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Understanding Positive Psychological Factors for Sustainable EFL Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between foreign language enjoyment, grit, and English language performance. This study adopted a descriptive correlational research design involving 388 Chinese EFL university students. Self-reported questionnaires and the College English Test-Band 4 were utilised to collect the data. The findings reported a moderate to high level of language enjoyment and grit among the students. No significant differences were found between male and female students regarding their language enjoyment and grit. Furthermore, the path analysis showed that language enjoyment and grit could significantly predict English language performance.

Keywords: foreign language enjoyment; grit; sustainable language learning; positive psychology

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1.0 Introduction

Today, the exponential spread of English is viewed as an asset in the competitive global workforce. Henceforth, most countries, including China, have introduced English as Foreign Language (EFL) in all schools and tertiary institutions. However, Chinese EFL students' acquisition of English has become a matter of concern as most of them have failed to reach the required competency (Yin et al., 2022). Foreign Language (FL) learning is a challenging task, and this issue is of concern in China and other Asian nations where EFL students live in a homogenous and exam-oriented environment with limited exposure to English (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). In line with the United Nations' fourth Sustainable Development Goal, which is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", researchers in China have long attempted to identify the factors that could sustain Chinese learners' English language performance (ELP).

Among the various factors that can affect language learning, an increasing number of scholars in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have examined positive psychological factors to enhance language learners' performance and well-being (Padilla et al., 2020). FL enjoyment and grit are two positive psychological factors that have drawn the increasing attention of SLA researchers.

Enjoyment is characterised as "a sense of novelty and accomplishment" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 46). Evidence has demonstrated the positive connection between FL enjoyment and students' language achievement (Guo, 2021; Li & Wei, 2022). Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) argued that learners tend to succeed in language acquisition if they have more positive emotions like enjoyment as opposed to less negative ones like anxiety.

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Grit is another positive factor that has been widely discussed. Duckworth et al. (2007) define grit as the persistence and passion people exhibit toward accomplishing greater goals. Khajavy et al. (2021) noted that grit is one of the most crucial personal qualities for language learners. Grittier people work harder and stay devoted to achieving tough long-term goals despite difficulty or failure. Grit has been found to be positively associated with students' linguistic performance (Lee, 2020; Wei et al., 2019).

To sustain language learning in a homogenous and test-oriented EFL learning context like China, a particular focus needs to be placed on exploring the role of positive psychological factors, including FL enjoyment and grit, in language learning. Furthermore, the combined effects of FL enjoyment and grit on ELP remain under-explored and unknown. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the relationship among Chinese EFL students' FL enjoyment, grit, and ELP. Accordingly, the research questions for this study were as follows:

RQ1: What are the levels of students' FL enjoyment and grit?

RQ2: Are there any significant differences in students' FL enjoyment and grit based on gender?

RQ3: Do FL enjoyment and grit predict ELP?

2.0 Literature Review

The section below presents a brief overview of the theory and variables related to this study.

2.1 Positive Psychology

Positive psychology has been defined as "the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). It investigates the topics that empower individuals, communities, and societies to flourish, such as character strengths, optimism, humour, life satisfaction, happiness, resilience, gratitude, excellence, compassion, leisure, self-esteem, flow, and hope. Psychology has been used to teach people to survive, endure, and heal themselves in adversity or distress. However, little is known about how psychology helps people make their lives the most worth living in prosperity. Accordingly, positive psychology was established to shift psychology's focus from addressing the problematic or negative aspects of life to helping people flourish by making use of positive features in life.

Likewise, traditional SLA research has narrowly focused on dealing with stress, anxiety, and other negative concerns in language learning (Padilla et al., 2020). Little attention has been paid to the positive strength that makes language learning meaningful and thriving. However, it is the latter that needs to be highlighted. Dewaele et al. (2019) explained that cultivating learners' positive psychological states do not seek to eliminate the negative concerns in language learning but to take advantage of the power of positive strengths to strike a balance by mitigating the adverse effects. Students who often experience positive feelings such as joy, happiness, and satisfaction or possess positive characteristics like optimism and creativity tend to learn better "as they enhance their ability to notice things in the classroom environment and strengthen their awareness of language input" (Dewaele et al., 2019, p. 3). With a positive emotional or psychological state, they are more likely to take in and absorb more language input. In addition, positive emotions or personal traits enable learners to overcome difficulties by consolidating their hardiness, willpower, and resilience. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that positive psychological factors, including FL enjoyment and grit, can help sustain and improve the quality of EFL students' acquisition of English.

2.2 FL Enjoyment

One of the cornerstones of positive psychology is positive emotion (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Many positive emotions are involved in language learning, but FL enjoyment has become increasingly prominent. Enjoyment is described as a "complex emotion, capturing interacting dimensions of the challenge and perceived ability that reflect the human drive for success in the face of difficult tasks" (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016, p. 217).

FL enjoyment has been reported to be positively linked to students' language achievement. For instance, a study by Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) explored how students' language performance was affected by their enjoyment and anxiety. Their results indicated that students' enjoyment and language performance exhibited a significant positive relationship, whereas students' anxiety and FL performance displayed a negative relationship. Similarly, an investigation has been conducted by Li et al. (2020) into how FL enjoyment and anxiety interacted in the Chinese EFL classroom. Their study indicated that students' self-perceived English language competence was positively associated with their enjoyment while negatively associated with their anxiety. Additionally, FL enjoyment has been reported to significantly predict students' FL performance (Bensalem, 2021; Guo, 2021). Nevertheless, few studies have investigated the simultaneous effects of FL performance and grit on language proficiency. Hence, this study aimed to address such a gap.

2.3 Grit

Defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087), grit consists of two sub-components: perseverance of effort (POE) and consistency of interests (COI). Grit is a personality quality that is essential for individual success. Gritty individuals are characterised by pursuing long-run aspirations and staying committed regardless of obstacles and adversity.

Teimouri et al. (2020) revealed that grit was positively associated with linguistic performance. POE has been reported to significantly predict language learners' willingness to communicate (Lee, 2020). In addition, a significant correlation exists between Chinese high school students' grit and language achievement (Liu & Wang, 2021; Yang, 2021).

However, based on the findings of Kramer et al. (2018), neither of the two sub-components of grit (i.e., POE and COI) related to EFL learners' reading performance. Likewise, Khajavy et al. (2021) also found that the two sub-components of grit and FL achievement

were not significantly correlated with each other. It has been prompted by these mixed findings that researchers in this study are considering a further investigation into grit's connection with academic success. This study sought to determine the predictability of Chinese EFL university students' ELP by FL enjoyment and grit.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive correlational research design to examine the relationship among FL enjoyment, grit, and ELP.

3.1 Participants

This study involved 388 Year Two tertiary EFL students who were randomly selected from various departments in one public university in Hebei province, China. There were 183 males and 205 females.

3.2 Instruments

Self-reported questionnaires with a five-point Likert scale were employed to collect the data. There were 15 items measuring students' enjoyment from the English Classroom Enjoyment Scale (Jin & Zhang, 2019) and eight items measuring students' grit from the L2 Grit Scale (Teimouri et al., 2020). Students' College English Test-Band 4 (CET-4) scores were used to evaluate their ELP. Table 1 displays the reliability analysis of the instruments.

Constructs	Sub-Constructs	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
FL enjoyment	enjoyment of teacher support (TS)	3	0.821
	enjoyment of student support (SS)	4	0.907
	enjoyment of English Language Learning (EL)	8	0.846
	Overall	15	0.919
Grit	perseverance of effort (POE)	5	0.879
	consistency of interests (COI)	3	0.831
	Overall	8	0.886

3.3 Data Collection

Once permission was obtained from the university, online questionnaires were distributed to the sample population comprising approximately 400 participants. After data cleaning, the final sample population considered was 388. Throughout the process, ethics were maintained as consent from participants was obtained alongside maintaining their anonymity and keeping data collected in a password-encrypted laptop.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical measures to answer the research questions guiding the study. Descriptive statistics such as mean score and standard deviation were calculated to analyse the participants' FL enjoyment and grit levels. Next, inferential statistics utilising the independent sample t-test was conducted to examine if there were significant differences in students' FL enjoyment and grit based on gender. Finally, using AMOS 24.0, structural equation modelling (SEM) was performed to test the predictability of ELP by FL enjoyment and grit.

4.0 Findings

The following section provides the main findings based on the three research questions that guided this study.

4.1 Students' Levels of FL Enjoyment and Grit

Research Question One investigated the levels of students' FL enjoyment and grit; the results are displayed in Table 2.

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
FL Enjoyment	3.61	0.746	-0.937	0.841
TS	3.69	0.870	-0.981	0.823

EL	3.57	0.817	-0.649	0.033
SS	3.63	0.976	-1.09	0.369
Grit	3.58	0.867	-1.046	0.754
POE	3.58	0.943	-1.057	0.487
COI	3.58	1.021	-0.575	-0.482

Scale: 1.00-1.80=low, 1.81-2.60=low to moderate, 2.61-3.40=moderate, 3.41-4.20= moderate to high, 4.21-5.00=high

As shown in Table 2, all the values of skewness and kurtosis fell into the range of the absolute value of 2 (-1.057 to 0.841), indicating that the data displayed normality (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019).

Students' overall level of FL enjoyment and levels of each sub-construct were examined. The mean score for students' overall level of FL enjoyment was 3.61 (SD = 0.746), which indicated that the students experienced a moderate to high level of FL enjoyment. Regarding the three sub-constructs of FL enjoyment, the students scored the highest in "enjoyment of teacher support" (M = 3.69, SD = 0.870), followed by "enjoyment of student support" (M = 3.63, SD = 0.976) and "enjoyment of English language learning" (M = 3.57, SD = 0.817). These findings suggested that, in general, the students had a relatively healthy emotional state. A majority of them experienced a moderate to high degree of enjoyment from studying English as well as teachers' and classmates' support.

In addition, students' overall grit and levels of each sub-construct were also examined. As reported in Table 2, the mean score for students' overall grit was 3.58 (SD = 0.867), indicating that the students had a moderate to high level of grit. With respect to the two sub-constructs of grit, the students also reported a moderate to high degree of perseverance of effort (M = 3.58, SD = 0.943) and consistency of interests (M = 3.58, SD = 1.021). All these scores indicated that the students could persevere in maintaining their efforts and enthusiasm in studying English to attain certain academic or personal goals.

4.2 Students' FL Enjoyment and Grit Based on Gender

Research Question Two determined if there were significant differences in students' FL enjoyment and grit based on gender. The results of the independent sample t-test are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' FL Enjoyment and Grit by Gender

Constructs	Males (n=183)		Females (n=205)		T-value	Sig.(2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
FL enjoyment	3.60	0.749	3.62	0.745	-0.305	0.760
Grit	3.51	0.905	3.63	0.830	-1.406	0.160

The results indicated no significant differences between the male and female students regarding their FL enjoyment ($p = 0.760 > 0.05$) and grit ($p = 0.160 > 0.05$).

4.3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Research Question Three explored if FL enjoyment and grit could predict ELP. Prior to the SEM, a CFA was performed to test the measurement model of the study. The measurement model consisted of two second-order constructs. FL enjoyment was assessed by three sub-constructs: TS, EL, and SS. POE and COI were the two sub-constructs that measured grit. Three items (i.e., PO3, EL8, and EL11) were dropped from the initial CFA model as they had factor loadings below 0.5. The revised CFA model is presented in Fig. 1.

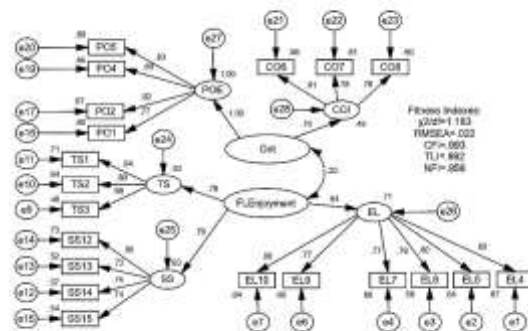


Fig. 1: The Revised CFA Model

In addition, the revised CFA model displayed excellent fitness indexes (Chisq/df = 1.183 < 3.0, RMSEA = 0.022 < 0.08, CFI = 0.993 > 0.95, TLI = 0.992 > 0.95, and NFI = 0.956 > 0.95). Subsequently, the revised CFA model was evaluated for validity and reliability (Table 4).

Table 4. Validity and Reliability of the Revised CFA Model

	Fornell-Larcker Criterion			
	CR	AVE	FL Enjoyment	Grit
FL Enjoyment	0.851	0.656	0.810	
Grit	0.850	0.744	0.205**	0.863

** Correlation is significant at p < 0.01.

As displayed in Table 4, the composite reliability (CR) values for FL enjoyment and grit were above 0.7, and the average variance explained (AVE) values for the two constructs were greater than 0.5. In addition, the correlation between the two constructs was lower than the square root of AVE (the bold values in the table) for each construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). These results indicated that the revised CFA model had acceptable composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

4.4 Structural Equation Modelling

Next, SEM was performed to test the predictability of ELP by FL enjoyment and grit. Fig. 2 shows the structural model.

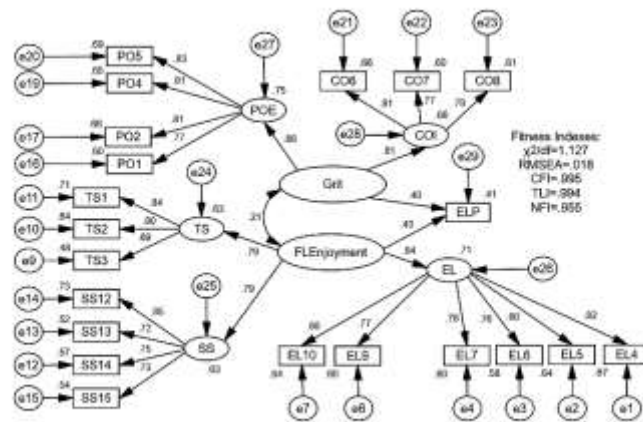


Fig. 2: The Structural Model

Table 5 summarises the path coefficients of the structural model. As shown in Table 5, both FL enjoyment and grit were significant predictors of ELP, and they could predict 41.5% of the variance in ELP. Moreover, FL enjoyment ($\beta = 0.429, p < 0.001$) was a better predictor of ELP than grit ($\beta = 0.397, p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Path Coefficients of the Structural Model

		Weight	S.E.	C.R.	P	β	Multiple correlations R ²
ELP	<--- FL Enjoyment	31.889	4.071	7.833	***	0.429	0.415
ELP	<--- Grit	28.560	4.340	6.582	***	0.397	
FL Enjoyment	<--> Grit	0.106	0.034	3.126	0.002	0.214	

***Correlation is significant at p < 0.001.

5.0 Discussion

The following section provides a brief discussion of the main findings that were obtained from this study.

5.1 Students' Levels of FL Enjoyment and Grit

The EFL students in this study were found to have a moderate to high level of FL enjoyment, which was consistent with the findings of Wang et al. (2021) and Guo (2021). However, the mean score of FL enjoyment among the students in this study was lower than the mean scores reported in the studies mentioned above. This may be linked to different proficiency levels of participants, teaching methods and skills, and school environments.

Likewise, the findings of this study revealed a moderate to high level of grit among the students, which echoed the results of Yang (2021) and Liu and Wang (2021). This can be explained by the fact that English has been a compulsory course in primary school, high school, and higher education in China, where the educational culture is exam-oriented (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). Therefore Chinese students are more likely to devote their effort and interest to learning English to achieve better academic grades and fulfil their personal goals.

5.2 Students' FL Enjoyment and Grit Based on Gender

The results of this study showed no significant differences between levels of FL enjoyment among male and female students. Similar findings were recorded by Bensalem (2021) and Guo (2021). This might be because students willing to participate in the study are relatively high language achievers who are satisfied with their English lessons and study. As a result, the gender impact may have been mitigated (Bensalem, 2021).

This study also revealed that there were no significant differences in students' grit based on gender. This finding corroborated the results of Khajavy et al. (2021) and Hodge et al. (2018). Gender differences in grit are present among school participants but might not exist among university participants (Khajavy et al., 2021). This study suggests that there is little evidence of conclusive findings with regard to gender, implying further investigation.

5.3 Predictability of ELP by FL Enjoyment and Grit

FL enjoyment in this study was reported to positively predict ELP, implying that students with a higher level of FL enjoyment would achieve greater English learning outcomes. In a similar vein, previous studies have also revealed a positive association between FL enjoyment and FL performance (Guo, 2021; Li & Wei, 2022). According to the broaden-and-build theory, experiencing enjoyment and other pleasant feelings can extend language learners' viewpoint, strengthen their ability to take in new information, and make them feel more resilient and self-assured (Dewaele et al., 2019).

Grit was also found to significantly predict ELP, implying that students with a higher degree of grit were inclined to be more successful in language learning. Similarly, grit has been found to be positively linked to students' linguistic performance in the Chinese EFL context (Liu & Wang, 2021; Wei et al., 2019). Grittier language learners will endure challenges, work harder to advance their English language abilities, and ultimately achieve better results in their language study (Teimouri et al., 2020).

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

There are certain limitations to this study. This study involved EFL students from one public university in China, and the scope of the study only explored two positive psychological factors. Future studies should involve a larger sample size involving both public and private universities in China and exploring other positive psychological factors.

However, the findings of this study may provide new perspectives for sustainable teaching and learning for Chinese EFL students at the university level. This study found that FL enjoyment and grit were significant predictors of ELP. Therefore, it is advised that EFL students' emotional health and well-being be given more consideration in a quest to sustain quality FL learning (Hu et al., 2022a). Teachers should be kind and creative in engaging students in novel classroom activities to stimulate students' pleasant feelings so that learning English is fun. Paying greater attention to what the students need, responding to them with constructive feedback, and choosing innovative learning tasks are among the methods that teachers can employ to help students build a sense of approval, improve their connections with their peers and thus boost their happiness and enjoyment in language learning (Hu et al., 2022b).

To promote grit in students, teachers should praise and reward their students for motivating them to be determined language learners (Yin et al., 2022). Teachers should guide students in developing realistic long-term learning objectives and devising strategies for achieving them. Finally, educators need to develop more performance-based lessons and assignments so that students are actively engaged and have more opportunities to advance their English language abilities.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper has highlighted the positive influence of two positive psychological factors on sustainable language learning in China. Both these factors have long been underestimated and ignored by EFL instructors.

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