

Researching Occupational Choice of Student Teachers of English as a Foreign Language at German Universities

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Abstract: The present study investigates occupational choice of student teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) at German universities. The main aim was finding out what motives influenced their decision for choosing teaching English as a career and whether they are certain about their decision. Moreover, the relationship between motives and gender was explored. The research data was collected via a questionnaire containing open-ended and closed questions which was completed by 1,709 prospective English teachers from 19 universities. The data analysis was carried out by means of SPSS statistical package program. The findings of the study showed that both female and male students were preliminarily motivated by intrinsic motives. While female respondents were generally encouraged by their enthusiasm for working with children and teenagers, the male subjects mostly named their obligation to society to accomplish a worthwhile social task. The results of the study demonstrated that a majority of the participants were certain about their career decision. Since it is difficult to reverse a career decision for teaching, a timely self-reflection concerning student teachers' occupational choice to avoid disappointments in the later stages of their teacher training and a burnout in their future career is emphasized.

Key words: career motivations, English language teaching, student teachers, occupational choice

1. Introduction

Teacher education in Germany is a demanding and tedious process. Prospective teachers are expected to complete a subject-based course of study and a series of internships related to the level at which they will teach. It should be noted that prospective teachers are required to specialize in at least two subjects, the combination of which must meet regulations. They have to submit a thesis and pass the written and oral First State Examination in subject-based content and educational sciences. The second phase of their education, comprised of in-service-training, culminates in the Second State Examination, which qualifies teachers to receive a full-time teaching position. It has four parts: a dissertation on educational theory, pedagogical psychology, or the pedagogy of one chosen subject; micro-teaching; and an examination on the fundamental issues of educational theory, educational and civil service legislation, and school administration.

In many countries, it has become difficult to motivate young people to choose the teaching profession and to

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keep trained teachers within the profession (Watt & Richardson, 2007; Taylor, 2006; Moran et al., 2001). Despite relatively better working conditions in Germany, compared to other European countries, the number of German teachers who take early retirement due to occupational stress is quite remarkable (15% in 2012) (Bericht von Statistisches Bundesamt, 2014, p. 1).

According to statistical information provided by the Federal Statistical Office, a majority of students of English/American Studies at German universities chose to become a teacher at the end of their university career (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2014, p. 55). Bearing in mind the challenge of teacher education and the realities of the teaching profession, this situation raises some important questions: What motivates young people to choose teaching as a career? What are their career goals? Do they have realistic expectations of the future?

In fact, for the past several decades these questions have been a popular subject of research. As a result, there is a substantial body of international research: for example, Krieger (2000), Ulich (2004), Terhart (2001), and Özkul (2011) in Germany; Saban (2003) and Aksu et al. (2010) in Turkey; Moran et al. (2001) and Sinclair (2008) in America; and Kappler (2013) in Switzerland. However, there has been a dearth of research focused on prospective English language teachers. That a prospective teacher has to make a decision not only about teaching as a profession but also about what to teach has been utterly neglected in career motivation research. In an attempt to address this research gap, the present study sought answers to the following research questions: What are the motivating reasons for young people at German universities to become EFL teachers? Are there any gender-specific differences? Are they certain about their occupational choices?

The main purpose of the study is to reach results and conclusions that will contribute to an understanding of the issues and help teacher educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers to improve the quality of pre-service teacher education. The goal is worthwhile because the choice of a career has a long-term impact on people. An unwilling or thoughtless choice may result in low academic achievement during pre-service education and corresponding low quality in teacher training. Since it is difficult to reverse a career decision to teach, poor decision-making may also trigger dissatisfaction and burnout during on-the-job teaching (Kan 2008; Dolunay, 2002).

The quality of pre-service training is closely related to the motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of prospective teachers. Thus, knowing the profile of one's students has become important and can help university faculties to improve the quality of their teacher training (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992).

2. Methodology

In this part, the selection of research participants, data collection and procedure as well as data analysis will be explained in detail.

2.1 Population and Sample

The first step of the study was to get access to and recruit student teachers for the research. A detailed information letter about the project was sent to the chairpersons of English Language Teaching Departments asking for their cooperation and permission to implement the questionnaire in their classrooms. The purpose of this method of sampling was to get as many student participants as possible and ultimately to reach reliable research findings. In effect, the questionnaire was completed by 1,727 students; however, due to errors or missing data in some responses, only 1,709 questionnaires were analyzed.

Of the final study group of 1,709, 76% were female and 24% were male, all enrolled in English language

teaching departments at 19 German universities in 10 federal states. Due to the retrospective nature of questions about an already made career decision, freshmen from 1st to 3rd semesters were asked to participate, thus avoiding a potential recency effect. Moreover, the whole study was conducted anonymously to account for social desirability in answering the questions. The average age of the subjects was 22. The participants completed the questionnaire voluntarily, in courses they were taking at their universities.

2.2 Data Collection and Procedure

The data collection was composed of three steps: pre-survey, piloting, and main survey. These procedures will be explained in the following sub-sections.

2.2.1 Pre-survey

In this stage, a questionnaire including three open-ended questions was administered to 197 students in the introductory course on Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the University of Munich, a small representation of the target group, namely university students studying English Language Teaching in their first three semesters. Participants were asked to respond in their own handwriting to the following three prompts: “(1) Why do you want to become a teacher?” “(2) Why did you choose English as your subject?” and “(3) Are you certain about your career decision? — and, if not, state your reasons.”

The questionnaire was conducted in German, the mother tongue of the participants. The objective of using a questionnaire with open questions was to provide students with an opportunity to formulate their answers spontaneously without the influence of any given options. By means of the computer program MAXQDA, various categories of career motives and item pools for the main survey were developed. The following categories were identified, corresponding to meaningful themes that recurred in student responses (see Table 1).

Table 1 Categories of Motives for Occupational and Subject Field Choice

	Intrinsic Motivation	Extrinsic Motivation
Occupational Choice	1. Competence and interest 2. Pedagogical motives 3. Social motives	1. Practice-related motives 2. Pragmatic motives 3. Experience-related motives 4. Study conditions 5. Others
Subject Field Choice	1. Improvement of language skills 2. Foreign language competence 3. Interest/lack of interest 4. Social motives 5. Enthusiasm for English language	1. Practice-related motives 2. Pragmatic motives 3. Experience-related motives 4. Study conditions

The following statements collected from the responses of participants in the pre-survey serve to illustrate each category:

Occupational Choice/Intrinsic Motivation: (1) Competence and interest: “I feel myself competent to teach English.” “I can incorporate my subject field interests in teaching profession.” (2) Pedagogical motives: “I like working with kids and teens.” “I can make a good contribution to the education of new generations.” (3) Social motives: “I want to accomplish a worthwhile social task.” “I want to pursue a profession which receives social recognition.”

Occupational Choice/Extrinsic Motivation: (1) Practice-related motives: “Teaching is an interesting and a diversified profession.” “I can work with pupils from different age groups.” (2) Pragmatic motives: Flexible working hours; lengthy vacations; civil servant status and security of employment; good salary; (3) Experience-related motives: “I gathered positive/negative experiences at school.” “Both of my parents are

teachers.” (4) Study conditions: “I wanted to study a subject field which could at best be combined with teaching profession.” “Due to my average grade in the school leaving exam (*Abitur*) the number of alternative studies was limited” (restricted combinations of subject fields). (5) Other motives: “I wanted to become a teacher because I didn’t know what to study otherwise.” “I wanted to become a teacher because my parents insisted on this profession” (teaching profession as a stop-gap solution).

Subject Field Choice/Intrinsic Motivation: (1) Improvement of language skills: “I have an opportunity to improve my language skills during my university education.” (2) Foreign language competence: “I had already possessed a good command of English before I started studying English.” “I am linguistically talented.” (3) Interest/lack of interest: “I am interested in English speaking countries and cultures.” (4) Social motives: “English plays an important role in international understanding and intercultural interaction.” (5) Enthusiasm for English language: “English is my favorite language.” “I am very enthusiastic about foreign languages.”

Subject Field Choice/Extrinsic Motivation: (1) Practice-related motives: “English as a subject field enables a creative and diversified lesson planning.” (2) Pragmatic motives: “Teachers of English have better employment opportunities.” (3) Experience-related motives: “I gathered positive/negative experiences at school” (trips to English-speaking countries, offering private English lessons). (4) Study conditions: “I wanted to study a subject field which could be combined only with English.”

2.2.2 Piloting

Based on the responses given in the pre-survey and guided by previous research studies, a comprehensive questionnaire was designed; it contains open-ended and closed questions about demographic information, occupational choice (teacher), subject-field choice (English), and certainty about occupational choice. Due to its two-part nature, the questionnaire provided both qualitative and quantitative information about the research subject. With a purpose to improve its language (German), structure, layout, as well as length, the questionnaire was pilot tested on a group of 36 pre-service English teachers at the University of Munich who would not participate in the main study. Their feedback helped to give the research instrument its final shape. Additionally, the questionnaire was discussed with colleagues from different disciplines at conferences and colloquia.

2.2.3 Main Survey

The final version of the inventory consisted of seven pages and five sections. The first section elicited background information about the participants, such as their family, educational experience, stay abroad, and languages spoken. The second section concerned the occupational choice of the student teachers. The third section included questions about the certainty of their occupational decision and potential reasons for uncertainty. The fourth section explored reasons for choosing English as subject-field. Finally, the students were invited to give feedback on the research instrument.

An adequate number of questionnaires was sent to participating universities via registered mail. The completed questionnaires were sent back by the lecturers who had administered them in their seminars. The return rate was 66%.

2.2.4 Data Analysis

To begin the analysis, all the responses to the questionnaires had to be transposed into digital data, a process that took approximately 130 work-hours for 1,709 questionnaires. The data obtained were analyzed via the SPSS program, mainly through mean reported frequencies of motives across all categories to identify the most and the least frequently chosen motives in both male and female groups.

In order to investigate any difference between these two groups, an independent samples t-test was employed.

Moreover, the mean results of both groups were compared, based on each motive category and individual item. A Pearson coefficient of correlation was used to analyze the relationship between the students' occupational choices and their gender. The significance level was taken to be 0.05 in all comparisons. Content analysis (Mayring, 2003) was used to analyze responses to the open-ended questions.

3. Findings

The fact that a majority of the participants were female pre-service teachers of English (76%) reflects the prevailing concept that teaching, in Germany and elsewhere, is a feminized occupation. Thus, the finding here confirms that entering candidates for teaching English, especially for English language teaching in primary schools (22.5% female; 8.5% male), are generally female (e.g., Watt & Richardson, 2007).

The results also reveal that teacher candidates generally come from non-academic families (i.e., without a university degree). Only 37% of the participants' fathers and 29% of their mothers had a university degree; however, 78% of the parents could speak at least one foreign language, namely English.

In the following section, selected research findings about occupational choice, subject field choice, and certainty of career decision will be presented.

3.1 Findings about Occupational Choice

The findings demonstrate that the occupational decisions of the participants had been made before their choice of subject. Accordingly, 68% of the female and 66% of the male participants had decided to become a teacher and later chose English for their subject. Nearly half of the participants (49%) wanted to teach English in high school. The average grade earned by male participants on the school leaving examination was lower than that of the female participants, a statistically significant difference between the two groups.

Intrinsic motives and pedagogical motives were the most cited reasons for occupational choice. The three top-rated motives for the occupational choice of both genders were: "I enjoy working with children and teens"; "I am interested in a profession in which I can establish frequent contact with other people"; and "I want to accomplish a worthwhile social task." Accordingly, both female and male subjects were mainly influenced by intrinsic motives in their occupational choice; however, pedagogical reasons were emphasized by female participants whereas male participants considered social reasons as the most determining factor. Consequently, the top three most highly rated motives for female students of EFL were: "I like children"; "I enjoy working with children and teens"; and "I am interested in a profession in which I can establish frequent contact with other people." The highest rated occupational motives for male students were: "I want to accomplish a worthwhile social task"; "I can make a good contribution to the education of new generations"; and "I enjoy working with children and teens."

A closer look at the findings revealed a few interesting statistically significant gender-specific differences, as depicted in the Table 2.

While motives regarding long holidays and teaching as a "fallback" career were behind most of the career choices of male participants, love for working with children and teens, more time for family, and the influence of the mother were behind most of the choices of female participants.

Table 2 Statistically Highly Significant Gender Differences Concerning Occupational Choice

Item	Women	Men
I enjoy working with children and teens.	61%	44%
If I become a teacher, I can combine family life with work life easily.	91.3%	78.4%
I was motivated by my mother to choose this profession.	41.9%	31.3%
I have long holidays.	40.4%	51.8%
I chose this profession because I did not know what to choose otherwise.	58.5%	79%

It is interesting to note that together with other two other motives, namely “less performance pressure” and “promotion opportunities”, “performing a profession with social prestige” was among the motives rated as least influential on the occupational choice of both genders.

Another remarkable finding was the influence of extrinsic factors on prospective teachers. Participants of both genders underlined the importance of prior positive experiences with their own teachers (65%), their experiences while giving private tutorials/lessons in English (58%), and prior negative experiences with their own teachers (52%). They stated either that they had had good teachers and wanted to take them as role models or that they wanted to do better than previous teachers with whom they had negative experiences. Moreover, they discovered their desire to impart the knowledge to others when they were giving private lessons.

Finally, the high ranking of the item “I wanted to become a teacher because I personally liked going to school” (71% female, 63% male) showed the influence of a positive atmosphere in the school environment on occupational choice. More than half of the participants (68% female; 63% male) identified their perceived talent for teaching as the reason for their career decision.

3.2 Findings about Subject Field Choice

The participants of the present study generally stated that they had become interested in English in the early grades of Gymnasium (grammar school). While female students usually preferred studying English as subject field in combination respectively with German, History, and Mathematics, male participants chose History, Sports, and German.

Both female and male participants were mainly influenced by intrinsic motives when making their choice of subject. The three most highly rated motives for choosing English are as follows: “I am interested in English speaking countries and cultures”; “I have an opportunity to improve my language skills during my university education”; and “I am very enthusiastic about foreign languages”. A highly significant difference between female and male participants was found in perceptions of their talent for learning foreign languages, which was mentioned more often by female respondents than by males.

There were three external reasons for choosing English: “English plays an important role in international understanding and intercultural interaction”; “English is a key qualification for future professional life of my pupils”; and “English as a subject field enables a creative and diversified lesson design.” The motives “English is liked by students more than other subjects”, “English is useful for travelling”, and “Teachers of English have better employment prospects” were the least rated.

In answer to questions about what extrinsic factors caused participants to choose English teaching, positive experiences with former teachers and when giving private lessons and also negative experiences in similar circumstances were given by both female and male participants as the most influential factors.

3.3 Findings about Certainty of Career Decision

Seventy-seven percent of female participants and 73% of male participants indicated that they definitely wanted to become a teacher.

Although there was not a statistically significant difference, the number of male participants who were uncertain about their decisions or certainly did not want to become teachers was higher than the number of female counterpart with similar misgivings. Furthermore, more male participants (25%) than female participants (16%) stated that they had decided to become a teacher because they did not know what else they could have studied, another statistically significant difference. Also, more males (28%) than females (15%) started or finished a previous university program, such as business administration, law, or medicine, before their current teacher training program, a finding in support of the hypothesis that more males than females choose the teaching profession as a “fallback” career, i.e., the career of “last resort.”

With the intent of finding out what factors could make the teaching profession seem unattractive, a further question about the reasons was asked: “I am interested in another profession” (73% female, 73% male); “I haven’t gained enough practical experience yet” (61% female, 61% male); and “I don’t have concrete future plans yet” (56% female, 79% male).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that intrinsic motives are of primary importance when prospective teachers of English make their choice of occupation and subject. Thus, it can be inferred that these student teachers were enthusiastic about entering the teacher education. Moreover, 68% of the females and 62% of the males named their talent for teaching as a motive for their career choice.

Extrinsic motives, such as lengthy holidays for male participants and pragmatic considerations for young mothers who wish to combine a career with raising children, produced a statistically highly significant difference between genders.

The majority of participants who were not sure about their career choice attributed their uncertainty to an interest in another profession. Another group stated that they were unsure because they had not yet gained enough practical experience in teaching. One might speculate from these arguments that uncertain English-teachers-to-be experience a certain amount of insecurity about the practical part of their profession and therefore are looking for plan B.

Reasons which were rated as the least influential on career choice, such as more attractive employment prospects, less performance pressure (working in a field that is not highly competitive), status and promotion possibilities, and working in a respectable profession explain to some extent why it has become difficult to motivate young people to choose teaching as a profession and to keep trained teachers within the profession.

It is well known that a skilled and qualified teaching workforce can influence young people’s lives by good teaching and the demonstration of good professional and personal traits (Bastick, 2000; Stronge, 2007). Prospective teachers in this study reported the influence of prior teachers as role models. Both career and subject choices of both genders were influenced by positive experiences with former teachers (65%). From this perspective alone, the quality of teacher education becomes crucial. It is momentous that candidates for the teaching profession become knowledgeable about their future occupation and form opinions about whether or not it is suitable for them by observing the behaviour of their teachers.

The arrival of highly motivated candidates will increase the quality of teacher education programs at universities and ultimately of teaching in schools. In this respect, an instrument for self-reflection on occupational decisions, including not only questions about underlying career motives but also about expectations of the profession, would be beneficial. In this regard, students making use of such an instrument should be asked to make predictions about the difficulties of their profession, such as the heavy workload of preparing lessons and teaching materials, insufficient teacher preparation time, which are often overlooked by students but are well documented in the research literature (e.g., Kronowitz, 2004; Stanulis, Follana & Pearson, 2002; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Teacher candidates should be confronted with the realities of their chosen profession through accurate statistical information.

Career guidance of student teachers of English should not be restricted to the early stages of teacher education. Although there have been advances in preparing students for full time teaching in pre-service education programs, this preparation is inadequate if the program cannot create or sustain an environment that genuinely reflects the reality of fulltime teaching. By means of more active cooperation between schools and universities, practicing teachers should be invited for talks about their daily lives spanning professional and private life. Students should be encouraged to ask questions about the difficulties and drawbacks of their chosen profession. For example, some useful seminars about educational issues, such as legal regulations, which are currently offered only during in-service training, should be integrated into teacher education programs at university. The reasons for future difficulties may perhaps be attributed to the unrealistic optimism of teachers-in-training.

Finally, owing to the participation of 1,709 teacher candidates attending 19 state universities in 10 federal states, it can be claimed that the present study conveys a large and representative account of the career motivations of pre-service English teachers in Germany. Future studies may complement the present study by observing prospective English teachers during the later stages of their teacher education as well as in the first year of their recruitment by using other data collection methods such as classroom observations, interviews, and journal writing. As a follow up longitudinal study the result of the present study may also be compared with the ones taken from experienced teachers.

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