

# Grit and its significance in language acquisition

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(Accepted December 8, 2023)

## Abstract

This report explores the concept of grit and its significance in the context of language learning. Grit, defined as a combination of passion and perseverance towards long-term goals, can perhaps play a vital role in language acquisition. Through an examination of grit, its impact on language learning, and strategies for developing grit in language learners, the paper tries to shed light on how grit can be harnessed as a valuable resource when learning a new language. Additionally, the report introduces Angela Duckworth's Grit Scale as a tool for measuring grit. It concludes by offering a strategy for developing grit in language learning and suggests research questions, paving the way for further exploration into the impact of grit on language acquisition and the most effective strategies for fostering grit within language learners.

## 1. Introduction

Within the area of language learning, a critical and often mystifying question arises: what differentiates those who master a new language with success from those who, despite possessing proficient language learning skills, seem to falter on their journey to becoming proficient speakers of that foreign language? This question prompted my search into the concept of grit, a term that perhaps best describes this ambiguous quality. I should note that the Japanese language beautifully describes it as “やり抜く力”, simply translated, as “the power to see things through.”

In the course of my English teaching career, I have taught students with initially strong English language learning skills struggle to make meaningful progress as English speakers, while others, initially less proficient, progress into accomplished communicators. The thought-provoking contrast between these learners, I thought, could be explained perhaps by a different type of motivating factor. It was the word “grit” that I had come upon that made me wonder if it could help explain this question.

I encountered the term grit in education while listening to a 2016 podcast titled *Freakonomics* (Dubner n.d.). This serendipitous discovery occurred just as I started working at Iwate Medical University. In the podcast,

Angela Duckworth, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, was the voice behind this research. She enthusiastically explained grit as the integration of passion and unwavering perseverance, a definition that resonated with the essence of what I had been perhaps observing. To gain deeper insights into this concept, I read into Duckworth's fascinating book simply named *Grit: Why passion and resilience are the secrets to success*.

Duckworth's explanation of grit involved a dual perspective. She portrayed passion as a profound commitment to a particular objective or task, while perseverance meant the unwavering pursuit of these goals despite the setbacks and obstacles one might encounter. In her pursuit to make sense of why certain individuals, despite equal intelligence, achieve more than their peers, Duckworth discovered that traits like creativity, vigor, emotional stability, and charisma did not fully explain everything. Instead, she uncovered the importance of grit. To support her idea, she conducted interviews with successful professionals covering various fields, including investment banking, painting, journalism, academia, medicine, and law. Surprisingly, their shared response pointed to the same underlying traits: perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth 2007).

Upon this discovery, Duckworth confidently described the definition of grit in more concrete detail by further clarifying the definition of not only perseverance and passion for long-term goals but emphasizing its role in enduring strenuous efforts, maintaining interest over extended periods, and overcoming failures, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual, she contended, views achievements as a marathon, wielding the remarkable advantage of stamina. While others might capitulate in their pursuits in the face of disappointment or boredom, the gritty individual perseveres and continues to the very end in achieving their goals (Duckworth 2007).

While this report does not yet provide specific results, it sets the stage for a future exploration of how grit serves as a critical factor in achieving success in language learning, particularly in the context of English acquisition. Furthermore, it invites contemplation on the pivotal role grit may play in the journey of medical school students, where the long-term goal of passing a rigorous medical board exam looms as a metaphorical marathon's finish line.

## **2. A short historical analogy: Thomas Edison's grit**

Thomas Edison, an innovator and one of history's most celebrated inventors, stands as a representative example of grit from what I have studied. Edison purportedly said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work," which serves as a profound testament to his unwavering determination and perseverance in the face of adversity (Keegan 2017). Edison's remarkable success in the field of invention underscores the power of grit. It is through this relentless determination and resilience that he not only achieved groundbreaking innovations but also left a legacy that continues to inspire people who wish to pursue endeavors through a spirit of trial and error.

Additionally, it is worth noting that Edison may have faced learning disabilities, such as dyslexia and ADHD. This fact, as highlighted by Angela Duckworth in her book, underscores a significant aspect of grit. High IQ, as Duckworth asserts, is not always the sole determining factor for success. Instead, effort should be equally acknowledged as a causal relationship for success. In her words, we, as educators, can sometimes become "distracted by talent," placing excessive emphasis on innate abilities while overlooking the significance of relentless effort (Duckworth 2017, p. 17).

Edison's life journey, filled with experimentation, failures, and eventual triumphs, remains a point of

inspiration. It encapsulates the profound truth that success often hinges on the unwavering commitment to long-term goals and a willingness to persist in the face of challenges. In this regard, Edison's story not only epitomizes grit but also offers valuable insights for educators and learners alike.

### **3. Grit in the context of language learning**

With Edison in mind, his words resonate profoundly in the context of language learning. Learning a new language is a challenging journey that demands dedication and sustained effort over an extended period of time. Learners frequently encounter obstacles that can be disheartening, such as struggling to grasp complex concepts or stumbling over fluency in conversations thus hindering a willingness to communicate. Herein lies the parallel between Edison's perspective and language acquisition. Grit emerges as a pivotal factor in understanding how language learners navigate these challenges and maintain their commitment to their long-term linguistic objectives.

The journey to linguistic proficiency can be riddled with setbacks, moments of frustration, and the daunting prospect of fluency that may seem distant and elusive. Yet, analogous to Edison's unyielding pursuit of innovation, language learners grapple with these obstacles and setbacks with an enduring spirit. Grit becomes the driving force that empowers individuals to persist through these difficulties and persevere in their pursuit of second language acquisition. Just as Edison's innumerable failures served as stepping stones towards groundbreaking inventions, language learners, through grit, see each challenge as a valuable opportunity for growth and progress.

In essence, the analogy of Edison's resolute spirit, exemplifying grit in the context of language learning, interweaves seamlessly into the fabric of language acquisition. Edison's unwavering determination and resilience offer a guiding light for those aspiring to overcome linguistic barriers and attain proficiency. His famous quote, reflective of his journey as an inventor, reverberates around language learning, emphasizing the indispensable roles of passion and perseverance in the pursuit of language proficiency.

Research findings have shown a strong association between grit and language learning outcomes. Language learners who exhibit higher levels of grit tend to excel in terms of language proficiency and success in achieving their language learning objectives. Kelly Keegan's work (2017), drawing upon a study conducted by Naiman et al. (1978), offered compelling evidence in this regard. Naiman's research revealed a noteworthy observation that successful language learners often did not perceive themselves as innately gifted or talented in language acquisition. Instead, they assigned their accomplishments to unwavering determination and vigorous motivation to learn. This insight perhaps underscores the pivotal role of grit in the sphere of language learning, where resilience and determination serve as the driving force behind learners' progress.

Such research might support the premise that grit, characterized by passion and perseverance, serves as a critical factor in the journey of language learners. The tenacity and unyielding commitment to long-term linguistic goals, even in the face of challenges and setbacks, become integral factors that separate those who flourish in language proficiency from those who give up and fall by the wayside. By adopting a mindset aligned with grit, language learners can harness their inner determination to surmount linguistic barriers and achieve their desired language proficiency.

### **4. Angela Duckworth's grit scale: A measure of grit**

To gain a deeper understanding of our individual levels of grit, we can turn to Duckworth's Grit Scale

(Duckworth 2017). This original model serves as an instrument that quantifies an individual's degree of perseverance and passion in their pursuit of long-term goals. The scale offers valuable insights for self-assessment on motivation, shedding light on our capacity for commitment and enthusiasm even in the face of formidable challenges.

However, bear in mind that a score reflects how you see yourself at present. How gritty you are today might be different from how gritty you were when you were younger. If you take the Grit Scale again later in time, you might get a different score. Duckworth does say it is not perfect and has limitations. For instance, it is easy to fake a higher score. Additionally, the way people evaluate behavior can differ, leading to a "reference bias" that influences scores. So, the score not only reflects a person's grit but also the standards they set for themselves.

The applicability of this scale extends beyond personal reflection. I find that it can possess the potential to be adapted and tailored to distinct educational contexts—an aspect I find particularly promising. For instance, it could serve as a tool for measuring the grit of medical school students who aspire to master communicative English as part of their journey toward becoming medical professionals. This adaptation holds the promise of providing profound insights into how grit influences the linguistic success of these students as they navigate the demanding path of second language acquisition, alongside the formidable subjects that constitute medical school curricula.

Embracing Duckworth's Grit Scale and contemplating its potential modifications may illuminate the link between grit and language learning outcomes. In doing so, it represents a small yet significant step towards shedding light on the pivotal role that grit may play in a learner's relentless pursuit of second language proficiency.

## 5. Strategies for developing grit in language learning

Understanding of grit levels, strategies for developing or even strengthening grit in language learning is important. Keegan (2017 p. 6) notes by saying,

“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 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 the 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.”

Keegan (2017) continues that teachers should avoid language that labels students' skills as fixed, but rather praise risk in the classroom. For example, speaking in a communicative English class without worrying about making a mistake or not being understood. A fixed comment like, “You're good at pronunciation!” may not be helpful because it may make students feel that their learning is out of their control, when in fact, they need to feel in control so they can sustain their effort, perseverance, and interest in English over time. A helpful comment to help grit in a student would be for example, “I've noticed how hard you've worked to improve your English-speaking participation this semester despite having trouble at first.” This helps the student know that they are in control of their learning for a successful outcome. Keegan (2017) explains further from GoStrengths (2012) by using the concept called *active constructive responding* (ACR) which ensures a positive outcome

for both the individual sharing positive news and the person receiving it. This informs the student that despite having difficulties and challenges, they are in fact persevering in class and have the wherewithal to set and complete their learning goals.

## 6. Conclusion and future research

In conclusion, the development of grit can be an essential characteristic for language learners, affording them the capacity to uphold their long-term goals despite setbacks and obstacles. Grit might provide invaluable insights into the improvement of learning outcomes over time, thereby enhancing the pursuit of linguistic proficiency.

My journey as an educator has been marked by diverse experiences, encompassing teaching at the high school level and presently in higher education. As I conclude, below are two research questions that might invite exploration in regards to grit and language acquisition:

- 1) In broader context, how does grit impact language learning outcomes over time? Can grit be intentionally developed or enhanced in language learners, and if so, what are the most effective strategies for doing so?
- 2) By devising department-specific grit scales, are there discernible individual differences in grit that influence communicative language learning success and overall learning outcomes among the four departments (MDPN)?
- 3) How can language educators actively cultivate and promote grit within their students?

It is my hope that this report has served as an informative and enlightening exploration of how grit might play in the area of language learning. Researching more about grit, may offer not only an invaluable perspective not only for our learners but may empower our grit as educators as well.

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