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Assessing Personality in SLA: Type- and Trait-Focused Approaches

Abstract: The study of personality has long been one of the major themes in Psychology. Nevertheless, within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), this research area has not received a lot of recognition, despite the strong ties of both disciplines. The objective of this paper is to describe the concept of personality and its role within the SLA field, as well as to outline the dominating research methodologies that are based on distinctive theoretical approaches. For this purpose, in Section 1 of the paper, the basic term of personality is defined, and its role in the process of foreign language acquisition is described, together with an outline of the most frequent problems encountered in the empirical studies of the concept therein. Sections 2 and 3 are devoted to the outline of the dominant theories of the study of personality: type and trait approaches. They are completed with a presentation of the most popular inventories and measuring scales assessing the concept in question that could be reliably applied in SLA research.

Keywords: personality, type theory and measurement, trait theory and measurement, the Big Five

Although personality has become one of the most frequently researched themes in Psychology, in the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) a significant paucity of research can be observed, owing to a variety of reasons. However, in spite of the obstacles, there is still a pressing need to deepen the understanding of personality as a shaper of behaviour and self-worth within the SLA domain. The main objective of this paper is to present the concept of personality and its role in SLA. It is followed by an outline of two general approaches to its study: type and trait approaches. Each of them is described from the point of view of its theory and research methodology that might be employed in SLA research in a reliable manner.

1. Personality in SLA

According to one of the most popular definitions of *personality*, it is regarded as “a dynamic organisation, inside the person, of psychophysical systems that create the person’s characteristic patterns of behaviour, thoughts and feelings” (Allport 11). It follows that personality can be understood as an active, structural system within which the mind and body interact, producing behaviour that is characteristic for an individual. Nevertheless, the latest developments in personality psychology, catering to the consolidation of various intellectual traditions, have brought about a slightly different approach to the definition of the term. It is now posited that personality is “an individual’s unique variation on the general evolutionary design for human nature, expressed as a developing pattern of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and integrative life stories complexly and differentially situated in culture” (McAdams and Pals 212). Such a conceptualization of the key term reveals the importance of evolution that has given way to the development of dispositional traits or broad trends which produce characteristic adaptations or specific responses to the demands of the daily life. They are shaped by the influence of time, situations, and social roles, culminating in individual life narratives that explain how a given person creates meaning in their life. Finally, all these processes are modified by culture. The above definition of personality demonstrates the development of human nature that is shaped by evolution, following the sequence of individual differences that transform into traits, then adaptations, inducing individual life narratives that are formed by culture.

The importance of personality as “the most individual characteristic of a human being” (Dörnyei, *The Psychology* 10) has been acknowledged by many disciplines, psychology among others. Although heavily impacted by genes (Krueger et al.), personality is also shaped by life experiences across the life span (Kandler et al.). It is generally understood that the impact of the construct is essential in daily interaction. As such, it should also be revealed in attaining educational goals for students who learn foreign languages (Erton). According to Cook, “there are three reasons for being interested in personality. They are: first, to gain scientific understanding, second, to access people and next, to change people” (3). From this point of view, it can be speculated that studying the role of personality in the field of second language acquisition appears to be of paramount importance because that knowledge might be indispensable for knowing the learner better in order to facilitate their bonds with the teacher and the learning material. In effect, the student’s progress within the SLA field can be accelerated.

Sadly, although personality might be regarded as a principal factor that explains the impact of individual differences on FL attainment (Ellis, *The Study*), the empirical research carried out so far disproves this speculation. It appears that personality factors have been found to explicate not more than 15% of the variance in academic success (e.g., Ellis, “Individual”). This meagre effect can be justified

by a speculation, according to which a direct effect of the factor on variables connected with foreign language attainment is hard to observe, mostly due to the change of language that obscures the relationship between the observed phenomena. This language modification ‘dramatically’ transforms the communication setting and the relationships between the investigated concepts (MacIntyre et al. 546). Owing to that qualitative variation, the otherwise clear and well-researched links become more complicated (Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey and Richmond), in comparison to those suggested by the research in psychology. For this reason, in the specific setting of a FL classroom, it is mostly the indirect effects of personality which can be observed, with personality shaping other variables, such as motivation and ability, that in turn might be detected in a straightforward manner (Piechurska-Kuciel). Understandably, partly due to that inconsistency, the research on personality in SLA has brought mixed results. However, aside from that, the lack of clear findings can also be attributed to complications with firm grounding in psychological theory or problems with the measurement instruments that might be deprived of validity and reliability, giving way to untrustworthy results. Another factor that should be taken into consideration is the situational nature of the language learning process that may not be clearly investigated while ignoring the impact of its dynamics. For this reason, catering to the temporal and situational variations of learner behaviour appears justified (Dörnyei and Ryan). However, notwithstanding these disheartening outcomes, there is still a need to explore the role of personality in the SLA field in order to gain a better understanding of the nature of the foreign language learner. This knowledge may be indispensable in order to effectively assist the student on their way to FL proficiency.

2. Type-focused approaches

The theoretical and empirical study of personality can fall roughly into two basic categories. The first one, called type-focused, incorporates theories and methodologies based on qualitative differences between people, while the other, trait-focused, on quantitative differences.

The foundation for *type-focused approaches* designed for measuring personality are specific theories that categorize individuals into a certain number of clear and autonomous types. Rooted in ancient intellectual systems, modern temperamental theories of personality comprise a system of personality types based on attitudes and functions proposed by Carl Jung, a Swiss psychologist. According to him, personality *attitudes* consist in the individual’s orientation to external objects, such as introverted and extraverted. Introverts, oriented inwards, get more energized by private, introspective activities. Extraverts, oriented outward, are energized by interacting with their external surroundings (e.g., other people) (Berens). Additionally, *functions* (judging and perceiving) describe mental activities or cognitive

processes oriented towards the external environment. *Judging* is a rational process, divided into two opposing types: Thinking and Feeling. *Thinking* judgments involve objective criteria, while *Feeling* judgments pertain to forming personal, interpersonal and universal values. *Feeling* is an irrational process, divided into *Sensing* and *Intuition*. The first one relies on the awareness of information coming from the physical sense organs, while Intuition involves collecting abstract and theoretical information. Following such a categorization, Jung proposed that one's personality can be described by means of eight basic types: four introverted types and four extraverted ones, with one function dominant, like extraverted or introverted sensation, extraverted or introverted intuition, extraverted or introverted thinking, extraverted or introverted feeling.

On these foundations, Cook Briggs and Briggs Myers developed a self-report personality questionnaire, complemented with the Judging-Perceiving dichotomy: the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Altogether, 16 possible psychological types are proposed (eight extraverted and eight introverted types). Each of them is described by means of four letters, each of which stands for the preference type. Following Jung, every type demonstrates one function that is the most dominant, apparent earliest in life. In adolescence, it is balanced by the *auxiliary* function, and in midlife by the *tertiary* function. Last, in highly-stressful situations the *inferior* function appears. The MBTI has become a very popular personality measure instrument used in education, psychotherapy, group behaviour or career development. It consists of 93 questions that include word pairs and short statements. The sample items are: "Change for me is: difficult/easy" or "I prefer to work: alone/in a team". On the basis of the responses, one of 16 personality types is indicated, together with its description, the best career paths to follow, and basic recommendations to work with this type of person.

In spite of a strong theoretical structure, there is insufficient evidence supporting its principles and test utility (Pittenger). Moreover, for most personality psychologists, the MBTI appears unscientific (Hogan). Altogether, type theories in general are claimed to fail to uncover all the intricacies of one's personality (Chitale, Mohanty and Dubey) because it has become apparent that all people cannot be allocated to a small number of distinct categories. Aside from that, types cannot be separated in a precise manner. In effect, an individual may be classified across categories (Costa and McCrae, "The NEO Inventories"). More importantly, the predictive value of such theories is seriously questioned because the move from individual personality structure to personality types reduces the knowledge about inter-individual differences (Asendorpf). Nevertheless, in spite of this criticism, it needs to be admitted that type theories with their holistic approach to personality enable a broader understanding of an individual's behaviour.

3. Trait-focused approaches

Trait theories view personality as composed of wide-ranging dispositions (Hiri-yappa). As traits are considered to be continuous rather than discrete entities, individuals are placed on a trait continuum signifying how high or low each individual is on any particular dimension, instead of being segregated into categories.

The first multidimensional model of personality structure was proposed by Cattell, who proposed 16 structural elements of personality (or source traits): Warmth, Reasoning, Emotional Stability, Dominance, Liveliness, Rule-Consciousness, Social Boldness, Sensitivity, Vigilance, Abstractedness, Privatness, Apprehension, Openness to Change, Self-reliance, Perfectionism, and Tension, as based on Carducci. These factors revealed the uniqueness of individual personality, allowing for the prediction of authentic behaviour. On the basis of his personality model, Cattell created a measuring tool called The 16 Personality Factors Questionnaire (16PF) (Cattell, Eber and Tatsuoka). Its latest revision contains 185 multiple-choice items, placed on a three-point Likert scale. Commercially-available personality measures, recent 16PF translations are culturally adapted, with local norms and reliability and validity information available in individual manuals. The validity of the 16PF has been documented in many studies (e.g., Conn and Rieke). The tool is used now by psychologists and counsellors in a wide range of settings. Nevertheless, its results need to be combined with information from other sources (interviews or other psychological measures) in order to predict behaviour in a reliable manner (Cattell).

A contemporary of H. Cattell, Eysenck (*The Scientific*) developed his distinctive structural personality model. According to it, there are four levels of the organization of behaviour, allowing for analysis to be conducted at various levels; i.e., that of supertraits, traits, habits and actions. Each supertrait is constructed of a number of traits, which come from habitual responses and specific responses (actions). At the core of this theory there are two independent personality dimensions: Extraversion-Introversion (E) and Neuroticism-Stability (N). Extraversion consists most of all in sociability with an element of impulsiveness, so people with high levels of Extraversion are friendly and outgoing. Contrarily, people with high levels of Introversion are quiet and reflective, with a tendency to spend time alone, planning their lives cautiously. Neuroticism, on the other hand, encompasses anxiety, tension, depression, and other negative emotional traits (M. Eysenck). Neurotic people tend to be nervous, unstable and vulnerable, whereas people who are low on Neuroticism tend to be stable, relaxed and well-balanced. These dimensions are the basis for the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI) (H. Eysenck and S. Eysenck, *Personality*), constructed with 57 “Yes/No” items. Aside from the measurement of Extraversion (24 items) and Neuroticism (24 items), it includes a falsification (lie) scale (nine items) to detect response distortion. In general, three measurements are obtained, showing the degree of the two supertraits and social desirability.

Later, a third dimension, Psychoticism-Normality (P), was introduced into this personality model. High levels of the trait describe an aggressive, hostile and uncaring person, predisposed to psychotic breakdowns. On the other hand, its low levels denote someone who is empathic, concerned about other people, and well-balanced. The three-component construct (H. Eysenck and M. Eysenck) is now called the PEN model. In this model, personality traits reflect individual differences in the ways in which people's nervous systems operate. An individual is likely to show some degree of each of these superfactors on a continuum. For this reason, the three universal factors should be interpreted as a set of bi-polar dimensions. Ultimately, H. Eysenck ("General") claimed that the superfactors of Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Psychoticism are universal dimensions, which means that these personality traits emerge in many different nations and cultures, not just Western countries.

All the three supertraits can be measured by means of The Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) (H. Eysenck and S. Eysenck, *Manual*). It not only introduces the dimension of Psychoticism but also focuses solely on the sociability aspect of Extraversion. The questionnaire includes 90 items with a 'yes/no' response format. Later, it was revised as The Eysenck Personality Questionnaire—Revised (EPQr) (Eysenck, Eysenck and Barrett) with some minor modifications. The EPQr contains 100 items in the full-scale version, 32 items in the Psychoticism (P) scale, 23 in Extraversion (E), 24 in Neuroticism (N), and 21 in Social Desirability. The short form version of the test contains 48 items (12 in each scale). All of them are commercially available to psychologists only, with the translation and testing of the instruments in various languages (e.g., Francis, Lewis and Ziebertz).

In spite of its unquestionable assets, the PEN model paved the way for another personality taxonomy: the Five Factor Model (FFM) (Dörnyei and Ryan), also called the Big Five (McCrae and Costa), which has achieved a principal status in personality studies (John, Naumann and Soto). The model incorporates five broad dimensions of personality traits or domains (Costa and McCrae, "Domains") that can describe an individual, regardless of language or culture. They represent personality at a very broad level of abstraction, with each dimension summarizing a large number of clear-cut, precise personality characteristics (John, Naumann and Soto). It accommodates five broad factors: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. Each dimension is placed on a continuum with two extreme poles, with six constituent facets that might be broken into even more distinct concepts (Clark and Watson). This categorization enables to perceive personality factors as independent variables in research studies in an easier and more reliable manner for non-psychologists (Dörnyei, "Individual").

The trait of *Neuroticism* (vs. Emotional Stability) is connected with negative emotionality and nervousness, accommodating people who are not in control of their impulses, and have problems coping with stress. The facets of Neuroticism are constituted by Anxiety, Angry Hostility, Depression, Self-consciousness, Impulsiveness and Vulnerability. *Extraversion* (vs. Introversion) pertains to an energetic, passionate, and bold approach to life and to social relations (Digman). The

facets describing the trait are represented by Warmth, Gregariousness, Assertiveness, Activity, Excitement-seeking and Positive emotions. *Openness to experience* (vs. low Openness) describes “individual differences in imagination, sensitivity to aesthetics, depth of feeling, preference for novelty, cognitive flexibility, and social and political values” (Sutin 83). It comprises the facets of Fantasy, Aesthetics, Feelings, Actions, Ideas, and Values. *Agreeableness* refers to altruistic consideration for other people, as well as to unsuspecting and big-hearted attitudes towards, and to trusting and generous sentiments. The facets of the trait are Trust, Straightforwardness, Altruism, Compliance, Modesty and Tendermindedness (Costa and McCrae, *Manual*). The last dimension is *Conscientiousness*, a spectrum of constructs that describe one’s “propensity to follow socially prescribed norms for impulse control, to be goal directed, to plan, and to be able to delay gratification and to follow norms and rules” (Roberts et al. 369). It comprises the facets of Competence, Order, Dutifulness, Achievement-striving, Self-discipline and Deliberation.

One of the most popular instruments for measuring the Big Five attributes is The Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R), consisting of 240 items, by Costa and McCrae (“Objective”). Aside from measuring the five dimensions, it also assesses the five sets of six respective facets (subordinate aspects of each trait). It has been found to be the most comprehensive, and presumably, best-validated inventory. Its shortened version with 60 items is called The NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) (Costa and McCrae, *Manual*), with 12 items per domain. The test was developed for use with adult men and women without overt psychopathology, but also turned out to be useful at younger ages (over 15 years of age). The sample items on the inventory are: *I keep my belongings neat and clean* or *When I'm under a great deal of stress, sometimes I feel like I'm going to pieces*. Responses are made on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *1—strongly disagree* to *5—strongly agree*. The scale has been shown to be highly reliable and valid, popular in various languages and cultures (McCrae et al.). However, both instruments have been strongly criticised for their market-oriented and proprietary nature (Goldberg).

In order to produce an instrument capable of measuring personality traits that could be made available to the general public, Goldberg initiated an international collaboration to develop an easily available, broad-bandwidth personality inventory, corresponding to the commercial NEO PI-R and NEO-FFI. The scale is known as Goldberg’s IPIP Big Five (IPIP B5), that is a 50-item instrument. The inventory can be freely downloaded from the internet for use in research (www.ipip.ori.org) with ten items for each of the Big-Five personality factors. Each item is in a sentence fragment form (e.g., “Am the life of the party”), with respondents rating how well they believe it describes them on a 5-point scale (*very inaccurate* to *very accurate*). The scale has turned out to be valid (Lim and Ployhart) and robust across languages, cultures, genders, and age groups (Guenole and Chernyshenko).

Altogether, the strengths of trait theories are mostly connected with their ability to classify observable behaviours (Hampson). Aside from that, the criteria used for classifying and measuring behaviour have been found to be objective, which

can be evidenced on the basis of the fact that independent teams of researchers working on defining a universal set of traits arrived at similar conclusions (e.g., Costa and McCrae, *Manual*; Goldberg). The Big Five model enables a researcher to capture the cumulative effects of different variables reflected in trait complexes. In this way, a clearer inspection of the effects of particular traits on academic achievement can be obtained (Dörnyei and Ryan). Nevertheless, trait theories and approaches are not free from criticism. They are said to be “conceptually vacuous” (Hogan and Foster 38) because a direct observation of traits, contrary to behaviour, cannot be carried out. Aside from that, prediction cannot be confused with explanation, which means that identifying regular patterns of behaviour (i.e., traits) is not identical with explaining these patterns by means of traits (Block).

Irrespective of the criticism of type and trait approaches, the empirical research on personality within the SLA area is still needed. It appears that assessing it by means of trait methodologies, such as those represented by Goldberg’s IPIP Big Five, is likely to give way to gaining reliable insight into the direct and direct effect of personality because of its solid theoretical foundations in Psychology, as well as sound measurement tools, some of which have already been effectively used in the applied linguistics research. At the same time, it must be noted that other thought-provoking approaches to personality study, like the narrative perspective, may render important information indispensable for the understanding of the language acquisition process (Piechurska-Kuciel, Ożańska-Ponikwia and Skafacka).

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