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Exploring the Nature of Personality in the Current Studies of Academic Performance with Focus on Language Learning

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1. Introduction

Since individual differences have been identified as variables influencing language learning outcome (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Skehan, 1989); and as it was shown by the study of Marttinen (2008), the high percent of source of learners' knowledge comes from teachers; Horwitz (1988) encourages teachers to discover the prescriptive belief of their own students. In this way, since 1990s, there has been a growing interest on how personality correlates to academic performance. Moreover, according to Cook (2008), to understand scientifically, it must be interesting in personality. In such case, so high progress has been made

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toward a consensus on personality structure (Costa & McCare, 1992; John, 1990; McCare & John, 1992).

The examination of the variation in human behavior refers to the study of individual differences (Ehrman & Dornyei, 1998). The study of individual differences includes many subsets of studies such as the study of personality differences (Hampson & Colman, 1995), and personality factors that are important in development of linguistic abilities (Ellis, 1985). Moreover, psychologically, it is a truism that people are different in many fundamental ways, and there are infinitely variables (Skehan, 1989). In this manner, Horwitz (1999) points out “language learners are individuals approaching language learning in their own unique way” (p.558). In addition, individuals who are characterized as a particular psychological type, adopt different learning strategies (Brown, 2001). In such situation, the teachers must aware of the relationship between personality and academic performance (Cattel & Butcher, 1968; Eysenck, 1967). Moreover, the study of individuality and personality differences is a central theme in psychology as well as the other areas of social and behavior sciences (Saklofske & Eysneck, 1998).

2. Review of Literature

The concept of personality has a long history, and since 2000 years back personality was researched by many researchers like Cicero and Hippocrates. During its history, it has received considerable attention in the literature up to date as various empirical and theoretical studies. In such studies, a large number of researchers attempted to develop definitions for personality, but since natural taxonomies typically have fuzzy definition (Rosch, 1978), and the abstract nature of the concepts in psychology due to some difficulty in defining them empirically (Brown, 2001), there is not a universal definition for the concept of personality and personality traits.

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There has not been unanimous consensus on definition of personality; the same can be said for its classification. Moreover, the evaluation of such taxonomies can affect the process of research on personality traits. For example, generalizability across different languages and cultures is an issue to evaluate personality taxonomies (John, Goldberg & Angleitner, 1984).

Regarding the issue of the relationship between language learning and personality, there is a bag of mixed results. For instance, in the reviewing nine studies regarding L2 success and personality, Kiany (1998) found that two of these studies showed a positive relationship between the extraversion trait and L2 success, three of them had a positive relationship between the introversion trait and L2 success, and three of them did not indicate any relationship. Alternatively, Robinson, Gabriel and Katchan (1994) found that there was a positive significant correlation between the extraversion trait and achievement of language learning, but Skehan (1989) proved that there was not any relationship. However, there are some more acceptable results such as Ehrman and Oxford's (1990) study. They revealed that inventors were generally uncomfortable with social learning strategies, and they did not like affective learning strategies. However, they were very much in favor of metacognitive learning strategies. More specifically, it was found that there is a correlation between the extraversion trait and certain linguistic measures (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999).

In general findings, it was found that the conscientiousness trait has the strongest relationship with academic performance (Blickle, 1996; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003); the openness to experiences trait is positively associated with academic performance; and Fournham (1993) found that personality factor could predict some academically related variables.

3. Classifications of Personality Traits

Many taxonomies of personality traits were suggested in the field of psychology during the history of psychology and the study of personality. Some of these taxonomies are more dominant in this filed. The most widely accepted taxonomies are presented as questionnaires Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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(tests) of personality traits. Such questionnaires are used as instruments in order to assess the personality of an individual.

There are four most dominant questionnaires of assessment of personality which developed based on four dominant suggested taxonomies.

The first one is Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) that is based on the work of Carl Jung, was developed by Isabel Myers and Katharine Cook Briggs. The second one is the three-factor model of Eysenck, the third one, which enjoys wide currency, is Big Five framework, and the fourth model of personality is the Raymond Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factor.

4. The Relationship between Personality and Language Learning

The various factors might potentially influence language learning. In addition, since there is a strong relationship between psychological traits and the way that learners use language learning strategies (Ehraman & Oxford, 1990), psychological traits can play the most important role in the field of language learning. For example, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) found that successful learners choose strategies that are suit to their personalities; alternatively, in another study, Reiss (1983) found that there is a significant correlation between successful language learning and extraversion, emotional stability, or conscientiousness. However, there is another claim that there is not a significant relationship between personality and learning strategy preferences in the study on 553 adults which was done by Conti and Kolody(1999) (as cited in Liyanage, 2004).

There has been a vast amount of research on the relationship between personality and academic performance (Cattel & Butcher, 1968; Eysenck, 1967).There are general and specific findings regarding the correlation between personality traits and academic performance. For example, Liadra, Pullmann and Allik (2006) found that openness to experiences, agreeableness and conscientious were correlated positively with grade points average and neuroticism was correlated negatively; Reiss (1983) points out that extraversion has a significant correlation with

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successful language learning; Ehrman and Oxford (1990) prove that the high inverted individuals use more metacognitive strategies compare to extraverted individuals, and extroverted students like to interact with others, they learn foreign language better; Blicke (1996) remarks that openness to experiences is correlated with interesting to use learning strategies, and openness to experiences positively is associated with academic performance; and Ackerman(1999) found that wide vocabulary was associated with openness to experiences.

Generally speaking, there is a belief that the relationship between personality and language learning is as a two-way process which they modify each other (Ellis, 1985), and there are enough evidences that show personality factors can facilitate learning of second language (Ely, 1986; Reiss, 1983; Strong, 1983); however, there are another opposite findings. The below examples show the mixed results in the related field.

Pazouki and Rastegar (2009) used Persian version of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire in their study in order to investigate on 93 university students in Iran. They found there was not any significant relationship between English proficiency and extraversion/introversion.

Sharp (2008) used the MBTI in his studies in order to investigate on 100 university students (both female and male) in Hong Kong. He found that there was not any significant relationship between language learning strategies and personality.

Chamorro-Premuzie, Furnham and Lewis (2007) used the NEO-FFI personality inventory in their study in order to investigate on 221 British medical students (both female and male, with range age between 20 to 28, on average 22.67 years old) in UK. They found that emotional stability, openness to experiences, and agreeableness were associated with deep approach to learning, and they were negatively related to the surface approach. In addition, conscientiousness was associated with deep and achieving learning approaches.

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Liadra, Pullmann and Allik (2006) used the NEO-FFI in their study in order to investigate on 3618 students from elementary to secondary school (both female and male, with age range 7 to 19) in Estonia. They found openness to experiences, agreeableness, and conscientious were correlated positively and neuroticism was correlated negatively with grade point average.

Shokri, Kadivar, Valizadeh and Sangari (2007) used the Big Five Factor Inventory in their study in order to investigate on 419 university students (both female and male) in Iran. They found that openness to experiences, conscientiousness, and agreeableness had a significant positive relationship with deep learning, and openness to experiences and conscientiousness had a negative relationship with surface learning. In addition, they found that neuroticism and extraversion had a significant positive relationship with surface learning.

Oyesoji (2009) used the NEO Big Five Factor Inventory in order to investigate on 450 students (both female and male with age range 17 to 21) in Nigeria. It was found that the Big-Five Factors of personality were positively associated with academic self-efficacy of educationally distressed adolescents.

Caspi, Chajut, Saporta and Beyth-Marom (2006) used the Big Five Inventory in order to investigate on 214 university students (both female and male, with age range between 17 to 57, and on average age 27.6 years old) in Israel. Their study was comparison of two instructional environments that were Classroom vs. Web-Based Instructional Environment (WBIE). A clear difference between two environments was observed. It was found that classroom participants were as extroverted, and non-participants as neurotic.

Busato, Prins, Elshout and Hamaker (1998) used the Big Five Factor personality questionnaire in their study in order to investigate on 900 students at university of Amsterdam. They investigated on the relationship between Big Five Factor personality and learning style. Their study shows that there is a significant relationship between some of personality dimensions and some of learning styles.

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Hu (2004) used the Big Five Personality Questionnaire in his study in order to investigate on 379 students of hospitality education (both female and male, with age range 19 to 25, on average 20.88 years old) in Taiwan. He found that different dimensions of Big-five personality traits were positively related to learning motivation, and openness to experiences was greater than other dimensions. Moreover, he found that openness to experiences and conscientiousness could be as predictors of learning performance.

Chamorro-Premuzie and Furnham (2008) used the NEO-PI-R in their study in order to investigate on 158 university students (both female and male, with age range of 18 to 21, and on average age 19.2 years old) in London. They found that academic performance was correlated with openness to experiences and conscientiousness.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the present study bring several implications to instructional practice for teachers and syllabus designers.

It seems to be necessary that the curriculum developers should revise and expand curriculum design in this area. For example, courses in EFL/ESL teaching regarding personality traits may provide the teachers with practical suggestion on how to teach EFL/ESL. Another important point, EFL/ESL researchers and teachers need to be aware of some possible misconceptions in related case of the relationship between language learning and personality traits. In such situation, school administrators should support teachers by encouraging and allowing them to implement what is required in their classroom, and curriculum developers should be challenged to develop lesson plans, study guides, curriculum frameworks and course outlines accordingly.

It must be some counseling sessions with the students regarding personality traits and how to learn language. Such counseling sessions can facilitate the students' understanding of

their successes, failures, problems and potential related to the discussed relationship between language learning and personality traits.

6. Limitations of the Related Studies

Generally speaking, there are some difficulties inherent in endeavor to conduct any research work. Such difficulties are as the results of methods (e.g. measurement issues, sampling issues), type of instrumentations (e.g. exclusive reliance on self-report responses to the questionnaires, ambiguity in the questionnaire item wording, response style bias), and the other variables used in conducting this type of research (Ellis, 1985). Moreover, since all the educational quasi-research deal with living human beings occur out of laboratory conditions, have limitations (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003).

Regarding the issue of questionnaire, although survey studies have been very illuminating and have yielded important results, the first limitation of most the studies is that the measurement of personality traits were done by using questionnaires. Since the questionnaires are self-report and single source of information of most the studies, it is not clear whether the participants indicated the personality traits they actually have. Secondly, there may also have been some unclear points in the questionnaires themselves. For example, “Never” to “Always” may have been fuzzy because the interpretation of these scales can change according to context (Hatch & Brown, 1995), and the vagueness of wording has been another persistent problem in using questionnaires (Gu, Wen & Wu, 1995). The third issue, the difficulty in cross-language research involves translation of the questionnaires. The fourth issue, questionnaires may not be able to cover all the dimensions of learners’ personality traits, and there is no deep insight.

Since longitudinal research is more complicated and much slower, in the most of studies, such type of study is not chosen.

Regarding the limitations related to statistical methods, there is an important issue in the statistical procedures, that it is Cronbach’s alpha estimates internal consistency may not be

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appropriate to measure something that could fluctuate in short period of time which is used in the most of studies. The test-retest reliability measurement is better indicator of reliability in this type of research. The second limitation is response biases. As it is known there are three prominent types of response biases, which are social desirable response, acquiescence, and extremely response bias (Herk, Poortinga & Verhallen, 2004).

Generally speaking, one of the problematic issues that can be traced as a limitation is lack of the comprehensive operational definitions.

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