manuscript.

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