



Learner's Autonomy and Grit: A Study in Iranian EFL Context

Azadeh Amirzadi

Siam University, Thailand

azadeh.ami@siam.edu

ABSTRACT

The present research studied the relationship between learner's autonomy and grit among Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. An online questionnaire measuring the two variables was used to collect the data and totally 40 EFL learners completed the survey. SPSS was used to evaluate the collected data and the results revealed a positive moderate correlation between autonomy and grit. Based on the findings, the higher level of learner's autonomy is associated with a greater level of grit in EFL Iranian context. Additionally, it suggests further investigations should be conducted on other effective factors in promoting autonomy among EFL learners.

Keywords: Autonomy, grit, English as a foreign language (EFL).

INTRODUCTION

Autonomy has become a prominent topic in education and has reshaped the “landscape of English teaching in the 21st century” (Tran & Duong, 2018, p.1). Many studies have investigated the notion of autonomy and ways to foster it from different viewpoints not only in the field of education but also in English as foreign language (EFL). The desire to foster autonomous learners can be seen vividly in EFL as learning a language is a lifelong endeavor, not one that begins and ends in a language classroom (Najeeb, 2013). Therefore, researchers have studied autonomy in the light of various variables such as teaching and learning strategies, language skills, motivation, self-determination, technology, self- efficacy and critical thinking (Nosratinia & Hossaini, 2018; Yeh, & Lan, 2018; Bravo et al., 2017; Wilany & Dewi, 2017; Nematipour, 2012).

Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) asserted that learners with self- regulation were intrinsically motivated and autonomous individuals who pursued their learning goals and took control of their learning process. On the other hand, investigations have shown that grit as a self- regulated 21st century individual trait was a consistent and adaptive predictor for the indicators of self- regulated learning (Wolters & Hussain, 2005; Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020; Wang, 2021). As individual differences were found to be associated with learner's autonomy (Tran & Duong, 2018) and grit has been considered as one of these individual differences, the hypothesis could be that the two variables of learner's autonomy and grit might be associated. Yamashita Takuhiro (2018) also proposed that grit might have a relationship with learners' autonomy.



However, there is still only one research investigating the correlation between learner's autonomy and grit (Jehanghir et al., 2024). Therefore, the purpose of the study was to figure out whether grit and learner's autonomy were correlated among Iranian EFL learners. The findings might help EFL teachers and educators to understand the relation of these two crucial variables better. These insights could also assist their teaching methods and help them provide practical learning strategies in order to have autonomous learners at the end.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Autonomy

There have been various definitions of autonomy from the mid-1970s by Dickenson and to the end of the 20th century by Benson and Holec (Benson, 2006). Henri Holec defined the concept of autonomy as "a capacity to take control of one's own learning" (2007, p.47). Benson explained the capacity as the ability of "determining objectives, content, and progression, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired" (2007, p.47).

Benson (2001) stated that the nature of autonomy consists of three main domains: learning management, cognitive process, and learning aspects. Attempts to promote autonomy considering the above aspects have been the major topic of most investigations and fostering autonomy through learning approaches have been investigated (Yeh & Lan, 2018; Bobbu & Sundatsingh, 2019). The results showed that developing a sense of responsibility, encouraging the learners to make decisions (Scharle & Szabo, 2000) and taking action for their own learning process (Dickenson, 1897) could foster autonomy.

Researchers have also found that autonomy entails both behavioral and psychological abilities (Benson, 2007). In other words, any competency that can lead to or promote a better learning outcome can be categorized as a competency in autonomy. In addition, the findings have shown that the key behavior to autonomy is the self- management of learning. (Benson, 2007). Based on this point, many researchers have investigated the concept of self-management and found a close relationship between autonomy and self-regulation in education as well as in EFL (Nakata, 2014; Tavallali, E., & Marzban, 2015; Hawkins, 2018).

The early attempts to assess learner's autonomy focused mainly on measuring the aspects of learner's autonomy such as learner's ability to plan, monitor, and learner's progress evaluation based on Dickenson's definition. Later, it transitioned towards the learner's self-assessment process (Little, 1991) and assessment focused on autonomy factors such as goal-setting, decision- making, and self-evaluation (Cotterall, 1995). Recently, Murase (2015) designed a Learner Autonomy Profile (LAP). She focused on evaluating autonomy from the psychological and cognitive aspect of learning. This instrument has been distinguished from the others due to its comprehensive approach in assessing learner's belief regarding autonomy, learner's motivation, and learner's role in taking control of their learning.



2. Grit

Grit as a self-regulation and non-cognitive personality trait was introduced in the realm of education by Angela L. Duckworth et al. (2007) and defined as “passion and perseverance to accomplish long-term goals whatever the obstacles and no matter how long it may take” (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009, p. 541). Duckworth and her colleagues explained the idea in detail and compared it with different viewpoints in psychology. They conducted six researches based on the concept of grit and three of them were on the relationship of grit and learning success. They found that learners with higher levels of grit had higher degrees of self-control and as a result they accomplished higher academic achievement. (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Many educational researchers, later, have investigated grit and highlighted the importance of that in education (Akin & Arslan, 2014; Wolters, & Hussain, 2015; Weisskirch, 2018; Yoon et al., 2018). In the findings of the studies in education, grit was considered as one of the vital traits that learners needed to have in order to be successful in the 21st century. Washington School Board Standards (WSSDA) discussed that educators and teachers should consider the role and factors of grit in the learning environment to foster perseverance and resilience in learners.

Beside the wide range of research done on grit in different fields of education, EFL researchers have become more interested in the role of grit in English as a foreign language settings and have conducted investigations on grit (Changlek & Palanukulwong, 2015; Keegan, 2017; Banse, & Palacios, 2018; Taspinar & Kulekci, 2018; Lee, & Drajadi, 2019; Wei & et al., 2019; Lee & Hsieh, 2019). These studies found a positive or moderate effect of grit and learner’s performance, achievement, GPA, and scholarly persistence. Kelly Keegan (2017) emphasized on the importance of identifying and building grit in language learning by discussing the connection of grit’s underlying characteristics. Keegan believed that these characteristics were introduced long ago in the history of language learning research by Naiman et al. 's definition of good language learners.

As language learning is a long term process and grit is passion and persistence for long term goals, few studies have studied the relationship of grit to self-regulation learning and autonomy in particular. The results showed that grit was a predictor of self-regulated learning in academic settings (Wolter & Hussain, 2015). More importantly, autonomy positively affected students’ academic grit level (Jehanghir et al., 2024).

In order to measure grit level, Duckworth and his colleagues developed an instrument named Grit-O (Duckworth et al., 2007). Later on, an efficient version of the instrument was developed called Short Grit Scale. The questionnaire was used to measure the two facets of grit including perseverance and passion for long-term goals. The instrument showed a higher reliability and validity; therefore, it has been widely used in investigations.

METHODOLOGY

1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study used a survey method to measure the correlation between learner’s autonomy and grit.



In this regard, an online questionnaire was used to collect the data and a quantitative approach was applied to address the hypothesis.

2. PARTICIPANTS

The present research used a random sampling method to collect the data. Adult EFL learners in a language school located in Tehran, Iran, were randomly selected to participate in the study. Participants were informed about the study's objectives and expressed their consent before answering the online questionnaire. The ones who were willing to cooperate were also informed with the definition of the two variables. In addition, they were assured that their identity would be kept confidential and the result would not affect their learning process in the language school. In total, 40 Iranian EFL learners filled and returned the survey. The participants were between the age ranges 20-28, mostly female, and had different levels of English proficiency from A1-C1 according to the CEFR level.

Table 1 Participants Information

	Information	Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	23	57.5
	Male	17	42.5
Age	20-25	27	67.5
	26-28	11	27.5
Level of English Proficiency	A1- A2	14	35
	B1- B2	10	25
	C1	16	40

3. INSTRUMENT

An online questionnaire with two sections was employed to find out the relationship between learner's autonomy and grit among Iranian EFL learners. Section I included the information sheet and consent form, and section II consisted of two parts to measure the two variables of the study.

The questionnaires in section II were chosen due to their high reliability and validity as reported in the original studies. Learner's autonomy items were adopted from Murase' (2015) to measure the participants' level of autonomy. The short version of her questionnaire consists of 20 items



and the scaling was modified to a 5 likert from 1 to 5; “never” to “always”. The adopted Grit- S items from Duckworth and her colleagues (2009) were used to measure the level of grit level in the participants. The questionnaire aimed to measure perseverance and passion for long- term goals with 8 items. The rating scale was modified ranging from 1 to 5; “never true about me” to “always true about me”. As the original questionnaires were in English, Back translation was used to ensure the validity of the content.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

The questionnaires were provided via Google form to participants. The link was shared with students in a language school in Tehran, Iran. In total, 40 students filled and returned the questionnaire.

Two steps were taken in order to assess the relationship between grit and autonomy using SPSS 22. First, before analyzing the data, reversed coded items were identified and were reversed coded. Then a Pearson correlation was computed.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics analysis showed that the participants had a moderate level of autonomy and grit.

Table 2 Descriptive Analysis of Learners’ Autonomy and Grit.

Variables	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.	Levels
Learner’s Autonomy	1	5	3.40	.88	Moderate
Grit	1	5	3.33	.41	Moderate

In order to interpret the relationship between autonomy and grit, correlation size was used (Rater, 2009). The results showed a moderate positive correlation between learner’s autonomy and grit among Iranian EFL learners ($r = 0.357$, $n = 40$, $p = 0.024$).

Table 3 Interpretation Criteria for Correlation

Size of correlation	Interpretation
.70 to 1.00 (-.70 to -1.00)	Strong positive (negative) correlation
.30 to .70 (-.30 to -.70)	Moderate positive (negative) correlation
0 to .30 (0 to -.30)	Weak positive (negative) correlation

DISCUSSION

The results depicted a moderate significant correlation between learner’s autonomy and grit in the



hypothesis. The findings were consistent with Jehanghir et al. 's (2024) which reported autonomy positively affected students' grit level. It was also aligned with the assumption that both learner's autonomy and grit could be correlated with self- regulation (Wolters & Hussain, 2005; Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020; Wang, 2021) and Yamashita Takuhiro's (2018) who proposed that grit might have a relationship with learners' autonomy. Thus, relying on the findings, it could be concluded that grit could be a predictor of learner's autonomy among EFL learners. Therefore, EFL instructors should provide a learning environment that could foster grit in order to have autonomous learners. The lessons or activities in classroom or outside of the classroom should be designed in such a way that could nurture grit and enhance autonomy as an end goal. Tasks encouraging long-term goal-setting, perseverance-based challenges, and self-regulated learning among learners could be integrated in order to assist learners to take ownership of their learning process and foster both grit and autonomy at the end.

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted a moderate significant relationship between learner's autonomy and grit among Iranian EFL learners. In other words, the findings depicted that increasing grit level in learners could foster the growth of learner's autonomy. The findings can give a deeper understanding to EFL teachers, educators and syllabus designers as it suggests gritty learners can be more likely autonomous learners. This can suggest that developing learner's autonomy and grit could be part of curriculum design or extracurricular training.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER STUDY

There have been some limitations in conducting the present research. First, the present research used questionnaires as an instrument to collect the data. The risk of over-rating or under-rating the responses could be a concern in self-reported data. Second, the limited sample size should also be considered. This might affect generalizing the results in other settings or context.

The future investigations could expand the findings of the present research by studying the variables in a larger sample size or integrating qualitative or mixed methods. Further research might also study the underlying factors between learner's autonomy and grit to find out the causality of the correlation.

REFERENCES

- Banse, H. & Palacios N. (2018). Supportive Classroom for Latino English Language learners: Grit, ELL status, & the classroom context. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 111 (6)., 1-12. doi:10.1080/00220671.2017.1389682
- Benson, P., (2007). Autonomy and Its Role in Learning. *International Handbook of English Language Teaching*. 11(1)., 733-745.
- Benson, P., (2012). Autonomy in Language Learning, *Learning and Life*. 29-39.
- Benson, P., (2006). *Autonomy in Language Teaching and Learning*. Cambridge University Press. 21-40. doi:10.1017/S02661444806003958



- Bravo, J. C. & et al, (2017). Motivation and Autonomy in Learning English as Foreign Language: A Case Study of Ecuadorian College Students. *English Language Teaching*. 10 (2)., 100-113. doi: 10.5539/elt.v.10n2p100
- Changlek, A. & Palanukulwong, T., (2015). Motivation and Grit: Predictors of language learning achievement. *International Humanities, Social Studies and Art*. 8(4). 23-28. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/EQIwE>
- Cotterall, S. (1995). Developing a course strategy for learner autonomy. *ELT Journal*, 49(3), 219-227
- Duckworth, A. & et al, (2007). Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92 (6)., 1087-1101. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087
- Hiver, P., & Al-Hoorie, A. H. (2020). Researching Language Learning Motivation: A Concise Guide. *Springer Nature*.
- Jehanghir, M., Ishaq, K. & Akbar, R.A., (2024). Effect of learners' autonomy on academic motivation and university students' grit. *Educ Inf Technol*. 29, 4159–4196 . <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-11976-2>
- Keegan, K. (2017). Identifying and Building Grit in Language Learners. *English Teaching Forum*, 55 (3)., 2-9.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues, and problems*. Authentik.
- Murase F. (2015). Measuring Language Learner Autonomy: Problems and Possibilities. In: Everhard C.J., Murphy L. (eds) *Assessment and Autonomy in Language Learning*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. doi.org/10.1057/9781137414380_3
- Najeeb, S. S. R. (2013). Learner autonomy in language learning. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 70. 1238- 1242. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.01.183.
- Nematipour, M., (2012). A study of Iranian Learners' Autonomy Level and its Relationship with Learning Style. *English Language Research*. 1 (1). 126- 136. doi: 10.5430/elr.v1n1p126
- Nosratinia, M. & Hossaini, F.A., (2018). Self- Efficacy and Critical Thinking as the Predictors of Autonomous Language Learning in EFL Contexts. *International Journal of applied Linguistics and English Literature*. 7 (1). 64-72.
- Ratner, B. (2009). The correlation coefficient: Its values range between+ 1/- 1, or do they? *Journal of targeting, measurement and analysis for marketing*, 17(2), 139– 142. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jt.2009.5>
- Schunk, D., and Zimmerman, B. (1997). *Social origins of self-regulatory competence*. *Educ. Psychol*. 32, 195–208. doi: 10.1207/s15326985ep3204_1
- Taspinar, H. & Kulekci, G., (2018). Grit: An Essential Ingredient of Success in the EFL Classroom. *International Journal of Languages' Education*, 6 (3)., 208-226. doi:10.18298/ijlet.3137
- Tran. T.Q., & Duong T. M., (2018). EFL learners' perceptions of factors influencing learner autonomy development. *Kasetsart Journal Social Sciences*. 1-6. Doi: 10.1016/j.kjss.2018.02.009.
- Yamashita, T. (2018). Grit and second language acquisition: Can passion and perseverance predict performance in Japanese language learning? (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Massachusetts Amherst. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/7V9Jr>
- Yeh, Y.L. & Lan, Y.L., (2018). Fostering student autonomy in English learning through creation in a 3D virtual world. *Educational Technology Research Development*. doi: 10.1007/s11423-017-9566-6



- Yoon, S., & et al, (2018). Predictive power of grit, professor support for autonomy and learning engagement on perceived achievement within the context of a flipped classroom. *Sega Journals*. doi:10.1177%2F1469787418762463
- Wang L. (2021) The Role of Students' Self-Regulated Learning, Grit, and Resilience in Second Language Learning. *Front Psychol*. 12(800488). doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.800488.
- Wei, H. & et al, (2019). Understanding the Relationship Between Grit and Foreign Language Performance: The Role of Foreign Language Enjoyment and Classroom Environment. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 10 (1508)., 1-8. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01508
- Wilany, E. & Dewi, D. S., (2017). The effects of Academic Self- Management and Reading Anxiety to Students' Reading Comprehension in EFL Classroom. *DIMENSI*. 6 (3). 421-433.
- Wolters, C.A. & Hussain, M, (2015). Investigating grit and its relations with college students' self-regulated learning and academic achievement. *Metacognition Learning*. 10. 293-311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11409-014-9128-9>