

The Relationship Between Learners' Personality Traits and EFL Learning

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In the process of foreign language learning, many factors interact to influence the learners' learning achievement, including teaching, the learner, and the context, among which the individual difference attracted many researchers' attention. They attempted to find out the relationship between these individual differences, especially personality traits and the learner's foreign language learning achievements. However, the results and findings of the researches are sometimes contradictory and not always unquestionable. This research is designed for verifying the results of other studies and finding out the relationship between personality traits and EFL learning in the Chinese context, thereby making some contributions to the EFL teaching and learning. This thesis consists of five parts. The first part is a brief introduction to the research. In the second part, some theories on personality are surveyed first, and some researches are reviewed. Part Three presents the method of the research, including a description of the research methodology, subjects, and data-collecting procedures. Part Four reports the results and the data obtained in the research. In the last part, the results of the present research are compared with those of other researches; the implications and limitations of the research are discussed, and some suggestions for further studies are also put forward.

Keywords: personality traits, introversion, extroversion, EFL language proficiency

Introduction

In the process of foreign language learning, many factors interact to influence the learners' achievements. The factors include teaching, the learner, and the context. The focus of applied linguistics turned gradually from teaching to learners. The individual difference attracted many researchers' attention. They attempted to find out the relationship between the individual differences and the learners' foreign language learning achievements. Many researches have been conducted with aims of finding out the relationship between learner' personality traits and their language proficiency. However, the results and findings are sometimes contradictory and not always unquestionable.

In China, learners' individual personality traits are often disregarded in the traditional teacher-centered languages classrooms. The research on the relationship between personality traits and EFL learning proficiency is inadequately meager. What is more, the conclusions of many studies are incompatible. In addition, such

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relationship might vary in different cultural contexts. This research is designed for verifying the results of other researches and finding out the relationship in the Chinese context, thereby making some contribution to the EFL teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Some historical milestones in the literature of the field of psycholinguistics are so important that they affected the way in which we think about SLA (second language acquisition) and the basic paradigms and methodologies we use to research SLA. One obvious influence on the field of SLA was Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar, which deeply affected our interpretation of how language is processed and acquired. SLA research accepts the competence-performance distinction introduced by Chomsky. This distinction is useful in studying such issues as the role of the formal language teaching, the role of the first language, and the role of practice in SLA. A second revolution took place in 1967 when Corder published his article "The Significance of Learners' Errors". His work gave rise to a new field called "error analysis". Sources other than the first language are considered as the main reason of learners' errors.

Step by step, the focus of SLA research turns from the cognitive factors to affective factors that influence language learning. People try to find out the relationship between language learning and learner factors, such as intelligence, motivation, learning strategies, and personality. However, the studies in this area are relatively scant, and sometimes rather conflicting conclusions are drawn from the researches concerning the relationship between personality and language learning attainment.

Ensenck and Cattell based their work on Freud's study of personality in a general psychological sense, and adopted another approach-psychodynamic approach to study personality. Eysenck (1972) categorized three major personality traits: extroversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism. The relationship between the scores and personality traits can be shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Relationship Between Scores and Personality Dimensions

Score/Trait	Extroversion	Neuroticism	Psychoticism
High	Sociable Outgoing	Anxious Sensitive	Independent Strong-minded
Low	Reserved Quiet	Well-balanced	Tender Dependent

Many investigations were made in the three dimensions as suggested by Eysenck.

1. The extroversion-introversion dimension: The relationship between extroversion/introversion and learning is found to be changing with time. Studying at primary schools, extroverts seem to be better students than introverts, because the teaching environment tends to be social, active, and relaxing. However, extroverts give their way to introverted students in higher education where the environment is academic, serious, individual, and even sometimes lonely.

2. The neuroticism-stability dimension: This dimension deals with the anxiety in the process of learning. It is claimed that moderate level of anxiety will motivate learners' learning, while high degree of anxiety may result in inhibition in students' performance and progress. Therefore, students with high scores on neuroticism should study in a relatively unstressful environment. However, there is also some evidence that students with high

neuroticism scores learn better than those with low scores in higher education despite the severe stress.

3. The psychoticism-dependency dimension: Psychoticism dimension measures to what extent a learner is independent and strong-minded. Unfortunately, no possible relationship is found between learning and psychoticism dimension.

Cattell (1980) identified many more than Eysenck's three personality dimensions. He designs a series of tests that measure 16 personality factors. His 16 Personality Questionnaire for adults are widely adopted.

Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978) studied, more specifically, the relationship between personality and language learning. They find eight personality traits that are connected closely with successful language learning: self-esteem, extroversion, anxiety, risk-taking, sensitivity to rejection, empathy, inhibition, and tolerance of ambiguity.

Rubin (1975) described the good language learner as having "a strong drive to communicate...[and is] willing to appear foolish...to make mistakes...[and] to live with a certain amount of vagueness" (p. 47). Beebe (1983) had expanded on this feature of the good language learner by exploring the personality traits of risk-taking. A risk taker is willing to take chances.

Motivated by these studies, many researchers carried out investigations in order to find out the relationship between personality traits and language learning. Two early studies on extroversion/introversion and learning were done by Pritchard and Metraux. The former studied the relationship between sociability and oral fluency in 1952, with the result that the extroverts have better oral proficiency than introverts. In 1964, Metraux studied the English-speaking children learning French. He described the better language learners as being outgoing, sociable, talkative, and adaptable whereas the slower learners as being reserved, quiet, and conformist.

In 1970's, a storm of researches were made, attempting to find out the connection between certain personality traits and language learning. The results still remained ambiguous. For example, it was found by Wankowski (1973) that by the age of eight, extroverts seem to be better learners while the academic attainment is positively related to introverts by the age of eighteen. Chastain (1975) found a positive relationship between outgoing personality and course grades.

In more recent years, Strong (1983) studied the correlation between some personality traits and items in language learning. Sociability dimension of extroversion was found to be relevant to language learning. In 1992, Liu Runqing (1990) made an important investigation of the relationship between personality and learning. In the report of the investigation, it is noted that the EFL learning is not significantly influenced by learners' personality traits. Extroverts got higher scores on listening and speaking while introverts got higher scores on reading and writing.

In spite of the inconsistent results of the studies, the importance of them lies not only in finding out the relationship between personality traits and foreign language learning, but also in their function of waking many teachers who have long been the centers and dominant figures in language teaching, and helping them become aware of the students' different personality traits. However, the advances made in these studies should not obscure some important issues emerged in the course of the research, such as measurement of the personality traits, criterion measure, and personality states.

This research is intended to find out the relationship between learners' personality traits and EFL (English as a foreign language) learning in the Chinese contexts, and the extent to which the results of the present research

corroborated with the claims made by other researchers.

The hypotheses of the research can be formulated as follows:

1. Students with different personality traits show diverse attitudes and behavior in EFL learning. The extroverts hold a more positive view towards some teaching techniques that show consideration for learners' personalities.
2. The extroverts' personality traits have a positive influence on their learning while introverts' personality traits have a negative influence on their learning.
3. Influenced by the traditional way of teaching, extroverts will show some characteristics of introverts.

Method of the Research

The research could be placed in the category of "descriptive" research. It is synthetic/holistic in approach, having a deductive objective, with a comparatively low degree of control and manipulation of the research context.

In order to investigate the connection between personality traits and EFL learning, we need the data of learners' personality traits and language proficiency. People's personality traits are manifested by their behavior in life. Students' behavior in the course of EFL learning, such as answering questions, participating in classroom activities, and reacting to mistakes, can show their personality traits. Therefore, students' behaviors and attitudes can provide acceptable evidence for describing their personality traits. As for EFL proficiency, learners' scores on EFL examinations can represent, to some extent, their ability to listen, speak, read, and write in EFL. Since in large-scale EFL examinations, oral tests are usually not included and the data of learners' speaking proficiency cannot be collected.

Two instruments are used: interviews and questionnaires. The interviews include two phases: open/unstructured interviews and structured interviews. Both interviews are recorded for later transcription and study. Guided by the results of the interviews, a questionnaire is designed. Since the research is made in Chinese EFL classrooms, it would be inappropriate to adopt any existing personality questionnaires which were designed by foreign researchers. Another important data in this research are subjects' scores on the EFL examination.

The 125 subjects are selected with randomization from Beijing Normal University. They study in different departments, including Chinese Language and Literature Department, History Department, Philosophy Department, Mathematics Department, and Physical Education Department. They are almost of the same age and come from different regions of China.

The analysis of the data generally takes the following steps:

Step 1: For each question or statement, the percentage of the subjects who choose respective answers will be calculated.

Step 2: Concerning some questions, answers provided by extroverts and introverts will be compared.

Step 3: The correlation between personality traits and EFL learning will be found out and tested. The results will be compared with those of other researches, focusing on introvert/extrovert and EFL learning achievement.

Step 4: Some special characteristics of introverts and extroverts found in this research will be discussed.

In this process, it is hoped that the hypotheses proposed previously will be tested, and some interesting findings may be generated as well.

Results and Findings

For the purpose of finding out the relationship between personality traits and EFL learning, the point-biserial correlation between introversion/extroversion and scores on the examination is calculated, using the (SPSS) Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The correlation coefficient between introversion/extroversion and total scores as well as scores of each subset is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Point-Biserial Correlation Between Introversion/Extroversion and Scores of EFL Examination

	Total 1	Total 2	Listening	Structure	Cloze	Reading	Translation
Rpbi	-0.0152	-0.0032	-0.5957	-0.0417	0.2094	0.4305	0.0552

The statistical hypotheses are like this:

$$H_0: r = 0$$

$$H_1: r > 0$$

$$H_2: r < 0$$

The alpha level is set beforehand: $\alpha < 0.01$.

The observed statistics are listed in Table 2. The critical value of the statistic is that $R_{crit} = 0.3218$ (at $p < 0.01$, $df = 48$).

Therefore, with regards to listening, the null hypothesis is rejected. Concerning reading, the null hypothesis is also rejected. That is to say, the probability is 0.01 that the Rpbi of listening at 0.5957 and Rpbi of reading at 0.4305 are due to chance. For the rest, the null hypotheses are accepted. In other word, there is a positive correlation between introversion and reading comprehension while there is a negative correlation between introversion and listening comprehension.

The t -test is adopted to find out the significance of the differences between the mean scores of introverts and extroverts (see Table 3). Table 4 shows the results.

Table 3

Mean Scores of Extroverts and Introverts

Subjects	Total 1	Total 2	Listening	Structure	Cloze	Reading	Translation
Extroverts	76.04	76.88	16.76	14.88	10.40	23.48	11.24
Introverts	77.04	76.84	13.56	14.72	10.16	26.12	11.40

Table 4

T-test for Scores on the Examination

	Total 1	Total 2	Listening	Structure	Cloze	Reading	Translation
t -value	-0.50	0.02	5.14	0.29	-1.48	-3.30	-0.38
p	0.622	0.982	0.000	0.774	0.144	0.002	0.703

Statistic hypotheses: $H_0: X_e - X_i = 0$

$$H_1: X_e - X_i \neq 0$$

alpha level: $\alpha < 0.01$

critical statistics: $t_{crit} = 2.5$

Therefore, for listening, $X_e > X_i$, that means extroverts are good learners. For reading, $X_i > X_e$, that indicates that introverts are good learners. For the other subsets of the examination, no significant differences are found between the mean scores of extroverts and introverts. The same conclusion can also be drawn from the p values in Table 4.

The main results of the research can be summarized as follows.

A. Personality traits do influence learners' EFL learning. Extroverts tend to do better than introverts at listening, while introverts get higher scores on reading comprehension. However, there seems no difference between them concerning the comprehensive competence which is reflected through the total scores on the examination.

B. All subjects lay emphasis on the importance of recognizing learners' personality traits in the process of EFL teaching and learning. Extroverts express this desire with more enthusiasm than introverts.

C. Since there is a close connection between personality traits and EFL learning, subjects hold that in the course of EFL teaching, either the teaching method or the materials and classroom activities should pay attention to learners' personalities.

D. Some extroverts show the tendency of studying alone which is often considered to be one of the characteristics of introverts, while many introverts also take an active role in the oral communicative activities in class that are believed to be extroverts' favorite practice.

Discussion of the Results

The first hypothesis is not rejected. Students with different personality traits experience totally different feelings in the course of EFL learning. Extroverts enjoy themselves in the sociable and active classroom activities, being eager to answer questions, and feeling at ease when they make mistakes in class. Quite the contrary, introverts tend to stay by themselves, avoid answering questions in class, and be annoyed when they make mistakes. There is a common belief among both extroverts and introverts that learners' personality traits should be paid attention to in teaching.

The second hypothesis is rejected. The hypothesis suggests that extroverts are better language learners than introverts. However, the results of the research show rather complex relationship between introversion/extroversion and EFL learning. Statistics show that there is no significant difference between the scores of introverts and extroverts. Nevertheless, some interesting results are obtained when analyzing learners' scores on each sub-section of the examination. There is a significantly positive correlation between introversion and reading comprehension and likewise between extroversion and listening.

These results are not difficult to understand. Extroverts, who are sociable and active, take chances to communicate with other people. In the course of oral communication, they must first comprehend what their partners say before they can make appropriate response. By doing this, they have much more opportunities than introverts to improve their ability of listening, and speaking as well. On the other hand, introverts tend to be quiet and reserved. They would not initiate a conversation with strangers or answer others' questions actively. As a result, they miss many chances to practice listening and speaking. With regards to reading comprehension, the situation is different. Since introverts like to study alone, seek help from books and dictionaries, and avoid prompt response to teachers' questions, they gradually develop the habit of thinking by themselves. They tend to

find the problems first, analyze the vital reasons, and finally carry out the solution. All these contribute to their higher scores on reading. In contrast, extroverts would like to study with other people and to ask for help from others. In addition, as they are eager to answer questions, they can hardly have enough time to think thoroughly about the problems they face. Their impulsiveness also adds to the explanation of the relative low scores on reading comprehension with comparison to the introverts.

The third hypothesis that influenced by the traditional way of teaching in China, extroverts would show some characteristics of introverts, is not rejected. Thirty-two percent of extroverted students prefer to study alone. For one thing, the traditional way of teaching in China has great influence on students' learning. In most cases, children are asked to finish their learning tasks by themselves. As a result, students form the belief that a good student should study alone. For another, the influence of the culture cannot be overlooked. Different cultures value personality traits differently. In our country, some traits of introverts are admired and praised, such as being modest and quiet, while extroversion is usually criticized. Therefore, active as extroverts are, some of them would rather study alone.

Such findings and results will be compared to other studies with regards to the better language learner, and to the typical characteristics of introverts and extroverts.

Based on the previous researches, no generally agreed conclusions can be drawn as to the relationship between introversion/extroversion and language learning. However, some similarities between this research and other studies are found. The findings of this present research keep in line with Scheibner-Herzig's research and Liu Runqing's investigation. Introverts are good at reading (Wu & Liu, 1992) while extroverts are good at listening (and speaking, *ibid*). In addition, the findings of this research are in accordance with all the descriptions about the characteristics of introverts and extroverts. A typical extrovert is sociable, active, talkative, impulsive, high risk-taking, and open to people, while a typical introvert is reserved, quiet, distant from people, introspective, and well-prepared.

Nevertheless, extroverted students in this study also show the tendency of studying alone. This is not reported in other researches. Another unique finding of this study is that introverts show certain features of extroverts. It can hardly be found in any investigations that the introverted learners take an active part in an oral communicative practice in EFL classrooms.

The conflicting results between this research and other researches may suggest some uniqueness of EFL teaching and learning in China. For one thing, there is little oral practice in the traditional EFL classrooms where teachers are the dominant figures. Fascinated by the novelty of such activities as role-play, even introverted students show great enthusiasm in participation. For another, students come to realize the importance of both linguistic and communicative proficiency. Furthermore, people's sense of value changes with the development of our society. Extroversion is no longer criticized as it was decades ago. Another important reason is that an oral examination is usually included in a job interview. These cultural and social factors all contribute to the unique characteristics of introverts and extroverts in Chinese EFL classrooms.

Through the discussion about the relationship between extroversion/introversion and EFL learning, we may find that no explicit conclusion can be drawn as to which personality type is better in language learning. Rather, what really counts is teachers' awareness of the influence of learners' personality traits on their learning and their readiness to organize EFL teaching in such a way that learners' personality traits are fully considered.

Finally, the results of this research can be summarized as follows:

1. Learners' personality traits do affect their EFL learning.
2. Extroverts are found to be better learners on listening comprehension while introverts are good at reading comprehension.
3. As for the comprehensive proficiency, there is no significant difference between introverts and extroverts.
4. Students claim that the teaching method should show the consideration for learners' personality traits, and some changes should be made in the teaching method we adopt now to meet the needs of each individual's personality traits.
5. Extroverted subjects in this research show the tendency of studying alone, which is characteristic of introverts, while introverted subjects display the enthusiasm to participate in the communicative classroom activities, which are extroverts' favorite practices.

It is hoped that the findings of the research might alert the EFL teachers in China, so that they might realize the importance of considering learners' personality traits in teaching and try to apply these ideas to the teaching practice.

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