

# GILE Journal of Skills Development

## Mastering Academic English in Hungarian Higher Education: Fostering Grit, Emotion Regulation, and Motivation among Doctoral Students

**Kübra Yetiş**

Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1283-3790>

**Eszter Szakács**

Eötvös Loránd University

 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6711-2525>

### Abstract

Pursuing a doctoral degree is an intellectually and emotionally demanding journey. In this context, the concept of grit, defined as perseverance of efforts and passion for long-term goals despite adversities has become a key factor influencing doctoral students' persistence, emotional resilience, and sustained motivation when navigating academic challenges. In today's globalised higher education, mastering academic English is also essential for academic and professional success, which can pose significant challenges, particularly for those who use English as a foreign language. Thus, this paper explores how grit interacts with emotions, emotion regulation, and motivation in mastering academic English within Hungarian higher education. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research involved nine doctoral students specialising in linguistics from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed and validated by co-coders. Findings revealed that highly gritty PhD students were driven by various internal and external sources of motivation, primarily by passion for learning and professional development as teachers and researchers. While the students' curiosity and enjoyment grew in insightful academic environments, their challenges with academic writing, negative feedback, extensive readings written in complex English, and unengaging classes led to anxiety, frustration and mixed feelings with fluctuations in motivation. The participants shared various strategies, including cognitive change and social support, to navigate the challenges. This study contributes to understanding the role of grit and emotion regulation in supporting doctoral students by emphasising the effective use of strategies. The research offers practical insights into integrating necessary training into graduate programmes aimed at developing grit, emotional resilience and wellbeing, sustained motivation, and linguistic proficiency essential for academic achievement and long-term career paths.

**Keywords:** academic English, doctoral students, emotion regulation strategies, grit, motivation

---

## 1. Introduction

Doctoral education requires commitment, emotional resilience, motivation, sustained effort and passion in specialised fields. In doctoral programmes, intellectual and emotional demands are high, with students often experiencing challenges related to performance, feedback, and time constraints (Stubb et al., 2011). Grit becomes pertinent in this context as it underscores the need for fostering sustained interest and effort to overcome adversities (Duckworth et al., 2007) associated with demanding workloads, assignment deadlines, critical thinking and academic writing (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). In addition, considering today's globalised higher education and academia, English is predominantly used for academic purposes, research and publications; mastering Academic English is crucial at this high-stake level, which may present difficulties for doctoral students using English as a foreign language. As it is evident that grit interacts dynamically with motivation and emotional experiences, which influence language proficiency (Csizér et al., 2024; Pawlak et al., 2022), this study explores the interplay between grit, motivation, and emotion regulation in Academic English mastery among doctoral students studying in Hungary. Our study employed semi-structured interviews to deepen our understanding of subjective experiences from an emic perspective, as grit research is primarily dominated by quantitative studies (Csizér et al., 2024). With a focus on strategy use, our study aims to provide a deeper understanding of grit in high-level learning contexts by offering practical strategies to support doctoral students in the face of challenges. The following part presents the reviewed literature, emphasising related studies on grit and other variables, followed by research questions.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Grit

Grit is defined as perseverance of efforts and passion for long-term goals despite challenges, comprising two components: perseverance of effort (POE) and consistency of interest (COI) (Duckworth et al., 2007). While POE refers to sustained effort towards a long-term goal, COI pertains to maintaining interest in the goal over a longer period despite facing obstacles (Duckworth et al., 2007). In second/foreign language learning (L2) contexts, while grit is initially regarded as a domain-general construct (e.g., Feng & Papi, 2020; Khajavy et al., 2021), that is, being gritty in life in general, domain-specific L2 grit, has gained importance due to its predictive power boosting language learning success by leveraging learners' strengths (Botes et al., 2024; Zhao & Wang, 2023). In this paper, L2 grit is associated with sustained efforts and interest in mastering Academic English among doctoral students in Hungarian higher education.

Research has revealed that components of grit differently affect L2 learning outcomes. POE is frequently linked with higher language proficiency and increased motivation (Pawlak et al., 2022), while COI has more variable effects on learning outcomes (Khajavy et al., 2021). This variability does not only highlight the context-dependent nature of grit but also emotional and motivational dynamics involved in sustaining goal-oriented determination. For instance, in environments where anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom are present, POE mediates the relationship between these emotions and motivational behaviours, thereby enhancing language proficiency (Csizér et al., 2024; Pawlak et al., 2022). Additionally, Cai et al. (2024) report that grit contributes to L2 achievement by fostering POE and COI by reducing negative emotions. Further research has explored the link between higher grit with greater engagement, which helps improve language performance and mediates between students' motivation and engagement (Jin, 2024; Li & Yuan, 2024; Sun et al., 2024). Besides, the impact of grit might be mediated

---

by other factors such as cognitive strategies, study effort, or self-efficacy (Credé et al., 2017; Hagger & Hamilton, 2019). Above all, grit has been highlighted as contributing to enhancing engagement, motivation, positive experiences, and linguistic proficiency. Thoroughly understanding these nuanced interactions with motivation and emotions can thus provide deeper insights into doctoral students' experiences in the demanding context of higher education.

## **2.2. Motivation**

Motivation, a driving force that guides and sustains goal-directed behaviours, is fundamental in language learning (Dörnyei, 2009), a cornerstone of academic achievement, especially in demanding PhD education. Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory provided a foundational framework for understanding motivation as a continuum between sources of intrinsic motivation, such as self-improvement, curiosity, and passion, and extrinsic motivation, including career advancement, financial stability, and social validation. Motivation is also often described regarding integrative orientations involving a genuine interest in the language and the target culture, and instrumental orientations typically achieving instrumental goals, such as getting good grades (Gardner & Lambert, 1972); both shape language learning strategies and experiences (Bonney et al., 2008). Furthermore, the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self have garnered considerable attention as part of the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) proposed by Dörnyei (2009). The ideal L2 self incorporates competencies that learners need to possess in their future selves to attain their L2 learning outcomes as a powerful motivator reflecting the learners' motivation to become proficient speakers, while the latter pertains to attributes they perceive they should possess to meet external expectations. Recent research highlights grit's interaction with the ideal L2 self, affecting language learning outcomes. Sun et al. (2024) and Feng and Papi (2020) indicate that grit enhances L2 learners' persistence and mediates the relationship between the ideal L2 self and engagement. A higher level of grit may enhance learners' ideal L2 self through emotional resilience, thus aligning personal aspirations with actual learning behaviour (Nikitina et al., 2025). Such interactions suggest that grit can act as a bridge between intrinsic motivation and external achievements, thus facilitating a deeper commitment to learning.

## **2.3. Emotions and Emotion Regulation**

Emotions are complex responses to situations seen as essential opportunities or difficulties in the world of individuals related to their objectives in life (Keltner et al., 2014). According to the broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions such as joy and interest enhance an individual's cognitive engagement, while negative emotions can significantly hinder their ability to flourish (Fredrickson, 2004). Specifically, in L2 learning contexts, Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) correlates strongly with higher motivation and language achievement, fostering a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, particularly in collaborative and challenging tasks (Dewaele et al., 2019). Moreover, curiosity, although less explored in the L2 learning field, is a key driver of inquiry and exploration, stimulating intrinsic interest in learning. Mahmoodzadeh and Khajavy (2019) found that curiosity often precedes enjoyment, creating a reinforcing cycle of engagement. For example, Takkac Tulgar (2018) observed that curiosity fosters language exploration, even in high-pressure academic settings. On the other hand, negative emotions, such as anxiety and boredom, pose significant barriers to learning. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) typically stems from pressures and can lead to avoidance behaviours (Horwitz et al., 1986), while it can motivate learners to prevent failure (MacIntyre,

---

1999; Pekrun et al., 2002). Similarly, boredom, defined as a disengagement arising from monotony or excessive challenge (Kruk et al., 2021), can sometimes drive learners to seek new ways to re-engage with the material, which highlights the complex role of negative emotions in shaping engagement in L2 learning.

The dual role of emotions as barriers and facilitators highlights the importance of emotion regulation (ER) in academic success. Gross (2015) defines ER as a process by which an individual influences their emotional experience and expression to achieve their goals through using ER strategies (ERS), situation selection or modification, attention deployment, cognitive reappraisal, and response modulation. In doctoral education, such strategies are invaluable during high-stakes tasks like academic writing and publication (Paltridge & Starfield, 2023). Research has shown that effective ER helps sustain learner engagement and motivation by enhancing academic resilience (Mei et al., 2024). Resilient students are better equipped to manage emotional setbacks and maintain their commitment to academic and linguistic goals. Solhi et al. (2023) emphasised that grit and ER are mutually reinforcing: students who effectively regulate their emotions are more likely to exhibit grit, while gritty individuals are better positioned to deploy adaptive strategies. Additionally, ER is influenced by interpersonal factors. Wei et al. (2019) found that supportive learning environments enhance grit and ER, helping students manage emotions and sustain motivation. These findings underscore the interconnected nature of ER strategy use, motivation, and grit in ensuring academic success.

Recent studies, as emphasised in this section, provide a substantial understanding of grit, emotions and ER, motivation, and engagement, nonetheless, mainly from a quantitative perspective, predominantly in Iranian and Chinese L2 learning contexts (e.g., Bensalem et al., 2024; Cai et al., 2024; Fathi et al., 2024; Khajavy & Aghaee, 2022; Mohammed Hossaini et al., 2024; Solhi et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2024). However, Csizér et al. (2024) examined the grit of Hungarian English majors from both emic and etic perspectives, revealing varied student profiles based on grit levels that are dynamically interlinked with motivation and emotions. Although relevant, their study did not explore regulatory strategies, which this research aims to address, focusing on an international PhD setting. Given this underrepresentation, it is crucial to understand doctoral students' experiences to grasp better the interplay between these variables.

#### **2.4. Doctoral Students' Experiences**

Doctoral students pursue their education for personal growth, career advancement, and scientific contributions, driven by various internal and external factors. Nonetheless, they face significant challenges, including demanding workload, publication pressure, supervisory and peer relationships, financial stress, employment concerns, loneliness, isolation, burnout, self-doubt, and language and cultural barriers, especially for those studying abroad, which negatively influence their holistic wellbeing and mental health (Anderson, 2021; Li, 2024). In this regard, purpose, empowerment, persistence, grit, intrinsic motivation, peer and supervisor support, financial security, access to resources, self-regulatory strategies, and feedback are essential for the successful completion of school (Vigil Avilés et al., 2025). Furthermore, mastering Academic English becomes vital yet poses a challenge, particularly for those with low language proficiency, which leads to less engagement in learning (Xiao, 2024) and frustration, anxiety, and mixed feelings among doctoral students (Geng & Yu, 2024). Furthermore, cultural norms may influence grit and emotional experiences among diverse PhD students (Markus &

---

Kitayama, 1991). For instance, Xiao (2024) notes that Asian doctoral students are often perceived as passive learners within the Western education context due to differing cultural and educational backgrounds. Therefore, understanding these dynamics is crucial for providing tailored support to meet PhD students' needs in a multicultural context (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). Given that, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What characterises general and L2 grit, emotional experiences, and motivation in mastering Academic English among doctoral students in Hungarian higher education?
2. What strategies do doctoral students use to manage their emotional experiences and navigate academic English challenges faced during their studies?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

The research adopted a qualitative approach, employing in-depth interviews to gain a broader and more nuanced understanding of the experienced world from doctoral students' perspectives (Dörnyei, 2007).

#### **3.2. Participants and Setting**

The participants included nine doctoral students enrolled in a four-year full-degree PhD program in Hungary focusing on linguistics, chosen through purposive sampling (Dörnyei, 2007). The first two years of education concentrate on educational and research modules, where students attend classes while preparing for a comprehensive exam and defending a dissertation proposal at the end of the fourth semester. The final two years focus on research activities, including compulsory publications and conferences and writing up the dissertation. After collecting the necessary credits and completing defences, the students become a PhD in their specialised area. To ensure anonymity regarding research ethics (Dörnyei, 2007), pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

Table 1 below illustrates that this multilingual group of three males and six females represents a diverse cultural background: three Hungarian students and six international students studying in Hungary for more than two semesters. This included two Burmese, one Indonesian, one Ecuadorian, one Ukrainian and one Jordanian student. Their ages ranged between 26 and 46 years, averaging 32.67 (SD=6.31). Only one student perceived herself as proficient (C2), while the others had advanced (C1) English according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001).

#### **3.3. Data Collection**

Data was collected in English on Teams during the academic year of 2022-2023 through one-round semi-structured interviews that lasted between 38 to 80 minutes. Before the interviews, participant consent was obtained via a consent form detailing information on privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, data storage, and research integrity (Dörnyei, 2007). During the interviews, participants were questioned about their perceptions of grit concerning their lives and PhD journey, emotional experiences, and how they managed emotions and navigated challenges. The interviews were transcribed for data analysis on ATLAS.ti 24 software.

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

| Participant | Gender | Age | Nationalities | First Language | Duration of Study | Proficiency |
|-------------|--------|-----|---------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Asja        | Female | 35  | Burmese       | Burmese        | 2 semesters       | C1          |
| Kristof     | Male   | 27  | Hungarian     | Hungarian      | 2 semesters       | C1          |
| Elisa       | Female | 38  | Ecuadorian    | Spanish        | 2 semesters       | C1          |
| Adrienn     | Female | 46  | Hungarian     | Hungarian      | 2 semesters       | C1          |
| Mina        | Female | 26  | Jordanian     | Arabic         | 3 semesters       | C1          |
| Reza        | Male   | 33  | Indonesian    | Nias           | 3 semesters       | C1          |
| Anton       | Male   | 27  | Ukrainian     | Ukrainian      | 3 semesters       | C1          |
| Maya        | Female | 35  | Burmese       | Burmese        | 3 semesters       | C1          |
| Anita       | Female | 27  | Hungarian     | Hungarian      | 3 semesters       | C2          |

Source: Interview data

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to explore recurring themes and patterns on motivation, grit, challenges, emotions and ERS. The first author, a Turkish doctoral student in Hungary, conducted all interviews, which helped establish rapport during the interviews while raising questions about researchers' positionality and potential bias due to shared experiences and social proximity. To address these dynamics, the first author engaged in persistent engagement within the research context, noting important reflections after each interview with questions about interpretation. Later, she completed initial codings while the second author, a Hungarian doctoral student, collaboratively reviewed the codes to establish consistency. To enhance the trustworthiness of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), peer debriefing was conducted between the authors, and an audit trail was established for analytic discussions with two experts, ensuring confirmability. Thick descriptions of the context, participants, and findings facilitated transferability. These steps aimed to ensure the credibility and transparency of the research process. Details on finalised themes are discussed in the following section.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings on doctoral students' perceptions, covering their motives for studies, general and L2 grit levels, academic challenges, emotional experiences, and strategies, along with earlier relevant studies. A visual summary of the identified themes is included in each sub-section.

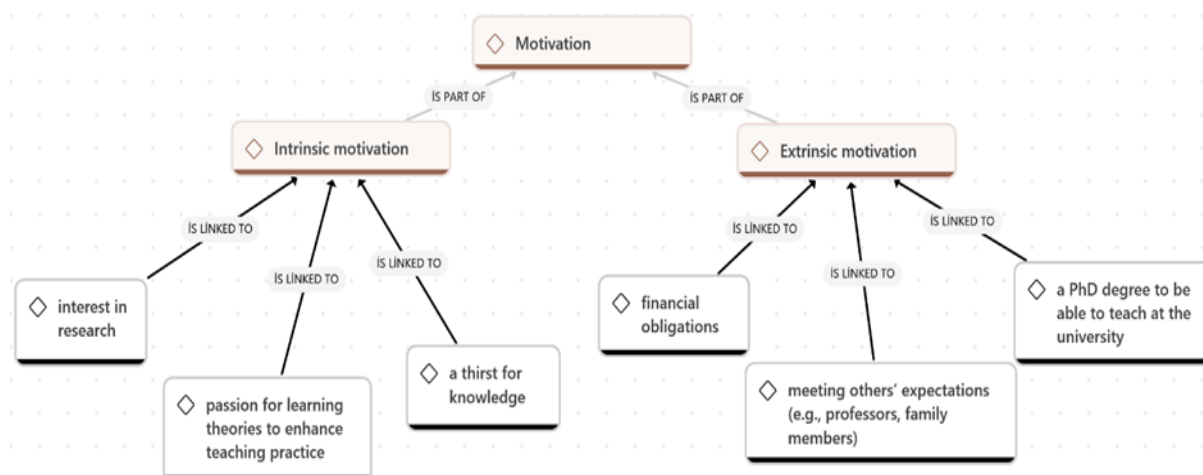
### 4.1. Motivation

Findings demonstrated that the participants were intrinsically motivated by self-improvement and professional goals as L2 teachers, doctoral students and researchers (Ryan & Deci, 2000), as shown in Figure 1 below. As teachers, they were fuelled by their passion for learning about theories to apply to their teaching context and understand classroom instruction (Asja, Mina, Elisa, Adrienn, Anita, Maja), helping others learn English (Elisa, Kristof). As researchers, they were intrigued by their research interest areas (Mina, Anton). Kristof defined this passion for learning as "a thirst for knowledge," stating, "I would like to provide more pieces of

information, reveal things to people to help them more.” He described his interest in research, stating, “I enjoy critical thinking, and research is also a form of self-expression; I want to ask questions that people may not have asked before.” Here, a doctoral education could serve a significant goal: enhancing theoretical knowledge and teaching skills while making scientific contributions. Their ideal self as teachers and researchers can interact with grit, helping them strive for their goals (Feng & Papi, 2020; Sun et al., 2024). Their continuous interest in learning and teaching may relate to higher COI and curiosity, as Takkac Tulgar (2018) noted, which enhances language exploration and performance by enhancing intrinsic motivation.

Alongside internal drives, external sources also contributed to their motivation. Reza highlighted the need for a PhD for his greater aspiration: “I want to teach at the university. That’s my dream after PhD.” Asja and Anita mentioned their financial obligations; failing to complete the PhD program would require repaying government reimbursement. Furthermore, Anita sought validation from others regarding her capabilities, while Maya pursued a PhD to honour her late father’s wishes. Their ought-to L2 self, being motivated by the urge to fulfil others’ expectations (Dörnyei, 2009) and instrumental goals (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), likely increases their determination to sustain efforts and interest during their studies. Nonetheless, these factors may fall short in grasping sustained effort over time (Csizér et al., 2024); thus, understanding general grit also becomes crucial.

FIGURE 1. THEMES ON MOTIVATION



Source: Authors’ analysis via ATLAS.ti, 2025

## 4.2. Grit

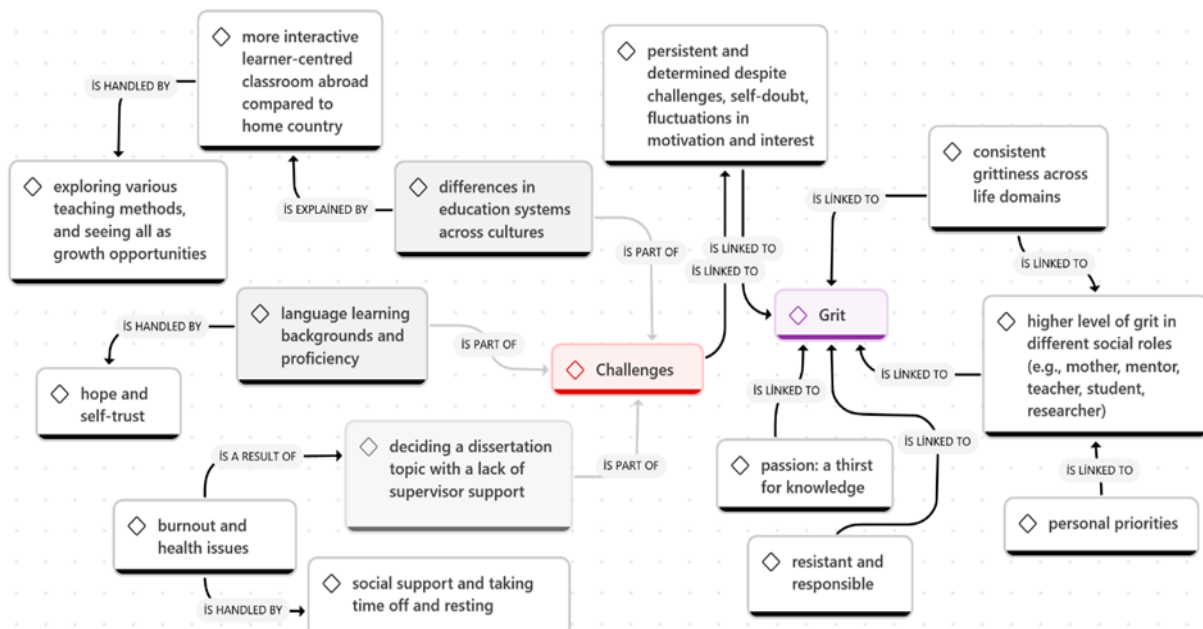
While general grit and domain-specific grit were found to be closely interrelated (Feng & Papi, 2020), grit may differ across domains in life for some individuals, especially in L2 learning (Pawlak et al., 2022; Teimouri et al., 2022). This aspect becomes important, considering that the participants reported themselves as L2 learners, teachers, and researchers.

Findings, as illustrated in Figure 2, revealed that all participants perceived themselves as persistent and determined despite challenges, while a few noted fluctuations in motivation and interest with self-doubt. Kristof described himself as “determined” to spread knowledge: “Work and study are not different for me in sight on the importance of persistence.” Adrienn linked her roles as a mother, wife, teacher, mentor, and PhD student to higher grit: “I think I’m

determined in all of my roles.” Her priorities changed across domains; family always came first, driving her determination to balance everything. PhD was intellectually enriching and enjoyable, contributing to her professional life: “This is kind of like my hobby that is actually useful for my work.” Elisa was also highly gritty, motivated by self and familial goals as a financial supporter, which further helped her to be a “responsible” student. Mina perceived herself as persistent and resistant, yet often with an inner uncertainty. Significantly, she faced burnout and health issues when selecting a dissertation topic with a lack of supervisor support. With the help of fellow professors and classmates and using strategies such as taking time off and resting, she navigated academic challenges: “Sometimes, you just need good guidance.” Similarly, despite fluctuating motivation and mixed feelings due to challenges in this “wavy road,” Kristof was determined to learn more and commit to his goals:

This thirst for knowledge is still going on for me, so that makes me go on. I want to be better. I would like to provide better. Even when I have ups and downs, still going on because I’m absolutely sure in the end that my goal, my dream, I still there. (Kristof)

FIGURE 2. THEMES ON GRIT AND CHALLENGES



Source: Authors’ analysis via ATLAS.ti, 2025

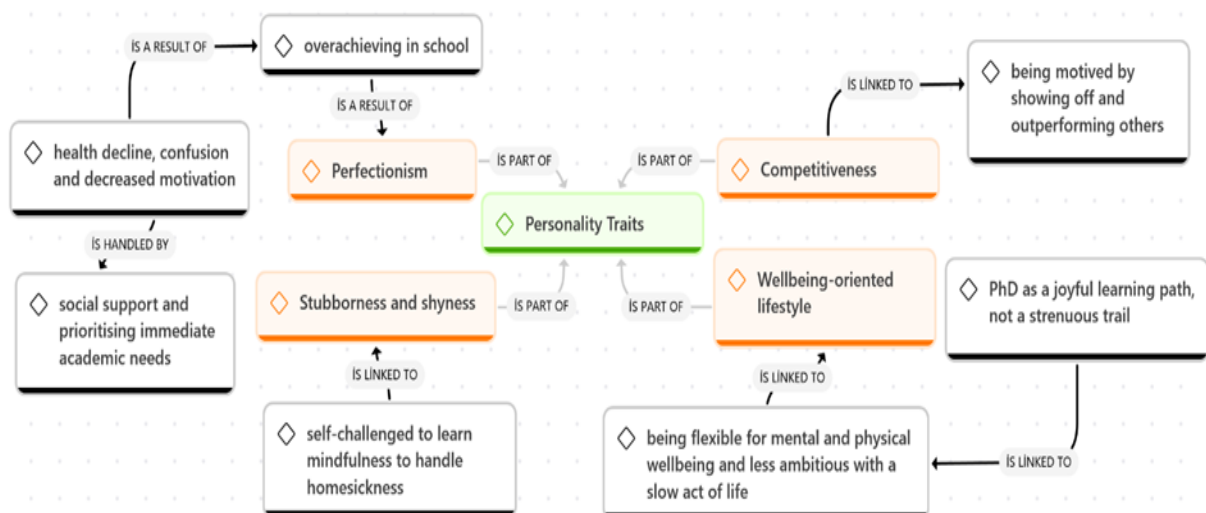
Moreover, traits such as competitiveness, perfectionism, and stubbornness contribute to grit, as illustrated in Figure 3. Anton’s competitive nature and tendency to “show off” were aligned with his higher general grit; making mistakes became a boost to continue to outperform others. In addition, Maya described herself as “quiet and shy” yet highly determined and stubborn in life. She self-challenged to learn mindfulness to cope with her homesickness after moving to Hungary. This significant change challenged Maya, especially when in a more interactive learner-centred classroom compared to her home country. She explored various teaching methods, motivated to adapt to local academic culture and seeing all as growth opportunities through mindfulness and social support: “Even if I find difficulties, I know that there will be some ways and there will be some people who will help me, so I ask for suggestions or help from other people.” Likewise, Asja recognised herself as “weak” in speaking and listening due

to differences in language education between her home and current country; nonetheless, she highlighted the importance of hope and self-trust amid cultural and educational challenges. According to Asja, being a teacher and researcher demanded varying levels of effort and skills in these two contexts, influencing the degree of perseverance necessary for both roles.

I was an English language teacher in a local situation. Now, I'm a researcher in an international setting; this situation is very demanding and very intensive. In my local situation, I'm okay. I can teach very well, and I can teach my student to achieve their goal. I don't have to put in a lot of effort like this. (Asja)

Furthermore, Anita described herself as perfectionistic in life: "I'm not satisfied with anything less than perfect, and that is true to all areas of my life." Initially overachieving in school in her first year, she felt exhausted, which resulted in a health decline, confusion and decreased motivation at the start of her second year. To manage this, she minimised tasks, focusing on only immediate academic requirements. Support from her supervisor and others, with "a novice spark of enthusiasm and an inner motivation," helped her rediscover her interests and balance personal wellbeing with lower academic expectations. Unlike Anita, Reza kept flexible goals for his mental and physical wellbeing, prioritising stress-free sleep. He was determined yet less ambitious, acting with reduced urgency when unmotivated or over-challenged. He regarded PhD as a joyful learning path, not a strenuous trail: "I don't really push myself like I have to change something after I finish my PhD. No, I just like learning. So, for me, being a PhD student is really fun. It's not difficult for me." Instead of seeing challenges as threats, he focused on the brighter side with a clear vision of his ambitions, together embracing challenges.

FIGURE 3. THEMES ON GRIT AND PERSONALITY TRAITS



Source: Authors' analysis via ATLAS.ti, 2025

The findings to this point suggest that all participants demonstrated a strong determination to show efforts towards their long-term goals, motivated by various sources. They showed consistent grittiness across various life domains, while those in unfamiliar international contexts may be affected by differences in cultural and educational backgrounds, as noted by Markus and Kitayama (1991) and highlighted by Xiao (2024) for Asian students. This cultural shift led Maya and Mina from Myanmar to develop strategies such as mindfulness or seeking social support. Our results corroborate earlier findings on which L2 grit is context-dependent

---

(Csizér et al., 2024; Khajavy & Aghaee, 2022) while it extends this understanding by focusing on international doctoral-level English-majors' L2 grit, which reveals new insights into how grit interacts with priorities and different roles in life, which have not been previously reported. We have found that personal priorities may influence grit and balance, considering Adrienn's family-first mindset and Reza's slow act of life. As for Asja, varying cultural and educational backgrounds might shape different grit perceptions in different roles. Furthermore, Anita's and Mina's burnout, Anton's competitiveness and Kristof's self-doubt caused their motivation to fluctuate, but all were determined with a mindset of "no way back; I have to go on" to reach their goals. All these perspectives suggest that their grit is influenced by various factors such as goals, emotions, courses, teachers, proficiency, social roles and priorities, and educational backgrounds. The following section delves into emotional experiences and academic challenges, showing their interaction with grit.

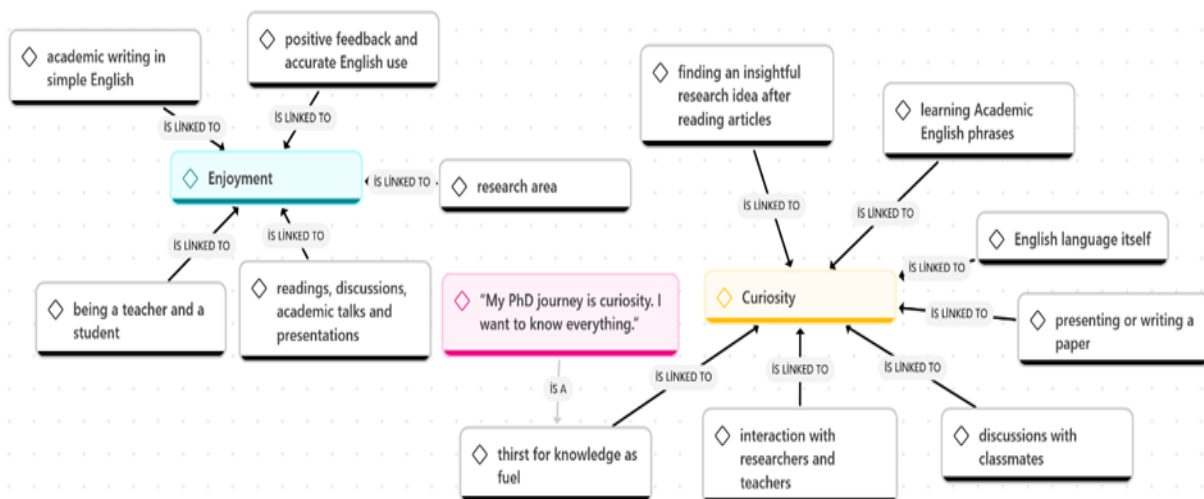
### **4.3. Emotions and Emotion Regulation Strategies**

Participants reported varying emotional experiences, such as joy, curiosity, anxiety, frustration, and boredom, in different situations and various ER strategies to cope with boredom, academic writing and reading anxiety.

#### *4.3.1. Curiosity and Enjoyment*

As shown in Figure 4, the analysis revealed that curiosity grew during discussions with classmates (Maya, Reza, Asja), interaction with researchers and teachers (Asja), presenting or writing a paper (Adrienn), finding an insightful research idea after reading articles (Reza), and learning Academic English phrases (Kristof). Elisa emphasised her curiosity about English, while Asja defined her thirst for knowledge as fuel: "My PhD journey is curiosity. I want to know everything." Similarly, the participants found enjoyment in readings, discussions, academic talks and presentations (Asja, Adrienn, Reza, Anita), positive feedback and accurate English use (Kristof), being a teacher and a student (Mina), research interest (Anton), academic writing in simple English (Anita). Our findings align with one study by Jin (2024) reporting that student engagement was influenced by FLE and L2 grit, which explains how the PhD students' enjoyment and grittiness foster deeper engagement in insightful academic environments. Similarly, Choi and Lee (2024) showed that COI and curiosity significantly predicted L2 vocabulary enhancement, aligning with the PhD students' curiosity in self-development in advanced language use and theoretical knowledge. Additionally, Kristof highlighted positive feedback, boosting his motivation: "When I have positive feedback, I'm the happiest person in the world. It is more motivation. For even doing more, study, work, research." This specific quote uniquely highlights that enjoyment leads to more motivation, which results in more effort and higher grittiness as a student, teacher, and researcher. This nuance enriches the current body of knowledge on the dynamic interrelations of grit, emotions, and motivation in diverse roles.

FIGURE 4. THEMES ON ENJOYMENT AND CURIOSITY



Source: Authors' analysis via ATLAS.ti, 2025

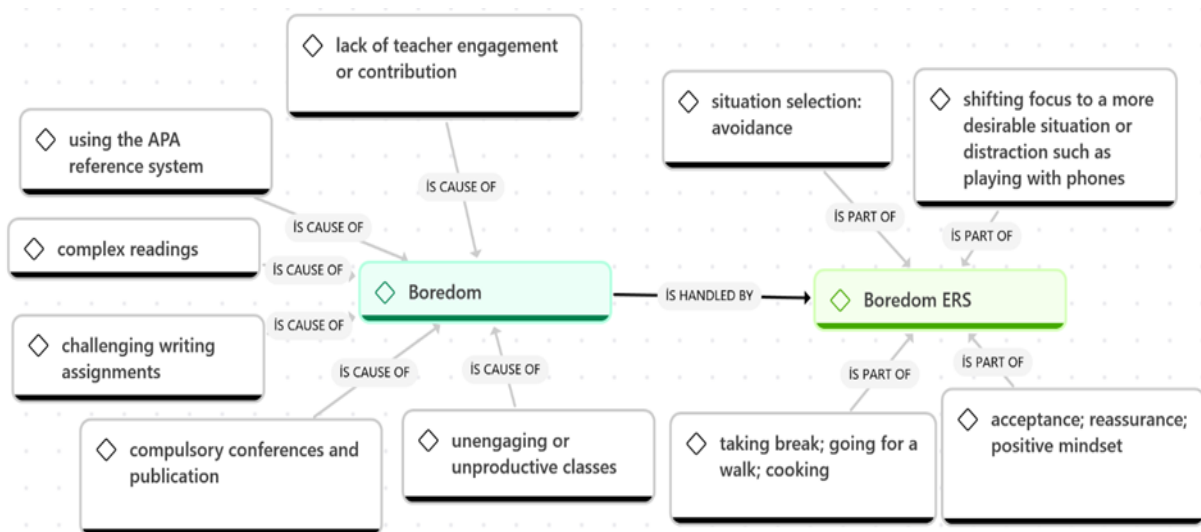
#### 4.3.2. Boredom

Findings showed that some circumstances caused boredom and decreased interest and joy, managed by different boredom ERS, depicted in Figure 5. These included challenging writing assignments (Asja, Reza), complex readings (Kristof, Anton, Adrienn, Anita), compulsory conferences and publications (Mina, Reza), using the APA reference system (Kristof, Elisa, Reza), and unengaging or unproductive classes (Elisa, Reza, Maya, Kristof, Anton, Adrienn). Cognitive reappraisal, modifying the situation, selecting a better condition by avoidance, and attention deployment were the most employed strategies to cope with course- and research-related boredom (Gross, 2015). For instance, Asja used cognitive reappraisal through accepting reality: “When I feel bored, I remind myself, okay, you have no choice. You have to go on. If not, life will be more terrible than this situation,” Kristof reassured himself: “That’s how I try to gain motivation; my ideas might still be good. But I might have problems with the references.” Among situation modification strategies, Mina preferred taking breaks, going for a walk, or cooking, which must be irrelevant to academia. Faced with a lack of teacher engagement or contribution, Elisa used distractions such as playing with phones, among attention deployment strategies: “It’s because the person that is in charge really doesn’t know how to make students get involved in their classroom, I got distracted,” along with her positive mindset and sustained motivation: “I’m with the motivation to learn. Yeah, I’ll go with my positive mindset to go and learn that sometimes.” Reza either preferred avoidance or shifting his attention to the computer while remaining in class as a requirement.

Prior investigations on L2 grit and boredom highlight critical insights that serve as a reference point to interpret the current study’s findings. Solhi et al. (2023) investigated L2 grit, boredom coping strategies with a behavioural and cognitive approach, and ER strategies, including cognitive appraisal and suppression, proving a strong relationship between L2 grit and ER, especially managing boredom through the cognitive approach. They also found that higher L2 grit predicted greater boredom coping strategy use. This study supports the findings on gritty PhD students’ sustained efforts and strategies used to manage their boredom in academic settings. Mohammed Hossaini et al. (2024) also found that mindfulness, grit and academic buoyancy influence boredom, aligning with Maya’s mindfulness and Elisa’s positive mindset

to manage boredom and increase positive experiences with grit. Students' distracted minds or avoiding behaviours due to boredom may lead to decreased engagement, which is noted by Sun et al. (2024). Mei et al. (2024) further noted that boredom may influence goal-oriented learners' grit. Likewise, Bensalem et al. (2024) suggest that boredom may impact more on students' willingness to communicate in class than L2 grit. In other words, despite high grit, boredom might cause less engagement and communication, possibly influencing student performance to a greater extent than positive experiences and grit. This focus reveals that the gritty PhD students might show less participation because of unengaging classes. This emphasised the need for ER to manage decreased interest and dullness.

FIGURE 5. THEMES ON BOREDOM



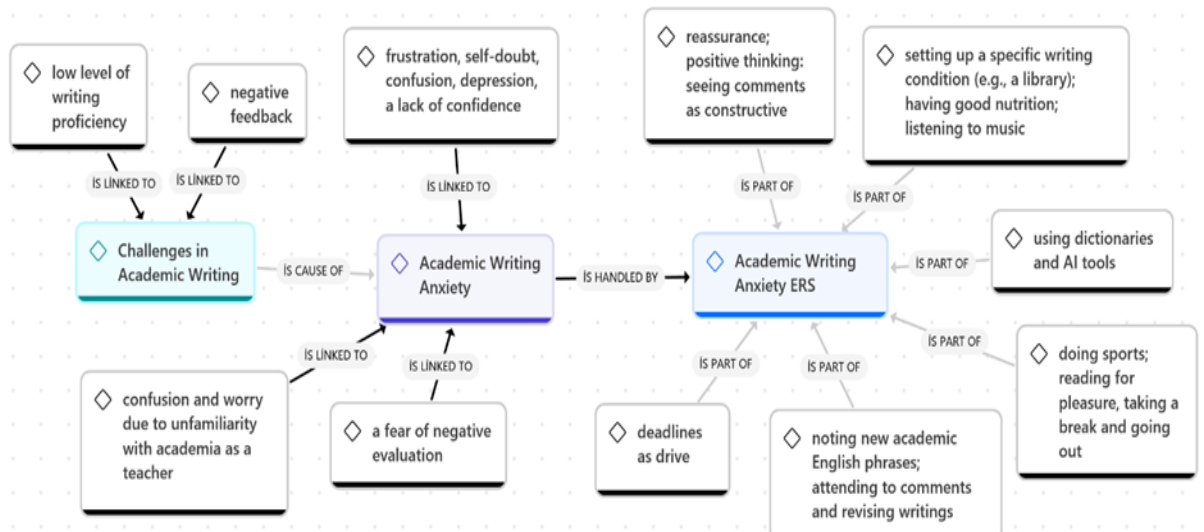
Source: Authors' analysis via ATLAS.ti, 2025

#### 4.3.3. Anxiety: Academic Writing and Reading

Challenges in academic writing, negative feedback and complex readings evoked anxiety, frustration, self-doubt, and confusion among the students, as shown in Figure 6, supported by Geng and Yu (2024). Regarding academic writing, all participants reported less proficiency. Asja experienced depression, a lack of confidence and writing anxiety, especially when receiving feedback. Similarly, Kristof experiences a fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1989). Mina echoed these observations by reporting, "I would feel anxious because when you write, you don't know who will read your writing." To cope, they reviewed comments multiple times and revised their writing following feedback, reassuring themselves. Elisa regarded comments as constructive, not threatening and making mistakes as natural: "I don't care honestly if they say that it's accurate. Fine, I can learn from my mistakes. We are human beings. We are not perfect." Adrienn shared her confusion and worry due to unfamiliarity with academia as a teacher-mentor; she felt proud of her growing self-awareness and belief. Besides, Mina and Reza believed writing was crucial for completing a PhD programme; both noted academic English phrases in articles. Most set up a specific writing condition, like a library, had good nutrition and listened to music to enhance concentration. Asja found deadlines motivating: "When the deadline is approaching and then I can't think about music, the surroundings, the deadline drives me to work." Furthermore, Kristof focused on sports or reading for pleasure, seeking success and joy despite feeling constant unease due to

requirements. Similarly, Reza took a break and went out to manage stress until feeling ready for writing. Like others, Maya found her writing “very simple” despite her continuous efforts, highlighting dictionary use to cope.

FIGURE 6. THEMES ON ACADEMIC WRITING ANXIETY



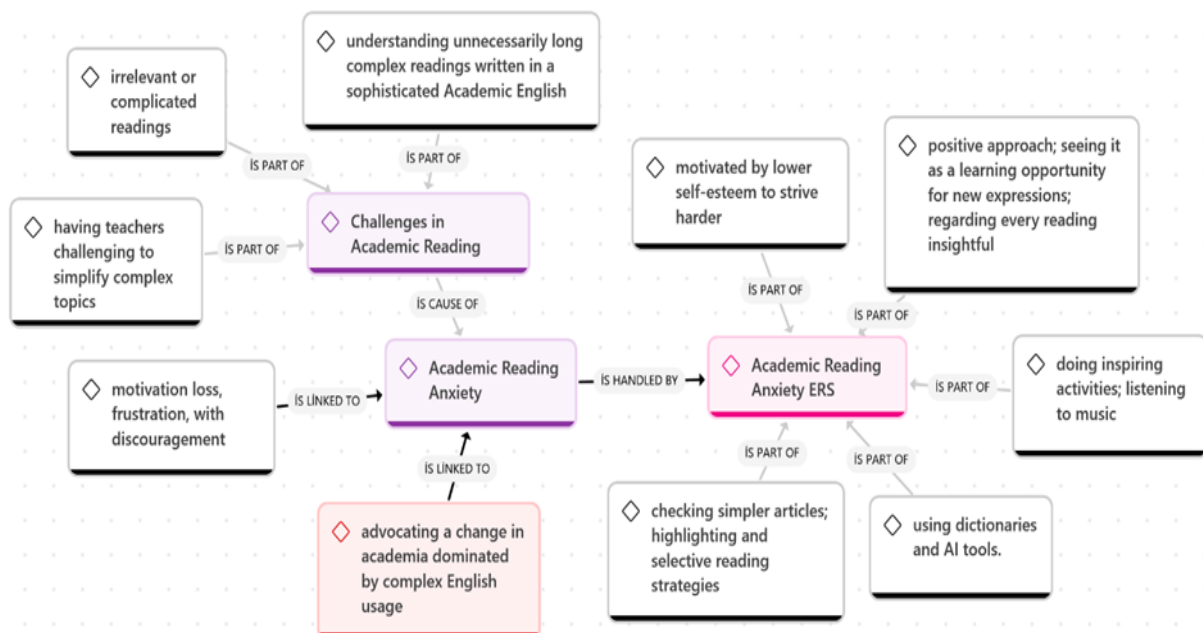
Source: Authors’ analysis via ATLAS.ti, 2025

Regarding emergent themes on academic reading mapped in Figure 7, unnecessarily long complex readings written in sophisticated academic language caused similar unpleasant emotions with fluctuating motivation and interest. Frustration was common when students had difficulty understanding readings, and they realised that teachers faced challenges in simplifying complex topics. To manage, Elisa approached simpler articles positively, seeing this as a learning opportunity for new expressions. Adrienn found every reading insightful: “I always find something interesting in them and something useful that strengthens my determination to become a better teacher.” Similarly, Kristof demonstrated a positive approach: “I still find something that is interesting for me; I like thinking or fantasising about how I could still relate this to my field.” However, Reza got less motivated by irrelevant or complicated readings. Inspiring activities helped increase his interest and motivation. This shows that relevance to interests could affect students’ engagement and emotions. Anton and Kristof also emphasised that reading motivation fluctuated; it did not mean constant or lack of interest, but varying over time. They listened to music or made gradual progress each time. Kristof mentioned his temporarily lowered self-esteem helped him to strive harder. Differently, Maya used dictionaries and AI tools for better understanding. Asja was conscious of her less critical skills, but she was eager to devote time to improve despite slow progress: “At the moment, it is still just a plan. I am very confused. How can I improve my reading? So, it can be slow, but it doesn’t mean I can’t do that.” Additionally, Anita urged a change in academia dominated by complex English usage, highlighting that scientific writing should be accessible and relevant to others, not just for academics’ own sake. Maya and Elisa agreed with Anita, indicating motivation loss, frustration, with discouragement because of complex English. To manage extensive course requirements, Anita used highlighting and selective reading strategies.

These strategies in academic writing and reading demonstrate the students’ eagerness to control their writing and reading endeavours, linking to higher L2 grit, especially in this complex

Academic English usage context. Calafato (2024) suggested that POE and language use predict reading and writing achievement, which aligns with the idea that sustained efforts together with using strategies may positively influence academic English progress. Fathi et al. (2024) found gritty L2 writers with a growth mindset and ideal L2 self, enhancing writing performance. Accordingly, gritty writers actively seek feedback, see challenges as opportunities, and use self-regulation strategies. Moreover, learners' engagement with feedback affects their approach towards revision and acceptance of mistakes; therefore, for those unsure how to improve writing, like Asja, it is suggested that teachers should provide positive and indirect feedback, utilise peer or digital tools for revisions, teach cognitive/metacognitive strategies to manage feedback (Li & Yuan, 2024). As for reading, Ismail et al. (2024) proposed that task-based instruction is essential in enhancing reading motivation and grit while decreasing anxiety; task-based activities relevant to students' interests foster active engagement and reading comprehension. These insights emphasise that gritty doctoral students are likely to adopt strategies, show resilience and efforts, and sustain motivation to master writing and reading skills, especially with guided instructions, higher self-efficacy beliefs and growth mindsets.

FIGURE 7. THEMES ON ACADEMIC READING ANXIETY



Source: Authors' analysis via ATLAS.ti, 2025

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the dynamic interplay of grit, emotions, motivation, and strategy use regarding Academic English mastery among PhD students studying in Hungary. The findings suggest that one theme is common for all doctoral students: a thirst for knowledge as a lifelong learner. This continuous interest in learning invigorates their determination, perseverance and motivation to strive more despite challenges, especially in academic reading and writing in English and fulfilling PhD requirements. External factors, fulfilling others' expectations or financial obligations, also shape students' ability to persevere during their education. The findings also indicate that most participants exhibit a high level of grit across various domains in life. Their social roles may influence their priorities, which does not imply they lack grit; instead, they make choices based on

---

what is significant to them, potentially influencing their displayed effort and interest in different aspects of life. Additionally, personality traits such as perfectionism, competitiveness, stubbornness, wellbeing mindset may positively affect general grit. On the other hand, despite demonstrating grit in their life and academic pursuits, fluctuations in motivation and interest may arise due to self-doubt, burnout, or unfamiliarity with the educational and cultural context among doctoral students. Nonetheless, they continued to strive for achievement by believing in themselves, seeking help, and practising mindfulness. More importantly, they employed various ERS, including cognitive reappraisal, reassurance, acceptance, and distraction. Besides, they preferred to immerse themselves in more pleasant situations for better engagement by visiting the library, taking short breaks, or listening to music. Furthermore, reviewing and addressing feedback, engaging in supplementary readings, noting down English phrases, and utilising dictionaries and AI tools helped to enhance their learning. All these strategies enabled them to pursue their aspirations while handling challenges.

These findings highlight the complex and often unexplored interplay between grit, emotion regulation, and motivation that shape doctoral students' experiences. This long and challenging journey requires effective collaboration among teachers, program coordinators, and higher education administrators to ensure success and student wellbeing (Li, 2024). In light of this, ERS should be incorporated into doctoral programmes to assist students in managing their emotions and sustaining motivation and engagement in their education. Regarding the development of academic writing and reading skills in English, feedback mechanisms, peer mentoring, flexible deadlines, and regular progress reviews can be provided to accommodate students' unique needs (Anderson, 2021; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). Clear communication is suggested among students and teachers, especially supervisors, to reflect on their roles and expectations (Vigil Avilés et al., 2025); in this regard, higher education can offer training to supervisors on developing their intercultural communication skills. A platform where students reflect on their experiences can help shape higher education policies. Additionally, offering academic writing and critical reading courses, workshops on ER, and counselling services contribute to students' performance and wellbeing, especially in this type of international environment.

While the study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. As qualitative research, the findings are only based on self-reported data from a specific student group with advanced language proficiency. As grit relates to long-term goals, and the current paper focused on grit at a single time during the first years of doctoral education, future research with a longitudinal perspective can provide deeper insights into how grit might evolve throughout the PhD education among students at different level of language proficiency, which contributes to a broader range of insights on grit. Besides, a focus on only students' self-perceived grit and emotions might overlook external factors such as supervisors and institutions, which may affect emotional and motivational experiences. Further investigation is needed on the role of other stakeholders in higher education, along with in other cultural contexts, using different research methods for a deeper understanding of doctoral student grit.

---

## References

- Anderson, T. (2021). The socialisation of L2 doctoral students through written feedback. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 20(2), 134–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2020.1726758>
- Bensalem, E., Derakhshan, A., Alenazi, F. H., Thompson, A. S., & Harizi, R. (2024). Modeling the contribution of grit, enjoyment, and boredom to predict English as a foreign language students' willingness to communicate in a blended learning environment. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 0(0), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00315125241289192>
- Bonney, C. R., Cortina, K. S., Smith-Darden, J. P., & Fiori, K. L. (2008). Understanding strategies in foreign language learning: Are integrative and intrinsic motives distinct predictors? *Learning and Individual Differences*, 18(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2007.11.005>
- Botes, E., Azari Noughabi, M., Amirian, S. M. R., & Greiff, S. (2024). New wine in new bottles? L2 Grit in comparison to domain-general grit, conscientiousness, and cognitive ability as a predictor of language learning. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2294120>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cai, Y., Zhu, L., & Xing, K. (2024). Self-efficacy mediates but does not moderate the relationship between grit and L2 achievement. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2024.2425803>
- Calafato, R. (2024). The moderating effect of multilingualism on the relationship between EFL learners' grit, enjoyment, and literacy achievement. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 29(1), 255–268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13670069231225729>
- Choi, E. Y., & Lee, J. H. (2024). An exploratory study on the relationships between positive emotions and target language vocabulary knowledge. *Oxford Review of Education*, 50(4), 517–532. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2246885>
- Council of Europe (CEFR) (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Credé, M., Tynan, M. C., & Harms, P. D. (2017). Much ado about grit: A meta-analytic synthesis of the grit literature. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 113(3), 492–511. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000102>
- Csizér, K., Pawlak, M., Albert, Á., & Kruk, M. (2024). (L2) Grit, emotions, and motivated learning behavior: The case of English majors in Hungary. *Language Teaching Research*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688241296857>
- Dewaele, J.-M., Chen, X., Padilla, A. M., & Lake, J. (2019). The flowering of positive psychology in foreign language teaching and acquisition research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2128. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02128>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The L2 motivational self-system. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 9–42). Multilingual Matters.
- Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 1087–1101. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087>

- 
- Fathi, J., Pawlak, M., & Hejazi, S. Y. (2024). Exploring the roles of ideal L2 writing self, growth L2 writing mindset, and L2 writing grit in L2 writing achievement among EFL learners. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 46(4), 1150–1178. <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263124000536>
- Feng, L., & Papi, M. (2020). Persistence in language learning: The role of grit and future self-guides. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 81, 101904. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2020.101904>
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 359(1449), 1367–1378. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2004.1512>
- Gardner, R.C., & Lambert, W.E. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in second language learning* (pp. 119–216). Newbury House.
- Geng, F., & Yu, S. (2024). Exploring doctoral students' emotions in feedback on academic writing: A critical incident perspective. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 46(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2022.2109616>
- Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2014.940781>
- Hagger, M. S., & Hamilton, K. (2019). Grit and self-discipline as predictors of effort and academic attainment. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(2), 324–342. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12241>
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125–132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x>
- Ismail, S. M., Wang, C. & Jamalyar, R. (2023). The impact of task-based instruction on learners' reading comprehension, L2 grit, anxiety, and motivation for L2 reading. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 8(42). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-023-00216-2>
- Jin, Y. (2024). Motivating students to actively engage in EFL classrooms: Exploring the role of L2 grit and foreign language enjoyment. *Learning and Motivation*, 85, 101960. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lmot.2024.101960>
- Keltner, D., Oatley, K., & Jenkins, J. M. (2014). *Understanding emotions* (3rd ed.). John Wiley and Sons.
- Khajavy, G. H., & Aghaee, E. (2022). The contribution of grit, emotions and personal bests to foreign language learning. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 45(6), 2300–2314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2047192>
- Khajavy, G. H., Pourtahmasb, F., & Li, C. (2021). Examining the domain-specificity of language mindset: A case of L2 reading comprehension. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 15(3), 208–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2021.1956936>
- Kruk, M., Pawlak, M., & Zawodniak, J. (2021). Another look at boredom in language instruction: The role of the predictable and the unexpected. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 11, 15–40. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2021.11.1.2>
- Li, Y. (2024). “I had so many conflicts in my mind”: Navigating the doctoral journey across languages and cultures. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 23(1), 111–125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2021.1972804>
- Li, J., & Yuan, F. (2024). Does engagement with feedback matter? Unveiling the impact of learner engagement and grit on EFL learners' English writing achievements. *Language Teaching Research*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688241257865>
-

- 
- MacIntyre, P. D. (1999). Language anxiety: A review of the research for language teachers. In D. J. Young (Ed.), *Affect in foreign language and second language teaching: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere* (pp. 24–45). McGraw-Hill.
- Mahmoodzadeh, M., & Khajavy, G. H. (2019). Towards conceptualising language learning curiosity in SLA: An empirical study. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 48, 333–351. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10936-018-9606-3>
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224–253. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224>
- McAlpine, L., & Amundsen, C. (2018). *Post-PhD career trajectories: Intentions, decision-making and life aspirations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mei, Y., Yan, Y., & Shen, Y. (2024). How regulatory focus associates with Chinese EFL learners' L2 grit: The mediating effects of achievement emotions. *SAGE Open*, 14(2), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241243201>
- Mohammad Hosseini, H., Derakhshesh, A., Fathi, J., & Mehraein, S. (2024). Examining the relationships between mindfulness, grit, academic buoyancy and boredom among EFL learners. *Social Psychology of Education*, 27(3), 1357–1386. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-023-09860-5>
- Nikitina, L., Su, L. L., & Furuoka, F. (2025). The relationship between L2 motivation and epistemic emotions of boredom and curiosity: A study among adolescent learners of English. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 54(1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10936-024-10119-z>
- Paltridge, B., & Starfield, S. (2023). The PhD by publication in the humanities and social sciences: A cross country analysis. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47(7), 863–874. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2190450>
- Pawlak, M., Csizér, K., Kruk, M., & Zawodniak, J. (2022). Investigating grit in second language learning: The role of individual difference factors and background variables. *Language Teaching Research*, 0(0), <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221105775>
- Pekrun, R., Goetz, T., Titz, W., & Perry, R. P. (2002). Academic emotions in students' self-regulated learning and achievement: A program of qualitative and quantitative research. *Educational Psychologist*, 37(2), 91–105. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3702\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3702_4)
- Ryan, R. M., & E. L. Deci. (2017). *Self-determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness*. Guilford.
- Solhi, M., Derakhshan, A., & Ünsal, B. (2023). Associations between EFL students' L2 grit, boredom coping strategies, and emotion regulation strategies: A structural equation modeling approach. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 46(2), 224–243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2175834>
- Stubb, J., Pyhältö, K., & Lonka, K. (2011). Balancing between inspiration and exhaustion: PhD students' experienced socio-psychological wellbeing. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33(1), 33–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2010.515572>
- Sun, W., Shi, H., & Yan, Y. (2024). Contributions of deal L2 self, grit, and boredom to engagement in an EFL context: A structural equation modeling approach. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 33(1), 1161–1172. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-023-00786-2>
- Takkac Tulgar, A. (2018). The effects of curiosity on second language learning in terms of linguistic, social-cultural and pragmatic development. *Adnan Menderes Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Eğitim Bilimleri Dergisi*, 9, 59–72.
-

---

Teimouri, Y., Plonsky, L., & Tabandeh, F. (2022). L2 grit: Passion and perseverance for second language learning. *Language Teaching Research*, 26(5), 893–918. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168820921895>

Vigil Avilés, D. J., Jang, Y., & Urban, M. (2025). ‘Take a break, you’ll be able to work more’: Convergent mixed methods analysis of PhD students’ blog posts. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 47(1), 210–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2024.2319806>

Wei, H., Gao, K., & Wang, W. (2019). Understanding the relationship between grit and foreign language performance among middle school students: The roles of foreign language enjoyment and classroom environment. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1508. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01508>

Xiao, M. (2024). Chinese international graduate students at Canadian universities: Language barriers, cultural identities and perceived problems of engagement. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(5), 491–508. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1941318>

Zhao, X., Wang, D. (2023). Domain-specific L2 grit, anxiety, boredom, and enjoyment in online Chinese learning. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 33, 783–794. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-023-00777-3>

## **Declaration Statements**

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author reports no conflict of interest.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for this article’s research, authorship, and/or publication.

### **Data Availability**

Data supporting the conclusions of this study can be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

## **Open Access Agreement**

This article is published under a CC BY 4.0 license. This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator. The license allows for commercial use. For more information, please visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## **Corresponding Author**

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Kübra Yetiş who can be contacted by email via [kubrayetis@staff.elte.hu](mailto:kubrayetis@staff.elte.hu)