

# A Qualitative Inquiry on EFL Learning Demotivation and Resilience: A Study of Primary and Secondary EFL Students in South Korea

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Published online: 9 December 2017  
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**Abstract** This paper presents the components influencing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning demotivation and resilience. Semi-structured interview data from 23 EFL students and nine teachers were thematically analyzed guided by the Grounded Theory approach after systematic reiterative comparative reviewing. The major demotivators were teachers' lack of clear delivery for elementary school students, excessive afterschool learning programs at private institutes for junior high school students, and impractical EFL lessons focusing on grammar rather than spoken English for high school students. In order to curb these demotivators and maintain high EFL learning motivation levels, four distinctive components influencing their resilience were identified: social support, emotional regulation, a clear learning goal, and tenacity in EFL learning. This study illustrates that emotional regulation, not negative emotions such as anxiety, is crucial, and students' clearly stated short-term learning goal is a crucial component in maintaining high academic resilience. Participants cultivated specific components influencing resilience as they advanced academically. Additionally, high-proficiency

EFL students exhibited greater tenacity and utilized various coping strategies. We argue for the necessity to refine the sub-constructs of EFL learning demotivation and resilience and recommend the need for a follow-up confirmatory study to prove the conceptual validity of these constructs.

**Keywords** Resilience · Demotivation · English as a foreign language · Interview methods

## Introduction

Recent research has focused on unique psychological constructs to reduce second language (L2) learning demotivation, leading to positive L2 learning behavior, and resilience is receiving renewed attention in the field of L2 learning (Kim and Kim 2017). Conceptualizing resilience as a psychological construct began with the question of why some people are vulnerable to adversity while others are resistant (Franklin et al. 2012). As L2 learners also experience difficulties in their L2 learning, which usually takes years of continuous effort, it is worth exploring how learners overcome learning challenges and recover from L2 learning demotivation from the perspective of resilience.

In this paper, we make the theoretical assumption that applying the concept of resilience to English as a foreign language (EFL) learning would shed new light on L2 learning (de)motivation studies. However, thus far, EFL learning (de)motivation researchers have paid scant attention to resilience, with only a few notable exceptions (Kim and Kim 2017). Moreover, the current literature on L2 resilience does not utilize verbal data obtained from EFL learners, which results in overreliance on previous

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**Electronic supplementary material** The online version of this article (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-017-0365-y>) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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resilience questionnaire items used in the field of psychiatry or mental health. Therefore, this study examined EFL students' prominent demotivators and the components<sup>1</sup> influencing EFL learning resilience by conducting a series of systematic, semi-structured interviews with both EFL students and instructors in primary and secondary schools in South Korea (henceforth Korea).

## Literature Review

### EFL Learning Demotivators

In the EFL context, where English is taught as a school subject, many L2 researchers attributed L2 demotivation to adverse learning situations such as rigid, grammar-based course books and the negative influence of EFL teachers (e.g., Falout et al. 2009; Kikuchi and Sakai 2009). There are also context-specific factors found in the East Asian context (Falout et al. 2009; Kim et al. 2014). Socioeducational consensus that primarily equates EFL proficiency with university entrance exams can be one of the dominant reasons for such widespread demotivation among EFL students in East Asia. In this social milieu, the successful admittance into apparently prestigious universities is viewed as climbing the social ladder into the nation's power elite group (Zeng 1995). This tendency was particularly intensified in China due to the one-child policy it maintained from 1979 to 2015 (Feng et al. 2016). The compulsory nature of EFL learning, the widening proficiency gap among students, and the social pressure to learn English for utilitarian purposes have been identified as demotivators among Chinese and Korean EFL students (Kim et al. 2014).

Given the competitive educational atmosphere in this region, L2 researchers focused on the different characteristics of demotivators in primary and secondary school contexts. Generally, as students advanced academically, their degree of demotivation increased (Kim 2012); even grade three to six elementary school students in Korea grew demotivated as their school grade advanced (Kim 2011). One of the dominant demotivators for junior high school learners was dissatisfaction with the learning atmosphere (Kim and Lee 2014). Additionally, the compulsory nature of English classes, reduced self-confidence, and difficulty of learning English were identified as demotivating factors among junior high school students (Choi and Kim 2013). EFL classes for high school students

prepare them for university entrance exams. Hamada and Kito (2008) identified five demotivators among 87 Japanese high school students: (1) learning environment, (2) teacher's lack of English competence and inadequate teaching style, (3) students' lack of intrinsic motivation, (4) non-communicative teaching methods, and (5) traditional textbooks and lessons.

### Resilience Studies in Psychology/Psychiatry, Education, and Business Administration

The psychological definition of resilience is "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar et al. 2000, p. 543). In other words, this denotes overcoming stress and maintaining high mental stamina despite suppressive adversity (Herrman et al. 2011). Resilience is a composite of dynamic factors, including a range of psychological and social traits (Luthar et al. 2000; Shin et al. 2009).

Based on the resilience studies conducted in the academic disciplines of psychiatry, education, and business administration, Table 1 summarizes the studies that have been conducted in these disciplines.

As shown in Table 1, the three different academic disciplines share "relationship (or social capital)" and "control (or self-regulation)" as common factors of resilience. Relationships with others play an important role in coping with life challenges (Olsson et al. 2003). When students are aware of the social, human-relational resources they can employ (e.g., emotional support from teachers or parents), they are more likely to overcome life crises (Plunkett et al. 2008). The ability to self-control has also been considered an important construct of academic resilience (Collie et al. 2015). Control is defined as a sense of being able to manage future academic outcomes, and learners get a high score by controlling their academic difficulties. However, despite previous efforts to identify the concepts of resilience in the different academic disciplines of psychiatry, education, and business, conceptual inconsistencies that prevent the concept of resilience from being directly applied to language education remain. Only a handful of attempts have been made in the field of language education to apply resilience as a core concept.

Among the studies that exist to date, Kim and Lee (2014) found that demotivated EFL students displayed low resilience levels compared to their motivated counterparts. The study by Kim and Kim (2017), analyzing quantitative data on secondary students, conceptualized EFL learning-related resilience as perceived happiness, empathy, sociability, persistence, and self-regulation. Among them, persistence and perceived happiness were identified as dominant explanatory factors for EFL learning

<sup>1</sup> The term "factor" used in this study is an element discovered through quantitative research in the previous studies, and the term "component" is an element discovered through our qualitative research.

**Table 1** Concept of resilience in different academic disciplines

Discipline	Concept of resilience	Factors of resilience
Psychiatry	The person's ability to adapt to chronic adversity and cope well with traumatic life events (Jung et al. 2012)	A sense of control and tenacity Self-efficacy, tolerance of negative affect, and easy recovery Positive acceptance of change and secure relationship Leadership and trust in one's instincts Spiritual influences
Education	Academic buoyancy enabling students to be proactive to challenge such as academic strains and stressors from competition (Martin and Marsh 2008)	Self-efficacy Control Anxiety Academic engagement Teacher–student relationship
Business	The personal strength to predict higher performance and potential positive outcomes despite unfriendly and stressful workplace (Masten et al. 2009)	Asset-focused strategies: human capital, social capital, positive psychological capital Risk-focused strategies: social capital Process-focused strategies: self-awareness, self-regulation

proficiency. Supplementing previous studies on EFL learning-related resilience, this study further aims to explore the distinctive components influencing resilience that occur in various stages of the EFL learning process by analyzing qualitative data.

To this end, by analyzing interview data obtained from both EFL students and instructors, this study explored the components influencing resilience, guided by the principles of the Grounded Theory Approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The research questions are as follows:

- (1) What are the similarities and differences in the components influencing EFL learning resilience compared to those in other academic disciplines?
- (2) What are the major differences in components influencing resilience as EFL learners advance from elementary to junior high school and finally to high school?

## Methods

### Participants

In Korea, according to the national curriculum, English education starts in Grade 3 in public elementary schools, with 2–3 h of instruction per week. However, most students have opportunities to receive private education from private institutions or cram schools, also known as *hagwon* (Hu and McKay 2012). Parents emphasize their child's English proficiency, which has functioned as a

measurement of success when it comes to entering top universities and employment (Choi 2008).

In the light of this background, we interviewed 23 students (elementary: 8, junior high school: 7, high school: 8) and 9 EFL teachers (elementary: 4, junior high school: 3, high school: 2) from Seoul (capital city) and Gyeonggi-do (vicinity of Seoul) in Korea (see Table 2). Elementary school A was a small school located in Paju City, a rural area where the parents' socioeconomic status was low. This school had one native English-speaking instructor who taught 3 hours per week. Elementary school B was situated near manufacturing facilities in Ansan City, an industrial area in Gyeonggi-do, where students' academic achievement was lower than that in other schools in the area. This school had no native English-speaking instructor. Junior high school A was located in a residential area in Seoul, where the students' socioeconomic status was middle to low in range. Junior high school B was surrounded by farms and manufacturing facilities in Gwangju City, Gyeonggi-do. High school A was located at the center of a residential area in Seoul composed of apartment complexes. High school B was an independent private school in Gangnam district in Seoul where most parents' average socioeconomic status was high.

### Data Collection

This study intended to explore the components influencing EFL learning demotivation and resilience and thus employed the topic-centered narrative interview method (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Since previous research has

**Table 2** Participants

School level	School	Number of teachers	Number of students
Elementary	A (Paju, rural area)	2	8
	B (Ansan, industrial area)	2	8
Junior high	A (Seoul, residential area)	1	7
	B (Gwangju, farming and manufacturing area)	1	8
High	A (Seoul, residential area)	1	8
	B (Seoul, residential area)	1	8

not used interview data to identify the unique components influencing EFL resilience, the present research is exploratory in nature. The analysis of qualitative data collected through interviews allows researchers to probe concrete experiences of individuals and understand a specific phenomenon (Seidman 2013). We collected data primarily through semi-structured interviews composed of two consecutive steps conducted in the summer and fall of 2016 (see Table 3). As a pilot study, we interviewed nine EFL teachers to collect background information regarding their school environment and investigate the components influencing EFL learning resilience. In addition, we asked the EFL teachers to recommend two high-proficiency (HP) and two low-proficiency (LP) students who could participate in the main study.

The pilot interviews lasted 30 min on average. After analyzing the data obtained, the interview questions were modified and finalized for the main study with the designated EFL learners.

For the main study, 23 students participated in the semi-structured interviews conducted from August to September 2016. As stated above, the participants were recommended by their teachers, but they participated in the study voluntarily and gave their written consent. Interview questions comprised relevant items inquiring about participants' EFL learning experience and components influencing resilience related to EFL learning. The first section of the interview questions covered participants' general attitude toward learning English, changes in their English test scores, motivating and demotivating components in learning EFL, and their personal learning experiences such as private tutoring or attending private English institutes. In the

second section, participants were asked questions related to their relationships and control, based on previous studies on resilience (Jung et al. 2012; Luthar et al. 2000; Martin and Marsh 2008; Masten et al. 2009).

Before conducting interviews with students, the questionnaire was sent to the teachers thereby allowing them to assess the difficulty level of the questions in advance. Interviews were conducted in-person in Korean, which was both the interviewer and participants' first language, at a place and time the students preferred (see Appendix for sample questions). All the interviews were recorded after obtaining the participants' consent. Interviews with students lasted 20 min on average. After the initial analysis, the teachers and students were asked supplementary follow-up questions via email or phone to confirm the students' current English proficiency and verify the data obtained through the interviews.

### Data Analysis

To specify the components influencing EFL learning resilience, we analyzed the obtained data through interviews using the three steps of Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1998). First, we coded the themes expressed by the participants (open coding). The initial process generated categories such as dissatisfaction with their current English proficiency. Second, we sorted the data using the initial coding and selected portions related to components influencing EFL learning resilience found in previous studies (selective coding). In the final step, when we discovered a component that influenced resilience significantly but was not included in previous studies, we

**Table 3** Data collection process

Method	Period	Time (min)	Participants
1. Pilot study			
Semi-structured interviews	From June to July 2016	30	9 EFL teachers
2. Main interview question development			
3. Main study			
Semi-structured interviews	From August to September 2016	20	23 EFL students

discussed and included it in the analysis. To ensure reliability in the coding process, first, each researcher conducted open coding separately, then changed the coded data and reached an agreement. In case of disagreement, we discussed and reanalyzed the conditions until we were in complete agreement.

Table 4 shows the frequency of the final categories identified in each student's interview transcript, based on the school level. Each interview was used as a unit of measurement. This means that even if a student made frequent references to one particular category, if it was within a single interview, it only counted once. Therefore, the frequency of a category did not exceed eight in the case of elementary and high school and seven in the case of junior high school.

## Results

### Overview of Identified EFL Learning Demotivators

In academic resilience, stressors that cause frustration and distress are regarded as demotivating components. Because of demotivators, learners may find it difficult to overcome difficulties and feel reluctant to study. In this section, based on the interview results, we examine the demotivators that learners experience from elementary to high school in Korea.

For elementary school students, the dominant demotivating component was associated with EFL teachers. Teachers' explanations were difficult to understand, and learners experienced stress when required to speak in English during class (see Online Resource 1 for interview excerpt).

The junior high school students commonly stated that the private academic institute for learning English or *hagwon* was their dominant demotivating component. All the participants had attended *hagwon* after school. Besides the official school curriculum, they depended on the private institution for supplementary lessons as well as advanced lessons. At *hagwon*, learners felt exhausted since they were

provided with more challenging EFL lessons (see Online Resource 2 for interview excerpt).

For high school students, lessons focusing on grammar and extensive vocabulary were the most detrimental components to their EFL learning. The students considered practical benefits, such as speaking English, to be the sole purpose of learning English. Hence, they thought learning grammar in English class was impractical (see Online Resource 3 for interview excerpt).

By examining elementary, junior high school, and high school students' interviews, three distinctive demotivating components were identified: teachers' incomprehensible explanations for elementary school students, exhausting *hagwon* classes for junior high school students, and grammar and vocabulary learning for high school students.

It is noteworthy that memorizing grammar and vocabulary was stated as a common demotivating component by not only high school but also elementary and junior high school students in Korea. In other words, all the participants felt pressured to memorize countless words and grammar-related features, which demotivated them (see Online Resource 4 for interview excerpt).

Thus, the demotivators of EFL learning in Korea were EFL teachers, *hagwon*, and the pressure to memorize vocabulary and grammar, which was considered impractical. As mentioned in the literature review, these demotivating components are the stressors for which students need to build resilience. Their awareness of composite, unique demotivators will enable them to overcome the difficulties of EFL learning, which implies that they have the opportunity to increase their individual levels of EFL learning resilience.

### Components Influencing Resilience

#### *Social Support*

As discussed in previous studies regarding resilience, each learner's external context plays a crucial role. Learners possess the ability to improve when they are supported and encouraged by influential figures such as parents, siblings,

**Table 4** Coding categories of resilience concepts in student interview data

Category	Elementary ( $n = 8$ )		Junior high ( $n = 7$ )		High ( $n = 8$ )		Total ( $n = 23$ )	
	$f$	%	$f$	%	$f$	%	$f$	%
Social support	7	87.5	7	100	8	100	21	91.3
Emotional regulation	3	37.5	2	28.6	6	75	12	52.2
Clear learning goal	4	50	3	42.9	4	57.1	11	47.8
Tenacity in EFL learning	1	12.5	5	71.4	3	37.5	8	34.8

$n$  number of participants,  $f$  frequency, % percentage

and teachers. They receive two forms of support: emotional and academic.

When students receive consistent encouragement and positively interact with those listening to their problems rather than insisting “just do it,” they are able to overcome their difficulty with EFL learning, which functions as a source of resilience. Emotional support from parents or teachers is particularly essential to improving their competence.

[Excerpt 1]

**S9\_JMH**<sup>2</sup>: When learning English became very difficult, I did not want to study anymore and complained a lot. At that time, my mom and teachers told me that everyone has troubles and I am not the only one. They encouraged me a lot. I didn’t quit and put in more effort.

When emotional support was not sporadic but constant, support from others helped increase students’ resilience levels.

[Excerpt 2]

**T5\_JM**<sup>3</sup>: He received 50 points (out of 100) in the mid-term English test, but it increased to 70 in the final. I encouraged him a lot by saying, “you can have a better score if you don’t lose control.” For almost a month, I kept telling him, “you can do much better, so don’t give up.”

Another component, academic support, comes from teachers, parents, siblings, and friends through various means, such as asking specific questions related to a reading passage. When students solve difficult questions with the help of others, they are not discouraged and continue the learning process. As they advance academically, the presence of academic assistance becomes an important component in exercising resilience for Korean learners.

[Excerpt 3]

**S20\_HMH**: I can ask my friends to solve the question I am struggling with and explain the solution as well.

When learners perceive different resources they can utilize and perceive the support they can receive, they feel

confident about handling adversity. These can be a springboard to overcoming adversity in EFL learning in Korea.

### *Emotional Regulation*

During EFL learning, learners may experience stress or negative emotions, and they are expected to deal with those feelings effectively for successful EFL learning. Regulating these negative emotions is a key component influencing EFL learning resilience in Korea. In this study, participants stated that when they have appropriate coping strategies they are able to overcome difficulties and negative emotions or stress caused by EFL learning and continue their learning. It was observed that the degree of negative emotions arising from students’ frustration with EFL learning increased as their school grade advanced. This led them to develop their own unique coping strategies for a variety of stressors or negative feelings as they advanced school levels.

Compared to junior high school and high school students, elementary school students did not express any stressed or negative emotions related to EFL learning. As presented in Excerpt 4, elementary school students in Korea are rarely stressed while learning EFL because the learning content is age appropriate and private institutes focus primarily on speaking and listening activities, not solely on grammar and vocabulary memorization.

[Excerpt 4]

**T1\_EM**: It seems that they haven’t been stressed. They have no tough schedule with attending private institutions, which several upper-year students attend, so I don’t think they need to develop emotional regulation strategies.

As learners advanced to junior high school, the importance of English learning in Korea increased, and all participants indicated that they felt stressed or had negative feelings while studying English. Recognizing their stress, some attempted to refresh themselves rather than continue studying. However, based on the participants’ gender, this degree of perception and coping with stress was displayed differently. Boys did not explicitly mention experiencing negative emotions or creating specific regulative strategies. However, girls recognized their negative emotions and discovered coping strategies such as refreshing themselves.

[Excerpt 5]

**S10\_JMH**: When I feel frustrated, I just keep studying... By continuing, I can forget about my own stress.

**S14\_JFH**: When I am stressed..., I take a good rest and then handle them again.

<sup>2</sup> The students were named using abbreviations in the present study—advanced level (Elementary = E, Junior high = J, and High school = H); gender (Male = M and Female = F); and proficiency level (Low proficiency = L and High proficiency = H). Each student has a number before the abbreviation to distinguish different students. For instance, student 1, related to elementary school, male, and low proficiency, was coded S1\_EML.

<sup>3</sup> The teachers were named using abbreviation as well—teacher number, advanced level, gender.

In high school, participants experienced stress and were frustrated by the increased learning burden. To control their high stress levels, high school participants created more elaborate, detailed strategies for emotional regulation. One dominant strategy was to refresh themselves by performing other activities, unrelated to learning, such as watching video clips.

[Excerpt 6]

**S17\_HFH:** I am stressed when I don't get a good score in English. When that happens, I enjoy myself by watching my favorite movies on YouTube.

Another form of regulating their stress was ignoring the negative feelings as stated by S10\_JMH in Excerpt 5. Rather than focusing on negative emotions or decreasing their stress levels, they were more interested in achieving a positive outcome by making a determined effort to learn EFL. This determination helped them ignore their negative feelings and neutralized the effects of stress.

### *A Clear Learning Goal*

The third component influencing EFL learning resilience of Korean learners is having a clear EFL learning goal. When learners have vivid, clear learning goals and internalize the positive outcomes of EFL learning, they are able to endure adversity and are not discouraged by learning difficulties or disappointing results. As learners advance academically, their vague and ambiguous learning objectives become clearer, leading to emotional and behavioral regulation.

In interviews with elementary school teachers and students, young learners in Korea showed varying degrees of interest in communicating with foreigners. In this case, it would be difficult to state that they had specific goals or objectives related to EFL learning in terms of their willingness to communicate. Instead, they showed an interest in foreign cultures or vague objectives related to their future career. It is difficult to postulate whether the vague forms of learning goals fully activated their willingness to overcome challenges, the evidence of resilience.

[Excerpt 7]

**T2\_EF:** We talk about whatever country the portion [in the English textbook] discusses. They are curious about other countries and cultures.

**S6\_EFH:** If I don't know English, I may experience difficulties in my future career or English tests at school. So, I think I need to learn English.

The junior high school students in Korea indicated that their objective in learning EFL was related to their future, such as obtaining a job or studying at a university, and EFL learning. As shown in Excerpt 8, unsatisfactory results of in-house test results contributed to setting up a clear goal of

having higher scores in the next in-house test. Specific goals helped the student's endeavor to overcome the immediate challenges, activating resilience.

[Excerpt 8]

**S13\_JFH:** When I was the first grader at junior high school, the test score of the first in-house test was lower than I expected. I got worried about my scores, which made me put more efforts in English learning. ... Next test, I received much higher score.

Participating high school students also expressed their own personal goals and objectives related to learning English. Students had more specific, short-term goals related to learning English, such as obtaining high scores in their College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) and having successful careers. Some even specified the moment they realized they need to study English and began to make an effort.

[Excerpt 9]

**S21\_HMH:** I am aiming to receive the perfect score in English tests at schools and CSAT. To prepare for that, I regularly took practice tests for CSAT, but I always got one question wrong. It made me frustrated. I found a prep-test book having only difficult questions. I started to study with the book. The reading passages were complicated despite my confidence in reading comprehension. Studying with the book, I felt that I needed more preparation for the test. ... Finally, I received a higher grade in the in-house test.

### *Tenacity in EFL Learning*

Another component influencing the resilience of Korean EFL learning context is tenacity—the ability to remain focused on a task and accomplish it. Even though the students had difficulties during EFL learning, the determination not to quit and endure had a beneficial impact. Many elementary school students complained about the difficulty of reading long sentences, which they did not know how to resolve. Of the eight students, only one explicitly attempted to regulate her behavior and attitude to complete a task in spite of facing difficulties in EFL learning.

[Excerpt 10]

**S6\_EFH:** Sometimes, I don't want to study English. When that happens, I suppress my feelings and determine to put in more effort.

In junior high school, learners began to express their dissatisfaction with rote learning, a widespread teaching method in private institutes where students are instructed to

memorize nearly all the passages in the textbook for securing high test scores in their in-house tests. Undoubtedly, memorizing a reading passage in a textbook is a laborious task, and participants clearly expressed their dissatisfaction with it. However, it was reported in the interviews that regardless of being compelled to rote learn, participants were able to obtain high test scores in their in-house tests.

[Excerpt 11]

**T7\_JM:** Making my students memorize the passage certainly guarantees a good grade. In this regard, it is an efficient method.

**S9\_JMH:** As school grades go up, vocabulary items are becoming difficult. So it is hard to memorize them all... I keep reading and memorizing them repeatedly.

Korean EFL students were inclined to concentrate on a task until they found an optimal solution. They recursively read sentences they did not comprehend until finally understanding it. A teacher working at a high school also supported tenacity as a major component influencing resilience. They found it important to put in the effort and focus on the task until they achieved their goals, even though they experienced disappointment with unsatisfying results on English tests.

[Excerpt 12]

**S21\_HMH:** I write down the questions I don't know separately and keep reading them to understand them completely.

**T6\_HF:** One of my students was stressed out because of her low test score, but she put in her best effort constantly. Finally, her test scores increased. If students were disappointed with their test scores and gave up, their English proficiency would not improve at all.

## Discussion

In a similar manner to the previous literature on psychiatry, education, and business administration, this small-scale study on 23 Koreans' EFL learning resilience identifies strong social support and emotional regulation as the components helping learners continue EFL learning despite adversity. Strong social support is one of the components influencing EFL learning resilience in the field of education (Morrison and Allen 2007). In this study, when learners recognize the presence of reliable social support, this provides a solid foundation for enhancing their EFL learning resilience. Parents provided emotional support and inspiration to help learners overcome adversity and

continue with their EFL learning. Teachers and peers were shown to offer academic assistance by suggesting practical solutions. Emotional regulation is concerned with Korean learners' effective control of their negative emotions during their learning. While resilience studies in education have focused on anxiety, emotional regulation in this study focuses not solely on anxiety but rather on the effective management of negative emotions. Particularly in the EFL learning context in East Asia, an enormous amount of competition among peers is often observed in terms of the pressure to obtain a high score in English tests as the primary way of gaining admission to prestigious universities or global, large-scale companies. In this context, EFL learners often fall victim to negative emotions and demotivation (Kikuchi 2013), and it is important for them to be able to first perceive their negative emotions and then manage them effectively and proactively to maintain high resilience levels.

This study identified two additional components influencing EFL learning resilience: clear learning goals and tenacity. The effects of clear learning goals have not been extensively discussed in other academic disciplines. Our study demonstrated that learners showed high levels of EFL learning resilience when they had clear and specific EFL learning goals. It was reported that specific learning goals contribute to improved learning behavior (Leondari et al. 1998). In L2 motivation research, learners' concrete goals and their participation in L2 communities led to enhanced levels of L2 learning motivation (Kim 2010). This study found that learning goals play a similar role in enhancing students' resilience. When a goal is vague and EFL learners do not perceive its immediate value, their resilience system becomes unstable and may not function in an appropriate manner. The other distinctive component identified was tenacity, or the ability to continue learning even when demotivated or disappointed. This is a distinctive feature for learners to overcome EFL learning challenges, as Kim and Kim (2017) has discussed. This component allows the learner to make an effort to achieve his or her goals without giving up, even when experiencing L2 learning demotivation or low L2 proficiency. Kim and Kim (2017) have shown that persistence, a component similar to tenacity, plays an important role in enhancing motivated behavior and L2 proficiency.

Regarding the second research question, the present study showed that students' recognition of resilience was considerably different across school grades. Elementary school students in general did not have concrete awareness of the components activating resilience, which might be related to their relatively low cognitive development. As shown in Table 4, except with regard to emotional regulation, elementary school students did not display a high level of resilience compared to their junior high and high



school counterparts. After joining junior high school, they tended to become more aware of the various components influencing resilience. Moreover, as they advanced to high school, the components influencing resilience became elaborate.

Korean elementary school students in their early stages of EFL learning do not experience much stress, and their learning goals are still somewhat vague; for example, their goal may simply be developing communication skills (Kim 2012). For them, social supports seem more significant than tenacity and emotional regulation. When learners receive stable social support, they can recover from adversity despite a lack of tenacity. Junior high school students begin to experience a cognitive burden and recognize demotivators (Kim 2009), and thus the role of tenacity emerges as a dominant component. Junior high school learners begin to express specific learning goals that help them improve the ability to endure learning difficulties. In high school, the identified demotivators become elaborate (Falout et al. 2009), and overcoming difficulties requires emotional regulation to combat academic stress and other negative feelings. Having interactive and constructive discussions with their friends on the difficulties they face functions as social support among high school students in Korea.

## Summary and Implications

Despite a few notable exceptions (Kim and Kim 2017; Kim et al. 2017), resilience and motivation are still new in the field of EFL learning. This paper first identified key demotivators from Korean EFL learners in three different school levels: elementary, junior high school, and high school. It was assumed that these demotivators provide a conceptual springboard for Korean EFL learners to recover

from their demotivation while facing learning difficulties. The identified demotivators were teachers' lack of clear delivery for elementary school students, excessive after-school learning programs at private institutes, or *hagwon*, for junior high school students, and impractical English lessons focusing on grammar and not realistic verbal exchange for high school students. Furthermore, the pressure to memorize vocabulary and grammar was considered a common demotivating component across school grades. This study also identified four components influencing Korean EFL students' academic resilience: social support and emotional regulation from previous studies, and a clear learning goal and tenacity in EFL learning from the current interviews. The study revealed that these components play a crucial role in recovering from EFL learning demotivation.

This explorative study aimed to explore distinctive components influencing EFL learning resilience by implementing a thematic interview analysis. As we did not intend to generalize from the limited number of participants, further studies need to be conducted to validate these findings with various EFL populations by employing different data collection methods and considering participants' socioeconomic status. Additionally, this study utilized retrospective verbal accounts from participants with different EFL proficiencies and school grades to identify components influencing resilience of Korean EFL learners. Further longitudinal research, capturing the fluctuations in resilience, would be required to obtain a systematic understanding of the psychology of EFL learning path.

## Appendix

### Sample questions for semi-structured interviews

Interview questions	Code name
1 Do you have any experience of studying English hard? Could you tell me what your experience is like and the reasons for that?	Code 1: English learning motivation experience
2 Have you ever experienced that you don't want to study English? Could you tell me what your experience is like and the reasons for that?	Code 2: English learning demotivation experience
3 Have you ever experienced that you overcome difficulties in learning English and have better results?	code 3: the experience of resilience
4 Do you ask people around you for help when you are having difficulties while studying English? Whom do you ask? (e.g., friends, parents, siblings, school teachers, etc.) What kind of help do you ask for?	code 4: relation
5 Have you ever felt bad feelings (sadness, anger, annoyance, etc.) while studying English? What did you do then?	Code 5: control

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