

Revisiting the Relationship between L2 Grit and EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how grit impacts willingness to communicate (WTC) in second language (L2) learning, both directly and indirectly. Findings indicate that higher grit positively impacts WTC, as it fosters resilient attitudes toward language learning challenges. Additionally, affective factors such as foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language anxiety (FLA) mediate this relationship. The study underscores the importance of grit in promoting communicative engagement in L2 acquisition, with implications for educational strategies that support sustained motivation and positive affective experiences in language learning.

KEYWORDS

L2 Grit; Willingness to Communicate (WTC); Second Language Acquisition (SLA); Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

1 Introduction

Acquiring a new language is often a demanding process that tests learners' persistence and motivation. Many language learners face challenges, such as managing language-related anxiety, maintaining long-term dedication, and cultivating the confidence to engage in real-life communication. Within the field of language learning psychology, two constructs—Second Language (L2) Grit and Willingness to Communicate (WTC)—have gained increasing attention for their impact on successful L2 acquisition. Grit, a concept defined by Duckworth et al. (2007), refers to a sustained passion and perseverance for long-term goals. Learners with high levels of Grit are generally more resilient, interpreting difficulties as opportunities for growth and remaining dedicated despite challenges (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). By sustaining their efforts over time, gritty learners are more likely to continue their language studies, engage in consistent practice, and overcome obstacles that might discourage less resilient learners. Therefore, Grit has been recognized as an essential factor in long-term language learning success, enabling learners to develop a solid foundation in their L2 skills. Willingness to Communicate (WTC), defined as a learner's inclination to engage in communication when the opportunity arises, directly influences the extent to which learners gain valuable speaking and listening practice (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). Interestingly, WTC does not always align with proficiency levels; for instance, some less proficient students may willingly speak English outside the classroom, while certain highly proficient students might avoid it altogether (Allahyar, 2021). As studies also suggest, learners with higher WTC often achieve better SLA outcomes (Clément et al., 2003), positioning WTC as a key affective variable in language learning.

With the integration of positive and personality psychology into SLA, new affective constructs—such as foreign language anxiety (FLA) (Fathi et al., 2021), foreign language enjoyment (Saito et al.,

2018), motivation (Joe et al., 2017), and Grit (Teimouri et al., 2020)—have become focal points in recent research. However, studies on the relationship between L2 Grit and WTC are still in their infancy (Shirvan et al., 2021). Current research on personality factors in WTC has largely centered on general Grit rather than the specific context of L2 Grit (Fathi et al., 2021; Dewaele & Li, 2021; Lee, 2022), and the roles of other internal and external factors, such as self-efficacy and classroom environment, within the L2 Grit-WTC relationship remain underexplored. Additionally, most studies focus on university students, highlighting the need for evidence from secondary school populations (Özhan, 2021; Yang, Azari Noughabi & Jahedizadeh, 2022). This study aims to explore the relationship between L2 grit and willingness to communicate (WTC) in EFL learners through a systematic review and analysis of existing literature. This review not only synthesizes key findings on grit and WTC in the context of second language learning but also highlights current research gaps, such as the limited focus on middle school student populations and the need for deeper investigation into the mechanisms linking L2 grit and WTC. Based on these insights, this study offers recommendations for future empirical research and seeks to foster a more comprehensive understanding of affective factors in second language acquisition.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 The Role of Grit in Second Language Learning

Grit encompasses two dimensions: perseverance of effort (POE) and consistency of interest (COI), reflecting an individual's sustained passion and determination in pursuing long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Unlike resilience, grit not only emphasizes the ability to adapt to change and overcome emotional challenges but also involves a sustained interest and commitment toward long-term objectives. Research indicates that grit plays a crucial role in second language acquisition; learners with higher levels of grit tend to invest more time and energy, are more inclined to seize opportunities to communicate in English, and demonstrate a greater sense of achievement in the learning process (Lake, 2013; Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). Moreover, grit is malleable and can be cultivated through education, suggesting that fostering grit in second language teaching could potentially enhance learners' language acquisition outcomes.

While grit has been extensively examined within psychology and education, its exploration within second language acquisition (SLA) remains in a nascent stage (Teimouri et al., 2020; Wei Hui et al., 2019). Research indicates variability in the performance of grit's subcomponents across different contexts: POE has shown a positive influence on L2 communication willingness, whereas COI appears to lack a significant association with communicative intent (J. Lee & K. Lee, 2020). In SLA, learners with higher levels of grit tend to invest more time and energy, leading to greater academic success (Lake, 2013; Wei et al., 2019); grit is significantly correlated with learning behaviors and language proficiency, evident in sustained effort, active engagement, and an ability to capitalize on learning opportunities. Studies on gender differences in grit yield inconsistent findings: while some suggest that females exhibit higher grit (Usher et al., 2019), others report minimal gender disparities (Hodge et al., 2018). In China, certain studies suggest that male students display higher levels of grit in English learning than their female counterparts (Wei et al., 2019). Domestic research in language learning has gradually shifted from focusing on negative emotions, such as anxiety, to exploring positive traits like grit, which has demonstrated a positive correlation with both academic engagement and achievement. Nevertheless, research on grit in SLA within China is still developing, particularly in terms of localizing grit scales for more precise measurement.

According to Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions not only expand an individual's range of thoughts and actions but also help build enduring personal resources, such as

grit and other non-cognitive traits (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). When learners experience joy or satisfaction during the learning process, they are more likely to exhibit greater resilience and maintain sustained commitment to their goals (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Positive emotions, as a psychological resource, not only assist learners in overcoming short-term challenges but also provide the motivation needed to face long-term obstacles, thereby reinforcing the development of grit. Thus, Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory provides theoretical support for understanding how grit is driven by positive emotions in the pursuit of long-term goals.

2.2 Concept and Models of Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) refers to the state of being willing to engage in communication in one's first language, reflecting variability in communication frequency. McCroskey and Richmond (1982) define first language WTC as the likelihood of initiating communication with others. Research on first language WTC has shown that learners' WTC is closely associated with their personality traits. WTC is conceptualized as a personality trait, exhibiting varying degrees across different contexts but remaining relatively stable over time and across situational changes.

Since the mid-1990s, researchers have investigated the nature of L2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC), identifying notable variations in learners' tendencies to engage in communication when using a second language (Fallah, 2014; J. Lee & K. Lee, 2020; MacIntyre & Donovan, 2003; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Yashima, 2009). MacIntyre (1996) was the first to study the first language WTC within an L2 context. L2 WTC is defined as learners' intention to communicate in the second language with a specific individual at a particular time (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Similarly, Kang (2005) noted that willingness to communicate in specific contexts can vary depending on factors such as the topic and the interlocutor, which influence learners' inclination to communicate.

Individuals acquire the cognitive intention to communicate and use the target language during interactions. Dornyei (2005) views WTC as a form of motivation that drives learners to engage in verbal communication. This definition implies that WTC can be considered a background variable in second language acquisition, as seeking communication opportunities has a profound impact on language learning outcomes (MacIntyre, 2007). Furthermore, L2 WTC exhibits both personality and situational characteristics within complex L2 contexts, with factors such as the topic of discussion and specific situations having significant impacts on learners' L2 WTC. WTC serves as an important predictor of speaking performance among English language learners in the classroom. According to Johnson (2000), classroom interaction differs from everyday communication, as it involves exchanges of perspectives and knowledge between teachers and students or among learners based on learning objectives. Shi Yunzhang (2008) emphasized that WTC serves as a deeper interest that encourages learners to seize opportunities to communicate both inside and outside the classroom. The present study aims to examine learners' actual WTC within the classroom, where WTC in the English classroom is defined as the readiness to communicate in English with teachers or classmates.

3 Relationship Between Grit and Willingness to Communicate

For English language learners, developing speaking skills requires sustained effort. Individuals with high levels of grit are more likely to maintain consistent effort in practicing English and tend to engage more in classroom communication. Although empirical research in SLA has seldom focused on grit, it is considered a favorable variable that positively impacts communicative intention in a second language, and yet there is limited research on its direct influence on this intention.

In foreign language contexts, learners often face numerous challenges and obstacles along their

language learning journey, akin to navigating a difficult path. Grit, viewed not only as a positive psychological factor but also as a socio-emotional competence, is demonstrated by those who persist through adversity. Communicative intention plays a pivotal role in influencing English language communication behavior, as the ultimate goal of learning English is to facilitate meaningful interaction, which requires continuous effort to enhance communicative competence. While cognitive abilities have dominated SLA research due to the intangible nature of non-cognitive factors, previous studies have shown that learners with strong grit and unwavering commitment are more likely to engage in second language communication. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) emphasized the connection between grit and language proficiency from a positive psychology perspective.

Macintyre (2020) suggested that various factors related to WTC are interconnected, preparing learners to engage in real-time, meaningful communication. Fathi et al. (2021) found that a positive mindset can effectively motivate learners in language acquisition, and identified positive emotion as a crucial element for efficient language learning, reducing unnecessary expenditure of time and effort. Some learners may remain reserved or unwilling to participate in interactive activities, indicating a reciprocal relationship between grit and WTC.

While studies indicate that gritty individuals tend to show perseverance in language learning and achieve notable success, research on grit in SLA remains scarce (Lake, 2013; Khajavy, MacIntyre & Hariri, 2021). Evidence from American college students shows that grit in general fields correlates with remarkable academic achievement (Yamashita, 2018). However, no clear link has been established between grit and language achievement among Iranian undergraduates (Khajavy et al., 2021). Nonetheless, research suggests that grit has minimal influence on reading scores, aligning with findings by Usher et al. (2019). Building on broaden-and-build theory, Fathi et al. (2021) used a structural model to examine the relationship between grit and WTC, finding that grit significantly influences learners' communicative intention and can stimulate students' interest in conversing with peers in English to improve oral proficiency.

Research on L2 communicative readiness primarily emphasizes general grit as a positive personality construct (J. Lee & K. Lee 2020; Lee & Drajerati, 2019), while grit specific to language learning has received less attention. Lee (2020) found a positive association between perseverance of effort and WTC among Korean language learners, but no substantial link with consistency of interest. Time invested in studying English positively correlates with L2 WTC, while age shows a negative relationship with WTC levels. In applied linguistics, Lee and Hsieh (2019) found that grit could predict L2 WTC among Taiwanese learners. Expanding on Duckworth's grit framework, Teimouri et al. (2020) adapted the concept of grit to the L2 context, developing a language-specific grit scale and examining the distinct impacts of perseverance of effort (POE) and consistency of interest (COI). The role of L2 grit in senior high school students' classroom WTC remains an area for further investigation.

In addition to the direct influence, grit indirectly impacts WTC through the mediation of affective factors, particularly Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). High levels of grit often correlate with increased enjoyment in language learning activities, as learners with strong perseverance are more likely to find satisfaction and even enjoyment in overcoming challenges (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). FLE, therefore, serves as a bridge, amplifying grit's positive influence on WTC by promoting a favorable emotional state that encourages learners to seek communicative interactions. Furthermore, grit aids learners in managing FLA, which is commonly associated with WTC inhibition. Learners high in grit are often better equipped to handle the stress and anxiety of language learning, mitigating the negative impact of FLA and thus supporting a more positive communicative intention (Fathi et al., 2021).

This dual pathway—grit's direct encouragement of communicative persistence and its indirect

influence through affective mediators—offers a comprehensive view of how grit supports WTC in language learning. While direct persistence allows gritty learners to approach communication opportunities confidently, positive affective experiences provide emotional reinforcement, making them even more inclined to engage in meaningful language use.

4 Review of Research Methods

In exploring the relationship between grit and willingness to communicate (WTC), researchers have employed a variety of methods to obtain comprehensive empirical support and theoretical validation. Commonly used methods include surveys, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), moderation and mediation models, as well as mixed-method approaches that integrate quantitative and qualitative analysis. These methods not only reveal the direct and indirect impacts of variables such as grit, foreign language anxiety (FLA), and foreign language enjoyment (FLE) on WTC but also facilitate the construction of complex, multi-layered theoretical models. For instance, both Lee (2022) and Fathi et al. (2021) utilized SEM to analyze data collected from surveys measuring grit, FLE, and FLA among EFL learners, examining how these emotional variables impact WTC. SEM enables researchers to analyze multiple relationships simultaneously, thus revealing both direct and indirect effects of grit on WTC. Lee (2022) found that classroom enjoyment mediates the relationship between grit and WTC, while Fathi et al. (2021) demonstrated that grit and FLA jointly predict learners' WTC. Additionally, Lan et al. (2021) employed a moderated mediation model to investigate the effect of the ideal L2 self on WTC through grit, finding that shyness moderates this relationship.

Moreover, some studies employed mixed methods. MacIntyre et al. (1998) and Clément et al. (2003) combined survey data and modeling to analyze contextual variables affecting WTC, such as confidence and sense of belonging in different language contexts. These studies not only relied on survey data but also incorporated qualitative interviews and classroom observations to gain deeper insights into learners' emotional states, communicative motivations, and behavioral patterns. In comparison, surveys and SEM are well-suited for large sample analysis, allowing researchers to quantify the relationships among grit, affective variables, and WTC and obtain robust results through statistical testing. However, these methods also have limitations; for instance, survey data depends on self-reporting, which may introduce subjective bias and does not fully capture learners' intrinsic motivations and complex emotional experiences. Conversely, qualitative methods, such as interviews and classroom observations, provide rich contextual information and insights, though they are time-consuming, challenging to generalize across large samples, and may introduce researcher subjectivity.

5 Discussion and Implications

In second language acquisition (SLA) research, grit and willingness to communicate (WTC) are significant non-cognitive factors that contribute to learners' success. Exploring the relationship between grit and WTC not only enhances our understanding of affective variables in SLA but also provides a novel perspective on how learners persist through challenges and strengthen their communicative intent. Grit, defined by sustained effort and consistency of interest, offers unique insights into individual differences, distinguishing itself from traditional affective factors like anxiety and motivation (Duckworth et al., 2007). Integrating grit into WTC studies enriches the affective framework by highlighting how learners' resilience fosters persistence in communication, adding a valuable dimension to SLA research focused on emotional variables (Lee, 2022; Fathi et al., 2021). Grit also introduces a fresh framework for understanding motivation and perseverance in language

learning. Traditional motivational theories, such as Gardner's integrative motivation, emphasize goal-driven efforts but do not fully capture how learners sustain engagement despite challenges. Grit fills this gap by focusing on learners' resilience, explaining how individuals maintain a positive attitude toward learning over extended periods. Highly gritty learners tend to show increased engagement and patience in language learning and are more inclined to seek out communication opportunities, which can enhance their fluency and self-confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998). By investigating the role of grit in WTC, SLA research expands its focus on personality traits, allowing for a more stable understanding of communicative intent that is less dependent on situational factors.

Incorporating grit also advances the application of positive psychology in SLA, as grit is considered a positive psychological resource that fosters resilience and adaptability (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002). Positive psychology emphasizes enhancing individual well-being through positive emotions, and grit aligns with this by influencing learners' foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and reducing foreign language anxiety (FLA), both of which promote WTC (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Through its role in fostering a supportive emotional environment, grit not only directly impacts WTC but also indirectly enhances communication willingness by mediating positive and negative affective states (Fathi et al., 2021). Integrating grit into WTC models therefore enriches the framework by adding a robust, non-cognitive predictor that shapes learners' communicative engagement and underscores the role of sustained effort in achieving language proficiency.

In promoting willingness to communicate (WTC) in English classrooms, both teachers and students play pivotal roles. Effective communication hinges on active student participation, which allows learners to maximize their use of the target language through engaging in interactive activities. Research suggests that WTC is lowest in teacher-individual interactions, indicating that students often feel more comfortable communicating in less demanding social contexts. To foster a supportive environment, teachers can build rapport by sharing their own language learning experiences, making students feel more secure and motivated to speak. Considering cultural nuances, teachers should incorporate real-world communication strategies and engage students by integrating their ideas into classroom activities, as this enhances motivation and participation. Sharing experiences from abroad can also broaden students' understanding of English's utility, encouraging a deeper connection to language learning. Importantly, teachers should choose engaging content and offer positive, constructive feedback to reinforce learners' confidence and engagement.

For students, individual differences in WTC are significant; some readily engage in discussions while others remain reserved. Research indicates that many Chinese learners exhibit low WTC due to uninspiring speaking activities. To address this, students are encouraged to maintain a positive self-image and work actively on expanding their vocabulary and language skills to boost confidence. Viewing English as a valuable skill for future success and committing to long-term language goals can also help cultivate a sustained interest in communication. By adopting effective learning strategies and focusing on building communicative competence, students can improve their English proficiency and develop a more robust willingness to communicate in English.

Future studies could benefit from expanding sample sizes to improve the generalizability of findings and by incorporating geographical factors. Additionally, while prior research has primarily focused on students' perspectives, there is a growing need to explore teacher-related factors and compare teacher-student perspectives, as teachers play a significant role in influencing students' communicative intentions (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Finally, to draw causal conclusions and obtain more detailed insights into L2 WTC, experimental or longitudinal qualitative studies are recommended. Longitudinal research could provide valuable information on the changes in students' engagement with foreign language learning over time (Dewaele & Li, 2020).

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