The Ugly, the Promising, and the Good: A Mixed-Methods Study of Shame, Guilt, and Grit among Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present mixed methods study examined the relationship of three constructs within applied linguistics, namely, shame, guilt, and grit among Iranian EFL learners. By considering the principles of positive psychology, the authors tried to determine the existence of any significant association between the variables. In this vein, 263 Iranian students aged between 13 to 18 participated in the study and filled out the questionnaires. Analyses of the data revealed strong negative relatedness between shame and the other two variables, while the learners' guilt and grit were found to be positively correlated. Expanding the quantitative results, the authors utilized a grounded theory approach and interviewed 30 students to further investigate the shame-inducing factors in L2 classroom and the analyses signaled that the ashamed learners suffer from internal and external shame-provokers. Attending to shame and other negative feelings would possibly reduce the learners' shame and stress, help them progress in learning and enhance their well-being.

Keywords: grit, guilt, positive psychology, shame, well-being

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1. Introduction

The horizon of emotions in language education is expanding due to recent studies (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2024; Derakhshan & Zhang, 2024; Wang et al., 2021). The previously polarized continuum of positive and negative emotions in which enjoyment and anxiety were the major constructs is now shattered into pieces of love, pride, amusement, and other positive factors on one side and negative ones like apprehension, boredom, and distress on the other (Derakhshan, 2022; Derakhshan & Zhang, 2024). The complex and multifaceted nature of emotions signals that emotions are better to be studied in relation to each other (MacIntyre et al., 2019), and that the mere objective, isolated, and one-sided measurement of each element within this territory might add to the vagueness of issues. Fortunately, the social turn in applied linguistics (Block, 2003) constantly reminds us that language classrooms are the representatives of social life. Therefore, any interpretations of whatever occurs inside and outside of the class are subject to considering the socio-cultural norms and values of the contexts where an intertwined network of emotions are present and influence the learners' well-being (Derakhshan & Zhang, 2024). In this regard, identifying the learners' and teachers' emotions and exploring their properties within the emotional rollercoaster would better predict what comes next and would lead to the conversion of possible threats into positive and facilitative opportunities. In this regard, researchers follow the tenets of Positive Psychology (PP) (Derakhshan & Zhang, 2024; MacIntyre, 2021) as their framework of reference to explore different layers of positive and negative emotions involved in language classrooms for the sake of Well-being theory which seeks to enhance positive notions such as perseverance, engagement, personal and social strengths along with wisdom, honesty, kindness, and love. Therefore, the educational environment must prioritize students' and teachers' well-being to ensure optimal growth and development in L2 classrooms (Mercer, 2021).

Many studies on well-being address the factors that contribute to well-being, such as resilience, socio-emotional competence, optimism, personality traits, motivation, and self-efficacy (Hiver et al., 2021). Shame, guilt, and grit are three pieces of the described emotional domino that have received less attention in the second language acquisition (SLA) studies (Pawlak et al., 2022; Teimouri, 2018). Shame is an aspect

of one's general identity or a response to specific shame-triggering situations and is a dreadful notion functioning as a cradle to other notorious feelings such as humiliation, sadness, disgrace, regret, and fear (Galmiche, 2017). On the extreme opposite side of this continuum resides another newcomer to SLA studies, i.e., grit, which is responsible for one's eagerness to remain consistent and tenacious in seeking long-term goals despite apprehensive feelings and situations (Duckworth, 2016). In between shame and grit comes yet another vague and under-researched notion of guilt which signals one's regret towards specific behavior and the drive to confess, apologize, repair, and compensate (Lewis, 2008).

From the theoretical point of view, these three constructs are intertwined and fit within the overly complex network of emotions present in any language learning context (MacIntyre et al., 2019), and surprisingly, the SLA literature suffers from the paucity of research on their properties; therefore, studying each of them is of utmost importance. It is noteworthy that the perception and interpretation of different feelings are highly influenced by socioecological factors along with cultural norms and values, implying that the meaning of shame, guilt, and grit, might differ according to contextual and cultural status (Cormier et al., 2019; Dutton & Lyons, 2021; Wong & Tsai, 2007). Further, for over decades, anxiety was treated as the most salient and significant saboteur in the classroom context (Dewaele, 2022), and the major focus on this *'master emotion'* (Freud, 1938) has shrouded other negative factors and left us with limited understanding of villains like shame which Galmiche (2017) believed to be the emotion "that most encapsulates the notions of identity and the self" (p. 25) and hampers one's willingness to communicate (WTC) and speak (Lewis, 2008). Therefore, dealing with shame-inducing situations in SLA contexts requires an in-depth inquiry of its theoretical properties, antecedents, and links with other factors. In this vein, we metaphorically labeled shame as the ugly side of the emotional continuum and the representative of negative feelings, followed by the promising factor, i.e., guilt which bridges toward the good and positive factors like grit and studied them alongside each other within the Iranian context. In the following section, an overview of the available literature is presented, and the interplay of shame, guilt, and grit among Iranian EFL learners will be investigated through a mixed methods design.

Accordingly, the researchers posed the following research questions: "(1) Is there any significant correlation between EFL learners' shame, guilt, and grit? (2) What factors contribute to EFL learners' shame?"

2. Literature Review

2.1. Shame and Guilt

Along with pride and embarrassment, shame and guilt are the members of self-conscious emotions which are believed to help individuals to maintain or enhance their social status, receive acceptance from society, reach personal or social goals, and avoid group rejection (Ekman, 2003; Leary, 2007). Much of the knowledge on shame and guilt stems from psychology and psychoanalysis (Lewis, 1971), where many theorists attempted to distinguish between the two. However, the vagueness and inconsistency of their elaborations still led to more confusion in psychological circles (Tangney & Dearing, 2003). In general conceptualization, trait shame is an aspect of one's identity and self that remains constant throughout life. At the same time, in the specific type, it is reflected in particular shame-inducing situations (Galmiche, 2017). However, as far as guilt is concerned and in Freudian conceptualization, the notion of guilt reflects a clash between one's behavior and moral values. The argument implies that its distinction with shame lies in that shame is closely related to one's identity, while guilt reflects behavioral regrets (Tangney, 1990; 1996).

Ashamed individuals usually blush (Cozolino, 2006; Nathanson, 1987), avoid interaction, cover their face, and downcast their eyes (Tangney et al., 1996). Studies also reveal psychological manifestations of shame, including self-blame (Gilbert, 1998, 2000) along with the senses of inferiority, powerlessness and helplessness, and unworthiness (Gilbert et al., 1994). Specifically, Gilbert et al. (2007) sought to explore different types of shame namely, external shame, internal shame, and reflected shame within Asian and non-Asian communities. In contrast to external shame, which focuses on what others think about the self, internal shame focuses on self-directed attention and negative evaluation (Cook, 1996). Reflected shame, on the other hand, refers to the shame one may bring to others or receive from others.

Underestimating shame and limiting it as a mere reflection of one's anxiety activates a self-defensive mechanism by which interpersonal connections are avoided (De Hoog et al., 2010; Parker & Thomas, 2009), self-damaging and self-critical thoughts and behaviors are reflected (Dorahy & Hanna, 2012; Nathanson, 1987), and identity formation is hampered (Wu et al., 2020). Guilt, however, does not affect one's self-perception, making it less unpleasant (Lewis, 1971). Since guilt requires a critical assessment of the behavior, guilty students are more inclined to accept responsibility for their actions and less likely to place blame on others (Teimouri, 2018). Guilt feelings may also be accompanied by regret. According to Tangney and Dearing (2003), those who are feeling guilty frequently think about the specific wrongdoing to change their behavior or undo the mistake they committed. Tangney (1996) discovered that shame feelings are much more unpleasant and difficult to describe than guilt feelings. Students' L2 learning experiences can also be improved by understanding the relationships between shame, guilt, and other important affective responses. According to research done by Stuewig et al. (2010), empathy has a negative correlation with shame and a positive correlation with guilt. As a result, guilt-prone students are more sympathetic toward their peers and teachers in the classroom and more willing to help create a collaborative, supportive learning environment for L2.

Research on shame and guilt has flourished in various fields in recent years. For instance, Curtis (2023) studied shame and guilt in relation to academic misconduct (i.e., plagiarism, cheating). The analyses of the data obtained from 459 students revealed that perceived shame and guilt protect individuals from breaching ethical assessment rules since three out of four sub-components of the shame-guilt scale used in Curtis' study had a significant negative correlation with academic misconduct intentions. Using a phenomenological approach, Nielsen et al. (2024) interviewed 18 Danish citizens to unravel the connection between shame and guilt with environmental concerns (EC) (i.e., climate change, global warmth, natural resources depletion). The rationale behind this trial was to offer a better picture of the moral responsibility of tending to EC. The results revealed that individuals with high EC reflect higher guilt, while shame is more prevalent among individuals with low EC.

Applied Linguistics is in the early stages of recognizing shame and guilt as

influential emotions in language learning, and the paucity of research in this regard calls for more consideration. Cook's (2006) research on the relationship between shame and anxiety is among the first significant attempts that directly studied shame and guilt in the SLA context. In that study, Cook utilized interviews to probe into 30 college students' shame, fear, distress, surprise, guilt, and anxiety. Shame in his research ranked as the most superior and prevalent factor. The analyses revealed that fear and anger stem from shame which surprisingly had no relationship ($r = .04$) with learners' anxiety. Using a mixed-methods design, Wang (2016) assessed the emotions of 143 Chinese college students. Results indicated that learners' perception of shame differs while learning in class, and in the test situation. According to Wang's findings, shame is positively associated with students' sense of helplessness and negatively with their hope and enjoyment in L2 class. The content analyses of the interview identified inadequate competence, social comparisons, and failure in fulfilling the professors' expectations as sources of shame. Teimouri (2017) looked upon 524 Iranian learners' shame through the lens of Dörnyei's (2009) motivational self-system model. Results pinpointed that shame embraces everyone in the language class, and students with stronger personal and social obligations for language learning feel more threatened by its presence.

The next stop for a shame-guilt-related study in SLA was Teimouri's (2018) trial in exploring the relationship between learners' shame and guilt with motivation and learning achievement using a newly constructed L2-specific shame-guilt scale. The results showed that shame is strongly but negatively correlated with motivation and learning achievement, while guilt positively affects learners' motivation. Also, using self-written autobiographies within a qualitative approach, Immonen (2020) explored the role of shame and speaking anxiety on 6 Finnish university students. Failure in achieving learning objectives and traumatized experiences of corrective feedback emerged as possible sources of learners' shame and decreased self-esteem. Further, findings signaled that shame might make the learners suspicious of being observed and under control, pushing them towards anger and avoidance. Recently, Yan et al. (2024) explored the mediating roles of hope and shame in associations between teacher autonomy support (TAS) and 402 Chinese EFL learners' intended effort (IE). The analyses showed that TAS positively predicts hope and IE while negatively

influences shame. Also, the results showed that hope positively impacted IE and mediated the links between TAS and IE, whereas shame had a detrimental effect on learners' IE. Likewise, Manchado-Nieto and Fielden-Burns (2024) explored the anxiety-related emotions (e.g., shame, nervousness, insecurity) among 231 students in a Spanish context. The result implied that although negative emotions such as shame are prevalent among the learners, understanding their needs and expectations and promoting pedagogical practices can effectively manage such feelings.

2.2. Grit

Academic accomplishment has been the focus of extensive research during the last few decades. Despite the widely held belief that talent determines success, Duckworth et al. (2007) claimed that other variables, such as grit contribute to success. They assert that an individual with grit pursues accomplishments with effort and interest, overcomes challenges and failures, and keeps working on the project despite becoming frustrated. Thus, they viewed grit as a higher-order construct incorporating the two components of persistence of effort (POE) and constancy of interest (COI). The first sub-construct, POE, refers to a tendency to work hard and sustain effort even when one faces challenges. The second sub-construct, COI, refers to longevity of interest despite obstacles and failures.

Despite the wealth of studies that have been done, we are still only beginning to grasp how grit works in SLA. Keegan (2017) asserted that there would be a positive association between grit and L2 learning outcomes from practitioners' perspective. She asserts that greater learner reflection can assist promote grit when it is incorporated throughout all L2 classroom activities and assessments. In terms of examining the correlation between L2 grit and L2 achievement with other variables, Khajavy and Aghaee (2022) found that POE can predict L2 achievement when taken as the only variable, but not when emotions and personal bests are included. Thus, L2 students' achievement is heavily influenced by individual differences. Furthermore, Pawlak et al. (2022) investigated the impact of a complex interplay of factors on motivation to learn an additional language. This study suggests that intentional effort depends on the interplay of a range of factors, which may not always

be obvious. Wei et al. (2019) examined one of the first empirical connections between grit and 832 Chinese EFL middle school students' English language performance, including listening, reading, and writing. These researchers found that grit significantly improves students' English skills. According to Lee and Drajati (2019), grit was a key determinant of L2 WTC among university and postgraduate students in Indonesia. Similarly, Lee (2022) has shown that POE and classroom enjoyment are significant predictors of L2 WTC, though COI is not.

Empirically, Khajavy et al. (2020) examined the significance of grit and language mindset in second language learning among 1,178 Iranian university students by a newly constructed paper-based questionnaire. As the results indicated a growth language mindset correlated with higher POE, whereas a fixed language mindset correlated with lower COI. They further concluded that a growth mindset led to better L2 achievement for language learners who believed they could learn a language faster with more effort at the end of the semester. Finally, grit did not affect L2 achievement since grit appears to be effective long-term rather than just for passing a course. More recently, Eight English language learners who scored highly on a nine-item grit questionnaire were studied by Freiermuth et al. (2021) in the hopes that patterns would emerge from the data. The statistics revealed that robust L2 students are determined and resilient learners who appear to have an inexhaustible curiosity about the L2, in addition to perseverance. They do not allow setbacks to stop them. They are extroverted, have a great desire to communicate, and are rarely bored while learning the L2. Feng and Papi (2020) investigated 94 Chinese students studying Chinese as a second language who displayed varying degrees of grit, motivational intensity, and tenacity in L2. The only aspect of grit that was significantly predictive of motivational intensity and L2 persistence in a multiple regression study was POE. Grit COI, on the other hand, did not predict any of the outcome factors, indicating that it is not a relationship between learners' propensity to put forth an effort and persevere in L2 learning and how frequently they switch interests.

Also, Derakhshan et al. (2023) reported on the connection between perceived L2 teacher variables (i.e., enthusiasm, appreciation, and support) and learners' L2 grit by analyzing the data collected from 285 Turkish English undergraduate students. The results showed that teacher-related variables significantly impact learners' grit, with

teachers' enthusiasm being the most influential variable. Similarly, Solhi et al. (2023) explored the relationship between 259 Turkish EFL learners' grit and boredom coping strategies (i.e., cognitive approach, avoidance, and behavioral approach) along with the moderating role of emotion regulation strategies. The results showed strong correlation between learners' grit and boredom coping strategies. Researchers also reported stronger predictive power for grit regarding the cognitive approach to boredom coping. In a similar vein, Derakhshan and Fathi (2024a) focused on the interplay between language enjoyment, grit, online learning self-efficacy (OLSE), and online learning engagement in a sample of 578 Iranian EFL learners. Findings indicated that language learning enjoyment and OLSE positively contribute to online learning engagement. The study also verified that OLSE mediates the relationship between grit and online learning. Longitudinally, Derakhshan and Fathi (2024b) examined the interconnectedness of foreign language enjoyment, anxiety, and WTC with a focus on the predictive role of L2 grit. Using a cross-lagged panel design and structural equation modelling, they analyzed the data obtained from 879 EFL learners at two-time intervals. The findings showed that initial anxiety had a substantial influence on future enjoyment and WTC, while the initial enjoyment had no similar predictive power. Additionally, L2 grit predicted enjoyment, anxiety, and WTC only at the first measurement point, implying that language learning anxiety plays a more pivotal role over time.

From the scope of language testing and assessment, Alazemi et al. (2023) highlighted the interplay between test anxiety (TA), academic emotion regulation (AER), academic resilience (AR), L2 grit, and core of self-assessment (CAS) (i.e., an honest evaluation of one's competence and value). In this vein, researchers collected data from 417 English learners from Kuwait and found that individuals with a healthy state of AER, AR, CAS, and L2 grit could effectively confront TA. Recently, Yan et al. (2024) focused on the interplay between teacher support, grit, and L2 WTC of 619 Chinese university students and the mediating role of foreign language enjoyment. The results showed that grit is a significant predictor of L2 WTC. The researchers also reported that teacher support and grit could collectively impact learners' L2 WTC and enjoyment. Likewise, Mei et al. (2024) modelled the predictive effects of regulatory focus (i.e., preventive and promotive self-regulation) on L2 grit through the mediating

role of achievement emotions among 1,043 non-English major graduates in a Chinese context. The results verified the correlation between the constructs and regulatory focus functioned as an indirect predictor of L2 grit. In the process, enjoyment and boredom partially mediated the impact on the relationship between regulatory focus and grit, whereas hope and anxiety had a stronger impact on them. Reviewing the empirical research on L2 grit, Jian and Xinli (2024) focused on 93 studies with diverse methods, participants, and results. The findings showed that researchers have primarily focused on the scale development and validation of L2 grit in various contexts, the impact of grit on learners' academic performance and the interplay between grit and other internal or external factors.

It is not pointless to remark that since Duckworth et al. (2007), the grit literature has grown tremendously, although not without criticism (see e.g., Botes et al., 2024; Credé, 2018; Credé et al., 2017). The infancy of grit-related literature in Iranian L2 context calls for more considerations. Specifically, the need for considering its interplay with other factors are highlighted within the emerging studies (Credé, 2018). Moreover, the novelty of shame and guilt within the entire territory of L2 emotions justifies the consideration of these entities alongside each other. Accordingly, as elaborated by Mercer (2021), Derakhshan (2022), and other proponents of PP within SLA context, educational systems have to consider the realm of emotions if guaranteeing the well-being of the stakeholders is of utmost importance. In this vein, the appropriate interpretation of psychological and emotional constructs such as grit, guilt, and shame which are believed to be affecting the well-being of the individuals (Teimouri, 2018) would require in-depth analyses. Considering these issues in mind, the authors attempted to provide the preliminary evidence on the interplay of shame, guilt, and grit within Iranian context where evidence on the relationship between these three is lacking. Building upon the findings of the present study, the future scholars would delve deeper within the ins and outs of the emotions and help the students become more perseverant in their language learning journey and deal with their shame-related feelings more effectively.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Settings and Participants

This study recruited participants from junior and senior Iranian high schools using a convenience sampling method and with their consent to participate. There are three grades in Iranian junior high schools, referred to as 7th, 8th, and 9th grades for junior high schools, and 10th, 11th, and 12th grades for senior high schools. A total of 270 Iranian students between the ages of 13 and 18 were involved in the study. However, answers with odd patterns were identified ($n = 7$) and excluded. As a result, 263 high school students, 125 males, and 138 females were included in the present study. The majority of the students (58.89%) learned English either in schools or institutes, while another (28.13%) learned English exclusively in schools. Furthermore, a total of 4.91% of students engaged in self-study as a means of improving their English language; 4.29% attended schools, institutes, or self-studies; and 3.68% took courses at schools. All the respondents were involved in the quantitative data collection process; however, in the qualitative phase, 10 students from each grade were randomly selected and made up the sample ($n = 30$).

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. L2 Shame-Guilt Scale

Considering the theoretical distinctions of shame and guilt and having Tangney's (1990) general Test of Self-Conscious Affect in mind, Teimouri (2018) designed the L2-specific scale of shame and guilt (Appendix A) and validated it by constructing externalization and detachment scales. The former assesses the extent to which the individuals blame others for their failures and the latter (i.e., detachment), deals with lack of concern or emotional involvement. The L2 Shame-Guilt Scale (LSGS) comprises 26 items (13 for shame, 13 for guilt) aligned on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very much), with Cronbach's alpha equivalent to .843 and .897 for shame and guilt components respectively, showing excellent reliability.

3.2.2. L2 Grit Scale

The L2-specific grit scale (Appendix B) designed by Teimouri et al. (2020) was used to tap into language learners' grit. The scale comprises two factors; namely, (1) Perseverance of Effort (POE), and (2) Consistency of Interest (COI) using 9 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranged from 1(not like me at all) to 5 (very much like me). The reliability of this scale was estimated using Cronbach's alpha method, which showed excellent reliability (α = .924).

3.2.3. Semi Structured Interview

A semi structured interview (Appendix C) was designed based on McAdam's (2008) life story model. It consisted of four open questions and some sub questions regarding learners' perceptions of shame-inducing factors. Interviews continued until no new information was obtained and data saturation was reached (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013), and participants were free to add any further points at the end of the interview. To ensure trustworthiness, the interview questions were piloted among four non-participants with similar characteristics to the participants of the study (Nassaji, 2020). The content validity of the instrument was also evaluated by four university instructors working in ELT departments to ensure that the interview questions were linguistically transparent and content-relevant. Each of the respondents were interviewed for approximately 15 to 20 minutes and their answers were recorded in order to be transcribed in later stages. Due to the nature of the questions, they were informed that they could stop providing the answers whenever they felt uncomfortable without the need of giving any reasons to the authors. It is noteworthy that the interviews were held in Persian for the respondents' comfort and ease.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection and analysis were carried out sequentially using explanatory mixed-methods. The explanatory design intends to "have the qualitative data help explain in more detail the initial quantitative results" (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 355). In the quantitative phase and since the scales are designed in English, a sample including

30 students were randomly selected for the translation process, the product of which was a Persian version of the scales so that the main participants stay focused on the items without any ambiguity. Two near native translators, one majored in Translation discipline, and the other in applied linguistics translated and back translated the items to ensure the faithfulness and colloquialness criteria, and the final version was checked by two experts in the field and the required revisions to word choice and clarity were applied. The participants of the pilot trial answered the final version of the questionnaires and their responses showed that the scales enjoy appropriate reliability indices. In pilot phase, the reliability estimates for shame, guilt, and grit scales were .843, .897, and .924 respectively. Ensuring confidentiality and ethical considerations, along with informing the participants' families, the authors explained the purpose of the study, their expectations, and required information. Further, two WhatsApp groups dedicated to each gender were created, and participants were added to them using the demographic and contact information that they had previously provided to the authors. The participants were given the link to the online version of the questionnaire designed using Google forms after being explained the expectations and research objectives. The final data included demographic information along with the learners' perceptions of shame, guilt, and grit in their language learning journey. Each individual was expected to complete the online form within a timeframe of 10 minutes. After data collection, answers with odd patterns, i.e., increasing, decreasing, and constant were identified (N=8) and excluded. The refined data underwent normality, linearity, outlier, and homoscedasticity check. SPSS 26 was used to analyze the research data using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation.

In the qualitative phase of the study, a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) was employed to analyze the interview data, with codes and themes arising entirely from that data (Abrahamson, 1983). After being informed about the study's purpose, ethical considerations, and anonymity issues (BERA, 2011), 30 randomly selected participants were interviewed in Persian for the ease of communication and idea expression. Each interview lasted about 15-20 minutes on average, but some lasted longer. The transcribed data was translated to English and was content analyzed using MAXQDA20, as content analysis is one of the most

common methods to analyze textual data (Berg, 2001). After analyzing the transcripts of the interviews using open thematic coding, the main themes regarding shame-inducing factors in the L2 classroom were identified. Consequently, we developed core categories by connecting individual (sub) categories using axial coding. In the end, selective coding involved integrating some categories to create a comprehensive model of issues faced by ashamed learners both inside and outside the classroom. To ensure the inter-coder agreement (Gass & Mackey, 2000), 25% of the entire list of emerged codes and themes were presented to and checked by one of the colleagues experienced in coding qualitative research to review our explanations and interpretations of the raw data independently. Cohen's Kappa indicated a 93% agreement between the two raters. Results were compared to the first data, discrepancies were discussed, and a modified model with two main themes was presented.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Results

Prior to answering the first research question, the scales underwent reliability check and the Cronbach's alpha reliability indices for shame, guilt, and grit scales were estimated to be .874, .919, and .941, respectively. Although "there is no set interpretation as to what an acceptable alpha value is, a rule of thumb that applies to most situations is >.9 excellent, >.8 good, > .7 acceptable, >.6 questionable, >.5 poor and < .5 unacceptable" (George & Mallery, 2020, p. 244); therefore, it can be claimed that the scales of the study enjoyed excellent reliability.

The first research question raised in this study investigated the relationship between the variables; thus, Pearson Correlation was utilized to answer the question. Pearson correlation assumes normality of the data. As displayed in Table 1 the values of skewness and kurtosis indices were lower than ±2; hence, normality of the present data (George & Mallery, 2020).

Table 1
Skewness and Kurtosis Indices of Normality

	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Grit	263	-.641	.150	-.504	.299
Guilt	263	-1.075	.150	.608	.299
Shame	263	.405	.150	-.448	.299

As depicted in Table 2, all the variables in the study are significantly correlated. In other words, shame is negatively correlated with guilt ((r (263) = -.683, $p < .05$), and grit ((r (263) = -.937, $p < .05$); while guilt and grit are positively correlated ((r (263) = .612, $p < .05$). Since Pearson Correlation itself is an index of effect size (Pallant, 2016), the obtained coefficients yield large effect size (Field, 2018, p. 179). This implies that the first null-hypothesis of the study in which no significant correlations between the variables were assumed is rejected.

Table 2
Pearson Correlations between Shame, Guilt and Grit

		Guilt	Grit
Shame	Pearson Correlation	-.683[**]	-.937[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	263	263
Guilt	Pearson Correlation		.612[*0]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N		263

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.2. Qualitative Results

Reflecting on the quantitative results, we realized that our data signaled the negativity of shame in the EFL classrooms. In other words, the negative association of shame with other factors (i.e., guilt and grit), triggered the researchers to zoom into this factor independently in order to find out the reasons for which Iranian EFL learners perceive shame. Therefore, as discussed earlier, the second phase of the research included the collection, refinement, and analysis of the qualitative data to find the

sources by which the learners feel shame in language context which was the topic of second research question. Following the principles of grounded theory approach (Corbin & Straus, 1990) and considering the available literature on shame related factors (Gilbert et al., 2007; Teimouri, 2017), we analyzed the data through open, axial, and selective coding processes the summary of which is depicted in the Table 3 and Figure 1.

Table 3
Most frequent sources of shame in L2 class

Themes	Type	Frequency	Percentage	Excerpt
Judgmental thoughts	Both	30	100	*I wouldn't believe my teacher if my family wouldn't have judged me like him. They see me as incapable student. I've started to believe they are right.*
Comparing thoughts	Both	28	93	*I'm ashamed when my classmates know the meaning of words that I don't know.*
Self-criticism/blame	Internal	27	90	*I only blame myself. Maybe if I was prepared enough, my teacher and classmates would have never laughed at me.*
Lack of interest and effort	Internal	26	86	*If my mother would have stopped comparing me with my sister whose English is good, I would have put much effort and interest on it. She makes me feel ashamed in front of the relatives.*
Teacher	External	26	86	*When I open my mouth to respond the teacher, he looks at me as if there is something wrong with me.*
Classmates	External	25	83	*They laugh at me and refuse to accept me in their group. I'm alone in L2 class.*
Family	External	23	76	*Whenever I get a good*

Themes	Type	Frequency	Percentage	Excerpt
Society	External	21	70	*score in English, my family reminds me about my previous low scores. No matter how much I practice. They won't support me in my lessons. I'm not ready for all the demanding aspects of life. Everyone expects perfectionism, but no one guides, helps, and listens to us.*
L2 Issues	External	20	66	*I think if I ask my teacher about the meaning of some words, everyone would laugh at me, but I really don't understand some of the English content and due to their behaviors, I prefer not to ask.*

Figure 1

Factors contributing to Iranian students' shame in L2 context
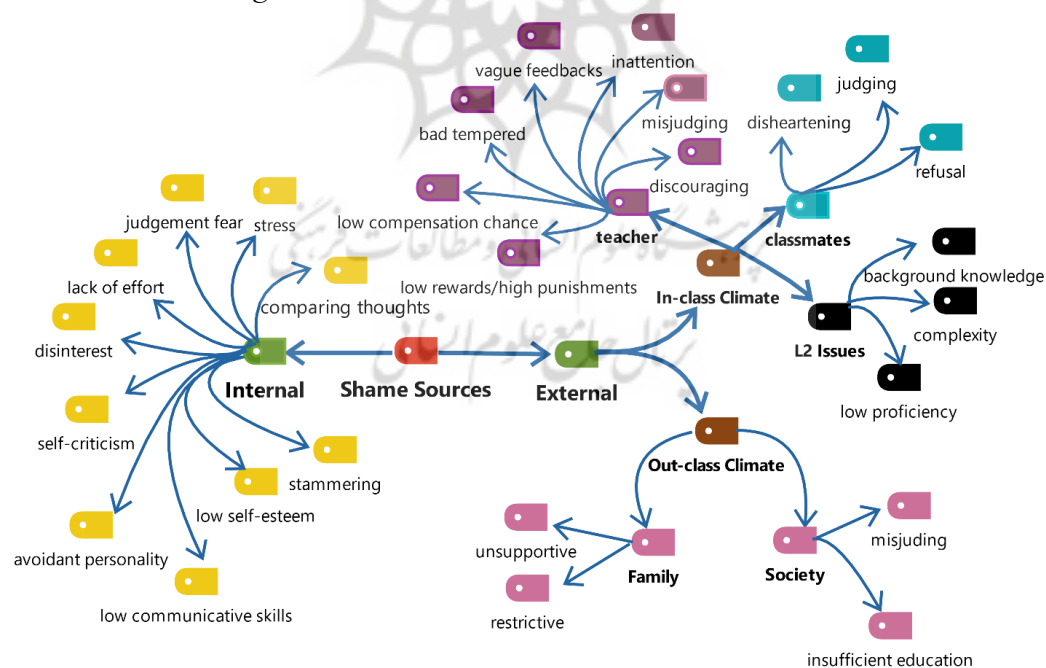
Accordingly, two major sources of shame, namely, internal (attitudinal) and external factors emerged from most of the responses. Precisely, internal factors encompassed an array of notions including the judgmental and comparing thoughts, self-criticism and blame, stress, lack of effort and other attitudinal notions that were prevalent in the responses of the respondents. The excerpts such as *"comparing myself to my classmates and their down looking view towards my silence in the class annoys me"* was addressed by 28 respondents. The following extract, signals a learner whose past failures pushed him towards a situation that he sees himself as incapable of doing anything:

I always underestimate myself and there have been countless opportunities in our English class where I could participate in the activities and answer my teacher but the fear of past failures and my shyness convinced me to remain silent. I sometimes overthink about the issues and self-criticizing makes me feel that I'm not capable of doing anything and this makes me ashamed.

Since the answers of all 30 participants yielded references to teachers, classmates, and family members, the external factors, including two sub-categories, namely, in-class climate and out-class climate, were identified. The in-class category aims at three sources of shame triggered by the English language and the relations with classmates and English teachers. To be exact, the complexity of L2 content, poor background knowledge, and low proficiency were among the responses of participants, while 25 of them were consistent about their classmates and teachers as the major sources of shame. Five of the learners noted that their only concerns in the L2 class are classmates' and teachers' misbehavior and negative feedback. The out-class climate represents shame-inducing factors rooted in family behaviors and social status. For instance, the judgmental factor was identified as the most prevalent issue and all of the participants mentioned that such thoughts, either about their capabilities or the feedback they receive from their classmates and teacher, make them feel shameful. The following extracts imply situations in which the combination of classmates' misbehaviors, the teacher's inadequate feedback along with the learners' internal feelings such as stress and fear pushed them towards silence and shame:

Our classroom environment is always judging and imposing. It is not limited to

our English class and in other subjects I have the same problems. I remember one day in which I was prepared for the English exam, and all I wanted was few more seconds to calm myself down and deal with my stress but my teacher started criticizing me for not being ready. I thought that whatever I answer to her questions would be negatively assessed and the laughter of my classmates made me feel alone and ashamed. When I discussed the result of that day to my family, they became angry for my low score in English. I wasn't this much ashamed learner but such thoughts and experiences have overwhelmed me. Now all that is left is my hope for success and my future goals.

Being ashamed in class becomes unbearable for me because thinking about my classmates' misbehaviors when I make a mistake and my teachers' look down views are with me when I'm at home and my family also overwhelms me with misjudging and criticism. I think the situation becomes more tense for one of my classmates as well. He suffers from stammering and I see that despite trying a lot, he receives inadequate support from the teacher and others. I don't know how he handles the tensions, but I would no longer care about language learning.

5. Discussion

Considering the principles of positive psychology, the researchers attempted to unravel the status of three under-researched constructs, i.e., shame, guilt, and grit, among Iranian language learners. This trial is justified by considering the significance of ensuring the learners' well-being inside and outside language education contexts because it not only affects learners' achievement, but also contributes to their well-being and life satisfaction (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Tang et al., 2020). In this vein, understanding the features of the negative emotions such as shame would help us to empower the students along the journey of language learning by investing in their promising and positive feelings like guilt and grit.

In this regard, identifying the association between shame, guilt, and grit was the first sought objective of this mixed methods study. The correlational analyses among these factors signaled strong relationships. On the one hand, shame as the negative emotion negatively correlated with guilt ($r = -.683$) and grit ($r = -.937$), while the

relationship between guilt and grit remained strong and positive ($r = .612$). The results imply that as shame increases in the L2 class, the learners' sense of guilt and grit would decrease accordingly and vice versa. Although the results of correlational analyses are to be interpreted and generalized cautiously (Shao et al., 2022), it can be argued that the present findings pave the way for preliminary interpretations of the interplay between the entities within the Iranian context. Accordingly, several arguments can be considered as justifications for the results. First of all, the negative correlation of shame with guilt and grit is justifiable by reconsidering the intertwined network of self-conscious emotions (Ekman, 2003) in which shame not only resembles negativity (Cook, 2006), but also hampers hope and enjoyment (Wang, 2016) and its inverse connection with grit is also supported by the qualitative analyses. Content analyses showed that 26 out of 30 respondents were entirely disinterested in learning or attending the language class. At the same time, the remaining 4 participants mentioned that although they were interested in language learning, countless shame-triggering situations had reduced their willingness to make an effort.

Guilt, as the positive counterpart of shame, functions as the silver lining and the promising hope for future improvements (Teimouri, 2017). Similar to previous studies where guilt was in line with other positive notions like motivation, enjoyment, and hope (Teimouri, 2018; Wang, 2016), the present study showed that its combination with grit as two beneficial factors seems plausible to assume within L2 classrooms. Since grit is a strong predictor of learners' motivational intensity ($B = .34$, $p < .001$) and L2 persistence ($B = .20$, $p = .01$) as reported by Feng and Papi (2020), it is reasonable to justify the interconnectedness of guilt and grit (r=. 612), by pinpointing that guilt-perceiving learners tend to improve the situation by focusing more on their learning and are willing to compensate the failures or drawbacks by relying on their triggered motivation and grit. We might further argue that the hypothesized continuum of shame-guilt-grit manifests itself within the obtained results of the present study. As Teimouri (2018) argues, shame threatens the social identity of the L2 learners; implying that the attention of an individual during a shame-inducing situation within language class would be limited as a result of responding to the judgment of teachers and peers towards oneself and one's

performance (Tangney & Dearing, 2003) as the learner has to constantly respond to negative emotions like sadness, humiliation, and fear (Galmiche, 2017). In such cases, one possible and plausible resource for compensating for the negative outcomes caused by shame would be relying on guilt which can be considered as the promising factor that, from one side, is linked to the sense of negativity and from the other bridges towards positive emotions and outcomes. Although shame touches most of the learners within language classrooms (Teimouri, 2018), their sense of guilt would likely help them in dealing with negative feelings. According to the available literature on guilt, this construct alters one's attention from self to behavior (Lewis, 1971) and triggers one to find practical solutions for soothing the situation by reflecting on the drawbacks and considering future trials required for dealing with shortcomings and failures. Additionally, guilt is positively linked to learners' sense of empathy, which encompasses soft-heartedness, compassion, and tenderness towards others (Batson et al., 2011), conveying that the guilty learners are not only concerned about themselves but also feel positive about making others grow and improve as well. The claim is supported by literature indicating that guilty learners are eager to create a collaborative and supportive environment for L2 learning (Stuewig et al., 2010). The positive correlation between guilt and grit is further justifiable by noting that guilt-prone learners accept the loss of effort in their performance and are interested in making things better. Effort and interest are two sub-components of grit (Duckworth, 2016) that are also shown to be strongly and positively linked with learners' motivation (Feng & Papi, 2020). Logically speaking, it is plausible and yet questionable to argue that the combination of guilt and grit and their pervasiveness in the language class, adds fuel to the motivation of L2 learners, helps them deal with negative feelings caused by shame and pushes them towards achievement in language learning which is believed to contribute to the learners' well-being (Derakhshan & Zhang, 2024; Wang et al., 2021); however, it is also possible to argue that combination of internal and external shame-inducing factors such as the sense of loneliness, low self-esteem, and helplessness would possibly hampers such progress. Although Gilbert et al. (2007) suggested that Asian students are more concerned about external shame-related factors than the internal, the current qualitative analyses showed that internal factors might also play pivotal role on the

students' mental health and well-being, especially when warning notions like self-damaging thoughts and behaviors are reflected by shameful individuals (Nathanson, 1987). To justify, we argue that participants in Gilbert et al.'s (2007) study were female university students aged between 18 to 45 and differed in their cultural and ideological backgrounds; however, the present study focused on language learners aged between 13 to 18, sharing similar cultural norms and bonds. Since the perception of emotions is highly context dependent (Cormier et al., 2019; Dutton & Lyons, 2021; Wong & Tsai, 2007), suggesting that external factors are the major suffering sources of shameful individuals somehow underestimates the issue. Moreover, shame is the emotion which encapsulates identity (Galmiche, 2017) and its perception might hinder identity formation which is influenced by numerous internal and external factors (Wu et al., 2020); therefore, the different worldviews that might exist between the individuals would possibly lead to different results, where in one situation like the present study, the participants report that their internal thoughts and conflicts fuel their perception of shame and in a context such as Gilbert et al.'s (2007) study, external sources are identified as the major sources of shame.

Further, by reflecting on the items dedicated to guilt in the shame-guilt scale (Teimouri, 2017), one notices that most of them describe a situation in which the learner would do something in the near future or is regretful about being a passive learner. Since self and others' judgement (teachers, classmates, family, society) was identified as a frequent shame-inducing factor, one might cautiously interpret the judgmental thoughts in the shame-guilt continuum. Within a guilt-inducing situation, learners would judge themselves and reflect on their inner strengths while focusing on the reasons for which they are being blamed and would take responsibility for making things better (Teimouri, 2017, 2018); however as far as shame is concerned, such judgmental thoughts might pertain to the inability of restoring a positive self-view, negative evaluation of self along with, self-damaging and self-critical behaviors (Dorahy & Hanna, 2012) as supported by the qualitative results.

6. Conclusion

The discussed issues contribute to the body of literature by implying that language

learning is the realm in which countless negative and positive notions such as shame, guilt, and grit function to direct the learners towards success or failure. The results remind us that within the journey of language learning, everyone would potentially feel shame from not only external sources, but also internal thoughts which might make them feel alone and hopeless. Raising awareness about the presence of shame-provoking factors in every language class would possibly provide an insight to the students and gives them an eagle eye towards the potential problems and opportunities for dealing with them. The attempt seems to be a reasonable goal and is to be sought by teachers, authorities, and policymakers of the educational systems, especially when the learners indicate that they not only have to deal with their own inner conflicts, but also the inappropriate behaviors and judgments of their teachers, classmates, and family members. Therefore, educating language teachers about the negative emotions that creep into language learning environments seems another adequate goal that is suggested to be considered in teacher education programs in Iran and elsewhere. As an outcome of such awareness raising, learners would realize that they are not alone in the journey, and their classmates would also perceive similar feelings. Further, the learners would benefit from the results of the emotion-laden studies, especially those which focus on guilt as an escaping door from the horrific feelings caused by shame and distress towards the lights of achievement and well-being.

Like other studies, the present one is also limited in some aspects. Due to practical limitations, we adapted the shame-guilt scale (Teimouri, 2017) by utilizing the items that only address shame and guilt; however, the scale has two additional components, namely, externalization and detachment, which were totally ignored. Since the scale requires further validation, further studies might consider all of its components along with other notions such as boredom, resilience, mindsets, etc. Participants of this research were recruited from high school contexts in Iran. Future studies can investigate shame, guilt, and grit among other audiences based on their proficiency levels and academic degrees with respect to other demographic information such as gender differences and cultural backgrounds. Researchers might also consider path analyses and structural modeling, primarily to determine the antecedents or possible causational links between shame, guilt, and grit along with other theoretically linked notions to see whether shame is a pre-requisite of guilt in L2 classes or other similar

hypotheses. This requires a more robust data strong enough to meet the assumptions of SEM analyses which requires more control on the side of the researchers. The present study built its interpretations mostly on the combination of quantitative and qualitative results since correlation alone, would give limited view towards the complex nature of the interplay between shame, guilt, and grit. In theory, the statistics and results of the present study show good array of numbers; however, in practice, due to the nature of correlational analyses, one might be cautious about interpreting and generalizing the findings. Moreover, focusing on language teachers' sense of shame, guilt, and grit during the teaching profession would provide more depth to the field of educational emotions, especially by considering the argument that from theoretical perspectives, emotions such as shame and guilt are potentially contagious (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021). Whether learners' perception of shame and guilt affects language teachers or not is a plausible gap that seems interesting to be filled. Furthermore, examining how reflective shame influences students' sense of L2 achievement would provide a better understanding of the complete shame-inducing factors that ashamed learners experience, along with external and internal factors.

To conclude, the present study shed fresh light on the three under-researched constructs, namely shame, guilt, and grit, among Iranian language learners. Results of the study manifested significant correlation among these constructs. The study shows the importance of integrating positive psychology into L2 proficiency and considering psychological emotion along with cognitive aspects. Results indicate that the beliefs learners hold about SLA can be changed by incorporating positive psychology into teacher education programs and that awareness raising among teachers and other stakeholders about L2 emotions provides a basis for overcoming challenges, dealing with tensions, and guaranteeing well-being.

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Appendix A

Shame-Guilt Scale (Teimouri, 2018)

1. I would feel incompetent.

2. I would feel incompetent writing in English.

3. I would feel hopeless and helpless.

4. I would feel weak and not confident.

5. I would feel dumb.

6. I would feel like I am a coward.

7. I would feel my English proficiency is worse than the other students'.

8. I would feel I don't have the talent to learn English.

9. I would think, "I am an irresponsible person."

10. I would try to hide myself from the teacher.

11. I would fear humiliation if suddenly the teacher asked me a question

12. I would think other students are looking at me and laughing.

13. I would feel small.

14. I should have studied more; I would try to do better in the future.

15. I would try to write more carefully next time.

16. I should have been more careful and spent more time on my writing.

17. I would try to avoid repeating those mistakes.

18. I would feel sad and work harder next term.

19. I would apologize and try to express my ideas in English.

20. I would apologize, and promise it wouldn't happen again.

21. I would try to boost my reading speed by studying more.

22. I would try harder next time to state what I mean more clearly.

23. I would feel regret; I would speak my mind next time.

24. I would feel sad and try to improve my English proficiency.

25. I would politely ask the teacher to repeat her question.

26. I wish I had practiced the audio before.

Scale: 1= not at all; 6= very much

Appendix B

L2 Grit Scale (Teimouri et al., 2020)

1. I am a diligent English language learner

2. My interests in learning English change from year to year

3. When it comes to English, I am a hard-working learner

4. I think I have lost my interest in learning English

5. Now that I have decided to learn English, nothing can prevent me from reaching this goal

6. I will not allow anything to stop me from my progress in learning English

7. I am not interested in learning English as I used to be.

8. I was obsessed with learning English in the past, but have lost interest recently

9. I put much time and effort into improving my English language weaknesses

Scale: 1= not like me at all; 5= very much like me

Appendix C

Interview Questions

This interview aims at understanding your perception of shame in specific circumstances. There are no right or wrong answers as it is about yours subjective understanding, your experiences and your views in specific situations. We ask you four main questions and based on your answers we might ask more:

1. Please remember and describe a situation in which you felt shame in your English language class.

2. When was it? What made you feel that? How did your teacher and classmates react in that situation and situations like that?

3. How does your family and friends react to your low scores and failures? Are they supportive?

4. What other factors contribute to your silence?

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