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# An exploratory study on Vietnamese university students' resilience in learning English as a foreign language

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Learning a second language (L2) is believed to be a long process with various challenges. While many students tend to give up or fall behind when faced with difficulties, others can overcome them to learn even better. It has been acknowledged that this is associated with academic resilience, the ability to cope with and adapt to adversity in learning. Realizing the importance of this capability, the current study aimed to investigate the level of academic resilience among English majors at a university in the Mekong Delta region. In addition, the potential difference between male and female students was explored. The study attempted to identify frequent obstacles and coping strategies among the study's participants. A total of 150 English majors were involved in the research survey, and five were chosen to participate in the interviews. The findings revealed that the participants have an average degree of resilience, and there is no difference in terms of gender in their levels of resilience. The students' struggles mainly stemmed from linguistics-related challenges, high teacher and curriculum demands, individual shortcomings, and demotivation factors. However, the students suggested several helpful strategies to deal with the difficulties and move toward becoming more resilient learners.

## KEYWORDS

academic resilience, English learning difficulties, overcoming strategies, gender-specific resilience, Vietnamese EFL learners

## 1 Introduction

Learning a new language is believed to be a protracted process that challenges learners to overcome a wide range of struggles. Common problems, as revealed from the literature and practical observation and experience of language learners, include both academic and non-academic challenges. Previous authors ([Martin and Marsh, 2006](#); [Morales and Trotman, 2011](#); [Winfield, 1994](#)) suggested a wide range of risks associated with a student's academic life including academic pressure, stress, difficulties in the classroom, bullying, physical and verbal abuse, parental separation, poverty, learning disabilities, inadequate classroom instruction, generalized hopelessness in the community, living in a rural area, and facing financial hardships.

It is commonly accepted that studying a foreign or second language (L2) is vital for all individuals. However, the quality of English language learning in Vietnam has frequently been "not yet satisfactory" ([Le and Phan, 2013](#), p. 248). According to [Tran \(2013b\)](#), the leading causes of the modest quality of English instruction at Vietnamese universities are the students' varying levels of English proficiency, the scarcity of teaching resources, the grammar-based and examination-oriented teaching methods, the condensed amount of class time, and the teachers' insufficient time and effort spent on lesson planning and improvement. Additionally, [Thao and Trung \(2022\)](#) cite that students may face a range of difficulties in the English

classroom, including linguistic (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary) and psychological (motivation, anxiety, and attitude) difficulties. Besides, Vietnamese students are often described as passive learners who depend totally on the teacher, listening to the lectures, taking notes, and reproducing their memorized knowledge in exams (Hoang, 2021; Tran, 2013a).

In reality, it can be witnessed that while innumerable difficulties may cause L2 students to fall behind, others can recover quickly, feel more optimistic about themselves, and preserve their learning (Zarrinabadi et al., 2022). It has been proposed that positive psychology in individual differences, especially resilience, is the main factor in explaining this phenomenon when resilience refers to “the capacity to bounce back, to withstand hardship, and to repair yourself” (Wolin and Wolin, 1993, p. 5). Resilience is, therefore, an important asset for individuals to possess (Bartley et al., 2010). Admittedly, not every teacher knows this concept and its influence on students’ academic life. Also, resilience attached to language learning and language majors has been under-explored. That is a great motivation for the authors’ decision to carry out a study on this topic, following Cassidy (2016, p. 1) view saying that “identifying characteristics that enable academic achievement and that distinguish individuals who are successful from those who are not, setting intellectual capacity aside, remains a worthy pursuit for educational research and practice.”

The interplay of resilience and gender is still a matter of inquiry. Different scholars have claimed inconsistent and even contrasting findings. For instance, Lobo (2024) found that school girls were more resilient learners than school boys. On the contrary, gender did not make significant differences in learners’ resilience in other studies, including Duan et al. (2024) and Alabdullah et al. (2025).

This study, therefore, aimed to fill the current gaps in the literature. It investigated the level of resilience among English majors at our institution, a university in the Mekong region. The study was also expected to touch upon issues such as gender, frequent difficulties faced in the learning process, and individuals’ experiences and strategies for overcoming them.

The research questions that informed this study are:

RQ1: What is the overall level of academic resilience among Vietnamese English majors?

RQ2: How different are male and female students in terms of resilience?

RQ3: What common difficulties are encountered by English majors?

RQ4: What strategies are used to overcome these difficulties?

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 An overview of resilience

Resilience is not new and has been widely researched in educational settings. Researchers have various definitions of resilience in the literature and conceptualize this abstract concept differently. For example, resilience is defined as “the process of capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening

circumstances” (Masten et al., 1990, p. 425). Riley and Masten (2005), nevertheless, provide a brief and seemingly simplified definition of resilience, as “referring to patterns of positive adaptation in the face of adversity” (p. 13). Howe et al. (2012) describe resilience from two different viewpoints, including psychological and sociological perspectives. The former defines resilience as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Howe et al., 2012, p. 543). According to the second viewpoint, resilience consists of several social indices that signify the interaction methods between individuals and their contexts and the kind of chances and occasions that people may have to develop (Ungar, 2012; Howe et al., 2012).

Other authors, such as Kim and Kim (2017), define resilience as “the sum of an individual’s abilities that allow him or her to bounce back from adversity and even thrive in the face of difficult times” (p. 2). Simply put, resilience is comprised of a multitude of sub-capacities. According to Truebridge (2016), resilience encompasses dynamicity and negotiation of internal and external factors. The internal factors have to do with each individual’s personal strengths, attributes, and past experiences. The external factors are the environment-related conditions such as school, family, community opportunities, resources, support, and services.

In many earlier studies about resilience, potential causes and sources are identified. Aliyev et al. (2021), for example, outline a long list of such causes, which includes pressure and stress at school, academic difficulties, physical and verbal harassment, bullying, parental separation, poverty, learning disabilities, lack of quality education in school, widespread hopelessness in the community, living in a rural area, and having economic disadvantages.

In recent years, resilience has been commonly viewed as a process and not an individual trait. The process occurs throughout our lifespan, and we all use specific strategies to face obstacles and challenges. These strategies help us overcome stressful situations and gain new insights for future encounters (Tülüce, 2018). Like with other well-established psychological factors, including multiple intelligences or emotional intelligence, more resilient people are assumed to have more potential to be successful.

### 2.2 Resilience in academic contexts

In educational contexts, resilience has been considered a dominant factor contributing to success. This is widely studied concerning the psychological health and wellbeing of the two direct stakeholders in education: the teachers and the learners. For teachers, Springer published a book in 2021 named *Cultivating Teacher Resilience: International Approaches, Applications, and Impact* (Mansfield, 2020). A review of related literature shows that teacher resilience has been investigated and explored within many scopes and through various lenses. According to Beltman (2021), teacher resilience can be approached from different perspectives, namely, person-focused perspectives, process-focused perspectives, context-focused perspectives, and system-focused perspectives. Resilience studies have been well-established; however, learner-focused research on academic resilience deserves as much attention.

On the side of learners, academic resilience can be defined as the ability to reverse academic misfortune and failure and succeed (Martin and Marsh, 2006). Several definitions exist; however, as Tülüce (2018)

has stated, resilience mainly reflects two general tendencies. First, resilience can be conceptualized as a psychological construct incorporating person-related factors, including self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation, resourcefulness, and health, which are essential to overcoming adversity. In the second trend, besides personal resilience, a wide range of other factors are incorporated into the concept. Social support systems (Tülüce, 2018; Alahmari and Alrabai, 2024), including friends, family, and community resources, are important. Putting personal and social dimensions together, academic resilience encompasses cognitive, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual factors (Truebridge, 2016), outgoing personalities, self-esteem, and problem-solving ability (Masten and Obradović, 2006). Other prominent social factors include enlisting social support, compassionate relationships, and opportunities for responsible participation (Masten and Obradović, 2006).

Within the traits of resilience, Zhang (2022) enumerated the following characteristics of individuals who possess personal resilience. These include self-assurance, flexibility, taking calculated risks, problem-solving, robustness, self-control, social skills, self-direction, optimism, cooperation, curiosity, and tendency toward self-regulation, sense of growth resulting from challenging circumstances, beliefs, hopes, reflection, creativity, initiative, and an incredible sense of fun supporting a realistic outlook on life.

Prominent in other resilience theories are risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors in students' academic lives were identified by Masten (1994) as chronic illnesses, living without parents, experiencing a natural disaster, having financial difficulties, etc. Yang and Wang (2022) argued that "Although risk factors produce undesirable consequences in a learner's academic life, they can also affect their advancement in numerous fields, and may simultaneously influence the learner's advancement by triggering each other" (p. 2). Protective factors are the quality of a learner's traits, social surroundings, or interactions. Yang and Wang (2022) posited that the identification and elaboration of protective variables play a crucial role in assisting students in navigating the uncertainties inherent in their academic pursuits. In addition, Masten and Tellegen (2012) noted that protective factors can help learners experience favorable outcomes and are divided into internal and external categories. As Foster (2013) stated, while internal variables are related to personal character, external protective factors are related to a person's social surroundings.

In short, academic resilience, according to Cassidy (2016), is a mechanism for dealing with stress and anxiety in the university setting and a motivation for achieving academic and personal goals. Moreover, resilient learners can continue to attain high levels of success in the face of difficult events and situations.

## 2.3 Trends and issues in resilience research

Previous research roughly fell into these categories: establishing the concept and its components, approaching resilience from various perspectives (viewing it as a personal trait or a process characteristic), examining resilience as a competence in a broad academic context or a discipline-specific area, correlating academic resilience with other variables thus highlighting its role in L2 learning and suggesting implications for developing support programs.

Admittedly, research on this psychological property has had limitations. Luthar et al. (2007) mentioned issues including the

existence of too many definitions of the concept and its key component factors, the heterogeneity of challenges and risks involved, and the instability of resilience.

Given the variance in definitions, measuring methods, and scales, several commonalities of resilience are shared among authors and researchers. Regardless of methods or tools, resilience should be assessed against the three broad categories: adversity, positive adaptation, and protective factors (Tudor and Spray, 2018; Sarkar and Fletcher, 2013).

## 2.4 Resilience in foreign language learning and teaching

While there has been a rich body of literature on general academic resilience, this vigorous psychological capacity in L2 learning is still under-researched. Studies in L2 learning contexts, with no exception, are confronted with similar limitations, specifically the challenge of conceptualizing the construct and the precise methods to investigate it.

In Yang and Wang (2022), EFL students' resilience is comprised of (a) socio-affective factors (peer relations, parents' high expectations, and teachers' attention and kindness), (b) socio-economic factors (the financial contribution of parents' to education, economic and social class level), and (c) affective factors (anxiety, self-efficacy, motivation). The study of Zarrinabadi et al. (2022) explored the antecedents and consequences of language learners' resilience. The researchers discovered that resilience is a factor in predicting engagement (including classroom engagement and intention to continue) and wellbeing, while growth in linguistic attitude and ideal L2 self positively influence resilience.

Previous studies suggest that students with a high level of resilience seem to obtain more achievements in their learning than others. Academically resilient students, according to Alva (1991), are defined as those "who sustain high levels of achievement, motivation, and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school" (p. 19). According to Wang (2021), resilient learners may maintain their high standards of performance even when confronted with challenging circumstances and events. Waxman et al. (2012) found that very resilient students also felt more competition in the classroom. By comparison, pupils with low resilience were not as focused and thought reading lessons were harder.

According to Martin and Marsh (2006), academic resilience among English language learners should be relevant to all students because occasionally they may encounter some level of poor performance, adversity, challenge, or pressure. This is in contrast to some pioneering authors focusing on specific groups of students who may have experienced poor parenting, divorce, being raised in a disadvantaged background, or being ethnic minorities and extreme underachievers (Finn and Rock, 1997; Lindström, 2001; Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000; Masten, 2001).

## 2.5 Relevant studies

Many studies have been carried out on EFL resilience for different purposes. Waxman et al. (2012) investigated the differences between three groups of students: average, low-resilient, and high-resilient.

They made comparisons regarding their classroom learning environment and their behaviors in reading environments. Data was recorded from the students' performance on standardized achievement tests during 2 years. The results demonstrated that compared to the other two groups, the low-resilient students tended to be easily distracted and to fail to complete tasks.

In another context, Tülüce (2018) examined how pre-service English language teachers dealt with their academic obstacles. The findings of this study revealed the challenges faced by participants in their English language learning, namely inadequate teaching strategies, test-related anxiety, ignorance of the target culture, and difficulty interacting with native speakers. This study found that pre-service teachers relied on social and environmental protective factors such as support from peers, teachers, and families. They also relied on personal protective factors such as autonomy, problem-solving abilities, and positive feelings. In China, Liu and Chu (2022) used a quantitative approach to look into the resilience structure of EFL teachers. It was discovered that EFL teachers' resilience patterns remained within a moderate to high range.

The relationship between resilience and other factors was also studied widely in the literature. Zhang (2022), for example, examined the relationship between EFL students' resilience and academic motivation. Survey results showed that these two variables had a substantial mutual association. The author found that teachers' instruction and programs had an impact on how students developed their resilience abilities and that academic resilience was a factor that enhanced school success. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2021) investigated the structural connections between resilience and L2 learning motivation and how these connections impact L2 learners' motivated behavior and proficiency. The findings showed that whereas resilience might lower L2 learning motivation, it significantly increased motivated behavior. Quantitatively carried out, the study by Öz and Şahinkarakaş (2023) looked at the relationship between ELF students' resilience and academic achievement. According to the findings, a minor correlation was observed between students' academic resilience and achievement, and the participants had moderate levels of resilience.

Several other studies looked into the factors that influence academic resilience. In Greece, Stavradi and Karagianni (2020) explored teachers' resilience concerning demographic, professional, and school and class variables. The results showed that most elements did not maintain or weaken teachers' resilience. Other research by Erdogan et al. (2015) used quantitative approaches to examine the psychological resilience level of university students and its relationship to gender and academic discipline. It was found that the field of study had no significant effect on students' levels of resilience; nevertheless, male students showed higher levels of resilience than female students. Additionally, students' levels of resilience were found to be greater than average.

In the context of Vietnam, studies on resilience have mainly focused on challenging situations, such as learning in a foreign country or dealing with a pandemic. Nguyen et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between childhood experiences and resilience among international students. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, the authors found a significant relationship between resilience and the personal experience of attending a foreign college or learning a second language. The authors also found that when the students encountered difficulties in life, they

had specific coping mechanisms. Likewise, Tran et al. (2023) investigated overseas students' ability to withstand academic fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study results showed a strong correlation between resilience elements and burnout symptoms. Moreover, the authors concluded that resilience may shield international university students' mental health by lowering burnout in the post-COVID-19 new normal. Similarly, Trang (2021) investigated ESL university teachers' ability to bounce back from the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggested that staying resilient would help improve teacher retention and reduce turnover in the face of hardships.

Another trend of resilience studies concentrated on the validation of measurements (Nguyen and Dinh, 2022; Minh-Uyen and Im, 2021). Widely employed in the literature of resilience studies have been the 10-item CD-RISC-10 Connor and Davidson (2003) and the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30) by Cassidy (2016). In many contexts, including Vietnam, these resilience scales were used and thought to be reliable and effectively capture the psychometric properties among students at various school levels.

The literature review shows that research has focused mainly on traumatic, momentary life situations, and there is a shortage of studies on long-term resilience. Framed within a broad scope, this study aimed to explore academic resilience, concentrating on the challenges and coping strategies pertinent to EFL learning.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

The current study followed a descriptive research design using mixed research methods to examine English major students' resilience in learning at a university in Vietnam. The quantitative method with statistical numerical data was used in this study to systematically analyze resilience as a social issue (Watson, 2015). In combination, the qualitative method was employed to investigate the notion at a deeper layer of knowledge regarding the experience and meaning aspects of people's lives and social environments (Fossey et al., 2002). Thus, the methods were appropriate to answer the four research questions discussed earlier.

### 3.2 Participants

This study involved 150 participants who were students studying English as their major at university. The participation was voluntary. These students were from different years in their four-year program, representing approximately 15% of the population of English majors. They had at least 6 years of experience in English learning, and their English level was estimated to be equivalent to level B1 of the CERF (Common European Reference Framework) and above. Among these participants, five students were chosen to participate in separate interviews for more specific information about their resilience. The participants were well-informed, and the survey and interviews were meticulously conducted face-to-face; therefore, all data collected were valid. Table 1 below presents the basic demographics of the participants.



TABLE 1 Participants' demographics (N = 150).

	Number	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	44	29.3
Female	106	70.7
<b>University year</b>		
Freshman	2	1.33
Sophomore	72	48
Junior	16	10.66
Senior	60	40

### 3.3 Research instruments

#### 3.3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adapted from Cassidy's (2016) Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30). A total of 24 items were used in the study, with six items irrelevant and inapplicable in the Vietnamese academic context being excluded. This item exclusion and other revisions were determined after consultation with experts and questionnaire piloting. The items in the scale were a 5-point Likert scale and were classified into three subgroups: perseverance, reflecting and adaptive help-seeking, and negative affect and emotional responses. After piloting the questionnaire, the researchers decided to make some wording modifications to the original version. This adaptation was necessary because the original scale was used with a specific vignette (a given difficult situation), and in the present study, we examined resilience in a broader academic context. For example, "I would try to think of new solutions" was replaced by "I first contemplate diverse possible solutions to a problem to solve it." Similarly, the item "I would see the situation as temporary" was modified to "I would see any situation as temporary, and everything will be fine no matter how difficult they are." Items "I would work harder" and "I would keep trying" were combined into "I would keep trying and work harder" because they had pretty similar meanings. Table 2 presents the modified questionnaire we used in the study.

The questionnaire included eight reverse questions. According to Weijters et al. (2013), reversed items were converted because every item on a scale should have the same directional relationship with the construct of interest. This required extra work but was beneficial (Ray, 1983). Reversed items were a way to control reliability and avoid biases (Paulhus and Vazire, 2007). Occasionally, the researchers could ask questions where the response value deviates from the intended measurement (Hitti and Khan, 2022). For those reasons, the authors kept the reverse wording of some items in the original version of Cassidy's (2016) scale.

The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese to prevent misunderstandings. Two instructors—subject matter specialists—reviewed it for content validity and language clarity. For the officially used 24-item questionnaire, a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.788 was obtained.

#### 3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted. In a mixed-methods research design, semi-structured interviews are seen to be helpful as an adjunct to complement and deepen other approaches (Adams, 2015). Interviews in this study allowed the

researchers to obtain comprehensive, nuanced, and coherent data because the interviewers could improvise or ask follow-up questions when the interviewees hesitated or provided evasive answers. To explore the challenges faced and the coping mechanisms implemented by English language learners, the interviews were performed with four principal questions (see the Appendix) and extra supplementary questions as needed. To protect the participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used for the interviewees (Dearnley, 2005). Every interview was in Vietnamese and lasted around 25 min.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Responses to the questionnaire were collected, entered into an Excel file, and analyzed using SPSS version 22. The descriptive statistics test was conducted, and the results, including mean (M) and standard deviation (SD), were presented.

The difference between the two gender groups was investigated using an independent sample *t*-test. A *t*-test is a statistical test used to compare the means of two groups. When there is no mutual relationship between the two groups being compared, an Independent *t*-test is appropriate (Kim, 2015). This study ensured normal distribution of the data before conducting the *t*-test.

A thematic approach was utilized for qualitative data from the participants' responses. Transcriptions were made verbatim based on the audio recordings. In the present research, relevant details in the participants' answers were excerpted and translated into English. The researchers assessed and arranged the data into themes for discussion according to the research questions.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Average resilience level

Figure 1 indicates that the English majors in the study have a moderate level of resilience, with the component "reflecting and adaptive help-seeking" scoring the highest (M = 3.838). "Perseverance" comes next with a mean score of 3.579. In contrast, "negative affect and emotional response" has the lowest mean score of roughly 3.320.

As seen from the statistics in Table 3, item 7, which denotes students' efforts to work hard and overcome difficulties, has the highest mean score (M = 4.187, SD = 0.900). The second rank comes with item 1 (M = 4.167, SD = 0.755), indicating that learners consider various solutions to their academic problems. The lowest mean score is seen in item 3 (M = 3.660, SD = 0.975). This points to the participants' positive opinions toward challenging circumstances, and the students would view every difficult situation as transient and possible to work out.

Item 2, about effortless attitude toward problems, has a low mean score (M = 2.633, SD = 1.058). Item 4 (M = 3.760, SD = 0.967) also indicates a negative attitude (the intention of shifting future careers). However, the mildly low values of these items signal a positive degree in the students' perseverance.

Table 4 displays students' resilience in terms of "Reflecting and Adaptive Help-Seeking" strategies. In this sub-group of resilience, item 12 reveals that the learners would encourage themselves when having problems, and this item receives the highest score (M = 4.200, SD = 0.867). Item 16, which refers to an ability to assess personal

TABLE 2 Items in resilience factors.

Perseverance	1. I first contemplate diverse possible solutions to a problem to solve it.
	2. I quickly give up when things go wrong*
	3. I would see any situation as temporary, and everything will be fine no matter how difficult it is.
	4. I would change my career plans.*
	5. I would see the situation as a challenge.
	6. I would do my best to stop thinking negative thoughts.
	7. I would keep trying and work harder.
	8. I would not change my long-term goals and ambitions.
	9. I would look forward to showing that I can improve my grades.
Reflecting and adaptive help-seeking	10. I would start to monitor and evaluate my achievements and efforts.
	11. I would seek help from my tutors.
	12. I would encourage myself.
	13. I would try different ways to study.
	14. I would set my own goals for achievement.
	15. I would seek encouragement from my family and friends.
	16. I would try to think more about my strengths and weaknesses to help me work better.
	17. I would self-impose rewards and punishments depending on my performance.
Negative affect and emotional response	18. I would probably get annoyed.*
	19. I would begin to think my chances of success at university were poor.*
	20. I would probably get depressed.*
	21. I would be very disappointed.*
	22. I would begin to think my chances of getting the job I want were poor.*
	23. I would stop myself from panicking.
	24. I would feel like everything was ruined and was going wrong.*

\*Reverse items.

strengths and limitations to study more effectively, has the second-highest mean score ( $M = 4.133$ ,  $SD = 0.872$ ). The lowest mean score comes to item 11 ( $M = 3.207$ ,  $SD = 1.057$ ), which shows that the students seldom rely on assistance from their instructors.

Table 5 reveals that the item with the highest mean score is item 23 ( $M = 3.807$ ,  $SD = 0.910$ ). This is the sole regular item in this subgroup and denotes the ability to avoid anxiety when students confront adversity. The remaining items, which are reverse coded, have a medium to low mean score, indicating that the participants in this study are affected only to an inconsiderable degree by the challenges. The reverse-coded item with the highest value is item 18 ( $M = 3.780$ ,  $SD = 1.022$ ), showing that the participants would feel annoyed in difficult academic situations. Item 21, standing second with a rather low value ( $M = 3.307$ ,  $SD = 1.089$ ), indicates that the students would experience some despair toward challenges. The lowest statistic value is witnessed in item 19 ( $M = 2.947$ ,  $SD = 1.110$ ), according to which participants assume their available chances within their academic environment.

## 4.2 Difference in resilience between male and female students

An independent sample  $t$ -test was used to explore the difference in resilience levels between male and female students. The results

displayed in Table 6 show that there are no significant differences when considering the  $t$ -value and  $p$ -value regarding gender toward the three factors of resilience ( $p = 0.564 > 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.72 > 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.612 > 0.05$ ), respectively. The gender-specific mean scores in the factor “perseverance” are nearly the same, with the statistical values of males and females  $M = 3.611$  and  $M = 3.658$ , respectively. “Reflecting and adaptive help-seeking” witnesses a moderate difference between the two genders, with the mean scores of male learners  $M = 3.699$  and female learners  $M = 3.895$ . The average values of items in the factor “Negative affect and emotional response” show a minimal distinction between the two genders, with the mean score of male students reported as  $M = 2.958$  and female students as  $M = 2.899$ . All of these slight differences, however, are not statistically significant.

## 4.3 Academic challenges

The participants in the present study reported difficulties coming from a wide range of sources. The challenges are mainly related to the English language, teachers and curriculum, motivational issues, and individual shortcomings.

### 4.3.1 Language-related difficulties

The interview responses reveal that several of the difficulties encountered by the participants in their learning are typically

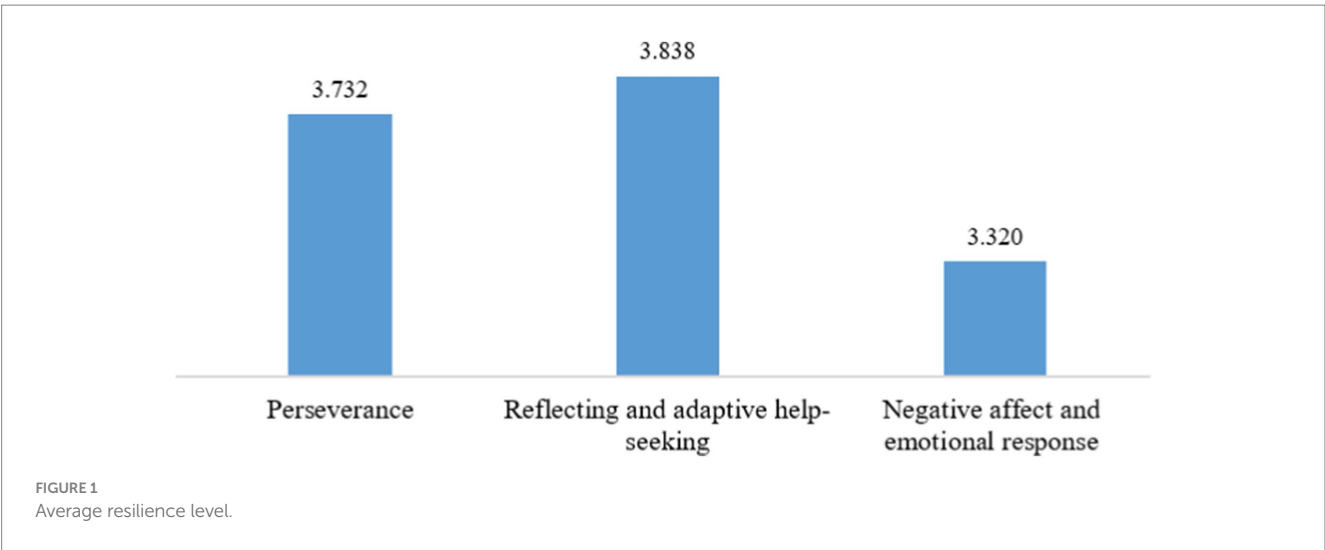


TABLE 3 Sub-category I—perseverance.

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
1	I first contemplate diverse possible solutions to a problem to solve it.	4.167	0.755
3	I would see any situation as temporary, and everything would be fine no matter how difficult it was.	3.660	0.975
5	I would see the situation as a challenge.	3.933	0.887
6	I would do my best to stop thinking negative thoughts.	3.813	1.083
7	I would keep trying and work harder.	4.187	0.900
8	I would not change my long-term goals and ambitions.	3.440	1.052
9	I would look forward to showing that I can improve my grades.	3.993	0.839
2*	I easily give up when things go wrong.	2.633	1.058
4*	I would change my career plans.	3.760	0.967

linguistics-related. For instance, many students have problems with pronunciation, and they think this is due to the L1–L2 phonological distance. Also, challenges in memorizing English vocabulary and completing lexical exercises are reported. Furthermore, in the students’ words, these problems could be associated with their lack of background in linguistic knowledge.

“I often have difficulty [...] and in remembering vocabulary [...]. During the process of learning English, I often have difficulty pronouncing English [...]. One of the most difficult things in learning English is pronunciation, especially the final sounds because, in Vietnamese, there are no final sounds.” (Interviewee A)

“The difficulty in learning a foreign language that I find difficult to overcome is forgetfulness [...] There are times when I come across easy, fundamental words and exercises that I had already studied, but I could not recall their definition or how to do them.” (Interviewee B)

TABLE 4 Sub-category II—reflecting and adaptive help-seeking.

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
10	I would start to monitor and evaluate my achievements and efforts.	3.867	0.910
11	I would seek help from my tutors.	3.207	1.057
12	I would encourage myself.	4.200	0.867
13	I would try different ways to study.	4.013	0.882
14	I would set my own goals for achievement.	3.987	0.851
15	I would seek encouragement from my family and friends.	3.773	1.148
16	I would think more about my strengths and weaknesses to help me work better.	4.133	0.872
17	I would start to self-impose rewards and punishments depending on my performance.	3.520	1.174

“I come from a poor rural area, so learning English there is very difficult [...] I do not have the opportunity to communicate and practice [...] so my English is quite weak.” (Interviewee E)

Speaking skills also cause problems for foreign language learners. The students in this study confess that they should try to speak confidently in front of a crowd. Also, it is important to focus on crucial factors, including practicing with a partner and actively answering various topics. Regarding speaking skills, the students express that they do not sufficiently have the confidence and the available opportunities for practice.

“I think the difficulty is speaking without fear of being wrong, afraid of being caught by others, or being laughed at.” (Interviewee E)

“I think the most difficult thing for me in learning English is speaking skills [...] I will need a partner or a friend to practice with every day. Besides, I should talk about many topics. I feel like speaking [...] requires learners to be proactive. If I do not have enough practice, I will never be good at it.” (Interviewee C)

TABLE 5 Sub-category III—negative affect and emotional response.

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
23	I would stop myself from panicking.	3.827	0.9104
18*	I would probably get annoyed.	3.780	1.0224
19*	I would begin to think my chances of success at university were poor.	2.947	1.1100
20*	I would probably get depressed.	3.187	1.1608
21*	I would be very disappointed.	3.307	1.0865
22*	I would think my chances of getting the job I wanted were poor.	2.987	1.1814
24*	I would feel like everything was ruined and was going wrong.	3.207	1.1131

An issue that is less frequently mentioned is facing difficulty with grammar. The learners admit they would use the wrong grammar if they did not review their grammar lessons regularly.

“If you do not have the opportunity to practice regularly in an academic environment and only use grammar at a common level of communication, it is easy to forget new points or even grammatically incorrect ones.” (Interviewee C)

### 4.3.2 Difficulties associated with highly demanding teachers and curriculum

Some students report problems related to a few heavily theoretical subjects in their EFL curriculum. They think that they do not have sufficient opportunities to practice. Also, teachers’ methods and instruction do not effectively engage learners in some courses.

“Sometimes, I do not have a chance to practice my speaking skills. I think the curriculum is too theoretical and lacks practice.” (Interviewee A)

“[...] some teachers have a way of teaching that is not attractive and exciting for learners [...] teachers need to have a good teaching technique or [...] have good means of communication to attract students to participate in the lessons. Some teachers I see have tried to implement it, but it is not very effective because only a few students participate, so the classroom atmosphere is not very lively. That makes me feel bored and unmotivated to study.” (Interviewee B)

### 4.3.3 Individual shortcomings

The interviewed students identify further academic challenges stemming from their shortcomings, especially their procrastination and lack of autonomy. The students reported these problems as the most challenging and inevitable at university.

“My biggest difficulty is procrastination.... That accidentally makes me stuck at one level and unable to develop further.” (Interviewee C)

“My self-study ability is quite weak, so I find it quite difficult because when I go to university, it requires me to find my sources of materials, knowledge, and ways to improve my skills [...] my personality being quite lazy and procrastinating.” (Interviewee E)

### 4.3.4 Sustainability of motivation

One problem worth mentioning is the feeling of demotivation. The students state that they tend to feel overwhelmed, dispirited, and temporarily disoriented when motivation is not sustained.

“Another difficulty is motivation [...] if I am motivated, I will study a lot, and if I am not motivated, I will not learn even a word. That causes my performance to develop slowly.” (Interviewee C)

“I find the biggest difficulty in learning English is keeping motivated throughout the learning process. Learning English is a long process, and if the results cannot be seen immediately, it is easy to get discouraged.” (Interviewee D)

## 4.4 Strategies to overcome difficulties

The interviewed students suggest different techniques to overcome problems, including actively seeking learning resources and assistance from friends.

Most participants say they actively use multiform sources such as documents, videos, films, and songs to improve their English.

“I will actively look for documents and watch instructional videos to learn English. For example, I often learn English through movies, listening to music, etc., to improve my listening ability as well as my vocabulary.” (Interviewee A)

“I look for outside sources of information such as listening to podcasts and videos that guide me to find ways to regain focus.” (Interviewee C)

“[...] I actively search and learn by myself.” (Interviewee E)

Another way to overcome this is to seek help from friends, especially close friends. When encountering a comprehension problem, students tend to rely on their friends for explanations. Some others suggest sharing their worries and concerns about learning with their friends to receive advice. Also, following a role model can inspire individuals to keep trying.

“I often attend classes with close friends, and we will discuss the topics ... Having friends to discuss is more fun than attending class alone and not understanding anything. When I encounter a complex topic, I ask a friend to summarize and explain it. Usually, that person is my close friend, and his communication is very interesting and easy to understand.” (Interviewee B)

“I will observe my friends who are in the same major. Although they already have good English achievements, they still try their best to participate in outside activities. That helps me [...] to continue studying.” (Interviewee C)

“When I saw that my friends had better results, I thought they had learned English very early, but when I talked to them, I knew they had only focused on learning English since grade 9 and high school. At that time, I thought if she could do it, I could do it too, and I started to improve and learn more.” (Interviewee D)



TABLE 6 Comparison of resilience between two genders.

Factor	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Std. error mean	t	p
Perseverance	Female	106	3.611	0.970	0.146	−0.579	0.564
	Male	44	3.658	0.919	0.089		
Reflecting and adaptive help-seeking	Female	106	3.699	1.030	0.155	−1.811	0.072
	Male	44	3.895	0.939	0.091		
Negative affect and emotional response	Female	106	2.958	1.169	0.176	0.504	0.615
	Male	44	2.899	1.044	0.101		

### 4.5 Additional comments about resilience

The students expressed further opinions about their ability to overcome obstacles. The participants report that resilience is an ability that is necessary for the English learning process, and they prefer to have a higher level of resilience. Also, they state that they have a certain method to avoid academic difficulties, but in some cases, they tend to get stuck, for instance, feeling nervous just before graduating. Also, participants draw attention to the fact that some students in their English major class tend to get confused when encountering difficulties and do not try hard enough to overcome these problems.

“I do not feel satisfied with my goal; it is just not enough because I want to develop myself further. In short, it is at a moderate level. I feel it is normal and want my ability to be even higher; the higher, the better.” (Interviewee A)

“I think I am quite satisfied but not extremely satisfied, but when I encounter difficulties, I also have a way to motivate myself and overcome them [...]. However, I have observed that when many friends encounter difficulties, they do not try to find a way to overcome it.” (Interviewee B)

“I am not satisfied with my level of resilience. I have found some methods to overcome difficulties, but I procrastinate often. Moreover, now, when I am about to graduate, I feel like I am stagnating, and I cannot escape this situation.” (Interviewee C)

“If the scale for overcoming difficulties had 5 stars, I would rate myself at level 3. I feel that I am not enough, and have not used all my strength to overcome difficulties.” (Interviewee E)

### 5 Discussion

Overall, the study reveals that students have an academic resilience level at a medium rate. Moreover, gender does not influence students’ resilience levels. The current study also finds some typical challenges students face and how they overcome them with strategies.

Regarding the three sub-components, students’ resilience slightly varies. The order from the highest to the lowest sub-groups is “reflecting and adaptive help-seeking,” “perseverance,” and “negative affect and emotional response.” This pattern is dissimilar to the study of [Öz and Şahinkarakaş \(2023\)](#), where the order was “perseverance,” “reflecting and adaptive help-seeking,” and “negative affect and emotional response.” This can be explained partly by the fact that the

students in the Mekong Delta may have a strong mind for social interactions and communication. This characteristic helps them build rapport with fellow students and be open-minded to ask for mutual amicable assistance.

It is worth mentioning that there is no statistical difference between male and female students in terms of their extent of resilience. This finding is in congruence with the results of several studies ([Erdogan et al., 2015](#); [Stavraki and Karagianni, 2020](#); [Duan et al., 2024](#); [Alabdullah et al., 2025](#)). There is no difference in terms of gender-specific resilience, which can be explained by the fact that equality is currently assured in many aspects of life, including educational conditions for both sexes. University students, especially English majors, usually experience similar affordances and challenges in the academic environment, and interactions frequently occur between the two genders, so they seem to share general characteristics regarding their academic resilience.

The current study also finds some common challenges faced by EFL students. Notably, the challenges that necessitate resilience are significantly associated with linguistics and personal characteristics, besides other influential factors, for instance, support from teachers, peers, and families ([Alahmari and Alrabai, 2024](#)). Their regular difficulties are mainly language-related, either skill-specific, like speaking and pronunciation, or knowledge-specific, like vocabulary and grammar. Students tend to be unconfident and avoid speaking because they fear ridicule when making mistakes. In addition, the participants gave some comments on the high requirements of the English language program. According to the interviews, they are concerned that some subjects are too hard and not motivating. Noticeably, creating more practical activities and an appealing learning atmosphere for students to engage in is important. Regarding linguistic knowledge, grammar and vocabulary are two areas that need more attention. It is believed that once grammatical and lexical competencies are enhanced, this would, in turn, help facilitate learners’ communication and self-confidence. Motivational issues are also a matter of concern. As a decisive factor that contributes to shaping second language learning, motivation is practically believed by the students to help them in their efforts to overcome academic challenges.

Regarding students’ strategies to overcome difficulties, the participants suggest an active personal effort to find resources and seek amicable help. The students in the study recommend attempts to search various technological applications and media for self-study to compensate for their limited background knowledge. It is apparent that the students’ awareness and motivation to achieve academic success have increased, and they always desire to become better versions of themselves. What is more, it cannot be denied

that external relationships, especially with friends, have a significant effect. The students consistently said they preferred to look for friendly assistance in many situations. Specifically, when encountering complicated topics or lessons, students tend to rely on friends as an alternative to lecturers to convey necessary knowledge. In social troubles, friends are listeners and advisors, and when they feel demotivated, they might look at their peers' performance as a model to follow.

The results suggest some pedagogical implications. First, as L2 learning is a long and challenging process, EFL teachers should help their students understand and accept this reality. By incorporating this understanding into regular instructions, teachers can help students have positive attitudes and motivation toward their learning process and prepare for and accept potential challenges. In addition, teachers can help learners identify their strengths and weaknesses. In other words, strong resilience strategies (e.g., personal efforts, self-evaluation, perseverance in this study) must be enhanced and sustained, whereas less frequently employed strategies should ultimately be encouraged and exercised (e.g., teacher's assistance and support, emotional advice). Furthermore, teacher-student communication outside of the classroom is needed. This could be maintained regularly as individual lecturer's office hours for content discussion of his or her subject courses. Alternatively, each school or department should have an office with staff to counsel students on academic and social issues when needed. Advice and consultancy are necessary when students are about to experience important happenings, for example, exams and graduation.

## 6 Conclusion and recommendations

This study explored the resilience to overcome academic challenges of students majoring in English at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The research also examined how gender affects the level of resilience among the sample of participants. Furthermore, frequent challenges pertinent to EFL learning and coping strategies were discovered.

The findings showed that English major students in this region of Vietnam have average resilience. In addition, there is no statistically significant difference between male and female students regarding resilience. The students have to face many learning difficulties, namely, problems associated with linguistic knowledge and skills, high curriculum and course teacher requirements, personal shortcomings, and demotivation issues. To sustain themselves, students employ strategies, including taking the initiative to find learning sources and asking for friends' assistance.

Overall, resilience is an important and beneficial quality that needs to be built up and developed. Authorities, including politicians, scholars, and schools, have become increasingly interested in this human asset and have begun introducing resilience-building programs into school curricula (Schofield and Beek, 2005; Hart and Heaven, 2013). For students, building up resilience increases their capacity to overcome challenges in their academic life and prepares them for future practice when they can help others face challenges and adversities (Schofield and Beek, 2005).

Although the present study has attained its fundamental objectives, it still needs to improve certain shortcomings. Firstly, the sample was limited in number; especially since only 5 students took part as respondents in the interviews, the qualitative data might not be highly representative. Additionally, the research included only English major students, so the findings did not provide a sufficiently diverse coverage.

Therefore, future research should expand the scope to collect broader information, for example, on resilience in EFL school pupils or non-English majors. In addition, since teachers play a decisive role in EFL classes, their perceptions about and development of resilience strategies could be promising research topics.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Academic Council of the School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

TL: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – review & editing. VT: Data curation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Investigation. LT: Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Appendix

### The interview questions

1. What challenges do you often face in learning English? Be as specific as you can.
2. What did you do to overcome those challenges?
3. What particular problems do you find most challenging for you? Why?
4. To what extent are you satisfied with how you overcome learning difficulties? Explain your answer.