EXPLORING MOTIVATION IN CAREER CHOICE OF PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS AT SAI GON UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *This mixed-methods study explores career choices and self-efficacy among pre-service English teachers at Sai Gon University (SGU). Results show that intrinsic and altruistic motivations, particularly passion for English, enjoyment of pedagogy, and social contribution, are the strongest drivers, while extrinsic factors, including Decree No. 116/2020/NĐ-CP, rank lowest. Additionally, participants express high professional self-efficacy, confidently asserting that AI cannot replace human educators. These empirical insights offer critical implications for curriculum design and teacher recruitment policies*

Keywords*: professional learning; teacher identity; teacher development; career choice motivation; teaching self-efficacy; pre-service English teachers*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the globalization era, English proficiency is vital for professional success, driving the demand for qualified educators whose teaching effectiveness and long-term commitment are fundamentally determined by motivation (Heinz, 2015). Globally and in Vietnam, research consistently shows that intrinsic and altruistic motives act as primary career drivers, while extrinsic factors rank lower (Nesje et al., 2018; Saito, 2024; Tran & Cao, 2020; Virtanen et al., 2025), though Decree No. 116/2020/NĐ-CP has recently elevated the significance of financial support (Tran et al., 2025). Crucially, teacher self-efficacy strengthens these intrinsic drives and persistence, whereas extrinsic motives show weaker links to perceived professional ability (Bilim, 2014). Despite extensive literature, critical gaps remain; contextually, Vietnamese research lacks focus on pre-service English teachers in the dynamic Southern market, and methodologically, purely quantitative data overlook atypical cases. Addressing these gaps, this study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design at Sai Gon University (SGU) to examine how professional identity is negotiated.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of motivation

Motivation is the fundamental driving force behind human behavior (Wlodkowski, 1978), encompassing the "energy, direction, and persistence" of intentions (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Rather than a static cause, it is a dynamic process that prompts, guides, and maintains activity over time (Graham & Weiner, 2012). Collectively, these perspectives view motivation as a multifaceted construct covering both initial decisions and long-term behavioral regulation. In education, it serves as a vital framework for examining why pre-service teachers at SGU enter and commit to the profession.

2.2. Types of motivation

According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in teaching for personal interest and enjoyment, while extrinsic motivation is driven by external rewards such as salary or job security (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000a; Shak, 2022; Saito, 2024). In addition, altruistic motivation reflects a desire to contribute to society and positively influence students' lives (Watt & Richardson, 2007; Virtanen et al., 2025).

2.3. Theoretical framework

This study combines SDT, the FIT-Choice model, and Self-Efficacy Theory to examine pre-service teachers' career motivations. SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) distinguishes between intrinsic (inherent enjoyment) and extrinsic (separable outcomes) motives, while the FIT-Choice model (Watt & Richardson, 2007) adds social utility values (altruistic social contributions). Complementing these, Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that pedagogical self-beliefs determine effort and persistence. Together, these theories form a holistic system where motivational orientations and self-beliefs jointly shape the professional identity and career persistence of English pedagogy students at SGU.

2.4. Previous studies

2.4.1. International studies

Global research consistently identifies intrinsic and altruistic motivations as primary career drivers. Intrinsic value and subject interest dominate in Finland (Lehtinen et al., 2025; Virtanen et al., 2025), Norway (Nesje et al., 2018), Germany (Stellmacher et al., 2020), Indonesia (Asriani et al., 2022), and Japan (Saito, 2024). Meanwhile, altruistic factors like knowledge sharing and social contribution are leading motives in Myanmar (Htang, 2019), South Korea (Lee et al., 2019), and Poland (Pudełko & Wojtowicz, 2024). Conversely, extrinsic motivation is generally ranked lowest across most contexts, including South Korea, Japan, Norway, and Indonesia (Lee et al., 2019; Saito, 2024; Nesje et al., 2018; Asriani et al., 2022). Despite regional variations such as the emphasis on fulfilling the bond in Brunei (Shak, 2022), the global tendency from internal and social factors still remains the cornerstone of career commitment.

2.4.2. National studies

Regarding national studies, researchers primarily employ quantitative methods, confirming that social utility and intrinsic motivations are the most significant drivers (Tran & Cao, 2020). Vietnamese pre-service teachers exhibit a strong desire to shape younger generations, a mindset often rooted in positive prior learning experiences that enhance their self-efficacy and career commitment. Nevertheless, extrinsic motivation remains influential. Notably, recent research identifies government financial support, specifically Decree No. 116/2020/NĐ-CP, as a major external factor guiding contemporary pedagogical students' career choices (Tran et al., 2025).

2.5. Gaps

Significant research gaps remain. In Vietnam, previous studies mainly focus on Northern regions or general pedagogy contexts, with limited attention to the Southern region (Tran & Cao, 2020; Tran et al., 2025). Methodologically, most studies rely on quantitative approaches, while qualitative insights remain limited (Asriani et al., 2022; Htang, 2019; Lee et al., 2019; Nesje et al., 2018; Pudełko & Wojtowicz, 2024; Saito, 2024; Stellmacher et al., 2020). To address these gaps, this study adopts a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, combining surveys and in-depth interviews to explore how career choices are shaped in the Southern Vietnamese context.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of career motivation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research was conducted at SGU, a public teacher-education university in Ho Chi Minh City, offering an appropriate context for exploring the motivations of pre-service English teachers.

3.2. Participants

Participants had to be ELT majors at SGU. In the quantitative phase, 120 pre-service teachers were recruited via convenience sampling. For the qualitative stage, 14 participants were purposely selected by filtering for atypical or inconsistent responses to uncover deeper insights.

3.3. Sampling techniques

The study employed two distinct sampling techniques tailored to each research phase. For the quantitative phase, convenience sampling was used to quickly gather a broad overview of motivational trends from readily available English pedagogy classes at SGU. In contrast, the qualitative phase applied purposive sampling to select information-rich cases. This technique ensured the collection of deep, relevant insights from participants whose specific experiences or atypical profiles could best explain the quantitative results.

3.4. Research instruments

3.4.1. The questionnaire

The survey synthesizes SDT, FIT-Choice, and Self-Efficacy theories, using an adapted 21-item questionnaire based on the FIT-Choice scale (Watt & Richardson, 2007) and a 5-point Likert scale. Section 1 collects demographic data, including gender, year of study, prior teaching experience and motivation awareness.

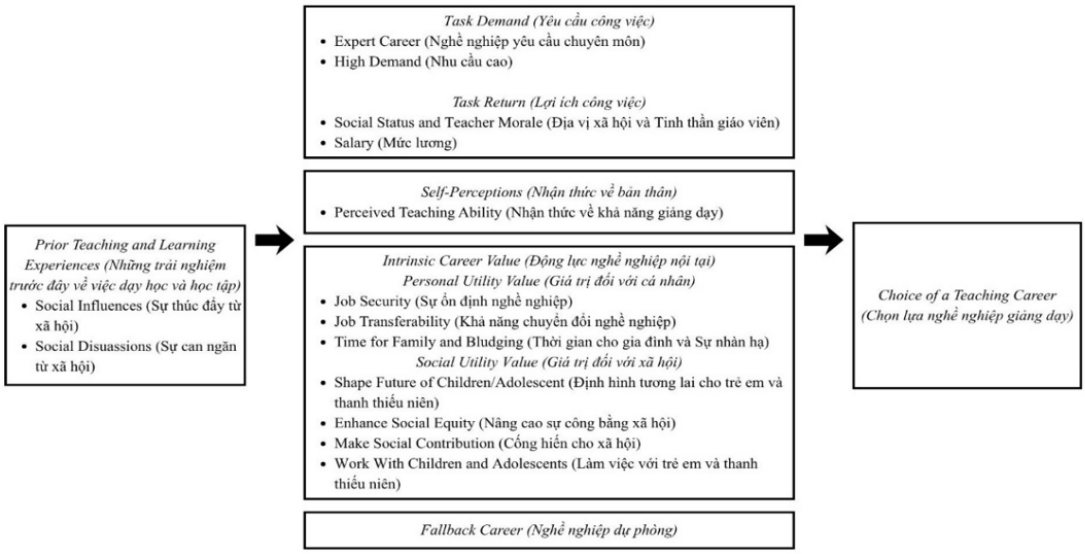

Figure 1. The FIT-Choice model (Adapted from Watt & Richardson, 2007, p. 176)

3.4.2. Semi-structured interview guide

This guide uses open-ended questions to uncover the "why" behind quantitative trends, capturing complexities beyond Likert scales. The structure covers three key areas: life histories (learning journeys and family influences), career commitment (maintaining resolve against work stress and market competition), and policy perception and changes in interest (the impact of Decree No. 116 and the evolution of teaching passion at SGU). This approach provides a nuanced understanding of students' long-term professional dedication.

3.5. Procedures

Data were collected over 35 days using a two-phase sequential design. Phase 1 (Quantitative) involved a 3-day creation and 1-day pilot of a 5-point Likert questionnaire with 15 students and one supervisor to ensure reliability. The finalized survey was distributed via Google Forms for 10 days, gathering responses from 120 consenting pre-service teachers, followed by 2 days of coding and statistical analysis. Phase 2 (Qualitative) utilized purposive sampling to select 8 participants for 60-90 minute semi-structured interviews via Google Meet. This 19-day stage included a 2-day pilot, 7 days of interviewing to address contradictory survey trends, and 10 days of transcribing and coding, with data saturation reached by the 9th encounter.

3.6. Variables

The study identifies two variable categories for analysis. Independent variables include gender (Q1), year of study (Q2), teaching experience (Q4-5), and motivation awareness (Q6). Dependent variables encompass career motivations and self-efficacy, measured via a 21-item Likert scale across four constructs: intrinsic (A1-3), altruistic (B1-4), extrinsic (C1-10), and self-efficacy (D1-4). These variables enable the exploration of motivational variations to address the research questions.

3.7. Data analysis

3.7.1. Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS software (version 26). In other words, descriptive statistics (M, SD) summarized motivation and self-efficacy levels across the four constructs. Moreover, internal consistency was verified via Cronbach's Alpha; all values exceeded .70, ensuring high reliability. These results established general trends and informed the selection of representative cases for the qualitative phase.

3.7.2. Qualitative data analysis

Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic framework. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. The researcher used a hybrid coding approach which combining theory-driven codes with data-driven open coding to capture emerging themes. Finally, these codes

were categorized and mapped to the four core constructs (intrinsic, altruistic, extrinsic, and self-efficacy) to explain the underlying reasons behind the quantitative trends.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Quantitative results

4.1.1. Intrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation highlights a sincere passion for both the subject and the work itself. The top intrinsic factor is their love for the English language and the desire to use it directly in their job (M = 4.19, SD = 0.80). This strong interest in the subject is the key starting point for their career choice. They also generally expect the job to bring long-term happiness and satisfaction (M = 3.95, SD = 0.80). Although the factor "always wanted to become a teacher" scored slightly lower (M = 3.88, SD = 1.00), the low variation in these scores shows that their inner drive is stable.

4.1.2. Altruistic/Social utility motivation

Altruistic/social utility motivation is strongest reason overall, reflecting a deep wish to serve the community. The most important factor in the entire survey is the wish to be a positive influencer on students' lives and future (M = 4.28, SD = 0.97). Students also feel strongly about contributing to social development through teaching (M = 4.14, SD = 0.87). Furthermore, they want to help and inspire people who are socially disadvantaged (M = 3.99). These high scores confirm that students see teaching as a crucial way to make a difference in society, valuing this humanitarian goal more than personal profit.

4.1.3. Extrinsic/Personal utility motivation

Table 1. Mean and SD of Extrinsic/Personal Utility Motivation Items

Constructs	Items	M, SD
C. Extrinsic/Personal Utility Motivation (Mean: 3.64, α = .774)	C.1. Teaching English will be a secure job.	4.03, 0.93
	C.2. The English teaching profession offers a stable and good salary/income.	3.85, 0.89
	C.3. The teaching profession offers me time for family (e.g. summer break or working hours).	3.56, 1.13
	C.4. I chose this major because financial support policies (e.g., Decree No. 116/2020/ND-CP) greatly influenced my decision.	3.16, 1.44
	C.5. The teaching profession receives social respect and high status in society.	4.05, 0.89
	C.6. Teaching was a secondary option when I failed my preferred major.	2.08, 1.38
	C.7. I think teaching will allow me to work anywhere.	3.67, 1.13
	C.8. Family or other significant influences encouraged me to choose the teaching profession.	4.03, 1.11
	C.9. My decision to become a teacher was influenced by my positive experiences with my English teachers.	3.86, 3.86
	C.10. My decision to become a teacher was influenced by my positive learning experiences with English.	4.07, 1.00

Source: Calculated and compiled by the authors from the research dataset

In contrast, table 1 shows that extrinsic/personal utility motivation has the lowest average score among three types of motivation (M = 3.64, SD = 1.25). However, some external factors related to social stability are highly rated, including positive learning experiences with English (M = 4.07, SD = 1.00), high social respect and status (M = 4.05, SD = 0.89), and a secure job (M = 4.03, SD = 0.93). On the other hand, financial policies like Decree No. 116 (M = 3.16, SD = 1.44) and the idea of teaching as a secondary option (M = 2.08, SD = 1.38) received the lowest scores. The large differences (high SD) for these two factors suggest that they are very personal and vary greatly among students.

4.1.4. Self-efficacy abilities

Table 2. Mean and SD of Self-Efficacy Items

Constructs	Items	M, SD
D. Self-Efficacy Abilities (Mean: 3.62, α = .792)	D.1. I am confident in my ability to learn and use the English language when teaching.	3.72, 0.85
	D.2. I am confident in my ability to teach effectively and convey knowledge clearly to my students.	3.56, 0.90
	D.3. I am confident in my ability to maintain classroom discipline and handle unexpected situations effectively.	3.36, 0.88
	D.4. I am confident that I have the abilities and qualities to become a good teacher.	3.85, 0.94

Source: Calculated and compiled by the authors from the research dataset

Finally, Table 2 illustrates that self-efficacy abilities is the lowest-scoring factor overall (M = 3.62, SD = 0.91). This highlights a readiness gap between their high ideals and their confidence in practical skills. Students are most confident in having the general abilities and qualities needed for teaching (M = 3.85, SD = 0.94). Yet, this confidence drops sharply for practical tasks, with the lowest score being the ability to maintain classroom discipline and handle unexpected situations effectively (M = 3.36, SD = 0.88). Their confidence in their English language skills (M = 3.72, SD = 0.85) is also higher than their confidence in their ability to teach effectively and clearly convey knowledge (M = 3.56, SD = 0.90).

4.2. Qualitative results

4.2.1. Intrinsic motivation

Regarding intrinsic motivation, three sub-themes emerged explaining how inner interest sustains student commitment: self-occupation alignment (N = 7), relational satisfaction (N = 3), and subject and pedagogical passion (N = 6). For self-occupation alignment, participants feel teaching perfectly matches their traits, with one describing: "This profession requires a harmonious combination of both physical and mental effort; therefore, I find being a teacher to be the most suitable choice for me." Relational satisfaction highlights the vital emotional rewards from learners; an interviewee noted: "Firstly, it is the joy of interacting with secondary and high school students; they consistently give new energy to me every day... interacting with students and receiving positive energy from them gives me additional motivation." Lastly, subject and pedagogical passion acts as a powerful anchor. One student shared: "My greatest motivation for staying with this profession and being willing to invest my time and effort is my love for the job." Interestingly, this passion often grew over time through university experiences rather than being present from the start, as another stated: "Initially, my orientation was to study Linguistic… However, my passion has been an incremental process over time... After starting the program and gaining practical experience, I truly realized that I love and am well-suited for this position."

4.2.2. Altruistic/Social utility motivation

Regarding altruistic and social utility motivation, qualitative data expanded on the high quantitative survey scores through three sub-themes: social and national development (N = 7), individual empowerment (N = 5), and altruistic fulfillment and sacrifice (N = 4). For individual empowerment, participants view English as a critical tool for future student success rather than just an academic subject, with one emphasizing: "I want to help Vietnamese students enjoy English more so that they can communicate smoothly, meet the demands of international integration, and gain the necessary skills for their future jobs." As the most frequent sub-theme, social and national development revealed a unique "reformist ambition" to improve the education system by correcting past limitations, as a student explained: "I want to rectify what previous generations of teachers did wrong... Regarding expertise, they were often trained within a narrow knowledge space... Regarding ethics, many teachers could not control their emotions, causing great harm to students." Finally, altruistic fulfillment and sacrifice highlighted a strong professional commitment to prioritizing student growth over personal comfort, as one shared: "Since I have chosen this profession, I will prioritize my students. I don't mind living in a "mess" as long

as my lessons are high quality and the students understand the material."

4.2.3. Extrinsic/Personal utility motivation

For extrinsic and personal utility motivation, three sub-themes emerged: professional enrichment and strategic development (N = 8), social recognition and interpersonal influences (N = 7), and financial and occupational stability (N = 6). As the dominant sub-theme, professional enrichment and strategic development shows that SGU students proactively use university environments to build skills and networks, with one explaining: "I believe these school activities will benefit me greatly, making me more dynamic and energetic. Through them, I can accumulate knowledge and expand my social network… ensuring that I am truly involved rather than just fulfilling a duty." Additionally, social recognition reflects a rising societal respect that boosts professional pride, as a participant noted: "The entrance score for Education majors is extremely high now, which shows society has a different view and no longer considers it an easy-to-enter field." Finally, regarding financial and occupational stability, Decree 116 is viewed as a motivating support system rather than a constraint, with an interviewee highlighting: "I view Decree 116 as a motivation rather than a constraint. This policy compels me to strive in my studies to ensure immediate employment upon graduation... It alleviates the pressure of job seeking later on."

4.2.4. Self-efficacy abilities

Finally, professional self-efficacy is reflected in three sub-themes: domain-specific competence (N = 7), pedagogical and management confidence (N = 6), and professional resilience and identity (N = 3). For domain-specific competence, participants feel secure about their linguistic foundation yet remain competitive, with an interviewee stating: "Because I already possess a strong fundamental competence in English and education, I am willing to undergo rigorous training to confront and overcome professional competition... I don't want to waste what I've learned in this field." Regarding pedagogical and management confidence, students adopt a strategic approach to making knowledge accessible, as one described: "I take what I've learned, logicalize it in my own way, and express it in the most understandable terms... I can visualize knowledge to make it easier to understand." Lastly, professional resilience and identity show how students counter anxiety over practical readiness by anchoring their value in human connection over AI, confidently asserting: "AI certainly cannot replace the adaptability and connection between people... because I am human, I can recognize the situation to know when to be firm and when to be gentle."

4.3. Discussion of mixed-method results

4.3.1. The primacy of altruistic driver

Findings at SGU show that altruistic values are more important than intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Altruistic motivation scored highest (M = 4.05), driven mostly by the desire to be a positive influencer (M = 4.28). This aligns with research in Vietnam (Tran & Cao, 2020). Also, this finding shows a similar pattern compared to Myanmar and South Korea. Interestingly, SGU students showed a unique reformist ambition: qualitative data revealed that they view English as a tool for empowerment and want to fix the teaching and ethical gaps of past generations (Asriani et al., 2022). This matches the belief that a teacher's job goes far beyond basic classroom instruction (Zubair et al., 2023). By focusing on student well-being and human development, these future teachers turn their career choices into a meaningful social mission, which helps sustain their long-term commitment (Medina-Carls, 2020).

4.3.2. Intrinsic motivation and the incremental vocational path

Intrinsic motivation is another strong factor for SGU pre-service teachers (M = 4.01), starting from a deep love for the English language (M = 4.19). This supports earlier Vietnamese research by Tran and Cao (2020) and mirrors global trends where internal interest drives career choice (Asriani et al., 2022; Lehtinen et al., 2025; Pudełko & Wojtowicz, 2024; Stellmacher et al., 2020; Virtanen et al., 2025). However, unlike the lifelong calling found in Finland (Lehtinen et al., 2025), SGU students view their career choice as a developmental journey (M = 3.88, SD = 1.00). A similar career transformation is found in Brunei by Shak (2022), where students also developed a love for teaching later on, but the underlying reason is completely different. In Brunei, this change is reactive because students are initially forced by a government bond. In contrast, SGU students are proactive; their passion grows naturally from their early love for English and is actively built through academic and social experiences at university, turning a personal hobby into a long-term career commitment.

4.3.3. The pragmatic and strategic role of extrinsic motivation

Extrinsic motivation at SGU is significant but secondary (M = 3.64), led by positive prior learning experiences (M = 4.07). This ranking and the importance of having inspirational teachers as role models align with Tran and Cao (2020), who noted that extrinsic motives rank lower than intrinsic and altruistic ones for Vietnamese students. It also supports Tran et al. (2025), who identify Decree 116 as a major external driver to reduce financial burdens. However, this contrasts with Brunei (Shak, 2022), where extrinsic motives rank second because students are bound by a compulsory government scholarship. While Brunei students view this policy as a restriction on their freedom, SGU students see Decree 116 in a completely different way. Instead of a trap, they view it as a helpful financial shield. This positive mindset reduces financial stress, allowing them to focus entirely on learning and transforming external rewards into a safety net that protects their academic journey.

4.3.4. The unique readiness gap and AI irreplaceability

SGU students recorded self-efficacy as their lowest construct ($M = 3.62$), revealing a psychological gap between high ideals and anxiety over practical readiness ($M = 3.36$). This aligns with general trends in Vietnam (Tran & Cao, 2020; Tran et al., 2025), where perceived ability is rarely the highest factor, but differs from Norway (Nesje et al., 2018) and Finland (Lehtinen et al., 2025; Virtanen et al., 2025), where teaching confidence is a top motivator. This gap exists because SGU students are culturally humble, believing that true educators require perfect teaching skills and moral virtues, not just English fluency. Interestingly, this completely contrasts with Bilim (2014), who found that high intrinsic passion always pairs with strong self-efficacy; at SGU, confidence remains low despite intense passion. To overcome this anxiety, students focus on a unique human value: that AI cannot replace human teachers.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, SGU students are motivated by altruistic and intrinsic values, including a love for English, a desire to inspire others, and a goal of modernizing teaching. Although they demonstrate strong language skills, concerns about classroom management remain. To address this, they emphasize the unique role of human teachers beyond AI. While limited by its single-institution scope and self-reported data, the study suggests that universities should provide early teaching experiences and AI-integrated training, while policymakers consider revising regulations to support teacher retention.

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