The Relationship between Personality Traits and Language Learning Strategies of EFL University Students

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ABSTRACT

This study was aimed to identify language learners’ personality traits as well as language learning strategies of Iranian university students learning English as a foreign language and to investigate the relationships between personality traits and language learning strategies. This study investigated the personality traits and language learning strategies of 203 Iranian university students through administrating Costa and McCrae’s (1992) NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO PI-R) of the five-factor model (FFM) of personality and Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The results of the study from Pearson’s r correlation revealed that Iranian university students’ personality traits in the FFM were significantly correlated to the six strategy groups in the SILL. This study provides pedagogical implications for practice regarding language learning and teaching and curriculum development.

Keywords: language learning strategies; personality traits; personality types; EFL learners
Introduction

In the field of second language (L2) learning, it is believed that language learning varies depending on individual characteristics (Skehan, 1989), and differences in language learning outcomes are attributed to learner characteristics (Dörnyei, 2006). Learners’ individual differences in personality, attitude, motivation, learning styles, and learning strategies have become one of the most important features for successful second or foreign language acquisition. Along with the transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction, an increasing number of learner-friendly study materials, and the extended roles of teachers as facilitators, helpers, and counselors, language learners themselves have become more actively involved in their learning process and taken more responsibility for their own achievements. Many researchers have investigated and identified learners’ characteristics and other factors which influence their success or failure in second language learning. Studies in individual differences, however, have failed to produce consistent research results (Skehan, 1989) as they interact with each other in a complicated way (Oxford, 1992).

Personality makes a difference in how people learn and what they learn (Myers & Myers, 1980). Carver and Sheier (2000) have defined personality as “a dynamic organization of psychophysical systems that create a person’s characteristic patterns of behavior, thoughts, and feelings” (p. 5). Personality variables are considered one of the significant individual variables affecting any success of L2 learning, as do linguistic, affective, motivational, and demographic factors (Carrell et al., 1996). Ellis (1985) has pointed out a two-way process of personality and language learning because personality can influence L2 learning and, in return, L2 learning can influence personality development, leading to a modification of the learner’s personality. As a result, personality variables have an important part in L2 acquisition and bring huge complexities into the language learning process (Reiss, 1981).

Moreover, several studies on personality have tried to identify certain personality variables which have a significant correlation with language learning (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Robinson et al., 1994; Rubin & Thompson, 1982). Some studies of personality focused on the relationship between personality and L2 performance to see which personality characteristics influenced learners’ performance and proficiency either positively or negatively (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Lalonde & Gardner, 1984; Robinson et al., 1994). Other personality studies investigated the relationships between personality factors and other learner variables, such as demographic backgrounds, language learning strategies, communicative competence, and affective variables (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995).

On the other hand, language learning strategies are believed to help language learners “make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Moreover, it is believed that strategies can enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information (Oxford, 1999). Further, language learning strategies enable language learners to study the target language more independently, autonomously, and continuously throughout their lifetime (Little, 1991). Studies on language learning strategies originally started in the 1970s when searching for successful language learners’ learning behaviors, techniques, habits, and actions. These early studies produced results that focused on
identifying certain types of learning strategies that more successful language learners use in L2 learning (Rubin, 1975). These studies later focused on different ways which successful language learners used (Chamot & O’Malley, 1996).

Since the 1970s several researchers have carried out studies to comprehensively define learning strategies (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1999; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) and classify or categorize learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). Primary studies on learning strategies attempted to find other variables which affect the frequency of use of language learning strategies. These strategies were more effective when they went hand in hand with learners’ personality, age, stage of learning, type of language, learning tasks, learning materials, and purpose of learning (Oxford, 1990).

Language learning strategies are fully related to personality as they have an important part mediating between personality and performance (Blickle, 1996). In addition, personality can facilitate or inhibit the use of strategies (Mumford & Gustafson, 1988). However, studies investigating the relationships between personality traits and language learning strategies have not been studied in EFL context, especially in Iran. It is also to be noted that personality traits also have an indirect effect on second language achievement through attitudes and motivation (Lalonde & Gardner, 1984) and through various situation-related variables (Dörnyei, 2006). As studies on personality and other individual variables have appeared to be complex and lead to inconsistent results, this study was undertaken.

In order to achieve the aim of this study, the three following research questions were addressed:

1. What kinds of personality traits do Iranian EFL students hold?
2. What kinds of language learning strategies do Iranian EFL students hold?
3. Are there any correlations between personality traits and language learning strategies of Iranian EFL students?

Methodology

Data Analysis

Using a survey design, the present study administered two self-reported surveys (the NEO PI-R, and the SILL) to EFL Iranian university students. The two questionnaires were translated into Persian. To analyze the quantitative data, statistical procedures such as descriptive statistics, Pearson’s r correlation, and Cronbach’s alpha test were conducted.

Participants

This study was conducted at Golestan University in Gorgan, in the north of Iran. The 203 participants were taking General English course during the 2013 academic year. They were from different majors including Geography,
Persian Literature, Social Sciences, Physics, and Computer Engineering. The participants had started to study the English language at the secondary school in the public education system for over 10 years.

**Instrumentation**

This study consisted of the two following measurements:

**The NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO PI-R)**

The NEO PI-R, developed by Costa and McCrae (1992), is the standard self-report questionnaire of the FFM. It is to be noted that it is also appropriate for use with adults 17 years or older such as individuals of university age was used. It provides a systematic assessment of emotional, interpersonal, experiential, attitudinal, and motivational styles by measuring five domain scales and 30 facet scales. The NEO PI-R is rated on a five-point Likert-scale system for each personal trait ranging from 1 to 5: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*. The NEO PI-R is composed of 240 items asking the five domains and 30 facets. Each participant had an overall score of the five domains and 30 facets, respectively. The reliability and validity of the NEO PI-R have been determined using Cronbach’s alpha to test internal consistency. In this study, the major five domains of the Persian questionnaire showed high reliability scores: neuroticism (.89), extraversion (.84), openness (.86), agreeableness (.89), and conscientiousness (.82).

**Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)**

The SILL is a self-reported questionnaire that measures the frequency of use of language learning strategies of adult L2 learners (Oxford, 1990). For this study, the SILL 7.0 version was used to measure the frequency of use of language learning strategies of Iranian university students. The SILL is rated on a five-point Likert-scale system for each personal trait ranging from 1 to 5: 1 = *never or almost never true of me*, 2 = *generally not true of me*, 3 = *somewhat true of me*, 4 = *generally true of me*, and 5 = *always or almost always true of me*. The reliability of the Persian questionnaire was determined to be .84.

**Data Analysis**

The quantitative data analysis was conducted with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows version 16.0. To begin with, descriptive statistics, which included means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were calculated and the overall personality traits and language learning strategies were summarized. Pearson’s *r* correlation was computed to investigate the correlations between personality traits and language learning strategies.

**Results**

**Descriptive Analysis**
As shown in table 1, the findings displayed that out of the five domains, extraversion showed the highest means, which was followed by agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and neuroticism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>47.38</td>
<td>9.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>51.62</td>
<td>9.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>47.81</td>
<td>8.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>49.92</td>
<td>10.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>49.68</td>
<td>10.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to investigate the intercorrelations among the five domains, Pearson’s $r$ correlation was computed. It is revealed that the five domains were correlated to one another, and a statistically significant positive relationship was found between extraversion and openness ($p<.001$), followed by the relationship between extraversion and conscientiousness ($p<.001$), and openness and conscientiousness ($p<.001$). This indicated that learners who had a higher degree of extraversion showed a higher openness and conscientiousness, and learners who had a higher degree of openness to experience showed a higher degree of conscientiousness. Neuroticism showed a statistically significant negative relationship with conscientiousness ($p<.001$), extraversion ($p<.001$), and agreeableness ($p<.001$). This indicated that learners who had a higher degree of neuroticism showed a lower degree of conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness.

With regards to Oxford’s (1990) scale of strategy use, out of 250 participants, 13% of the participants reported high strategy use, 74% of them reported medium strategy use, and 14% reported low strategy use (table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High (3.5 ≤ M ≥ 5.0)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (2.5 ≤ M ≥ 3.4)</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>74.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (1.0 ≤ M ≥ 2.4)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in table 3, participants revealed that they used all six groups of language learning strategies at the medium level, ranging from 2.62 to 3.46. The most preferred strategies were metacognitive strategies, followed by compensation strategies, affective strategies, cognitive strategies, memory strategies and social strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory Strategies</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Strategies</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation Strategies</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive Strategies</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Strategies</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Strategies</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To investigate the correlations among the six groups of language learning strategies, Pearson’s $r$ correlation was computed. The six groups were correlated to one another. The statistically strongest relationship was found between cognitive strategies and memory strategies ($p<.001$), followed by the relationship between cognitive strategies and social strategies ($p<.001$) and the relationship between cognitive strategies and compensation strategies ($p<.001$).

**Correlational Analysis**

To investigate the relationships between personality traits and language learning strategies using the NEO PI-R for personality traits and the SILL for language learning strategies, Pearson’s $r$ correlations were computed. With regards to the five domains, extraversion ($p<.001$), openness ($p<.001$), neuroticism ($p>.001$), agreeableness ($p>.001$) and conscientiousness ($p<.001$) were significantly correlated to the overall strategy use.

**Conclusion**

The current study showed that Iranian university students’ personality traits in the FFM were significantly correlated to the six groups of language learning strategies. Regarding the domain level, extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness showed positive relationships with most of the language learning strategies, and neuroticism showed negative correlations with one strategy group, metacognitive strategies. Almost all the facets showed the same relational patterns as did the five domains except for the facets of agreeableness that showed
both positive correlations (trust, altruism, and tender-mindedness) and negative correlations (modesty) with language learning strategies, which caused the relationship with the six strategy groups to be found insignificant.

**Pedagogical Implications**

The findings of the study showed that extraversion and openness were positively correlated and modesty was negatively correlated to the frequency of use of learning strategies. This implies that the Iranian education system can make better use of the advantages of students’ personality traits for their learning process and outcomes. So, the findings of the present study help teachers and language policy makers develop curriculum and instruction for English education at the national level.

In the past, the main role of Iranian English teachers was to transmit new knowledge (vocabulary, grammar, and listening and reading skills) to students based on their teaching styles (teacher-centered). However, this study also provides pedagogical suggestions for teachers’ roles in the classroom to be aware of students’ different personality traits and language learning strategies in their learning processes. Further, teachers should move from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction and from one-way lecture-based to task-based, interactive learning activities so that students can get actively involved in their learning processes and more effectively employ different language learning strategies.

**References**


