

IMPROVING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR THE STUDENTS OF “NICOLAE BĂLCESCU” LAND FORCES ACADEMY OF SIBIU DURING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse the influence of certain demographic (gender, year of study, graduated high school and major) and psychological (grit, self-management, and social awareness) characteristics of military students regarding their classroom effort and self-efficacy about English subjects. The results of the independent samples t-test revealed that there were significant differences between male and female students only in terms of classroom effort and self-management. The level of classroom effort of the students in the sample is predicted by the combination of gender, year of study, level of social awareness and grit. The female students put in more effort into activities in English classes; also, students in their third year of study seem to put more effort than their first- and second year peers. The levels of social awareness and grit are associated in determining the level of classroom effort: the higher the level of social awareness, the more effort the cadets put into the activities in English classes and the higher their sense of self-efficacy in solving English tasks.

KEYWORDS:

cadets, classroom effort, grit, self-management, social awareness, self-efficacy about English subjects

1. Social and Emotional Learning at “Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy of Sibiu

“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy of Sibiu prepares Romanian cadets to become army leaders, well prepared academically, physically and morally

because, despite all the technological advances, the human being and its will to fight still remains the most valuable military resource.

The teachers of foreign languages spend many hours with the cadets, which means more classes than in the case of

many other disciplines, in order to prepare them to reach STANAG level 2 in all the four English language skills, a requirement they have to fulfil before graduation. During the four years of studying English, the teachers get to know their students quite well and they can establish a rapport that will enable them to develop their learners' social and emotional skills that are so needed for operating in the armies of the future. Due to their interaction with the cadets, the teachers have realized the importance of integrating SEL in the language classes so as to assist in the holistic development of the learners.

The military training undergone by the students is intense, highly demanding and sometimes even extreme, causing them to experience high levels of stress and pressure. It is SEL that fosters better coping with stress, higher resilience, stronger cohesion, ethical decision-making, a more understanding environment and a more effective management of emotions. As leaders of the future, cadets need to hone their SEL skills as these will positively impact their and their subordinates' professional and personal lives, enhancing overall success and well-being.

2. Research Design

In this research we aimed to analyze the influence of certain demographic (gender, year of study, graduated high school and major) and psychological (grit, self-management, and social awareness) characteristics of students regarding their classroom effort and self-efficacy about English Subjects.

Duckworth, Peterson, Mattheus and Kelly (2007) have defined grit as "*perseverance and passion for long-term goals*", a personality trait consisting of two second-order latent facets: perseverance of effort (PE), and consistency of interest (CI). Grit is "*an essential blend of commitment and perseverance in pursuing a goal over a long period in spite of failures or obstacles*" (Zhao & Wang, 2023, p. 1). This personality trait significantly influences overall academic

performance, with current studies indicating a significant correlation between these two constructs (Tang, Wang, Guo & Salmela-Aro, 2019; Postigo, Cuesta, Fernández-Alonso, García-Cueto & Muñiz, 2020).

The SEL framework defines social awareness as follows: "*The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. This includes the capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize family, school, and community resources and supports*". Self-management is defined as "*The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal and collective goals*" (CASEL, n.d.).

Classroom effort represents the level of engagement, commitment, and persistence that a student demonstrates in learning activities and is shown through active participation in classroom (i.e. engaging in class discussions, cooperating with teachers and peers), self-discipline (i.e. completing assignments, tests and quizzes, organizing materials), and attention and focus (actively listening to the teacher, staying engaged during lessons by minimizing distractions). Classroom effort is a component of learning motivation and, in turn, has three components: the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimension (Reeve, Cheon & Jang, 2020).

A student's level of *self-efficacy in English subjects* is built on their own beliefs about their ability to successfully solve tasks related to English language learning such as:

- reading – confidence in understanding texts, interpreting meaning, and analysing content (Yang & Gan, 2024);

- writing – belief in one's ability to express ideas clearly in writing or use effective writing strategies (Li, 2022);

– speaking – confidence in communicating thoughts verbally in English, trust in fluency and pronunciation, and willingness to engage in conversations (Ma, 2022);

– listening – belief in the ability to understand spoken English, including different accents and speech speeds, trust in comprehension (Xu, Fan & Luo, 2021).

We started from the following hypotheses:

H1. There are significant differences between students in terms of grit, self-management, self-awareness, classroom effort and self-efficacy about specific subjects depending on their gender, major (Quartermaster vs. Signal), high school (military vs. civilian) and year of study.

H2. The students' level of classroom effort and self-efficacy about specific subjects is predicted by demographic variables such as gender, year of study, high school and major as well as their level of grit, self-management, and social awareness.

The research sample consists of 113 students of whom 48 are male (42.5%) and 65 are female (57.5%), 54 are in their first year of study (47.8%), 42 in their second year of study (37.2%) and 17 in their third year of study (15%), 85 are graduates of military high school (75.2%) and 28 of civilian high school (24.8%), and 61 belong to the Quartermaster Corps (54%) and 52 to the Signal Corps (46%). Students responded voluntarily and anonymously to this questionnaire.

3. Measures

As a research instrument we used a questionnaire consisting of 34 questions selected from the questionnaire designed by Panorama Education which partners with school districts and state departments of education in the United States in order to create and implement survey programs for students, parents, and teachers. From Panorama's *The User Guide. Social and Emotional Learning* (2023) we chose the categories that are of the highest interest to the foreign language teachers:

a. *Grit* is measured by 5 items (such as, "How often do you stay focused on the same goal for several months at a time?" and "If you fail to reach an important goal, how likely are you to try again?"); the Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.60.

b. *Self-Management* is measured by 10 items (such as, "During the past 30 days... how often did you come to class prepared?" and "During the past 30 days... how often did you follow directions in class?"); the Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.75.

c. *Social Awareness* is measured by 8 items (such as, "During the past 30 days... how carefully did you listen to other people's points of view?" and "During the past 30 days...how much did you care about other people's feelings?"); the Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.79.

d. *Classroom Effort* is measured by 5 items (such as, "How much effort do you put into getting involved in discussions during class?" and "When your teacher is speaking, how much effort do you put into trying to pay attention?"); the Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.75.

e. *Self-Efficacy about English Subjects* is measured by 5 items (such as, "How confident are you that you can complete all the work that is assigned in your current English class?" and "When complicated ideas are presented in your English class, how confident are you that you can understand them?"); the Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.75.

These are elements that we can investigate and assess most during the classes we have with our students, and we also think that we can work most on these in order to improve them. We also added to the above-mentioned categories questions related to the age, gender, the type of high school they graduated from, the year of study, and the military branch in which they are enlisted. The students answered this questionnaire on a voluntary basis, and they were assured that the anonymity of their answers was respected.

4. Results

Since all the measures used in the research use a Likert scale from 1 to 5, the subjects' answers can fall between these two values, the average value being 3. In Figure no. 1 one can see that the subjects included in the sample obtained values

above average for all the measured variables: grit ($m = 4.01$, $sd = 0.55$), self-management ($m = 4.06$, $sd = 0.47$), social awareness ($m = 3.89$, $sd = 0.59$), classroom effort ($m = 3.82$, $sd = 0.69$), and self-efficacy about English subjects ($m = 3.98$, $sd = 0.66$).

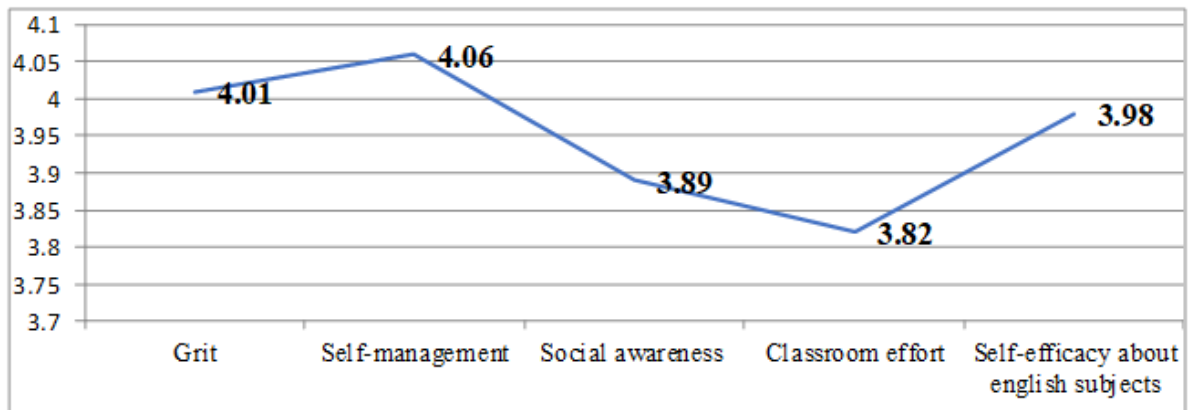


Figure no. 1: Averages of sampled students on the scales used in this research

A two-sample t-test was performed to compare grit, self-management, self-awareness, classroom effort and self-efficacy about specific subjects of male and female students in the sample. Significant differences between these two groups only occurred for two variables:

- Level of self-management: female students ($m = 4.15$, $sd = 0.41$) reported a higher level of self-management compared to male students ($m = 3.95$, $sd = 0.53$), $t(111) = -2.32$, $p = 0.022$;

- Level of classroom effort: female students ($m = 3.95$, $sd = 0.67$) reported a higher level of classroom effort compared to male students ($m = 3.66$, $sd = 0.68$), $t(111) = -2.21$, $p = 0.029$.

These differences are shown graphically in Figure no. 2.

No significant differences were identified between students on the variables measured in this research by major (Quartermaster versus Signal) or by high school (military versus civilian).

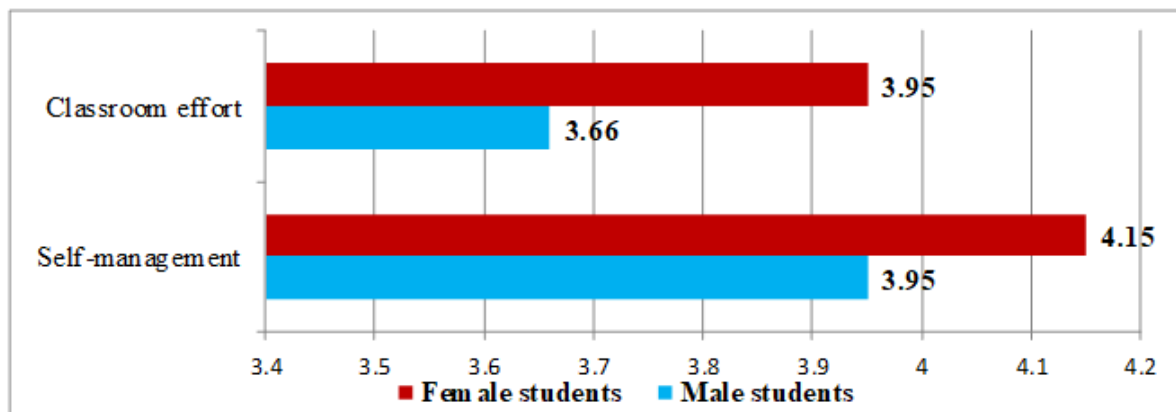


Figure no. 2: Comparative chart of male and female students' means on scales measuring self-management and classroom effort

A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of the year of study on the students' grit, self-management, social awareness, classroom effort and self-efficacy about specific subjects. The one-way ANOVA analysis revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in classroom effort between at least two groups ($F(2,110) = 3.69$ $p = 0.028$). The Bonferroni test for multiple comparisons found that the mean value of classroom effort was significantly different between first year,

and second- and third-year students ($p = 0.024$, 95% C.I. = [- 0.91, - 0.04]). There was no statistically significant difference between first year students and second year students ($p = 0.69$) nor between second- and third-year students ($p = 0.27$). These differences are shown graphically in Figure no. 3.

No significant differences were found between students in the three years of study in the other variables measured in this research.

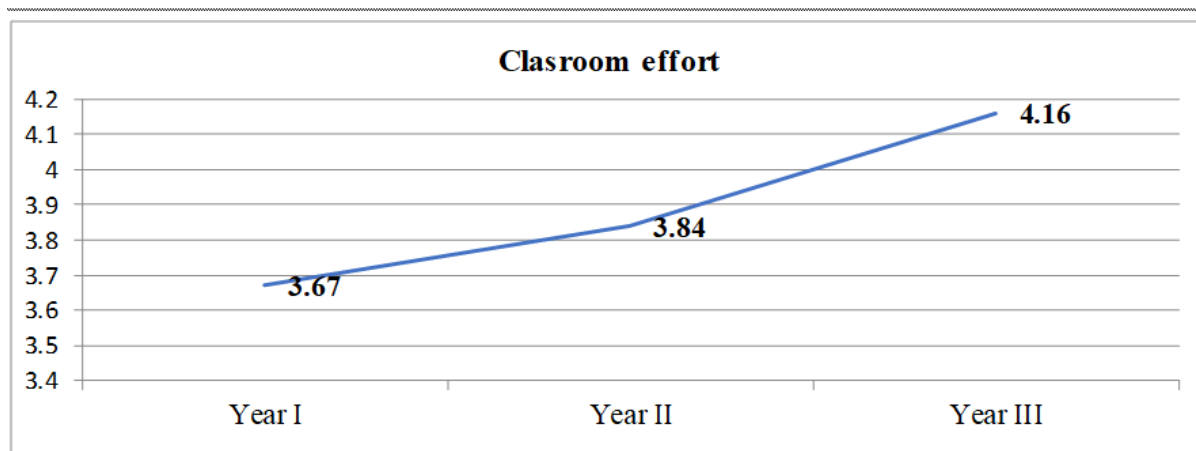


Figure no. 3: Comparative chart of sampled students' average scores on scales measuring classroom effort by year of study

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed in which *classroom effort* was entered as a criterion variable and demographic variables (gender, age, high school, year of study, major) as well as grit, self management, and social awareness were introduced as independent variables. The independent variables predicting the level of *classroom effort* of the students in the research sample are as follows: *student gender* ($\beta = 0.161$, $p = 0.033$), *year of study*

($\beta = 0.237$, $p = 0.002$), level of *social awareness* ($\beta = 0.404$, $p < 0.001$), and level of *grit* ($\beta = 0.259$, $p = 0.002$). The combination of these four variables accounted for 40% of the variance and the model was significant with $F(4,108) = 18.42$, $p < 0.001$. These coefficients are presented in Table no. 1 and the correlations between these variables are presented in Table no. 2.

Table no. 1

Hierarchical regression analysis predicting the classroom effort of the sampled students

Variables	Classroom effort			
	R^2	ΔR^2	B	p
	.406**	.406**		
Gender			0.161	$p = 0.033$
Year of study			0.237	$p = 0.002$
Social awareness			0.404	$p < 0.001$
Grit			0.259	$p = 0.002$

Table no. 2*Correlation matrix between classroom effort, gender, year of study, self-management and grit*

		<i>Gender</i>	<i>Year of study</i>	<i>Self-management</i>	<i>Social awareness</i>	<i>Grit</i>
Classroom effort	Pearson Correlation	.205*	.246**	.474**	.507**	.421**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.029	.009	.000	.000	.000
	N	113	113	113	113	113

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed in which *self-efficacy about specific subjects* was introduced as a criterion variable, and demographic variables (gender, age, high school, year of study, major) as well as grit, self management, and social awareness were introduced as independent variables. The independent variables predicting the level of *self-efficacy about English subjects* of the students in the

research sample were the level of *social awareness* ($\beta = 0.269$, $p = 0.003$) and the level of *grit* ($\beta = 0.366$, $p < 0.001$). The combination of these two variables accounted for 28% of the variance and the model was significant with $F(2,110) = 21.39$, $p < 0.001$. These coefficients are presented in Table no. 3 and the correlations between these variables are presented in Table no. 4.

Table no. 3*Hierarchical regression analysis predicting the level of self-efficacy about specific subjects of the sampled students*

Variables	<i>Self-efficacy about English subjects</i>			
	R^2	ΔR^2	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>
	.280**	.280**		
Social awareness			0.269	$p = 0.003$
Grit			0.366	$p < 0.001$

Table no. 4*Correlation matrix between self-efficacy about specific subjects, social awareness and grit*

		<i>Social awareness</i>	<i>Grit</i>
Self-efficacy about English subjects	Pearson Correlation	.406**	.467**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	113	113

5. Discussion

The students surveyed scored above average on all the five variables measured in this study. Therefore, we can say that they feel able to persevere through setbacks to achieve important long-term goals, to successfully manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in various situations, to consider the perspectives of others and empathize with them, and to succeed in

achieving academic outcomes because they put a lot of effort into school and learning. They also have a high level of confidence in their ability to successfully complete English language tasks.

The first hypothesis we started from in this research stated that there are significant differences between students in terms of grit, self-management, self-awareness, classroom effort and self-efficacy about specific subjects

depending on their gender, specialization (Quartermaster vs. Signal), graduated high school (military vs. civilian) and year of study. This hypothesis was partially confirmed by the results of the independent samples t-test which revealed that there were significant differences between male and female students only in terms of classroom effort and self-management: female students invest more effort in classroom activities and manage their emotions, thoughts and behaviours better in academic and learning activities than male students. They engage in class discussions, pay more attention to what professors say and generally put more effort into English language assignments than male students do. Female students also report a higher level of ability to focus on tasks by ignoring distractions, to remain calm in difficult classroom situations, and to be polite in interactions with professors and peers. All this is reflected in their academic success, often higher than that of their male peers. This finding of our research is supported by the results of another similar research in the field. For example, D. Voyer and S.D. Voyer found, based on a meta-analysis of 15,042 published articles and 2,265 theses and dissertations that “...gender differences favoured females in all fields of study” and that there is “a generalized female advantage in school achievement” (Voyer & Voyer, 2014, p. 1194). Furthermore, in the university students’ samples included in Kannangara et al. (2018) research, the female students, older students and postgraduates had significantly higher levels of grit.

The second hypothesis which stated that students’ level of classroom effort and self-efficacy about specific subjects is predicted by demographic variables such as gender, year of study, high school and major as well as their level of grit, self-management, and social awareness is also partially confirmed. The level of classroom effort of the students in the sample is predicted by the combination of gender, year of study, level of social awareness and

grit. We have already seen that female students put more effort into activities in English classes; also, students in their third year of study seem to put more effort than their first- and second-year peers. Moreover, the levels of social awareness and grit are associated in determining the level of classroom effort: the higher the level of social awareness, the more effort the cadets put into the activities in English classes and the higher their sense of self-efficacy in solving English tasks.

The students with a higher level of social awareness are able to listen respectfully to other people’s points of view, to care about other people’s feelings, to compliment others’ accomplishments, to get along with students who are different from them, to clearly describe their feelings, to stand up for themselves without putting others down and to disagree with others without starting an argument; they are also capable to remain focused on the same goal for several months at a time, they will try again if they fail to reach an important goal, and they will resist distractions in achieving their goals.

6. Conclusion

Grit is positively related to the students’ language learning motivation and achievement (Teimouri, Plonsky & Tabandeh, 2022) and to language achievement and engagement (Kiatkeeree & Ruangjaroon, 2022). Because learning English involves constantly overcoming intellectual and mental challenges, the learner has to constantly call on grit to cope with them (Liu & Wang, 2021; Zhao & Wang, 2023). Astuti, Fitriani and Kismullah (2023) identified the main psychological difficulties encountered by English foreign language learners: “*fear of making mistakes followed by speaking anxiety, lack of confidence, shyness, and lack of motivation. Those problems were caused by their inability to speak English, an unsupportive learning atmosphere, less speaking practice, negative attitude towards English, afraid of*

being mocked and underestimated by friends, afraid of being misunderstood, and terrified of appearing foolish” (Astuti et al, 2023, p. 1023). Teachers can support students in overcoming these difficulties by helping and guiding them in developing their grit level because *“high grit scorers had significantly higher levels of self-control and mental well-being, were more resilient and were more likely to have a more growth-oriented mindset”* (Kannangara et al., 2018, p. 1). Students with high grit scores are capable to manage their own emotions, to identify and use stress management strategies, to exhibit self-discipline and self-motivation, to learn and use planning and organizational skills, to show courage and take initiative.

Likewise, developing students’ social awareness is necessary for creating and maintaining a positive and engaging classroom atmosphere in which students support each other in overcoming obstacles and achieving a high level of proficiency. To this end, students must learn to adopt other people’s perspectives, recognize the strengths of others, express empathy and compassion, show consideration for the feelings of others, identify different social norms, including inequitable ones, recognize situational demands and opportunities, and understand how organizations and systems influence individuals’ behaviors.

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