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## Choice factors in M.A. ELT programs

Özkan Kırmızı<sup>a\*</sup>, Arif Sarıçoban<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Başkent University, Ankara, Turkey*

<sup>b</sup>*Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey*

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### Abstract

The present study has been carried out in order to determine professional targets of M.A. ELT program students, the factors that are influential in deciding to start M.A. ELT studies, and the ones that are influential in department selection. The study group comprises both students and graduates from various ELT departments and they are made up of three groups in terms of occupation: research assistants, instructors, and teachers. The results indicate that many students undertake postgraduate education primarily with a view to improve their intellectual skills and most of them state that they want to continue their PhD studies.

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*Keywords:* Post-graduate education; M.A. ELT programs; choice factors

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### 1. Introduction

Post-graduate education is conceived as one of the most important steps in educating prospective academics and maintaining national scientific policies. Thus, the fundamental aim of post-graduate education can be regarded as raising qualified workforce that can produce, use, and criticize information. Clearly, therefore, post-graduate education itself becomes highly important and must be empowered by scientific studies (Alhas, 2006).

Teachers cannot be thought of as isolated from the situation on the basis of the fact that teachers are the most important agents that are supposed to impart knowledge that is being produced in universities. In addition, teachers are supposed to take on a dual role on account of the fact that they are responsible for both keeping abreast of the recent knowledge and the most recent developments in teaching methods. Accordingly, the importance of post-graduate education for teachers, and especially for language teachers, is two-fold. One is related to developments that take place in linguistics and the other is

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\* Corresponding Author: Tel.: +090 506 533 90 44  
E-mail address: [ozkankirmizi@gmail.com](mailto:ozkankirmizi@gmail.com)

methodological innovations. Shortly, the significance of teacher education is aggravated by these important factors and moreover this situation signals the pressing need for specialization, continuity and innovation in teacher education (Ersoy, 2002).

There are a number of studies that handle post-graduate education from various viewpoints in Turkish context (Karaman & Bakırcı, 2010, Arslan & Kara, 2010, Ahlas, 2006, Ünal & İltar, 2010). However, these studies are not particularly related to ELT departments. In addition, they cover the issue from either a general perspective or boil down to beliefs or opinions of participants. In short, there are no studies that are specifically related to the profile of participants who conduct their M.A. studies. This study, therefore, aims at investigating the factors that motivate students to start their M.A. studies in ELT programs, their professional targets, and the factors that are influential in department selection.

There is one study that specifically focuses on the factors that are influential in doing master degree. It was carried out by Erkiş (2009) and it is one of the studies that gave the inspiration for the present one. Erkiş's study was an extensive study that was carried out with a very large number of participants from science, medical and social sciences faculties. From Erkiş's study, it is clear that the most important factors that were influential in starting M.A. study are related to educational purposes rather than research and developmental, psycho-social, and socio-economic ones. In short, this study aims at answering the following questions:

Research questions:

1. What are the professional targets of M.A. students?
2. What is the influence of the given factors in deciding to do M.A. studies?
3. Which factors are influential in department choice?
4. What program components are favored by current M.A. students and graduates?

## 2. Participants

The subjects of the study in two groups are 90 participants (male=30, female=60). The first group comprises of the current M.A. students (n=29) attending M.A. ELT programs in Turkey. The second group includes graduates (n=61). In terms of their occupations, the participants come from three main groups: teachers (n=15), instructors (n=56), and research assistants (n=11). The age range of participants spans between 23 and 41.

## 3. Data Collection

Data were collected by means of a questionnaire which has three parts that inquire (1) the professional targets of the participants, (2) the factors that influence the students' decisions to do M.A. studies, (3) the factors that are influential in department selection, and the courses favoured by those current M.A. in ELT students and graduates.

Table 1. Distribution of participants in terms of graduation and jobs

	Teacher	Research Assistant	Instructor	Total
student	14	4	12	30
graduate	9	7	44	60
total	23	11	56	90

As we can understand from Table 1, the number of teachers who participated in the study is 23. There are nine students and six graduates in this group. The number of research assistant is 11, with four students and seven graduates. The number of instructors is 56, 12 students and 44 graduates.

*Research Question 1: What are the professional targets of students?*

A number of professional target options were identified and the participants were asked to select the one that applied to them. These items range from becoming a PhD student to becoming a teacher in a state school. The results are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Professional targets of the participants

Professional targets	Frequency	%
PhD student	29	<b>32,2</b>
Researcher in an academic setting	21	<b>23,3</b>
Researcher in a non-academic setting	2	2,2
Management or administration	2	2,2
Other non-academic position	3	3,3
English teacher in state school	28	<b>31,1</b>
English teacher in private school	5	5,6
Total	90	100,0

Table 2 indicates that 32, 2 % of the participants opted for “becoming a PhD student” after the completion of their M.A. process. The second most selected item is “becoming an English teacher in a state school” with a percentage of 31, 1. The percentage of those who want to become a researcher in an academic setting is 23, 3. It may be speculated that fresh graduates seek to be employed right after their graduation; that is, they would like to start their professional life immediately and earn their living as soon as possible. Of course, then, their second aim is quite naturally to proceed on their academic studies by doing their doctoral study to become an academician at an academic setting.

As to the research questions 2, 3, and 4 the favourable choices of students have been calculated positively by considering the “important” and “very important” options together. For this reason the percentages of these options have been added to reach the most favourable decision.

*Research Question 2: What is the influence of the given factors in deciding to do M.A. studies?*

Besides professional targets, the study also inquired the influence of the given factors like “personal intellectual enrichment”, “primary career choice”, or “increased income potential”. Table 3 gives the findings.

Table 3. The influence of the given factors in deciding to do M.A. studies

Factors		The least important	Not important	Important	Very important	Average
Personal intellectual enrichment	N	0	2	27	60	<b>3,65</b>
	%	0,0	2,2	<b>30,3</b>	<b>67,4</b>	
Primary career choice	N	0	10	38	40	<b>3,34</b>
	%	0,0	11,4	<b>43,2</b>	<b>45,5</b>	
Advanced degree required for career advancement		N	1	11	31	<b>3,37</b>

	%	1,1	12,4	<b>34,8</b>	<b>51,7</b>	
Change of career	N	21	22	30	16	2,46
	%	23,6	24,7	33,7	18,0	
Increased income-earning potential	N	18	26	34	11	2,43
	%	20,2	29,2	38,2	12,4	

As we can understand from Table 3, the most important factor for doing M.A. study is “personal intellectual enrichment” (%=97,7). The second most favoured factor is “primary career choice”, which is rated by 88,7% of participants. The third most important factor is “advanced degree required for career advancement” (%=86,5%). It seems that participants view M.A. degree as an opportunity to develop oneself besides career advancement. However, there is another striking and at the same time unexpected finding that only 50% of the participants (37, 8% important;12, 2% very important) would like to do their M.A. studies to get higher income in such a country like Turkey where it is believed that teachers in general receive less income than their European counterparts.

*Research Question 3: What are the factors that are influential in department selection?*

The participants were presented a number of factors that could play a role in department selection. The findings are given in Table 4.

Tablo 4. Factors influential in department selection

Items		The least important	Not important	Important	Very important	Average
Graduate program's reputation	N	4	21	42	22	2,92
	%	4,5	23,6	<b>47,2</b>	<b>24,7</b>	
Opportunity to work with particular faculty member	N	7	25	37	20	2,79
	%	7,9	28,1	<b>41,6</b>	<b>22,5</b>	
Job opportunities are good for graduates of this program	N	10	21	42	15	2,70
	%	11,4	23,9	<b>47,7</b>	<b>17,0</b>	
Encouragement of program faculty while deciding	N	8	30	41	10	2,60
	%	9,0	33,7	<b>46,1</b>	<b>11,2</b>	
Received fellowship, assistantship, or scholarship	N	21	27	25	16	2,40
	%	23,6	30,3	28,1	18,0	
Recommendation of undergraduate advisor or faculty member in your field	N	14	34	31	10	2,42
	%	15,7	38,2	34,8	11,2	
Recommendation of friend, acquaintance, or colleague	N	24	32	22	11	2,22
	%	27,0	36,0	24,7	12,4	
Location of campus	N	35	28	19	7	1,98
	%	39,3	31,5	21,3	7,9	
Proximity of family members	N	38	30	17	4	1,85
	%	42,7	33,7	19,1	4,5	
Availability of housing in the area	N	39	30	16	4	1,83
	%	43,8	33,7	18,0	4,5	
Campus visit	N	41	34	11	3	1,73
	%	46,1	38,2	12,4	3,4	

*Research Question 4 What program components are favored by current M.A. students and graduates?*

Table 5. The Importance of Program Components.

		1 Not important at all	2 Minimally important	3 undecided	4 important	5 Extremely important	Average
Linguistics Component	N	2	4	5	46	32	4,15
	%	2,2	4,5	5,6	51,7	36,0	
Literature Component	N	9	22	17	29	12	3,15
	%	10,1	24,7	19,1	32,6	13,5	
ELT Methodology Component	N	0	0	3	30	55	4,59
	%	0,0	0,0	3,4	34,1	62,5	
Research Component	N	0	0	2	28	59	4,64
	%	0,0	0,0	2,2	31,5	66,3	
Educational Sciences Component	N	2	4	7	43	33	4,13
	%	2,2	4,5	7,9	48,3	37,1	

It is obvious from Table 4 that the most important factor in enrolling the program is “the reputation of the graduate program”. The number of participants who stated that the reputation of the program was important is 42 with a percentage of 72,1. The next two important factors are “opportunity to work with particular faculty member” and “job opportunities are good for graduates of this program” with the same number of participants. The number of the participants who stated that “opportunity to work with particular faculty member” was important is 37 with a percentage of 64,1. And the number of the participants who stated that “job opportunities are good for graduates of this program” is important 42 with a percentage of 64, 7.

As we can understand from the table above, the most important component of an M.A. ELT program is viewed as research component. The second one is ELT methodology component. The third is linguistics component, and the fourth is educational sciences component. Literature component is the least important component in the eyes of the participants. One interesting finding is that educational sciences component is viewed as less important than the ELT methodology component and linguistics component. This shows that M.A. students value practical issues more than theoretical ones. The next section evaluates how successful each of these components are.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, we found out that most of the participants want to carry out their M.A. studies in order to continue further academic studies leading to PhD degrees. The number of those who want to become a teacher in a state school is also considerably high, which indicates that teachers want to improve themselves in terms of their knowledge and skills in language teaching. Another important finding of this section is that in terms of the expectations of the participants is the desire to develop themselves intellectually. This is the most important factor in deciding to carry out M.A. studies as well as “primary career choice”.

When it comes to the factors that make students enrol in their programs, the most important factor was found to be “graduate program's reputation”. The next two favoured choices are “opportunity to work with particular faculty member” and “job opportunities are good for graduates of this program”. Now that “opportunity to work with particular faculty member” is one of the most important factors in enrolling a particular program, it can be speculated that professors with high credentials and qualifications are extremely important in such studies. It cannot be underestimated that these high credential professors do contribute one's professional knowledge and help them improve their capacities not only in teaching but also in conducting their further academic studies on their own. They act as professional guides in this ocean.

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