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## Navigating Teaching Without Pedagogical Training: An Ecological Perspective

Ekrem ERÖZ <sup>\*1</sup>, Dilara DEMİRBULAK <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sivas University of Science and Technology

<sup>2</sup> Yeditepe University

Corresponding Author Email: [ekrem.eroz@sivas.edu.tr](mailto:ekrem.eroz@sivas.edu.tr)

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**Abstract:** Although substantial scholarly attention has been devoted to the challenges encountered by novice teachers possessing formal Initial Teacher Education (ITE) qualifications, the professional experiences of individuals entering the teaching profession without such preparation remain markedly underexplored. Anchored in the ecological model of teacher agency, the present study investigates the affordances and constraints encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers with non-ITE backgrounds during their inaugural year of teaching in Turkish state secondary schools. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 21 purposively selected participants serving in diverse educational settings across Turkey. Thematic analysis of the interview data indicates that the absence of formal pedagogical training gives rise to notable impediments, including insufficient theoretical and methodological grounding in instructional practices, perceived marginalisation by colleagues with ITE credentials, and challenges in constructing a coherent professional identity. Nevertheless, the analysis also uncovers salient affordances, such as interdisciplinary academic foundations, diverse experiential capital acquired through alternative career trajectories, elevated levels of intrinsic motivation, and a pronounced propensity for pedagogical innovation. The study concludes by discussing the implications for teacher education policy and institutional practice in Turkey, advocating for differentiated support structures that both address the distinct challenges faced by non-ITE teachers and harness their unique professional assets.

## 1. Introduction

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has long been regarded as a vital component in preparing individuals for the teaching profession, providing them with the necessary pedagogical knowledge, instructional competencies, and formal qualifications required for effective classroom practice (Wallace and Bau, 1991; Korthagen et al., 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2012). However, in recent years, a growing teacher shortage -both globally and nationally - has prompted a reconsideration of this conventional route into the profession. According to UNESCO (2016), meeting global educational demands will require an additional 17 million teachers by 2030, a statistic that reflects the scale of the crisis. In response to this shortage, many education systems around the world have increasingly recruited teachers without formal ITE credentials, especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged, rural, or hard-to-staff regions (Education Commission, 2019; UNESCO, 2022).

Turkey is no exception to this trend. While the Turkish education system continues to prioritise graduates of faculties of education, the persistent imbalance between teacher supply and demand has led to the employment of individuals from non-education faculties, especially in contexts where urgent staffing needs must be addressed. For instance, in regions with limited

access to trained teachers - such as in parts of Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia - it is not uncommon to encounter English language teachers who hold degrees in unrelated disciplines but are placed through central assignments or contractual schemes (MEB, 2020). This situation reflects broader global patterns seen in countries such as Indonesia, China, and the United Kingdom, where similar measures have been adopted to bridge gaps in the teaching workforce (MOE, 2000; DE, 2022; Tanoto Foundation, 2023).

Given the growing presence of non-ITE teachers in Turkish classrooms, especially in the domain of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it becomes increasingly important to examine their professional experiences - not only in terms of challenges but also in relation to their sense of teacher agency. Teacher agency is understood as educators' capacity to make purposeful, context-sensitive decisions, shaped by their personal values, educational histories, goals, and the institutional structures in which they work (Biesta and Michael, 2007; Toom Pyhältö and Rust, 2015). Research suggests that a strong sense of agency allows teachers to respond creatively to instructional challenges and curriculum reforms, contributing both to student learning and systemic innovation (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Tao and Gao, 2021).

Moreover, teacher agency has significant implications for teacher retention. Educators who perceive themselves as active agents within their professional settings are more likely to remain in the profession, thereby contributing to the long-term sustainability of the teaching workforce (Kayi-Aydar and Steadman, 2019). In Turkey, where teacher attrition in under-resourced areas remains a challenge, supporting the agency of novice teachers - particularly those without ITE backgrounds - could play a critical role in improving educational equity and teacher retention.

Despite the increasing relevance of this issue, the professional agency of non-ITE teachers remains under-researched in the Turkish context. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences and perceived agency of novice EFL teachers without ITE qualifications during their first year in Turkish state secondary schools. This transitional period is particularly significant, as it is marked by critical developments in teacher identity, efficacy, and commitment to the profession (Halford, 1998; Hökkä and Eteläpelto, 2014; Brew et al., 2018; Smith, Ulvik and Helleve, 2019). Through a detailed exploration of their affordances and constraints, this study aims to provide insights into how non-ITE teachers navigate the complexities of the profession and how their agency can be supported within policy and practice.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Challenges faced by novice teachers**

Teaching has long been recognised as a profession fraught with emotional, cognitive, and logistical demands, often linked to elevated levels of stress and a pronounced risk of early career burnout (Sims and John, 2020). Halford's (1998) vivid portrayal of teaching as "the profession that eats its young" captures the intense and often overwhelming nature of the early years in the profession, even for those equipped with formal Initial Teacher Education (ITE) training. For novice teachers, the transition from structured practicum environments to the dynamic, unpredictable realities of actual classroom settings frequently results in what has been termed a "reality shock" (Veenman, 1984). This phenomenon reflects the dissonance between theoretical preparation and the complexities of everyday teaching practice (Tsui, 2003; Smith Ulvik and Helleve, 2019).

In the Turkish context, this transitional shock is similarly observed among newly appointed teachers, particularly those placed in state schools through centralised assignments without the benefit of long-term practicum or mentoring experiences. Novice educators often

confront a multitude of professional challenges, ranging from managing student behaviour and assessing learning outcomes to cultivating student engagement in overcrowded classrooms (Mintz et al., 2020). Additionally, systemic issues such as excessive administrative burdens, limited professional autonomy, and difficulties integrating into school communities - especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged or rural regions - further compound the pressures of the initial teaching years (Courtney et al., 2023).

These challenges are frequently exacerbated by insufficient institutional support mechanisms. Research indicates that the lack of well-structured induction programmes, effective mentorship, and opportunities for professional collaboration hinders the successful adaptation of novice teachers to school environments (Gaikhorst et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2012; De Neve and Devos, 2017). In Turkey, although the Ministry of National Education (MEB) has introduced initiatives such as candidate teacher training programs, the scope, quality, and consistency of such support remain uneven, particularly in under-resourced settings.

Moreover, novice teachers often face scepticism regarding their professional competence, a perception that may stem from their limited experience and unfamiliarity with institutional norms (Correa et al., 2015; Kelchtermans, 2017). This deficit view tends to overshadow the unique assets these teachers may offer, including technological fluency, adaptability, and cultural proximity to younger generations (Ulvik and Langørgen, 2012) - qualities particularly relevant in contemporary Turkish classrooms that are increasingly diverse and digitally mediated.

In addition to systemic and institutional barriers, novice teachers also encounter internal struggles. These include diminished intrinsic motivation (Sali and Kecik, 2018; Duan et al., 2023), cognitive dissonance between pre-existing teaching beliefs and mandated curriculum frameworks (Gilakjani and Sabouri, 2017), and limited capacity for self-directed professional development (Pithouse-Morgan, 2022). In such a multifaceted and often contradictory landscape, the construct of teacher agency becomes especially salient. As an enabling force, teacher agency empowers novice educators to assert control over their professional trajectories, respond proactively to contextual challenges, and foster sustainable teaching identities.

## **2.2. Teacher agency**

The concept of *teacher agency* has been subject to diverse theoretical interpretations, ranging from individualistic perspectives that frame agency as an internal ability to act or achieve goals (Taylor, 1985; Biesta and Michael, 2007), to more context-sensitive views that stress the dynamic interplay between the individual and their environment (Biesta and Michael, 2007). While earlier formulations often positioned agency as a fixed personal trait - suggesting teachers can always act upon their intentions regardless of context - recent research has moved towards a more nuanced, ecological understanding of agency. This shift is particularly important in recognising how institutional policies, school cultures, and material resources can significantly constrain or facilitate teacher decision-making and autonomy (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Tao and Gao, 2021).

In Turkey, where the teaching profession is strongly shaped by centralised regulations, standardised curricula, and high-stakes assessment systems, agency is not simply a matter of personal willpower. Teachers' capacity to act is deeply intertwined with the institutional expectations of the Ministry of National Education (MEB), school leadership practices, and often, the socio-political narratives surrounding education. Especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers without formal Initial Teacher Education (ITE) backgrounds, the lack of pedagogical training, limited exposure to practicum environments, and unclear role expectations can further hinder their ability to act as autonomous, reflective professionals.

Building on the work of Emirbayer and Ann (1998), Biesta and Michael (2007) propose an ecological model of teacher agency that foregrounds three interrelated dimensions: iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative. The iterational dimension relates to how a teacher's past experiences - including personal histories, educational background, and prior work environments - inform current dispositions and instructional practices. The projective dimension highlights the importance of teachers' aspirations and long-term goals, shaping their professional imagination and planning. Lastly, the practical-evaluative dimension focuses on how teachers respond to the immediate demands of their teaching contexts, balancing past patterns and future aims while navigating real-time constraints such as policy restrictions, classroom conditions, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships.

This model has proven valuable in empirical studies exploring the nuanced realities of teacher practice. For instance, studies have shown that when teachers lack a clear vision for their career or face a mismatch between their pedagogical beliefs and institutional demands, their agency may be limited to surface-level compliance rather than transformative engagement (Ashton, 2022; Wang, 2022). Similarly, in contexts of top-down educational reforms - such as curriculum changes mandated by MEB - teachers' agency can be significantly shaped by their alignment with reform ideologies and the structural flexibility they are afforded in implementing new practices.

In the Turkish context, where novice EFL teachers with non-ITE backgrounds are increasingly present in the national education system, especially through centrally appointed positions in state schools, their professional agency warrants focused investigation. Drawing on the ecological model of teacher agency, this study aims to explore how such teachers experience and exercise agency during their initial year of teaching. This inquiry is guided by two central research questions:

1. What factors constrain the professional agency of non-ITE novice EFL teachers during their first year in Turkish state schools?
2. What personal and contextual affordances enable these teachers to act agentively within their professional environments?

By exploring these dimensions, the study seeks to deepen understanding of the lived realities of non-ITE teachers in Turkey and to contribute to a more inclusive discourse on teacher development and support frameworks.

### **2.3. Context for the research**

In Türkiye, the preparation of future teachers is primarily undertaken by education faculties within universities, where a four-year Initial Teacher Education (ITE) program - typically leading to a degree in teacher education - is designed to equip prospective teachers with pedagogical knowledge, subject expertise, and practical training for teaching at various educational levels. Despite this structured and centralised approach, the Turkish education system continues to grapple with several enduring challenges, including regional disparities in teacher distribution, high turnover in disadvantaged areas, and ongoing teacher shortages, particularly in rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged regions of Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia.

To mitigate these issues, Türkiye has implemented various policy measures that allow university graduates without formal ITE training to enter the teaching profession through alternative routes. One notable example is the Pedagogical Formation Certificate Program, a post-graduate short-term training scheme that enables non-education faculty graduates to obtain teaching credentials. Furthermore, contractual teacher appointments by the Ministry of National Education have enabled rapid placement of teachers - often without extensive preparation - into

schools with critical staffing needs. These policy adjustments mirror global trends in diversifying entry paths into the teaching profession to respond to teacher supply crises.

This study is situated in Sivas, one of Türkiye's most populous provinces in the Central Anatolia region, characterised by a young population, high student-teacher ratios, and significant educational inequalities. Sivas consistently ranks among the regions with the highest number of open teaching positions and the greatest reliance on newly appointed or non-ITE teachers to fill these gaps. The province's educational profile reflects systemic issues such as high classroom density, linguistic diversity due to refugee and minority populations, and limited access to experienced mentors - factors that intensify the challenges faced by novice teachers.

Given the increasing employment of non-ITE novice EFL teachers in such high-need regions, Sivas offers a compelling case for investigating how these teachers navigate their first year of professional practice. The unique demographic, institutional, and pedagogical dynamics of the region provide a rich context for exploring the professional agency of non-ITE teachers and identifying both the affordances and constraints shaping their teaching trajectories.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1. Participants**

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilising semi-structured interviews with 21 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers working in 12 state secondary schools located in Sivas province, Türkiye. All participants commenced their teaching careers in September 2024, and were in the process of completing or had just completed their first full year in the profession at the time of data collection.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling guided by the following inclusion criteria:

- (a) they were actively teaching English at the lower or upper secondary level (middle or high school);
- (b) they had recently completed their first year of professional teaching experience;
- (c) they did not possess an Initial Teacher Education (ITE) background (e.g., no formal teacher education degree from a faculty of education);
- (d) they voluntarily expressed both interest in and availability for participation in the study.

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was secured from the ethics board of the researcher's affiliated institution. Prospective participants were provided with a detailed participant information sheet, outlining the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical safeguards. They were given three days to review the information, ask questions if needed, and decide whether to participate. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before any interviews were conducted.

### **4.2. Data collection and analysis**

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the first-year teaching experiences of novice non-ITE EFL teachers. This method was chosen for its ability to elicit in-depth responses and capture the nuances of participants' perceptions and professional realities (Mann, 2016). Interviews were conducted in Turkish, held online to accommodate participants' schedules, and lasted between 50 to 70 minutes, ensuring both depth and manageability. The interview protocol began with background-related questions and gradually progressed toward core themes, specifically the constraints and affordances shaping teachers' professional agency.

Guided by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson's (2015) ecological model of teacher agency, participants were invited to reflect on their past experiences, current socio-cultural contexts,

and future aspirations. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure a faithful representation of the discussions. Participants were then given the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy. Following this, transcripts were translated into English by a professional translation service, and a bilingual academic reviewed the translations to ensure linguistic precision and clarity. To maintain coherence and readability in reporting, quotations were lightly edited for fluency, with ellipses used to indicate omissions.

A thematic analysis (TA) approach, as outlined by Braun and Victoria (2006), was employed to identify recurring patterns and meanings in the data. This process unfolded in six stages: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) development of initial themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. In the first stage, transcripts were read thoroughly and initial notes were taken. Next, line-by-line coding was conducted, with descriptive labels assigned to meaningful data segments. These codes were iteratively reviewed, grouped into subthemes, and ultimately organised into overarching themes, ensuring alignment with the study's research questions. Any data not relevant to the research focus was excluded from the final analysis.

Themes were then clearly defined and contextualised through illustrative quotes from the participants and were linked to the existing body of literature. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, the entire dataset and findings were reviewed by an EFL expert with three decades of teaching experience in Turkish secondary schools and ten years of service as a department head.

## **5. Results**

The analysis of interview data revealed two overarching themes central to understanding the professional agency of novice non-ITE EFL teachers: (1) constraints to agency at work and facilitators in exercising agency. These themes, along with their sub-themes and codes, are summarised. Each theme is presented below, supported by illustrative excerpts from participant interviews.

### **5.1. Constraints to agency at work**

Participants reflected on the limitations they encountered during their first year of teaching, which emerged from a complex interplay of their past experiences, future aspirations, and present working conditions.

#### **5.1.1. Past experiences**

A recurrent theme across interviews was the participants' recognition of how their lack of formal initial teacher education (ITE) impacted their classroom efficacy. The absence of foundational pedagogical training often left them feeling underprepared for key instructional responsibilities such as lesson planning, differentiated instruction, and student assessment. Participant A explained:

“Although I could tell the whole class was struggling with listening, I didn’t know how to respond. I’m confident in my language skills, but converting that into student learning was overwhelming.”

Many novices reported relying on their own past experiences as language learners, often modelling their teaching on how they had been taught. This self-referential approach, however, fell short when applied to contemporary, student-centred methodologies. Participant F noted:

“Trying to use the Communicative Language Teaching method was tough. Quiet students wouldn’t join group tasks, and the louder ones got off-topic. It felt inefficient, so I went back to grammar rules and exam prep.”

### **5.1.2. Future goals**

A significant barrier to agency arose from participants' professional identity struggles. Lacking the legitimacy conferred by a traditional ITE background, several novices expressed uncertainty about their place in the profession. Participant I shared:

“Without pedagogical training, I feel like I’m in costume – I look like a teacher, but I don’t feel like one.”

This identity tension made some participants question their long-term suitability for teaching. As Participant J put it:

“I’m building my teaching like a house without a blueprint – it stands, but I don’t know if it will last.”

### **5.1.3. Present context**

Participants described how their school environments posed immediate challenges that constrained their agency. One key issue was the misalignment of induction programmes, which failed to account for their specific needs as non-ITE teachers. As Participant H noted:

“The induction process treated everyone the same, so we had to figure out our pedagogical gaps alone.”

Another widespread concern was the lack of structured mentorship. Although mentors were assigned, their heavy workloads often meant limited availability. Participant D commented:

“My mentor’s amazing, but finding time for mentoring sessions felt like trying to find silence in a market.”

Additionally, participants were burdened with excessive workloads, often equal to those of experienced colleagues. They were also expected to take on pastoral and administrative roles. Participant B recalled:

“My day started at 7:30 a.m. and didn’t end until 11 p.m. I was so drained I couldn’t even focus on my teaching.”

Compounding these pressures, 11 participants reported feeling marginalised by peers from traditional teacher education backgrounds. Participant H described being excluded from a novice teacher competition:

“Just because we didn’t graduate from teacher education programmes, we weren’t allowed to participate.”

These collective challenges led several participants, including Participant I, to re-evaluate their future in the profession:

“Given everything we’re dealing with, I’m not sure I can still achieve the goals I once had in teaching.”

## **5.2. Facilitators in exercising agency**

Despite the considerable constraints, participants also identified enabling factors that supported their development and agency during their first year.

### **5.2.1. Past experiences**

The participants' diverse educational and professional backgrounds emerged as a key strength. Many drew from fields such as business English, intercultural communication, legal

English, and tourism. This broad-based knowledge allowed them to enrich language instruction in innovative ways. Participant O, for instance, leveraged their legal English background:

“I used legal scenarios to teach language. It helped students see how English connects to social values.”

Others brought cultural insights into lessons. Participants with tourism backgrounds (e.g., E, L, Q, and I) created culturally immersive learning experiences, integrating geography and history to contextualise language use.

Interestingly, their non-traditional training also fostered creative autonomy. Participant B described how student feedback guided her teaching:

“Students told me what worked, so I adjusted my assessments accordingly. It became a dynamic process.”

Participant H incorporated virtual reality into vocabulary lessons:

“Using VR to ‘walk through’ vocabulary got students – and even other teachers – excited.”

Moreover, strong intrinsic motivation was central to their resilience. While most struggled in the first few months, many overcame early self-doubt through reflection and active learning. Participant H shared:

“Teaching part-time during university made me realise I loved helping students grow. That passion kept me going through the hardest parts.”

### **5.2.2. Future goals**

Most participants entered teaching with a clear, intentional vision. Sixteen of them expressed strong, future-oriented motivations that guided their professional growth. Participant C described:

“I stepped in knowing I had a lot to learn. But I saw each challenge as part of the journey toward the teacher I want to become.”

### **5.2.3. Present context**

A key enabling factor was the alignment between participants’ values and their schools’ educational philosophies. Eighteen teachers cited their schools’ emphasis on holistic development, equity, and inclusion as sources of motivation. Participant R reflected:

“Knowing the school valued growth and not just performance helped me push through the tough times.”

While most reported insufficient mentoring structures, a few (Participants C, G, L, and Q) benefited from dedicated, structured mentorship. Regular, reflective sessions helped them problem-solve and grow professionally.

“My mentor met with me weekly. We discussed lesson plans and classroom issues. That support made all the difference.” (Participant G)

## **6. Conclusion**

Drawing on Priestley et al.’s (2015) ecological model of teacher agency, this study explores the professional experiences of non-ITE novice EFL teachers working in Turkey - a group often overlooked in national education policies and teacher development initiatives. By examining the interrelated dimensions of the ecological model - iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective - the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how



teacher agency is shaped in a Turkish context marked by both challenges and unique opportunities.

In the iterational (historical) dimension, many non-ITE teachers entered the profession with limited pedagogical training and a tendency to reproduce traditional teaching methods rooted in their own educational experiences. This often hindered their initial confidence and limited their ability to implement contemporary communicative approaches. However, their diverse academic pathways and varied internship experiences equipped them with distinct perspectives that enriched classroom interaction and contributed to student motivation and learning.

Within the practical-evaluative (present) dimension, several structural and cultural challenges emerged. Negative societal perceptions regarding the competence of non-education graduates, coupled with institutional shortcomings - such as lack of systematic induction, heavy workloads, and limited access to professional mentoring - additional burdens. Despite these obstacles, alignment with the school's culture and values often acted as a buffer, helping these teachers gradually adapt to the demands of the profession.

In the projective (future-oriented) dimension, non-ITE novice teachers in Turkey demonstrated strong internal motivation and long-term dedication to teaching, even when faced with identity conflicts and burnout risks. Their passion for education and desire to contribute meaningfully to student development helped them sustain their efforts and imagine lasting teaching careers. This study also offers an extension of Priestley et al.'s model by suggesting that the influence between present realities and future aspirations is bi-directional: current constraints and experiences actively shape teachers' evolving visions for themselves.

From a policy and practice perspective, the findings underscore the urgent need for tailored support systems for non-ITE novice teachers in Turkey. Structured induction programs, phased workload models, and dedicated mentoring structures are crucial to facilitating smoother professional transitions. Equally important is the shift in institutional mindset - from perceiving these teachers as "deficient" to recognizing them as assets who bring valuable diversity and fresh insights into the classroom. Such a shift can foster a more inclusive, collaborative school culture where all educators are empowered.

Although this study contributes to understanding the complex experiences of non-ITE novice EFL teachers in the Turkish context, certain limitations remain. The relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of findings. Future research should aim to include a broader range of disciplines and geographical regions to uncover common patterns and contextual differences. Moreover, since the first five years of teaching are often the most critical and turbulent, longitudinal studies are necessary to trace the development of teacher agency over time and design more sustainable support strategies that nurture professional growth throughout the teaching career.

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