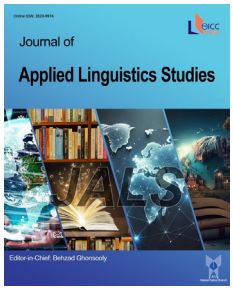

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Student Attrition at English Language Institutes: An Explanatory Case Study

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Abstract:

Although the number of students attending English language institutes (ELIs) is rising, many students withdraw from courses before completion. Student attrition is typically attributed to two categories of factors, i.e., compulsory and voluntary factors. However, little is known about the reasons for student attrition at ELIs. Drawing on an explanatory case study as a particular kind of qualitative research, the researchers built a conceptual framework and conduced in-depth, semi-structured, on-line interviews with 20 former students who chose not to complete their courses. Participants were selected using a typical case sampling strategy. A directed approach to content analysis, given its structured nature, was employed to identify key concepts as initial coding categories. The results of the qualitative content analysis revealed three main themes contributing to student attrition at ELIs: (i) Dissatisfaction with the Quality of Study Programs, (ii) Academic Demotivation, and (iii) Dissatisfaction with Instructors. We discuss the study's implications for practice, and several directions for future research. Ultimately, we conclude that ELIs need to redefine their student profiles in light of 21st century-born students as most institutes do not seem to be Generation-Alpha ready.

Keywords: Academic Demotivation, Dissatisfaction with Instructors, Dissatisfaction with Study Programs, English Language Institutes (ELIs), Student Attrition

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INTRODUCTION

Continuing second language (L2) education at English language institutes (ELIs) is a significant academic pursuit for many Iranian families, leading numerous students of various ages to enroll in EFL programs at these institutes. ELIs serve as a vital supplement to formal EFL education in Iran, offering learners opportunities for language use and authentic communication. Unlike formal L2 education, ELIs often overcome common barriers such as limited class time for interaction, lack of technology, and ineffective instructional techniques. However, a notable concern is the number of students who withdraw from ELIs at different learning stages (Gholami Zafarani, Kasaian, & Jalal, 2015). While attrition in higher education is a recognized issue, ELIs also experience significant attrition rates. This failure to persist is detrimental not only to the EFL learners but also to their families and the institutes themselves. Compounding this challenge is the lack of definitive statistics on student retention at ELIs. Despite extensive literature on student attrition in general, this phenomenon remains largely unexplored within ELI settings. The specific reasons behind these learners discontinuing their programs prior to completion are still largely unknown, posing a persistent challenge for researchers.

Previous research has explored factors contributing to academic attrition in high schools and universities, identifying diverse influences such as mental, educational, and economic factors (Aparicio Colino, Arroyo-Barrigüete, Hernández Estrada, & Sánchez Ávila, 2025; Farhadi, Javaheri & Gholami, 2005; Netanda, 2024; Nuuyoma, Nevensha, & Sehoole, 2025; Nuuyoma & Sing, 2025; Rawling, 2023; Schneider & Lin, 2011). However, there

is limited understanding of learner attrition specifically at ELIs in Iran, despite their crucial role in L2 pedagogy. Therefore, investigating why some learners fail to continue their studies at ELIs is essential. Gaining insight into these contributing factors can help ELIs better meet learners' needs, thereby increasing retention and completion rates.

This research holds significance not only for EFL teachers interested in these learning experiences but also for ELIs that view attrition as damaging to their reputation. Students who withdraw from ELI programs can generate negative word-of-mouth publicity for their former institute (Colgate, Stewart & Kinsella, 1996; Ettehad, Zoghi, & Davatgari Asl, 2023), potentially harming the institute's image in the long run. In a competitive landscape, ELIs with high attrition rates may lose students to those that have proactively addressed and strengthened their competitive position (Colgate, et al., 1996; Farhadi et al., 2005). Consequently, identifying variables that predict attrition can enable ELIs to better monitor and develop programs that support their learners, ultimately assisting students in completing their courses. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the improvement of the EFL learning process and better address learners' needs, potentially offering crucial insights to encourage learners' persistence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The reasons for student attrition are complex, and past studies show limited agreement on which combination of factors is most important. Nevertheless, common themes regarding student withdrawal consistently appear in the literature. Two primary categories of factors emerge: voluntary and compulsory pressures (Bakariwie, Asamoah, & Duwiejuah, 2025; Bennett, 2003; Christo & Oyinlade, 2015; Kember & Fan 2023; Lorenzo-Quiles, Galdón-López, & Lendínez-Turón, 2023). Voluntary withdrawal, as defined by Bennett (2003), stems from conscious student decisions, such as a perceived lack of educational challenge, dissatisfaction with peers or teachers, loss of motivation, or boredom. Conversely, compulsory disengagement results from unwillingly made decisions not based on student preference. Christo and Oyinlade (2015) describe compulsory attrition as 'push' conditions where students are forced to withdraw despite their wishes, such as serious illness, financial inability, or family obligations. For consistency with existing literature and to provide a robust theoretical grounding, this study specifically draws upon Bennett's (2003) framework of voluntary and compulsory pressures for student withdrawal, alongside insights from the Push-Pull Theory (Bogue, 1969) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Bennett's model offers a foundational distinction between internal, student-driven reasons for departure (voluntary) and external, unavoidable circumstances (compulsory). Building on this, the Push-Pull Theory helps conceptualize the forces attracting students to stay (pull factors) and those pushing them to leave (push factors). While the study primarily focuses on voluntary factors as per Bennett's model, the underlying tenets of Push-Pull Theory inform the broader understanding of why students might disengage. Furthermore, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a valuable lens through which to explore the psychological determinants of students' intentions to persist or withdraw. Specifically, TPB's constructs of attitude towards the behavior (continuing studies), subjective norms (perceived social pressure to stay or leave), and perceived behavioral control (perceived ease or difficulty of continuing studies) are particularly relevant to understanding voluntary withdrawal.

Given that ELI learners in Iran are typically traditional students aged 18 to 22, the relevance of voluntary factors is presumed to be more significant than compulsory pressures. Non-traditional students, usually older (over 24) and from working-class backgrounds, are generally influenced more by additional, external forces and stressors. Therefore, this study, guided by Bennett's framework and informed by the Push-Pull Theory and TPB, aims to explore why selected voluntary factors play a major role in student attrition from ELIs. The research question addressed how these selected determinants (voluntary factors), conceptualized through the lens of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control related to the institute's program, could contribute to predicting student attrition. This theoretical grounding will directly inform the design of our data collection instruments, particularly the interview protocol, ensuring that questions are structured to elicit responses relevant to these theoretical constructs. For instance, questions will explore students' feelings about their studies (attitude), the influence of family or friends (subjective norms), and their perceived ability to overcome challenges (perceived behavioral control). The data analysis will then explicitly categorize findings according to these theoretical components to provide a comprehensive understanding of voluntary attrition. Therefore, the main research question is formulated as:

RQ: From the perspective of ELIs' students, what are voluntary factors contributing to attrition at ELIs?

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

A particular type of purposive sampling technique known as typical case sampling was used since the focus was on the typicality of the students experiencing attrition at ELIs. The term 'typical case' in this context refers to students who exhibit the common characteristics of individuals experiencing attrition from ELIs in Karaj, Iran. Our aim was not to explore extreme or unusual cases, but rather to understand the prevalent experiences of students who voluntarily discontinued their studies. Therefore, the participants in this study were students who had recently withdrawn from ELIs. The email addresses and phone numbers of these students were obtained from the management offices of seven ELIs. In the emailed consent form, the participants were informed that they would be selected for the individual interviews. The criteria for selecting the participants in the study included: (1) having completed at least one academic semester at an ELI in Karaj; (2) being an adult-age student who had reached the

age of 18 at the time of attrition, and (3) being withdrawn from an English language program. Twenty students, who had chosen to leave voluntarily, agreed to participate in the study. As no additional students agreed to participate, this sample size was considered adequate to ensure that reasonably accurate data saturation could be acquired (Ando, Cousins & Young, 2014; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

For completion of the interviews, all the participating students were provided a small financial incentive, a fifty-thousand-toman gift. The researchers deposited this amount of money online into their bank accounts once they received the participants' bank card numbers prior to the study began. The APA Ethics Code acknowledges that incentives for research participation are permissible, provided they are not excessive or coercive. Participation was presented as entirely voluntary and that the incentive was clearly communicated as compensation for their time, not as a condition for their responses.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We drew on an explanatory case study (Yin, 2014) to affirm and illuminate a theory that we came to. In an explanatory case study – a particular kind of qualitative research – researchers build the conceptual framework that ultimately helps them gain an understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2014). The conceptual framework in qualitative research provides understanding rather than a theoretical explanation (Jabareen, 2009).

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The in-depth semi-structured phone interview was the main tool for qualitative data collection in this study. Interviews were conducted in Persian via Skype to avoid any ambiguity and misunderstanding. The interview questions were developed based on our postulates that voluntary pressures may negatively affect student attrition. They focused on the issue of attrition and the voluntary predictors of EFL learners' attrition at ELIs. The protocol was pilot tested on four students. A few minor modifications were made to the interview protocol based on feedback from expert reviewers and pilot participants. For example, following reviewers' comments, we reordered some items so that general questions appeared at the beginning of the protocol and other important questions came in the middle. The interview protocol employed in this study is presented in Appendix A.

The participants received the interview questions before the scheduled interview time and were informed the interview would be audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Respondents were also told that they would receive and review the contents of the transcription and correct them if necessary. Interviews were conducted in Persian, each of which lasted almost 25-35 minutes to collect the intended data. For the purpose of data analysis, we translated the interview transcripts into English with the help of an expert in translation. Every attempt was also made to observe such ethical considerations as the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviews of the participants.

GENERAL PROCEDURES

The qualitative data collection primarily focused on explaining why voluntary pressures could affect ELI student attrition. We conducted in-depth semi-structured online interviews with 20 former ELI students. The data collection took two months. Participants chosen were contacted via a phone call or email by the first author. She coordinated individually with each participant so that she could fix a date and time that suited the participants' schedules best. The participating students gave permission to audio-record the interviews; however, two of them had second thoughts and disagreed to take part in the interviews. They also had an opportunity to review the interview questions prior to the scheduled calling time.

She began interviews with welcoming words and made interviewees feel comfortable. Next, she reviewed the aim of the study and provided some guidelines to follow during the interview. Participants were asked 10 main, open-ended questions, each requiring more elaboration on a particular voluntary factor of attrition. Furthermore, the researcher provided additional probing questions to make the understanding of the questions clearer. Interviews lasted almost 25-35 minutes and the data collected from the interviews were transcribed verbatim into electronic format. After the interview transcription was completed, a copy was emailed to the participants to confirm its accuracy. The identifying information of the interviewees was taken out from the data as soon as it was found that it was no longer needed. The electronic files used for audio-recording the interviews were permanently deleted once the study was complete. The participants were also told that their recorded voices would be labelled pseudonymously. Finally, at the end of the study, the researcher emailed the findings of the study to each ELI that had agreed to participate in this study.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Credibility is a process of verification, in which the trustworthiness of findings is established (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Four main types of provisions suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were included in the context of this study to promote confidence and also produce credible findings: (a) detailed and thick descriptions of the findings; (b) member checking; (c) triangulation; and (d) peer debriefing.

Thick description, or rather describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail, is seen as an important provision for achieving credibility and external validity. A rich and in-depth description of the phenomenon under scrutiny can help with the evaluation of the extent to which the obtained results are transferable to other settings and people. Sufficient detailed description of attrition factors in this study could allow readers to have an in-depth understanding of it; therefore, as Shenton (2004, p. 70) asserts, it can enable readers "to compare the instances of the phenomenon described in the research report with those that they have seen emerge in their situations".

To achieve credibility in this study, member checking was

also used. Member checking refers to receiving feedback from participants regarding the accuracy of the identified themes. This strategy allows checking the researchers' understanding and interpretation of the qualitative data by having the participants take an active role in the study. As such, the data transcriptions and interpretations were emailed to the interviewees for review.

Among different types of triangulation, we drew on site triangulation (Shenton, 2004) as it was deemed appropriate. Site triangulation can be achieved by the participation of informants within several institutions. This could minimize the impact of specific local factors particularly pertinent to one institution. Shenton (2004, p. 66) argues that "where similar results emerge at different sites, findings may have greater credibility in the eyes of the reader". To this end, seven different English language institutes were chosen as research sites.

Finally, peer debriefing by the researchers' colleagues was used as a credibility technique in this study. Peer debriefing is the scrutiny of the research project by an outsider who reviews the study and provides feedback. The comments and suggestions obtained from the peer debriefing technique provided fresh perspectives and enabled us to strengthen our arguments.

THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

The first author was personally involved in the data collection of the study. She is a faculty member and has taught at ELIs for many years. She has extensive experience with ELI students and has witnessed their withdrawal. On that account, she assumed a participatory role in this qualitative investigation. She was also cognizant of the current situation relating to student attrition, and it arguably provided the impetus for the study. Her prior experience may be regarded by some as a potential source of bias, which may create a likelihood of subjective interpretations. Logical it might seem, no research is conducted in vacuum and researchers' prior knowledge cannot be put aside or "unlearned" (Heath & Cowley 2004). As Gibson and Hartman (2014) note, researchers have preconceived notions, but they should not use them.

Although these arguments do not rule out the possibility of bias, we believe that her prior knowledge and experience of the phenomenon being studied could help her understand the nuances of the qualitative data (Walls, Parahoo & Fleming, 2010). Furthermore, different verification procedures (e.g., member checking, peer debriefing, and site triangulation) were used to promote confidence in the findings and to address some of the research issues causing concern.

DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative text data obtained through the interviews were coded and analyzed for themes. A qualitative content analysis approach was undertaken. Content analysis is, in fact, a flexible method that focuses on the content or contextual meaning of text data (McTavish & Pirro, 1990; Tesch, 1990). With content analysis, researchers can gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). There are three distinct types of qualitative content analysis used to interpret text data: conventional, summative, and directed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The specific kind of content analysis approach that researchers choose is based on their theoretical interests and the problem being studied (Weber, 1990).

In this study, as the researchers used the existing theory and prior research related to the phenomenon of attrition, a directed approach to content analysis was deemed appropriate. The goal of directed content analysis is to validate or extend both a theoretical framework and past work (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This type of content analysis is a structured approach through which researchers identify key concepts as initial coding categories with the help of existing theory or prior research (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

Given the researchers' intent, directed content analysis began with coding immediately with the predetermined codes. Data that could not be coded were identified and analyzed later to determine if they represented a new category. In fact, the first author engaged in an iterative process of data collection and analysis to ensure thematic saturation. Interviews continued until no new themes or significant insights emerged from the data, indicating that a rich and comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences had been achieved. This iterative process involved ongoing thematic analysis concurrent with data collection, allowing us to identify recurring patterns and cease further data collection once thematic redundancy was observed across multiple interviews.

RESULTS

The interview protocol was designed to offer the former ELI students the opportunity to present views and experiences that highlight the attrition factors. To address the study's research question, the first author coded and content-analyzed the translated interview transcripts through the directed approach to content analysis. This type of content analysis, also known as deductive category application (Mayring, 2014), helps qualitative researchers identify key concepts as initial coding categories with the help of prior research (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). She first reviewed the transcripts carefully, highlighting all text that appeared to describe a voluntary factor. All highlighted text was coded as concepts indicating the predetermined categories wherever possible.

Overall, the steps in the qualitative analysis included: (1) preliminary exploration of the data by reading through the transcripts and writing memos; (2) coding the data by segmenting and labeling the text; (3) verifying the codes through inter-coder agreement check; (4) using codes as concepts to develop themes by aggregating similar concepts together;(5) connecting and interrelating themes; and (6) constructing a narrative (Creswell, 2002). Finally, we used rank-order comparisons of the frequency of concepts, as suggested by Curtis, Wenrich, Carline, Shannon, Ambrozy, & Ramsey (2001). It helped us find out about the incidence

Table 1. Coding Log: Excerpts, Concepts & their Frequencies, and Themes

Excerpt (Example Quote from Interview Data)	**Concepts (Coding Rationale)**	**Theme**	**Frequency**
"There were not enough instructional facilities … and what is more, we experienced different instructional styles as our teachers were changed each term." [No. 1]	Lack of infrastructure; inconsistency in teaching methods	Dissatisfaction with Quality of Study Programs	6
"Its quality was below average… I was still at the intermediate, or maybe at the beginner level after four years…" [No. 7]	Poor learning outcomes; ineffective curriculum		6
"The problem was with the quality of the program. They were going so slowly…" [No. 10]	Slow instructional pace; frustration with progress		7
"The procedures taken for instruction was extremely too long… no consultation center…" [No. 18]	Inefficient instruction; lack of academic support		5
"There was not much to achieve… classes were heterogeneous… mostly kids under the age of seven…" [No. 13]	Inappropriate class composition; low academic level		6
"ELIs insist on students' admission… employ some specific materials for all…" [No. 15]	Rigid curriculum; lack of differentiation		8
"I really felt disinterested… I enrolled… simply to 'see how it feels'… I got demotivated." [No. 1]	Lack of purpose; emotional disengagement	Academic Demotivation	7
"Students… different proficiency levels… different age groups… I did not know how to learn…" [No. 4]	Class heterogeneity; confusion; lack of motivation		4
"Sitting there and doing nothing helpful was really tiresome… I was not motivated to learn." [No. 5]	Passive learning; boredom; disengagement		6
"Lessons were really difficult to handle… I could not learn effectively…" [No. 7]	Learning challenges; frustration; lack of control		8
"Teachers… failed to arouse my interest… could give us emotional strength…" [No. 20]	Lack of emotional engagement; motivational support		9
"A negative point about my classes was that teachers were boring." [No. 13]	Unengaging instruction; boredom		8
"Teachers… unable to provide us easily and effectively with the knowledge… each had his own way." [No. 16]	Ineffective teaching; inconsistent methods	Dissatisfaction with Instructors	5
"Level of teachers' knowledge and expertise was quite low…" [No. 11]	Lack of subject mastery; poor instructional delivery		6
"Teachers… could not take care of student needs… should be well-versed in teaching." [No. 7]	Inadequate pedagogical skills; unmet learner needs		7
"Some teachers were unable to transmit the material… accustomed to teaching young learners…" [No. 5]	Poor adaptability; ineffective communication		6
"They did not have enough teaching experience… not pedagogically serious." [No. 8]	Lack of professionalism; inexperience		9
"Teachers… failed to arouse my interest… could give us emotional strength…" [No. 20]	Emotional disconnect; lack of motivational support		7
"Teachers were typically young and inexperienced… did not spend enough time…" [No. 10]	Lack of rapport; insufficient individual attention		5
"Teachers were boring." [No. 13]	Unengaging teaching style		6

of concepts representing the main themes.

The analysis yielded three themes related to the participants' attrition decision i.e., (a) "Dissatisfaction with Quality of Study Programs", (b) "Academic Demotivation", and (c) "Dissatisfaction with Instructors". Table 1 highlights how individual, selected excerpts map onto conceptual codes and broader thematic patterns.

To show similarities among the participants who withdrew from ELI programs, the researchers intentionally employed qualitative frequency indicators such as a few, some, and many to preserve the interpretive depth inherent in qualitative research. This approach is consistent with the epistemological stance of thematic analysis, which prioritizes meaning-making over numerical representation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By using flexible descriptors, we also aimed to reflect the relative salience of themes without reducing participants' voices to statistical abstractions.

The themes deemed important for the interviewees as related to their withdrawal from the ELI were:

DISSATISFACTION WITH QUALITY OF STUDY PROGRAMS

Attrition decision can be postulated as a bottom-up process, meaning that the most fundamental factor negatively affecting attrition decision, or rather the bedrock of it, lies at the bottom. That is 'Dissatisfaction with Quality of Study Programs'. It is also intended to show that 'Dissatisfaction with Quality of Study Programs' creates a condition in which attrition decision becomes stronger. The participating interviewees indicated that the quality of educational services was the primary factor influencing their decision to withdraw from the program. In other words, they explicitly indicated a lack of quality of study programs as the major driving force for them to discontinue the ELI. Though they did not get far into the program, they believed that the quality of the ELI program was low and it could not meet their needs. In fact, they were not happy with the educational content. Many of them highlighted the following issues that negatively affected education quality at the ELI: (a) instructional materials and teaching methodologies were not suitable for them, (b) the duration of the programs was long, (c) the instructional framework was not consistence as instructors were changed each term at the ELI. They also highlighted the lack of advisory services at ELIs to solve their problem. For example, most of the respondents discussed the quality of study programs at the ELI by referring to the following points:

> *"There were not enough instructional facilities … and what is more, we experienced different instructional styles as our teachers were changed each term". [No. 1]*

This participant highlights two structural issues contributing to dissatisfaction: inadequate instructional resources and inconsistent teaching approaches. The frequent turnover of instructors disrupted pedagogical continuity, suggesting a lack of programmatic cohesion that undermined students' learning experiences.

> *"Its quality was below average; you know, … I was still at the intermediate, or maybe at the beginner level after four years that I had classes there in the ELI". [No. 7]*

This statement reflects a perceived failure of the program to deliver meaningful language progression. Despite long-term enrollment, the participant felt stagnated at a low proficiency level, indicating concerns about instructional effectiveness and curriculum design.

> *''The problem was with the quality of the program. They were going so slowly… and that was my primary reason for leaving the ELI''. [No. 10]*

Here, the participant explicitly links dissatisfaction with instructional pacing to their decision to withdraw. The slow progression suggests a mismatch between learner expectations and program delivery, reinforcing broader concerns about curricular responsiveness and academic rigor.

> *"The procedures taken for instruction was extremely too long and most of the students felt fed up"… Besides, there was no consultation center and we did not know how to get guidance". [No. 18]*

This quote illustrates both instructional and support service shortcomings. The participant's frustration with prolonged instructional procedures and lack of academic guidance points to systemic inefficiencies and a failure to address student needs holistically, contributing to overall dissatisfaction.

ACADEMIC DEMOTIVATION

From their observations, it was clear that "Academic Demotivation" moderated the effect of the quality study programs on attrition decisions among the participating former ELI students. As they indicated, they were unwilling to invest effort into their learning; they could not regulate their learning effectively; and they lacked the determination to keep on learning English when faced with obstacles. Relevant factors for demotivation included (a) an overload of activities, and (b) heterogeneity of students in terms of language proficiency and age, as argued by the participants:

> *"There was not much to achieve from the courses as students in classes were heterogeneous… the level of the classes was low… there were mostly kids under the age of seven… so, one cannot feel motivated to carry on". [No. 13]*

This quote underscores how inappropriate class composition—particularly age and proficiency mismatches—can reduce learner motivation. The participant's sense of futility reflects a broader theme of academic demotivation stemming from poorly structured learning environments that fail to meet adult learners' expectations.

> *"Lessons were really difficult to handle… when one is not proficient enough things will get really hard for them …. I could not learn effectively… and I could not really control my learning". [No. 7]*

Here, the participant expresses a loss of agency in the learning process, which is central to academic demotivation. The struggle with lesson difficulty and lack of self-regulation suggests that instructional design did not adequately support differentiated learning, leading to frustration and disengagement.

> *"To me it seems that ELIs insist on students' admission into the program and they also employ some specific materials for all; this is inconsistent with modern language teaching methods." [No. 15]*

This statement critiques the rigidity of the curriculum and the institution's enrollment practices. The participant's reference to outdated teaching methods reflects a disconnect between learner expectations and pedagogical approaches, contributing to a sense of reduced motivation. When discussing factors that might lead to attrition, many participants asserted that EFL learners must feel that they achieve something from the educational program; otherwise, they would become demotivated. For example, a few of the participants said:

> *"I really felt disinterested. You know why?... I enrolled in [the name of the ELI] simply to "see how it feels". I did not have a graduation purpose. The terms took a long time; for example, we covered only one book in three terms… and I got demotivated". [No. 1]*

This quote reveals a lack of goal orientation and dissatisfaction with the program's pacing. The participant's initial curiosity turned into disengagement due to slow progress and unclear academic trajectory, illustrating how ambiguous learning structures can undermine sustained motivation.

> *"Students usually enjoyed a wide range of different proficiency levels. Some could be considered as low intermediate students while some others were at the upper intermediate level. Homogeneity [of students] is very important.... Surprisingly enough, we were also in different age groups…there was an old man [LAUGHING] in our class. I did not know how to learn in these classes". [No. 4]*

This participant highlights the cognitive and social challenges posed by heterogeneous classrooms. The lack of instructional coherence and peer convergence created confusion and hindered effective learning, reinforcing the theme of academic demotivation through environmental mismatch.

> *"Every language learner may feel disappointed during the learning process. That is something natural. But in those classes, we merely focused on lessons for one hour and half. Sitting there and doing nothing helpful was really tiresome… so I was not motivated to learn". [No. 5]*

This reflection distinguishes between normal learning fatigue and sustained disengagement caused by ineffective instruction. The participant's boredom and perceived lack of meaningful activity suggest that the classroom experience failed to stimulate or support active learning, leading to motivational decline.

DISSATISFACTION WITH INSTRUCTORS

During the interviews, the mostly agreed-upon factor of attrition decision was identified as 'Dissatisfaction with Instructors'. As the majority of the respondents observed, it is language teachers who may in part help students continue learning at the ELI. They all agreed that EFL teachers have a facilitative role in learning and can also increase the sense of success or failure in students. For example, a few of the comments made by the respondents are:

> *"Teachers were trying to teach the content of the materials to learners; however, they were unable to provide us easily and effectively with the knowledge that was intended and necessary… each had his own way. I think they should familiarize themselves with new instructional methodologies so as to make the material understandable". [No. 16]*

This quote critiques the inconsistency and inefficacy of instructional delivery. It highlights a lack of methodological coherence among instructors. It indicates a gap between

teaching intent and actual learning outcomes, suggesting that instructors may lack training in contemporary pedagogical strategies. Also, it directly reflects dissatisfaction with instructors' preparedness and adaptability, reinforcing the need for professional development in teaching methodology.

> *"Unfortunately, the level of teachers' knowledge and expertise was quite low and they were unable to make us comprehend the material". [No. 11]*

This blunt assessment points to a perceived deficiency in both subject matter expertise and instructional skill. It equates effective teaching not just with linguistic knowledge but with the ability to facilitate understanding. It exemplifies how perceived incompetence among instructors leads to frustration and disengagement.

> *"the level of teachers and institutes was low … they could not take care of student needs… perhaps, their linguistic knowledge was enough for them, but they should definitely be well-versed in terms of teaching the language". [No. 7]*

This quote distinguishes between knowing a language and knowing how to teach it. The participant expects instructors to be responsive to learner needs and pedagogically skilled—not just fluent. It reinforces dissatisfaction rooted in the mismatch between institutional standards and learner expectations. As the students reported, ELI teachers did not have a strong personal responsibility for their job. The interviewees were mostly dissatisfied with the teaching strategies that their teachers were using.

> *"It just bothered me that some teachers were unable to transmit the material or to do something that could turn the class into an exciting setting… I am sorry to say that they were really unable to do so…you know, teachers who are accustomed to teaching young language learners cannot really perform well in other classes". [No. 5]*

> *"I guess they [teachers] did not have enough teaching experience and did not act in pedagogically serious way". [No. 8]*

These quotes critique both instructional delivery and classroom atmosphere. The participants value engaging, age-appropriate teaching. They also perceive a lack of commitment and pedagogical rigor, which undermines their trust in the learning process. The former students also indicated how interest in EFL learning could affect its achievement. Most of the participants emphasized the key role of instructors in generating interest among EFL learners:

> *"I believe that having an interest is necessary for language learning. If we are not interested in doing something, nobody is able to force us to do so. The teachers that I had in the ELI failed to arouse my interest in the subject matter. Admittedly, they [teachers] could give us some emotional strength to keep on learning." [No 20]*

> *"Teachers were typically young and inexperienced. I believe that they need to be patient and deliver lessons with great care; … they did spend enough time to work individually with learners and also build rapport with them". [No. 10]*

> *"A negative point about my classes was that teachers were boring". [No. 13]*

These quotes emphasize the emotional and motivational role of instructors. The participants in this context expected teachers to foster interest and provide affective support—not just deliver content. These quotes show dissatisfaction with instructors' failure to engage students emotionally, which is crucial for sustained motivation. It seems that they also critique the interpersonal and instructional maturity of instructors.

Overall, the findings from the directed content analysis in this study offer supporting evidence for our postulate based on Bennett's (2003) perspective in addition to the Push-Pull Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior. The qualitative analysis suggests that attrition decision is developed in a context in which the quality of EFL education is poor and it is further affected by "Dissatisfaction with Instructors" and "Academic Demotivation". Additionally, "Academic Demotivation" seems to have a moderating effect on the relationship between "Dissatisfaction with Quality of Study Programs" and "Attrition Decision". Finally, it suggests that "Attrition Decision" is impacted by "Dissatisfaction with Instructors".

DISCUSSION

Given the research question of the study, the qualitative findings provide a rich description of the former ELI students' voices about their attrition decision. Before interpreting the findings, we caution readers against generalizing the outcomes of this study to all ELI contexts due to the regional and sample-specific nature of the research.

Results show that instances of attrition decision were generally linked to specific voluntary factors that exerted pressure on the study participants to decide to withdraw from EFL programs. Borrowing the terms from the classic

immigration/migration push-pull theory (Bogue, 1969), we look at voluntary factors as "push" factors that are internal and intrinsic as opposed to external "pull" factors. "Push" or voluntary factors in this study most probably pushed the former ELI students to discontinue their educational pursuit at ELIs. The current qualitative explanatory case study revealed that three reasons were pivotal: (1) "Dissatisfaction with Quality of Study Programs"; (2) "Academic Demotivation", and (3) "Dissatisfaction with Instructors". Also, the qualitative analysis revealed that attrition decision is a bottom-up process, suggesting that the bedrock of attrition is "Dissatisfaction with Quality of Study Programs" by which the other two factors are affected. This research was directed primarily toward traditionally-aged ELI students; therefore, it was not counterintuitive to have considered voluntary factors as possible determinants of their attrition decision.

The "Dissatisfaction with Quality of Study Programs" had the most negative effect on the process of participants' attrition decision in the program because we found that this perception was, more or less, evident across all the study participants. Teachers, scholars, school officials, and policy makers may have different interpretations and views on quality (Napier, 2014; Netanda, 2024; Scherman & Bosker, 2017). However, in the context of the present study, the quality of study programs refers to the educational services that ELI students are offered. The qualitative evidence from this study indicates that the basic constituents of the quality of study programs are such components as the number of courses and their duration, teaching methods, instructional materials, assessment of students, staff professional qualifications, management, and curricula. These may be considered overriding quality factors responsible for ELI students' persistence in the program.

As noted, "Dissatisfaction with Quality of Study Programs" was a key driver of ELI students' attrition decision. To be more specific, it became clear in this study that dissatisfaction with the quality of study programs arose from poorly structured teaching, lack of instructors' teaching experience, and unnoticed differences in the preferred learning styles of students. This finding is consistent with past studies (Kember & Fan, 2023; Martinez, 2001; Stronge, 2018). Perhaps, this result can best be explained by a psychologically-based account of student attrition– the theory of planned behavior (TPB) proposed by Ajzen (1991). The TPB postulates that decisions are based on an evaluation of the probabilities and values of the outcomes of an action. As maintained by the TPB, the likelihood that individuals will engage in or pursue an action is primarily dependent on their intention. Among three factors (i.e., attitude, norms, and control) determining intention, attitude is of particular relevance to this study. Student choice to quit, as evidence suggests here, was influenced by their negative attitude toward the quality of study programs. The more negative a person's attitude toward a task, the firmer their decision to disengage in the task is said to be (Dewberry & Jackson, 2018). Overall, evidence collected in this study indicated that there is likely a psychological dimension to attrition decision for ELI students.

Another way to interpret this key finding is that ELI students had far more pragmatic needs than social needs. As the qualitative evidence revealed, the ELI students seemed to value those features of a course that are more practical, such as an appropriate curriculum, effective instruction, authentic instructional materials, and assessment strategies. Considering pragmatic considerations as significant aspects of student attrition, this study provided evidence that perhaps one of the best ways for ELIs to promote the quality of study programs would be to concentrate on such practical areas. When ELI directors and instructors respond adequately to their students' academic and nonacademic needs, their sense of resilience is sustained, and academic dissatisfaction may in turn fade away.

Furthermore, this study found ELI students to be a young, demanding clientele that expects high-quality educational services. They are more interested in a quality program that can satisfy their needs, especially their needs to spend less time and find a way to learn fast than they are in social relationships at the ELI. It is important to recognize that unfulfilled needs can promptly turn to dissatisfaction and then to attrition decision. This finding can be interpreted that what ELI students appreciate in an educational program is high quality along with convenience – a very strange mix. It is therefore up to ELI directors to strike such a difficult balance between what can be two opposing goals.

As was evident, demotivation was not uncommon among the study participants. In fact, "Academic Demotivation" emerged as a major predictor of attrition decision in this present study. We posit that it was born out of students' unfulfilled expectations about the quality of education at ELIs.; the ELI students who lacked motivation for academic success showed a greater propensity for leaving ELIs. In essence, 'demotives' decrease an action tendency and the available evidence here implied that students who were demotivated and did not believe that they could succeed at ELIs showed less resilience when facing difficulties, and thereby showed less interest in educational pursuit. This result supports similar findings reported in the literature (Bakariwie et al., 2025; Kikuchi, 2009; Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2018; Lamb, 2017; Lorenzo-Quiles et al., 2023; Nuuyoma et al., 2025; Usher & Pajares, 2006). Given that voluntary withdrawal from ELIs involves an active choice and a range of cognitive adjustments, a psychological theory of motivation may have the potential in explaining the reason(s) why students withdraw from language institutes. In this regard, Expectancy-Value Theory or EVT (Atkinson, 1964; Eccles, Adler, Futterman, Goff, Kaczala, Meece, & Midgley, 1983) may once again contribute.

This study also found that "Dissatisfaction with Instructors" as another emergent theme in this study is of crucial importance in understanding attrition. A strong demotivator for their educational pursuit was the lack of instructors' teaching experience and their inadequate knowledge about teaching methodologies. As evidenced by previous research (Ettehad et al., 2023; Falout & Maruyama 2004; Kember & Fan, 2023; Kim et al., 2018; Lamb, 2017),

instructors failing to provide constructive feedback, make class interesting, and make sure everyone understood are likely to be a potential source of student demotivation. The study participants almost unanimously believed that having experienced instructors was a key element that could impact their decision to stay in a program. This finding may not be new, but they may send a message to education providers at ELIs. For economic reasons, ELIs may recruit educational staff who are inexperienced and lack the necessary qualifications. If they continue to do so without full consideration of the likely consequences, a heavy price for their uncalculated decision is to be paid. ELI students, as the qualitative evidence showed, expect their instructors to be well-versed in effective teaching methodologies. Once academic authority is evident in instructors, only then could they rely upon and relate to their instructors.

The self-system model of motivational development or SSMMD (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008) could also offer an explanation for this finding. King (2015, p. 27) argues that SSMMD "offers a more precise theoretical formulation of ideas on relatedness and engagement". The model consists of three self-system processes as personal resources; they are organized around individuals' basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Relevant to this discussion, we opine that relatedness as a self-system process has the potential to account for student attrition decision, as confirmed by recent research (Nouwen & Clycq, 2021; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Lorenzo-Quiles et al., 2023). Once the fundamental psychological need of feeling related is not satisfied, students are most likely to be disengaged. Therefore, an effective student-instructor relationship can, to some degree, meet students' needs, which in turn may lead to more engagement in learning. Otherwise, disaffection or disengagement is only to be expected.

In sum, the analysis of the qualitative data showed that the most salient student attrition factors across all the participating students could be categorized under the following three themes: (1) "Dissatisfaction with Quality of Study Programs"; (2) "Academic Demotivation", and (3) "Dissatisfaction with Instructors". Given these variables, analytical generalization (Gunbayi, 2023) is in order. We may generalize from the study's data to the existing theories proposed by Bennett (2003), Bogue (1969), and Ajzen (1991). Analytical generalization is applicable here since we employed a theory-driven qualitative study (Gunbayi, 2023) and the qualitative data showed that our postulate holds true under this particular 'scope condition', i.e., in the context of ELIs.

The findings of this study have a number of implications for policy and practice at ELIs. Specifically, they highlight a couple of important implications with regard to instructor quality. Maintaining optimal levels of high-quality instructors is imperative for ELIs for a number of reasons, including student retention and economic considerations. ELI instructors need training to fully understand the rationale behind the study programs. Their understanding should be guided, developed, and better adapted to the circumstances. Delivering engaging instruction requires an interrelated set of skills and knowledge. ELI instructors need to know about the particularities of teaching contexts and have a deep understanding of EFL learning and teaching. ELI instructors need to have a wide repertoire of available strategies to rely upon and also skill at adapting instructional practices to the needs of individual students. An effective policy for instructor admission is a much-needed component that ELIs seem to ignore. In some regard, having a comprehensive framework for instructor admission and preparation can be of great help. In fact, such a framework can be utilized to estimate instructors' most valued knowledge, i.e., their pedagogical knowledge in English language teaching (Whitehead & Hiver, 2025).

One newly developed framework for gauging EFL instructors' pedagogical knowledge, which can be put into use by ELIs, contains nine components: "knowledge of the subject matter; knowledge of teaching; knowledge of students; knowledge of classroom management; knowledge of educational context; knowledge of democracy, equity and diversity; knowledge of assessment/testing; knowledge of learning; and knowledge of (professional) self" (Dadvand & Behzadpoor, 2020, p.122). As is evident, pedagogical knowledge goes far beyond mere knowledge of the subject matter (Whitehead & Hiver, 2025). In agreeing with Whitehead and Hiver (2025), who point to the crucial role of pedagogical knowledge, we wish to underscore that it is essential for ELIs to ensure instructors' pedagogical knowledge when hiring educators.

As a significant variable, dissatisfaction with the quality of the study program clearly has a detrimental effect on ELI students. ELIs must, therefore, make a great effort to generate a positive attitude toward educational pursuits among their students. In fact, student attrition at ELIs because of negative attitudes toward their course suggests that institutions need to do more to make courses more stimulating, enjoyable, and worthwhile. That means that ELIs must strive for the betterment of their academic environments so that they can create a pleasant and congenial atmosphere for the students to stay in their study programs until completion.

To ensure quality, ELIs have to monitor it on a regular basis. That way, institutions constantly enhance their programs and regularly weigh up their business. It would then be feasible to identify problems and potential challenges, and put the necessary mechanisms in place to curb student attrition. We, therefore, find it necessary to recommend that it should be a strategic imperative for ELIs to first understand the types of students and their needs if they are to control attrition factors. To reiterate, the bottom line is to create ongoing monitoring systems to minimize student attrition.

For ELI students to become interested in language learning, they need to find learning an enjoyable experience. Obviously, dealing with an increasingly new generation of students with different life experiences and different levels of academic preparation can be a challenging task (Peercy, Troyan, Fredricks, & Hardy-Skeberdis, 2024). Learners today appreciate adaptive and evolving learner-centered approaches; the portrait of the new generation of students is totally different from the past and still continues to evolve.

Some students, for instance, enroll at ELIs just to "see how it feels" rather than having "a graduation purpose". Evidence obtained from this study indicates that there is probably a personal dimension to attrition decision for ELI students. Preventive measures can be taken to control attrition only if ELIs know the intentions of their students. Effective educational initiatives are necessary to constantly examine potential internal and external pressures so as to better understand student needs, and allocate resources efficiently.

There may be some students who realize after some time that their study programs are not suitable for their educational goals. Then, poor motivation is likely to emerge and contribute to poor academic performance, which in turn encourages the student to withdraw. It follows that ELI managers must place issues relevant to motivation in the forefront of their attention. To accommodate the needs of such students we recommend the establishment of advisory services. The findings of the current study indicate that there are no student advisory services at ELIs. The provision of educational consultancy services at ELIs may buffer against such negative outcomes as demotivation and attrition. These support programs could then function as early intervention measures to address and provide possible solutions to students' problems before they decide to leave their study programs.

As is implied by the study, students often come to ELIs eager to learn; however, many of them may lose their academic motivation as they move along. This study found that poor motivation is likely to result from personal reasons that a study program does not fit their expectations and needs. Clearly, this does not necessarily mean that external factors are of little importance. We emphasize that since each institution is academically and culturally unique, generalizations about such terms as attrition and retention can be misleading (Manyanga, et al., 2017). Students may leave a program for a number of reasons including, but not limited to, academic challenges, social issues (Netanda, 2024; Nuuyoma et al, 2025), and financial hardships (Christo & Oyinlade, 2015). Added to the mix are students' educational backgrounds and what they bring along into the learning environment (Bakariwie et al., 2025). Future research should focus on the possible effects of such factors and systematically assess various aspects of ELIs. Of importance, a considerable amount of additional research is needed to identify essential resources and the principles underlying the effective organization of services that address the multiple academic and nonacademic needs of ELI students.

When interpreting the results, readers also need to take into account the limitations of this study. Considering the directed content analysis, we need to be aware of the challenges that this kind of analysis presents. Although comments and suggestions were obtained from the peer debriefing technique about the whole study and the accuracy of predetermined categories, it is often argued that in the directed content analysis approach the study is informed by theory or prior research; and this may lead to bias as researchers might attempt to merely find evidence that supports a theory and some interviewees might get cues to answer the probe questions in a certain way or agree with the questions to please researchers (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Much in the same line, another limitation of this study concerns potential researcher-interviewer bias. In spite of strong measures taken to control factors affecting data collection and analysis, it is likely that the researcher-interviewer may have been influenced by her personal emotions or biases and accordingly she may have prevented the interviewees from responding accurately on the research topic.

A note of caveat is also warranted here. All participants' quotes support the three themes and there was no sign of contradictory opinions. Although the researchers acknowledge that this may represent a limitation in their sampling, it is possible that students who left for external or compulsory reasons (e.g., financial hardship, family obligations, health issues) either did not respond to the invitation or did not feel compelled to elaborate on those aspects during the interview. While the study's findings are thematically consistent, they do not claim to exhaustively represent all possible reasons for attrition from ELIs. There is definitely a lack of empirical evidence as to precisely what other factors have prominent roles in predicting attrition at ELIs. Future studies now need to uncover further what it is about the quality of education, academic motivation, and teacher quality that leads to attrition decision. Since compulsory factors have also been found to be effective in previous studies, it is imperative to understand the interplay of voluntary and compulsory pressures in affecting ELI students' propensity for discontinuing their EFL education. As the study sample was geographically limited, a replication study in a different location with different student characteristics could add more weight to the findings. The majority of the respondents in this study were traditional students, having less than three years of learning experience at ELIs. This factor might or might not have had an impact on the outcomes of this research and warrants additional investigations. Finally, replication of this study comparing attrition decision between state-run and private ELI settings would add depth and context to this initial study of attrition.

CONCLUSION

While the value of EFL education is greatly appreciated, ELI attrition rates seem to be high. Likely as it might seem, this issue is of national importance and is becoming more critical now since there are not enough students to enroll in EFL programs (Gholami Zafarani et al., 2015). The shortage may also become worse in the next decade as the current pandemic negatively affects traditional education. Understanding the causes of attrition is the first step we can take to curb its spread.

In fact, the quest to find more effective ways to support student retention remains a fundamental objective for every educational institution (Kember & Fan, 2023; Nuuyoma et al., 2025). Despite an increase in our knowledge about student attrition, there is still much to learn. ELIs, perhaps, need to redefine their student profiles in the light of 21st century-born students as most institutes do not seem to be

Generation-Alpha ready. Knowing their students' basic characteristics might provide clues about how they are motivated and satisfied. ELIs should not play down student satisfaction with education experience. As is evident, ELIs' education system is monetized; one could argue that ELI students can be seen as 'consumers' and student dissatisfaction with 'product' may have repercussions for the whole institute (Boswell, 2016; McKinney, Novak, Hagedorn, et al., 2019). This may suggest that the most important educational imperative for ELIs is to provide an optimal learning environment that meets Generation-Alpha students' needs.

Authors' Contributions
All authors have contributed equally to prepare the paper.

Availability of Data and Materials
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Introduction
    a. Welcome
    b. State the aim of the interview and research
    c. Provide Guidelines to consider during the interview
2. Warm-up & make interviewees feel comfortable
3. Provide the definition of the key term “attrition”
4. Begin with Nonthreatening Questions
    a. Tell me about the role of English language in today’s world
    b. Where can we learn the English language in our country?
5. Continue with More Serious Questions
    a. What prompted you first to take English classes in that Language Institute?
    b. What do you feel has hindered your learning English in that institute?
    c. What contributed to dampen your motivation to learn English?
    d. How do you feel the quality of education has changed in that institute fluctuate?
    e. Tell me about your English language instructors in that institute.
    f. How do you feel the institute environment influenced your dropping out?
    g. In what ways do you feel your social interactions could have influenced your decision in dropping out?
    h. How do you think we can help learners to persist their education in EFL programs at ELIs?
6. Wrap-Up
    a. Is there anything else you would like to add or share with me about your attrition?
    b. Answer any remaining questions
    c. Express appreciation for participating in the interview.