

# *Personality Affecting English as L2 Learning and Implication in Language Teaching*

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**Abstract:** For ESL/EFL learners, many factors influence their advancement of second language learning. A paramount one is the individual difference among ESL/EFL learners during their learning process. In this article, I will first summarize the relevant theories of second language acquisition associated with my interview, then present the interview with one of my classmates about her experiences learning English as a foreign language. After analyzing the answers to my interview questions and exploring relevant findings, I make a comparison between the interviewee and myself in foreign language learning. Finally I complete my paper with some insights and implications in the future language teaching.

## **1. Theoretical overview of individual differences in SLA**

For the relevant SLA theories underlying my interview, personality traits could be considered the largest proportion among all the data. Personality refers to those relatively stable and long lasting aspects which can tell one individual from another [1]. All in all, five personality variables will be summarized as follows.

### **1.1. Extroversion-Introversion**

Dewaele and Furnham found extroversion-introversion as one of the personality characteristics related to L2 learning and introduced it as a vital factor in second language learning [2]. They suggested extroverted learners are more willing to communicate with people in large groups while introverted ones are shy, reserved and less involved in social activities. However, Wong-Fillmore found that, in certain learning situations, the quiet observant learners may have greater success [3].

### **1.2. Inhibition and Risk-taking**

Guiora found that inhibition is a block for language performance, especially for pronunciation, for a certain number of learners are afraid of making errors during L2 learning, whereas risk-taking is promoted as it indicates adventurousness [4]. Brown suggested that learners will never improve language skills if they do not open their mouths until they are sure what is correct [5]. Thus, it can be concluded that inhibition would probably worsen the effect of language learning as it discourages risk-taking, which is an unavoidable route during language learning.

### 1.3. Anxiety

It is acknowledged that the majority of learners have experienced anxiety while learning a second language. Learner anxiety mainly indicates worries, nervousness and stress, it is also thought as a permanent feature of a learner's personality, especially in some particular situations. They also found competitiveness among students and tests could increase anxiety; others show that anxiety leads to poor performance [6].

### 1.4. Self-esteem

Self-esteem is applied to many fields including language learning, people develop their sense of self-esteem in order to succeed. Brown outlined three categories of self-esteem, they are global, situational and task self-esteem respectively, while situational self-esteem could be most associated with SLA [5]. Other studies done by Gardner and Lambert indicate that there is a positive relationship between higher self-esteem and better language acquisition [7].

### 1.5. Empathy

Empathy, according to Stern, means the willingness and capacity to recognize similar feeling with others [8]. Guiora led the studies of empathy's relationship to L2 acquisition in terms of pronunciation in the early 1970's. He hypothesized that more empathetic individuals would be better listeners and better attuned to the native features of speech [4]. Therefore, empathetic individuals would acquire a more native-like proficiency in pronunciation.

## 2. Interview with analysis and findings

Interview is one instrument of the qualitative research methods. Its main aim is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say [9]. With regard to my own situation, I consider interview as an ideal way to get more in-depth information from my participant as it is conducted face to face and orally, involving a lasting engagement with the participant.

### 2.1. Research Questions

- 1) Does an extroverted person really suit language learning? Why?
- 2) Why is inhibition a negative force for second language pronunciation performance?

### 2.2. The Participant Information

The participant is a Chinese female student studying TESOL in the university of Sydney. She is now in her early 20s and has been learning English as a foreign language for 13 years since the third year in her primary school. She arrived in Australia several months ago after completing her bachelor of English Teaching in one of the universities in Chinese. She cannot speak any dialects, so mandarin is the unique factor of first language influencing English learning as a foreign language.

### 2.3. Interview Analysis and Key Findings

After the interview, I have listened to the audio several times in order to catch the main meanings and the key words, then integrate those fragile sentences into structured ones which are complete and clear in my transcription. By reading the transcription, I can identify the main theory underlying it could be personality characteristics in second language learning, even though some

other aspects such as motivation, learning style, and age are also mentioned.

Interview analysis is a qualitative analysis beginning with a question-by-question analysis and statistical distribution of answers. The studies also suggested that the participant's answers to my interview questions should be filtered so as to be effective for my analysis, so other parts of her discourse can be ignored or treated as unimportant [9]. The following illustrative examples are from my interview quoted to see whether the answers support the theories discussed.

Example 1: Q9. What positively affected your learning rate or success?

*A: Having a good personality is vital to Language learning, As for me, I am outgoing and talkative, and I am willing to communicate with others so I perform better at least in speaking activities than those who have a quiet and introspective personality.*

In this interview, the interviewee's response is associated with the first aspect of personality which is extroversion-introversion discussed above. Extroverts score higher in oral production tests than introverts, but other studies did not find such a relationship [2]. In fact, a number of personality characteristics have been considered as likely to affect second language acquisition, but it is difficult to measure the extent to which personality traits affect language learning; or to what extent can we predict differences in the success of second language acquisition [6].

Example 2: Q7. What were your favourite teachers like?

*A: My favourite English teacher is Miss Wan in junior high school as she was so outgoing and she never got angry with students even if we didn't do well. She encouraged us instead of criticizing. And she advised us to avoid anxiety, try risk-taking, and improve our self-esteem when learning languages. Also, she set an example by comparing two of her previous students, one was clever but lost heart when confronting with difficulties; the other was of ordinary intelligence but confident, the result is that the latter performed much better in language learning.*

In the second example, the interviewee's views could be summarized as "what the participant likes is the same as what her favorite teacher thinks". Based on the example set by the teacher of my participant, it is admitted that individual differences, inherent in the learner, can predict success or failure in language learning. Furthermore, many teachers are convinced that extroverted learners who interact without inhibition in the second language and seek opportunities to practise language skills will be the most successful learners [6].

In the next example, we will see if personality elements are supported by the interview findings.

Example 3: Q10. What kinds of relationships did you have with speakers of the language and whether you felt yourself a part of a community in which it is spoken?

*A: Unfortunately, there was no relationship with English speakers until I arrived in Australia. Now I adapt to Australian accent quite well so I can understand what local people say. Also, I feel involved in the authentic community as I have made several friends through going to the pub.*

Neil Naiman and his colleagues have tried to identify whether personal characteristics make one learner more successful than another. Coincidentally, the answer of the participant to Q14 is the exact response to what Naiman and his team are trying to explore. We can make a conclusion that extroverted personality with skilled communication ability not only develops language learning but also helps adapt to Australian life [10].

### 3. Similarities and Differences

Through reading the answers to the interview questions, I realize that individual difference does exert a great impact in second language learning. As for some of the data given by the participants, I find them identical with my personal learning experiences; however, contradictory opinions also exist. Thus, I will explore the similarities, followed by differences.

First of all, our learning contexts are almost the same as the teaching methodologies adopted by

the teachers are within the scale of the official teaching syllabus issued by the Ministry of Education in China. Self-esteem exists in all levels of language learners while the best learners are those who could overcome anxiety [11]. I also agree that outgoing learners acquire language more easily but research does not always support the argument that extroverted learners are performing better than introverted ones although some studies have found extroversion such as outgoing, talkative and assertiveness lead to success in language learning [6].

Referring to differences, the first one is age. I started learning English at 11 when I entered my junior high school but my participant started at 8. Another one is that she relies on personality too heavily while I contribute second language learning to other factors like intelligence, environment and motivation. This inter-individual variations are related to inherent ability or language learning capacity by some researchers, while others suggest there might be environmental issues and the contexts for language learning. Investigation indicated anxiety in second language learning is different from other types of anxiety as it has a negative effect on second language acquisition [12].

#### 4. Insights and Implications

Before presenting the insights and implications about second language learning, I would rather point out some deficiencies of my interview design which I have never done before. Several problems can be found as the steps of my paper goes on, for instance, the interview questions are not precise enough though they are relatively open. Taking the 6<sup>th</sup> question and answer for example:

Q6. *What kinds of learning activities did you like?*

A: *I think this is a hard question because it is too broad, I just divide the activities into several categories according to different levels of study. In primary school, I liked activities which involved games and play; in the secondary school, competitive and cooperative learning might be popular activities since young learners are fond of pair work and are eager to share their opinions with each other. In my university, I preferred the communicative language teaching which has benefited me a lot. Overall, I cannot bear studying alone as language learning is not like science such as maths, physics and chemistry.*

The participant found it difficult to answer this question as the design of it is short of accuracy; in contrast, it is the interviewee that performed very cleverly as she immediately turned my question from broad to specific according to different learning contexts, finally giving a perfect answer which helps proceed my interview.

Regarding the future classroom teaching implications based on what I mentioned above, teachers should adapt their methodology to the individual differences in personality in order to enhance the language learning progress. However, complete individualization is not always possible in the classroom, responding differently to different learners to the same input where their personality affects their perception and interpretation of their language is essential. When users control their learning environment, they can intuitively select the options best suited for their learning style [13].

What is insufficient is that the specific aim of constructing a unique and direct method of measuring empathy was not achieved. However, many other personality characteristics have still been learned, such as dominance, talkativeness and responsiveness.

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## Appendix

Transcription of the interview

Q1, What was your English learning context?

A: *Well, I learn English as a, my foreign language in china. Normally I learn it in classroom context.*

Q2, How old were you when you first learned English?

A: *At that time, I was 8 years old. I remember I was in Grade 3. And....everyday the English teacher taught a few simple words.*

Q3, Does your age affect your learning?

A: *Of course, age can affect L2 learning to a large extent. For instance, er...students who do well in English they always start at an early age, you know, the earlier the better. Nowadays, there are more and more bilingual kindergartens opening in China, more and more children learn English from earliest childhood.*

Q4, Why did you decide to learn English?

A: *To be honest, we students cannot decide this. It is a policy in my country because English is a compulsory course from grade 3 in primary school, we must learn it.*

Q5, How was English taught in the classroom?

A: *In traditional classrooms, the mode is always that teachers present, students listen and take note, then do some practices, oh, sometimes teachers may do a little bit changes according to the specific classrooms.*

Q6, What kinds of learning activities did you like?

A: *I think it is a hard question because it is too broad, so I will divide the activities into several categories according to different levels. In primary school, I liked activities which have some games and interests inside; in secondary school, competition and cooperative learning is the most popular because young learners, they like pair work and want to share ideas with somebody else. Then, in universities contexts, I preferred communicative language teaching, it have lots of benefits. Anyway, I cannot bear studying alone.*

Q7, What were your favourite teachers like?

A: *I think my favourite English teacher is Miss Wan. She was my junior middle school English teacher. I like her because she was so outgoing that she never get angry with us, even if we didn't do so good. She often encouraged students and don't criticizing them. Once a time I remembered that she tell us personality is an important factor to learning English. And um... How to say, she advises us must avoid anxiety, try some risk-taking, and improve our self-esteem when learn*

*English. Also, she told us an example by comparing two of her previous students, one is clever but lose heart when meet difficulties; the other one is ordinary intelligence but quite confident, the result is that the latter performed much better.*

Q8, What negatively affected your learning rate or success?

*A: In fact I cannot remember the situations which happened before, now I am very frightened a learning material which have a large number of new vocabularies. Before, I think I hate grammar rules.*

Q9, What positively affected your learning rate or success? (to replace assignment P4 Example One)

*A: Having a good personality is vital to Language learning, As for me, I am outgoing and talkative, and I best like to communicate with other people, so I do very better in speaking activities at least than those person who quiet and shy to open mouth.*

Q10, What kinds of relationships did you have with speakers of the language and whether you felt a part of a community in which it is spoken? (to replace assignment P5 Example Three)

*A: Sorry, do you mean English speaking friends? Unfortunately, there are not any relationships between English speakers and I until I arrived in Australia. Now I adapt to Australian accent quite well so that I can understand local people say. Also, I feel I am inside in the English society as I made friends through playing table tennis and go to the pub.*