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Understanding motivations to become teachers of English: ELT trainees’ perceptions

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore pre-service EFL teachers’ reasons for choosing English language teaching (ELT) as a career. The participants of the study were second-year student teachers in an ELT department in Turkey (N=100). Data were collected by means of The Teachers’ Ten Statements Test, which is a structured qualitative measure. The analysis revealed that ELT trainees seemed to be driven by a web of interacting intrinsic, extrinsic and socio-cultural motivational factors influencing their career choices. The results were discussed in relation to foreign language teacher education.

Keywords: ELT trainees; motivation; pre-service teacher education; teacher perception.

1. Introduction

Identifying and understanding teacher trainees’ reasons and motivations for becoming teachers seem to be crucial for teacher educators to add new forces to the teaching profession and to impact upon their subsequent professional growth, engagement, commitment and hence their teaching quality (Bruinsma & Jansen, 2010; Mansfield, Wosnitza, & Beltman, 2012; Subaşı, 2010; Richardson & Watt, 2005). Motivations for choosing teaching as a career have thus attracted considerable attention in recent years, and a number of research studies have been conducted to gain insights into pre-service and in-service teachers’ reasons for entering teacher education programmes. What these research studies have revealed is that there are many intrinsic, extrinsic, and sociocultural influences at work motivating individuals to become teachers: the incentive for ongoing personal development and learning, to touch and impact on the lives of others, to contribute to society, to secure a stable job and salary, to maintain a manageable workload, to name a few (Bastick, 2000; Chong & Low, 2009; Klassen, Al-Dhafri, Hannok, & Betts, 2011; Richardson & Watt, 2005; Rinke, 2008; Watt & Richardson, 2008).

Although there is a wealth of research on teacher motivation in the field of general education, there seems to be few studies that have investigated the motivations to become a teacher of English in the field of ELT (Kyriacou & Kobori, 1999; Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Subaşı, 2010). As also stated by Dörnyei (2001, 2003), there is a scarcity of research on language teacher motivation, and research studies on second language teacher motivation have not offered a comprehensive picture of why individuals choose second/foreign language teaching as a career. In light of all these, the present study aims to unearth ELT trainees’ motivations for becoming language teachers in a Turkish education context and contributes to the language teacher motivation literature in two unique ways. First,
rather than using quantitative measures to identify trainees’ motivations, it employs a structured qualitative measure called ‘The Teachers’ Ten Statements Test’ (TTST hereafter) (Klassen, Al-Dhafri, Hannok, & Betts, 2011). The use of quantitative survey measures has been criticized on the grounds that it might not offer a rich and sophisticated understanding on pre-service teachers’ motivational orientations (Brookhart & Freeman ,1992; Klassen, Al-Dhafri, Hannok, & Betts, 2011). Thus, this problem is dealt with in the present study through the use of a structured qualitative instrument. Second, a framework of language teacher motivation will be offered based on empirical data and guided by a clear theoretical approach: Watt and Richardson’s FIT-choice theory (2007).

2. FIT-choice theory

The FIT-Choice theory, derived from expectancy-value theory, proposes that career choices in education are influenced by teachers’ success expectations and task valuations (i.e. beliefs about expectancy/ability, perceptions of task value, and perceived task difficulty). To put it differently, we are motivated to act when we have expectancy for success. Watt and Richardson’s FIT-choice framework consists of a total of 12 factors. Five of these factors are stand-alone factors, and seven of them are grouped under two composite themes. The five stand-alone motivation factors include teaching ability, intrinsic career value, perception of teaching as a fallback career, prior teaching and learning experiences, and social influences. The personal utility value composite theme includes job security, time for family, and job transferability. The social utility composite theme includes shaping the future of students, enhancing social equity, making a social contribution, and working with children and adolescents.

A study on language teacher motivation would be impossible without a definition of teacher motivation. Following Katzell and Thompson, (1990) and Klassen, Al-Dhafri, Hannok, and Betts (2011), teacher motivation in the present study is broadly defined as a construct encompassing the processes that are responsible for the creation and maintenance of career choice and career continuance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were in their second year of training at an ELT department in one of the Turkish universities (N=100). In the context of the present study, ELT trainees, in their second year of education, are offered a variety of courses in relation to ELT methodology, English literature, and general educational principles. When the data were collected, the participants had already started taking these courses. The sample in the present study reflected the typical gender balance in Turkish teacher education programmes. 75% of the participants were female, with a mean age of 18.6 years.

3.2. Instrument

Data for the present study were collected by means of The Teachers’ Ten Statements Test, which is a structured qualitative measure. The benefits of using a structured qualitative measure are two-fold: It allows for the interpretation of contextual and cultural factors that quantitative measures cannot achieve. Also, participant responses are not influenced by researcher assumptions or biases during the data collection phase (Klassen et al, 2011). The original TTST asks participants to complete the following prompt by listing 10 reasons for why they have chosen to become teachers: ‘I am a teacher because …’. For the purposes of the present study, the wording of the prompt was slightly changed, and the participants were given the following prompt in Turkish: ‘I have chosen to become a teacher of English, because …’.

3.3. Data analysis

Participants’ responses were analysed by means of categorical-content method (Klassen et al., 2011; Lieblich et al., 1998). In order to code those responses, Klassen et al.’s framework of motivational factors (2011) was utilized.
In this framework, a total of 14 sub-factors was proposed, these sub-factors being ‘Intrinsic value, job security, time for family, job transferability, shape future, enhance social equity, make social contribution, work with children/adolescents, perceived ability for teaching, prior teaching and learning experiences, social influences, fallback career, gender roles, and religious purpose. However, several emerging themes were also considered in the analysis such as the linguistic and social status of English in Turkey and in the world. Each phrase or sentence generated by the participants was considered to be a single unit of analysis and coded accordingly. In order to establish reliability in the coding process, an independent researcher was asked to analyse certain amount of data after an initial discussion of the coding procedures. The two researchers first examined the whole data carefully together and then started working independently to code the responses. Through further sessions of discussion, coding disagreements were negotiated, and the codes were finalized. In order to calculate inter-rater reliability, the total number of agreements was divided by the sum of total number of agreements + disagreements (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis resulted in a high level of inter-rater reliability (80%).

Data were weighted according to the total number of reasons produced by participants. That is, each of the reasons and related motivational sub-factor were counted and described in the form of frequencies. Some of the participants gave two or more different reasons within a single sentence. Those reasons were counted as separate items.

4. Findings

As mentioned before, Klassen et al.’s framework of teacher motivation (2011) was used for purposes of data analysis. In this scheme, there were 14 different sub-factors and three composite themes. The present study extended this framework, resulting in in novel sub-factors of teacher motivation (See Table 1 for the full list of sub-factors and major themes). These sub-factors were ‘loving the subject matter itself, not having ability for other subject matters, opportunities for linguistic development, opportunities for self- development, not wanting to become a teacher, prior teaching experiences, financial influences, linguistic influences, social/linguistic status of the subject matter, significant others, extrinsic career value, and practicality of teaching’. In addition to the existing three composite themes in Klassen et al.’s framework (2011), a new composite theme was created to include several of the emerging factors. This new theme was titled as ‘extrinsic career value’ and consisted of two sub-factors (The other three major themes were personal utility value, social utility value, socio-cultural influences.). Thus, the framework in the present study consisted of four composite themes and 26 sub-factors in total. 11 of these were stand-alone factors.

Participants generated 1012 responses in total, with a mean of 10.12 responses. Of all the others, ‘intrinsic career value’ and ‘loving the subject matter itself’ were the most frequently mentioned reasons. These were immediately followed by ‘social influences’. ‘Extrinsic career value’ was rated as the fourth-highest endorsed sub-factor. As shown in Table 1, the other frequently endorsed sub-factors were as follows in descending order: ability, significant others, job security, make social contribution, prior learning experience, working with children/adolescents/people, not having ability for other subject matters, social and linguistic status of English, job transferability, opportunities for self-development, opportunities for linguistic development, gender roles, financial influences, shape future of children/adolescents, time for family, practicality of teaching, linguistic influences, religious purpose, not wanting to become a teacher, prior teaching experiences, and fallback career. The sub-factor ‘enhance social equity’ was not rated by participants at all. Overall, ‘socio-cultural influences’ were the highest-rated composite theme, followed by ‘personal utility value’, ‘extrinsic influences’, and ‘social utility value’.
5. Discussion

The present study revealed socio-cultural motives as the most prevalent group of factors in ELT trainees’ career choices (As indicated in Table 1, this composite theme consisted of four individual sub-factor: social influences, religious purpose, significant others, and gender roles.). The predominancy of sociocultural motives might be explained on the basis of the collectivist nature of the Turkish society where the individual’s wants and expectations are superseded by those of families and communities.

‘Intrinsic career value’ and ‘loving the subject matter itself’ were the other most frequently mentioned reasons for why ELT trainees choose language teaching as a career. It might well be argued that this paints a promising picture since there is evidence to support the relationship between type of motivation and degree of professional commitment. In other words, those who are attracted to teaching for intrinsic reasons are more committed to teaching (Wang & Fwu, 2001). Also, this finding seems to echo the findings of previous research on teacher motivation carried out across different educational settings and points to the universal nature of teacher motivation.
‘Personal utility value’ and ‘extrinsic career value’ were also mentioned frequently by participants as reasons for their career choices. This finding suggests that some of the ELT trainees are interested in pragmatic and extrinsic gains of teaching, which in turn might be a predictor of less teacher commitment and engagement. When compared to the above-mentioned factors of motivation, ‘social utility value’ ranked rather low. Interestingly enough, the sub-factor in this composite category ‘enhance social equity’ was mentioned by neither of the participants. There were also four of the trainees who stated that they did not want to become teachers. These findings seem to be a bit disheartening and have a bearing on both foreign language teacher educators and policy makers. In teacher education programmes, it should be customary to explore and develop teacher trainees’ motivational beliefs from the very beginning of their education to the end. This could be achieved by awareness raising activities in which teacher trainees are asked to reflect on their own motivations and aspirations for teaching. Similarly, policy-makers should reconsider teacher recruitment and retention strategies to keep teachers motivated all throughout their careers.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed to unveil ELT trainees’ motivations for choosing language teaching as a career. To this end, The Teachers’ Ten Statements Test (Klassen et al., 2011) was administered to second-year ELT trainees in an ELT department in Turkey (N=100). Results seemed to indicate that ELT trainees were driven by a web of interacting intrinsic, socio-cultural and extrinsic motivational factors influencing their career choices, socio-cultural factors being a more salient source of career motivation and largely provided support for the FIT-Choice framework of teacher motivation. Furthermore, TTST proved to be a useful tool to explore pre-service teachers’ career choices and contributed to an enriched understanding of their motivational orientations, extending the previous frameworks of teacher motivation.

References