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Identifying and Building Grit in Language Learners

In 2007, a group of researchers proposed the term *grit* to describe a trait in people who have the diligence and endurance to keep working for a goal in spite of various setbacks, such as extended lengths of time to reach the goal, changing interests, or other problems encountered along the way (Duckworth et al. 2007). According to these researchers, accomplished and successful people throughout history have had this grit trait that has set them apart from other people.

An example of a well-known historical figure with grit is Thomas Edison. His famous quote, "I have not failed; I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work," summarizes how he found great success through perseverance with his many inventions. More recently, Chinese entrepreneur Jack Ma is an example of a person with grit. He talks openly about failing his college entrance exam three times and receiving numerous job rejections, including one for a job at a fast-food chain, before he founded Alibaba, the world's biggest online commerce company. In sharing his story, he encourages others to have grit and reminds them, "If you don't give up, you still have a chance." Another inspiring example of a person with grit is Malala Yousafzai, who in 2014, at the age of 17, became the youngest-ever winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Even after a life-threatening assassination attempt in her home country of Pakistan, Yousafzai refuses to give up her passion for learning and activism for educating females around the world despite obstacles and opposition. She has had many experiences even in her young life that have built her grit.

Currently, many educators feel that the research on grit points to an innovative way to produce higher-achieving students. If the claims about grit are valid, then developing students' grit is as important as developing their cognitive strategies and skills. Furthermore, examining grit in language learning provides valuable insights into why some second- or foreign-language learners are more successful than others.

Throughout my teaching experiences in foreign-language settings as well as in university intensive-English programs, I have witnessed students with apparently strong language skills fail to become successful language learners over time, and I have also witnessed students with initially weak language skills go on to become highly successful language learners. Perhaps these differences are due, at least in part, to grit.

The purpose of this article is to investigate grit: what it is, how it has been measured, how it connects with research in the second- and foreign-language field, and how it can be applied and promoted in language-learning classrooms.

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BACKGROUND ON GRIT

The concept of grit originated in the field of psychology, which William James suggested should address two basic questions: "First, what are the types of human abilities and, second, by what diverse means do individuals unleash these abilities" (cited in Duckworth et al. 2007, 1087). Duckworth et al. (2007) state that the first question has been examined thoroughly in the field; however, the second question is one psychologists know little about. Therefore, Duckworth et al. (2007, 1087) began their investigation by asking the basic question: "Why do some individuals accomplish more than others of equal intelligence?" They assumed traits like "creativity, vigor, emotional intelligence, charisma, self-confidence, emotional stability, physical attractiveness" and others would be included, but they were specifically seeking a trait or traits that might be more important than others and would be applicable to any field (Duckworth et al. 2007, 1087).

Before making an initial hypothesis, the researchers interviewed a broad range of "professionals in investment banking, painting, journalism, academia, medicine, and law," asking each of them what traits they thought distinguished successful people in their field (Duckworth et al. 2007, 1088). They noted patterns among the participants' responses; namely, it was consistently revealed that the successful people in a variety of fields exhibited "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al. 2007, 1087). In fact, many participants were in awe of their less-gifted peers who were able to sustain their dedication to a field to become successful; likewise, many participants were surprised at some seemingly talented peers who did not make it to the top of their career area as might be expected (Duckworth et al. 2007).

Following the interviews, Duckworth et al. (2007) felt confident in suggesting that *grit* was the quality shared by successful and outstanding leaders across domains, and they further clarified the term:

> We define grit as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously towards challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course. (1087–1088)

Once grit was clearly defined, the researchers turned their focus to developing an effective measure of this trait, which came to be known as the Grit Scale, "a brief, stand-alone measure of grit" in which individuals rate themselves on statements about "focused effort and interest over time" (Duckworth et al. 2007, 1089). The resultant self-report questionnaire requires individuals to score themselves on a "5-point scale from 1 = *Not at all like me* to 5 = *Very much like me*" (Duckworth et al. 2007, 1090). Duckworth et al. (2007) conducted six studies using the scale with different groups, examining grit in relation to factors such as age, education, and grade point average. With two groups of West Point military cadets, the Grit Scale predicted "first summer retention" better than the military's own complex evaluations (Duckworth et al. 2007, 1098). Through

several additional studies and analyses, an amended Grit Scale reaffirmed that it was a better predictor of success than IQ and other tests (Duckworth and Quinn 2009).

Furthermore, Duckworth and Gross (2014) describe the distinction between self-control and grit in reaching goals. According to the researchers, a person with self-control has the ability to choose between two competing ideas to reach a desired objective. For a self-controlled English language learner, that might mean choosing to finish grammar homework over playing Frisbee with friends one afternoon. Gritty English language learners will not only choose to finish the grammar homework that afternoon, but if they spill coffee on it later or accidentally delete it, they will redo it all so as not to miss a homework deadline the next morning. In other words, gritty language learners would have the ability to, when met with setbacks, respond with "an active search for—or even invention of—viable alternatives" (Duckworth and Gross 2014, 322).

GRIT IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

Recently, mainstream educators across the United States have responded to the research on grit, and as a result, many schools now include grit as a part of their character-development programs alongside other positive traits like "self-control, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism, and curiosity" (Tough 2011, 5). For example, school districts in California have moved forward to test students on social–emotional skills related to grit, such as "self-control and conscientiousness" (Zernike 2016, 1). Educators are also discussing how to develop grit, and some agree that learning how to deal with failure is a necessary component (Tough 2011). Tough (2012) uses applicable stories from children and innovative educators to illustrate how important it is for parents and schools to teach children character qualities that include grit.

Although psychologists and mainstream educators are looking at grit, it has yet to be examined and discussed in the specific context of second- or foreign-language learning. Examining grit in language learners could provide insights in the field of language acquisition and help to foster higher-achieving language learners. Becoming effective communicators in their second or foreign language is the long-term goal of most language learners. One can hypothesize that in order for learners to achieve this challenging goal, a great deal of grit is needed.

CONNECTION OF GRIT TO SECOND- AND FOREIGN-LANGUAGE RESEARCH

Characteristics of grit have been examined in the second- and foreign-language learning context indirectly, but second-language (L2) researchers have not yet utilized specific research on grit or the Grit Scale to measure grit in language learning. Nevertheless, a review of L2 research reveals that certain characteristics and features of grit were addressed decades ago. The landmark report about good language learners by Naiman et al. (1978) was intended to correlate successful language learning with aptitude, personality traits, and attitudes and motivation; I use those characteristics to guide the following discussion, which highlights grit's connection with past L2 research.

Aptitude

Intelligence and aptitude were among the first factors likely to affect L2 language learning, according to Naiman et al. (1978). However, a study of highly proficient adult language learners found that aptitude for language learning was not necessarily an important factor in learners' overall achievement (Naiman et al. 1978). In fact, a majority of the study participants did not consider themselves to have a talent for learning languages; rather, the participants felt they had determination and strong motivation for learning.

There has been a revival of interest in aptitude over the last decade or so; currently, researchers are considering aptitude within a more dynamic construct that "is composed of different subcomponents, all of which are necessary for language learning" (Sparks et al.

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2011, 253). One subcomponent of language aptitude may, in fact, be grit.

Personality traits

Second-language researchers have previously explored language learners' personalities in attempts to find common characteristics or traits among successful learners. Naiman et al. (1978) asked participants about their feelings during their language-learning experiences, and all listed similar feelings of frustration, discouragement, and uncertainty. Interestingly, when participants were asked how they dealt with these feelings, "persistence" was the key word they used; one responded, "Persist! There's lots of plateaus … just keep on going … try more, until it happens" (Naiman et al. 1978, 13). In their results, Naiman et al. (1978, 17) describe a good language learner as one who "also finds ways to overcome obstacles, whether linguistic, affective or environmental."

Persistence over time despite setbacks and obstacles, as discussed previously, is a key component of grit: "The gritty individual not only finishes tasks at hand but pursues a given aim over years" (Duckworth et al. 2007, 1089). Although Naiman et al. (1978) did not explicitly note the length of time it took their participants to become proficient in their L2, it can be assumed that it was a long process over an extended period of time. Thus, it seems the participants in the study showed high levels of grit.

Attitudes and motivation

Another factor likely to affect language learning is the attitude and motivation of the learner. Since the foundational studies of Gardner and Lambert (1959) in the 1950s, learner motivation has received ample attention from L2 researchers who have

worked to refine and expand the definition of L2 motivation. Some of these expansions provide further support for grit.

Crookes and Schmidt (1991) argue that the topic of motivation should be expanded beyond discussions about student attitudes toward language learning, and they cite Maehr and Archer's (1987) behavioral psychology research about the following four important features of motivation: direction, persistence, continuing motivation, and activity level. Combined, these behaviors provide a well-rounded description of grit.

Additionally, the importance of goal-setting is addressed in Naiman et al.'s (1978) research. They found that good language learners had positive attitudes toward language learning despite varied reasons for learning a language; for example, when students were "asked which language they would like to learn, many subjects also mentioned specific goals" (Naiman et al. 1978, 9). Furthermore, Oxford and Shearin (1994) indicate that motivation and performance may be closely related to learners' accepted goals. Therefore, they recommend that more time be spent on setting goals in the L2 classroom; interestingly, this recommendation regarding goal-setting is also a key component of grit: namely, striving for long-term goals.

It is apparent that some aspects of grit have already been addressed in relation to language learners' aptitude, personality traits, and motivation and attitudes. The measurement of grit in the L2 field is new, but the factors that make up grit are, in fact, not. Understanding the important role that grit has in overall success and the factors that connect grit to language learning should be of great interest and value to all language teachers.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS OF GRIT

The process of identifying how grit fits into L2 research would benefit from further discussion, debate, and modification by L2 researchers and professionals. In the process, language teachers should consider how to foster grit in learners with the hopes of producing more-successful language learners. If Duckworth et al.'s (2007) claims about grit are indeed valid, then grit has serious implications for all teachers, particularly language teachers.

Strengthening grit in language learners

First and foremost, language teachers and students should understand that grit has value for all individuals, at all levels, all ages, all abilities, and in all contexts, including English as a second or foreign language and English for specific purposes. Teachers can explain to their students that being labeled "talented" or "gifted" in language learning does not necessarily predict their success. In fact, it may hurt their success if those students think they will not meet challenges or do not need to persist through setbacks. All students should be told that what they may lack in language-learning ability can be made up for with focus, hard work, and persistence— otherwise known as grit.

Teachers should avoid language that labels students' skills as fixed, and they should praise risk in the classroom. Using the terms "good at" and "bad at" when talking about a student's skills can make the student feel that his or her language ability is fixed, or unchangeable. Comments like, "You're good at pronunciation!" may make students feel that their learning is out of their control when, in fact, they need to feel in control to sustain their effort and interest over time. On the other hand, offering a comment like, "I've noticed how hard you've worked to improve your pronunciation this semester" instills an idea that the student is in control of his or her own success. This is a concept called *active constructive responding* (sometimes referred to as ACR), which gives "both the deliverer of good news and the listener a positive outcome" (Neutrino 2012). Also, by adding the small word *yet* when discussing students' skills ("You haven't mastered the past tense yet … "), teachers send a clear message to students that their skills will grow and develop with hard work. Students should know that if they persist and set goals, they have the capability to reach those goals.

In addition, teachers should praise those students who boldly "fail" in front of others. For example, if a student raises his or her hand and answers incorrectly in front of the whole group, the teacher could respond, "That's not the correct answer, but thank you for being brave and volunteering to share your answer. Would you like to try again?" By allowing the student to try again and praising the student's effort, the teacher is letting all students know that errors and disappointment are acceptable and normal, and that they can be overcome. It is important for students to feel comfortable enough to take risks inside the classroom. Once students feel comfortable, teachers can address ways that students can overcome their language-learning obstacles.

Another way that grit can be strengthened in language learners is through creative, teacher- or student-led activities relating to the challenges students face throughout their language development. For example, the *Why English? Comics for the Classroom* resource (at https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/why-english-comics-classroom) can be integrated into a lesson. Many comics in this resource, including "Do You Speak English?" and "Opportunities," address common challenges and specific goals of

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learning English. Your students might relate to these stories, or these stories could be a springboard for discussing specific challenges in a different culture or context. The students could even create their own comics, illustrating their specific challenges and how to be gritty.

Overcoming setbacks and planning for success

Having students create plans in the form of "If … then" statements that link setbacks with ways to overcome them is one practical application cited in Tough (2012). This idea incorporates Oettingen's (2014) acronym WOOP (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, and Plan) to teach students how to recognize and confront obstacles and be successful learners. For example, in the Wish step, students state something they truly wish to accomplish; in the Outcome step, students state the best possible result from accomplishing that goal; in the Obstacle step, they think of an obstacle that might block them from accomplishing their goal; and in the last step, Plan, students identify what they can do to surmount that obstacle and frame it as a problem with a solution, in the form of an "If … then" statement (Character Lab 2017).

For example, an English language learner "wishes" to have a fluent conversation in English with a classmate who does not share an L1. The learner visualizes the "outcome" as forming a wonderful friendship with the classmate. The student imagines "obstacles" like the rate of speech of the classmate, an unfamiliar accent, or lack of vocabulary knowledge, any of which might make having a fluent conversation difficult. The student's "plan" might look something like this: "If my classmate speaks too fast, then I will ask her to slow down or repeat herself politely. If I don't know the vocabulary words, then I will ask the meaning and study those words later."

This kind of activity should not be completed at the beginning of the course like a typical goal-setting activity, but rather toward the middle of the course or after students have become familiar with language-learning strategies. For younger or lower-level students, this activity could be illustrated through pictures rather than words. Another option is to have students role-play their goals using the WOOP method in small groups or for the whole class. Consistent reminders of students' goals should be integrated into lessons throughout the course, so students are constantly motivated by their "wish" and "outcome."

Language teachers should make "grit" a buzzword in their classrooms. Reading and reflecting on true stories from gritty world figures, such as Jack Ma and Apple cofounder Steve Jobs, offer examples of how success can come from failure or setbacks. Asking students to reflect on a time in their past when they had committed to something, even though it was difficult, and completed that task successfully could easily link to a discussion about how that same grit applies to their language learning. Students can also demonstrate experiences of grit through presentations, comics, or role plays.

Language teachers could also bring in guest speakers, including former students, or share their own language-learning experiences that highlight the difficult practice, struggles, failures, and personal grit during their own process of language learning. I have often shared with my students a story about an emotional breakdown in a Korean coffee shop because the cashier could not understand my order (in Korean). That was a moment of failure and frustration, but it did not stop me from going into that coffee shop another day and attempting to order again in Korean.

Setting long-term language-learning goals

Another essential component for building grit in the classroom is for teachers and students to understand that becoming proficient in a language *must* be a long-term goal that will likely take years to achieve. Having a discussion with students that allows them to identify their long-term language goals is important, especially for students enrolled in intensive study programs. Language learners (and likely their parents) looking for a quick fix must understand that there are no miracle methods or programs that can produce completely proficient learners in just a few months. Instead, students need to set realistic, specific, and personalized long-term goals for their language learning with a realistic time frame in mind.

For example, a student-produced goal that reads, "I will be fluent in English by the end of the semester" is unrealistic and vague. To make that goal more meaningful and effective, a teacher could guide that student to produce a realistic, specific, and personalized goal such as, "I will be able to order in my favorite restaurant in English without any confusion or translation," or "I will be able to comprehend Voice of America news articles and discuss those topics with my classmates and friends."

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as step-by-step projects, end-of-semester portfolios, and draft-and-revision tasks, naturally require reflection and sustained effort over time, which help language learners practice persistence. Additionally, before giving an assignment, teachers should let learners predict how hard the task will be to complete, how hard they will need to work, and whether they will enjoy it or not. After students complete the task, allow time for them to review their predictions and consider the amount of effort and knowledge that went into completing that task. Reflections can be recorded through large- and small-group sharing or journaling.

Maintaining high expectations

Finally, teachers should maintain high expectations in their classrooms. It is often hard for teachers to watch their students temporarily "fail," but this should not result in the lowering of standards. Lowering standards will not build grit in learners. Teachers should instead encourage students to keep trying and persisting. One poor grade on an exam should not discourage students but rather, with knowledge about grit, motivate them to persevere. It must be stressed that experiencing how to overcome setbacks is the most important factor if they want to meet their language-learning goals.

CONCLUSION

The recent research on grit offers language-learning researchers an exciting new angle to add to the discussion about why some language learners might be more successful than others. Further discussion and investigation in order to clearly identify grit's role in the language-learning field, specifically in relation to learner characteristics, would be of great benefit. Meanwhile, language instructors of all levels, ages, and contexts

can use this knowledge about grit to foster it in their language classrooms and in their learners. As Duckworth and colleagues would be sure to agree, the grittier the language learner, the better!

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