

## Grit in Second Language Learning and Teaching: Introduction to the Special Issue

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### ABSTRACT

This brief, introductory paper contextualizes the special issue in relevant literatures in psychology, education, and SLA. In addition to describing the rationale for the special issue and providing a preview of the papers included, we identify the major themes and questions raised by the authors. Balanced against the conceptual, measurement, and pedagogical issues is an argument for the applicability of the concept within SLA. Finally, we provide the implications of the special issue which should be considered in future research in L2 grit studies.

*Keywords:* grit, consistency of interest, perseverance of effort, second language learning and teaching, positive psychology

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*Some days you are the sandpaper...  
Some days you are the wood*  
~ adapted from folk wisdom

The coarseness of sandpaper is called its grit value; different levels of grit are appropriate for different jobs—from rough sanding to fine finishing work. Woodworkers know that using gritty sandpaper makes a bit of a mess. Grit research in second language acquisition (SLA) also has made a bit of a mess; there is some fine finishing work yet to be done. Every language teacher and learner knows that the process of language learning is a long one, and that the process of second language communication can be frustrating and even embarrassing from time to time. For these reasons and many more, it makes sense to engage with the concept of grit in SLA to reflect the passion, effort, and perseverance learners show as they overcome difficulties in learning and communication. The goal of this special issue is to address the criticisms of grit research and offer some potential ways forward.

The concept of grit was popularized by Duckworth and colleagues (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) and is defined as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (p. 1087). In the field of education, grit has been a ‘hot’ topic, many studies have investigated the role of grit in different motivational, emotional, and achievement outcomes (e.g., Muenks et al., 2017; Steinmayr et al., 2018; Wolters & Hussain, 2015). Given that learning a second language is a lengthy process and language learners regularly face discouragement and failure, showing grit, with emphasis on maintaining consistency of interest and perseverance of effort, can push language learners to continue their effort to reach their goals. Researchers in SLA have been examining this construct in second language classrooms, and interest appears to be rapidly expanding (Feng & Papi, 2020; Khajavy et al., 2021; Sudina & Plonsky, 2021; Teimouri et al., 2020).

Despite its potential appeal, however, there have been controversies about the construct of grit, its measurement, and its usefulness within the fields of psychology and education. As grit attracts the attention of SLA researchers, there is a need for deeper understanding of the construct, its potential and limitations. SLA researchers will benefit from awareness of the developments that have been made in grit research, and especially the critiques that have been offered. As positive psychology and its concepts become more

widely influential in SLA (Gabrys-Barker & Galajda, 2016; MacIntyre et al., 2019), it is time to carefully consider the potential role of grit in language learning and teaching.

## SUMMARY OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Leading off this special issue of JPLL is a paper by Oxford and Khajavy who focus on grit within the language domain. In discussing the etymology of the word grit, the authors suggest that the concept has multiple interpretations but not all of them are positive. The authors draw attention to some of the issues with grit as a concept for research located in the emerging positive psychology tradition. One of the concerns is a lack of definitional and measurement clarity affecting theory and research, coupled with equivocal evidence, that leads to the question of whether the hype surrounding grit is justified. The authors offer an intriguing discussion that concludes with a series of suggestions for advancing grit theory, research, and practice in SLA.

The second paper by Credé and Tynan outlines some of the major criticisms of grit as a concept in personality and education. The authors note that the idea of grit as a superordinate construct, encompassing passion and perseverance, has been challenged. They argue that the evidence for this two-part conceptualization is itself based on an error. The authors further advance the position that a number of biases affecting the interpretation of correlations may be problematic for studies of grit. They call for refining the definition and measurement of grit, retaining the two components as separate variables, and comment that, “...at a minimum, new measures of grit and perseverance should better assess the manner in which individuals respond to initial failures and difficulties.”

The empirical papers within the special issue address many of the criticisms noted in the two articles above. As a whole, this special issue features novel approaches to grit, new ways of measuring the concept, alternative approaches to its definition, and a host of considerations emerging from the qualitative description of what it means to show grit.

Elahi Shirvan, Lou, and Yazdanmehr examine the issue of teachers’ grit in a detailed analysis of its dynamic changes during a highly stressful event—the Covid-19 pandemic and emergency conversion to online teaching. The authors found that the teacher grit scale they examined did not provide a suitable account of a teacher’s actual behavior as

they adapted to the stressful situation. The authors found that the ebb and flow of effort and interest reveal complex dynamic patterns that are not reflected in the summary account provided simply by using the scale as a measure of individual differences. They argued that meaningful patterns or clusters could be identified as patterns of perseverance and interest change under pressure.

Thorsen, Johansson, and Yang Hansen used a large sample of 4,646 students in Sweden to investigate whether grit components affect achievement differently in English, Swedish, and Mathematics. They found that while both consistency of interest and perseverance of effort predicted achievement in Swedish and mathematics, only consistency of interest predicted achievement in English, not perseverance as is more often found in the grit literature (cf. Credé & Tynan's contribution). The authors suggest that the lack of a role for perseverance might be related to the nature of the domain, as the English language is frequently used in the Swedish context and students do not need much effort to achieve high proficiency. The authors also found that students with lower socioeconomic status and higher achievement indicated they were grittier, implying that grit can be more beneficial in adverse and challenging situations, which is consistent with the conclusions of Elahi Shirvan et al.'s contribution.

The next two studies examine how grit can be related to emotions, trait emotional intelligence, and students' perceptions of the classroom environment in the Chinese and European contexts during the Covid-19 pandemic. Li and Dewaele investigated the relations between general grit, foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), and students' perceptions of the classroom environment among a large sample of 1,517 Chinese junior and senior middle school students. They found that higher levels of general grit can be related to more positive perceptions of language classrooms and lower levels of foreign language classroom anxiety. Similarly, Resnik, Moskowitz, and Panicacci examined how second language specific grit (LX grit) could be related to foreign language enjoyment (FLE), FLCA, and trait emotional intelligence among a sample of 481 European EFL learners. They found that higher levels LX grit were related to more FLE, less FLCA, and more trait emotional intelligence. These two studies found support for the positive role of grit in the foreign language classrooms across two different contexts.

Zawodniak, Pawlak, and Kruk dig into the mixed-methods toolbox for their study of Polish English-major university students' L2 grit levels. They examined differences between 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-year English majors and how L2 grit differs over the three years. Participants showed considerably high levels of grit. They also reported that there was a general downward trend in students' level of grit from year 1 to year 3. With regard to the dynamics of grit, authors explained that the relative influence of the two components of grit might depend on the specific situation as perseverance of effort increases when one faces a demanding situation and consistency of interest improves when EFL learners are given a choice for what they want to learn. Given that both of these factors change with increasing experience and changing demands in the learning context, results provide a nuanced approach to understanding how grit components might work (cf. Thorsen et al. and Credé and Tynan's contribution).

Freiermuth, Patanasorn, Ravindran, and Huang used a primarily qualitative approach and investigated the characteristics of eight female English language learners across Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, and Japan who previously obtained high scores from L2 grit questionnaire. After interviewing these language learners, the authors found that these gritty L2 students enjoy learning English, do not experience much anxiety, are curious about language learning, are not bored, are willing to communicate in English, and have a clear vision of the role of English in their life. Although both the Zawodniak et al. and Freiermuth et al. studies used mixed methods, reading both allows for interesting contrasts as they strike the balance very differently between quantitative and qualitative positioning of the research questions.

Finally, to wrap up the special issue, Teimouri, Sudina, and Plonsky reviewed recent studies published on grit within the SLA context. They argued persuasively that grit should be conceptualized and measured primarily in a domain-specific framework to address criticisms of its predictive and construct validity arising in the Oxford and Khajavy article as well as the Credé and Tynan paper. The authors also answer criticisms raised against the conceptualization and measurement of grit in the domain-general grit research and connect their argument to research on grit within the SLA context. The authors conclude the paper by providing directions for future research on L2 grit. It is interesting to contrast the specific recommendations

provided by Teimouri et al. with the more expansive list provided by Oxford and Khajavy.

## CAUTIONS FOR GRIT RESEARCH

Our hope as guest editors of this special issue is that examining the whole collection of papers in the special issue will give researchers both enthusiasm for a rapidly developing concept, a more solid base for conceptualizing and measuring grit in SLA, along with some specific considerations when thinking about how to conduct a study involving grit. We can identify three recommendations for future research in this area that emerge from the collection of papers in the special issue.

1. Clearly define the concepts of interest, taking account of whether grit and the correlates included in a particular study are relatively broad (using what Teimouri et al. call domain-general grit) or domain-specific, which is the direction in which SLA research on grit is moving. Until more data is available, researchers should consider using L2 specific grit measures in combination with domain-general scales to see how they relate to each other and establish whether a more domain-specific measure might have different relationships with L2 specific constructs. Although the relative breadth or specificity of the grit concept is an issue, there are other issues that emphasize the need to very carefully define the concepts and consider the processes under study. To be clear, using Duckworth's terminology, consistency of interest is not the same as passion, as Oxford and Khajavy's paper shows. There is a need to conceptualize more clearly how grit is connected to emotions in SLA; Crede and Tynan's advice to examine how interest and effort (separately) are related to specific emotions likely would help to clarify the most active ingredients grit offers the language learning process. The findings reported by Li and Dewaele and Resnick et al. advance the connection between grit and emotions, especially for enjoyment and anxiety. More work needs to be done to clarify the cognitive and affective dimensions of grit, and we should not lose sight of intense emotions such as passion.

2. Measure the concept with the methods that are most relevant to the outcome being examined. Since the publication of Duckworth's scale, there have been persistent issues with the grit scale, and its psychometric measurement

properties are problematic; specific issues are outlined in all of the papers in this special issue. SLA researchers should follow the advice of Teimouri et al. and avoid the temptation to uncritically use any of the existing grit measures; it is especially important to be cautious in light of the separate critiques in this special issue by Crede and Tynan, Oxford and Khajavy, and Teimouri et al. The analysis provided by Thorsen et al., who did not use the grit scale, shows that interest and perseverance do not operate in lock-step, and that different school subjects implicate interest and perseverance in different ways. Freiermuth et al. go back to the drawing board to ask what gritty students actually do while learning a language (English in their case), as expressed in the learners' own words.

3. Describe the role of grit in dealing with various types of adversity. It almost goes without saying that grit emerges in situations that are difficult or challenging, where a reasonable person might give up. The issue of challenge is central to the definition of grit but not as often addressed directly in research projects. The paper by Thorsen et al. show that language learning situations that are perceived to be a welcome occasion for 'rest and relaxation' do not implicate grit, or its subcomponents, in the same way as challenging subjects. The Zawodniak et al. paper examined learners under considerable challenge, showing that persistence of effort and consistency of interest do not show the same differences in groups with different levels of expertise. If an optimal balance between challenge and skill produces a welcome state of flow (Csikszentmihályi, 2000), grit may be demanded when challenge and skill are mismatched. Future research can address how grit affects dealing with frustration when challenge is too high, and dealing with boredom when challenge is too low and consider practical interventions that teachers can offer their learners.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

As guest editors of the special issue, we see this collection of papers as something of a turning point providing a foundation for future work on grit in SLA (that is our hope). Although readers of the special issue can expect a challenging series of papers, they have advanced the study of grit in ways that occasional (individual) papers might not. We would like to draw out three implications of this collection emerging in the literature at this time.

1. Studies of grit in SLA need a diversity of research methods. Examining the collection of papers included here, and in particular the empirical papers, reveals the need to draw upon a diverse methodological toolbox. Studies in the special issue adopt archival, questionnaire based, dynamic, and qualitative methods, and yet the work of describing how grit facilitates (or inhibits) language learning is far from complete.

2. Studies of grit must link to existing research on motivation and emotion in SLA. Motivation holds a place of prominence among individual difference concepts in SLA, having been the subject of over 60 years of research (Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2020). The elements commonly ascribed to grit have been included in multidimensional models of motivation, such as Gardner's socio-educational model which featured the integrative motive. Gardner's conceptualization measured both interest in foreign language and the level of effort or motivation intensity, along with other concepts. Dörnyei's (2005) L2 motivation self system also has used the concept of effort, or more specifically intended effort as a criterion measure influenced by the motivation for language learning and its ties to the self (Al-Hoorie, 2018). Interest can be considered a component of enjoyment, and is itself a cognitive-conative-affective conglomerate, so sorting out the role of emotions in grit is necessary. Although existing criticisms of domain-general grit research tend to emphasize its overlap with the concept of trait conscientiousness, the literature in SLA already shows different patterns of relationships with personality traits. It is likely that the strongest correlates of grit for language learners will change over time as learners gain skill and experience different types of challenges.

3. Studies of grit need to consider a starting point other than personality. The third implication drawn from reading the collection of studies in this special issue seems to be that researchers and teachers alike can take a step back from the starting point that views grit as a trait. Duckworth located the concept in personality, as a consistent trait carried from one situation to another; other starting points are possible. Elahi Shirvan et al. examine the dynamic nature of grit, suggesting that perhaps it is more of a decision to be made and a trait to be shown. If we take another step back, rather than assuming that some people are grittier than others, what if the starting point assumed that everyone shows grit at some point, under at least some conditions. Language

learners are faced over-and-over again with the decision to continue or to abandon language learning on different time scales such as (1) a specific individual task (studying for an exam or oral interview, mastering a difficult concept, etc.), (2) a difficult conversation, (3) a trip or study abroad, or even (4) the pursuit of a target language. A more dynamic approach to grit would investigate it as an open system, a transient, emergent property based on the interactions among many other systems, including cognition, emotion, language choice, the local/social context, and self-perception (including how one understands their own personality traits). Regular patterns of individual differences may emerge from a dynamic starting point, but the flexibility afforded by reconceptualizing grit as dynamic decision making is very much worth pursuing as an alternative to conceptualizing it as a generalized personality trait, especially given the limitations identified by all of the authors in this special issue.

4. Studies of grit in SLA need to consider revising and developing a collection of grit measures that reflect the main aspects of the grit construct. As explained in Oxford and Khajavy in this special issue, pursuing long-term goals is at the heart of grit. However, the current L2 grit scales have not sufficiently taken the long-term issue into account and use only reverse-coded items to measure consistency of interest subscale. These two issues pose some problems for accurate interpretation of scores and the measurement of grit in both the domain-general and the L2 contexts. Therefore, in SLA, further research is required in developing a collection of L2 grit scales that reflect the specific language development processes on which grit might have an effect, including classroom learning, travel or migration contexts, unique issues in language teaching (e.g., Sudina et al., 2021), and the challenges of authentic communication.

## WELCOME TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

As guest editors, we welcome readers to this special issue of the *Journal for the Psychology of Language Learning*. The papers that comprise this issue of JPLL have implications for applying grit in theory, methods, and practice. Grit is emerging as a potentially important individual difference factor in SLA. Despite its potential appeal, there have been controversies about the construct of grit, its measurement, and its usefulness within the field of

psychology and education. As grit attracts the attention of SLA researchers, there is a need for deeper understanding of the construct, its strengths, and limitations. SLA researchers who choose to examine grit will benefit from awareness of the critiques and developments that have been made in this research area. More generally, as positive

psychology and its concepts become more widely influential in SLA (Gabrys-Barker & Galajda, 2016; MacIntyre et al., 2019), it is timely to carefully consider the potentially complex role of grit in language learning and teaching. As a group, we believe readers will find much to think about among the papers in this special issue.

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