



European Journal of English Language Studies

Volume 4, Issue 1, 25 - 38.

ISSN: 2770-9752

<https://www.ejels.com/>

Determinants of Grit in English Learning: A Qualitative Study on Vietnamese Students' External and Internal Influences

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Received: November 14, 2023 • Revised: January 26, 2024 • Accepted: March 5, 2024

Abstract: This study delves into understanding the determinants of grit in English learning among Vietnamese students, highlighting both external and internal factors. Utilizing qualitative interviews, the research engaged with a cohort of 15 students, aiming to unearth the intricate interplay of influences that bolster their commitment and persistence in English studies. External factors emerged prominently, with teacher influence playing a significant role. Teachers' motivational techniques, personalized feedback, and the establishment of a nurturing learning environment were underscored as pivotal in shaping students' determination. On the internal facet, personal goals and aspirations, self-efficacy, intrinsic curiosity for the language, adaptive learning strategies, peer comparisons, and reflective self-assessment were identified as central elements. Insights from Constructivism and Socio-Cultural Theory were instrumental in interpreting the findings, revealing how individual experiences intersect with broader societal and cultural narratives. The study uncovered that while personal motivations and aspirations drive the students, they are simultaneously influenced by societal values, especially in the Vietnamese context, where education is deeply revered. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on grit in educational settings, shedding light on the unique cultural and individual determinants in the context of Vietnamese students learning English.

Keywords: *English learning, external factors, grit, internal factors, qualitative study, Vietnamese students.*

To cite this article: Thao, L. T., Thuy, P. T., Chau, T. N. B., Linh, N. T. T. & Yen, P. H. (2024). Determinants of grit in English learning: A qualitative study on Vietnamese students' external and internal influences. *European Journal of English Language Studies*, 4(1), 25-38. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ejels.4.1.25>

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, English proficiency has become indispensable for a wide range of professions, academic pursuits, and intercultural interactions. English, widely recognized as a global lingua franca, offers opportunities for access to global knowledge, better job prospects, and cultural connections (Rao, 2019). For nations like Vietnam, where the demand for English is growing at an unprecedented rate, the need to understand the role of individual traits such as grit in language acquisition is becoming increasingly critical. This is particularly true as the ability to persist in learning amidst challenges becomes a defining factor in mastering a new language like English. Vietnam's educational culture, which emphasizes discipline, perseverance, and the value of education, potentially fosters an environment where grit can naturally develop as students navigate the rigorous demands of language mastery. The drive to foster a generation of proficient English speakers is more pronounced than ever.

Vietnam, with its history, culture, and distinct educational system, offers a unique context for the exploration of English language learning. Over the years, Vietnamese tertiary institutions have continually adapted and innovated their English programs to prepare students for global challenges (Nghia & Tran, 2020). Yet, while pedagogical approaches, resources, and external motivations play significant roles in the language learning journey (Wulandari et al., 2020), it is imperative to acknowledge that these elements alone are not sufficient. The cultural backdrop of Vietnam,

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characterized by a strong work ethic and resilience in the face of challenges, may significantly contribute to the development of grit among learners. The internal qualities of the learners, particularly their grit, play a pivotal role. Intrinsic factors—such as students' resilience, perseverance, and 'grit'—can be decisive in achieving English proficiency (Liu & Han, 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

Grit, as defined by Duckworth et al. (2007), refers to perseverance and passion for long-term goals. This trait has been linked to various success outcomes across different fields, from academia to the professional world. In the realm of English language learning, the relevance of grit becomes even more pronounced. This is because learning a language is a long-term endeavor that often involves navigating through periods of stagnation and frustration. In the context of language learning, grit can be instrumental in surmounting challenges, persisting through setbacks, and dedicating oneself to consistent practice and improvement. While grit's significance is undeniable, it is essential to investigate how this trait interplays with the unique challenges of language learning, particularly in environments like Vietnam. The Vietnamese educational system, with its emphasis on diligence and academic achievement, might play a crucial role in nurturing or stifling the development of grit in the context of English language learning. The factors that contribute to or impede its cultivation, especially in English language learning, are less understood, particularly in the Vietnamese tertiary context.

This study, therefore, aims to explore the factors affecting Vietnamese tertiary students' grit in their English learning. The existing body of research has primarily focused on the general concept of grit in various contexts, but there is a notable gap in understanding how cultural and educational systems, specifically in Vietnam, influence the development of grit in English language learning. Through a qualitative lens, this research will delve into the lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives of Vietnamese university students, providing a comprehensive understanding of how grit influences and is influenced by the process of learning English as a second language. Most studies to date have not deeply examined the interplay between cultural norms, educational practices, and individual traits like grit in the specific context of English language learning in Vietnam. This study will also consider how Vietnam's unique cultural and educational dynamics contribute to shaping the development of grit in language learning. By addressing this gap, the study aims to provide insights that are currently underrepresented in the literature, particularly regarding the cultivation of grit among Vietnamese learners of English. Unraveling these insights is crucial, not only for enhancing the effectiveness of English education in Vietnam but also for enriching the global understanding of grit in the context of second or foreign language learning.

Literature Review

The Global Importance of English Learning

The spread of English as an international lingua franca has been extensively documented in linguistic and educational research. Crystal (2003) highlighted that over a quarter of the global population is currently engaged in learning English, reflecting its significant role in global communication, business, science, and culture. The ability to communicate in English, as Nghia and Tran (2020) observed, has profound implications for social mobility, job opportunities, and access to global knowledge.

Vietnamese Context of English Learning

In recent decades, Vietnam has shown an intensified push for English proficiency, recognizing its potential for economic and cultural advancement (Tran & Tanemura, 2020). The Vietnamese government's 2020 Project aimed at universalizing English for Vietnamese students by 2020 underscores this priority (Thao & Mai, 2020). Yet, amidst the systemic changes and innovations, individual learners' experiences and intrinsic motivations in the Vietnamese context remain an area warranting deeper exploration.

Defining Grit in Learning

Duckworth et al. (2007) described grit as a trait encompassing perseverance and the consistent pursuit of long-term goals, regardless of obstacles and setbacks. It has been differentiated from other motivational constructs, such as self-efficacy, in its emphasis on long-term stamina rather than immediate intensity (Duckworth et al., 2009; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Gardner, 1988). In academic contexts, grittier students tend to display higher levels of achievement and are less likely to drop out of challenging courses (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014).

Grit in Language Acquisition

While research on grit in general academic scenarios is vast, its exploration in the language learning field is still burgeoning. Some studies, like those of Shirvan and Alamer (2022), indicated a positive correlation between learners' grit and their English learning achievement. This relationship, as argued by Khajavy and Aghaee (2022), can be attributed to the nature of language learning, which often demands prolonged effort, resilience in the face of plateaus, and the capacity to bounce back from mistakes and misunderstandings.

Factors Affecting Grit in Learning

Several factors can influence the development or suppression of grit. External motivators, such as supportive educators and constructive feedback, have been shown to bolster students' grit (Dweck, 2008). Conversely, environmental factors like excessive pressure, unrealistic expectations, or lack of resources can stifle it (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). Additionally, personal experiences, cultural nuances, peer influence, and individual personality traits play significant roles in shaping a student's grit (Datu et al., 2021; Hoerr, 2013; O'Neal, 2018; Schreiner, 2017).

The Cultural Dimension of Grit

Culture can shape the understanding and expression of grit. Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of culture highlight how individualistic and collectivist societies may perceive persistence and long-term goals differently. In the Vietnamese context, where societal values emphasize familial expectations, communal goals, and respect for education (Trung & Van, 2020), the interplay between culture and grit becomes particularly intriguing.

In sum, while the existing literature provides foundational insights into the nature of grit, its significance in learning, and various influencing factors, there is a notable gap in understanding how these dimensions manifest in the specific context of English learning among Vietnamese tertiary students. This study aims to address this lacuna.

Methodology*Research Design*

This research adopts a qualitative approach, leveraging the depth and nuance that such methodologies can offer. Given that the focus is on understanding the intricate factors affecting Vietnamese tertiary students' grit in their English learning, it becomes essential to prioritize their voices, perspectives, and lived experiences. Consequently, the decision to employ semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool was made. This format allows for a flexible exploration of the topic, granting participants the freedom to share their narratives while also ensuring that key areas of interest are adequately addressed.

The study's design is underpinned by two primary theoretical frameworks. The first is Constructivism, as posited by Vygotsky (1978). In this paradigm, knowledge is not merely received but actively constructed by the learner, grounded in their previous experiences and interactions. By understanding students' individual journeys, experiences, and the meanings they assign to them, we gain insights into how their perceptions of grit and its role in English learning are formed. This lens encourages us to view grit not as a fixed trait but as a quality shaped by a myriad of personal, social, and cultural interactions.

The second framework informing this research is the Socio-Cultural Theory, particularly its emphasis on the social context of learning. According to this theory, learning, motivation, and even constructs like grit are deeply embedded within a social context and cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural, interpersonal, and societal dynamics at play (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Given the distinct cultural backdrop of Vietnam—with its unique educational traditions, societal values, and historical influences—the Socio-Cultural Theory offers a valuable lens through which to interpret and understand the narratives of the participants.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 15 English-major tertiary students from a renowned university in Vietnam. The decision to select students from a prominent institution was made with the belief that their experiences might provide a deeper insight into the challenges and motivations associated with pursuing English proficiency at an advanced level.

Among the 15 participants, there were 10 females and 5 males, reflecting a gender distribution that is not uncommon in English-major programs in many tertiary institutions. The age range of the students was between 19 to 23 years. They hailed from various provinces across Vietnam, bringing in diverse socio-cultural backgrounds to the study. Regarding their academic standing, the participants included 5 freshmen, 4 sophomores, 3 juniors, and 3 seniors, allowing for a representation across different stages of the tertiary educational experience.

In the planning and execution of the study, strict adherence to ethical standards was maintained. Prior to the interviews, all participants were informed about the study's objectives, the nature of their involvement, potential risks, and the confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. They were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any repercussions. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms have been used during the data analysis and reporting phase. All data, including recordings and transcriptions, have been securely stored to ensure only authorized access.

It is noteworthy to mention that all participants were in the latter stages of their English-major program, which implies that they had already displayed a certain level of commitment and persistence in their English learning journey. Moreover, they were chosen purposively based on faculty recommendations and academic performance to ensure a

balance of experiences, both of those who are highly motivated and those who might have faced challenges in their pursuit.

The rationale behind choosing English-major students was to delve deeper into the experiences of those for whom English learning is not just a skill but a primary academic endeavor. This specificity ensures a more profound exploration of grit, its influences, and its implications in the context of intensive language learning.

Data Collection

Central to this study's design, semi-structured interviews were the primary tool for data collection. These interviews offered a balance between structured inquiry and flexibility, allowing participants to express their narratives while ensuring that critical aspects of the study's objectives were covered.

To enhance the robustness and appropriateness of the interview protocol, a pilot interview was conducted with three English-major students who were not part of the main study. This pilot aimed to test the clarity, relevance, and flow of the interview questions. Feedback from these pilot interviews was instrumental in refining the questions, ensuring that they resonated with the experiences of the target population and facilitated meaningful discussions.

After revisions, the final interview protocol consisted of questions such as:

- "Can you describe a particularly challenging period in your English learning journey and how you navigated it?"
- "What internal or external factors do you believe influence your commitment to English learning?"
- "How would you describe 'grit' in the context of your English studies, and can you provide specific instances where you felt it played a role?"
- "In moments of doubt or difficulty, what motivates you to persist in your English studies?"

Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, providing ample time for participants to reflect upon and articulate their experiences. Recognizing the importance of comfort and familiarity, interviews were conducted in places that were convenient for the participants, such as quiet university common rooms, libraries, or even local cafés, ensuring both privacy and a conducive environment for open discussion.

Given the cultural and linguistic context, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. This choice was made to ensure participants could express themselves most authentically and comfortably, minimizing potential linguistic barriers. The researchers, being fluent in both English and Vietnamese, later translated the transcriptions into English for analysis, ensuring that nuances and cultural references were accurately captured.

To further ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, once transcribed and translated, a summary of each interview was shared with the respective participant for member-checking. This process allowed participants to confirm, clarify, or augment their responses, ensuring that their perspectives were faithfully represented in the study.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the rich data derived from the semi-structured interviews, a thematic analysis approach was employed. This method, as outlined by Braun et al. (2023), allows for the identification, examination, and interpretation of patterns or "themes" within qualitative data. By adopting this approach, the research aimed to derive deeper insights into the factors influencing grit among Vietnamese tertiary students in their English learning journey.

The first phase of the analysis involved a familiarization process, where all the transcriptions were read and re-read multiple times by the researcher to immerse themselves in the data. This was accompanied by the generation of initial codes, highlighting recurrent concepts, ideas, or patterns that emerged in the participants' narratives. Once these initial codes were identified, they were grouped and regrouped to identify potential themes. This involved looking for patterns or interconnectedness among the various codes, capturing the essence of the participants' shared experiences. Some themes were more prominent, while others were more nuanced but equally significant. Following this, each theme was reviewed and refined, ensuring they reflected the dataset's complexity and answered the research questions. This process often required revisiting the original data to ensure that the themes accurately captured participants' experiences and perspectives. Lastly, the final themes were defined and named, culminating in a narrative that intertwined the derived insights with the existing literature. By integrating quotes and excerpts from the interviews, the analysis was enriched, grounding the findings in the lived experiences of the participants.

Throughout the analysis, a recursive approach was adopted, meaning that there was a constant movement between the entire dataset, the coded extracts, and the analysis produced. This iterative process, intrinsic to thematic analysis, ensured that the derived themes were both data-driven and theoretically sound, providing a comprehensive and insightful understanding of the factors affecting students' grit in their English learning.

Findings

External Factors – Teacher Influence

One of the most salient external factors that emerged from the data was the influence of teachers on the participants' grit in English learning. All 15 participants explicitly cited the role of their teachers as pivotal in shaping their persistence and commitment to the subject. For example, one participant noted,

“There were times I felt like giving up, thinking I would never be good at English. But my teacher always believed in me, provided feedback, and gently pushed me to go beyond what I thought I could do. That encouragement became a driving force for me.”

Another participant reflected,

“My English teacher not only imparted language skills but also life lessons. She constantly reminded us about the broader horizons that English can open up for us and inspired us to push through the challenging phases.”

Through the lens of Constructivism, these sentiments underscore the significance of a supportive learning environment in shaping students' knowledge and attitudes. Teachers, in their role as facilitators, can constructively influence the learning experience by nurturing self-belief and providing a scaffold upon which students can build their competencies and resilience. Moreover, drawing from the Socio-Cultural Theory, teachers act as key mediators in the learning process, bridging the gap between the learner's current abilities and potential capacities. Their influence goes beyond academic guidance, encompassing motivational and emotional support, rooted in the shared cultural and societal values. In the Vietnamese context, where respect for teachers runs deep, their words, actions, and beliefs can significantly mold students' attitudes and perseverance, echoing the narratives shared by the participants.

External Factors - Peer Dynamics and Collaboration

Another compelling external factor elucidated from the data was the role of peer dynamics and collaborative learning experiences in influencing grit among participants. Out of the 15 students, ten highlighted instances where their interactions with peers, both collaborative and competitive, played a crucial role in their sustained effort and commitment to English learning. One participant shared,

“Studying with my friends, especially during group projects or presentations, always motivated me. We shared resources, corrected each other's mistakes, and learned from one another. It felt like we were on this journey together, and I did not want to be left behind.”

Similarly, another student observed,

“There is a healthy competition among us. When I see a classmate excelling or trying something new in English, it pushes me to try harder, to explore areas I have not before.”

From a Constructivist perspective, these accounts emphasize the importance of social interactions in the knowledge-building process. Learning, in this light, is not an isolated endeavor but a collaborative construction, shaped and enriched by diverse perspectives and experiences. The shared challenges and mutual support systems among peers provide a framework that bolsters individual determination and resilience. Drawing upon the Socio-Cultural Theory, the social interactions within the academic community play an instrumental role in shaping learning trajectories. The cultural fabric of Vietnam, which values communal solidarity and shared achievements, resonates with the participants' emphasis on collaborative learning. The dynamics among peers, encompassing both collaborative endeavors and healthy competition, act as social mediators, reinforcing the cultural norms and providing a shared space for mutual growth and sustained effort in English learning.

External Factors - Societal Expectations and Job Opportunities

Societal expectations and perceived future job opportunities emerged as another dominant external factor impacting the participants' grit in their English studies. Of the 15 interviewees, eleven expressed that the societal emphasis on English proficiency as a marker of success and the potential doors it could open in the job market significantly influenced their persistence in English learning. One participant stated,

“In Vietnam, English proficiency is often seen as a ticket to better job opportunities and social standing. I sometimes feel the pressure, knowing that my fluency can determine my career prospects.”

Another participant echoed a similar sentiment, remarking,

“Our society highly values those who are proficient in English. It is not just about grades or academics; it is about the potential of leading a better life, accessing global opportunities, and even earning respect in the community.”

Through the lens of Constructivism, these reflections highlight the intertwining of external societal constructs with individual perceptions and motivations. The societal value placed on English proficiency in Vietnam is not just passively acknowledged by students; it's actively incorporated into their personal motivations and aspirations, shaping their grit and persistence. The Socio-Cultural Theory further illuminates this finding. Learning and motivation are not isolated phenomena but are deeply embedded within a broader social and cultural tapestry. In the context of Vietnam, the societal reverence for English proficiency can be seen as a cultural tool that mediates the learning experiences of students. The collective societal value system, emphasizing the importance of English for future success, acts as a significant external driver, pushing students to persevere through challenges and remain committed to their English learning journey.

External Factors - Access to Technology and Media

The increasing accessibility to technology and exposure to global media were cited as pivotal external factors in shaping students' engagement and persistence in English learning. From the cohort of 15 participants, nine underscored how technology and media played a significant role in maintaining their enthusiasm and grit towards mastering the English language. One student elaborated,

"The internet and apps like YouTube have exposed me to so much English content, from music to lectures. They not only help me practice and improve but also constantly remind me of the global nature of English."

Another participant shared,

"Watching English movies and series, without relying on subtitles, has always been a personal goal. Every time I understand a new phrase or slang, it feels like an achievement, motivating me to delve deeper."

Viewed through the Constructivist framework, technology and media can be perceived as tools that facilitate experiential learning. They offer students authentic contexts to apply, test, and refine their knowledge, enabling them to construct meaning from real-world interactions with the English language. This continuous interaction fosters a sense of achievement and relevance, further fueling their grit. Incorporating insights from the Socio-Cultural Theory, technology and media serve as contemporary cultural artifacts. They are not merely passive tools but active mediators that shape learning experiences in alignment with the broader societal shift towards globalization. In a society like Vietnam, rapidly integrating with the global ecosystem, proficiency in English symbolizes not just academic prowess but cultural competency. This cultural evolution, amplified by technology and media, reinforces students' resolve to remain committed to their English learning, recognizing its relevance in a globalized world.

External Factors - Familial Support and Expectations

Familial dynamics, encompassing both support and expectations, stood out as an influential external factor in the participants' resilience and determination in English learning. From the 15 respondents, thirteen voiced the profound impact their families had on their academic journey. One participant poignantly expressed,

"My parents have always emphasized the importance of English. They believe it is the key to a brighter future and often share stories of opportunities missed due to language barriers. Their belief in me and their sacrifices to ensure I get the best education keep me going."

Another student mentioned,

"It is not just about my dreams but also my family's aspirations. Every time I think of giving up, I remember the pride in my parents' eyes when I converse in English or ace an exam. Their pride and hopes become my driving force."

From a Constructivist perspective, familial support and expectations serve as foundational pillars upon which learners build their understanding and commitment. Families play a pivotal role in establishing the initial contexts and environments for learning, influencing students' perceptions about the value and utility of English proficiency. Their encouragement and validation act as consistent reinforcements, anchoring students' grit. Diving deeper with the Socio-Cultural Theory, families are primary social units that mediate cultural values, beliefs, and expectations. In Vietnam, where familial bonds and responsibilities are deeply entrenched in the societal fabric, the family's role extends beyond mere emotional support. It encapsulates a blend of cultural tradition, societal expectations, and shared aspirations. The nexus of these dynamics significantly shapes students' motivations, ensuring they remain steadfast in their pursuit of English proficiency, viewing it as a collective dream rather than just an individual endeavor.

Internal Factors - Personal Goals and Aspirations

A prominent internal factor that resonated among the participants was the influence of personal goals and aspirations on their grit in English learning. From the total of 15 students, fourteen emphasized the integral role of their individual dreams and objectives in fueling their commitment and persistence. One participant reflected,

“I have always dreamt of studying abroad, experiencing new cultures, and broadening my horizons. English, for me, is the gateway to these dreams.”

Another student shared,

“Every time I read an English novel or article, I imagine myself as a writer, sharing my thoughts with a global audience. This vision propels me forward, especially during tough times.”

Viewed through the lens of Constructivism, these statements reveal how personal aspirations play a pivotal role in the construction of knowledge and motivation. The intrinsic drive stemming from these goals serves as a robust scaffold, upon which students structure their learning experiences. They actively seek, assimilate, and apply knowledge in ways that align with their ambitions, making the learning process more meaningful and personalized. Incorporating insights from the Socio-Cultural Theory, personal goals and aspirations can be understood as internalized representations of broader cultural narratives and values. While they are deeply personal, they also reflect the societal emphasis on achievement, success, and global integration. In the Vietnamese context, where the pursuit of education is deeply revered, individual aspirations in English learning become intertwined with cultural expectations of success and progress. Thus, these personal ambitions, rooted in both individual desires and cultural narratives, significantly bolster students' grit in their English studies.

Internal Factors - Self-Efficacy and Belief in One's Abilities

The concept of self-efficacy and an unwavering belief in one's capabilities surfaced as a crucial internal factor underpinning participants' grit in English learning. Out of 15, eleven interviewees highlighted moments where their confidence in their abilities played a determining role in pushing through challenges. One participant articulated,

“There have been instances where I have struggled, doubting my aptitude. But deep down, I have always believed that if I put in the effort, I can conquer any challenge in my English journey.”

Another student shared a similar sentiment, stating,

“Every success, no matter how small, reinforces my belief that I can master English. It is this inner conviction that often pulls me through the tough phases.”

Examining these reflections through the Constructivist framework, it becomes evident that self-efficacy forms a core foundation upon which students construct their learning experiences. Such beliefs act as cognitive anchors, guiding students in their interactions with the learning material and challenges. When faced with difficulties, this intrinsic confidence in their capabilities empowers them to seek solutions, experiment with strategies, and persevere. The Socio-Cultural Theory further contextualizes this finding by emphasizing the interplay between individual beliefs and broader societal values. In Vietnamese culture, where tenacity, resilience, and dedication to learning are highly esteemed, personal beliefs in one's capabilities can be seen as internalized cultural virtues. These virtues, while stemming from personal experiences and achievements, are also reinforced by societal expectations and narratives of success. Consequently, the synergy between individual self-efficacy and cultural values acts as a robust internal driver, magnifying students' determination and persistence in their English learning endeavors.

Internal Factors - Intrinsic Curiosity and Passion for the Language

Intrinsic curiosity and a genuine passion for the English language emerged as another defining internal factor that influenced participants' grit. From the cohort of 15 students, twelve distinctly identified their innate curiosity and love for the language as pivotal forces in sustaining their commitment. One student passionately described,

“Beyond exams and grades, there is a beauty in the English language that captivates me. The literature, the history, the nuances - they evoke a curiosity in me that is insatiable.”

Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating,

“Every new word, phrase, or grammatical structure feels like unraveling a piece of a vast puzzle. My passion for English is not driven by external rewards but by the sheer joy and satisfaction I derive from learning it.”

Considering these insights through the Constructivist lens, intrinsic curiosity and passion can be seen as foundational elements that shape the learning journey. When students approach learning from a place of genuine interest, they actively engage, explore, and experiment, constructing knowledge in ways that resonate with their personal interests and inclinations. This intrinsic motivation, rooted in curiosity and passion, enriches the learning experience, making it

more immersive and personal. Drawing upon the Socio-Cultural Theory, one can understand that individual passion and curiosity are not isolated from the broader cultural and societal context. The value that Vietnamese society places on education, combined with the global allure of the English language, can amplify personal inclinations. The societal narrative, which regards English as a tool for global integration and cultural enrichment, can intersect with individual passion, further fueling curiosity and deepening the commitment to the language. In such an interplay, personal passion for English becomes both a reflection of individual desires and a manifestation of broader cultural aspirations.

Internal Factors - Adaptive Learning Strategies and Resilience

The students' ability to adapt their learning strategies and exhibit resilience in the face of challenges emerged as a crucial internal factor that bolstered their grit in English learning. Out of the 15 participants, ten emphasized the importance of being flexible in their learning approaches and consistently bouncing back from setbacks. One student observed,

“English, like any subject, has its ups and downs. Over time, I have learned to adapt my methods. If one approach does not work, I try another. This adaptability keeps me moving forward.”

Another participant shared an insight into their resilience, stating,

“Every failure, every mistake, is a lesson. Instead of getting disheartened, I use them as stepping stones, adjusting my strategies and ensuring I do not repeat them. It is this resilience that has been central to my progress.”

From a Constructivist viewpoint, these accounts spotlight the students' proactive role in shaping their learning experiences. They are not passive recipients of knowledge; rather, they actively construct their understanding by continually assessing, refining, and adapting their strategies. This self-regulation and adaptability are central to meaningful learning, ensuring that the knowledge acquisition process is aligned with individual needs and contexts. The Socio-Cultural Theory further elucidates this finding. Resilience and adaptability, while inherently personal traits, are also cultivated and reinforced within the broader socio-cultural milieu. In the Vietnamese context, where perseverance and diligence are highly valued virtues, the societal ethos can fortify individual resilience. As learners navigate the challenges of English proficiency, their internal strategies of adaptability resonate with broader cultural narratives of tenacity and determination. In this symbiotic relationship, the students' internal resilience and adaptive strategies become both a reflection of their personal journeys and an embodiment of culturally endorsed virtues.

Internal Factors - Peer Comparisons and Competitive Drive

Peer comparisons and the competitive drive that arises from such comparisons came forth as another significant internal factor in shaping the participants' grit towards English learning. From the 15 students interviewed, nine discussed instances where their peers' achievements or progress served as benchmarks, motivating them to either catch up, surpass, or consistently remain at par. One student candidly revealed,

“Seeing some of my peers excel in English often lights a fire under me. It is not just about envy but more of a realization that if they can achieve it, so can I.”

Another student provided insight into the competitive spirit, stating,

“Being in a class with talented individuals pushes me to step up my game. I do not want to lag behind, and this drive keeps me on my toes, always seeking to improve.”

Analyzing these perspectives through the Constructivist framework, it becomes evident that learners continually assess their standing and progress in relation to their peers. This constant self-evaluation, informed by peer comparisons, plays a critical role in shaping their motivations, strategies, and goals. The learning experience, in this context, becomes a dynamic interplay between individual effort and collective benchmarks, driving students to strive for excellence. The Socio-Cultural Theory offers a complementary perspective on this phenomenon. In many educational cultures, including Vietnam's, the spirit of competition and the drive to excel in academic settings are ingrained societal values. Peers are not just fellow learners but also represent societal standards and benchmarks of success. As students navigate their English learning journey, the societal emphasis on achievement and the implicit and explicit comparisons with peers reinforce their internal competitive drive. This drive, rooted in both personal ambition and broader societal expectations, acts as a powerful motivator, compelling students to persevere and strive for excellence in their English studies.

Internal Factors - Reflective Self-assessment and Growth Mindset

The practice of reflective self-assessment and the adoption of a growth mindset stood out as central components in the participants' internal drive towards English learning. Out of the group of 15, eight students emphasized the transformative impact of regular introspection and the belief in their capacity to develop and grow. One student remarked,

“Every few weeks, I take a step back and assess my progress. Where have I improved? Where am I lagging? This self-reflection helps me align my strategies and maintain focus.”

Another participant delved into the mindset aspect, saying,

“I have come to realize that proficiency is not a fixed trait. Every challenge is an opportunity to grow. Adopting this growth mindset has shifted my perspective, making me more receptive to feedback and more resilient in the face of setbacks.”

From the vantage point of Constructivism, reflective self-assessment is a mechanism that allows students to continually recalibrate their learning trajectories based on real-time feedback. This process fosters an active and personalized engagement with the learning material, ensuring that students remain attuned to their evolving needs and goals. Meanwhile, the growth mindset serves as a cognitive scaffold, reinforcing the belief that abilities can be cultivated through dedication and effort. When viewed through the Socio-Cultural Theory, the importance of reflection and a growth mindset can be contextualized within the broader cultural ethos. In societies like Vietnam, where diligence, perseverance, and the pursuit of self-betterment are celebrated, these internal practices become embodiments of cultural ideals. The interplay between personal introspection and societal values centered on growth and self-improvement strengthens the students’ resolve. Consequently, their commitment to English learning is not just an individual endeavor but is intertwined with cultural narratives of resilience, progress, and the continuous journey of self-enhancement.

Discussion

In discussing the external factors influencing students’ grit in English learning, this study offers valuable insights that resonate with and diverge from existing literature. The influence of teachers has consistently been highlighted in prior studies as a significant factor influencing students’ motivation and commitment to learning (Altun, 2017). However, the present research emphasizes not just the role of teachers in academic support but also in providing emotional and motivational scaffolding. This nuanced view contributes to the ongoing debate over the multifaceted role of teachers, challenging the traditional notion of teachers as merely conveyors of knowledge (Saeed & Akbar, 2021). This approach is particularly distinct in the Vietnamese context, where the teacher-student relationship often extends beyond the classroom, contrasting with more individualistic Western settings where teacher-student interactions tend to be more transactional and academically focused. Regarding peer dynamics and collaboration, previous research has underscored the importance of peer interactions in the learning process (Tenenbaum et al., 2020). Yet, the dual role of peers—as collaborators and competitors—as brought forth in this study, particularly amplifies the nuanced role peers play in shaping grit. This finding adds to the academic debate on the impact of peer dynamics, suggesting a more complex interplay between collaboration and competition than previously recognized (Canning et al., 2020). This aspect is especially pronounced in Vietnamese culture, which balances communal collaboration with a competitive spirit, a combination that is less common in Western educational systems that often prioritize individual achievement. The role of societal expectations and job opportunities in shaping motivation aligns with Pham’s (2013) study which highlighted English proficiency as a societal status symbol in Vietnam. However, this study further nuances this understanding by linking societal expectations not just with status but also with personal aspirations, emphasizing the deeply intertwined nature of societal norms with individual goals. These insights contribute to debates on the extent to which societal factors influence individual educational pursuits, particularly in non-Western contexts (e.g., Ng & Wei, 2020). In contrast, Western contexts might not exhibit such a direct correlation between language proficiency and societal status, highlighting a unique cultural difference in the Vietnamese setting. In the realm of technology and media, while previous studies (Nawaila et al., 2020) have pointed out the influence of technology in English learning, the present study offers a deeper understanding of how technology serves as a motivational tool, constantly reinforcing the global relevance of English and thereby fueling grit. This perspective enriches discussions on the role of technology in education, suggesting a more integrative and motivational role than typically acknowledged (Selwyn, 2020). This differs from Western contexts where technology is often seen as just another tool rather than a key motivational factor, due to the prevalent use and accessibility of English in everyday life. Finally, while the role of familial support in academic motivation has been consistently acknowledged (Descals-Tomás et al., 2021), this study brings to light the intricate blend of familial support and expectations in the Vietnamese context. This finding adds a new dimension to the debate on the role of family in education, emphasizing the cultural specificity of familial influence. It underscores how family becomes not just a source of encouragement but a beacon of shared dreams and aspirations, a phenomenon more pronounced in collectivist cultures like Vietnam, as opposed to Western individualistic societies where there is a greater emphasis on personal choice and autonomy in educational pursuits.

Besides, this study highlighted several internal factors that played significant roles in shaping students’ grit towards English learning. Foremost among these were personal goals and aspirations. An overwhelming majority of the participants emphasized the influence of their individual dreams in fueling their commitment. This is consistent with previous studies that underscore the importance of personal aspirations in enhancing learner motivation (Alderman, 2007). This finding contributes to the ongoing debate about the extent to which cultural context shapes personal aspirations, challenging the notion that aspirations are universally similar (Zhang et al., 2020). The current findings,

however, uniquely spotlight the deep interconnection between these aspirations and the Vietnamese cultural context. This contrasts with Western contexts where individual aspirations are often more self-directed and less influenced by societal narratives. While individual dreams propel learners forward, they are also deeply anchored in broader cultural narratives about success, education, and global integration. Similarly, belief in one's abilities or self-efficacy emerged as a cornerstone of grit in the participant cohort. A substantial number of the participants alluded to this intrinsic confidence as a crucial driver. These findings align with Bandura's (1977) assertion that self-efficacy is a primary determinant of how individuals approach challenges and persist in the face of adversity. Our study's emphasis on the interplay between self-efficacy and cultural values contributes to discussions on the variability of self-efficacy across different cultural contexts (Gebauer et al., 2021). In juxtaposition with previous studies, our research accentuates the intricate weave between personal beliefs and Vietnamese societal values that prize resilience and tenacity. In Western societies, self-efficacy is often seen more as a product of individual psychology and less as a reflection of societal ethos. Intrinsic curiosity and a passion for English were also identified as pivotal internal motivators. Such intrinsic motivation has been widely recognized in literature as a determinant of sustained effort and long-term achievement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This aspect of our findings addresses the debate on intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation in language learning, especially in non-Western contexts (X. M. Le & Le, 2022). The current research adds a nuanced layer to this understanding by revealing how personal inclinations interact with societal narratives that view English as a vital tool for global integration. This is distinct from Western contexts, where intrinsic motivation for English learning might not be as strongly influenced by societal narratives. The present findings on the importance of adaptive learning strategies and resilience resonate with Dweck and Yeager's (2019) work on the growth mindset. However, this study further elucidates how these internal strategies are both a reflection of individual experiences and an embodiment of culturally endorsed virtues, particularly within the Vietnamese context. This insight adds to the scholarly discussion about the cultural specificity of learning strategies and the role of resilience in educational success (Yang et al., 2022). This differs from the Western approach, where personal growth and learning strategies are often developed independently of cultural virtues. Interestingly, the competitive drive arising from peer comparisons was another key internal factor. While the role of competition in motivation has been explored in various studies (Grum & Grum, 2015), this research underscores its significance within educational cultures like Vietnam's, where academic excellence is a societal expectation. This finding contributes to the debate on the role of competition in educational settings, particularly in contrasting cultural contexts (Toropova et al., 2021). This aspect of competition is less emphasized in Western educational systems, which often focus more on individual achievement than on competition as a societal norm. Lastly, the practice of reflective self-assessment and a growth mindset stood out in this current study. Reflection as a tool for self-regulation and improvement is well-documented (Schön, 2017). However, the present findings emphasize the synergistic relationship between personal introspection and societal values centered on self-improvement within the Vietnamese context. This highlights an ongoing discussion about the role of reflection in different cultural settings, especially in relation to societal values and educational practices (T. T. Le et al., 2023; Thuy et al., 2023; Pham et al., 2024; Yen et al., 2024). In Western education, the emphasis is often more on individual reflection as a means for personal growth, not necessarily linked to societal expectations or values.

Conclusion

The ever-increasing pace of globalization and the merging of various cultural contexts have highlighted the significance of mastering languages like English. In Vietnam, with its deep-rooted educational values and evolving societal aspirations, unraveling the determinants of grit in English learning becomes crucial. This study aimed to dissect both the internal and external factors that catalyze the tenacity, dedication, and determination of Vietnamese students in mastering English. Through comprehensive interviews, the research team interacted with 15 students, delving deep into their experiences, challenges, and motivators. This qualitative method enabled a profound understanding of the students' intrinsic and extrinsic drivers in their journey towards English proficiency. The current exploration brought forth a multitude of factors shaping students' grit in English learning. On the internal front, personal goals and aspirations rooted in individual dreams and cultural narratives, self-efficacy, intrinsic curiosity, adaptive learning approaches, resilience, peer-driven competitiveness, and the habit of reflective self-assessment complemented by a growth mindset stood out. However, the influence of external factors was equally compelling. Prominent among them was the pivotal role of teacher influence, with students citing instances where the encouragement, feedback, and pedagogical approaches of educators served as significant motivators or deterrents in their English learning odyssey.

The implications of these findings are manifold. Recognizing the intertwined nature of internal motivations and external influences, teachers are poised to integrate cultural understanding with pedagogical strategies. Given the salience of societal values and narratives in shaping motivations, tailored methods that align with these cultural nuances can foster deeper student engagement. The emphasis on intrinsic drivers suggests the potential benefits of inculcating reflective practices, promoting growth mindsets, and facilitating platforms where students can align personal goals with academic pursuits. On the external front, the profound influence of teachers underscores the need for continuous professional development, emphasizing not just pedagogical skills but also the capacity to motivate, inspire, and connect with students. It becomes imperative for teachers to be aware of the weight of their influence and

to harness it constructively. Encouraging a classroom environment that nurtures healthy competition, paired with constructive feedback, can further elevate student commitment.

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the complex tapestry of factors, both internal and external, driving Vietnamese students in their pursuit of English proficiency. As teachers, stakeholders, and policymakers endeavor to optimize English education in Vietnam, the insights derived from this study can serve as pivotal anchors, ensuring pedagogical strategies that are both impactful and culturally resonant.

Recommendations

Building upon the insights gleaned from this research, several avenues emerge for future exploration. Firstly, while this study provides a qualitative snapshot of students' experiences, a complementary quantitative approach using a larger sample could validate and further elucidate the factors identified. Such studies might employ standardized scales measuring grit, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation, allowing for broader generalizability and deeper statistical insights.

Secondly, a more granular investigation into the teacher influence factor would be invaluable. Parsing out specific teaching methodologies, communication styles, and feedback mechanisms that resonate most with Vietnamese students can offer a comprehensive blueprint for effective pedagogy. Research dedicated solely to the role of teachers in shaping grit and motivation could provide nuanced guidelines for curriculum development and teacher training.

Given the significance of cultural narratives highlighted in this current study, a comparative cross-cultural analysis stands as an exciting prospect. Understanding how grit in English learning manifests in different cultural contexts could yield global best practices and pinpoint unique cultural determinants. Such endeavors can pave the way for collaborative international educational initiatives, benefiting from shared insights and strategies.

Furthermore, delving into the technological aspect, future studies might explore the role of digital tools and platforms in bolstering grit. As technology integrates more deeply with education, understanding its influence on motivation, engagement, and resilience in English learning becomes pertinent.

Lastly, an exploration of familial influences and peer dynamics, extending beyond mere competition, would provide a holistic understanding of external factors. Uncovering the roles of parents, siblings, and broader social networks could enhance the comprehension of the socio-cultural ecosystem shaping students' English learning journeys.

Limitations

While this study provides critical insights into the determinants of grit in English learning among Vietnamese students, it is essential to recognize its limitations. First and foremost, the sample size of 15 students, although offering depth in qualitative data, limits the generalizability of the findings. This cohort might not be entirely representative of the broader student population, given the diversity in backgrounds, experiences, and learning environments.

Another limitation arises from the inherent subjectivity of qualitative interviews. Participants' responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, wherein they provide answers they perceive as favorable or expected rather than their genuine feelings or experiences. This potential bias can be accentuated in a culture that values educational achievement and perseverance, potentially leading to over-representations of grit or certain motivating factors.

Lastly, the study's interpretative framework, which leaned heavily on Constructivism and the Socio-Cultural Theory, may have influenced the way findings were analyzed and presented. While these theories provide valuable lenses, they may not capture the full spectrum of experiences and influences on grit in English learning.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Le: Design and Supervision. Pham: Analysis. Tran: Editing. Nguyen: Writing and Reviewing. Phuong: Conceptualization

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