PERSONALITY THEORY AND TESOL

By

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, it is argued, based on evidence from psychological literature, that there are three major approcahes to the study of personality, namely (i) situationism, (ii) interactionism, and (iii) constructivism. It is also noticed that these approaches have resulted in the emergence of three major types of personality theories: (i) Type Theories, (ii) Trait Theories, and (iii) Factor Theories. In connection to TESOL, it is argued that extroversion/introversion and risk-taking are the most important personality factors. It is also argued that such personality factors considered as tolerance of ambiguity, empathy, self-esteem, inhibition, and intelligence have also been addressed by TESOL research, but that the two most important factors are extroversion/introversion and risk-taking.

Keywords: Personality, Risk-taking, Extra-version, TESOL, Introversion.

INTRODUCTION

Those who study human personality are often interested in individual differences. They assume that there are considerable individual differences in personality and that these differences will be revealed by difference of behaving and reaction in a given situation (Eysenck, 1994, p. 38). That is why one feature common to the majority of personality theories is the emphasis on the individual. Researchers, during the last few decades, have done a lot of work in order to find a comprehensive definition of personality. Personality can be defined on many levels like educational, psychological, and social. At the level of teaching and learning, researchers are looking for those aspects of personality that affect the nature and the quality of the learning process. In this paper, definitions of personality will be presented, looking at the personality dimensions from a psychological point of view. The paper will review the theories and hypotheses that deal with personality, especially Eysenck's distinction between personality 'types' and personality 'traits'. To talk about personality at the level of TESOL, the paper finds that most of the literature focuses on two dimensions of personality, closely related to the learning process: extroversion/introversion and risk-taking.

1. Defining personality

Personality is considered a very important category of individual differences since the individual is often judged depending on their personality. "Personality refers to those relatively stable and enduring aspects of the individual which distinguish him from other people, and at the same time, form the basis of our predictions concerning his future behaviour" (Wright, et al., 1970, p. 511, quoted in Shackleton and Fletcher, 1984, p. 46). It is also regarded as referring to stable internal factors or traits which underlie consistent individual differences in behaviour. These internal factors, according to Eysenck, are called traits. He says that it is assumed that individuals differ in terms of the extent to which they possess any given trait (Eysenck, 1994, p. 38). Another definition that captures much of what psychologists mean by personality is Child's description of personality characteristics as more or less stable, internal factors that make one person's behaviour consistent from one time to another, and also from one situation to another and different from the behaviour and reaction other people would manifest in comparable situations (Child, 1968, p. 83, quoted in Eysenck, 1994, p. 38). Therefore, it is expected that any given individual will behave in a reasonably consistent manner on different occasions.

2. Theories of personality

Personality is usually inferred from behaviour, because judgements about people tend to be based on their

behaviour. Eysenck (1994, p. 61-68) points out that three main approaches to interpreting personality and behaviour have appeared. These approaches are situationism, interactionism, and constructivism. Situationism emphasizes the role of the situation rather than intrinsic personality in determining behaviour. Situationists say that our behavior is largely decided by our environment, and not by heredity. Interactionism, which is a social theory, says that, as human beings, we do not exist except within society. Interactionism is based on the idea that the interaction between person and situation is a more important determinant of behaviour and reaction than either one on its own. Constructivism claims that our behaviour and personality are moulded to some extent by the views that we believe in, and that interpersonal interactions play a key role in the development of personality. Moreover, the way in which one behaves in an interpersonal situation is determined to a large extent by the behaviour and attitudes displayed by another person or people towards one. In other words, we change depending on our experiences so we keep re-evaluating our experience (Eysenck, 1994).

According to the constructivist model, as Hampson (1997, p. 73) argues, personality is composed of three elements: actor, observer, and self-observer. The study of the first component is usually associated with the psychological context of the personality. The second, the self-observer, is the direct consequence of the human capacity for self awareness. The third component, namely the observer refers to the way the actor is perceived by other people and in the educational context. We can use such a model to examine how teachers may perceive their learners and deal with them and vice versa. From this position, we can infer that a teacher can make judgements about a learner's behaviour. A teacher's capacity to respond to different kinds of behaviour and characters in the classroom may, thus, benefit from a wider theoretical knowledge of different types of personality. It is worth mentioning that teachers, learners and peers are all important observers in the educational process. The students' criticism may, sometimes, be more important than the teachers'. " Hampson (1997, p. 74) says that "the actor's behaviour is used by the observer to construct an impression of the actors' personality, and this is done by adding social significance and meaning to observed behaviour." Looking at these classifications from a purely psychological point of view, these three components have reciprocal influences as Hampson expands: "The actor's behaviour is interpreted in a certain way by the observer who then responds accordingly." The actor's subsequent behaviour is influenced by the observer's response. The actor's ability to be a self-observer will allow them to make some inferences about the impression that is probably forming in the observer's mind, and the actor may wish to adjust his or her behaviour in order to modify this impression. It is inferred that it is possible to control other people's impressions about us. The ways in which we manipulate other people's impression is a crucial factor in our effective performance as social beings.

These approaches to the study of personality have resulted in the emergence of several sets of personality theories. To date three sets of personality theories have been proposed: type theories, trait theories, and factor theories.

2.1 Types theories

Eysenck, (1994, p. 39-40), talks about two approaches to personality: the 'types' approach and the 'traits' approach. His discussion endorses the Greek theory of types of personality. Personality theorists of the past often used to identify personality types rather than traits. Traditions of establishing dichotomies of types have generally been developed from Greek thinking. In essence, type theorists assume that all individuals can be allocated to one of a relatively small number of types or categories such as:

- Melancholic i.e. a pessimistic non risk-taker;
- Sanguine which means thoughtful and cynical, i.e. sensible and balanced in an optimistic way;
- Choleric i.e. impulsive; or
- Phlegmatic which means slow and lazy

These types were identified by ancient Greeks. They are quite deep and constant and there are not many of them,

so we are not likely to change them. There are problems with these types; it is hard to accept the Greeks' four kinds of personality because people have more than these four kinds. Eysenck does not agree either, because he considers that these four types are not enough to explain personality. He goes on to say that our every day experience indicates that most people have non-extreme personalities, flexibility always exists, and he claims that this view is supported by personality research (Eysenck, 1994).

2.2 Trait theories

In another approach, personality theorists have argued that personality consists of a number of traits, which have been defined as "broad, enduring, relatively stable characteristics used to assess and explain behaviour" (Hirschberg, 1978, p. 45, quoted in Eysenck, 1994, p. 39). Another definition is given by Mischel: a "trait is a relatively stable and long-lasting attribute of personality" (Mischel, 1968, quoted in Eysenck, 1994, p. 53). Traits are more shifting, more specific, more changeable and more learnable in that they are more accessible to learning. The number of traits mentioned in this literature is quite large. Therefore, this approach looks more reasonable since it provides a number of traits that account for the diversity of human personality in a more variable but specific way. The approach also suggests that a person may posses a trait with different changeable levels. These traits seem to be more useful for looking at learning from a critical point of view.

The most obvious difference between the type and trait approaches, as Eysenck states, is that "possession of type is regarded as all-or-none, whereas individuals can possess a trait such as sociability in varying degrees" (1994, p. 40). More specifically, most theorists have assumed that traits are normally distributed in the population. The type approach is often criticized because it fails to capture the complexity of human personality, and because most people have non-extreme personalities. Most traits, on the other hand, have been found to be normally distributed. Some theories take personality to mean all enduring qualities of the individual while others limit their use of the term to observable traits that are not predominantly cognitive in nature (Shackleton and Fletcher, 1984).

It is suggested that the clearest aspect of personality is its interpersonal nature. The first psychologist to explore the interpersonal nature of personality is William James (1980). He said that "the self only exists in relation to other selves and that a person has as many selves as people with whom he or she interacts" (quoted in Hampson, 1997, p. 73). According to Sullivan (1953), "the individual cannot exist apart from his or her relation to others, the study of personality is the study of interpersonal behaviour" (quoted in Hampson, 1997, p. 73). An implication of this approach of psychology is that each one of us has a lot of personality traits which can be modulated according to the person or situation we are dealing with. This in turn implies that bilingual people may have more than one personality since each language represents part of a different culture. It is worth mentioning here that these arguments are not proofs. They are hypotheses which may be right or wrong. In general, it appears that embracing the hypothesis of multi-personality has more positive implications for understanding foreign language learning and this seems to be supported by the literature related to TESOL (e.g., Ellis, 1994 and Skehan, 1989).

2.3 Factor theories

Due to the huge number of personality traits, one concern of any theorist is to include all the basic traits in their theory. Moreover, "the most important issues that personality theorists have to consider are the number and nature of the traits which together form human personality" (Eysenck, 1994, p. 50). Several factor theories of personality have been proposed. However, M. W. Eysenck (1994, p. 50) argues that the two best known and most influential are those of Cattell and H. J. Eysenck.

2.3.1 Cattell's 16-PF factor theory

Cattell has derived sixteen personality traits which have been extracted from a research on all the words that can describe personality. In doing this, he made use of the work of Allport and Odbert (1963) who uncovered eighteen thousand words in the dictionary which were of relevance to personality. This number then dramatically

decreased after they had eliminated and excluded all synonyms and unfamiliar words. The remaining words were examined in further rating studies which suggested to Cattell that there are approximately sixteen factors in rating data (Eysenck, 1994, p. 51). Cattell has done a huge effort to identify all possible traits of personality using questionnaires and objective test data. Cattell and Child (1975) went on to argue that personality consists not only of the way we do things, but also of the reasons why we do things. Eysenck (1952a) stated: "to the scientists, the unique individual is simply the point of intersection of a number of quantitative variables" (quoted in Shackleton and Fletcher, 1984, p. 46).

2.3.2 H. J. Eysenck's factor theory

H. J. Eysenck, on the other hand, agreed with Cattell that factor analysis is a useful tool to discover the structure of human personality, and disagreed with Cattell's conception of the importance of first-order factors (the sixteen factors). Eysenck claimed that second-order, orthogonal (or uncorrelated) factors are preferable because first-order factors are often so weak that they cannot be discovered consistently since it proved impossible to confirm the existence of the sixteen different first-order factors in the Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factor Test (i.e., Cattell's 16PF) (Eysenck, 1994, p. 51-53)—Orthogonal means that knowing an individual's score on one factor doesn't allow prediction of his or scores on other factors. Eysenck was trying to identify the orthogonal factors so he did his own research and found three factors:

- introversion-extraversion;
- neuroticism-stability; and
- psychoticism-normality

These factors are very broad in that each one of them can contain within it a big range and degree of the sixteen factors. They were called "superfactors" by H. J. Eysenck himself (quoted in Eysenck, 1994, p. 54).

3. Personality factors in TESOL

Ellis (1994) and Skehan (1989) have studied personality as an aspect of individual differences and have tried to relate the personality dimensions to language learning in general and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in specific. Skehan has borrowed a few conclusions in which he prefers to relate the dimensions of extroversion-introversion and risk-taking to the issues in TESOL (1989, p. 100-109). Ellis, on the other hand, has found that only the extroversion-introversion dimension of personality is closely related to TESOL and has therefore concentrated on this (1994, p. 519-520).

The discussion presented hitherto indicates that personality theories of psychology have some applications for language teaching and teachers. The following section will theerefore focus on the applications of personality theories to language learning in TESOL. That is, the focus of the paper will shift from psychology to education and language teaching.

4. The Psychology-TESOL interface

Ellis reviews six types of personality and focuses in particular onhe distinction between extroversion and introversion, since he considers that this variable relates to a well-established theory while the others are based only very loosely on constructs in general psychology. The six categories identified by Ellis (1994, p. 518) include:

• The Extroversion/ Introversion: In studies by Busch (1982) and Strong (1983), using Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI), they found that extrovert learners are sociable, lively and active, and introvert learners are quiet and prefer non-social activities. Strong found that extrovert children learned faster.

• Risk-Taking: A study done by Ely (1986) using the self-report questionnaire shows that risk-takers show less hesitancy, are more willing to use complex language, and more tolerant of errors. They are less likely to rehearse before speaking. Moreover, risk-taking is positively related to voluntary classroom participation.

• Tolerance of ambiguity: Naiman, et al. (1978) and Chapelle and Roberts (1986) have used the Budners scale MAT60 which is a self-report measure to conclude that learners who enjoy a kind of tolerance of ambiguity of the input are entailed an ability to deal with ambiguous new stimuli without frustration and without appeals to authority, yet this ability does not increase the learner's proficiency;

Naiman, et al. found that tolerance of ambiguity was significantly related to listening comprehension.

• Empathy: Naiman, et al. (1978) and Guiora, et al. (1967), using the Hogan Empathy Scale, which is a Micro-Momentary Expression Test that measures perceptions of changes in facial expression, found two contradicting results. Naiman, et al. have found empathic learners who are able to put themselves in the position of other people in order to better understand them, are not necessarily proficient learners. However, Guiora, et al. reported a positive correlation with proficiency.

• Self-esteem: Self-esteem refers to the degree to which learners feel confident and believe themselves to be significant people. Self-esteem is manifested at different levels (global, situational, and task). In research carried out by Heyde (1979), Gardner and Lambert (1972), Heyde found, using the self-report questionnaire, that self-esteem correlated positively with oral production. Using the same method, Gardner and Lambert (1972) failed to find a significant relationship.

• Inhibition: Guiora, et al. (1972 and 1980) administered some alcohol and valium to reduce subject inhibition. Subjects given alcohol showed better pronunciation while valium had no effect. Inhibition means the extent to which learners build defences to protect their egos. Learners vary in how adaptive their language egos are—how they are able to deal with the identity conflict involved in L2 learning.

Ellis also noticed that there is one fact in common among all these dimensions and interpretations of personality: it is difficult to relate the dimensions of personality to the learning of language; the lack of empirical evidence for these theories means that it is difficult to consistently apply the results of any personality research to language teaching (Ellis, 1994, p. 517-523).

Ellis also observes that these personality variables are sometimes vague and overlap in ill-defined ways. He adds that the instruments which have been used to measure the personality variables are varied and, in some cases, of doubtful validity and reliability. These worries appear to have led Ellis to exclude most of these variables from his studies of their relation to language learning. Instead it appears that he went to Eysenck's Traits Theory which argues that personality consists of three dimensions, namely introversion-extraversion, neuroticism-stability, and psychoticism-normality. Ellis found that the dimension of extroversion/introversion is of clearer relevance to TESOL. Therefore, he limited his discussion of the effects of personality variables on language learning to the dimension of extroversion introversion. He argued that, by choosing to investigate the extroversion/ introversion distinction, TESOL researchers are investigating only one aspect of learners' personality.

Skehan (1989), on the other hand, considers three crucial factors of language learning:

- intelligence,
- risk-taking ability, and
- extroversion/introversion

He argues that the latter two dimensions of personality have an affective influence on language learning, and claims that risk-taking together with extroversion-introversion can be associated with language learning.

4.1 Extroversion/Introversion

Extroversion and Introversion are terms used to gauge two styles. Extrovert characters tend to be gregarious, while the introverted tend to be private. The activity of the extrovert is usually seen as usually directed toward the external world and that of the introvert inward upon himself or herself. Extroverts are sociable, like parties, have many friends and need excitement in everything they do; they are sensation-seekers and are lively and active. Extroverts will be easily distracted from studying, partly as a result of their gregariousness and partly because of their weak ability to concentrate for long periods. Conversely, introverts are quiet, prefer reading rather than meeting people and talking to others, have few but close friends and usually avoid excitement (Eysenck and Chan 1982, p. 154, quoted in Ellis 1994, p. 520). In other words, Extroverts are motivated from "without" and their attention is directed outward. They are people who appear relaxed, confident, and have trouble understanding life until they have lived it. When they are feeling bad, low in energy, or stressed, they

are likely to look outside themselves for relief. They get energized from the outside world, and they look for meaning outside of themselves. Introverts, on the other hand, are motivated from "within" and they are oriented towards the inner realm of ideas, imagery, and reflection. They get their energy from within rather than from the outside world. An introvert values quiet time alone for thinking while an extrovert wants time with others for action. Introverts believe that they cannot live life until they have understood it. They are seen as reserved, quiet, shy, aloof, and distant. When an introvert is tired, stressed or feels bad he is likely to withdraw to a quiet place and engage in reflective activity that only involves herself/himself. Introverts look to the inner world for energy and meaning.

Ellis (1994) points out that the relationship between extroversion/introversion and second language learning has been hypothesized in two different ways. At first it suggests that extroverted learners will do better in acquiring basic interpersonal communication skills. Skehan, in relation to this idea, points out that there is a tendency for extroverts to underperform slightly compared to introverts in that they show poorer recall after a delay while introverts may code material more efficiently into long-term memory (Skehan 1989). Secondly it states that introverted learners will do better at developing cognitive academic language ability, but with no clear empirical support. However, Ellis points out that other studies have given different results which fail to lend much support to the hypothesis that introversion aids the development of academic language learning.

Many investigators have suggested that sociable learners—that is, extroverts—will be more inclined to talk, more inclined to join groups, more likely to participate in class, more likely to volunteer and to engage in practice activities, and more likely to maximize language-use opportunities outside the classroom by using language for communication. Thus, an extroverted individual would benefit both inside and outside the classroom by having the appropriate personality trait for language learning since learning is best accomplished, according to most theorists, by actually using the target language (Skehan, 1989). Although there is some social bias toward extroverted learners, introverted persons have no reason to feel that there is anything wrong with them. As a result, Skehan (1989) indicates that extroversion and introversion have their positive features, and that an extreme way is likely to work against some aspects of target language development.

4.2 Risk-taking

The second personality factor with a close bearing on language learning is risk-taking. Risk-taking is a developmental trait that consists in moving toward something without thinking of the consequences. Learning is expected to flourish in an atmosphere in which the learner is willing to take risks, and it is the task of the instructor to create such an atmosphere for learning. McClelland (1961) proposed that some learners perceive the likelihood of achieving goals as constituting medium-risk tasks, and respond to such challenges on the basis of a past history of success with such tasks. Unsuccessful learners, as McClelland argues, will tend to be those who set excessively high or low goals for themselves, with neither of these outcomes likely to lead to sustained learning. In the same regard, Skehan thinks that successful learners will be those who construe the tasks that face them as medium-risk in that these tasks are achievable. This will lead them to engage in the cumulative learning activities that lead in turn to longer-term success. Risk-takers tend to rehearse. They tolerate vagueness, and are not worried about using difficult things and getting them wrong. They do not hesitate to take risks.

A study by Ely (1986) suggested that class proficiency, class participation, and risk-taking are inter-dependent factors. It is worth saying that aptitude and motivation are thought to influence both classroom participation and proficiency. A result of this study led to the assumption that risk-taking learners participate more in the classroom and consequently, they may increase their language proficiency, especially if it is considered that language proficiency appears to increase remarkably by more use of the language. Ely elaborated that four dimensions underlie the risk-taking construct:

- lack of hesitancy about using a newly encountered linguistic element;
- willingness to use linguistic elements perceived to be complex or difficult;
- tolerance of possible incorrectness or inexactitude in using the language; and
- inclination to rehearse a new element silently before attempting to use it aloud.

Skehan notices that within the TESOL field, risk-taking has been seen, in situations that contain social interaction, as likely to increase opportunities to hear language and obtain input. Risk-takers are not afraid to get involved in any kind of interaction with others, to speak language, and use output and engage in functional practice because they prefer what they want to say without worrying about the small details or errors. A risk-taker is more likely to be one who takes his existing language system to the limit. Such a learner is more likely to change and more resistant to fossilization.

A language teacher who would support student risk-taking is reported in the literature on personality factors to possess four characteristics:

Model how to take risks

One way to build student confidence is to be willing to take risks yourself. A great deal of emotion and social behavior is learned through modelling (Bandura, 1977) by the way in which the teacher handles errors and wrong turns; the teachers needs to demonstrate to students that even experts make mistakes.

Exude organization and competence

When the students are convinced that the instructor is in control and knows where the class is going, they will feel more comfortable about taking risks. They will be confident that if they make a mistake or go off on a wrong tangent, the instructor will be able to bring them back on target. Therefore, the instructor must be well-organized and solidly grounded in the content—such that he or she can handle any eventuality.

Minimize the pain of making an error

One reason many students are reluctant to take risks is the fact that many classrooms have such a strong evaluation component. They are afraid that if they make an error in class, it will affect their grade. Therefore, it would be useful to separate the learning process from the evaluation outcome. Does everything assigned have to be graded? If in-class activities are known to be preparations for the evaluation, but not themselves graded, students are just as motivated to use that opportunity to prepare. Evidence from the mastery learning literature has demonstrated the value of letting students check their learning prior to the real test (Bloom, 1984).

Provide risk-taking opportunities

In order to help students take risks, the instructor must provide opportunities. This means not doing all the talking yourself. Outside observers of classrooms are struck by how much work instructors do in class and how little their students do (Weimer, 1989). Instead, instructors must let the students do some of the work, then stand back and help them where needed. This requires the teacher's not being rigidly tied to their own agenda. The teacher will always have an ultimate goal in mind, but there may be many wrong paths which would be just as instructive and possibly more interesting because they would reflect the students' own struggle with the task rather than the teacher's preconceived notion of the correct way to do something. In the long run students will learn more from following their own wrong path than from following the well-worn footsteps of the teachers.

If this view of learning as risk-taking is accepted, one can begin to confront the factors that discourage students from taking risks and build a class environment where learning becomes less of a risk, or where the risk-taking in learning becomes valued instead of being scary. Both of these directions require that instructors develop a trusting relationship with students. The teacher who has all these characteristics will be more able to maximize students' participation in the classroom by making them aware of the advantages of being risk-takers. In order to do that, teachers should work on the dimensions which contribute to risk-taking in their students as well as enhancing any other dimension and factor that will support students' risk-taking—like trust-building between the teachers and the learners.

Conclusion

In this paper, the main literature sources on theories of personality were summarized. It was argued, based on evidence from literature that there are three major approcahes to the study of personality: situationism, interactionism, and constructivism. It was also noticed that these approached have resulted in the emergence of three major types of personality theories: type theories, trait theories, and factor theories.

In connection to TESOL, it was argued that extroversion/introversion and risk-taking are the most important personality factors. It was also argued that such personality factors as tolerance of ambiguity, empathy, self-esteem, inhibition, and intelligence have also been addressed by TESOL research, but that the two most important factors are extroversion/introversion and risk-taking.

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