

Grit and Foreign Language Anxiety as Predictors of Willingness to Communicate in the Context of Foreign Language Learning: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach

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Abstract

Given its key role in enhancing learners' communicative competence, willingness to communicate (WTC) has received much research attention in the field of second language (L2) teaching and learning. Numerous studies have explored the antecedents of WTC in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. As an attempt to shed more light on this line of research, this study was set to investigate the effects of grit and foreign language anxiety as predictors of L2 WTC among Iranian EFL learners. For this purpose, a number of 163 undergraduate English major students from several universities participated in this survey. The required data were collected by distributing valid and reliable instruments measuring the three target variables (i.e., WTC, grit, and anxiety). A structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was utilized to test the hypothesized structural models for the relations between these variables. The SEM results indicated that grit accounted for 10.6 % of the variance and Foreign Language (FL) anxiety explained 20% of the variance in the participants' L2 WTC. Furthermore, the unique impact of foreign language anxiety on WTC was greater than that of grit. The implications of these findings for language teaching and learning are discussed at the end of the paper.

Keywords: Grit, Foreign language anxiety, L2 willingness to communicate, Structural equation modeling

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INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the significance of communication in second language acquisition (SLA), willingness to communicate (WTC) has been the subject of exploration by many SLA researchers in recent decades (Clément et al., 2003; Ghahari & Piruznejad, 2017; Grant, 2020; Khatib & Nourzadeh, 2015; MacIntyre, 2007; MacIntyre et al., 2001, 2002, 2003; Yashima et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2018). It is commonly acknowledged that this affective variable plays a crucial role in second/foreign language (L2/FL) learning processes. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), L2 WTC is conceptualized as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a specific time with a specific person or persons’ using a L2” (p. 547), driving some learners to seek opportunities for L2 speaking, and others to avoid communication and remain silent in the classroom (MacIntyre, 2007). Another significant variable that substantially affects language learning is FL anxiety (Horwitz, 1986), which is also considered tightly-woven with WTC (Liu & Jackson, 2008). FL anxiety is “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). A burgeoning body of research on the relationship between FL anxiety and WTC has been undertaken, hypothesizing a negative correlation between the two (Dewaele, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020; Liu, 2018; Peng, 2015). That is, learners with less FL anxiety show greater willingness to communicate (Dewaele et al., 2018). As a result, those students that feel further degrees of fear or anxiety are likely to withdraw from L2 learning and communication (Pappamihel, 2002). Besides, the close association of FL anxiety with self-perceived L2 competence and communication apprehension has also been highlighted (see Dewaele, 2002; MacIntyre et al., 2003; McCroskey, 1977; McCroskey & Richmond, 1991; Sultan, 2012; Zhang, 2019).

Due to the ever-increasing significance of positive psychology in SLA, affective and individual variables of both teachers and learners have been the target of much exploration (Fathi et al., 2021; Greenier et al., 2021;

Wang et al., 2021). Grit, a recently emerging non-cognitive variable in language learning, is a significant individual variable that was first introduced by Duckworth et al. (2007) in the field of psychology. This personality trait is defined as “one’s passion and perseverance for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). In respect to describing the characteristics of a gritty individual, Duckworth et al. (2007) state that he “not only finishes his tasks at hand, but pursues a given aim over years” (p. 1089). Further, they believe that, in addition to IQ, grit is necessary for achieving success. The salient effects of grit on academic performance have been investigated in a number of studies (e.g., Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Wei et al., 2019). In some more recent publications, grit has been introduced as one key antecedent of L2 WTC (Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020). It is posited that grit plays a major role in affecting L2 students’ WTC (Lee & Drajiati, 2019).

Despite the fact that an alluring line of inquiry into L2 WTC and its relationship with significant individual learner variables exists in the literature (Alemi et al., 2013; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011; Yashima et al., 2018), grit stands as an exception. Of course, some researchers have already begun to examine the relationship between grit and L2 WTC (Cheng, 2021; Lan et al., 2021; Lee & Drajiati, 2019; Lee & Hsieh, 2019), but they have often employed correlational designs for this purpose and their findings are far from being conclusive. Further, studies on the interrelationship between the correlates of grit and FL anxiety with L2 WTC are scant in the literature, and thus further investigation is essential to increase the existing body of knowledge on learners’ WTC in English and its correlates. For this reason, the objective of this study was to throw more light on the role of grit and FLA in predicting learners’ WTC in Iranian EFL context. In doing so, the study adopted a structural design to model the role of FLA and grit as the correlates of WTC among Iranian EFL learners. This would help reach a higher confidence about the effects of these correlates on EFL learners’ L2 WTC. As a result, the following research questions were formulated for the purpose of the current research:

1. Does grit significantly predict WTC among EFL learners?
2. Does foreign language anxiety significantly predict WTC among EFL learners?
3. Which variable is a stronger predictor of WTC among EFL learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anxiety and WTC

Krashen (1982) proposed his *Affective Filter Hypothesis* in response to the growing attention to affective variables in L2 achievement and use. As stated by this hypothesis, some factors including, anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, and personality traits can function as either a filter or a facilitator. The affective filter impedes L2 production when it is high and facilitates learning when it is low. The underlying assumption is that high levels of anxiety can hinder L2 success and low levels can facilitate learning. In addition, students *take in* the comprehensible input when the affective filters are low. As regards the impact of anxiety on learning, Horwitz et al. (1986) noted “Teachers and students generally feel that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak another language” (p. 125). They introduced three types of FL anxiety: 1) Communication Apprehension; also known as “stage fright”, refers to individuals’ nervousness of speaking with others. “Stage fright is the fear or anxiety a person experiences when one communicates orally in a situation where other individuals are in a situation to observe and evaluate the communication attempt” (McCroskey, 1977, p. 79). 2) Test Anxiety; students dealing with this type of anxiety are anxious while taking a test because they consider their imperfect test as a failure, and 3) Fear of Negative Evaluation; some students are afraid of being judged negatively because of their mistakes. Exploring the role of anxiety in L2 learning achievement and the way its detrimental effects can be intervened has been the target of a considerable number of studies (Horwitz, 2001; Steinmayr et al., 2016; Teimouri et al., 2019; Zarei & Kavyari Roustai, 2019). In this line

of inquiry, Onwueguzie et al. (1999) carried out a study to investigate the relationship between anxiety and L2 achievement. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of anxiety on L2 achievement in three stages of learning: input, processing, and output. 1) Input anxiety is defined as the fear that learners experience when initially learning a new structure in the FL learning, 2) Processing anxiety refers to learners' anxiousness when thinking process is involved in the L2, and 3) Output anxiety stage is a point at which students are intimidated by producing utterances in the target language. The data were collected through Input Scale, the Processing Scale, and the Output Scale. Findings revealed that anxiety was negatively correlated with L2 success in the three stages. As a result, it was claimed that students' language performance was negatively influenced by their anxiety.

In accordance with research into WTC, Donovan and MacIntyre (2004) argued that gender played an influential role in learners' WTC behavior. They carried out a study to examine WTC, self-perceived competence, and communication competence among female and male students with different age groups. The results suggested that learners' level of WTC was predicted by their self-perceived competence, while both self-perceived competence and communication apprehension were the predictors of WTC among female high school students. Nevertheless, only communication apprehension predicted WTC among high school females. In another study, MacIntyre (1994) examined the effect of communication apprehension and perceived competence on WTC. Their model indicated that these two variables were predictors of WTC. It was reported that people showed WTC when they considered themselves competent enough to communicate and when they were not afraid of communication. In addition, Elahi et al. (2019) argued that perceived communicative competence had the largest impact on L2 WT.

In recent years, a considerable body of empirical evidence concerning the association between willingness to communicate and language anxiety has been reported (e.g., Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Hashimoto, 2002; Liu,

2018). A recent study by Zhou et al. (2020) explored the impact of FLA on the association between L2 competence and WTC among Chinese EFL students. For gathering the required data, FLA questionnaire, WTC scale were administered. Also, an IELTS test was employed to assess the learners' L2 competence. Descriptive and correlational analyses showed that the relationship between L2 competence and WTC was negatively moderated by FLA. In addition, a positive correlation between WTC and L2 competence among Chinese EFL students was confirmed. Also, as an attempt to investigate the correlation between anxiety and WTC, Manipuspika (2018) carried out a study in order to compare freshmen's anxiety level with the second or third-year students. The findings revealed that 1) learners with high degrees of anxiety were less likely to communicate in L2 due to their fear, 2) among the three kinds of anxiety known as fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and communication apprehension, first-year students were most struggling with the fear of negative evaluation, and 3) learners were more eager to communicate with their friends and relatives rather than strangers. It was also revealed that anxious students who encountered obstacles during their learning process were unwilling to speak in the target language. Liu (2018) probed into the link between WTC and anxiety among 167 bilingual and multilingual students. Findings demonstrated a significant correlation between WTC and FLA. It was revealed that students were reluctant to communicate because they were intimidated by public speaking, were not capable of effective communication in Chinese, and were concerned about their low level of speaking ability.

Delving deeper into this line of research, MacIntyre and Doucette (2010) carried out a study to probe the relationship between WTC, perceived competence, language anxiety inside and outside the class. A total of 238 learners who were learning French as their L2 were recruited from a high school on the east coast of Canada to participate in the study. Results indicated that WTC inside the class was significantly correlated with perceived communication competence and negatively with anxiety. Another

key finding was that WTC was directly affected by high levels of volatility in class and indirectly outside the classroom. This negative connection made students less willing to talk and remain silent while students with low levels of volatility were more eager to complete their tasks.

To elaborate more on the studies concerning WTC, the findings of Baker and MacIntyre's (2000) study illustrated that WTC is also influenced by context. This study aimed to compare immersion and non-immersion learners' WTC. In this respect, a group of students were provided with frequent L2 communication through immersion program. Findings indicated that given that immersion students were less anxious they were more willing to communicate in the L2. In consideration of this fact, it was claimed that anxiety was negatively associated with WTC among immersion students. In contrast, non-immersion students' WTC was correlated with the perception of their L2 competence. Likewise, Dewaele (2019) reported the strong link between classroom enjoyment, teachers' frequent use of English, and WTC. They argued that Spanish students' L2 WTC was hindered by their anxiety in the EFL context.

Grit and WTC

After conceptualizing grit by Duckworth and her colleagues (2007) in the field of psychology, the emerging non-cognitive trait of grit has instigated much attention in various contexts (Alamer, 2021; Cheng, 2021; Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Feng & Papi, 2020; Gyamfi & Lai, 2020; Khajavy et al., 2021; Lan et al., 2021; Lee & Lee, 2020; Nazari & Alizadeh Oghyanous, 2021). Duckworth et al. (2007) validated the Grit Scale (Grit-O) in order to measure students' grit. The 12-item domain-general grit scale includes two components, consistency of interest (COI) and perseverance of effort (POE). Recently, Ebadi et al. (2018) proposed a tentative grit questionnaire to assess EFL students' grit. They believed that since EFL students in Iranian context are not provided with opportunities to communicate in English, they need to maintain their perseverance toward

learning when encountering setbacks. They also highlighted the significant role of grit in learning process in EFL contexts. Regarding grit conceptualization, students with high levels of grit tend to work harder and maintain commitment to their long-term goals. They do not give up and continue perseveringly while encountering difficulties, obstacles or discouragement (Duckworth et al., 2007). It is also claimed that grit promotes learners' FL performance (Wei et al., 2019) and subjective well-being (Li et al., 2018). Since gritty students have a positive relationship with their teacher, they are more involved in learning and gratified by their school satisfaction (Lan & Moscardino, 2019). Accordingly, grit determines the level of learners' academic achievement in different domains (Cross, 2014; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Duckworth et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2014).

To increase the existing knowledge of this concept in learning, Gyamfi and Lai (2020) conducted a mixed-method study to investigate the effect of different variables on grit. To this end, a scale adapted from Grit-O scale (Duckworth et al., 2007) and Grit-S scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) were used. The participants of this study were second and third-year EFL university students in Thailand. Both questionnaire and focus group discussion were conducted to collect the required data. The analysis of quantitative data showed that the participants were willing to continue learning English despite all the failures and setbacks that they faced. The results of qualitative analysis demonstrated the influential role of context in learners' consistent interest and perseverance of effort. The socio-cultural context and Thai learners' personal experience were reported to have important role in their grit level. Another intriguing result was that the participants were interested in studying English as their university major due to some reasons such as their fame as an English student, societal needs, and future occupations.

In regard to exploring the link between grit and L2 achievement, Wei et al. (2019) carried out a research to analyze the inter-correlation between language enjoyment and grit. A sample of 832 learners were the participants of this study. The findings of the study indicated that grit was positively

correlated with FLP and FLE. In addition, CE was greatly influenced by FLP. It was also revealed that students with high levels of grit flourished FLE and FLP in a positive CE. On the other hand, grit had a weak influence on academic performance in a poor CE. Moreover, females were grittier than males and also showed more FLE, FLP and, CE. From this perspective, it was noted that gender was related to these variables while age did not play a significant role. In connection with L2 WTC, a few researchers have examined the association between WTC and grit (Lee, 2020; Lee & Drajadi, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020).

In this line of inquiry, Lee (2020) conducted a study to explore the effect of grit as an internal variable and classroom enjoyment as an external factor on WTC. 647 students in different levels in South Korea were the participants of this study. The relevant data were gathered by employing three scales of L2 WTC, grit, and classroom enjoyment. The results indicated that even though grit (perseverance of effort) was positively related to L2 WTC, there was not a link between grit (consistency of interests) and L2 WTC. It was also revealed that classroom enjoyment played a positive role in influencing L2 WTC. Moreover, learners' length of study was correlated with their WTC. It is claimed that those students who devoted a longer time to learning English were more inclined to communicate. In the same vein, Lee and Drajadi (2019) have stated that L2 WTC is positively associated with grit in EFL context. Examining a sample of 261 Taiwanese EFL students, Lee and Hsieh (2019) focused on finding the correlation between various affective variables and willingness to communicate. L2 self-confidence, motivation, grit, anxiety and WTC scales were adopted to collect the data. This study sought to explore their relationship in three various communicative contexts (in-class, out-of- class, and digital). Findings showed that grit and L2 self-confidence were correlates of students' WTC in all three communicative contexts. It was suggested that gritty students who had high levels of confidence volunteered starting English communication in both traditional (face-to-face) and online settings. In spite of the fact that anxiety could not significantly predict WTC

in L2 digital context, it was linked with students' L2 WTC in-class and out-of-class settings. Similarly, Lee and Lee's (2020) study was an attempt to investigate the link between grit and other affective variables on L2 WTC in three settings including digital, in-class, and out-of-class contexts. 176 Korean students majored in EFL (both undergraduate and graduate) were the participants of this study. Three intriguing findings were reported. First, virtual intercultural experience, self-confidence, and age had impact on L2 WTC in digital context. Second, learners' self-confidence, risk-taking level and their major influenced their WTC outside the class. Finally, L2 WTC was predicted by grit, lack of anxiety, and motivation inside the class.

METHOD

Participants

As for the purpose of this research, a total number of 163 Iranian EFL learners from several universities in Iran served as the participants. The sample included undergraduate English major students from Tehran, Kermanshah, and Kurdistan provinces. Convenience sampling procedure (Ary et al., 2018) was used to select these participants. The respondents consisted of both male (N = 76) and female (N = 87) EFL learners whose ages varied from 20 to 26, with the average age of 21.24. Their English learning experience ranged from 3 to 12 years, with a mean of 5.6 years of experience.

Instruments

Grit Scale

In order to measure grit characteristics of the respondents, the Short Grit Scale (Grit-S) developed by Duckworth and Quinn (2009) was used. This scale includes 8 items which are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale varying from 1 to 5. Grit-S scale measures two underlying components including Consistency of Interest (G-CI) and Perseverance of Effort (G-PE). As for G-

CI, 4 items are reversely coded and 4 items are positively coded for G-PE. This scale enjoyed acceptable reliability indices as reported by Duckworth and Quinn (2009). The internal consistency of this scale was also within the acceptable range (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

Foreign language anxiety of the learners was measured by administering the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), designed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Containing 33 items, this scale measures the anxiety of EFL learners in using or learning an additional language. Each statement of the FLCAS is measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability coefficient of this self-report scale was relatively high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$) in this study.

Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire

In order to measure the participants' level of WTC, MacIntyre et al.'s (2001) Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire (WTCQ) was employed. This questionnaire contains 27 items for measuring inside-the-class WTC and 27 other items for outside-the-class WTC. This scale measures respondents' WTC for the four skills of reading (6 items), writing (8 items), speaking (8 items), and listening (5 items). Each statement is assessed using a 5-point Likert scale. The internal consistency of this scale was calculated to be .84 in the present study.

Procedure

The three self-report scales measuring the three constructs (i.e., grit, FLCAS, & WTC) were put together in a form of an online survey using the Google Docs application (<https://docs.google.com>). The data collection began in the Spring Semester of 2021 with cooperation of some university instructors. The link of the Google-Docs survey was sent to the university professors teaching at various universities in Iran. Then they shared the

links with their English major undergraduate students via Telegram or WhatsApp groups and asked them to answer the items on the online survey. It took about three weeks to gather all the data.

Data Analysis

After the data were collected, they were fed to the SPSS AMOS, version 21. The data were first checked for the missing data and outliers. Additionally, wrongly coded data were checked. A limited number of missing items were investigated using the expectation– maximization (EM) algorithm. The structural model (the relations between grit, foreign language anxiety, and WTC) was examined through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The model was investigated against a number of fit indices: χ^2/df (chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The acceptable values of the indices are $\chi^2/df < 3$, $GFI > .95$, $TLI > .95$, $CFI > .95$, and $RMSEA < .06$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

RESULTS

Prior to testing the hypothesized model, the psychometric properties of the scales used in this study were examined. In fact, the purpose was to check whether the three self-report scales possessed appropriate validity and internal consistency. For this purpose, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was run on the dataset to verify the scales. The results of CFA indices yielded a good fit ($X^2/df = 1.96$, $p = 0.00$, $GFI = 0.971$, $TLI = 0.985$, $CFI = 0.993$, $RMSEA = 0.04$). With regard to reliability coefficients, it was revealed that the scales enjoyed acceptable reliability indices. Table 1 indicates the reliability of the scales.

Table 1: Reliability of the scales

Scales	Cronbach's α
Grit-S	.78
FLCAS	.86
WTCQ	.84

After that, descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables were calculated. Table 2 demonstrated the descriptive statistics and correlations between grit, FLCAS, and WTC. As shown in Table 2, the correlation coefficient between FLCAS and WTC ($r=.59$, $p<.01$) was stronger than the correlation between grit and WTC ($r=.47$, $p<.01$).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and correlations

	Mean (SD)	Correlation			
		1	2	3	4
Grit	3.28 (.85)	1.00			
FLCAS	2.24 (.95)	-.36*	1.00		
WTC	3.46 (1.17)	.47**	-.59**	1.00	

* $p <.05$; ** $p <.01$

Afterwards, SEM was used to test the hypothesized model in which the two constructs of grit and FLCAS were considered as the predictors of WTC. Considered a useful and valid multivariate approach, SEM adopts a confirmatory hypothesis-testing technique for testing the relations (Byrne, 2012). It is also able to measure the error variance more accurately by taking both latent and observed constructs into account. To test the structural relations, two models were proposed in this study, as illustrated in Figure 1. Though the structures of the associations for the two models (A and B) were identical, both models were investigated to shed more light on the results. Also, measures of fit indices and common variances were considered to identify the unique impact of each predictor on the criterion variable (i.e.,

WTC). Model evaluation values verified a good fit to the data (see Table 3). As illustrated in model A, the inter-relations among the three constructs were statistically significant. FLCAS and grit had 6% of variance in common ($R^2=.247$). Also, FLCAS and WTC demonstrated 20 % common variance ($R^2=.453$). Likewise, grit and WTC had 10.6 % of shared variance ($R^2=.326$). Given these values, it can be argued that FLCAS was a stronger predictor of WTC than grit.

After that, in order to pinpoint the unique contribution of FLCAS and grit beyond and above each other, R^2 increments were examined by comparing the variability percentage in WTC which is depicted in model A and model B. Model B revealed that FLCAS and grit together accounted for 29% of the total variance in WTC. Consequently, it can be concluded that grit by itself contributed to the additional amount of 9% of the variance in WTC, beyond the single FLCAS ($\Delta\chi^2=.29-.20=.09$). Moreover, the unique impact of FLCAS in accounting for WTC above the grit as the single explanatory variable was 19% ($\Delta\chi^2=.29-.10=.19$). As confirmed by these values, the unique impact of FLCAS was greater than grit.

Table 3: Goodness of fit indices

	χ^2	χ^2/df	GFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$
Models A and B	5.89	1.96	.97	.98	.99	.04	
Model A1 (β Grit = 0)	10.76	2.62	.98	.97	.98	.03	4.87*
Model A2 (β FLCAS = 0)	11.65	2.89	.97	.96	.97	.02	5.76*

* $p < .05$.

As the final phase of the analysis, the unique impacts of grit and FLCAS on WTC was examined by constraining each related beta weights to zero. The changes in χ^2 were evaluated for model B. In fact, significant $\Delta\chi^2$ was considered as the criterion. In other words, in case zero beta weights leads to significant $\Delta\chi^2$ (i.e., changes in χ^2), the unique impact of every predictor in the model is considered to be significant. Table 3 shows both the fit indices and $\Delta\chi^2$ for the specified models. Constraining beta weights to zero for grit in model A1 (β grit =0) and anxiety in model A2 (β FLCAS =0)

yielded significant $\Delta\chi^2$ (model A1 (β grit =0): $\Delta\chi^2$ (1, N=163) = 4.87, $p<.05$; model A2 (β FLCAS =0): $\Delta\chi^2$ (1, N=163) = 5.76, $p<.05$). These results also verified the significant predictive power of grit and FLCAS in influencing WTC.

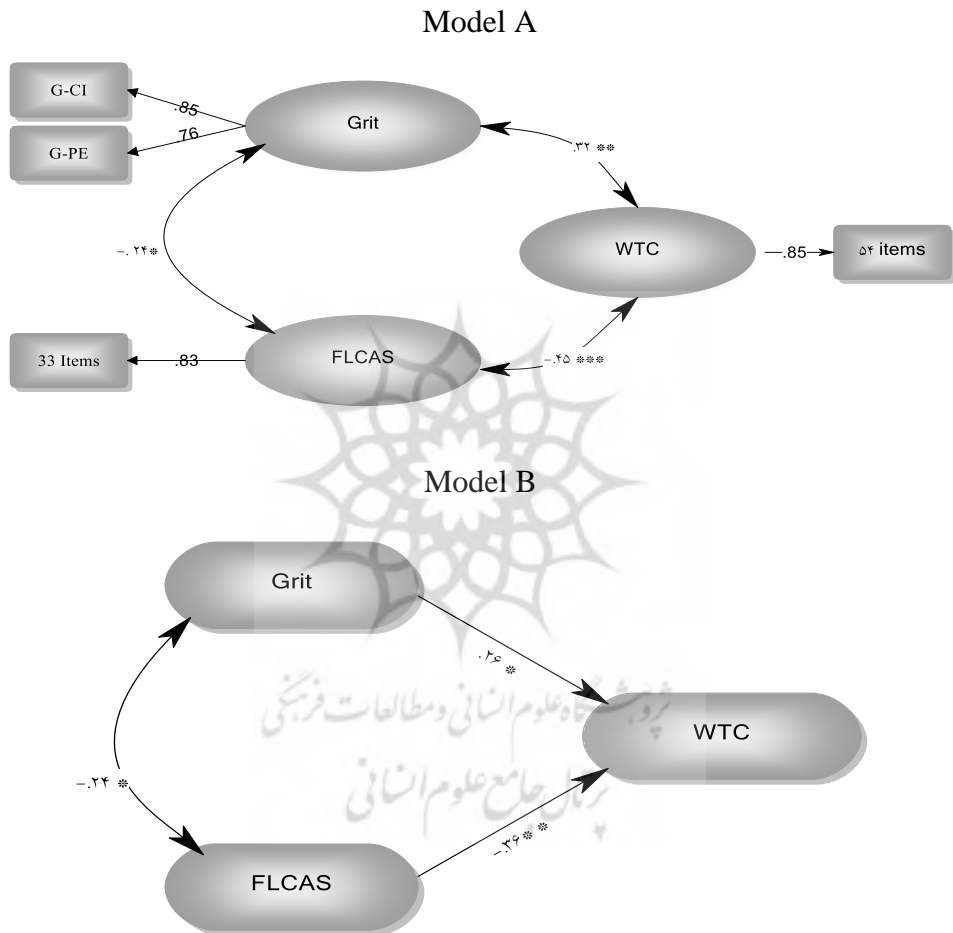


Figure 1: Grit and FLCAS as predictors of WTC.; G-CI = Consistency of Interest; G-PE = Perseverance of Effort. $*p < .05$. $**p < .01$. $***p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The current study attempted to explore the role of learners' affective variables, namely FLA and grit in predicting WTC among Iranian EFL students. More precisely, the aim of this study was to advance our understanding of whether, and how student's grit and FLA are associated with their L2 WTC. The results yielded two noteworthy findings. First, it was revealed that the participants' WTC was significantly predicted by their grit in an EFL context. The obtained finding lends further support to earlier findings regarding the significant positive role of grit in determining WTC (Lee, 2020; Lee & Drajati, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020). A similar result was reported with Taiwanese EFL students (Lee & Hsieh, 2019), who showed a positive association between grit and their WTC. This finding corroborates the previous study conducted by Lee and Lee (2020) that revealed the influential role of grit in increasing WTC level in the classroom. Based on the present findings, two interpretations of this finding seem to be warranted. First, gritty EFL students' high levels of perseverance of effort may lead them to work tirelessly toward accomplishing challenging tasks and prioritize the purposeful activities which help them to make progress. This interpretation re-echoes Duckworth et al.'s (2007) claim that gritty individuals are persistent in completing tasks and they stick with them until they are finished. According to the results regarding the positive impact of grit on the participants' WTC, it can be argued that grittier learners may seek opportunities to communicate in English with their peers and teachers to promote their proficiency level. They may assume that their engagement in performance-based activities can help them complete a challenging task (e.g., improving English speaking).

Second, gritty EFL students' achievement-oriented characteristics seem to motivate them to remain committed to reaching their goal which is learning English. Locke and Latham (2006) believed that individuals who set goals will constantly endeavor to succeed. It can be argued that since EFL gritty learners have a burning desire to learn English, they tend to

remain persistent in learning and try hard to meet their goal. This assumption can be taken as evidence for Gyamfi and Lai's (2020) study which demonstrated that Thai English major students had persistence in making sustained effort to achieve their future goals. As a result, they tried hard to maintain their interest toward learning English. In regard to pursuing their goals, gritty individuals show determination and perseverance in spite of facing failures and barriers (Duckworth et al., 2007). Based on these arguments, it can be claimed that gritty students who aim to learn a new language are encouraged to put a great deal of energy and effort to mastering it. Given their passion for becoming a competent English speaker, they pioneer in initiating conversations and show higher WTC when called upon. These two assumptions are likely to inspire the gritty EFL learners to become more willing to communicate and make continuous efforts in order to boost their English communicative skills.

The second intriguing finding drawn from this study suggests that FLA is a stronger predictor of WTC. This finding is partially in line with the earlier studies that reported the negative relationship between FLA and WTC (Khajavy, MacIntyre, Taherian et al., 2021; Liu, 2018; Manipuspika, 2018; Zhou et al., 2020). The current study showed that learners with greater anxiety levels reported less WTC, as reported in Liu and Jackson's (2008) study in which students with high FLA were unwilling to communicate, indicating that FLA was a powerful predictor of students' unwillingness to communicate. The present finding is also partially consistent with Liu's (2006) study which suggested that students' unwillingness to communicate was caused by FLA. Based on the current finding and previous studies, the stronger predictive power of FLA in influencing students' WTC may be attributed to two reasons. First, anxious students' avoidance of communication may be due to their fear of being judged negatively by others. As referred to by Howritz et al. (1986), this finding may be credited to the fact that anxious learners are afraid of being mocked by their classmates due to their poor performance and mistakes. As a result, they withdraw from participating in discussions in the class

(Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). In MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991) perspectives, anxious students' fear of making mistakes and losing face causes them feel uncomfortable and lose their passion for voluntary participation. Moreover, they are less likely to use new linguistic forms in order not to make mistakes. They also believed that FLA has a negative impact on language learning process. In a same vein, Manipuspika's (2018) study showed that among three types of anxiety mentioned earlier, fear of negative evaluation ranked first in affecting the participants' performance. Also, individuals with high fear of negative evaluation have tendency to become nervous in evaluative situations, and try hard to avoid others' disapproval (Watson & Friend, 1969). Therefore, it can be argued that the fear of other negative evaluations may have reduced the learner's WTC level. This also supports the findings of Liu and Jackson (2008), who indicated that more than one third of the students were struggling with high anxiety when speaking in public in their English class due to their fear of being evaluated by others.

The second explanation might be concerned with students' communication apprehension in changing their WTC behavior. In other words, students' poor choice of communicative strategies and disfluencies in verbal presentation (MacCroskey, 1984) cause them feel anxious. Consequently, they become reluctant to initiate a communication because they may have difficulty understanding others and make themselves understood. This assumption is partially supported by MacCroskey (1977), who stated that communication apprehension is a sub-construct of reticence and that persons with high degrees of this apprehension are less willing to communicate when they are addressed to speak. Apprehensive individuals feel incompetent and anxious to interact with others because they may consider themselves not competent enough to communicate. This argument aligns with those of Croucher (2013) and MacIntyre (1994) who also reported that WTC was negatively associated with comprehension apprehension.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the findings of this study emphasized the impact of grit and FLA on learners' WTC in an EFL context. It was revealed that Iranian EFL students with lower FLA and higher degrees of grit appeared to be more willing to communicate in English. The findings of this study add novel insights to the current literature. Although grit was suggested to be a significant predictor of WTC, lack of FLA was identified as a stronger predictor of Iranian EFL students' WTC. Moreover, the results of this study extend the extant knowledge on how some affective factors may affect learners' communication behavior. This is in line with Samimy and Tabuse (1992) in stating that "affective factors could play a strong role in determining students' linguistic performance in class" (p. 393).

Findings of this study present some pedagogical suggestions for EFL teachers. As Young (1991) argued that instructors have an influential role in impacting learners' anxiety, it can be argued that EFL teachers can mitigate learners' anxiety level by (a) raising awareness that errors are signs of learning and changing their negative attitudes toward mistakes, (b) correcting them unobtrusively when it is necessary, and (c) praising them for their correct utterances (i.e., emotional support). Teachers should make efforts to encourage students not to feel embarrassed after they made mistakes (Pyun et al., 2014). Findings from Khajavy et al.'s (2018) study in an EFL context indicated that students were more willing to communicate in a stress-free environment with an encouraging teacher. Dewaele and Dewaele (2018) also asserted that teachers' frequent use of foreign language had a major role in strengthening learners' WTC. This suggests that EFL teachers are responsible for promoting their students' WTC. From this perspective, teachers can design and utilize various instructional strategies to engage anxious students in a variety of communicative tasks. They may speak English frequently and provide students with opportunities to speak in a comfortable and non-threatening environment. Students may also display more grit (i.e., perseverance of effort) in positive environments (Lee, 2019).

In addition, it is recommended that EFL teachers inspire their students to promote their knowledge and communicative English skills by implementing collaborative activities. For example, teachers might divide students in groups based on movies, books, or the music they enjoy talking about. The benefits of the collaborative activities are that the students have the chance to talk more, learn from each other, and reduce their anxiety levels.

However, the present study has two main limitations. First, since this study was conducted in the context of Iran, the current data from this sample of Iranian EFL students may not be generalized to other EFL contexts and other languages. Thus, further research is required to capture more details regarding affective variables in other cultures. Second, it is necessary for future studies to use qualitative approaches in addition to questionnaires to draw more accurate and conclusive findings. For instance, semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions would provide further insights into the current knowledge. The reasons why students' grit affects their WTC behaviors across different proficiency levels can be also a novel topic for future research. It is always intriguing how different affective variables are interrelated and how they affect each other.

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