

International Journal of Educational Innovations

ISSN 3078-5677

International Journal of Educational Innovations
Volume 1, Issue 2, 25-38
<https://doi.org/10.46451/ije.250502>

Received: 12 May, 2025
Accepted: 7 June, 2025
Published: 10 June, 2025

“Teaching by Choice, Not by Chance”: A Phenomenological Study into Vietnamese EFL Graduates’ Career Decision-Making in Light of Rational Choice Theory

Phan Nhat Hao*
Nguyen Hoang My
Truong Thai Thanh Tam
Can Tho University, Ninh Kieu District, Can Tho City, Vietnam
(*Corresponding author. Email: phannhathao85@gmail.com)

Abstract

In Vietnam, teaching is socially conceptualized as one of stable and prestigious careers, particularly for English language graduates. Previous research has shed light on these graduates’ motivation to declare teaching as their profession, leaving a knowledge gap in understanding their lived experiences in this career decision-making process. This study aims to fulfill this gap through investigating how English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) graduates make sense of their decision to enter the teaching profession, using a phenomenological approach framed by Rational Choice Theory. Data was collected from semi-structured interviews with twelve purposefully selected participants and analyzed following the Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological analysis guidance. Results indicated that participants experienced a process of career decision-making prioritizing an emotional attachment to the teaching profession, influences of inspirational role models, perceived practical advantages, a low-cost investment with stable returns, and concerns over instability in other professions. While they recognized teaching as a pragmatic and attainable choice, their decisions were also shaped by personal values, formative life experiences, and the cultural significance of teaching in Vietnamese society. The findings suggested that rationality in the career decision-making is also informed by emotional meaning and individual identities. These insights carried critical implications for language education and training, career counseling, and education policy in Vietnam and beyond.

Keywords

Career decision-making, English studies, EFL, graduates, phenomenology, Rational Choice Theory

Introduction

In recent decades, the demand for English language education has grown exponentially, both globally and within Vietnam (Nguyen, 2013). As the country continues to integrate more deeply into the global economy, English proficiency has become an essential asset for academic achievement, career advancement, and social mobility. In response to this growing demand, the Vietnamese government launched the National Foreign Language Project 2020 in 2008, aimed at enhancing the country's language capabilities. This initiative has since evolved into the National Foreign Language Project 2025, which focuses on elevating English teaching and learning standards across all educational levels (Phan et al., 2025). The project has positioned English as a critical priority and bolstered the reputation of teaching English as a viable and respected profession (Phan & Truong, 2025).

As the need for skilled English teachers escalates, coupled with the expanding opportunities in various English language proficiency exams, the profession of ELT has garnered increasing attention. The demand for qualified teachers within this field has created a huge number of opportunities, positioning teaching as a potentially rewarding profession (Moodie & Greenier, 2024). However, the decision to enter this profession is complex since it entails more than just a passion for teaching but is also influenced by a rational analysis of job security, career stability, and financial prospects. Moreover, the cultural values and societal expectations surrounding education hold a vital role in shaping career choices. The profession of teaching is respected and considered a stable and honorable career path. In light of Vietnam's competitive job market and fluctuating economic conditions, many people turn to teaching as a safe and dependable career choice. Moreover, the recent surge in the English proficiency tests in Vietnam such as IELTS (International English Language Testing System), TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), and VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency) (Nguyen et al, 2024) has provided further incentives, positioning English language teaching as a fulfilling and secure option, especially for those seeking long-term career sustainability.

Despite the growing body of literature on career decision-making and the increasing significance of English teaching globally, limited research has focused on lived experiences during this career decision-making process. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the career decisions of EFL graduates in Vietnam, using Rational Choice Theory as the guiding framework. By exploring the rational considerations that influence graduates' decisions to pursue teaching as a career, the research aims to offer deeper insights into the decision-making process, contextualized within Vietnam's unique educational, economic, and cultural environment. The study also holds global relevance, particularly for nations facing teacher shortages, growing demands for English education, and the challenge of aligning teacher recruitment strategies with the realities and motivations of future teachers in many diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Literature Review

ELT career choice in Vietnam

EFL graduates have a wide array of career pathways after their graduation. With their linguistic competence and intercultural communication skills, they are eligible for different working roles. They are allowed to work in translation and interpretation, tourism and hospitality, international business, customer service in multinational companies, media and publishing, and even graduate studies in related fields (Huynh et al., 2024). However, among these diverse options, a significant number of EFL graduates still choose to become language teachers. This

is considered a decision which raises important questions about the motivations, influences, and perceived value associated with teaching in different contexts.

The decision to pursue teaching as a long-term profession is neither impulsive nor homogeneous. It reflects a dynamic negotiation between individual aspirations, social values, and structural opportunities and limitations. In many Global South contexts, English language teaching holds symbolic and material significance, regarded as a respectable profession which provides stable income, social mobility, and a sense of contributing to national development through education (Nguyen, 2013). In Vietnam, teaching is symbolically tied to notions of respectability and familial pride. Vietnamese parents tend to encourage their children to become teachers, regarding it as a source of pride and long-term stability (Tran & Moskovsky, 2024). The influence of social expectations does not negate the role of self-agency. EFL graduates proactively reflect on and interpret their environments, internalizing or even resisting such expectations depending on their individual goals and their perceptions of the profession. Moreover, the process of deciding to become teachers is incremental and shaped by graduates' lived experiences throughout their academic programs. Participation in pedagogical coursework, field trips, internships, and interactions with stakeholders contribute to shaping their professional identities. Some students enter EFL programs without initially intending to teach but gradually develop a sense of purpose through engagement with real-world teaching scenarios. Others may begin with strong aspirations but later reassess their objectives in light of disillusionments experienced during training. Given this evolving nature of professional identity formation, the act of choosing teaching as a career must be understood as a fluid and context-bound process. It requires acknowledging how they attach meaning to their own choices, how they interpret teaching in relation to their circumstances, and how these meanings shift chronologically (Do & Hoang, 2024).

Related studies on ELT career choice

A substantial body of research has examined the motivations, perceptions, and contextual influences that contribute to the career choices of prospective EFL teachers. These studies, conducted in diverse national and educational contexts, have shown that the decision to pursue teaching is driven by a convergence of psychological, social, and structural influences.

Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000) found that undergraduates were influenced by intrinsic and altruistic motivations, such as a genuine interest in working with children and the belief in education as a meaningful profession. These findings supported the notion that personal fulfillment played a dominant role in shaping teaching aspirations in Western contexts. Besides, Basöz (2021) surveyed 155 pre-service EFL teachers and found that intrinsic career values, desire to work with children, time for family, and their social contribution significantly predicted academic achievement. This study also reported that grade level did not significantly influence students' motivation, suggesting that career aspirations remained relatively stable during teacher education programs. Similarly, Cengiz (2023) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate the motivations of pre-service EFL teachers in Turkey, with a particular focus on gender and societal influence. Using SPSS for quantitative analysis and Quirkos for qualitative coding, the study found that all participants were highly motivated to become English teachers and that the support and expectations of the community played a strong role in reinforcing this decision. Nine motivational factors were identified, combining both internal enthusiasm and external social validation.

Within Vietnamese settings, previous studies have offered context-specific insights into the motivations of EFL teachers to pursue teaching. Tran and Cao (2020) examined the career

intentions of 114 senior students at a language teacher education institution. Their findings indicated that prior teaching experience, intrinsic values, and the desire to make a social contribution were the most influential motivating factors. Less influential were fallback career concerns, job transferability, and time for family. The study also emphasized concerns about the declining number and quality of students entering English language teacher education programs, raising questions about long-term sustainability in the profession. Pham (2022) investigated how EFL teachers and students at a Vietnamese university perceived the qualities of a good EFL teacher. Although the study did not focus explicitly on career motivation, it offered important implications for teacher identity and professional aspiration. Both groups of participants emphasized knowledge of language teaching as the most important competency, based on the English Teacher Competency Framework (MoET, 2008). The shared perception of teaching competence and professionalism may influence students' decision to enter and remain in the profession.

While these studies offer valuable insights, most of them approach teacher motivation as a static phenomenon measured through survey instruments. Few have adopted a phenomenological perspective centering on how people experience and interpret their career choices. The current study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of EFL graduates in Vietnam, focusing on how their decisions to become teachers were shaped through reflection, negotiation, and contextual reasoning. By amplifying their voices, this research aims to contribute a more grounded understanding of how this teacher population makes sense of their lived experiences in career decision-making.

Theoretical framework: Rational choice theory

To investigate how EFL graduates decide to become English teachers, this study drew on Rational Choice Theory (henceforth abbreviated as RCT) as its central theoretical framework. Coined in economics and later applied in the social sciences, the theory posits that individuals are rational actors who make decisions by evaluating potential benefits and drawbacks of available options, aiming to select the one that best serves their personal goals (Steinmetz & Pratt, 2024). Thus, it assumes that people act intentionally and strategically, based on their perceptions of what is most advantageous within the context of their lived realities (Scott, 2000).

In the domain of career decision-making, RCT offers a structured lens to understand how individuals assess career paths such as teaching by considering various factors. These evaluations are inherently subjective, which is shaped by contextual influences. Importantly, RCT does not reduce decisions to cold calculations. Instead, it acknowledges that values, emotions, and social obligations are integrated into individuals' reasoning processes. This study integrates this theory to highlight how individuals interpret and justify their career choices based on their lived experiences. Instead of seeking to measure motivation quantitatively, the study aims to explore how EFL teachers perceive their decisions as rational. RCT, thus, functions as an interpretive tool which reveals the underlying logic participants use to make sense of their career paths, especially when such decisions might appear contradictory or even unexpected to outside observers.

To guide the inquiry, the following research question is proposed: How do Vietnamese EFL graduates interpret their decision to pursue teaching as a rational career choice within their socio-cultural contexts?

Methodology

Research design

This study was deployed with a phenomenological research design to explore how EFL graduates in Vietnam experienced and made sense of their decisions to pursue teaching as a career. Phenomenology, as conceptualized by Creswell and Poth (2018), is a qualitative research approach that aims to uncover the meanings that individuals assigned to their lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon under investigation was the career decision-making process of entering the teaching profession. Academically, phenomenology was selected for its emphasis on personal lived experiences, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how EFL graduates interpreted and constructed meaning around their decisions. The approach provided a nuanced understanding of the personal, social, and institutional factors that influenced their choice of teaching. Also guided by RCT, the study examined the decision-making processes of these graduates via a lens which assumed individuals acted rationally to evaluate options, seeking to maximize benefits and minimize costs (Scott, 2000). This theoretical framework was relevant in understanding how graduates weighed personal aspirations, family expectations, economic considerations, and personal conditions when deciding to become teachers.

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited through a purposive sampling technique, one of the most popular non-probability sampling techniques. It targeted those who met specific criteria relevant to the research focus. The study focused on EFL graduates from a public university in southern Vietnam, all of whom had majored in English Studies (locally translated as *Ngôn ngữ Anh*). To be eligible, participants needed to have declared teaching as their professional choice and completed at least one year of teaching experience by the time of data collection.

A population of twelve EFL graduates (six males and six females) were finally selected, representing diverse academic profiles. Significantly, some graduates pursued additional professional development activities like Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (abbreviated as TESOL) certificates or obtained English proficiency credentials including IELTS, TOEIC, and VSTEP, which further shaped their teaching career trajectories. Table 1 below summarizes the demographic information of the participants.

Data Collection

Data was qualitatively collected via semi-structured interviews (Takona, 2024). This approach enabled an investigation into the nuanced reasoning, emotional undercurrents, and contextual influences guiding each graduate's career choice. The interview protocol was developed based on the study's phenomenological orientation and RCT framework. The aim was to invite reflection and interpretation rather than mere description. To ensure alignment with research objectives, the protocol was structured around four core thematic areas including personal background and educational journey, career decision-making processes, influential factors, perceptions of teaching and professional identity. This protocol was reviewed and refined in consultation with two qualitative research specialists in language education. A piloting interview was conducted with one eligible graduate, after which minor adjustments were made to improve the clarity, logical flow, and depth of data collected.

Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to maximize comfort, authenticity, and expressiveness. Each session took place either in a quiet office, depending on participants' locations and preferences, ensuring minimal interruption and an open atmosphere. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and with participants' informed consent, all sessions were

audio-recorded. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim, with attention to preserving tone, pauses, and emotionally salient expressions to retain the depth and richness of the data for analysis. This rigorous interviewing process allowed participants to reflect personally on their journeys, offering insights into what decisions they made and how they understood, justified, and lived through those decisions. The resulting data served as a foundation for capturing the layered realities of EFL graduates' career choices within their broader socio-cultural contexts.

Table 1.
Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Year of graduation	Qualifications	Years of teaching
Anh	Female	2021	TESOL Certificate IELTS 7.5	3
Bao	Male	2020	TESOL Certificate TOEIC 900	4
Chi	Female	2022	TESOL Certificate VSTEP B2	1
Duy	Male	2019	TESOL Certificate IELTS 7.5	3
Lan	Female	2021	TESOL Certificate IELTS 7.5	3
Minh	Male	2020	TESOL Certificate TOEIC 890	3
Nam	Male	2022	TESOL Certificate VSTEP B2	1.5
Oanh	Female	2019	TESOL Certificate VSTEP C1	4
Phuc	Male	2021	IELTS 8.0	2
Quyen	Female	2022	TESOL Certificate VSTEP C1	2
Son	Male	2020	TOEIC 950	4
Thu	Female	2023	TESOL Certificate IELTS 7.5	1.5

Data analysis

The data analysis process in the current study was deployed following the steps introduced by Moustakas (1994) in phenomenological studies. These steps involved identifying significant statements, categorizing them into themes, and synthesizing the essence of participants' experiences. The first step was bracketing, where the researcher set aside personal biases to ensure an unbiased understanding of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2018). Following this, the researcher carefully read through the interview transcripts, identifying significant statements that captured the essence of the participants' lived experiences. These statements were then coded into themes based on their relevance to the research question.

Once significant statements were coded, they were grouped into broader themes reflecting key factors influencing the participants' career decisions. The analysis process was further facilitated by NVivo software, which helped in organizing and coding qualitative data. By synthesizing themes, the researcher was able to articulate the shared and individual meanings underlying participants' decisions to pursue teaching as a career. This phenomenological approach to data analysis aimed at providing a deep understanding of the decision-making

processes of EFL majors in Vietnam, revealing common and unique aspects of their experiences.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were a crucial aspect of this study, and all procedures were carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines. Prior to data collection, participants were fully informed about the nature, purpose, and potential risks of the current study. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and could withdraw from the study at any time without any detrimental consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they understood their rights, including the right to confidentiality and anonymity. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Any identifying information was removed from all interview transcripts. Audio recordings and transcriptions were stored securely in a password-protected personal computer. Additionally, the researcher made efforts to be culturally respectful of participants' perspectives, recognizing that their experiences were individual and nurtured by socio-cultural influences. By adhering to these ethical principles, the researcher sought to ensure that participants' rights were protected and that the research process was conducted with integrity.

Trustworthiness

Establishing the trustworthiness for the current study was a key priority throughout the research process. Trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) refers to the establishment of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research findings. Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of this phenomenological research. To establish credibility, the researcher engaged in prolonged engagement with participants, spending adequate time in the data collection phase to build rapport and gather in-depth insights. Member checking was conducted, wherein participants were invited to review the interview transcripts and initial interpretations of the data to ensure that their perspectives were accurately represented. Secondly, to ensure transferability, the study provided detailed descriptions of participants' backgrounds and the research setting. The dependability was ensured through an audit trail, which involved documenting all stages of the research process, from the development of the research questions to the final interpretation of the data. The researcher kept detailed notes on decisions made throughout the study and steps taken to ensure consistency in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Lastly, to enhance confirmability, the researcher took steps to minimize bias and ensure that research findings were based on the participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's assumptions. Additionally, the researcher engaged in self-reflection to identify and address any personal biases and preconceptions which might influence the interpretation of the data.

Findings

The findings revealed that the decision to pursue teaching as a career among Vietnamese EFL graduates originated from a combination of personal passion, life experiences, and contextual influences. Through a phenomenological analysis of participants' data, five key themes emerged, shedding light on the unique ways graduates interpreted and made sense of their career choice in teaching.

A deep-seated passion for teaching and education

For many participants, the decision to become a teacher was shaped by emotions and personal values. They recalled that this interest began during their school years. Positive experiences and meaningful interactions with teachers inspired them to imagine themselves in the role of a

language teacher. Duy described powerful emotions he experienced during her first classroom teaching session,

“The moment I stood in front of a classroom for the first time, it felt like something inside me aligned. I was moved. Watching students look up, waiting for me to guide them, I realized this was what I was meant to do. It’s a strange but beautiful feeling when you know deep down that you belong to a certain place, and for me, that place is the classroom.”

Duy’s story illustrated how he saw his teaching career choice as an emotionally charged action. Teaching was a space where he felt a strong sense of belonging and purpose. These experiences supported the idea that career choices are tied to inner feelings and meaning-making processes. Furthermore, Son shared a memory from his childhood which continued to influence his thinking as an adult,

“As a child, I used to “teach” my younger cousins and my neighbors’ kids using old notebooks and broken chalk. Years later, when I was in university, I realized that what I felt back then was not just childish play. It was a longing to connect, to guide, to help someone become a better version of themselves. Now, when I teach English, I still feel that same energy. I now see teaching as a life rhythm that suits the way I think”.

Son showed how early personal experiences became part of a meaningful story which helped him explain and understand his decision. His career choice developed over time via experiences which forced him to recognize teaching as part of who he was becoming.

These illustrated that teaching, for participants, was a continuous unfolding of personal meaning. Their experiences formed a coherent emotional thread that linked past impressions with present commitments. Teaching became a space where they could express held values and revisit parts of themselves that once felt joyful and purposeful.

Inspirational role models

A significant factor that shaped participants’ decisions to become teachers was the presence of inspirational role models. These figures were often former teachers who made a deep and lasting impression on participants during their educational journey. Many recalled how observing the dedication and enthusiasm of their teachers shaped their perception of what it meant to teach.

In particular, Lan shared a story about her high school English teacher,

“I still remember how my high school English teacher stayed after school just to help me understand grammar. She did not treat me like a weak student but believed I could do better. That kind of faith stayed in me. I want to give that to others too. I kept thinking, if I could be half the teacher she was, I’d already be proud of myself.”

Lan’s story illustrated how meaningful support from a teacher could leave a strong emotional impact. Her decision to pursue teaching came from a personal desire to recreate the same care and belief she once received. Additionally, Minh spoke about the influences of one of his university lecturers,

“It was during our final year that I was imitating the way my university lecturer explained things. Not just the content, but her tone, her way of listening to my friends and me. I think we choose teaching as we have seen what “beautiful teaching” looks like.”

Minh's account showed how observing thoughtful teaching practices helped him form his own image of the kind of teacher he wanted to become. He viewed teaching as a personal ideal and was inspired by real-life examples he had witnessed.

Across the interviews, participants described their role models as more than just teachers. These figures acted as emotional anchors who shaped how participants viewed teaching and how they viewed themselves. In turn, they were motivated to become that kind of presence for future learners.

Perceived practical advantages

Although many participants described their decision to become teachers as emotional and value-driven, several others focused on practical concerns that influenced their career choices. These included the availability of teaching jobs, financial stability, and the possibility of maintaining a balanced lifestyle.

For some participants, teaching appeared to be a realistic and accessible path. They described it as a career that matched their existing qualifications and required fewer additional resources compared to other professional options. Bao explained his reasoning,

"To be honest, I considered many careers, but most of them required extra qualifications or connections that I did not prefer. Teaching felt realistic. It's something I'm trained for. I know I can get a job in a school, and that matters when your family depends on you."

This showed a process of careful evaluation. Bao recognized the limits of his current resources and identified teaching as a profession that provided a clear and attainable route. Expanding upon Bao's idea, Oanh offered a perspective that combined present practicality with future possibilities,

"I know teaching is not the most glamorous job, but it offers stability. The schedule is manageable, the salary is enough for a modest life, and in the future, I can work in education management or open a language center."

In this realization, Oanh valued the structure which teaching provided. Her view reflected strategic thinking: she entered teaching with the intention to explore other roles in education later on.

These reflections illustrated how many participants used rational judgment in their career decision-making. Teaching was seen as a sensible choice within the context of limited options, economic pressures, and the desire for personal progress. For these participants, the profession represented a step toward survival and opportunity, offering a degree of control over their future paths.

Low-cost investment with stable returns

Several participants described teaching as a profession that required a modest amount of input but offered dependable outcomes. Their decisions reflected a thoughtful evaluation of what the profession could realistically offer based on their financial means. They appreciated that it was clear, structured, and offered room for personal development without requiring initial investment. Minh shared his thoughts,

"Teaching felt like a realistic starting point. I already had the degree then I enroll for training programs, and I could step into a classroom and begin learning through doing. I did not need a lot of money to get started."

Minh saw the classroom as a place where he could develop self-efficacy and personal competencies over time, without needing to invest heavily in further education or external training. Quyen further expressed a similar view,

“I chose teaching because I knew I could grow into it. It does not ask for too much at the beginning. It gave me space to build myself up. Every lesson, every interaction teaches me something new. I am not just giving knowledge but gaining it too.”

Quyen’s words reflected a mindset of continuous learning. For her, teaching offered both financial stability and personal enrichment. She valued the chance to improve herself through experience, and to evolve professionally while already being in the field.

These reflections revealed that participants assessed teaching as a career that balanced feasibility with meaningful growth. The profession allowed them to begin without financial burden while also offering ongoing opportunities for learning. In this sense, their decisions were facilitated by a rational understanding of what they could manage and what they could become.

Choosing Teaching Due to Perceived Instability in Other Careers

Several participants described their decision to pursue teaching as a response to the instability they observed in other professional fields. Their choice reflected a practical evaluation of risks and opportunities in a changing economic environment. As they assessed their career options, teaching appeared to offer a level of stability and continuity that other careers did not guarantee.

In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the way participants perceived the job market. Some industries were described as unpredictable and vulnerable to sudden disruption. Anh recalled the shift in her thinking,

“At first, I wanted to work in another field. However, after the pandemic, everything collapsed. My cousins lost their jobs in that field, some of my friends could not find work after graduation. Among many options, I looked at teaching with security. Teaching gives me peace of mind.”

Anh’s reflection showed how external events influenced her career direction. The teaching profession appeared more dependable, offering reassurance in a time of uncertainty. Phuc also described how he reconsidered his career goals after observing challenges,

“I used to think I would work for a private company and try something in marketing. After my graduation from university, I saw how unstable the job can be. People get fired easily, the pressure is very very high, and the future is unclear. [...] With teaching, even if the pay is not that high, at least I know that it is stable.”

The high demands and unpredictability of private-sector jobs discouraged Phuc from pursuing that path. Teaching offered him a sense of routines and control over his work life.

For participants, teaching represented protection from the uncertainties of the labor market. These participants did not describe teaching as a backup plan, but as a logical and responsible choice in light of what they had experienced. In their reflections, teaching was conceptualized as a vital profession that both withstood external pressures and provided a sustainable path forward.

Discussions

The decision to pursue teaching among Vietnamese EFL graduates in this study can be interpreted through the lens of RCT, yet it also transcends the narrow assumptions of purely economic calculation. RCT suggests that individuals make choices by evaluating options based on their costs, benefits, and available resources. Participants in this study demonstrated a clear awareness of these factors. They recognized teaching as a profession that offered institutional stability, accessible entry, and opportunities for continuing long-term personal and professional development. Especially for those coming from the Mekong Delta where job markets are more constrained and career advancement depends on public-sector employment teaching represented a sustainable and socially endorsed choice.

Participants' decisions showed that rationality was driven by culturally embedded values and personal experiences. Many described an early emotional connection to teaching, sparked by positive school experiences. These affective encounters were not incidental. They were integrated into the reasoning process, helping them see teaching as a path which aligned with their values and offered a sense of educational purpose. In this regard, RCT can be enriched by acknowledging that internal coherence and emotional fulfillment are themselves perceived benefits, particularly in cultures where teaching is held in high moral regard. Participants also framed teaching as a space of possibility. Although it did not promise financial abundance, it offered clear progression, social respect, and room for learning. Several participants viewed teaching as a launchpad for future ambitions whether in educational management, private language centers, or postgraduate study. Their choice was forward-looking and pragmatic, shaped by the constraints of their present and the vision of a better future. These suggest that RCT had better consider not only short-term trade-offs but also long-term aspirations within boundaries of what is realistically achievable. Cultural expectations played a significant role in shaping the perceived value of teaching. In the Vietnamese context, and particularly in the Mekong Delta, educators are not merely knowledge transmitters but moral figures. Teaching carries social recognition that translates into symbolic capital. Participants repeatedly mentioned the pride of their families, the status associated with being a teacher, and the sense of moral clarity they found in the profession. These cultural meanings amplified the non-material rewards of teaching, reinforcing its rational appeal in a socially constructed value system. Unlike in many urban or globalized labor markets wherein teaching may be devalued, in this region, teaching retained its prestige and functioned as a pathway to social legitimacy and contribution.

A comparison with relevant studies reveals convergences and divergences in motivations for choosing teaching as a career. Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000) identified intrinsic interest and altruistic goals as key drivers among British undergraduates, such as a desire to work with children and to contribute to society. While similar motivations were found in the present study, they were more deeply embedded in cultural narratives of duty and identity. Basöz (2021), working in the Turkish context, emphasized that intrinsic career values and social contribution were predictors of academic success, echoing this study's findings that emotional fulfillment and strategic planning could coexist in participants' decisions. Cengiz's (2023) findings also aligned with how participants saw teaching as a socially endorsed and dignified role. In the Vietnamese context, the study revealed that even amidst practical concerns, participants viewed teaching as a meaningful and viable long-term path, consistent with Tran and Cao (2020)'s findings. Pham's (2022) perceptions were reflected in this study. Participants went further by framing teaching as a vocation that allowed for ongoing self-formation, stability, and contribution. Collectively, the findings suggested that RCT is effective when interpreted as a flexible framework which can accommodate emotional, social, and cultural reasoning.

Participants interpreted their world, evaluated their position within it, and chose teaching as the most coherent, secure, and meaningful path forward. In this context, rationality was not simply about maximizing benefit but becoming someone they could be respected, in a profession their community would value, and in a life that made emotional and ethical sense. Teaching, in these participants' perspectives, was both a rational choice and a deeply reasoned one.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that teaching was chosen through a process of rational reasoning that was situated within cultural, emotional, and structural realities. Drawing on RCT, the study demonstrated that participants actively assessed teaching as a profession which offered long-term stability, accessible entry, and a pathway to personal growth and social recognition. Their choices reflected a calculated response to the perceived risks and limitations of other professional fields, especially in the socio-economic context of the Mekong Delta, where economic precarity and limited career alternatives are ongoing concerns. However, what emerged most clearly is that rationality was defined by emotional logics. Cultural narratives surrounding teaching in Vietnam further elevated its appeal. These cultural meanings shaped participants' perceived benefits and solidified teaching as a rational and value-aligned choice.

Implications

The findings of this study offer several key implications for educational policymakers, education institutions, and career guidance services in Vietnam, particularly in relation to supporting EFL graduates as they navigate their career choices. Firstly, the graduates' strong emphasis on job stability and economic security in their decision to pursue teaching underscores the need for policies that enhance the long-term viability and attractiveness of the teaching profession. As many sectors face growing precarity, the education system should offer clearer career pathways, stable employment conditions, and accessible opportunities for professional advancement. Secondly, the cultural value traditionally attached to teaching in Vietnamese society presents an opportunity for policymakers and educators to reposition the teaching profession as a socially respected and development-oriented career. By embedding civic responsibility, ethical service, and national contribution into teacher education programs, institutions can reinforce the non-material rewards of teaching, aligning graduates' intrinsic motivations with broader societal needs. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening career guidance services at university levels. Furthermore, career counseling should move beyond the general encouragement and offer data-informed, context-sensitive support, including information on job market conditions, expected incomes, and long-term career progression across different sectors.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into how participants interpret their lived experiences in choosing teaching as their profession, several limitations need to be carefully considered. Above all, the study focused on EFL graduates at a specific university, which may not fully represent the broader population of university students across the country. Future research could explore the career decision-making process of EFL graduates in different regions and educational contexts to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Secondly, while this study employed a qualitative approach, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced biases related to participants' perceptions of their own decision-making processes. To improve this, future studies could incorporate a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative tools with quantitative data sources to validate findings and offer a more well-rounded view of career choices. Finally, research on career decision-making in the teaching profession could examine the long-term outcomes of choosing teaching, particularly in terms

of job satisfaction, professional identity, and career progression. By following participants over time, future studies are expected to shed light on how rational career choices alter as individuals gain experience in the profession and encounter teaching challenges.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality of their responses. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription to ensure anonymity. The study received ethical clearance from the research ethics committee of the affiliated institution.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to the EFL graduates who generously shared their experiences and insights. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues and advisors who provided valuable feedback throughout the research process

References

- Basöz, T. (2021). Pre-service EFL teachers' career motivations and the role of grade level and academic achievement: A Turkish case. *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 13(1), 476–496. <https://ijci.wcciinternational.org/index.php/IJCI/article/view/457>
- Cengiz, B. C. (2023). The motivation of pre-service EFL teachers to become teachers: A mixed-methods study in Turkey. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 19(1), 100–117. <https://jlls.org/index.php/jlls/article/view/4481>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Do, Q., & Hoang, H. T. (2024). The construction of language teacher identity among graduates from non-English language teaching majors in Vietnam. *English Teaching & Learning*, 48(4), 485–502. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42321-023-00142-z>
- Huynh, N. T., Nguyen, P. N. T., Nguyen, T. N. T., Do, C. T., Nguyen, H. T., & Huynh, T. V. M. (2024). Cultivating job-seeking skills in youth: Exploring Vietnamese EFL learners' experiences with the English for employability skills program. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 15(6).
- Kyriacou, C., & Coulthard, M. (2000). Undergraduates' views of teaching as a career choice. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 26(2), 117–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607470050127036>
- Moodie, I., & Greenier, V. (2024). "I promised growing up I would not become a teacher": Exploring the career trajectory of a language teacher through Social cognitive career theory. *Tesol Quarterly*, 58(1), 394–422. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3235>
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Nguyen, H. T. M. (2013). The curriculum for English language teacher education in Vietnamese universities: A gap analysis. *RELC Journal*, 44(2), 195–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688213488388>
- Nguyen, T. H. H., Nguyen, B. T. T., Hoang, G. T. L., Pham, N. T. H., & Dang, T. T. C. (2024). Computer-delivered vs. face-to-face score comparability and test takers' perceptions: The case of the two English speaking proficiency tests for Vietnamese EFL learners. *Language Testing in Asia*, 14(1), 6. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-024-00277-1>

- Pham, T. N. (2022). Perceptions of a good EFL teacher: Voices from teachers and students at a Vietnamese university. *International Journal of TESOL & Education*, 2(4), 13–29. <https://i-jte.org/index.php/journal/article/view/193>
- Phan, N. H., & Truong, T. T. T. (2025). “Resilience fosters sustainability!”: Exploring Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers’ emotional experiences in a school-based teaching practicum from the lens of Resilience Theory. *Educational Point*, 2(1), e118. <https://doi.org/10.71176/edup/16299>
- Phan, N. H., Trinh, Q. L., & Le, C. T. (2025). Factors hindering EFL Master’s students’ motivation in research engagement: A self-determination perspective. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 23(1), 1782-1795. <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2025-23.1.00138>
- Richardson, P. W., & Watt, H. M. G. (2007). Motivational factors influencing teaching as a career choice: Development and validation of the FIT-Choice scale. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 75(3), 167–202. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JEXE.75.3.167-202>
- Scott, J. (2000). Rational choice theory. In G. Browning, A. Halcli, & F. Webster (Eds.), *Understanding contemporary society: Theories of the present* (pp. 126–138). SAGE Publications.
- Steinmetz, K. F., & Pratt, T. C. (2024). Revisiting the tautology problem in rational choice theory: What it is and how to move forward theoretically and empirically. *European Journal of Criminology*, 21(4), 513–532. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14773708241226537>
- Takona, J. P. (2024). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. *Quality & Quantity*, 58(1), 1011–1013. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-023-01798-2>
- Tran, L. H., & Moskovsky, C. (2024). Who stays, who leaves, and why? English language teacher attrition at Vietnamese universities. *Cogent Education*, 11(1), 2384240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2384240>
- Tran, T. T., & Cao, T. H. P. (2020). Motivations and intentions to become teachers: Voices of senior ELT students in Vietnam. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 36(6), 76–91. <https://doi.org/10.25073/2525-2445/vnufs.4547>