



## Research Article

# Investigating English Learning Resilience and Its Associations with English Learning Anxiety

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**Abstract:** With the positive turn in second language acquisition, more positive psychological factors, including resilience, have been currently receiving an increasing amount of attention. However, research has underexplored the connection between resilience and negative emotions. Based on the Control-Value Theory (CVT), anxiety, as a negative achievement emotion, closely associated with resilience which is a personality trait. However, the interplay between resilience and negative emotions, particularly in the context of language learning, remains an under-researched area. To fill this gap, this study, grounded in CVT, sought to elucidate the correlations among English Learning Resilience (ELR), English Learning Anxiety (ELA). The present study implemented a mixed-methods design, collecting data from 863 senior high school students from Northeast China through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that the overall resilience in English learning among senior high school students was moderate to high, with self-regulation, sociability, and empathy exhibiting moderate to high levels. In addition, a significant negative correlation was found between ELR and ELA, indicating a potential protective role of resilience against anxiety. The implications for both foreign language teaching and learning were provided.

**Keywords:** English learning resilience, English learning anxiety, academic achievement, mediation analysis, senior high school students

## 1. Introduction

With the shift toward positive psychology in the second language (Dewaele et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2025b), research that delves into the positive traits of individual differences has come into researchers' sight. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) developed the view that the goal of positive psychology is to achieve a "positive turn" in research and practice in the field of psychology and proposed "three cores" of positive psychology: positive experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions. MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) introduced positive psychology to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and provided paradigms for further studies. Following this trend, many scholars have turned their attention to a host of positive psychological factors such as flow (Liu & Song, 2021), enjoyment (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019), and resilience (Kim & Kim, 2017; Kim et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2019; Liu & Han, 2022; Wei et al., 2023). As an essential factor of positive individual traits in positive psychology, resilience underpins academic success (Pinkney & Walker, 2020). Resilience refers to "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (Masten et al., 1990, p. 426).

Within Pekrun's (2006) Control-Value Theory, resilience—the capacity to adapt successfully to adversity—acts as a distal antecedent that positively shapes cognitive-emotional appraisal processes. It operates by simultaneously strengthening both control appraisals (the perceived ability to influence outcomes) and value appraisals (the perceived importance or interest of an activity), which in turn drive achievement emotions. This is achieved through cognitive and emotional regulation, enabling learners to reframe challenges, sustain task focus, and flexibly adjust goals, thereby supporting adaptive learning cycles.

The relationship is reciprocal and dynamic: trait resilience promotes adaptive appraisals, which in turn foster positive achievement emotions and improved performance. These successful outcomes then build further psychological resources, reinforcing resilience itself and creating an upward spiral of adaptation. In essence, resilience provides the foundational psychological capital that allows individuals to sustain the belief that their goals are valuable and attainable, especially under duress. It thus operates upstream in the Control-Value Theory (CVT) framework, not merely as a recovery mechanism but as a proactive filter that shapes appraisal processes in real time, making resilient individuals more likely to generate the control and value perceptions essential for long-term motivation, emotional well-being, and achievement.

Previous studies on English Language Resilience (ELR) have predominantly focused on university students (e.g., Ghanizadeh et al., 2019; Pathan et al., 2021), while less attention has been given to learners at the basic education level, particularly senior high school students. Research examining the relationship between ELR and other psychological constructs has largely emphasized motivation (e.g., Danesh & Shahnaazari, 2020; Kim & Kim, 2021; Kim et al., 2019; Zhang, 2022) and engagement (e.g., Liu et al., 2022; Zarrinabadi et al., 2022). However, there remains a scarcity of research exploring the connection between ELR and negative psychological factors in foreign language learning contexts. Although foreign language anxiety has long been a central concern in student affect, it has seldom been investigated in relation to resilience. Only a few recent studies have indicated a negative correlation between resilience and foreign language anxiety (Çakmak et al., 2023; Gordani & Sadeghzadeh, 2023; Shen, 2022), yet none of these have specifically focused on senior high school English learners in China.

While the relevance of positive psychological constructs in language learning is increasingly recognized, there remains a paucity of research examining how these resources, such as resilience, function within high-stakes, exam-oriented educational contexts. Such settings, characterized by intense academic pressure, may fundamentally shape the interplay between learners' psychological assets and their emotional experiences. This study, therefore, focuses on Chinese senior high school students—a population operating under the immense, singular pressure of the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao). As one of the largest and most consequential standardized examinations in the world, the Gaokao is administered annually in June to over ten million students across China. Serving as the primary, and often sole, criterion for university admissions, it holds immense societal weight, widely perceived as a pivotal determinant of an individual's academic trajectory, career prospects, and socioeconomic future. The examination spans two to four days, covering three core compulsory subjects, Chinese, Mathematics, and English, alongside discipline-specific tracks in sciences or humanities.

Within this high-stakes and structurally rigid system, English occupies a position of particular significance. As a mandatory subject with equal scoring weight to Chinese and Mathematics, English proficiency is not merely an academic competency but a decisive factor in Gaokao outcomes. Consequently, English learning is intensely instrumental, oriented overwhelmingly toward test performance rather than communicative competence or intercultural understanding. This context creates a pressurized learning environment in which anxiety is prevalent and the cultivation of psychological resilience becomes both challenging and critically important.

This exam not only dictates their future educational trajectories but also renders the English language a critical, often anxiety-inducing, component of their high-stakes assessment. Investigating resilience and anxiety within this context is crucial, as it allows us to understand whether and how psychological resilience can buffer against anxiety in an environment where language learning is intensely instrumental and stress-laden.

Therefore, it is necessary to examine whether this negative correlation persists among this particular learner group.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 English learning resilience

Previous research has conceptualized resilience through three main lenses: as a trait, a process, and an outcome. Broadly defined, resilience is “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten et al., 1990, p. 426). From the trait perspective, resilience is viewed as an innate quality, defined as “the personal qualities that enable one to thrive in the face of adversity” (Connor & Davidson, 2003, p. 76). In contrast, other scholars argue that resilience is a dynamic process rather than a fixed trait, describing it as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). From an outcome-oriented viewpoint, resilience refers to “a class of phenomena characterized by patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity or risk” (Masten & Reed, 2002, p. 74).

English learning often involves intense competition and pressure, and students frequently encounter setbacks such as low test scores or difficult assignments. While some adapt successfully and continue to develop, others struggle, potentially losing motivation and academic performance. To address resilience in educational contexts, Wang et al. (1994, p. 46) introduced “educational resilience” as “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities”. Martin (2002, p. 35) further refined this idea with “academic resilience”, defined as “students’ ability to deal effectively with academic setbacks, stress, and study pressure”.

As research evolved, discipline-specific forms of resilience began to emerge. In language learning, Kim and Kim (2017, p. 2) defined 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”. However, few definitions are tailored specifically to English learning. An exception is Shin and Kim (2017, p. 69), who described English learning resilience as “the internal power to overcome difficulties in adverse English learning situations”. Based on existing definitions, key characteristics of resilience include its multidimensional nature, occurrence in adverse conditions, and association with positive adaptation. While prior studies often treat resilience in language learning as a trait, this study also adopts a trait-based perspective. Accordingly, English Learning Resilience (ELR) is defined here as the ability to adapt positively to academic setbacks, difficulties, or adversities encountered while learning English, particularly across key skills such as reading, listening, writing, and speaking.

The relationship between control appraisals and resilience is dynamic and reciprocal, forming a mutually reinforcing feedback loop rather than a unidirectional pathway. This perspective enables a robust theoretical integration between Control-Value Theory (CVT) and resilience, wherein adaptive control appraisals promote resilient outcomes, which in turn strengthen subsequent control beliefs, establishing a self-perpetuating cycle.

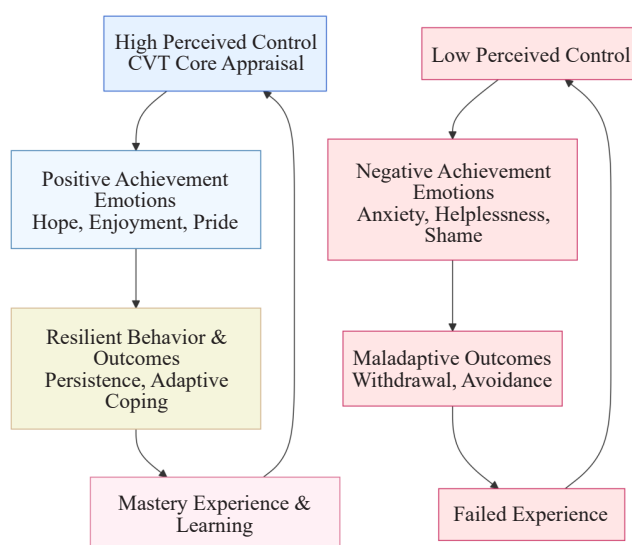


Figure 1. Theoretical path

According to CVT, heightened perceived control—a core appraisal dimension—triggers positive achievement emotions, such as hope and enjoyment. These emotions facilitate persistent effort and successful adaptation in the face of academic setbacks, reflecting key behavioral indicators of resilience. Importantly, such successful coping experiences serve as mastery evidence, reinforcing an individual’s sense of agency over future challenges. Conversely, diminished perceived control is linked to anxiety and helplessness, which may undermine persistence and lead to outcomes that gradually erode resilience. Thus, while trait-like resilience may act as a distal antecedent influencing initial appraisal tendencies, resilience is also dynamically shaped and sustained through recurrent, positively reinforced sequences of control-value appraisals, emotions, and actions. The proposed reciprocal model, depicted in Figure 1, provides a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the interaction between these constructs in high-stakes learning environments.

## **2.2 English learning anxiety**

Horwitz (1986) defined Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) as “a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process”. Prior to 2000, research identified three main approaches to defining FLA: psychological, situation-specific, and social (e.g., Horwitz, 1986; Young, 1990; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

From the psychological perspective, anxiety involves heightened autonomic nervous system activity along with feelings of tension and apprehension (Spielberger, 1971). It consists of both cognitive (worry) and affective (emotionality) components (MacIntyre, 1995). Worry reflects cognitive aspects (Eysenck, 1979; Borkovec, 1985), while emotionality involves feelings of unease and tension (Eysenck, 1979; Sarason, 1984). Emotionality may facilitate performance on simple tasks but impair it on complex ones, unlike worry, which generally has negative effects. The situation-specific approach views FLA as anxiety uniquely triggered in foreign language contexts, such as when speaking, learning, or listening in the classroom (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), rather than being a subtype of general anxiety (Horwitz, 1986). Proponents of the social approach argue that FLA arises when learners doubt their abilities or feel pressured to understand every word, leading to frustration and negative self-assessment (Oxford, 1993; Vogely, 1998). Such apprehension may also stem from fears of misinterpreting messages or being unable to process others’ communication, contributing to receiver anxiety (Wheless, 1975; Ayres et al., 1995).

Language learning evokes various emotions, both positive (e.g., gratitude, enjoyment, hope) and negative (e.g., anxiety, boredom, shame), which significantly influence learning outcomes (Alpert & Haber, 1960; Shao et al., 2019). Pekrun et al. (2002, p. 92) introduced the concept of “achievement emotions”, defined as emotions tied to academic activities and outcomes, such as enjoyment, pride, or anxiety. Research in this area has often focused on isolated emotions, such as test anxiety (Lowe, 2018) or listening anxiety (Ji et al., 2022), resulting in a fragmented understanding (Pekrun, 2006).

Integrating these findings, Pekrun (2006) proposed that CVT provided an analysis method for achievement emotions. Affective arousal, which is directly linked to people’s views of their own control and personal worth over successful activities or outcomes, is referred to as achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006). Pekrun et al. (2002) found that a range of feelings, including enjoyment, optimism, pride, relief, anger, anxiety, hopelessness, humiliation, and boredom, were commonly expressed by students in academic contexts. A three-dimensional taxonomy that includes the aspects of valence (negative vs. positive), activation (deactivating vs. activating), and object focus (action vs. outcome) can be used to categorize these emotions. It is possible to separate feelings of outcome into two categories: prospective and retrospective. In agreement with the CVT, anxiety is a prospective positive and negative activating emotion, as well as outcome emotions, which can lead to possible success or failure. It arises from a cognitive appraisal conflict characterized by “high value-low control”. That is, when an individual highly values a certain goal (e.g., English in the college entrance examination) but perceives a lack of control over it, anxiety is likely to be triggered (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun & Perry, 2014).

## **2.3 Correlations between English learning resilience and English learning anxiety**

The Control-Value Theory (CVT) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the formation and influence of emotions. This theory posits that emotions arise from the interactive appraisal of an individual’s perceived control

over tasks and their subjective value assessments (Pekrun, 2006). Anxiety, in particular, tends to emerge in situations where there is a conflict between high value and low perceived control (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun & Perry, 2014). Within this mechanism, resilience serves as a key personal trait that significantly influences the occurrence and intensity of anxiety by modulating how individuals perceive control and value, as well as how they respond to such appraisals (Pekrun, 2006). Highly resilient individuals typically exhibit strong emotional regulation skills (Kim & Kim, 2017), a tendency toward positive cognitive restructuring, and robust psychological adaptability. These traits help them maintain or enhance their sense of control when pursuing high-value goals, thereby mitigating anxiety stemming from the perception of being unable to manage important outcomes (Liu et al., 2025a). For example, when facing setbacks, highly resilient individuals are more likely to view difficulties as manageable challenges rather than uncontrollable threats, which reduces feelings of helplessness and decreases anxiety levels. Thus, from a CVT perspective, resilience is regarded as an important protective factor against anxiety.

Although some studies have validated the negative predictive effect of resilience on foreign language learning anxiety across different contexts, empirical research focusing specifically on Chinese high school students remains relatively scarce. For instance, Shen (2022) investigated the relationship between resilience, mindfulness, and foreign language anxiety among 502 Chinese university students. The results of multiple linear regression analysis showed that both resilience and mindfulness significantly predicted anxiety, with resilience independently contributing to reduced anxiety levels. Similarly, Çakmak et al. (2023), based on questionnaire data from 512 learners in the Middle East who used Telegram for language learning, found that academic resilience modulated test anxiety, further indicating the beneficial role of resilience in anxiety management within technology-assisted learning environments.

However, despite the growing body of cross-context empirical evidence, there is still a lack of targeted research on the relationship between English learning anxiety and resilience among Chinese high school students in typical classroom settings. This group is at a unique developmental stage, facing a compulsory curriculum structure and high-intensity academic competition. Their control-value appraisals and emotional responses may differ significantly from those of university or adult learners. Therefore, conducting systematic research in the context of English language teaching in Chinese high schools would not only help verify the contextual applicability of CVT but also hold practical significance for developing anxiety intervention strategies tailored to this population. Thus, this study aims to address the following two research questions:

(1) What are the levels of learners' English language resilience and English language anxiety among Chinese senior high school students?

(2) What are the correlations between English language resilience and English language anxiety among Chinese senior high school students?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

Senior high school students from northeast China, Changchun, Jilin Province were involved in the current study through a convenience sampling approach because it is easy to get access to students in high school (Rose et al., 2019). As shown in Table 1, a total of 883 students were engaged in the questionnaire to explore their resilience, anxiety, and academic achievement in the context of English learning. All participants were native Chinese speakers and spoke English as a foreign language. English is a compulsory course in high school. Leaving 20 invalid responses, a valid sample of 863 students was obtained with a response rate of 97.7%. Within the valid sample, 359 participants (41.6%) were male, and 504 (58.4%) were female, including 375 (43.5%) in Grade 1 and 488 (56.5%) in Grade 2.

Students from Grade 3 were excluded from the sampling frame for two primary reasons. First, during the data collection period, their academic focus had shifted almost entirely to intensive, high-stakes revision for the imminent National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao). This creates a fundamentally distinct and extreme learning environment compared to Grades 1 and 2. Second, this singular exam-oriented context could introduce significant confounding variables, such as uniformly elevated stress levels and a narrowed range of learning activities, which might obscure the general psychological mechanisms between resilience and anxiety that this study aims to investigate.

The participants' ages ranged from 15 to 17 years ( $M = 16.2$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ). Their English proficiency was determined

based on their scores on the most recent standardized school-wide examination. Students scoring within the top 30% were categorized as the higher-proficiency group, and those scoring within the bottom 30% were categorized as the lower-proficiency group for the purpose of comparative analysis in this study.

**Table 1.** Basic information of participants

		Male		Female		Total	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Grade	Grade 1	199	53.1	176	46.9	375	43.5
	Grade 2	160	32.8	328	67.2	488	56.5

Six students were chosen to participate in the interviews, each lasting an average duration of 20 minutes. The students who provided contact information in the questionnaire were chosen to participate in the interview. Volunteering students participate in the interview, representing a mix of proficiency levels in English, ranging from high to low. Information on interviewees and their scores on each dimension of the questionnaire are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Interviewees' scores of English learning resilience and English learning anxiety

Student	Gender	Grade	SR	Soci	Em	ELR	ELA	Academic A
S1	Female	1	4.00	5.00	2.67	3.92	2.25	102
S2	Male	2	4.17	5.33	4.00	4.42	3.50	103
S3	Female	1	3.50	3.67	3.67	3.58	3.63	91
S4	Female	1	4.67	4.00	5.00	4.58	2.88	127
S5	Male	2	5.17	4.67	4.00	4.75	3.00	125
S6	Male	2	4.50	4.33	3.67	4.25	3.13	99

Note: SR = Self-Regulation; Soci = Sociality; Em = Empathy; ELR = English Learning Resilience; ELA = English Learning Anxiety; Academic A = Academic Achievement

## 3.2 Instruments

### 3.2.1 English learning resilience

English learning resilience scale was adapted by Liu et al. (2025a), which is adapted from the instruments developed by Kim and Kim (2017) and Liu and Han (2022). The scale (12 items) was validated to be comprised of a three-factor structure: self-regulation (LR01-LR06), sociability (LR07-LR09), and empathy (LR10-LR12). The overall scale demonstrated good reliability ( $n = 12, \alpha = 0.86$ ). To ensure comprehension and ecological validity for the participants, all items in this scale—as well as in the other quantitative instruments—were translated into Mandarin Chinese and presented in the students' first language.

Based on the results obtained from the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) ( $N = 391$ ) was conducted to examine whether the tri-factorial structure of students' ELR fits the data in the current sample. Following Kline's (2016) recommended benchmarks for model fit indices ( $\chi^2/df \leq 8$ ; Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI)  $\geq 0.90$ ; Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI)  $\geq 0.90$ ; Comparative Fit Index (CFI)  $\geq 0.90$ ; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)  $\leq 0.08$ ; Root Mean Square Residual (RMR)  $\leq 0.10$ ), the CFA results confirmed a good fit of

the tri-factorial model with 12 items. Specifically, the  $\chi^2/df$ , RMSEA, and RMR were 0.971, 0.000, and 0.040, respectively, and the GFI, AGFI, and CFI were all greater than 0.90. The values reached the cut-off scores mentioned above.

### **3.2.2 Short-form foreign language classroom anxiety scale**

Short-Form Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (S-FLCA) (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Botes et al., 2022) consists of 8 items. A six-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” was used to score each item. The scale had high reliability, with Cronbach’s Alphas of 0.89, indicating strong internal consistency and measurement reliability.

### **3.3 Interview protocol**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data to validate and complement the quantitative data, the interview protocol was developed based on the quantitative results of the present study. 36 students left their contact information, and after contacting them one by one and excluding invalid information, 12 students were finally contacted. Only eight of them agreed to be interviewed. The data about six students achieved saturation during the interview process, so the study was finalized with six interviewees. The data collection followed a semi-structured interview format. The interview protocol was developed on the strength of previous literature and the quantitative results of the present study, centering on English Learning Resilience (ELR) and English Learning Anxiety (ELA), particularly emphasizing how pupils persevere in overcoming obstacles, difficulties, or failures when learning English. In addition, reasons for the relationship between ELR, ELA, and academic achievement were also included. Open-ended questions in Chinese were used throughout the interviews to make sure the students could comprehend the questions and communicate more freely and effectively.

### **3.4 Data collection and analysis**

In May 2023, the investigation was carried out in Jilin province, involving 883 students from two grades participating in the study. The questionnaire was given out on Wenjuanxing (<https://www.wjx.cn>) with the help of the class teacher. Before administering the questionnaires, the researcher talked with the teachers and monitors to clarify the study’s focus on students’ English learning experiences rather than their overall learning state in all subjects. These communications ensured that students received a clear message when answering the questionnaires. This was vital to accurately capture students’ insights in the field of English discipline. The participants were given instructions regarding the surveys and informed that they were anonymous. Additionally, they were assured that the data collected would be kept private. Participants received assurances that their choices represented their experiences learning English and that there were no correct or incorrect responses. Furthermore, particular emphasis was placed on paying close attention to every detail. Sincere gratitude was then given to the pupils. This appreciation was reiterated once more after students had finished the questionnaire.

In the second data collection phase, six students were interviewed in August, with an equitable representation of three students from Grade 1 and three from Grade 2. Given the geographical diversity of the participants, interviews were done over the phone or via WeChat. On average, each interview lasted twenty minutes. The interviewer thanked the students and gave them an explanation of the interview’s goal prior to the interview. After clarifying that the information was just being used for the study, the interviewer videotaped the talks with the student’s permission. Furthermore, to understand the students’ ELR and ELA, the interviewer made notes on significant details and asked for clarification. Following the interview, the tape was transcribed for analysis. Lastly, quantitative studies will be supported by the findings of the qualitative analysis.

After data collection, we conducted descriptive statistics and correlation analysis using SPSS 26.0 to examine the overall level of the two targeted variables among participants and the relationships between them.

To robustly validate the measurement models, the total sample ( $N = 863$ ) was randomly split into two independent subsamples using SPSS’s random case selection function. The first subsample ( $n = 391$ ) was used for Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to test the factorial validity of the adapted ELR and ELA scales. The second subsample ( $n = 472$ ) was reserved for all subsequent main analyses, including descriptive statistics, reliability assessment, and correlation/

regression analyses examining the relationship between ELR and ELA. This approach ensures that the scale validation and hypothesis testing are conducted on independent data, enhancing the rigor of the findings.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s framework. The process involved: (a) repeated reading for familiarization, (b) generating initial codes inductively from the data, (c) collating codes into candidate themes, (d) reviewing and refining themes against the full dataset, and (e) defining and naming final themes (e.g., “Peer Support as a Stress Buffer”). Coding was conducted independently by two researchers, with disagreements resolved through discussion to ensure consistency.

The semi-structured interviews explored students’ personal experiences of anxiety and coping strategies. Core questions focused on sources of anxiety, personal and social coping resources, and perceived links between resilience and anxiety (see the full protocol in Appendix A).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Profiles of English learning resilience

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of students’ ELR, including extreme values, mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis. The mean value of global ELR is 4.24 ( $SD = 0.79$ ), higher than the median value 3.5 on a 6-point Likert scale (Liu & Han, 2022). This indicates that students’ global ELR is moderate to high, suggesting that Chinese high school students generally exhibit substantial resilience in English learning. In terms of the levels of the dimensions of resilience, it is found that students’ self-regulation, sociability, and empathy are all at moderate to high levels. Among the three resilience dimensions, students have the highest level of sociability ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), followed by empathy ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ) and self-regulation ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

**Table 3.** Results of descriptive analysis of English learning resilience

Variables	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skew	Kurt
Self-regulation	1.00	6.00	4.01	1.27	-0.800	-0.104
Sociality	1.00	6.00	4.54	1.05	-1.050	1.483
Empathy	1.67	6.00	4.41	0.74	-0.450	0.749
Global ELR	1.83	6.00	4.24	0.79	-0.533	0.004

*N* = 391

In this study, all six senior high school students who participated in the interviews shared their experiences of difficulties in learning English and their success in coping with them. It illustrates that they had a specific ability to solve problems and adapt positively, demonstrating a certain degree of resilience rather than giving up quickly at the first sign of problems. The results of the interviews corroborate the findings of the quantitative study. When discussing successfully coping with difficulties in learning English, all six students shared their past experiences and were willing to discuss them further. Some of them have been discussed in detail. For example,

Excerpt 1:

*Of course. What impressed me most was one of my monthly exams. I could not find the fill-in words in the English listening test. I thought I could not do it because the test itself was difficult, but it turned out that all my classmates could do it. I realized that it was due to my low English proficiency. After that, I have been conducting targeted training and studying English listening. I would communicate with my classmates and ask them for advice with a humble mind, and they were also willing to teach me what they knew. Therefore, I have gained a lot and improved my listening. In addition, I think the main reason for my improvement is that I put in the effort to learn.* (Student 2, 2023/8/22) (In the bracket, the time of interviewing is 22 August 2023).

From the above interview, it can be found that Student 2 “could not find the fill-in words in the English listening test,” and he encounters complex problems and does not perform well. However, he would “conduct targeted training and studying on English listening,” which indicates that he would likely continue to work hard when facing difficulties. In addition, he “could communicate with his classmates to a certain extent” and could solve his problems by asking his classmates what he did not understand. He also says that “he is open-minded and good at dealing with teachers and classmates,” reflecting a high level of sociability, which confirms the study’s quantitative results. All the students interviewed coincidentally mentioned the help they received from teachers and peers. This is similar to the quantitative results in that sociability is the highest of the three dimensions of resilience. This is also reflected in the content of Student 3’s interview.

Excerpt 2:

*After doing homework, I will check the answers myself. If the results are unsatisfactory, I may read the answers and explanations if provided. If they cannot explain my puzzles, I will search the questions through the photo search of my cell phone’s homework helper and collect information on the Internet to help me understand them. If I still need help understanding, I will ask some students who are good at English for advice. In addition, I will consult teachers if they are accessible at school.* (Student 3, 2023/8/22).

In the above interview, Student 3 will “collect information on the Internet” by herself and think about solving the problem by herself, showing her persistence. In addition, she will “ask some students good at English for advice” or “consult teachers,” reflecting her high sociability level. It emphasizes the combination of personal ability and external support, demonstrating her overall level of resilience.

Excerpt 3:

*When faced with a challenge I have never attempted, I will have anxiety and nervousness in my mind. However, I will go through it step by step. Firstly, I will regulate my inner emotions, then keep practicing inner self-regulation, and finally get encouraged by telling myself that it is not difficult and that I can do it.* (Student 6, 2023/8/27).

Student 6 can maintain a stable mindset by regulating his emotions and encouraging himself as much as possible, demonstrating his high level of self-regulation despite the anxiety he feels when he encounters problems. Other students also say that “due to the heavy study load and time constraints in senior high school, there is no extra time for them to indulge in bad emotions, so they will adjust their mindset more quickly and devote themselves to the next round of study,” which is similar to the “positive psychological implication” mentioned by other students. Most interviewees present a high level of self-regulation. This is in line with the quantitative results. Self-regulation is at a medium-high level in the present study.

Excerpt 4:

*Generally, when the teacher asks us to communicate in English in a group, we will be silent at the beginning. At first, we may think about the problem separately, and then we need a student as a leader to drive the group discussion rhythm. I will come forward at this time. If a student needs help keeping up with the speed of speech or needs help understanding, I will help him or her through my own experience and enlighten him or her.* (Student 3, 2023/8/22).

Student 3 also points out the tendency of awkward silence in classroom English exchanges, and she acts as a facilitator and constantly pays attention to her classmates around her. Hence, she has a high level of empathy. The level of empathy is usually reflected in English communication. However, since there are few opportunities for students to communicate with each other in English, whether inside or outside the classroom, they are only able to empathize with each other’s feelings when there are oral activities like role-playing and simulated conversations in the classroom. Therefore, some students report that they seldom have opportunities to speak English, and the only time they do is to use what the teacher prescribes in the classroom. As a result, Student 1 says, “I probably pay more attention to the

passage that I am about to read. I do not care much about how other people's expression is." It means he is carrying out this English conversation from his point of view without experiencing other people's emotions and thoughts, so his level of empathy is not high. This may explain why the level of empathy is not the highest. However, most students who are interviewed express their cherish of valuable chances to have English conversations. Student 4 will try to grab all the information when communicating with others, including their gestures, facial expressions, and tones. She says, "I can get what others mean from their eyes or gestures and follow their feelings." English serves as both a language and a tool for communication. Communicating effectively and adapting positively to different situations requires understanding how others feel and think. Therefore, it is undeniable that empathy plays a significant role in resilience.

## 4.2 Profiles of English learning anxiety

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics of ELA, including extremes, mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis. It can be seen that the mean score of students' ELA is 3.31 ( $SD = 1.12$ ), which is slightly lower than the median value 3.5 of the scale (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). This indicates that a small percentage of the participants in this study are anxious about learning English.

**Table 4.** Results of descriptive analysis of English learning anxiety

Variable	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skew	Kurt
Learning anxiety	1.00	5.38	3.31	1.12	-0.005	-1.000

*N* = 391

From the results of the interviews, all six high school students who participated in the interviews reported that they occasionally felt anxious. The interviewees' anxiety manifested in the following ways: nervousness before the test, worry about the results, and concern about their performance in class. However, not all interviewees showed anxiety; some students, because of their cheerfulness, always kept a positive mindset even when they encountered difficulties, while others felt very confident in their English ability and did not feel anxious about learning English. Students, in general, may feel anxious about learning English, but they do not always indulge in anxiety. This is because the college entrance examination faced by senior high school students is stressful, heavy, and time-consuming, and they need to focus their limited energy on things that are more beneficial to the college entrance examination, such as studying hard and improving their English proficiency. This also explains why the anxiety level of high school students is not high in the quantitative data. When it comes to the origin of anxiety in English learning, tests and exams may be major reasons, but there are some special situations.

Excerpt 5:

*I get a little bit nervous if the teacher asks me to recite a text, but I forget to memorize the text the night before. Then I am afraid that I will not be able to perform well and will be criticized by the teacher.* (Student 1, 2023/8/22).

Excerpt 6:

*I do not feel too much anxiety. Before the exam, I just think about reviewing quickly, and I do not have time to communicate because the task is tight. I have less time, so I do not feel this anxiety anymore. I think what I can do is study hard.* (Student 1, 2023/8/22).

Student 1 says he is "afraid of being unable to answer the teacher's questions" and "a little bit nervous" in class. Nervousness is one of the manifestations of anxiety. It is often because he cares too much about his own performance and other people's opinions, and he is afraid of failing to meet the expected requirements. From the interview, it can be seen that Student 1 has slight anxiety due to insufficient preparation. However, she "does not feel much anxiety" in

the test, reflecting her low level of anxiety. She also explains that it is because of her “tight study schedule and time constraints,” which suggests that she may have prepared carefully before the test and focused on her studies, so she does not have much anxiety. Student 4 states that he “feels a little anxious when he realizes that his classmates are doing very well and he cannot surpass them in the exam.” In the interviews, they all feel only “a little” and “not too much” anxiety to a low degree, indicating that their anxiety levels are not high.

Excerpt 7:

*I feel anxious when I cannot remember the English words, but I can look them up in the dictionary and read and write them down to memorize them, so I do not feel so anxious.* (Student 2, 2023/8/22).

Excerpt 8:

*When the teacher calls someone up to answer a question, and I am afraid of being asked a question, I feel a little bit nervous and uneasy. I also worry that I cannot understand it well and will say the wrong thing, which will be embarrassing. However, next time, I will prepare for the lesson in advance to keep my powder dry.* (Student 3, 2023/8/22).

Student 2 says, “English words are too difficult to memorize,” i.e., a kind of input that has nothing to do with external influences, but rather the learner’s anxiety about the limited self-knowledge. However, this student also improves his cognitive level through the cognitive strategy of “looking up in the dictionary, reading and writing more” and relieves his anxiety through self-regulation. Student 3 showed output anxiety, i.e., anxiety when using a foreign language. “Fear of making a mistake” usually occurs when speaking or writing in a foreign language. This student uses the metacognitive strategy of “pre-preparation” to plan and prepare for the situation and to improve his/her ability, thus relieving his/her anxiety. Although these students feel anxious, they may try to alleviate anxiety by adopting some strategies. This shows that, from the overall aspect, students experience a moderate level of anxiety in English learning.

### 4.3 Correlation between English learning resilience and English learning anxiety

In order to understand the correlation between students’ ELR and ELA, Pearson’s correlation coefficient was calculated between ELR and ELA through SPSS 24.0. The results reveal a statistically significant and robust negative correlation between ELA and global ELR ( $r = -0.521, p < 0.0$ ), which indicates that as the ELA level increases, the global ELR level decreases. Among the dimensions of ELR, ELA correlate moderately and negatively with self-regulation ( $r = -0.465, p < 0.01$ ) and sociability ( $r = -0.243, p < 0.01$ ) while having a weak but still significant negative correlation with empathy ( $r = -0.263, p < 0.0$ ). The negative correlations mean that lower ELA is linked to higher levels of self-regulation, sociability, and empathy (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Results of Pearson correlation

	Self-regulation	Sociability	Empathy	Global ELR
Anxiety	-0.465**	-0.243**	-0.263**	-0.521**

\*\* $p < 0.01$  (2-tailed);  $N = 391$

The correlation between ELR and ELA is also reflected in the interviews. When it comes to the feelings of anxiety while encountering difficulties in English learning, their experiences reveal a close relationship between ELR and ELA.

Excerpt 9:

*I feel anxious when there are difficulties, challenges, and more pressure in English learning. As I said before, I am not a very introverted person, so I communicate with my English teacher if I encounter a lot of problems. I may ask him how to solve the difficulties I experience now, and then he will provide me with some solutions.*

*He may teach me to practice specifically for this area, including doing after-school exercises or doing specialized training. Therefore, my English teacher helped me a lot. I also communicate with my friends and classmates because they perform better than I do in English learning, and I can learn from them. I do not share my study with my family because they do not know English very well. But my parents also help me ease my anxiety as they always encourage me, not scold me if I do not do well in the exams, and make me more cheerful and optimistic. In addition, I think self-suggestion and exercise are beneficial in relieving anxiety. Self-suggestion gives me more power to motivate myself, and exercising relaxes me. (Student 2, 2023/8/22).*

Student 2 is happy to seek help and encouragement from teachers, classmates, and parents when he encounters difficulties, demonstrating sociability well, which is part of the resilience structure (Kim & Kim, 2017). He also believes that interaction with classmates, teacher help, and family encouragement effectively relieve his anxiety. This is consistent with the quantitative results, showing a negative correlation between sociability and anxiety, where the higher the level of sociability, the easier it is for anxiety to be relieved. Student 2 shows a high level of sociability, but his anxiety is low. Student 2 also emphasizes the role of “autosuggestion” in reducing anxiety. “Autosuggestion” is a method of self-regulation that can consciously influence one’s mental health and keep it positive (Myga et al., 2022). As a form of self-regulatory mechanism, it indicates that the student has a high level of self-regulation. It also relieves anxiety and is negatively correlated with anxiety. This is confirmed by the findings of Shen (2022), who discovered the mental power of resilience that can mitigate anxiety.

Excerpt 10:

*I feel anxious if there are a lot of unfamiliar words in the reading passages because I only know a few of them, so I cannot understand the whole passage. I fear making mistakes when I am indecisive in choosing the answers. (Student 3, 2023/8/22).*

Student 3’s inability to solve the reading problem reflects a low level of overall resilience and a higher level of anxiety as a result, similar to the negative correlation between overall ELR and ELA in the quantitative data.

Consistent with the CVT (Pekrun, 2006), ELR is a personality trait influencing achievement emotions (e.g., ELA). Those who are resilient in English learning generally believe they can solve difficulties well. It echoes the assumption that resilience is a personality antecedent of achievement emotions and a kind of control and value belief (Pekrun, 2006).

## 5. Discussion

This study examined the levels of ELR and ELA among Chinese senior high school students, as well as the relationship between these two constructs. The results indicate that the participants demonstrated a moderately high overall level of resilience in English learning. Across the sub-dimensions of ELR (self-regulation, sociability, and empathy) students scored from moderate to high, with sociability being the most prominent, followed by empathy and self-regulation. In terms of anxiety, students exhibited low to moderate levels of ELA.

These findings align with existing literature. Previous studies conducted in East Asian educational settings, such as those by Kim and Kim (2017), Shin and Kim (2017), Kim et al. (2018), Liu and Han (2022) have consistently reported moderate to high levels of ELR among secondary school students. Liu and Han (2022) indicated above-average scores across all three components; however, whereas sociability emerged as the strongest dimension in this study, self-regulation was most prominent. Although slight, these discrepancies imply that both sociability and self-regulation play central roles in shaping ELR among Chinese EFL learners. A further divergence is observed in the ranking of empathy, which was reported as the lowest among the three dimensions by Liu and Han (2022) but ranked second in the current study. These variations suggest that resilience levels are not static, but rather dynamic and context-dependent, influenced by factors such as regional culture, socio-historical conditions, and specific school environments.

The finding that sociability was the highest dimension of resilience can be contextualized within China’s collectivist culture and the high-pressure high school ecosystem. In this environment, peer support is not merely a

personal preference but a critical, culturally-sanctioned coping strategy. The collective experience of preparing for the Gaokao fosters interdependence, making collaborative learning and emotional sharing (as noted in interviews) a primary mechanism for managing anxiety and sustaining motivation. Thus, sociability reflects a form of relational resilience that is particularly adaptive in this setting.

Conversely, the relatively lower prominence of self-regulation may be understood through the same lens. Within a highly structured academic system where goals and schedules are largely externally imposed, students' self-regulatory efforts are often channeled into persistent execution rather than autonomous goal-setting. Furthermore, in a collectivist context, self-regulation may frequently operate through relational channels—such as living up to familial expectations or emulating peers—which might not be fully captured by a scale emphasizing individualistic self-management.

From a Control-Value Theory perspective, these interpretations align well. High sociability directly bolsters students' perceived control (through shared strategies) and reinforces the relational value of learning, thereby mitigating anxiety. This suggests that for Chinese students, the appraisal processes central to CVT are significantly mediated by social interdependence, positioning sociability as a key antecedent of adaptive control-value appraisals in this context.

Concerning students' overall ELA levels, the descriptive results suggest that participants experienced low to moderate anxiety, a finding consistent with several previous studies (Heng et al., 2012; Çağatay, 2015; Elaldi, 2016; Sadiq, 2017; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020). As Horwitz (2008) noted, averages around 3 indicate mild apprehension, while scores of 4 and above reflect more pronounced anxiety. This aligns with Sadiq's (2017) report of moderate anxiety among Saudi university students and Jiang and Dewaele's (2019) finding of moderate Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) among Chinese undergraduates. Similar moderate anxiety levels were observed in skill-specific studies, such as oral communication apprehension and test anxiety (Heng et al., 2012) and speaking anxiety among Turkish EFL students (Çağatay, 2015). However, the current results diverge from those of Elkhaifi (2005), who found that anxiety levels varied significantly by grade level, with third-year students exhibiting lower anxiety than their first- and second-year counterparts.

Most importantly, a significant negative correlation was identified between ELR and ELA, supporting earlier studies by Benetti and Kambouropoulos (2006), Putwain et al. (2013), Anyan and Hjemdal (2016), Morote et al. (2017), Gan et al. (2022), Shen (2022), Çakmak et al. (2023), and Rustamov et al. (2023). For example, Putwain et al. (2013) observed a moderate negative correlation between resilience and test anxiety, indicating that more resilient students experience less anxiety. Similarly, Morote et al. (2017) reported comparable results in a Hispanic Latin-American sample using the Resilience Scale for Adults (RSA), and Gan et al. (2022) documented significant negative correlations between resilience and anxiety among teachers.

The relatively weaker correlation observed between empathy and ELA, compared to other predictors, warrants nuanced interpretation. This attenuation may be attributed to a confluence of factors. First, the predominant nature of formal English learning tasks in the sampled context—often focused on high-stakes examinations, individualized drills, and grammatical accuracy—might not consistently activate or require the socio-affective capacities central to empathy (e.g., perspective-taking, emotional sharing). In learning environments where collaborative communication and meaningful interpersonal exchange are less emphasized, the protective or exacerbating role of empathy in shaping anxiety may be less pronounced. Second, the specific measure of empathy, capturing a general trait tendency, may not fully tap into the situational empathic responses elicited within foreign language communication scenarios, where anxiety is most acute. A measure more specific to language-related empathetic engagement (e.g., empathizing with an interlocutor's communication difficulty) might reveal a stronger link. Finally, the developmental stage of the participants (university students) must be considered. Their empathy levels may have stabilized relative to younger adolescents, while their ELA is more directly shaped by immediate academic pressures, competence appraisal, and perceived performance demands, potentially diluting the direct empathy-anxiety pathway. This suggests that empathy's role in ELA is likely moderated by contextual, methodological, and developmental factors, indicating a more complex relationship than a simple main effect.

From the perspective of Control-Value Theory (CVT), these findings can be interpreted as follows: students with higher resilience likely possess a stronger sense of control over their learning processes and outcomes, along with more adaptive appraisals of the value of English learning (Pekrun, 2006). This cognitive-affective regulatory capacity reduces their perception of anxiety-provoking situations, thereby mitigating actual anxiety levels (Liu et al., 2025a). Conversely, lower resilience may intensify feelings of uncontrollability and negative value appraisal, leading to elevated anxiety.

Thus, the present study not only reinforces the utility of CVT in explaining the dynamics between anxiety and resilience in foreign language learning but also underscores the role of resilience as a protective factor that moderates control-value appraisals.

## 6. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the levels of and correlated relationships between ELR and ELA. Firstly, concerning the students' ELR and ELA levels, this study found that Chinese senior high school students have medium-high levels of resilience in English learning. Their global ELR was at a moderate to high level. Regarding the different dimensions of ELR, students' self-regulation, sociability, and empathy were all at moderate to high levels. Among the three resilience dimensions, students had the highest level of sociability, followed by empathy and self-regulation. Senior high students' anxiety in English learning was at a low to moderate level. Secondly, regarding the second research question, correlations between students' resilience, and anxiety were identified. Specifically, the results uncovered a high and negative correlation between global ELR and ELA. This meant that students with a high level of resilience were more likely to feel less anxious in English learning. Among the dimensions of ELR, ELA was moderately and negatively correlated with self-regulation. At the same time, ELA had a significant low and negative correlation with sociability and empathy.

This study confirms a strong negative correlation between ELR and ELA among Chinese high school students, with the sociability dimension of ELR being most salient.

The findings extend Control-Value Theory (CVT) by demonstrating that resilience, particularly through social channels, is a key antecedent that shapes students' control and value appraisals, rather than merely an outcome. It also highlights the cultural specificity of resilience, where collectivist values elevate sociability as a primary adaptive mechanism.

For educators, this underscores the critical need to move beyond fostering individual grit. Pedagogy should actively build collaborative classrooms through structured peer-assisted learning. Curricula should integrate socio-emotional learning to legitimize and develop peer support as a core skill for resilient language acquisition.

In essence, leveraging social interdependence is vital for cultivating less anxious and more resilient EFL learners in similar high-stakes, collectivist contexts.

### 6.1 Limitations

Although the present study has contributed to the research on the relationship between resilience and anxiety in language learning setting, there are some limitations. Firstly, participants in the study are limited to Grade 1 and Grade 2 senior high school students in the Northeast area. Future research can examine three grades to gain a thorough grasp of the characteristics and trajectory of student development. Regional difference is also an influential factor in English learning. Future research can expand the scope of participants, including students from different districts across China and different levels of schools such as regular schools, vocational schools, and so on. Secondly, as this study used a quantitative research design supplemented by interviews, future studies can employ diverse qualitative methods such as observations, diaries, case studies, ethnography, and so on. Thirdly, the present study adopts a cross-sectional method without considering time changes. Future studies can use a longitudinal method to trace the development of students and observe their dynamic changes.

### 6.2 Recommendations

This study finds that resilience, comprising self-regulation, sociability, and empathy, serves as a key mitigating variable that reduces the negative impact of academic challenges on achievement. From the perspective of the constitutive dimensions of resilience, we propose the following instructional recommendations:

Given that self-regulation is an essential intrinsic capacity for overcoming personal obstacles, English instructors should adopt student-centered approaches that help learners recognize, articulate, and manage their emotions. Teachers can guide students to shift their focus toward factors within their control, such as effort and strategy, rather than external

difficulties. Providing opportunities for quiet self-reflection, encouraging autonomy in learning tasks, and incorporating diverting activities like listening to English songs or watching films can help students regain emotional balance and sustain motivation. Additionally, maintaining an English error notebook allows students to reflect on and learn from mistakes, thereby reinforcing a growth mindset.

To cultivate social competence, it is crucial to create a collaborative and supportive classroom environment. Teachers can establish small English learning communities where students assist each other with difficulties, for example through peer recording and sharing of learning challenges, followed by one-on-one support. Educators should act as facilitators by offering feedback and summarizing effective learning behaviors observed during interactions. Furthermore, home-school collaboration plays a vital role; parents can be encouraged to provide both material and emotional support, such as promoting participation in English-speaking activities like public language corners.

Empathy strengthens interpersonal bonds and creates an inclusive atmosphere conducive to learning. Teachers can integrate role-playing and group reflection activities that encourage students to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives. Structured discussions and cooperative projects help learners practice empathetic communication, which in turn builds emotional support networks within the classroom. Acknowledging and valuing each student's emotional experiences contributes to a trusting and resilient learning community.

Through targeted strategies across these three dimensions, educators can systematically nurture students' resilience, thereby supporting not only their academic achievement but also their overall personal growth.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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## Appendix A: English version of the questionnaire

Q1: How do you usually learn English? What difficulties have you encountered?

Q2: Can you describe an experience where you successfully dealt with setbacks, pressure, or challenges?

Q3: When you encounter difficulties in learning English, how do you solve them on your own?

Q4: When you face difficulties in learning English, how do you seek help from those around you? Who do you turn to, and what kind of help do you ask for?

Q5: When classmates ask you for help, how do you assist them?

Q6: What problems have you encountered during English communication in class? How do you perceive the other person's thoughts or feelings?

Q7: What situations have made you feel anxious during English class?

Q8: How do you deal with anxiety when it arises during English learning?

Q9: What aspects of your current English learning are you satisfied with? What aspects are you dissatisfied with?

Q10: How are your usual English grades?

Q11: Do you feel anxious when you encounter difficulties in learning English? Why? (Guidance: Provide specific situations, such as being unable to answer a question in class.)

Q12: When you successfully overcome difficulties in learning English, how do you think this affects your grades?

Q13: When you encounter difficulties in learning English but cannot solve them, how do you think this affects your grades?

Q14: How do you think feeling anxious during English learning affects your grades?

Q15: In your daily English learning, how do you usually solve difficulties?

a) What makes you feel anxious during this process?

b) What impact does anxiety have?

c) How does it affect your grades?