

PERSONALITY AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Personality and individual differences are aspects of second language acquisition and learning that are still being explored. Little is known about the effects that individual differences can have on second language learners' abilities to acquire another language. Though there are different tests to assess general personality traits, individual differences are difficult to accurately and expressly define. Gaining an understanding of individual differences, and being able to tailor second language teaching to students with certain personality traits would create so many more opportunities and a better degree of second language teaching. This paper will discuss various articles written on research in the field of personality affecting oral ability, implicit learning, and learning strategies that can be tailored to personal differences.

II) Oral Ability

Definitions of oral ability in second language learning are still being developed, but a basic understanding of the definition of oral ability is be a collaboration between the knowledge and ability for the use of phonology, which incorporates pronunciation, stress and intonation; accurate language, which includes syntax, vocabulary, and cohesion; fluent language, which includes pauses and repetition; strategic capacity, which is managing communication; textual capacity, which includes abilities like turn-taking and proper conversation format; and pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence Fulcher (2003).

One skill in second language acquisition and learning that is relatively easy to measure is oral ability. In an article relating personality to second language oral ability titled "Self-consciousness and Assertiveness as Explanatory Variables of L2 Oral Ability: A Latent Variable

Approach” by Gary Ockey (2011), self-consciousness and assertiveness are assessed as influential factors in second language learning.

According to Ockey, in the realm of second language acquisition, self-consciousness is often assumed to be an imposition on the acquisition of a second language, while assertiveness is considered a facilitator of second language acquisition. Past studies have attempted to find a correlation between these two personality traits and second language acquisition in the past and failed to provide convincing evidence. Self-consciousness and assertiveness are very specific aspects of human personalities and as such can be difficult to identify in individuals, and then test as learning factors. Ockey set out to prove those experiments wrong and find a relationship between personality traits and oral ability. This article puts emphasis on the need for interaction to develop oral abilities.

Self-conscious second language learners are less likely to be open to social interactions, and less likely to speak to and intermingle with other members of their target language group, and as a result miss out on chances to develop their second language, or second language, oral abilities. An assertive person will have no hesitation to speak, be a group leader and have no problem being in the spotlight. There is a common idea that assertiveness does aid in second language acquisition. According to Ockey a person who is more assertive and shows traits of extraversion may excel in second language learning over a more reserved, shy person because of the willingness for interaction. There is, however, very limited research on the subject, as most research has been focused on the broader domain of extraversion as a personality trait. Studies performed in Iran, Spain, and the Netherlands compared extraverted to introverted test subjects using the Eysenck Personality Inventory or the Cutler and Gura Assertiveness questionnaire to

measure extraversion. These tests all found positive relationships between extraverted individuals and second language oral ability in terms of fluency.

Some studies have failed to find any correlation at all between L2 oral ability and extraversion or introversion. Other studies have also found no correlation between assertiveness and self-consciousness. Studies in this field are still very new and very abstract, and as such scattered results are to be expected. These results are still valuable in that they can be used to manipulate and fine tune future trials in the realm of experiments of personality's effects on L2 oral ability.

Ockey studied three hundred sixty first year Japanese university students who were taking English as a foreign language. He used the Japanese version of the NEO-PI-R (Shimonaka, Nakazato, Gondo, & Takayama, 2002) personality test, and judged the students' oral ability through a group discussion test. The NEO-PI-R is a 240-item measure of the "big five personality traits", extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experiences (Costa, P., McCrae, R. (1992). The study found a correlation between assertiveness and second language learning as it pertains to pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills. Communication skills, which require interaction and conversational attentiveness, are found to be strongly associated to extraversion and assertiveness through Ockey's study, and lead to the belief that second language oral ability and personality are linked. One reason that past studies may have failed to detect a positive correlation between assertiveness, or the bigger domain of extraversion, and second language oral ability is that second language oral ability measures in the past didn't include communication skills. Ockey's study found a larger effect size for a relationship between assertiveness and fluency, making a strong argument for personality affecting second language oral fluency.

Ockey found assertiveness as a strong explanatory variable of second language pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills, with a stronger emphasis on communication skills and fluency being affected. The study however didn't find a tie between self-consciousness and second language oral ability. This study provides support for the belief of second language teachers and learners that certain characteristics of personality, like assertiveness, are linked to second language oral ability.

These results can give hope to future teachers and future learners of a second language because they may hold the key to tailoring lessons to different personalities. By breaking a self-conscious or introverted person out of their shell, or finding new teaching strategies to appeal to more introverted and self-conscious students, you can expose them to interaction, and as a result, potentially develop their language acquisition skills further.

II) Implicit Learning

Implicit learning is an unconscious process of managing various inputs, resulting in an abstract, tacit knowledge of complex or hidden covariations in the environment. The article "Implicit Learning as an Ability" Brown, J., Mackintosh, N., DeYoung, C. G., Gray, J. R., Jiménez, L., Kaufman, S. B.(2010), pioneers the research in personality's relationship to implicit learning.

This study brings in the concept of implicit learning as it pertains to personality traits in second language learners. The study of implicit learning as an ability studied sixteen to seventeen year old students to investigate a relationship between individual differences, or personality traits, and implicit learning. This study used the Big Five aspects scales and also the NEO-PI-R Openness to Experience scale. The Openness to Experience scale describes openness

to aesthetics, action, fantasy, feelings, ideas, and values. Aesthetics, fantasy, feelings and action are markers of openness, where the openness to ideas is a marker of intellect. The researchers for this study felt that testing Openness would be most efficient because it would be positively associated with implicit learning. Intellect in contrast is more of an intelligence marker involving working memory and explicit associative learning. This study was attempting to find a relationship between the more abstract aspects of personalities, rather than the intellectual parts, due to the nature of implicit learning, it's subconscious.

The study tested one hundred forty seven students aged sixteen to eighteen through a series of computerized tests. The results found that implicit learning was strongly related to the markers of Openness to aesthetics and fantasy. Implicit learning was significantly related to common factors in various measures of the Openness aspects of the Big Five domain, but not related to the Intellect aspect of the domain. As this is still a new concept with little research having been done as of yet, the causes for these results are still unknown but it does raise the potential that subconscious detection and learning may be a trait of Openness not Intellect. There was also a strong correlation between implicit memory and a lack of deliberation, showing that by not attempting to deliberate, one may be more open to implicit learning since their selective attention will focus on a wider array of stimuli.

This study shed light on the notion that people who are more open to abstract experience and less focused on structural intellectual aspects of education may have an advantage at acquiring a second language due to their ability to subconsciously absorb and process a wider variety of stimuli rather than focusing on one particular concept.

V) Learning Strategies

In the article “The Impact of Personality Traits on the Affective Category of English Language Learning Strategies” by Fazeli, S. H. (2011), a study of two hundred thirteen Farsi speaking Iranian females who were third year English students with varying degrees of Openness to Experience were tested using affective strategy.

The study tested English proficiency with affective strategies in place. As we saw in the past experiments with the Big Five characteristics, Fazeli tested subjects with characteristics of extraversion, openness to experiences, agreeableness, conscientiousness and neuroticism. Overall the students’ Affective strategy use was significantly positively correlated with openness to experiences and conscientiousness. The students’ overall affective strategy use was not correlated with the extraversion trait, according to one test by Fazeli. Fazeli also noticed that “based on increasing of the Conscientiousness trait level of the students, higher average of Affective Strategies would be used, and based on decreasing of the Conscientiousness trait level, lower average of Affective Strategies would be used.”

Through all the trials and experiments, this article concluded that traits like openness to experiences and conscientiousness can best predict overall use of affective strategies of students. Similar to past experiments, the Big Five and the NEO-PI-R personality test came into play in this test. Fazeli found similar results to Kaufman et. al in that students with openness to experience show prowess as better second language learners. This article also suggests that those who exhibit openness to experience may be able to approach education in a calmer way, bypassing the affective filter and being able to learn a second language with ease.

VI) Conclusion

Second language learning and teaching is constantly evolving to meet the needs of its targets. Students of second languages come in all shapes and sizes with varying degrees of need in terms of their learning style. Some students are more introverted, where others are more extraverted; some have attention deficit disorders, some are critical thinkers with immense brainpower who can put their full attention into their education. Understanding these individual differences, and being able to act accordingly are necessary for teaching any subject, but maybe even more so for second language acquisition classes.

Ockey showed that assertive personalities exhibit a higher capacity for fluency and language use in the form of oral ability due to a tendency to interact and have little fear in social settings. Though this was true of extraverted people, he was incapable of finding a relationship with self-consciousness and oral ability. This doesn't mean that there isn't one, just that extraversion is a lot more conducive to the acquisition of a second language, and progression of oral ability through interaction.

Kaufman et al. introduced the tendencies of second language learners in the five realms of openness as they pertain to implicit learning in second language acquisition. People who are more open to abstract concepts, and the beauty and fantasy in the world around them, are more likely to learn through implicit learning. By not focusing all your energy into one thing and instead absorbing what you can, you are activating your capacity for implicit learning.

Fazeli tested learning strategies using affective strategy for different types of language learners. By experimenting with affective strategies on a variety of personality traits, Fazeli was able to identify characteristics that are more encouraging for second language acquisition.

These three studies show how second language acquisition can be assisted through more assertive tendencies, stronger extraversion, openness to the abstract and the world around you,

and openness to experiences. These theories can be applied in the classroom, where teachers will be able to develop methods that may appeal to the self-conscious learner if the teacher can lower the student's affective filter through an environment that promotes openness to experiences, for example. So much is yet to be explored in the realm of personality and when new discoveries are made, they can be the key to unlocking diverse language learners in the classroom.

Works Cited:

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