



PERCEPTIONS OF PERSONALITY FACTORS IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The following are specific personality factors in second language acquisition as identified by the well-known linguist, Brown, H.D (2014): self-esteem, willingness to communicate, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety, empathy, extroversion/introversion and motivation. These factors had also been singled out by other language scholars earlier, for example, Burt, Dulay and Krashen (1982). The purpose of this study is to investigate the role played by personality factors in second language acquisition. The study was conducted by way of library research and an open-ended questionnaire administered to graduate students pursuing a Master's program related to English language teaching and language studies. The current thinking on the factors involved, including cultural and religious factors, indicate that each of the personality factors is relevant for successful second language acquisition (SLA). They have an impact on the learners' varying degrees of success. It is crucially important to understand how learners feel and respond in their pursuit of acquiring a language, besides their own first language which they acquire on their own natively, naturally and almost effortlessly. An understanding of these personality factors and how they may make a difference, either positively or negatively, in both the verbal and written spheres is important in the psychology of language education.

Key words : personality factors, psychology, second language acquisition, English

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INTRODUCTION

Personality may be defined in general terms as "The totality of qualities and traits, as of character or behavior, that are particular to a specific person" and "The pattern of collective character, behavioral, temperamental, emotional and mental traits of a person" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1996: 1351). Leary (2005:3) defined personality as "the system of enduring inner characteristics of individuals that contribute consistency in their thoughts, feelings and behavior." Brown (2014) acknowledges that a careful, systematic study of the role played by

personality in second language acquisition has contributed to a much improved understanding of the language learning process and improved language teaching designs. Leary went on to add that human beings have individual differences, i.e. "personality characteristics and processes that differ across people. Human beings are remarkably variable in their personalities." Individual attributes may be viewed along a continuum of a five-point scale: very low to very high, with low, average and high in between.

Prominent linguists, for example, Brown (2014) and Burt, Dulay and Krashen (1982), among

others regard the following eight specific personality factors in human behavior which are related to SLA as being instrumental: self-esteem, willingness to communicate, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety, empathy, extroversion/introversion and motivation. The emphasis of this paper will be on acquiring English as a second language and the secondary role played by the culture of the learners..

Method of study

The study is a qualitative one which used library research: scholarly works of linguists, academicians and research publications on the topic under investigation. Fifteen graduate students enrolled in a Master's program of a reputable Malaysian university participated in the study. They were practicing teachers and those aspiring to be teachers of English. They responded to an open ended questionnaire (please refer to appendix) on all the personality factors identified above. They were requested to comment on the relevance and importance of these factors based on their readings and experience as teachers. They were also asked to approach the issue from a cultural (especially, Malaysian) and Islamic perspective.

Results and Discussion

Self-esteem

A highly acceptable definition of self-esteem, according to Coopersmith (1967:4-5), as cited in Brown (2007) is "the evaluation which individuals make and customarily maintain with regard to themselves, it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which individuals believe themselves to be capable, significant, successful and worthy."

According to Harmer (2001: 127), if effective learning is to take place "a student's self-esteem is vitally important." Learners need to have reasonable self confidence in themselves as this will facilitate the process of learning. Having positive self-worth of oneself is not similar to being arrogant. It is actually a good trait as the learners feel at ease with themselves. But having high self-esteem does not mean learners should be overconfident and stop seeking help from teachers or resource materials when they face learning difficulties. Learners must believe in themselves,

however. Having a low self-esteem could lead to depression and doubts about their self-worth.

Baumeister (2005) sums up the differences between people with high self-esteem and low self-esteem. The former are more willing to start a conversation even with strangers, they are more likely to participate actively in a group discussion, are independent and are able to deal with failure positively. Low self-esteem is related to less positive self-regard of oneself. It may lead a person to being socially withdrawn and thus communicate less.

Willingness to communicate

Second language (SL) learners must demonstrate the willingness to communicate in a language which is necessary for them educationally, socially and professionally. By being reserved or taciturn a learner may not acquire the ability to speak the language actively. The spoken language of such people may be devoid of fluency and complexity.

From a religious perspective Muslim female students may not want to be seen as too willing to communicate so as not give any impression that they are too friendly, and so would rather tend to be withdrawn. In some cultures, it is better off learning passively. Some learners in rural areas do not see the need to communicate in a foreign language as both the teacher and the taught are of the same ethnic background. A lecturer who teaches at a tertiary institution had mentioned to the present academician that her students spoke to her in Malay even when she spoke to them in simple English. The socioaffective strategy of cooperation whereby learners interact in English and work with their peers in a language activity may help to instill a willingness to communicate.

Inhibition

Inhibition in psychology refers to "Conscious or unconscious restraint of a behavioral process, a desire or an impulse" (AHD, 1996: 929). It has been hypothesized "that the defensiveness associated with inhibition discourages risk-taking" (Ellis, 1985: 121) by learners, but the latter is essential for good progress in SLA. Ellis further adds that egocentrism causes increased self-consciousness in the pursuit of SLA. Building defenses can be a detriment (Brown, 2007). The fear

of native target language speakers ought to be minimized. Inhibition is deemed a negative factor. Reduced inhibition aids, while greater inhibition hinders the learning process.

Inhibition, though may be culture-related, has to be discouraged. Teachers can help to lower their students' sense of inhibition by identifying and conducting appropriate activities. More exposure to authentic materials in the form of interesting reading materials and visual aids could gradually help to lower their inhibition. Learners should feel relaxed in their attempts to learn and become proficient in a language which will be of much benefit to them later.

Risk-taking

Brown (2007) opined that risk-taking was a very useful trait in SLA. Krashen *et al* (1982: 75) stated that learners ought to be prepared and "eager to try new and unpredictable experiences." Learners have to be a little adventurous to try out something unfamiliar to them without fear of getting it wrong or loss of face in class. In SLA, learners ought to take language risks with their pronunciation performance, spoken skills, etc. In the absence of risk-taking, learners will fail to get corrective feedback with regard to their language use. Krashen *et al* claimed that risk-taking learners proceeded to learn fairly quickly. Learners should not allow their unsuccessful risk-taking attempts to affect their morale (HajaMohideen, 2001).

The students should not be unduly worried about the possible negative behavior of some unsupportive counterparts. Only constructive feedback from the teachers and supportive peers should matter to them. Demotivating behavior on the part of some fellow students, or even some insensitive teachers should, in fact, spur them to prove that they can go on to become successful language learners too. Malay (and Asian) learners need to remember that in class, silence is not golden. In the Western education system, students do not fear risk-taking. Making mistakes is an integral part of the learning process. As they say no pain, no gain.

In their study comparing Indian and Malay secondary school pupils in Form 1, Sheema Liza Idris and Johana Yusof (2009) found that Indian students

who had a good command of the English language were better prepared to take risks. They also concluded that the Malay socio-culture had not adequately prepared the Malay students for fluent use of the language thus minimizing the risk-taking behaviour. According to them socio-cultural factors are influential in risk-taking practices.

Anxiety

According to Scovel (1978: 134), as cited in Brown (2014), anxiety is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry. Anxiety is one of the affective factors that may have an influence on SLA. A study by Horwitz *et al* (1986) as cited in Kees de Bot *et al* (2005) found that poor foreign language performance may be attributed to anxiety.

Scovel (1978), among others, refers to two types of anxiety: facilitative which is helpful and debilitating which is harmful. While excessive discomfort about an impending task may not be very helpful, some amount of apprehension which causes a person to be serious in accomplishing a task is not negative, it is positive. Learning a foreign language such as English requires facilitative anxiety for Asian learners. Some foreign languages may cause anxiety due to historical and cultural factors. Such anxiety has to be overcome by practical attitudes towards the target language. Teachers have to be careful not to provide feedback which may be misconstrued as negative. This will raise their anxiety level. Kees de Bot *et al* (2005) stress that low anxiety, together with motivation and positive self-esteem, facilitates successful SLA. On a spiritual level, anxiety may even bring people closer to God to seek His help to overcome their difficulty and do their part to push themselves to succeed in a given task.

Empathy

AHD (1996: 603) defines empathy as "Identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings and motives." Krashen *et al* (1982) emphasized that learning a language required listening carefully to others and being concerned more about communication than about avoiding errors. Brown (2007 and 2014)) stresses that for effective communication to take place, an individual has to be able to understand another person's

emotional and mental states, failing which there is a big possibility of communication breaking down.

In spoken English, for example, a word or phrase which has been misunderstood can be quickly asked for clarification by the hearer and it can be rephrased by the speaker for clarity. If a speaker from UK were to mention Boxing Day to a person who is unaware of it and shows his/her unfamiliarity by way of nonverbal communication, the former should empathize with the latter and explain what the day is about. Similarly if a host in US were to offer her Muslim guests root beer, the latter may be forgiven if they thought the drink contained beer. For successful empathy to take place HajaMohideen (2001: 70) suggests that a learner should ask oneself the following questions: Do I express myself clearly to the listener? Will the addressee be able to understand my accent? Have I written coherently enough for the teacher to understand me? Am I making sufficient effort to figure out what my fellow interlocutor is saying? In some countries, native English speakers are recruited to teach the language. In Malaysia, for example, not long ago teachers from primarily English speaking countries, known as English teaching assistants, had been employed in some parts of the country. There may have been initial difficulties understanding each other in terms of their accents and the cultural content introduced by the visiting teachers. In such cases, there has to be mutual empathy.

Asian and Muslim learners are empathetic towards their teachers as they have much respect for their guru. So, they try to cooperate with their teachers in the tasks assigned to them. Their teachers too need to empathize with their students in their pursuit of a foreign language. SLA is a complex undertaking indeed.

Extroversion/introversion

Oxford (2001) explains that extroverted individuals are those who like interaction with people and develop many friendships. While extroverts derive much energy from the external world, introverts get theirs from the internal world tending to nurture only a few friendships, which however are often very deep. It may be safe to assume that an extrovert communicates a lot,

though not always with accuracy. Introverts may be more careful with their language use, though it may not guarantee accurate language use. Though their personalities are different, the teacher can assign suitable tasks which may be shared by both types of learners, or cater specifically to either group. Studies have not come to a definitive conclusion which of these two personality factors is more conducive to SLA (Ellis, 1985). Both extroversion and introversion strengths have to be exploited by the teachers. It is believed introvert students comprise the majority in Asian classrooms. Therefore teachers need to accommodate these students. It is important not to marginalize them for their lack of verbal participation because very often it is the extrovert students who may gain the teachers' attention.

Our different personalities are shaped by the environment we live in- cultural, religious, national, ethnic, etc. In some cultures, students who are introvert are more favorably regarded as the cliché goes: Silence is golden. From a Malay cultural and religious perspective (in Islam) introvert students may be perceived as being more modest.

Motivation

It may be reasonably assumed that motivation is a key factor for success and lack of it failure in any pursuit. As far as learning English is concerned, the motivation to be proficient, or even acquire rudimentary English would be useful to almost anyone, living in urban or rural areas, at some time in their lives (Davies and Pearce, 2000), given the ubiquitous and influential presence of the language.

The motive to learn an additional language has instrumental, integrative, intrinsic and extrinsic purposes. A learner may be motivated by all or some of the above. Students and individuals may be encouraged to acquire a language for instrumental or practical objectives such as passing an exam, furthering one's job prospects and/or gaining a promotion. There may be others who want to learn English because they want to integrate with the Anglo-American culture. Instrumental and integrative motivation also include attitudes towards the target language speakers, towards the target language itself and interest in foreign languages (Kees de Bot *et al*, 2005).

Learners who are intrinsically motivated are involved in activities for their own sake and find the involvement internally rewarding and self-fulfilling (Edward Deci, 1975) as cited in Brown (2007 and 2014). In extrinsic motivation, the learner anticipates an external reward in the form of positive reinforcement, money, higher grades, awards and scholarship. Harmer (2001) had concluded that intrinsic motivation was vitally important for success based on numerous studies. The motivation to learn English today crosses boundaries and overcomes prejudices. English is not the language of the white people anymore. It does not belong to any specific cultures, societies, countries or regions (Davies and Pearce, 2000). Islam motivates its followers to seek knowledge even if they have to go as far as China. There is a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which emphasizes lifelong learning: Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. The motive to achieve one's goal is shared by all cultures and religions.

Conclusions

We have thus far discussed key personality factors related to SLA which can make a difference in the learners' attempts to acquire a non-native language. These factors have been identified by linguists and psychologists to be able to make an impact. We no longer live in monolingual societies. Countries have become multicultural and therefore multilingual. It is to the advantage of a country's young people as well other citizens to acquire another dominant language of a country without any prejudice. The acquisition of languages which have an international status will give the users the opportunity to participate in a global environment, the influential mass media included. Research studies have shown that the factors identified are all closely associated with SLA, and they can make a difference.

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Appendix

PERCEPTIONS OF PERSONALITY FACTORS IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Name (optional) _____ Age _____

Occupation _____ Yearsof teaching _____

Others _____

The following are regarded as specific personality factors in human behavior related to second language acquisition (Brown, 2014):

Self-esteem

Willingness to communicate

Inhibition

Risk-taking

Anxiety

Empathy

Extroversion/introversion

Motivation

How important do you think, are these personality factors, especially to Malaysian learners you are teaching/going to teach from a cultural and Islamic perspective? Write a paragraph under each of the above categories.

Thank you for your time and effort in responding to this survey. May Allah bless you.
