

Application of personality in SLA and its research for teaching practice

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Abstract: Individual differences, such as intelligence, learning style, motivation, age and so on, have been playing a significant role in second language acquisition (SLA). Particularly, this essay discusses what impacts personality has on second language acquisition as well as the implication in future language teaching practice. First, a series of personality variables including extroversion/introversion, inhibition/risk-taking, anxiety, self-esteem and empathy are reviewed. This is followed by a discussion on the relevance between personality and second language teaching. Last but not the least, research and application of personality for future teaching practice along with an evaluation will be presented in the following sections.

1. Introduction

A number of studies argued that personality is one of the most outstanding features among many individual variables as it affects the extent of success that learners achieve in acquiring a second language (L2) [1][2]. According to my six years' teaching experience and classroom observation, different learners achieve greatly different grades of L2 proficiency even when the learning environment and teaching approach are nearly the same. That is to say, some individual characteristics may promote or hinder L2 learning by improving certain aspects of language acquisition while restricting others.

2. Personality

To be specific, Child, I. L. described personality traits as more or less stable, internal factors keep one individual's behavior consistent most of the time and occasions, although sometimes different from the reaction that other people would perform in comparable situations. In comparison, Wright and Taylor focused on those relatively lasting and stable features of the individual which tell one learner from the other, and predict their future behaviors at the same time [3][4]. Therefore, it is commonly accepted that individual will behave in a consistent manner on different occasions. However, Brown, H. D. later proposed that a number of personality characteristics such as extroversion-introversion, inhibition and risk-taking, anxiety, empathy, self-esteem have been as likely to influence L2 learning, which I will review as follows [5].

2.1. Extroversion-Introversion

Extroversion-introversion is introduced as an important factor in L2 learning [6]. They suggested that an extroverted learner is someone who is sociable and more willing to talk or communicate with people in large groups while introverted individuals are shy, reserved and less involved in social activities. In this case, it seems that extroverts may be more successful in language learning than introverts due to more frequent contact with L2. However, Wong-Fillmore, L. found that, in certain learning situations especially concerning systematic study, quiet observant learners might be greater achievers [7].

2.2. Inhibition and Risk-taking

Inhibition would probably worsen the effect of language learning as it discourages risk-taking, which is considered as a necessary indicator in language learning process. That is to say, if we expect to learn a foreign language, it is inevitable that during our L2 learning we make mistakes through which we can be more proficient learners. This is particularly true when Guiora, A., Beit-Hallahami, B., Brannon, R., Dull, C., & Scovel, T. found that inhibition is a block for language pronunciation performance, so risk-taking is promoted as it indicates adventurousness [8]. Brown, H. D. suggested that learners will never improve language, in particular communicative skills, if they do not open their mouths until they are sure what is correct [5]. This can be proved by our common sense that children adopt a new language, especially listening and speaking, more rapidly than adult learners who are less willing to reveal their weakness or look silly provided they make errors in language learning.

2.3. Anxiety

It is widely acknowledged that the majority of learners have experienced anxiety while learning an L2. Lightbown, P. M. and Spada, N. demonstrated that learner anxiety mainly discusses worries, nervousness and stress; it is also thought as a permanent feature of personality especially in some particular situations and circumstances [9]. For example, competitiveness among students and tests could increase anxiety. Brown, H. D. considered anxiety as a state of mind combined with feeling uneasy, frustrated as well as worried. Despite the fact that anxiety seems to be a negative element that is supposed to be avoided, facilitative anxiety which means a bit tense in the learning process is always seen as a positive element [5]. Unsurprisingly, anxiety and stress may have an impact on the achievement in examinations or even lead to low attendance, poor state of health condition and poor study habits [10]. Therefore, language learners should avoid having too much or too little anxiety so as to facilitate the progress of second language learning.

2.4. Self-esteem

Language learners need to a certain extent of their sense of self-esteem so as to succeed. Williams, M., and Burden, R. L. mentioned social comparison theory which indicates classroom interactions greatly affect the way learners perceive their capabilities and suggests self-esteem is a vital variable in SLA [11]. In other words, learners' sense of accomplishment is influenced by the information they obtain from both teachers and peers in the language classroom. Brown, H. D. outlined three categories of self-esteem: global, situational and task self-esteem [5]. While situational self-esteem has the closest association with SLA in generally, task self-esteem might refer to individual evaluation of a specific language aspect such as speaking and writing in a particular language classroom, or even a certain type of classroom teaching activity. Brown also

defined self-esteem as the assessment that individual learners make about themselves based on an attitude of either approval or disapproval. To be more specific, it states the degree to which learners' self-belief of being valuable, successful, important and able.

2.5. Empathy

Empathy means the willingness and ability to recognize similar feeling with others [12]. Guiora, A., Beit-Hallahami, B., Brannon, R., Dull, C., & Scovel, T. carried out the research of empathy's connection to L2 acquisition based on pronunciation. He made the assumption that more empathetic learners could have better listening ears and better acquisition of the native characteristics of speech [8]. Thus, learners with empathy would gain a more native pronunciation. Surprisingly, Guiora went on with his research of empathy and pronunciation in which subjects provided with alcohol beverages are considered to lower inhibitions, which was, however, condemned severely and was thus halted.

3. Relevance to English language teaching

English language teaching and learning have a close interactive relationship, and a high percentage of learners' knowledge comes from teachers who take learner characteristics into account during their teaching process in L2 classroom [13]. Therefore, it is important to encourage language teachers to discover the prescriptive traits of their students since personality has been considered as one of the vital factors influencing language learning outcomes [14].

Many teachers are convinced that outgoing learners who interact without hesitation in an L2 would be the most successful learners [9]. Educators hope to find ways to help learners with different characteristics to achieve success in the L2 learning. This inter-individual variation can be accounted for one of learner-internal factors. Being different from variables, such as height or age, it is impossible to directly observe and measure the variable as personality. The paper is focusing on discussing the importance of personality in English language teaching.

4. Research on L2 teaching implications

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition that teaching is one of the greatest accountability in student language achievement [15], which is originated from a landmark research on language teaching quality in Tennessee where Sanders, W. L., & Rivers, J. C. collected data about student achievement over several years for all the teachers to examine what an effective teaching is [16]. This section reviews three empirical studies on the effect of personality on L2 learning and the implications for teaching.

Bratko, D., Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Saks, Z. aimed to examine the relationship of self and other-assessed personality with school grades in 255 Croatian pupils [17]. The first finding suggests personality is a more accurate predictor of academic performance (AP) when assessed through peer-rather than self-ratings of the big five. Another finding is that cognitive ability seems unlikely to moderate the effects of personality on AP when personality traits are assessed. Most noticeably, emotional stability and extroversion in terms of the lower desirability of low scores on these traits is also indicated.

Papi, M. examined a theoretical model that subsumes the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience in English anxiety and intended effort to learn English. It is found that the ideal self and ought-to self show significant impacts on anxiety [18]. To be more specific, ought-to L2 self contributes to English anxiety to a large degree while ideal L2 self indicates a negative relationship. Also, the negative relationship between the ideal L2 self and English anxiety

is quite expected when internal origin of ideal self and external anxiety are given. In addition, the negative second language learning experiences result in the increase of L2 anxiety, whereas positive learning experiences reduce the students' anxiety. Interestingly, the study finds that anxious learners study more than learners who experience less anxiety.

Another study conducted by Zabihi, R. sought to explore the relationships among personality, English language proficiency, and achievement in EFL classes. It reveals four findings based on the personality variables of neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Firstly, extroversion and neuroticism are the best predictors of lower grades on the proficiency test [19]. Secondly, openness to experience is predictive of higher proficiency score. Thirdly, openness to experience and agreeableness are not associated with achievement scores, but proved to be correlated with proficiency scores. Finally, conscientiousness is the best predictor of higher achievement grades and has the highest correlation with achievement grades.

5. Proposed applications of personality in future classroom teaching

In order to provide effective instructions for language learners, teachers need to learn to identify and understand their students' individual differences, and become aware that their own teaching styles are appropriate to their learners' strategies [20]. In this section, it is worthwhile applying the above findings of three empirical studies on personality and language learning to the future classroom teaching, introversion-extroversion and anxiety in particular.

Dörnyei, Z. recommended that educational researchers should include measures of social desirability with both peer-ratings and self-ratings of personality, and aim at exploring the determinants of educational success and failure in future designs [21]. More specifically, an effective way of realizing this is to provide as many varieties in the classroom as possible to ensure all personality styles are considered, like frontal teaching, group study, pair work, and individual learning useful to all learners. The study also showed most teachers would agree enthusiastic and positive participation should be a goal to strive for in the classroom [21].

Papi, M. demonstrated that the strong impact from the ideal L2 self on English learning anxiety [18], producing this aspect of L2 self Dörnyei, Z. through specific strategies [21], can be effective in diminishing learners' anxiety. Moreover, the study showed that since extroverts might own a propensity for language learning, teachers should encourage the reticent students to open their mouths and participate more in the language classroom. However, Brown, H. D. indicates that it is not proper to test for language proficiency only on the basis of oral competence but cover an overall scope of L2 facility, including four macro skills of listening, reading, writing, and speaking. This gives introverted learners more opportunities to justify their abilities in L2 learning [22].

Zabihi, R. suggests that English teachers foster learners' conscientiousness by implementing them with the sense of competence, order, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-discipline, and deliberation, all of which might lead to higher performance on some parts of learners [19]. Furthermore, it has been argued that one effective way of coping with personality differences in the classroom might be treating students according to whether they are introverted or extroverted, for example, teachers could give more individualized instructions to match each personality traits.

6. Why and how students get benefit

For many years English as an L2 teaching methodology has emphasized the importance of providing a variety of learning and teaching activities in the language classroom. Moody, R. reveals that learners would pay attention if being provided by some unpredictable sets of ways of performance with frequent changes [23]. This part demonstrates two aspects of students' benefits.

First of all, use listening, reading and writing measures to examine L2 learners' English proficiency instead of speaking. This would give less extroverted students more opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities in using English as an L2. Effectively applying task-based approach, such as role-play, pair work, and group work, in the classroom teaching and learning can facilitate students of various personalities to be involved in the language acquisition process and enhance their pragmatic competence of the language. This is particular so to those introverted learners who are encouraged to actively to participate in a variety of tasks that helps to overcome the defects of their personality and achieve optimal learning outcomes.

Introverted learners tend to start peer dyadic interactions a lower percentage of the time than extroverted learners, and tend to ask for help a lower percentage of the time than extroverted learners [24]. Thus, to those extroverted learners, they might act as group leaders in these tasks, which, to some extent, helps to develop their abilities of leadership.

7. Evaluation of teaching practices

Teaching can be evaluated for the improvement of practice and for personnel decisions such as promotion. The links below offer actual actions to assess or examine teaching effectiveness for both purposes.

Johnson, K. suggested that opportunities for communication in L2, especially with native speakers, should be encouraged among the quieter students in order to provide them with sufficient comprehensible input and with chances to practise expressing themselves in the new language [25].

Peer tutoring, also introduced by Johnson, means pairing between English-speaking learners and native English speaking partners. One of them is given various tutoring tasks, such as explaining or teaching an activity. The tutors then have to communicate information with their partners and instruct them to complete the task. The experimental program continued for five weeks when the roles of tutor and learner were constantly exchanged between the two partners. It was found that the children in the treatment group interacted more in English and significantly increased their mastery of English vocabulary as a result of the peer-tutoring experience, compared to the control group that did not experience the peer tutoring.

8. Conclusion

Some people may consider favorable personalities as a necessary requirement of language success, but what are favorable personalities? Different learner personality styles will affect students' learning outcomes directly, so English as L2 facilitators should apply different teaching methodologies to different learner personality variables. For example, teachers should not only provide as many chances as possible to language learners to make them reflective, but also encourage those introverted students to overcome their anxiety and enjoy communicating with others.

Although advantages and disadvantages of personality traits are not the focus of this paper, some merits of personality may enhance language studies while its drawbacks discourage language learning. As L2 language teachers, they should take students' personality into account in order to adopt relevant teaching attitudes and materials, enabling students to promote their personality strength and avoid personality shortness.

Considering all the discussions above, I conclude English as L2 acquisition, especially in speaking, is largely affected by external factors, such as emotion and personality, rather than internal intelligence. As Lawrence, G. identifies that "A sign of a good teacher is the ability to make one's teaching style better fit the needs of those being taught" (p. 74) based on the connection between teaching and learning styles of students, teacher's personality is sure to impact the teaching

and learning outcome, which should also be shed a light on in the further practice and research [26] [27].

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