Personality and Motivation in Learning Second Language

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by

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Introduction:

In the second language studies field, there are many factors that influence the success of learning second languages. Personality and motivation are two important factors. As a second language learner and a future language teacher, adjusting the ways I learn a second language and motivating my students to learn is based, in a large part on their and my personalities. I am interested in finding out if personality and motivation have any influence in second language learning and what roles they play, positive or negative. I intend to apply these findings to my own future learning and teaching in my classroom, as well as help my children to become bilinguals. In this paper, I will focus on how different types of personalities and motivation influence people in learning second language. The following three research questions will be discussed:

- Does personality have any correlation to the second language learning? Is it positive or negative toward the second language learning?
- Does motivation have any correlation to the second language learning? Is it positive or negative toward the second language learning?
- Is there any relationship between personality and motivation in second language learning? How do they relate?

I will further divide this paper into three parts. a. Discussing the definition of the different types of personalities and their role in second language learning. b. Examining the definition of the motivation and its role in learning second language. c. Investigating the relationship between personality and motivation in learning second language.

Part 1: Personality in second language learning:

Research Question #1:

Does personality have any correlation to the second language learning? Is it positive or
negative toward the second language learning?

Both my sister and I were born in the same family and grew up in the same language environment. We were in the same school, the same teachers taught us English (L2). My sister is a typically introvert person and she doesn't like talking to people in public. Compared to her, I am more active, I love talking to people and enjoy attending all kinds of meetings and activities, either inside or outside of the classroom. In English studies, both my sister and I have huge differences. My sister is good at reading and writing English, she always had a higher grade than me on English tests. But I am better in oral communication. I can speak English much better than she does. In English class, both of us felt very good at learning, we were highly self-confident people. That was another reason why both of us were tops in English class. I also felt anxiety in my English study. In English class, sometimes if someone is doing better than me in a certain area, especially my close friends or my classmates, I would feel very uncomfortable. I would study hard, try to pass them next time, that would give me great satisfaction.

Based on my personal experiences in learning second language as I stated above, I hypothesized personality has huge influence in second language learning. Extroverted people are better at communicative competence in language learning than introverted people. Introverted people are better in grammatical and literature in language learning than extroverted people. Self-esteem plays a positive role in SLA. Anxiety has a mixed influence, mostly negative, sometimes positive in second language learning.

Before discussing the hypothesis, it is necessary for us to understand what personality is and what types of personalities are related with second language learning. According to Wright and Tyler (1970), personality is the stable characteristics by which we can distinguish a person from others. Therefore, every individual has their unique personality. There are many types of personalities that relate to second language learning, such as: self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety, empathy and
extroversion. In this paper, I will only focus on three traits: self-esteem, anxiety and extroversion which are related with the second language learning:

**Self-Esteem and SLA:**

Self-esteem is the combination of self-confidence and self-respect (Shahila & Meenakshi, 2011). It is how you feel about yourself. Much research has shown that a higher self-confident person is more successful in learning second languages because he lacks anxiety and can learn in a safe and friendly language environment which is most important in second language learning. Brown (2000) further demonstrated the above statement that high-self-esteem person is the one who is likely to be successful in language learning because the higher self-esteem learners are not inhibited. The higher self-esteem, the greater achievement the learners would have in language learning. On the other side, lower self-confidence, lower self-respect mostly would cause failure in language learning because if the learners have low self-esteem, that would create insecurity and fear feelings to prevent them from taking necessary risks to achieve communicative competence in language learning. Among all of the research, I agree with Krashen’s theory which was cited by Lightbrown & Spada (2011) in SLA. He suggested in his “monitor” theory that lower self-esteem, lower motivation and debilitating anxiety will arouse the affective filter, thus blocking our brain from receiving the comprehensible input which is necessary for acquiring second language. Therefore, to be successful in SLA, we need to have a higher self-esteem and avoid low-esteem.

Overall, from above analysis, it is easy to see, self-esteem has a close correlation with SLA. Higher self-esteem will lead to higher achievement in SLA. Lower self-esteem has a negative influence in SLA. However, self-esteem is not the only factor that is related with SLA, nest is anxiety.

**Anxiety and SLA:**

Anxiety is another trait of personality, it was simply explained by Lightbown and Spada (2001) as: the feelings of worry, nervousness, and stress during the learners learning second languages. (p. 61).
There are many reasons why the learners experience anxiety in SLA, such as competition between the same level of learners, as my experiences or before the important test or exam, because the learners want to do better in the exam, they do not want to fail, that would increase their stress and the feeling of worry. Another situation will be before learning the new language, the learners have no experience of this language, mostly the learners will feel fear because they don't have any idea what this language looks like, and will it be easier or difficult to learn? Another situation will be the learners are afraid if the teachers will ask the questions which they don't know, that will make them feel fear and insecurity, someone may be afraid they will lose face in front of the classmates. Facing all these anxieties in the different situations, the researchers found anxiety has the negative influence on the language learning process. Bailey and Krashen (1983) “Diary study” further showed this negative influence. They collected eleven second language learners diaries. And they analyzed their diaries and found out they described how their anxiety effected their language learning process. For example, in some of the diaries, the learners claimed that they became anxious when they compared themselves with their classmates and found their language proficiency was not as good as others, but interesting is when the learner’s language was getting more proficiency; their anxiety decreased. So from this “Diary study”, we can see as anxiety is decreasing, language proficiency is improving. However, not all anxiety has the negative influence in SLA. From other side, some anxiety actually helps with SLA. For example, before the exam, test or oral presentation, although the learners always feel anxiety, they worry if they can pass the exam or if they can get a good grade on the exam. But a little anxiety will motivate the learners to study hard and try to get a good grade. Mostly those learners will be successful. Lightbown and Spada (2011) further confirmed: a certain amount of anxiety has a positive influence in learning second language. (p. 61).

All the above research give us strong evidence that anxiety plays an important role in SLA. It has mixed influences, some anxiety has negative influence and some plays a positive role in SLA.
**Extroversion/introversion and SLA:**

Extroversion and introversion are the most important traits in personality that relate with SLA. Extroverts are the person who like to contact with the others and share their thoughts and experiences. They are more open and enjoy attending all activities. Extroverts are very sociable and like to have parties, they mostly have many friends. (Shahila & Meenakshi, 2011). But in language study, they are very easier to distract from the study because they lack concentration for a period of time on the study. (Shahila & Meenakshi, 2011). On the opposite side, introverts like to hide inside. They mostly do not want to or are not willing to talk to people, especially in public settings. They usually just have a few friends but very close friends. (Shahila & Meenakshi, 2011). Because extroverts like to interact with others and share their experiences, so they will get most practice time using their L2 and more language input. They mostly have a positive influence in learning second language, especially in communicative competence because communication requires many interactions with others and practice which extroverts are good at. Schmidt (1983) provided us a very good example of how extroverted people can achieve communicative competence. A Japanese tourist Wes immigrated to Hawaii; he didn't have any English background in Japan. But he achieve higher in English (L2) proficiency in communication just shortly after he immigrated to Hawaii. Wes was a super extrovert, he likes going outside to talk to people in English (L2) and listening to native speakers feedback, he is also risk taking, he is not afraid of making mistakes when he uses his L2. Through interaction with the others, he has more chances to practice his English (L2). Through listening to the feedback from the native speakers, he can correct his mistakes, not making the same mistake next time. Although his grammatical competence was still in a lower level, he achieved higher communicative competence through his interaction and feedback. Schmidt (1983) used Wes' case to prove that extroverts are good at in communicative competence. Without his willingness talking to people and getting native speakers feedback, he will not able to achieve communicative competence in SLA. However, on the other side, introverts have a correlation
with SLA, too. Many researches also showed that since introverts are very patient, they can concentrate more in studying than extroverts, they are good at grammar and academic skills, such as reading and writing which do not require too much interaction with people. Chen and Huang (2011) did a survey on 364 high school students in Taiwan as subjects who study English as their L2, and they found out because introverts are using “meta-cognitive” strategies for planning language tasks, they are good at academic skills. Shahila & Meenakshit (2011) also concluded after a serial of studies that introverted people are better on reading and writing in terms of learning second language. Therefore, it is clear that both extroverts and introverts both have positive influences in SLA.

Overall, my hypothesis was supported by many studies that personality has a close correlation with SLA. Self-esteem, extroversion and introversion all have positive correlations in SLA. Higher self-esteem, promoted SLA, low-esteem, decreased the ability to learn. Extroverts are good at communicative competence and introverts are better in grammar and literature in L2. Anxiety has mixed influence in SLA. As analyzed above, most anxieties are negative in SLA. But some anxieties may help the learners to learn second language better.

Part 2: Motivation and Second Language Learning:

Research Question #2:

Does motivation have any correlation to the second language learning? Is it positive or negative toward the second language learning?

Both of my children are growing in the same language environment, same parents and almost same school environment. One child speaks very well Chinese (L2), although he still does not know how to read and write Chinese. Other one almost cannot speak Chinese (L2) at all. The child who is good at in Chinese (L2) is the one who had the most motivation in learning Chinese because he likes grandma who lives in China. He wants to learn Chinese, so he would be able to communicate with her in Chinese, to understand grandma. The other one does not have any motivation in learning Chinese,
since there is nothing she is interested in China. So for her, she thinks there is no reason for her to learn Chinese.

Based on my experience of raising my two children, watching their language development, especially watching them to learn second language, I hypothesized that motivation has strong correlation in learning second language. It also has positive influence in SLA.

Motivation has been found to correlate with SLA in many studies (Lightbown & Spada, Engin, Gardner and Lambert). According to Gardner and Lambert (1972) motivation is defined as “the willingness to learn” in language learning. Motivations can be divided into two terms according to Gardner and Lambert (1972): instrumental motivations and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation can be explained as someone wanting to learn a language for a certain immediate goal, like trying to find a job. Integrative motivation is a person wanting to learn the language because they are interested in learning and they enjoy learning. The goal of learning is for “personal growth or cultural enrichment.” (Gardner and Lambert, 1972).

Both of the instrumental and integrative motivations make the person aware the importance of learning second language, thus, the more students were motivated, the more success they would have in their learning second languages. Both types of motivation play a very crucial role in SLA. The following study further indicated that integrative motivation is more effective than instrumental motivation because the students want to learn, they are willing to learn, but not be forced to learn. If someone is willing to learn something, mostly they will put a large amount of effort to it and they will learn better. Without motivation, there would be less or no success in SLA. Another study further showed motivation's positive influence in learning second language. Ghapanchi, Khajavy and Asadpour (2011) studied 141 Iranian EFL university students, all the participants were asked to complete L2 motivational self-system and self-rated measures of second language proficiency. The results showed that the students who get the most motivated are the ones who have more L2 proficiency. They
conclude that those students who learn English (L2) for pleasure, have a positive attitude, achieve more L2 proficiency. In Schmidt's paper (1983), he used Wes as a case study to further prove that in order to succeed in learning a second language; motivation is a very important role. Wes wanted to be able to communicate with the English speakers in Hawaii, he learned English not because he has to learn, but because he wants to learn and he enjoyed learning, his motivation was intrinsic. That would be more the effective motivation.

From above all studies, we can easily see motivation play a huge positive role in learning second languages. That further demonstrates my hypothesis is true.

**Part 3: The relations between personality and motivation in SLA.**

**Research Question #3:**

*Is there any relationship between personality and motivation in second language learning?*

**How do they relate?**

Based on results from the above studies and analyses that both personality and motivation have a close correlation with SLA, I hypothesized that personality, especially extroverts and introverts has a close relationship with motivation in second language learning. Although extroverts find it easier to achieve communicative competence in SLA, without proper motivation, successful learning will not happen. On the other side, introverts who do not have any advantage in communicative competence also can be successful in achieving communicative competence with the right motivation.

The relationship between personality and motivations was shown in Ghapanchi, Khajavy and Asadpour's (2011) study again. As I stated above, this study was among 141 Iranian EFL university students. The students were tested with personality measure, motivational self-system, and a self-rated measure of second language proficiency. The results showed that both motivation and personality are important factors in second language learning. Furthermore, motivation and personality are related to each other. Even if language learners are not extroverted persons, their proficiency can be improved by
motivating in the right way. There is another study (Lalonde and Garden, 1984) to further support my hypotheses that there is a closed relationship between personality and motivation in SLA. They used 88 first-year university students of French as participants to examine language aptitude, attitudes, motivation, personality traits, and self-perceptions of proficiency of French. Their findings showed that motivation is significantly and positively related to L2. Motivation is also significantly and negatively related to “impulsive and aggression.” They also found that the students who get more motivated, they would feel less anxious about the L2 learning situation, therefore they have more self-confidence and self-respect in their study, and are more successful in learning. Everybody has the unique personality, as the educator or the teacher, we need to find different learners personalities and find the right ways to motivate them to meet their learning needs.

Overall, my hypothesis was confirmed: there is a correlation between personality and motivation in second language learning. With the right motivation, even different personality can achieve the success in learning second language.

Conclusion:

From above analyses and studies, we can see easily, both personality and motivation play a very important role in learning second language. Different types of personality have either positive or negative influences in SLA. Some traits of personality have positive influences, such as higher self-esteem, extroversion, and risk-taking. Other traits may have the negative roles, such as lower self-esteem and anxiety. However, anxiety is not totally negative; some anxiety will help the learners to learn. No doubt, motivation has the positive role in SLA. Personality and motivation influence each other in SLA. With proper and right motivation, even the negative personalities in learning L2 still can be successful in language learning.

In today’s language classroom, every student has their own personalities, how to motivate students in learning second languages to fit individual students' learning needs is extremely important
for the teachers and educators. For those introverted students who are not good at communicative competent, we need to create the positive language environment, create the more chances for students to interact with others, using “role-play” or “act out and read” to motivate the students to practice talk using their L2. Eventually, they will be successful in communicative competence.

However, although this research paper used many resources to establish that the correlation between personalities, motivation and second language learning. It is impossible to search enough papers and articles to gather all the ideas on different aspect of personality and motivation related with SLA. In additional, many sources used in this paper are based on self-measurement, they are may be not so accurate. So the results of this research still has its limitations. In order to get detail and more complex of the relationships between personality and motivation in SLA, further research is needed.

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