

## TEMPERAMENT AND PERSONALITY: A MUTE STRUGGLE FOR LANGUAGE ACHIEVEMENT

By

FATEMEH BEHJAT

*Faculty of English Language Department, Islamic Azad University, Abadeh Branch, Abadeh, Iran.*

### ABSTRACT

*There has always been dissatisfaction by language teachers who observe different levels of achievement with students attending the same language class and taking the same instruction. This variation in attaining the desired level of proficiency can be caused by the learners' personality types. The present study was an attempt to explore the degree to which one's temperament and personality type can influence one's language achievement. To this end, Longman TOEFL Test (2005) was administered to a group of 127 intermediate English learners at Marefat English Institute in Shiraz. At the same time, Black Dog Institutes' temperament and personality questionnaire was administered. After the instruction, which took about nine months, the remaining 76 students who passed three successive terms at the institute, took the same TOEFL test. The comparison between the students' achievement and their personality types revealed that there is a relationship between the learners' temperament and their language attainment. This implies that taking the same instruction, learners who are more irritable, anxious, personally reserved, and socially avoiding achieve less. On the other hand, learners who are more self-focused, interpersonally sensitive, perfectionist and self-criticizing enjoy a higher level of language proficiency.*

*Keywords: EFL Learners, TOEFL Test, Temperament and Personality.*

### INTRODUCTION

Research on language learning has revealed that there are many elements which directly or indirectly affect the way an individual learns a foreign language. These elements are either linguistic or non-linguistic. While the linguistic factors are linguists' business to take into considerations, psychologists play the key role in discovering non-linguistic factors which positively or negatively influence on the way learners acquire a foreign language. The individuals bring to language classes different skills, approaches, attitudes and temperaments [7]. In the course of language learning, individual differences should be considered as they may lead to different levels of achievement. Affective (motivation, attitude, anxiety and acculturation), cognitive (aptitude, learning styles and strategies), biographical (sex), linguistic (initial language proficiency level), and circumstantial variables were studied and concluded that these variables are necessarily independent of each other, but each can have an impact on the degree of language achievement

an individual reaches [7].

Previously, language learners were all considered the same, and what a teacher expected was for the students to reach the same level of language ability. But, Gardner put it differently:

The biggest mistake of past centuries in teaching has been to treat all children as if they were variants of the same individual, and thus to feel justified in teaching them the same subjects in the same ways (Gardner as quoted in Tomlinson, 2000, p. 9).

Taking individual differences into consideration, one can find two categories of learners' diversity to be investigated, subjective or objective diversity [11,23]. Subjective differences are those that suggest how a learner is genetically equipped for learning. From this category, one can study personality, intelligence, learning styles and strategies, motivation, aptitude, and age. On the other hand, objective differences could be described as what comes from outside, for example, education of parents, social and financial status of the family and related areas.

This study took a subjective approach and aimed at finding out the degree to which language learners' personality types and temperaments might affect their language achievement [11,23].

### Literature Review

One of the determining factors in foreign language learning and acquisition is personality and temperament. While personality generally refers to the way an individual feels, temperament refers to the personal way of thinking and believing. There are some differences between those who have thinking preference with those who have feeling preference. Those with a thinking preference, rather than a feeling preference, prefer an analysis of language data and have a greater ability to see details rather than the global picture [26]. Thinkers are less likely to guess or decide based on the way they feel to be right. Those with a feeling preference, on the other hand, see things more globally and seek holistic strategies such as, guessing and predicting with avoidance of having a logical analysis. Having the knowledge of learners' personality and temperament is very important as the teacher can plan for teaching methodology and materials which matches individual differences in the classroom. Though a number of personality characteristics are proposed as being influential in language learning, it is not easy to demonstrate them in empirical studies [18]. On the other hand, through different studies, one might not come to a consensus on the similar impacts of the same personality traits since temperament and personality are very complex issues [5,11,12]. There are some characteristics which seem to be important in the process of language learning. They include self-esteem, empathy, talkativeness and responsiveness, yet research does not show a clearly defined relationship between personality and foreign language learning [18]. In order to deal with different personalities in a language classroom, several suggestions were offered to a teacher as they claim that one needs to individualize his teaching so that each learner would develop his personality. They stated that considering temperament and personality differences, learners have a chance to reach their maximum potential; they can experience success and perceive the learning positively;

they are responsible for their own learning; they respect others and would be tolerant to their differences; finally, they develop their interests and use their previous knowledge and experience to learn better [15].

An important aspect of personality which highly affects language achievement is attitude. Students' attitudes tend to prompt learners to adopt particular learning behaviours [14]. In an empirical study, among all current issues related to factors influencing language learning including social, cultural, contextual, cognitive, affective, and personal factors, attitudes have an important place [2]. Personal characteristics of language learners were also studied and concluded that attitude is an important factor in language learning [6]. The internal structure of language learning are investigated and discovered that motivation has a direct relationship with learning effort and achievement [9]. There are many studies on different aspects of personality factors including attitude and language learning such as the relationship between attitudes and motivation [3,8], the relationship between attitudes and learning strategies (Gan, 2004), the relationship between attitudes and level of achievement [13], and the relationship between first language use, anxiety, and language learning [17].

Another aspect of personality is extroversion-introversion. Extroverts were advantaged at acquiring basic interpersonal communicative skills and introverts were better at improving their cognitive academic language ability [8]. In the same way, extroverts learn a second language more easily because they are more risk-taking. The reason is that they are not afraid of embarrassing themselves by speaking incorrectly, or by not being able to speak at all, so they do not miss the opportunities that can help their learning achievement [28]. An empirical study was conducted and indicates that introverts could have a higher language achievement than introverts in speaking [25].

Considering other aspects of personality, an empirical research on the role of anxiety, self-confidence and oral performance of language learners in Japan was conducted and concluded that while anxiety is an obstacle on the learners' way towards language achievement, self-esteem or self-confidence function as a

positive factor which can empower learners with a feeling by which they can achieve a better oral proficiency [20]. Anxiety is referred as a complex affective concept associated with uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and worry [1]. When appears, anxiety can, as Aida stated, change language learners' test performance. Self-confidence is a key factor in all kinds of learning, especially language learning [19]. There are three levels of self-esteem, each of which can influence a learners' degree of language attainment. They include global, situational and task self-esteem [4].

Following the pieces of evidence in the literature on the positive and negative roles that different personal ways of feeling and thinking can play in foreign language achievement, using Black Dog Institute's personality and temperament questionnaire, the present study aimed at finding the degree to which subjective factors, [23 and 11], would influence foreign language achievement for Iranian students learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, the following research questions were posed.

Q1- Do the Iranian EFL learners with different personality types and temperament achieve significantly different in their language learning process?

Q2- What kind of temperament and personality type helps the Iranian EFL learners outperform in their language learning process?

### Method

#### *Participants*

The present research was done on 127 female language learners studying English at Marefat English Institute in Shiraz. Of course, the number decreased to 76 participants due to failing the course or leaving the program later. The method of selection was non-random availability sampling. These students were all at the institute intermediate level. They were assigned to take intermediate classes following a placement test administered by the institute and two elementary courses. They were all assumed to be at the same level as far as their English grammar, reading comprehension, grammar and writing abilities were concerned. The participants were at the age range of 17 to 22 years old.

#### *Instrumentation*

The tools which were used to answer the research questions included a language proficiency test and a personality questionnaire. Longman TOEFL Test [22], including 40 grammar and structure, 40 vocabulary and reading comprehension, and 45 listening comprehension multiple choice items, was used for the pre- and post-test of language proficiency. The test was piloted for its reliability using test-retest method, and the reliability of the test turned out to be 0.87, which is considered a high level of reliability. Then, it was evaluated as having content validity by three language experts who examined the test.

Another instrument which was used in this study was Black Dog Institute's Temperament and Personality Questionnaire. Subjects were required to rate each item on the questionnaire according to how they generally felt or behaved. The final available online version of the T&P questionnaire comprised 10 subscales, eight of which assessed temperament and personality, and two of which referred to personality function. The items were to be answered in 20 minutes. The aspects of personality which were assessed by this measure were anxious, worrying, personal reserve, perfectionism, irritability, social avoidance, interpersonal sensitivity, self-criticism, and self-focus. It was based on a Likert scale, and each item on the questionnaire was rated on a 4-point scale: very true = 3; moderately true = 2; slightly true = 1; not true at all = 0. The questionnaire was shown to be valid and reliable and had been used by a number of researchers as a standard questionnaire. For example, the test enjoyed a high level of reliability using Cronbach's Alpha ( $r = .811$ ) and highly valid as far as content and construct validity of the questionnaire was concerned and used the same T&P questionnaire in their studies [21, 24].

#### *Procedures*

In order to answer the research questions, 127 language learners at the intermediate level in Marefat English Institute in Shiraz were selected based on non-random availability. Then, they took Longman TOEFL Test as the pre-test of language proficiency. The test consisted of three sections of listening, grammar and writing, and vocabulary and reading comprehension. All the items were in multiple-

choice form, and the time allocated to do the test was 100 minutes. After taking the language test, they were required to fill out the temperament and personality (T&P) questionnaire. The questionnaire which was used for the study was available online and published by Black Dog Institute. It was a valid and reliable test of temperament and personality, different versions of which were extensively used in several studies. The personality dimensions under the focus of this scale were anxiety, personal reserve, perfectionism, irritability, social avoidance, interpersonal sensitivity, self-criticism and self-focus. The scoring instructions were provided by the institute. Then, the participants were categorized into eight groups based on the personality dimensions.

Then, for the instruction, the participants attended their language class, one hour and forty five minutes each session, twice a week. Based on their English coursebooks, at each level, the students took lessons on grammar, reading comprehension and listening each session. They had the same coursebook, and teachers followed the same methodology to teach English. When they passed three levels, there were only 76 students who reached the advanced Level. The rest of the students had either failed and were not able to keep up with their peers or left the institute. Each level consisted of 21 sessions, including the first session as the introductory session, two sessions for midterm and final exams and eighteen sessions for taking lessons, and each term took about two and a half months or so.

As soon as they registered for advanced level at the institute and participated in the first session of the class, they took the same test they had taken for the pre-test before. The second administration of Longman TOEFL test was to compare the students' progress after attending the ILI classes for four successive terms. Then, the students' raw scores in the pre- and post-tests of TOEFL as well as the scores on the information elicited through the questionnaire were considered as the data for the study.

## Data Analyses and Results

In order to answer the research questions, pre- and post-tests of TOEFL were taken before and after the instruction. Along with the pre-test of TOEFL, the online Black Dog

Institute's personality and temperament questionnaire was administered. The questionnaire was on a Likert scale measuring a number of personal characteristics including anxious worrying, personal reserve, perfectionism, irritability, social avoidance, interpersonal sensitivity, self-criticism, and self-focus. The students' selected choices were counted based on the scoring system provided by the Black Dog Institute, and the students were categorized into eight groups based on the questionnaire's scale. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants in each group.

High scores on anxiety (18 and over, out of a maximum of 27) indicated a great tendency to become stressed, worried and anxious. For self reserve, high scores (17 and over, out of a maximum of 27) were associated with a tendency to keep one's inner feelings to oneself. High scores (31 and over, out of a maximum of 33) on perfectionism were associated with a tendency to be very responsible, to have high standards for oneself and to be highly committed to tasks and duties. Items in this scale included 'I always like to do my best' and 'I put high standards on myself and most things I take on'. High scores (21 and over, out of a maximum of 33) on irritability were associated with a tendency to be quick-tempered and to externalize stress by becoming snappy and irritated by little things. High scores on social avoidance scale (17 and over, out of a maximum of 27) were associated with a tendency to be introverted and to keep to oneself, while those low on this dimension tended to be very sociable. High scores (14 and over, out of a maximum of 24) on interpersonal sensitivity were associated with a tendency to worry about rejection or abandonment. High scores on self-criticism (10 and over, out of a maximum of 12) were associated with a tendency to be very tough on oneself. Finally, high scores

Groups	frequency	percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Anxious	9	11.8	11.8	11.8
Irritable	11	14.5	14.5	26.3
Personally reserved	13	17.1	17.1	43.4
Socially avoiding	7	9.2	9.2	52.6
Self-focused	8	10.5	10.5	63.2
Perfectionist	12	15.8	15.8	78.9
Self-criticizing	7	9.2	9.2	88.2
Interpersonal	9	11.8	11.8	100.0
Total	76	100.0	100.0	

Table 1. Distribution of Participants in Different Groups Based on T & P Questionnaire

on self-focus (9 and over, out of a maximum of 24) were associated with a tendency to give priority to one's own needs over the needs of others.

Then, to see if there was any significant difference in the performance of the learners with different temperament and personality types, a number of statistical operations were run. The following tables show the results.

A glance at Table 2 reveals that, in the first place, the mean score of all groups in the pre-test was lower than that of the post-test. For example, while the anxious group had a mean score of 62.7778 in the pre-test, they had a mean score of 67.8889 in the post-test. The same thing happens to the mean score of other groups in the pre-test and post-test of TOEFL. If this difference turns out to be significant, one can claim that the instruction has been useful and the students improved their general English proficiency studying English at the institute.

Secondly, there is a difference in the mean score of the first four groups in the post-test and that of the four last groups. For example, whereas the anxious, irritable, personally reserved and introvert learners had mean scores of 67 to 69, the self-focused, perfectionist, self-criticizing and sociable learners had a mean score between 71 to 77. Again, if this difference is significant, one can conclude that different personality types and temperaments

Groups	Number	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Pre-test anxious	9	62.7778	11.07675	3.69225
Irritable	11	61.2727	9.18794	2.77027
Personally reserved	13	62.6154	12.22387	3.39029
Socially avoiding	7	63.5714	11.78781	4.45537
Self-focused	8	60.5000	11.57584	4.09268
Perfectionist	12	63.2500	8.09180	2.33590
S-criticizingself	7	60.1429	10.77696	4.07331
Interpersonal	9	63.8889	9.00617	3.00206
Total	76	62.3289	10.04973	1.15278
Post-test anxious	9	67.8889	11.38469	3.79490
Irritable	11	66.0909	8.82558	2.66101
Personally reserved	13	69.0769	11.67948	3.23930
Socially avoiding	7	69.8571	11.72502	4.43164
Self-focused	8	72.1250	10.92098	3.86115
Perfectionist	12	75.8033	8.72648	2.51912
Self-criticizing	7	73.4286	11.41428	4.31419
Interpersonal	9	77.0000	9.27362	3.09121
Total	76	71.3947	10.62334	1.21858

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Participants' Language Performance in the Pre- and Post-tests

influence the learners' achievement.

To see if the difference between the pre-test and post-test was significant, first, the descriptive statistics for the individuals' pre-test and post-test scores were obtained with no regard to the type of temperament and personality they had. The following table reveals the results.

As Table 3 shows, the mean score of the participants' performances in the pre-test was lower than that of the post-test. To see if this difference was noticeable for further explanations, a *t*-test was used. The results are in Table 4 as follows.

### Disregarding their Personality and Temperament

As Table 4 shows, the value of *t* ( $t = 21.116$ ) exceeds the significance level ( $\text{sig.} = .000$ ). This implies that the difference between the students' mean scores in the pre- and post-tests was significant. That is, the students performed better in the post-test, and in fact, the learners had improvement in their language proficiency after taking language classes.

The next phase of the statistical analyses of the data was to compare the language performance of the participants in the pre- and post-tests of TOEFL, this time taking their personality and temperament into careful considerations. To this end, a one-way ANOVA was applied. The results are in the following table.

Based on Table 5, for the pre-test mean scores, the value of *F* ( $F = .054$ ) is lower than the significance level ( $\text{sig.} = .993$ ). It can be concluded that before the instruction, the participants were homogeneous and at the same level of

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	62.3289	76	10.04973	1.15278
Post-test	71.3947	76	10.62334	1.21858

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the participants' Language Performance in the Pre- and Post-tests Disregarding their Temperament and Personality Types

	Paired Differences				<i>t</i>	df	Sig.
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference lower upper			
Pre- and Post-test	-9.06579	3.74285	.42933	-9.92107 -8.21051	-21.116	75	.000

Table 4. Paired *t*-test to Compare Participants' Pre- and Post-test Scores

language proficiency since the difference in the performances of different participants in the pre-test considering their personality types and temperament was not significant. On the other hand, the value of F ( $F = 3.367$ ) in the post-test was higher than the significance level ( $\text{sig.} = 0.33$ ), which implies that, with regard to the learners' personality type and temperament, the difference in the language performances of participants in the post-test was statistically significant. Therefore the first research null hypothesis stating that there is not any significant difference between language achievement of Iranian EFL learners with different personality types and temperament, is not accepted

In order to answer the second research question, a post hoc analysis, scheffe test, was run. The results are in Table 6 as follows.

Table 6 indicates that the highest language achievement belonged to the participants who were self-focused, self-criticizing, perfectionist and interpersonally sensitive with mean scores of 72.12, 73.42, 75.83, 77 respectively. On the other hand, students who were irritable, anxious, personally reserved, and introvert had a lower degree of language achievement with mean scores of 66.09, 67.88, 69.07, and 69.85 respectively. Therefore, the second research question asking which of the personality types and temperaments help the Iranian EFL learners outperform in their language achievement could be answered here. The more irritable, anxious, personally reserved, and introvert an individual is, the less he would achieve in language proficiency, and the more self-focused, self-criticizing, perfectionist and interpersonally sensitive a student is, the better he is expected to learn in a language program.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The main objective of the present research was to

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Pre-between	118.252	7	16.893	.054	.993
within total	7456.525	68	109.655		
	7574.776	75			
Post-between	1044.324	7	149.189	3.367	.033
within total	7419.834	68	109.115		
	8464.158	75			

Table 5. One-Way ANOVA to Compare the Participants' Language Performance in the Pre- and Post-tests

	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05
Irritable	11	66.0909
Anxious	9	67.8889
Personally reserved	13	69.0769
Introvert	7	69.8571
Self-focused	8	72.1250
Self-criticizing	7	73.4286
Perfectionist	12	75.8333
Interpersonally sensitive	9	77.0000
Sig.		.668

Table 6. Scheffe Test to Compare the Participants' Mean Scores in the Post-test

compare the language achievement of Iranian EFL students who enjoy different personality types and temperaments. This study also was an attempt to explore what temperament and personality types could possibly help the Iranian EFL learners outperform in their language classroom. The results of the present study indicated that individuals with different ways of thinking and feeling perform differently in a language learning course. This is in line with [11] and [23] which stated, the positive and negative roles different individuals' personal characteristics play in their language achievement. This study also revealed that if a language learner had a tendency to do his best, i. e. being perfectionist, focus on his work, be able to accept others' criticisms, and sociable, he would be more successful in his language learning process. On the other hand, students who are anxious and stressful, or those who are personally reserving and socially avoiding would normally achieve less than they are expected in a language course. Therefore, attention to individual differences, especially subjective aspects of language learning would help teachers adjust their language programs so that different learners with different personality types would enjoy the language class and achieve as much as they are expected.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Fatemeh Behjat has been a faculty member at English Department, Islamic Azad University, Abadeh Branch, Abadeh, Iran since 2000. She also teaches English at Islamic Azad University, Shiraz branch and the Zand Institute of Higher Education in Shiraz. She holds a PhD in TEFL and she has so far presented papers at international conferences in Iran and abroad, and published books and articles in language Journals. Her main area of interest is teaching and language acquisition.*