

Grit and Chinese Students' Foreign Language Enjoyment in University¹

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Abstract

The "deaf-dumb" phenomenon whereby students desist from using the target language in classrooms is still prevalent in China today. Few students in English Medium Instruction (EMI) universities in China actively use English to communicate during instruction. Promoting grit skills could boost students' self-confidence to enjoy learning a foreign language and communicate more. Data were collected from 85 undergraduates using Grit Scale-Short scale and the Chinese version Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) scale. Correlation and regression analyses evaluated the relationship between the variables and revealed a significant correlation between grit and FLE. The T-test showed moderate grit levels among participants, with $M=3$. While the correlation analysis showed a shallow and positive correlation ($r=.276$, $p=0.010$), the linear regression test revealed that a unit increase in the grit scale would contribute to a 0.276 growth in positive attitude toward FLES ($\beta=0.276$, $p=0.010$). This result implies that promoting grit skills could increase FLE. Hence engaging students in frequent self-reflection to boost self-confidence, lower anxiety, and increase self-motivation to use the language often is vital. Moreover, instructors should be caring and patient, give frequent, meaningful, and timely feedback on work completed and break large tasks into smaller chunks to motivate students to work passionately towards achieving set long-term goals.

Keywords: Grit, Foreign Language Enjoyment, English as a Foreign Language, Positive Psychology.

Article Type Research article

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Introduction

As positive psychology expands, there is evidence that students' personality traits, positive emotions, and learning environments often influence foreign language learners' performance (Gabry's-Barker, 2016; Macintyre & Mercer, 2014). While second language (L2) mastery requires learners to develop strong character attributes when facing learning challenges, some learners' reactions to the challenges of learning a second language may be perceived as a lack of interest or unfit to achieve language learning goals. Other learners, however, embrace learning hardship as a natural process to achieve success (Khajavy et al., 2021). The non-cognitive skills of grit have been shown to influence student success in many contexts (Duckworth et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2014; Wolters & Hussain, 2015; Tiandem-Adamou, 2019). Grit is often considered a leadership quality and a significant aspect of success regardless of a person's ability or talents (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Studies show academic grit is derived from students' enthusiasm and perseverance to achieve long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016). It entails arduous work and the ability to sustain interest and determination for long despite certain hardships and challenges students may encounter (Hammond, 2017). Research has shown a strong association between grit, achievement goals, and academic success (Akin &

¹A study investigating the effects of grit on Chinese students' foreign language enjoyment in an English Medium Instruction university in China.

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Arslan, 2014; Tiandem-Adamou, 2019). In recent years, grit has been used as an indicator and fundamental component of success and accomplishments in diverse areas, including business, healthcare, and schools (Sudina et al., 2021).

In China, despite more than 176.7 million people learning a second language and English being the most popular foreign language, many English language learners are uncomfortable and restrain from using the language for daily communication (You & Dörnyei, 2016). Although English is a mandated subject in the Chinese curriculum from elementary to high school, only about 20% of second language learners (L2) actively use the language to communicate daily (Juan, 2021; Wei & Su, 2018). Consequently, the “deaf-dumb” phenomenon, whereby learners refrain from speaking in English classes due to poor language abilities and low confidence, is widespread (Jiang & Deweale, 2019; Lui & Lui, 2010; Liu, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008)). Grit is recommended to help second language learners increase efforts to achieve language proficiency goals despite challenges encountered while learning a new language (Keegan, 2017). As a result, supporting EFL students to develop non-cognitive skills like grit might encourage them to persist and work passionately to master and confidently use the language to achieve academic and workforce endeavors later.

Interestingly, while most Chinese students desist from using English to communicate in the classroom, a small percentage of students are able to use the language more effectively. Understanding why some L2 learners use the language more than others is necessary. There is evidence some students fail while others succeed because of academic grit enabling the development of passion and perseverance to complete long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016). Grit is an essential characteristic of learners (Tiandem-Adamou, 2019; Hammond, 2017; Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). Grit has been identified in goal achievement, tenacity, and growth mindset (Akin & Arslan, 2014; Christensen & Knezek, 2014), and consistent practice of language skills helps students gain procedural knowledge and automation (DeKeyser, 2007; Jiang & Li, 2017). Other studies reveal that grit enables students in high attrition environments to overcome challenges and achieve academic success (Tiandem-Adamou, 2019; Wolters & Hussain, 2015). A strong correlation exists between grit and persistent effort in learning a second language and grit is an important personality trait for EFL learners (Lake, 2015; MacIntyre, 2016).

Despite many studies recognizing the crucial role of positive learning environments on language learning outcomes (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014), there however, remains a gap in research that examines what makes some Chinese undergraduate EFL students more successful in using the target English language in EMI universities classrooms than their peers. This study fills this gap in the literature by examining the relationship between the predictive mechanisms for grit to undergraduate Chinese students’ foreign language enjoyment (FLE). This research is important to inform EFL policy and practice, and support Ells achieve their foreign language mastery and proficiency goals faster.

The research questions and hypotheses were as follows:

- RQ1. What is the level of grit in Chinese undergraduate EFL learners?
 - RQ2. What is the relationship between Chinese undergraduate grit and FLE?
 - RQ3. To what degree does Chinese undergraduate grit impact FLE?
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- H20: There is no relationship between undergrad EFL students' grit and FLE.
 - H21: There is a significant relationship between undergraduate students' EFL grit and FLE.
 - H30: Grit has no significant impact on undergraduate EFL students FLE.
 - H31: Grit has a significant impact on undergraduate EFL students' FLE

Literature Review

Grit

Grit is a non-cognitive trait involving a person's enthusiasm and tenacity to achieve set goals amidst hardship. It relies on a person's stamina to resist and work extremely hard, maintaining interest in desires to achieve goals (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Evidence shows gritty students are persistent in advancing education and improving academic performances (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal & Duckworth, 2014). Moreover, another study revealed teaching grit to students fosters growth since students learn to persist amid educational challenges encountered. Hence when students develop a growth mindset, thinking is altered, and learning how to achieve long-term goals by resisting and overcoming challenges and abrasive school practices (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015; Tiandem-Adamou, 2019). Grit is also essential for learners since it gives students the fortitude to overcome tremendous stress. Hence when student talents and efforts on the direction, length, and passion of actions towards a goal are combined, students tend to achieve academic success (Hammond, 2017). A study of grit as a determinant of e-learning revealed students with high grit levels and perseverance in long-term goals are more successful in school (Aparicio, Bacao & Oliveira, 2017).

Similarly, when looking at the relationship between grit and achievement goal orientation, the researchers found learning approach goal orientation related to grit, thus concluding students with a higher level of grit tended to adopt a learning-approach goal orientation (Akin & Arslan, 2014). More so, measures of tenacity and perseverance were closely related to grit, thus suggesting when a student's ability is combined with zeal and hard work, the attitude of high achievement develops (Christensen & Knezek, 2014). It may mean schools emphasize students' non-cognitive skills like grit to support their academic success (Duckworth, Tsukayama, Berstein & Erricsson, 2011). Hope and mindfulness were significant predictors of grit in a study of Latina/o students, which recommended school counselors enhance students' hope to create a positive future and increase passion and perseverance for long-term goals (Vela, Smith, Whittenberg, Guardiola & Savage, 2017). Moreover, when helping students develop academic resilience and persistence in school, Polirstok (2017) suggested teaching methods and materials enabled students to develop growth mindsets and perseverance to overcome life challenges. It was also determined self-control and grit were interrelated since self-control directly influenced people's thoughts and impulses to promote delayed gratification, while grit improved long-term success goals in hardship (Oriol, Miranda, Oyanedel & Torres, 2017). Although perseverance can be costly, grittier students are less likely to give up on long-term tasks since grit gives people more positive emotions and expectations towards tasks despite the loss incurred (Lucas, Gratch, Cheng & Marsella, 2015).

Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) Emotions play a critical aspect in human development and promoting positive emotions in EFL learners can increase classroom engagement as learners gain purpose and understand the reward of learning a new language (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, 2016; Dewaele, MacIntyre, Boudreau, & Dewaele, 2016). Chinese EFL students struggle more with learner-related variables affecting self-esteem, often connected to stressful educational contexts (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). Hence, promoting positive emotions in the classroom increases motivation, perseverance, and resilience to help EFL learners achieve long-term foreign language proficiency goals (Dewaele, MacIntyre, Boudreau, & Dewaele, 2016). Studies also reveal that Chinese students' FLE is derived chiefly from teachers-related variables; thus, increasing classroom enjoyment can help L2 learners process and acquire the target language and encourage learners to be more willing to communicate in classrooms (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Saito et al., 2018). Also, because the degree to which a learner acquires a second language depends on the level of affective filters in their learning context, teachers must understand that higher affective filters in learners reduce students' understanding and processing of the language (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, 2016). Hence, teachers can help lower the affective filters in learners to spark interest and increase confidence in learning the new language (Krashen, 1982).

Moreover, enhancing learners' classroom environment can strengthen students' awareness of language input and help students flush out negative emotions to begin exploring and having fun learning (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). Teachers with positive attitudes use humor more frequently and give praise to students who tend to promote FLE in their classrooms (Arnold, 2011; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019; Liu & Liu, 2010). Therefore, creating a safe emotional atmosphere at the school is crucial for L2 learning. Teachers can produce a comprehensible discourse that utilizes verbal and non-verbal strategies, so students feel valued and willing to take risks as they understand the new language's benefits (Arnold & Fonseca, 2007). Moreover, boosting L2 learning motivation and positive attitudes towards EFL students requires that teachers strive to establish excellent relationships with students (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Fostering a positive learning environment can promote solidarity amongst students and encourage language use and positive learning experiences. Especially since most EFL students tend to shy away from making mistakes as they rather preserve their self-image and not lose face in front of classmates and teachers (Baider, Cislaru, & Coffey, 2015; Dewaele, 2015; Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Using appealing topics relevant to students establishes excitement and motivation in the classroom and increases students' engagement. Despite specific strict guidelines imposed by school authorities on course material and delivery, the teacher should be creative in making lessons exciting and challenging to instill surprise and humor and boost L2 enjoyment (Dewaele, 2015; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019).

Method

Research Design

This quantitative correlational study determined the grit of students in an English course in an EMI university in China to predict levels of FLE. The chosen study design, correlational analysis was vital to establish a relationship between the variables without influencing participants yet allowing for generalized predictions (Cohen, Cohen, West & Aiken, 2013; Field, 2013).

Research Sample

Demographic information was gathered and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The sample population were 85 undergrads students taking English courses in an EMI university in China. Table 1 explains the descriptive statistics to show most participants were from the 18-19 age group (75.3%), followed by the 20-21 age group (21.3%) and 22 years and above (3.5%). Regarding participants gender, there were more females (56.7%) than males (40%). Most students studied English for 5 to 10 years (55.3%). Besides, most students rated their English level as intermediate (65.9%). Almost all the respondents were in their first year of university (96.5%) and were of Chinese ethnic background (100%) as illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics (N=85).

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
What is your age range?				
18-19	64	75.3		
20-21	18	21.2	1.28	0.526
22 and above	3	3.5		
What is your gender?				
I prefer not to say	2	2.4		
Male	34	40	1.55	0.546
Female	49	57.6		

How long have you studied English?				
1-5 years	9	10.6		
5-10 years	47	55.3	2.24	0.63
More than 10 years	29	34.1		
How would you rate your English Level?				
Beginner	27	31.8		
Intermediate level	56	65.9	1.71	0.508
Advanced	2	2.4		
What year are you in university?				
Freshman (first year)	82	96.5		
Sophomore (second year)	3	3.5	1.04	0.186
What is your ethnic background?				
Chinese	85	100		
Others	0	0	1	0

Research Instrument and Procedures

The Short Grit Scale, with proven efficacy in measuring academic grit with set reliability at $\alpha = .82$ (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), was used. Participants rated themselves using a Likert-type scale of items ranging from 1 (not like me at all) to 5 (very much like me). Grit-S Survey Questions 2, 4, 7, and 8 were coded starting with a score of 5 for very much like me and 1 for not like me. Questions 1, 3, 5, and 6 were reverse coded, starting with 1 for very much like me and 5 for not like me. Participants' scores were added and divided by eight, with the maximum score on the Grit-S scale being 5 depicting an extreme level of grit, and the lowest score of 1, showing a shallow level of grit (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). The average score of eight items (including four reverse-scored items) was calculated to yield the value of grit, with a higher value indicating more remarkable grit. Foreign language enjoyment (FLE) was measured using the Chinese version of the Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale with a reliability set $\alpha = .79$ (Li et al., 2018), containing 11 items. Participants rated the item on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

Validity and Reliability

The validity of the Short Grit Scale, with proven efficacy in measuring academic grit with set reliability at $\alpha = .82$ (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), was validated for Chinese populations by previous studies with adequate construct and criterion validity (Li et al., 2018). A pilot test of the research instruments was conducted with $N = 15$ students not involved in the study but reflecting the same characteristics as participants (undergrads EFL students in a similar course) to check language, translation issues, determine the reliability, and guide changes in the final version of the instrument. All survey questions must have been completed to be included in the study data, and any uncompleted survey was rejected. Finally, the valuable data was transcribed to the SPSS, and a factor analysis defined the variables' main structures and reestablished the measures' validity and reliability (Creswell, 2014; Cohen et al. 2013).

Ethical Consideration

Request for students' consent was received after the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance. Participation criteria were based on those students completing the survey and any incomplete survey rejected. An introductory statement, a request for students' participation, a consent letter, and the survey questionnaire link was attached to an email and sent to undergrad students in

an English course at an EMI university in China. Google's website ensured confidentiality through online completion, protecting participant confidentiality during and after the proposed study. Data was retrieved from the website and later transferred into Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for control, analysis, and interpretation. Research questions applied inferential techniques.

Data Analysis and Process

Correlation and regression analyses determined the relationship between grit and FLE. Before conducting the statistical analyses, data were inspected and mined to detect and reject missing or flawed information and compile the data needed for the study. All survey questions must have been completed to be included in the study data, and any uncompleted survey was rejected. The valuable data was transcribed to the SPSS, and a factor analysis defined the variables' main structures and reestablished the measures' validity and reliability (Creswell, 2014; Cohen et al. 2013).

Findings

The first research question explored the level of grit in Chinese undergraduate EFL learners. First, a T-test was performed with the Grit scale (dependent) and undergraduate students as an independent variable. Then a composite Grit scale was established per the guideline (add up all the points and divide by 8). The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the least score on this scale is 1 (not at all gritty) as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2

Level of Grit of Undergraduate Students.

	What year are you in university?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	P-value
Grit Scale	Freshman (first year)	82	3.0595	0.42275	-0.287	2.064	0.800
	Sophomore (second year)	3	3.1667	0.64145			

As seen in Table 2 above, the t-test revealed moderate grit level among both first- and second-year students with an average mean around 3.

The second research question was to determine the relationship between Chinese undergraduate grit and FLE. Our sample students all were undergraduates. So, we can see the connection between the grit scale and the FLES scale through Pearson correlation as shown on Table 3 below:

Table 3

Undergrad Grit and FLE.

Correlations		FLES Scale	Grit Scale
FLES Scale	Pearson Correlation	1	.276*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.010
	N	85	85

* Correlation was significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In Table 3, the correlation analysis result revealed that the two used scales regarding Chinese undergraduate students are very low and positively correlated ($r=.276$, $p=0.010$). Regarding this correlation, our hypothesis was:

H0: There is no relationship between undergrad EFL students' grit and FLE.

H1: There is a significant relationship between undergrad students' EFL grit and FLE.

Based on the correlation result, we rejected the null hypothesis and accepted the alternative one. As indicated by the P value, there is a significant relationship between undergrad students' EFL grit and FLE. However, it is a shallow relationship.

The third research question was to see how Chinese undergrad grit impacted their FLE. Linear regression was performed. Table 4 shows the resulting output. Since all participants were of Chinese ethnic background and undergraduate, we chose only the grit scale as the independent variable. Preliminary analyses ensured no violation of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity assumptions. First, boxplots indicated that each variable in the regression was normally distributed and free from univariate outliers. Second, an inspection of the standard probability plot of standardized residuals and the scatterplot of standardized residuals against standardized predicted values indicated that the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity of residuals were met. Third, the skewness value was between ± 1 , and the kurtosis value was between ± 2 shown in table 4 below:

Table 4

The Impact of Chinese Undergrad Grit on FLE

Variables	Adjusted R2	Beta (SE)	Sig.
	0.065		0.010
Grit Scale		0.276 (0.092)	0.010
Model Summary			
N		85	
R2		0.076	
Adjusted R2		0.065	
F Change		6.864	
Df		1,83	
Significance of F change		<0.010	

As seen in table 4, linear regression was calculated to predict respondents' response to 'FLE (Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale)' based on the Chinese grit scale. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1, 83) = 6.864$, $p < 0.010$, with an adjusted R^2 of .065. Results showed that the grit scale predictor could account for 6.5 percent of the variance in FLES. A one unit increase in the grit scale will contribute to a 0.276 growth in positive attitude toward FLES ($\beta=0.276$, $p=0.010$). The hypothesis regarding this question was:

H0: Grit has no significant impact on undergrad EFL students' FLE.

H1: Grit has a considerable effect on undergrad EFL students' FLE.

Based on the results of the linear regression, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative accepted to show that, grit significantly impacts Chinese undergrad EFL students' FLE

Discussion And Suggestions

This study examined the effect of academic grit on Chinese undergrad students' FLE. The results showed a significant relationship between the variables to suggest that students may benefit from activities or interventions that enhance non-cognitive skills such as grit. Academic grit had a direct positive effect on FLE after controlling participants' gender and age, thus consistent with previous studies (Perkins-Gough, 2013). Grit is an essential positive psychological trait. Students with high grit tend to maximize their perseverance and effort and are less likely to give up amidst failures or while facing learning challenges (Duckworth, 2016; Credé et al., 2017). Chinese students in EMI universities often have low self-efficacy (Huang, 2012) and high anxiety levels (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Pappamihel, 2002). Cultivating higher grit will enable persistence and effort to overcome difficulties in foreign language classrooms and eventually promote using a second language to communicate more often (Aparicio et al., 2017; Huang, 2012).

Moreover, research shows that high-grit students tend to persist and overcome setbacks when learning, which eventually leads to positive language performance (Aparicio et al., 2017; Lan & Moscardino, 2019). In this study, grit positively affected FLE, consistent with the stated hypothesis. Chinese students often have lower positive emotions and higher anxiety when studying a second language (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Li et al., 2014). They lack self-motivation when learning a second language, as they primarily strive only to pass the entrance exam to higher education (You & Dörnyei, 2016). Also, the high social pressure on the student to be successful in school and master the English language cannot be ignored. Hence, promoting grit skills in EFL classrooms is vital for students to devote more time to foreign language learning despite the challenges they may encounter while learning. Since grit enables students to evaluate their behaviors (Lan & Moscardino, 2019), engaging students in frequent self-reflection may trigger positive emotional reactions causing them to enjoy learning the new language (Bandura, 1991). As learners begin to enjoy learning a foreign language, their cognitive resonance improves to be more efficient. Their self-confidence increases when they experience lower anxiety as they gain more motivation to learn a new language (Lucas et al., 2015; Piniel & Albert, 2018).

Since grit directly promotes FLE, instructors should cultivate students' non-cognitive skills to stimulate positive emotions in the classroom. Since grit can be fostered and taught, students should be given long-term opportunities to complete tasks. It is vital to break language learning tasks into smaller tasks, so students build on knowledge gradually and can perceive the bigger picture later. At the same time, instructors should strive to create a conducive and compassionate learning environment to enable students to achieve their learning goals. A healthy learning environment improves communication during language learning as students feel safer making mistakes when they perceive failure as a learning process. Also, engaging students in self-reflections entices them to set long-term goals to achieve language proficiency. Through reflections, students can evaluate their learning to see how much progress they have made throughout the learning process. Reflections also motivate students to realize their abilities to master the language and become successful. We must remember that the learning environment plays a crucial role in L2 success.

Instructors should be caring and patient with students and give students frequent, meaningful, and timely feedback on completed work. Meaningful feedback on students' specific limitations inspires them to quickly fix their mistakes in future assignments and learn from them. Also, allocating ample time to complete the tasks allows students to use writing tools like mind maps for planning, electronic annotations tools while researching and other editing tools to revise their work before submission. Culturally, Chinese students want to be acknowledged for their academic efforts. Hence giving frequent praise to students' work helps boost their morals to believe in themselves and gain motivation to work harder. Another effective tool to promote grit skills in the classroom is introducing students to biographies of successful people to realize that success requires hard work. Learning about growth and fixed mindsets helps students reflect on how negative self-talk can hinder their success while learning a foreign language.

Additionally, engaging students in conversations of interest helps them overcome classroom anxiety and engage more in class activities. Students love listening to teachers learning experiences as it helps them realize that success is for hard workers. Hence sharing success stories may inspire students to desire success as well. Establishing fundamental strategies for evaluating learners' grit in classrooms can help instructors teach grit skills in classrooms successfully. Determining students' grit and mindset levels at the beginning, mid-term, and end of the semester may inform students' grit levels and provide critical data for the next steps in learning. Moreover, promoting cooperative learning allows peer relationships to improve as students collaborate in completing set tasks, and encourage and support each other, to increase their grit levels and achieve language proficiency goals.

Limitations

Despite the findings in this study, some limitations included controlling for only two variables, gender, and age, although many other factors could affect students' language learning performances. Also, the limited number of participants and self-reported measures could hinder reliability, considering participants needed to be more experienced in completing surveys and may have reported inaccurate answers. Hence various data collection strategies would be more valuable in providing detail insights to derive more definitive conclusions. Future studies could sample a larger population and extend to other institutions to establish a solid relationship between these variables. This study's findings, however, hold critical implications for foreign language learning for undergrad students in China.

Conclusion

Grit is an essential aspect of youth personality development and has been acknowledged as a critical multifaceted instrument to boost confidence and effort when completing demanding tasks. Many Chinese undergrad students suffer an emotional breakdown and anxiety while learning in English Medium Instruction (EMI) universities. Considering that learning a new language comes with many challenges, helping students learn and develop passion and perseverance will enable them to overcome specific learning challenges to be successful later. Therefore, teaching grit skills in every aspect of learning particularly in EFL classes in universities is vital to help students overcome the emotional stress of learning a foreign language to later achieve their academic goals.

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