Iranian EFL Learners at Loggerheads with Perceived Social Support

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Abstract

Resilience as a psychological emotional mechanism is employed by the individuals when they are in stressful irritating situations to be able to resume their previous productive mental activities. It is a vital coping activity when students go through upsetting events, psychological breakdowns, academic failures, suffocating educational atmospheres, and undemocratic teaching techniques. The essential elements of such a construct can be diverse based upon a whole prism of cultural specificities. The crux of the matter is that resilience is immensely influenced by social parameters and *significant others* who are in interaction with the students. The objective of this study is to investigate the predictive relationship between perceived social support (social support of family, *significant others*, and friends) and resilience in English language learners. To this end, 200 EFL learners studying at university level participated in the study. The data were gathered through two questionnaires and multiple regression analysis was run as a statistical procedure to analyze the data. The results of the study indicated that social support of family, *significant others*, and friends significantly predicted resilience. The implications of this study pointed to the importance of *significant others*, and social support from teachers, family and friends in providing EFL learners with effective copying skills manifested as resilience in confrontation with unwelcoming stressful tasks and challenges in the process of language learning.
Keywords: Resilience, Copying Skills, Perceived Social Support, EFL Learners.

1. Introduction

Within the aim of learning a second/foreign language, learners encounter irritating and stressful situations fraught with debilitating feelings of anxiety, apprehension and nervousness. These feelings are considered to have a potentially detrimental effect that can stifle language learning and performance abilities of the learners (Brown, 1973; Chastain, 1975; Scovel, 1978). Such negative and debilitating feelings causing demotivating behaviors in the learners can result in

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psychological and emotional symptoms encompassing embarrassment, feelings of helplessness, and fear. Added to that, learners who experience these feeling may grapple with negative social behaviors such as inappropriate silence, unwillingness to participate, absenteeism, and withdrawal from the course (Bailey, Daley, & Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Oxford 1999). The source of feelings of anxiety, frustration, and stress are both attributed to the *situational variables* including course activities, course level, course organization, and instructor behavior (e.g., Jackson, 2002; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001) and to *learner variables* such as ability, age, beliefs, gender, learning styles, and personality factors among others (e.g., Dewaele, 2002; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

Having said this, it is conspicuous that regulating the negative and debilitating feelings and helping the learners to overcome them are considered significant for learners' language learning process. One way to withstand stress, anxiety, and apprehension is to foster the learners' resilience with focusing on their strengths that allow them to survive and grow even in the face of adversity and stressful situations. The study of resilience has the potential to inform language teachers of the interventions that can be employed to ameliorate the affective problems learners face in the process of language learning. Padrón, Waxman, Brown, and Powers (2000) contended that studying the resilience of English language learners "enables us to specifically identify those 'alterable' factors that distinguish successful from less successful students" (p. 1).

Resilience has been defined in a multitude of ways and there is a little consensus on a single definition. According to Richardson, Neiger, Jensen, and Kumpfer (1990, p. 34), resiliency is "the process of coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with additional protective and coping skills than prior to the disruption that results from the event". Masten and Reed (2002, p.75) stated that resilience is "patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity or risk".

Studies carried out within the ambit of resilience have tried, for the most part, to focus on risk factors (Condly, 2006; Cowan, Cowan, & Shulz, 1996; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001) and protective factors (Esquivel, Doll, & Oades-Sese; 2011; Knight, 2007; Ratrin Hestyanti, 2006). While studies on risk factors tired to examine the characteristics that are thought to expose individuals to adversity with undesirable future outcomes, studies on protective factors were a paradigm shift directing the attention to moderating factors that can boost adaptation. Protective factors are those internal or external factors that buffer individuals from risk. That is to say, with the increase of protective factors, individuals try to display more resilience. Knight (2007) argued that protective factors have more value than risk factors because they support positive development. Further, Esquivel et al. (2011) underlined the importance of protective factors in educational settings as they can reduce students' stress and prepare them for healthy and productive lives.

Among the protective factors affecting educational outcomes for individuals, Rutter (1987) highlighted the importance of external social support structures, and parental personality characteristics in providing students with opportunities for positive education in the face of adversity. Researchers maintained that support from family, teachers, schools, and peers have been argued to be helpful and influential in helping students positively adapt to the transition from high school to university (Southwick, Morgan, Vythilingam, & Charney, 2006; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Dawson and Pooley (2013) found that perceived social support is beneficial for

students helping them to cope with anxiety and improve their academic achievement especially during their first year of study. Werner and Smith (1988) argued that protective factors encompassing affective bonds within family, supportive teachers, and external environmental supports could bolster students' resilience helping them thrive in the face of adversity. Among the factors deemed as protective factors, caring and supportive learning environment students experience have been given a considerable attention. Werner and Smith's study (1988) highlighted the importance of the role of a teacher in creating and cultivating caring and supportive learning environments that resulted in the increase of resilience. The presence of *significant others* is also thought to influence students' resilience. Investigating the impact of positive role models in the lives of students, Coburn and Nelson (1989) came to the conclusion that teachers who went beyond the traditional role of being a teacher and showed empathy and interest in students could foster their resilience.

Taken together, it can be concluded that resilience as a psychological emotional mechanism can be employed by the learners when they are in stressful irritating situations to be able to resume their previous productive mental activities. It is a vital coping skill when students go through upsetting events, psychological breakdowns, academic failures, suffocating educational atmospheres, and undemocratic teaching techniques. The objective of this study is to investigate the predictive relationship between perceived social support (social support of family, *significant others*, and friends) and resilience in English language learners.

2. Method
2.1. Participants
The participants of the study were 200 EFL learners (125 female and 75 male) from two Iranian universities (Kashan University and

Tehran Azad University, South Branch) and they were aged between 19 and 24. At the time of the study, all the participants were at their first year of study at university, doing a BA degree in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). The rationale behind choosing this sample of population is supported by the idea that transition from high school to university and beginning to study a foreign language can to a large extent put the individuals in stressful situations calling for resilience.

2.2. Instruments and Data Collection Procedure
Two questionnaires, namely resilience questionnaire and Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), were used to gather the data.

To tap into the participants' resilience, the use was made of a 25-item, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire adopted from Connor and Davidson (2003). The questionnaire measures factors including personal competence/tenacity, trust in one's instincts/tolerance of negative affect, positive acceptance of change/secure relationships, control, and spirituality. Since the reliability and validity were established only for the whole questionnaire and not for the subscales (Connor & Davidson, 2003), the current study used total scores of the questionnaire.

The MSPSS adopted from Zimet, Dahlem, and Zimet (1988) was used to measure perceived social support. The questionnaire is a 12-item 7-point Likert scale questionnaire that differentiates between three social supports of family (questions 3,4,8,11) significant others (questions 1,2,5,10) and friends (questions 6,7,9,12). Cronbach's alpha (α=.88) indicated a good internal reliability for this questionnaire.

Before the participants' filling the questionnaires, the researchers explained the objective of the study to the participants and they were informed that the survey was

anonymous. The data were gathered at the end of the first semester.

3. Results and Discussion

The objective of current study was to investigate the contribution of social support of family, *significant others*, and friends to the resilience of first-year Iranian EFL learners during their first year of study at university. Table 1 shows descriptive results for the participants' resilience and social support of family, significant others, and friends.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Resilience, SSF, SSSO, and SSFr*

Variable	N	M	Std.
Resilience	200	67.08	28.69
SSF	200	10.86	3.73
SSSO	200	18.11	6.31
SSFr	200	13.63	7.74

SSF = Social Support of Family, SSSO = Social Support of Significant Others, SSFr = Social Support of Friends

In order to address the research question, multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the variables in the present study. The criterion variable was participants' resilience and the predictor variables are social support of family, social support of *significant others*, and social support of friends. The resulting R value in the regression analysis was significantly different from zero $F_{(3,196)} = 7.843$, $p <. 000$, indicating that the regression model for resilience was significant. That is to say, 20.7% of the total variance in EFL students' resilience was accounted for by social support of family, significant others, and friends.

Examination of the standardized regression coefficients (β) revealed that social support of family ($\beta = .206$, $p = .004$), social support of significant others ($\beta = .245$, $p = .000$), and

Table 2. *Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Resilience*

Independent variables	B	Beta	t	sig
Social support of family	7.934	.206	2.881	.004
Social support of significant others	9.528	.245	2.107	.000
Social support of friends	1.543	.094	.795	.021

Model R2 =0.207 (p<.000), F (3,196) =7.843.
Adjusted R2=0. 194 p <.05

social support of friends ($\beta = .094$, $p = .021$) contributed to significant prediction of resilience in Iranian EFL learners. This study showed that as scores for social support of family, social support of significant others, and social support of friends increased by one, scores for resilience increase by 7.934, 9.528, 1.543, respectively confirming for this sample that social support of *significant others* is the strongest predictor of resilience.

This study indicates that perceived social support including social support of family, significant others, and friends EFL learners receive significantly predict their resilience. That is to say, social support of family, social support of significant others, and social support of friends significantly predicted resilience and accounted for 20.6%, 24.5% and 9% of the variance of the regression model $F_{(3,196)} = 7.843$, $p<.000$.

The results of this study are in line with those of Masten and Reed (2002) who highlighted that "[individuals'] relationship bonds to other competent and involved adults and also to prosocial peers are widely reported correlates and predictors of resilience" (p. 82). This shows that relationship between students and significant others who are in interaction with the students can make positive changes in students' expectations, motivation and behaviors. Andersen, Chen, and Miranda (2002) held

that "in terms of resilience, interpersonal motivations, such as the need to connect with others, are clearly activated in transference, and evoke a willingness to reach out to the others in a positive way" (p. 164). This calls for eliminating barriers which prevent students from being motivated to develop and maintain significant-other relationships. Thus significant others who are in interaction with students can offer them opportunities to develop relationships involving a degree of emotion, mutual trust and respect, and can function as a foundation to bolster their resilience particularly in their first year of study at university.

This study also provides support for Rutter's (1984) argument that building students' social relationship with teachers and classmates can act as protective factors enhancing students' resilience. In addition, the results appear to reinforce the argument of Dawson and Pooley (2013) who found that perceived social support not only helps students cope with stressors but also enables them to achieve positive academic outcomes particularly during their first year of study.

All in all, it can be argued that social support including significant others, support from family, teacher, and friend can act as protective factors and buffer learners from the impact of stressful situations and threats they experience when learning a foreign language. Thus, the results of the present study make a case for supporting researchers (Brisette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Schneider et al., 2005; Tusaie, Puskar, & Sereika, 2007; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007) who held that social supports students experience is positively correlated with optimism, and the choice of coping style.

4. Conclusion

This study found a positive relationship between the perceived social support and resilience suggesting that students who experience a higher level of the perceived social support including social support of family, significant others, and friends will most likely rate highly in terms of resilience. This study pointed to the importance of significant others as well as social support from family and friends in providing EFL learners with effective copying skills manifested as resilience in confrontation with unwelcoming stressful tasks and challenges in the process of language learning. Hence, the degree of feelings of closeness and support the learners receive from the family environment can protect them from stressors. In addition, supportive peers and teachers can offer social support validating feelings of self-esteem, competence, and personal control in the face of stressful situations.

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