Grit in Foreign Language Learning: As a perspective of English language learning motivation in Japanese university students

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The idea of grit as a predictor of success proposed by Duckworth and her colleagues (2007) has started to draw attention in L2 learning. This study aims to (1) compare grit scores of foreign language learners in advanced and elementary classes at a Japanese university and (2) explore implications of grit for L2 learning. The results indicated a slight difference in the average grit scores between the classes. However, a few insights emerged to reconsider grit specifically in L2 learning.

1. Background

1.1. Motivation in L2 Learning

A number of researchers have been trying to conceptualize motivation, so numerous definitions can be seen in motivation research. From a psychological perspective, Williams and Burden (1997) claim that “motivation may be construed as a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal (or goals)” (Williams and Burden, 1997, 120). On the other hand, from a perspective in second/foreign language learning, Gardner (1985) defines second/ foreign language (L2) learning motivation as a concept that “refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language” (Gardner, 1985, 10). Figure 1 shows a schematic representation of the motivational construct as it relates to L2 learning suggested by Gardner, 1985, 54).

Attitudes toward learning French

Figure 1: Gardner’s (1985) schematic representation of the concept of motivation as it relates to SLA
In the 1970s, researchers started to focus on second/foreign language (L2) motivation which has been divided into two components: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985). "Integrative motivation" refers to a willingness or desire in learners to be a member of the L2 community. "Instrumental motivation", on the other hand, involves an orientation which attempts to gain benefits by practical use of the L2, for instance, getting a higher score on a language test, or getting ahead in one's occupation. This motivational dichotomy, unlike motivation research in other areas, can be unique to L2 learning. However, numerous research has indicated that integrative and instrumental motivation cannot be clearly distinguished.

In the early 1990s, L2 motivation research shifted from a social psychological approach to a more educational focus. L2 motivation was examined more specifically focusing on characteristics of motivation itself or examining what formed motivation. In Dörnyei's research (1994), new models of L2 motivation were presented by a list of components of foreign language learning motivation, especially to language teachers. In the framework, he categorized motivational strategies into three levels: Language Level, Learner Level and Learning Situation Level. Integrative and instrumental motivational subsystems are allocated to the Language Level. Gardner & Tremblay (1998) also categorized L2 learners' motivation into "trait" and "state." They interpreted motivation as a variable dynamic process with several different factors in the learning process and through the learning phase.

In the early 2000s, motivation began to be interpreted from a broader perspective, for instance, education and psychology. Yashima (2002) investigated the relationships between L2 learning and L2 communication variables employing the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model and the socio-educational model in Japanese context. The results indicated the applicability of the WTC and socio-educational models to L2 communication in the Japanese context. Dörnyei’s (2009) L2 Motivational Self System illustrates a model of L2 motivation as a process. This model consists of three elements: Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self and L2 Learning Experiences. The traditional "integrative" or "instrumental" motivation can be fit in Ideal L2 Self which refers to one's ideal self in relation to L2 use. Furthermore, Dörnyei et al. (2014) proposed a new concept which is called a Directed Motivational Current (DMC). They describe a DMC as an intense motivational drive which is a relatively short-term, highly intense burst of motivational energy. It can also be considered as a possible boost of motivation to transport a person or a group towards a special goal. Accordingly, the concept of L2 motivation has been gaining complexity in relation to other different factors or subsystems. However, what the definition of L2 motivation has in common is that motivation is a factor which link to effort, desire to achieve goals, and attitudes towards the language.

Generally foreign/second language learning requires a long-term effort to master the language. A number of researchers have shown the importance of motivation in L2 learning success and second language acquisition (SLA) considers motivation as a key factor in L2 learning (e.g. Ellis, 2001). Therefore, 'stimuli' for L2 learning may be essential to maintain a certain level of persistence. In addition, motivation in L2 learning, unlike motivation in learning other subjects, is particularly concerned with long-term effort and L2 community. L2 learning involves cultures and people of the L2 community. It is consequently quite important for learners to sustain their interests in the cultures and people in the L2 community (as presented as integrative motivation). Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) point out that "without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither appropriate curricula nor good teaching are enough to ensure
student achievement” (Dörnyei and Csizér, 1998, 203). Therefore, one of the most critical factors in L2 and foreign language learning can be learner’s motivation.

1.2. Grit and L2 Learning
In recent research especially in the field of psychology, grit, proposed by Duckworth and her co-researchers (2007) has been drawing attention as a predictor of success in life. Duckworth et al. (2007) define grit as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously towards challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina” (Duckworth et al. 2007; 1087-1088). Grit, thus, involves a motivational perspective from a psychological angle. It can also be one of the components of motivation. The idea of grit has started to be applied to SLA. There are some papers regarding grit and L2 learning. Keegan (2017) mentions a connection of grit to second-and foreign language research. She suggests multiple approaches to build L2 learner’s grit. Kramer et al. (2017) investigated Japanese students’ grit in English in a foreign language (EFL) classroom. They discussed correlation between grit and two tasks: vocabulary learning and extensive reading. The results showed that the relationship between grit and both tasks was not statistically significant. Taguchi (2017) views grit as one of the non-cognitive skills from psychological perspective. Non-cognitive skills include several different factors such as grit, self-control, optimism, resiliency, adaptability, conscientiousness, self-efficacy, hope, growth mindset, and others. Cognitive skills, on the other hand, refer to skills which relate to the ability to think or learn as presented as Intelligent Quotient (IQ) (Heckman, 2008, cited in Taguchi, 2017). He attempts to apply these psychological theories of grit, motivation and self-control to SLA describing the correlation between grit and self-control. Grit can be an aspect of motivation because its definition relates to effort and achievement goals as well as motivation. The history of research in grit, however, in relation to L2 learning is still short, so there has been little research on this subject. In addition, in any research, the relationship between L2 learning motivation and grit has not been shown clearly yet.

1.3. Purpose of the Study
This study will specifically consider motivational aspects of grit associated with foreign language learning. If L2 learners have grit, they will continue learning more sufficiently since L2 language learning requires a long period of time. As mentioned above, grit, one of the non-cognitive skills, can be a predictor for a success in life, but probably not in foreign language (not second language) learning. This is because foreign language learning requires a certain level of cognitive skills (e.g. ability to remember vocabularies or the meanings) in the process of learning. Moreover, how the concept of grit relates to motivation in foreign language learning is still vague. Thus, in this study, grit of foreign language learners in two levels, advanced class and elementary class, will be compared. Then, this study will find out any differences in learners’ grit between the two classes and will attempt to discuss what grit involves in foreign language learning.

2. Methods
The participants (N = 115) were first-year students at a junior college and a university in Japan. All
First-year students were required to take a compulsory English course once a week, so they had the same English proficiency test, which is based on learning content that they were supposed to accomplish by the end of high school, before the course began at the beginning of the semester. Then they were divided into several classes according to their English proficiency test scores. Two groups were chosen as participants of this study from them. The first group (Group A) was the students assigned to one of the advanced classes \((N = 57)\), and the other group (Group B) was from the elementary class \((N = 58)\). Therefore, the students in Group A can be considered to have achieved a higher level of successful learning compared to the students in Group B at this point in their process of English learning. All participants were told the purpose of this study. The questionnaire was anonymous. The questionnaire was adopted from the Japanese version of Duckworth’s Grit Scale (2016) so that the students could understand all the questions in each item.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Average Grit Scores

The total average Grit scores of the two groups showed a difference. The total average score of Group A was 3.29 whereas the total average score of Group B was 2.75. According to Duckworth (2016), a Grit score of 3.3 indicates its percentile value as 30%, for example. This means the grit can be stronger than 30% of American adults who were examined as samples. Thus, the total average grit score of Group A for the present study was considered relatively low. Furthermore, the total average Grit score of Group B indicated even lower, as its percentile value was 15%.

Table 1 shows the average scores between Group A and Group B in each component. There are gaps between the groups in all of the components, especially in Questions 9 and 10. The responses to question 9 ("I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.") indicate that Group A is infrequently discouraged by setbacks and would not give up easily, compared to Group B. Also, the scores from Question 3 ("I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.") show that Group A tends to sustain a consistent goal setting once they set one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Group A (n = 57)</th>
<th>Group B (n = 58)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Setbacks don’t discourage me. I don’t give up easily.</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am a hard worker.</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I finish whatever I begin.</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. My interests change from year to year.</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I am diligent. I never give up.</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
compared to Group B. Furthermore, Group A seems to have more experience of overcoming setbacks and a certain amount of challenges to conquer, as can be seen in the response to question 10 ("I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge."). There were a few invalid answers (one in Question 5 for Group A and one each in Question 2 and 6 for Group B), so these are exclusions.

3.2. Passion and Perseverance

Questions with odd numbers imply passion, and those with even numbers indicate perseverance in Grit Scale. The students in both groups had higher degrees of passion than perseverance. The average score from the items regarding passion in Group A was 3.44 - from the items regarding perseverance it was 3.13. In Group B, on the other hand, the average score which indicate passion was 2.92, and perseverance was 2.57. The average score from Group A exceeded Group B in all items. However, it did not make much difference between the two groups in Question 1 ("New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.") and Question 8 ("I am diligent. I never give up.").

Question 1 is related to passion, and it involves interests. This could indicate that Group B had a slightly lower degree of passion than Group A, and it is concerned with their lower degree of interests. In foreign language learning, interests often reflect not only toward the language itself, but also toward the culture and people in the target language community. However, in L2 learning, interests can mean more specific targets compared to the one meant in general Grit Scale. Thus, the object of “interest” in Grit Scale could presumably be quite different from one in L2 learning. In contrast, Question 8 is associated with a perspective of perseverance. Both groups showed fairly low degrees of an aspect of perseverance, and they may lack their diligence. This can suggest that L2 proficiency and diligence of L2 learners may not be relevant. This will be discussed later.

4. Discussion

The results of the current study showed some significance. After the examination, a few things were brought to consider in relationships between L2 motivation and grit.

4.1. Conceptualizing Grit in L2 Learning (L2 Grit)

Duckworth et al. (2007) describe grit as learner’s stamina on a marathon. Foreign language learning is just like a marathon which requires learners to persevere for a long time. Stamina refers to “the physical or mental strength that enables you to do something difficult for long periods of time” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010), so it can be a circumstance that creates a certain degree of energy. Stamina needs energy to maintain the function, so the energy is considered as what drives or controls stamina. Consequently, motivation can be interpreted as the source of stamina, that is energy, which can transfer to a performance to achieve goals as an outcome. However, stamina in itself, that is grit, would not be a key factor for success, because it needs energy to function. In other words, to maintain the function of grit, motivation is required as a source of energy. In addition, various components of motivation can be considered as nutrients to produce energy. Accordingly, grit may not arise without motivation, and motivation can be an underlying element of grit. This idea can be partially applicable to the concept of DMC proposed by Dörnyei et al. (2014).

As motivation in psychology slightly differs from L2 motivation (which involves people and cultures
from target language community, as mentioned above), grit in psychology may be different from the one in L2 learning (it is now called "L2 grit"). Keegan (2017) admits "characteristics of grit have been examined in the second- and foreign-language learning context indirectly, but second-language (L2) researchers have not yet utilized specific research on grit and the Grit Scale to measure grit in language learning" (Keegan, 2017, 4). Hence, a Grit scale to be used specifically for L2 learning needs to be developed.

4.2. Grit and L2 Learning Context
The definition of success in L2 learning is often uncertain. This is possibly because participants in research are often learners still in the middle of their L2 learning process. The results of this study showed that L2 learners in an advanced class have higher grit scores as Duckworth et al. (2007) suggested. They suggest that the students with high levels of grit are more successful in both academic and non-academic pursuits. Their research suggests that IQ is not necessarily a predictor of academic success, however, grit could be the one.

Language learning, especially foreign language learning, requires a certain degree of knowledge to remember vocabulary, spelling, meanings of words and grammar, for instance. Consequently, cognitive skills, such as IQ, would also be necessary for language learning. Whereas non-cognitive skills, including grit, self-control, optimism, resiliency, adaptability, conscientiousness, self-efficacy, hope and growth mindset, may be more important, when learners actually use the language, cognitive skills would be more important skills when they learn it, especially in a foreign language learning context. In the context of second language learning, however, non-cognitive skills would be more significant. This is because in second language learning context, people can be immersed in the culture and its language, so they can master the language without much use of cognitive skills. Learning contexts involving people or community would compromise non-cognitive skills more than cognitive skills. L2 learning requires so many cognitive and non-cognitive skills which are complicated and intertwined. For example, when L2 learners practically use the language as a communication tool towards people in the target language community, non-cognitive skills can be essential. In contrast, when the learners want to obtain a good mark on their language proficiency test, they might need cognitive skills. Motivation or grit can be considered as a key factor for success in L2 learning, but highly motivated learners may not always be able to obtain high scores on tests. Therefore, L2 learners can also require different skills depending on their learning context or their learning process. It should not be considered that only grit, one of the non-cognitive skills, can be a predictor of success in L2 learning.

4.3. A Unique Goal to L2 Learning
Previous research on grit focuses on success in life, such as jobs, academic GPA, grades or performance on military program activities. However, success in L2 learning or a goal for foreign language learners can not only have practical values, such as getting high scores on a language proficiency test or getting a good job, which can be related to instrumentality in L2 motivation theory, but also simply communicating with people from or in the target language community. These kinds of goals reflect integrativeness towards the culture and people in the target language community, and it could be a unique concept to L2 learning, which was presented as integrative motivation. Yashima (2015) points
out that language is employed to communicate with people, thus, learners' interests toward people in the target language countries and their willingness to familiarize with the people, and willingness to behave like them would relate to success in their learning (Yashima, 2015, 11). Therefore, grit in a psychological perspective may lack some aspects of success compared to one in L2 learning.

5. Conclusion

The current study was conducted to compare grit of two groups of L2 learners from an advanced class and an elementary class and attempted to explore what L2 grit involves. The results showed that grit of Japanese students indicated slight differences between the two levels of classes. Learners in the advanced class indicated higher average grit scores than ones of learners in the elementary class in all items on Grit Scale. It suggests that learners with higher grit scores can be more successful at a certain point in their English learning process. Students in the elementary class seemed to lack their consistency of interests. Also, the degrees of passion and severance of the elementary level learners were lower than the ones of the advanced level learners.

The results, however, brought up a few things to consider. Firstly, the concept of grit in psychology may be different from the one in L2 learning. It should be examined from different angles of motivation as well. Secondly, correlations between grit and L2 learning context are still vague. Finally, to measure L2 learners' grit, Grit Scale obviously needs to be developed specifically for L2 learning, including the concept of integrativeness towards people and cultures in the target language community.

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