

Fostering Perseverance: A Review of the Roles of Well-Being and Engagement in EFL Learners' Grit

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Abstract

This review explores the connection between a language learner's well-being and their long-term perseverance, or "grit." Essentially, it looks at how a student's mental state and their involvement in academics can fuel their ability to stick with the challenging journey of learning English.

The research clearly shows that when learners feel psychologically well—meaning they are resilient, find joy in learning, and see purpose in their studies—they are far more likely to develop grit. These positive emotions act as a powerful engine, driving them to persist through difficulties.

Furthermore, the review highlights that being actively engaged in schoolwork also builds grit. Key personal traits like self-discipline, confidence, and strong motivation serve as crucial bridges, turning classroom participation into lasting determination.

Finally, the paper discusses the real-world teaching applications of these findings, offering ideas on how to improve learning experiences. It also points the way for future research to deepen our understanding of how these positive factors work together.

Keywords: academic engagement, psychological well-being, positive emotional constructs, pedagogical implications, grit.

INTRODUCTION

For many students, learning a foreign language is a significant challenge. Because of this, a great deal of research has traditionally focused on the negative side of the experience, exploring emotions like anxiety, boredom, and burnout, as well as individual differences in traits like apprehension and motivation.

However, understanding how these negative feelings impact a student's enjoyment, engagement, and ultimate success has never been fully clear. This gap led to the rise of positive psychology in language learning. Instead of just fixing what's wrong, this approach focuses on building what's strong. Researchers have found that cultivating learners' innate strengths is a powerful way to improve their outcomes.

Now, the focus is shifting toward a more detailed exploration of these positive emotions. The goal is to understand precisely how feelings like well-being and academic engagement contribute to a learner's "grit"—their long-term perseverance. While these positive factors have been studied on their own, examining how they connect and influence one another in a classroom setting can offer valuable new insights. This review aims to synthesize that very relationship, hoping to shed light on the dynamic interplay between a learner's well-being, their engagement in studies, and their ability to stay resilient.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological Well-Being

The field of positive psychology has evolved, shifting its primary focus from the pursuit of simple happiness to a deeper exploration of overall well-being. To explain this complex idea, experts generally recognize two main perspectives:

- The hedonic view, often called subjective well-being, centers on the experience of happiness, life satisfaction, and pleasure.
- The eudaimonic view, or psychological well-being, is about more than just feeling good. It involves having a sense of purpose, nurturing positive relationships, pursuing personal growth, and living in a way that feels authentic and meaningful.

Research has shown that a student's psychological well-being is influenced by a wide range of factors, from demographic background and social support to hope, resilience, and stress levels. Studies indicate that well-being established in high school carries into university, though it often declines over time without active support. Importantly, a strong sense of well-being is closely linked to greater optimism and academic achievement.

Conversely, factors like excessive family responsibilities (parentification) can negatively impact a student's well-being and resilience. The good news is that interventions, even those delivered online, have proven effective in actively improving psychological well-being.

While the role of well-being in general education is well-documented, its specific impact in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms is a newer area of study. Much of the existing research has focused on the well-being of language *teachers*, but attention is now turning to students.

Emerging findings are significant. In Chinese EFL contexts, for instance, emphasizing students' psychological well-being and engagement is crucial. Studies consistently show that successful language learners tend to have higher levels of well-being and self-esteem, and they often employ more effective learning strategies. Furthermore, a direct, positive correlation has been found between an EFL learner's psychological well-being and their overall language proficiency, particularly in skills like listening.

In essence, a learner's psychological state is not separate from their academic performance; it is a fundamental component of their ability to succeed.

Learners' Academic Engagement

At its core, academic engagement is about a student's active involvement in their own learning. It's not just about showing up to class; it's the mental energy and investment a learner puts into understanding and mastering the material.

Experts break this down into three interconnected dimensions:

- **Behavioral Engagement:** This is the most visible form, seen in actions like participating in class discussions, completing assignments, and actively interacting with teachers and peers.
- **Emotional Engagement:** This refers to a student's emotional reactions in the classroom, such as their levels of interest, enthusiasm, and sense of belonging.
- **Cognitive Engagement:** This is the intellectual effort a student makes, characterized by a willingness to use complex learning strategies and think deeply about the subject, rather than just memorizing facts.

When students are engaged across all these areas, they develop a more optimistic and resilient approach to learning. Research consistently shows that high academic engagement is a powerful predictor of success. It is strongly linked to better academic achievement and a lower likelihood of students dropping out.

A student's motivation is a key driver of their engagement, which is in turn shaped by their cultural background and their relationship with the teacher. Studies confirm that a teacher's support and the quality of their interaction with students are directly related to how engaged those students become. In fact, the support a teacher provides often boosts a student's cognitive and emotional engagement by first encouraging them to participate more behaviorally.

Finally, teaching methods play a crucial role. Outdated approaches like rote memorization are known to predict student disengagement. In contrast, modern strategies, such as the flipped classroom model where students prepare before class and use lesson time for active problem-solving, have been suggested as effective ways to re-engage learners and make learning more dynamic.

The Role of Psychological Well-Being in Learners' Grit

In recent years, educators and researchers have become increasingly interested in "grit"—a vital non-cognitive trait that goes beyond raw talent to influence a person's success and satisfaction. Think of grit as the powerful combination of passion and perseverance. It's the

ability to stick with your long-term goals, bouncing back from setbacks with sustained effort and resilience.

In the context of language learning, grit has proven to be a significant factor. Grittier students tend to achieve more academically and demonstrate higher proficiency in specific skills like reading, listening, and writing. This is because grit is closely intertwined with other positive traits like self-confidence, motivation, and a willingness to communicate in the target language.

So, how does a student's mental state influence their grit? A growing body of evidence suggests that psychological well-being is a powerful fuel for perseverance. Studies show a clear, positive relationship between the two: students who report higher levels of grit also tend to enjoy greater subjective and psychological well-being.

This connection creates a positive cycle. On one hand, gritty students, with their focus on long-term goals and resilience, are less likely to experience depression and emotional distress. Their determination itself seems to protect their mental health. On the other hand, when a student's psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and connection are met, their sense of well-being increases, which in turn strengthens their capacity for grit.

Essentially, students who feel capable, purposeful, and emotionally supported are better equipped to develop the persistence and passion needed to overcome the inevitable challenges of learning a new language. They see the world as meaningful, which fuels their determination, and their determination, in turn, reinforces their overall sense of well-being.

The Role of Academic Engagement in Learners' Grit

While we know that grit can contribute to effective learning, the reverse relationship—how a student's active involvement in class fuels their grit—is a newer area of exploration in language education.

The existing research, though limited, suggests a powerful synergy between engagement and grit. In studies beyond language learning, such as in nursing programs, a clear connection has been found: students who are more engaged in their courses also tend to be grittier.

Specifically, the "perseverance of effort" aspect of grit is closely linked to behavioral engagement—the simple act of showing up, participating, and doing the work. Furthermore, a student's perseverance is a strong deterrent to academic disengagement.

This relationship often forms a success cycle. Gritty learners typically display higher levels of academic engagement, which in turn drives their academic achievement. In this view, engagement acts as the crucial bridge that connects a student's long-term determination (grit) to their tangible success in the classroom.

The mechanism behind this connection seems to be supported by key personal traits. Factors like **meticulousness** (being thorough and careful) and **self-control** are thought to act as mediators. A student who is both diligent and able to regulate their impulses is better positioned to be fully engaged in their work and sustain the effort that grit requires.

However, the picture isn't entirely uniform. Some studies have reported weak or non-existent correlations between grit, engagement, and achievement. These mixed findings highlight the role of other influencing factors. For instance, a student's **motivation** and **self-confidence** are

critical. A learner may possess grit, but if they lack the belief in their ability to succeed in a specific subject, they may not become fully engaged. In one study, the enjoyment of learning (a form of emotional engagement) was linked to grit primarily through the mediating effect of motivation.

In summary, while the relationship is complex, the evidence leans toward a positive, reinforcing loop between engagement and grit. When students are actively involved—behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively—it builds the perseverance and passion that define a gritty learner, ultimately paving the way for academic success.

Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

This review of the literature highlights a clear and powerful connection: by actively fostering students' psychological well-being and academic engagement, educators can directly cultivate the grit needed for long-term success in language learning. The implications of this are significant for learners, teachers, and educational systems as a whole.

Practical Implications for the Classroom

For language learners, understanding the link between their emotions and their perseverance is the first step toward self-regulation. Students can learn to manage their feelings, thereby boosting their own well-being, engagement, and ultimately, their grit.

For teachers, this means moving beyond purely academic instruction to create a supportive psychological environment. Instructors can:

- **Foster a Positive Climate:** Design enjoyable and interesting learning tasks that reduce cognitive load and spark curiosity. This makes learning feel less like a chore and more like an engaging challenge.
- **Integrate Well-Being:** Be mindful of students' emotional states. Reduce communication apprehension and disengagement by building rapport and providing a safe space for practice.
- **Explicitly Teach Grit:** Don't just hope for perseverance—teach it. Use resources like TED Talks on grit, share stories of resilient figures, and administer grit scales to spark self-reflection. Empower students to take ownership of their learning journey.
- **Model a Growth Mindset:** Act as a role model for grit by sharing your own challenges and perseverance. Actively teach students that intelligence isn't fixed but can be developed through effort—a core belief of gritty individuals.

Recommendations for Teacher Development

Teacher trainers and mentors have a crucial role in preparing educators for this holistic approach. They should:

- Incorporate workshops in both pre-service and in-service training that focus on the science of grit, well-being, and engagement.
- Provide concrete techniques for increasing student enjoyment and reducing anxiety in the classroom.

- Encourage teachers to be gregarious, humorous, and supportive, as these traits help create inspiring learning environments that connect language proficiency to positive emotions.

Guidance for Policymakers and Material Developers

School leaders and policymakers can support this shift by:

- **Shifting Policy Focus:** Acknowledge the critical role of students' emotional traits in academic success.
- **Invest in Workshops:** Fund professional development that equips teachers with strategies to enhance student well-being, grit, and engagement.
- **Promote Positive Environments:** Foster school-wide cultures that encourage participation and positive behavior.

For material developers, the call to action is to create resources that do more than teach grammar and vocabulary. They should:

- Incorporate multimedia content like podcasts and videos that evoke positive emotions.
- Design creative, authentic tasks that naturally build grit and sustain engagement by making learning meaningful.

In conclusion, by strategically attending to the heart and the mind—by nurturing well-being and fostering engagement—we can empower language learners with the grit they need to succeed not only in their academic pursuits but in their broader life challenges.

Suggestions for Further Research

This review has identified several promising avenues for future research to build a more comprehensive understanding of how positive psychology shapes language learning:

1. Validating and Refining Our Tools

Future studies should focus on validating and comparing the various scales used to measure psychological well-being, grit, and academic engagement. This will ensure that researchers across different contexts are capturing these complex traits accurately and consistently.

2. Exploring Dynamic Relationships Over Time

A key recommendation is to conduct longitudinal studies. Tracking the same group of learners over an extended period would reveal how their well-being and engagement influence the development of their grit, and vice versa, showing how these relationships evolve.

3. Broadening the Context

Research is needed across diverse educational, cultural, and national settings. We must ask:

- How do local values and educational systems impact the role of grit and well-being?
- How do these dynamics differ in online versus traditional classrooms?

4. Diving Deeper into Specific Constructs

- On Grit: Future work should dissect the different components of grit (e.g., perseverance vs. passion) to see how each uniquely affects language achievement, communication apprehension, and classroom anxiety. The role of a student's mindset (fixed vs. growth) in relation to grit also warrants deeper investigation.
- On Psychological Well-Being: Important questions remain, such as:
 - How is well-being linked to a student's emotional intelligence and working memory?
 - What is the specific impact of teaching methodologies and digital tools (like video games) on learner well-being?
 - Does the relationship between well-being and grit work in both directions?
- On Academic Engagement: Research should explore its connection to other positive traits like hope, optimism, and resilience, as well as its role in mitigating negative states like anxiety and boredom. The influence of individual differences, such as whether a learner is extroverted or introverted, on their engagement is another fertile ground for study.

5. Investigating the Teacher-Student Ecosystem

A crucial area for future research is the interpersonal dynamic. We need to understand:

- How teacher-student relationships influence these positive psychology variables.
- How student engagement and well-being affect teacher well-being and burnout, creating a fuller picture of the classroom ecosystem.

By pursuing these directions, the field can move from establishing correlations to understanding the nuanced causes and effects, ultimately leading to more effective and holistic language teaching practices.

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