Personality Characteristics Associated with Successful Second Language Acquisition

Andreea CERVATIUC

I. Theoretical Consideration on the Role of Personality Factors in Second Language Acquisition

The study of affect and personality factors such as self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking, determination, anxiety, extroversion, character types and motivation is one of the most recent trends in second language acquisition (SLA) research. There is a noticeable shift in research focus from behavioural questions, to the cognitive realm, and, more recently, to the emotional domain. Young (1999) synthesizes the evolution of SLA research as a transition from body to mind to emotions.

In the 1950s and 1960s, structural and descriptive linguists were very much concerned with the 'what' question of descriptive and contrastive analysis while behavioural psychologists focused on exterior, visible acts of language learning.

Dissatisfied with this focus on the body and surface structures, cognitive psychologists challenged the previous stance, posing the questions 'why' and 'how', and shifting the research focus on processes of the mind, on meaning, understanding, and knowing. Chomsky's (1968) work and generative transformational linguistic theories focused on the mental ability and processes in acquiring foreign languages. Chomsky (1968) argued that the human mind is not 'tabula rasa', but a very complex organ, and a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) is figuratively imbedded in the brain.

Nevertheless, until the 1980s, one piece of the puzzle was missing from SLA research. Theorists neglected emotions and personality characteristics, and focused either on habits and behaviours or on reasoning and thinking. Brain scientists emphasize that emotions can influence the process of second language acquisition to a high degree and can have primacy over cognition.

> Cognitive processing capacity is short-circuited by emotions, which trigger a complete synchronization of the brain's resources. In other words, emotions can monopolize the brain's system, or circuitry, to the extent that it can override conscious brain activity, or cognition (Young, 1999).

As a consequence of the recognition of the role of affect in learning, SLA researchers started to focus on variables such as anxiety, risk-taking, motivation, empathy, and attitudes. Gardner and Lambert (1972) wrote on the role of affective variables in language learning, even before the 1980s, but the turning point in SLA research was marked by Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis that attributes a

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substantial role to emotions, especially anxiety, in language learning. He explains that anxiety works like a filter that, when it is up, can short circuit the brain's processing power. While debilitating anxiety inhibits language production, facilitating anxiety can have a positive role.

> Otherwise (in the absence of facilitating anxiety), a learner might be inclined to be 'wishy-washy', lacking the facilitative tension that keeps one poised, alert, and just slightly unbalanced to the point that one cannot relax entirely (Brown, 2000).

Self-confidence or an attitude of approving of and believing in one's abilities as being worthy has been linked to high willingness to communicate in a second language. Some learners may be more prone to seek communication in a second language environment, while others with low self-confidence may avoid it. Nevertheless, the relationship between self-confidence and success in second language learning has not been shown to be a causal one. Brown (2000) emphasizes that SLA research has not answered 'the classic chicken-or-egg question: Does high self-esteem cause language success, or does language success cause high self-esteem?' (p. 146)

The concept of risk-taking is interrelated with the idea of self-confidence, as learners who believe in their abilities will tend to take more risks and venture outside their comfort zone. There are two competing ideas in SLA research. On the one hand, there is the claim that high risk-taking in second language speaking circumstances has a positive effect on second language proficiency (Ely, 1986), as these learners will not have inhibitions to try out or practice words or expressions they are not completely sure of. On the other hand, there is the claim that successful second language learners are moderate or calculated risk-takers who would experiment only with words or expressions they have learned (Beebe, 1983), as they prefer to be in control of their learning process and do not want to risk being laughed at or sounding foolish.

II. Research Context

The current research study was conducted in Canada and can be situated within the complex sociological and psycho-linguistic context of immigration. Like other new countries such as the Unites States, Australia, and New Zealand, Canada has grown through immigration. In the past, first generation immigrants were generally well skilled manual workers but over the past 20 years, Canada's immigration policy has been strategically crafted to attract the a 'brain gain' immigration wave, consisting of bright and highly-educated people from all over the world (Baxter, 1999; Duffy, 2000a; DeVoretz, Hinte, & Werner, 2002). While many adult immigrants never acquire close-to-native English proficiency and do not integrate into Canadian society and workforce according to their level of education and skill, some of them make excellent second language learners and manage to achieve their professional and social goals.

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III. Research Question

This research study was guided by the following research question: What is the combination of personality characteristics to which excellent adult second language learners attribute their success in acquiring a high level of English proficiency?

IV. Participants in this Study

The sample of this study consisted of 20 adult highly-proficient non-native English speakers, who arrived in Canada after the age of 18 and who are academically or professionally successful. The age upon arrival ranged between 18 and 39 years old and the length of residence in Canada ranged between 5 and 37 years. All the participants belong to the same category of highly-educated (17+ years of education), independent immigrants who came to Canada as young adults, and had a relatively high socio-economic status in their native country. The sample selected for this study is representative of the 'brain gain' immigration wave of the last two decades.

The research subjects were selected through *theoretical sampling*, a common procedure in qualitative research, especially in grounded theory, according to which the subjects are selected based on how likely they are to contribute to the development of an emerging theory (Seale, 2004).

The researcher approached various organizations (educational institutions and companies that employ internationally-educated professionals) that were likely to know highly proficient adult non-native English speakers and that would invite them to participate in this study on behalf of the researcher.

V. Research Methodology

The data proceed from language proficiency assessments and informal interviews with the participants. Data were gathered and analyzed following the principles of the *grounded theory method* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The process of data analysis was concomitant with the process of data gathering and began immediately after the first day in the field. The study aims to answer the research question by thoroughly capturing participants' voices and interpretations.

Grounded theory had its philosophical roots in American pragmaticism and its sociological roots in the thinking of symbolic interactionists who viewed the social world as symbolically constructed. In this light, social meaning is not static, but dynamic, as it constantly evolves from social interaction. Grounded theory studies aim at discovering the world as seen through the eyes of the participants in specific contexts. Researchers gather data about the lived experiences of participants and this study is particularly about perceptions or lived experiences of adult second language learners. The grounded theory method is recursive allowing for simultaneous data collecting, coding, and analysis.

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VI. Findings and Discussion

VI.1. What Is the Participants' Level of English Proficiency?

All participants were perceived as has having superior command of English and recommended to the researcher by native English speakers from various educational institutions and companies that employ internationally-educated professionals. The next step was for the researcher to actually measure their English proficiency level using a standardized assessment instrument in order to ensure that all participants belonged to the same category. The researcher conducted assessments of each participant's English proficiency level, using the *Enhanced Language Training Placement Assessment (ELTPA 6-10)*. Each assessment consisted of a standardized speaking interview, a listening comprehension section, a reading component, and a writing assessment.

The ELTPA 6-10 is a national English proficiency assessment tool that was developed by the Canadian Centre for Education and Training. Being a high stake assessment tool that is used to establish the degree of support in terms of language classes to be offered to immigrants, its content and use are restricted and confidential and cannot be reproduced. All assessors who use the tool must be nationally trained and certified through the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, in Ottawa. The researcher is a nationally certified ELTPA 6-10 assessor, with prior experience in administering this tool for research purposes.

Based on the outcome of the ELTPA 6-10 assessments, all participants were assessed to have close-to-native or advanced English proficiency.

VI.2. What Personality Characteristics Made Them Excellent Language Learners?

The researcher spent a considerable amount of time interviewing participants, aiming to get a deep understanding of the personality characteristics perceived to be associated to successful second language acquisition. Six personality traits were reported by the majority of participants as conducive to a high level of second language proficiency: outgoingness, risk-taking, self-esteem, intellectual curiosity, perfectionism, and tolerance of ambiguity. The following sections provide an analysis of each personality characteristic, supported by relevant quotes from participants' interview responses:

VI.2.1. Outgoingness

Outgoingness, openness, and sociability were generally perceived as being essential for the development of an idiomatic, native-like, productive vocabulary. Most participants note that in order to acquire high communicative competence, non-native speakers need to be exposed to a variety of social situations where they can use English to accomplish tasks:

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> Adi: A good language learner is an outgoing and sociable person. If you're not social, you don't socialize, you don't communicate enough, and then you cannot learn the language. I am very sociable and friendly.

All the interviewees considered themselves more extrovert than introvert and most of them defined their personality using words such as outgoing, outspoken, talkative, and friendly. Outgoingness was generally understood as the ability to initiate conversations in English and interact with native speakers on a variety of topics to ensure exposure to a wide array of authentic language instances. The excerpt below provides an excellent example of a learner who has exploited a variety of social or work situations as opportunities to learn and practice new lexical items:

> Alin: The first year I came to Canada, I worked in a warehouse. You know I learned a lot, because I was initiating discussions, I was coming up with interesting topics to make native speakers talk to me... I am always the guy who initiates discussions. If I am on a train or a bus and there are two people sitting next to me, I will be the person who will initiate conversations ... I am not going to sleep, because I am going to use those four travel hours to learn something, as I am very efficient. When you communicate, you learn and every day I learn something ... Even from this interview, I am learning something.

It is worth mentioning that *outgoingness* is not necessarily an innate characteristic. Some participants defined themselves as being naturally outgoing and outspoken, while others cultivated an outgoing behaviour in order to improve their English. Unlike Norton's (2000) informants who became introverted and sensitive to rejection, the participants in this study cultivated outgoingness and extroversion, in spite of being at times rejected or ridiculed. They adopted a persona that allowed them to be someone other than themselves and take risks and understood that this consciously deployed manoeuvre would advance their English.

VI.2.2. Risk-taking

Another characteristic that most participants consider as an important factor for developing high communicative competence in a second language is the ability to take risks in using the language. Without experimenting with the new words in various contexts, it is virtually impossible to gain productive knowledge of a large, idiomatic vocabulary.

Several participants emphasize that in order to learn how to use the words properly, one needs to take risks in conversations and overcome the fear of making mistakes. Moreover, one needs to be resilient, tenacious, and courageous, make a conscious effort not to get discouraged by jokes about one's language mistakes, and believe that things will get better.

For some participants, risk-taking means avoiding isolation in a sheltered first language environment and getting involved in various social situations that require frequent second language use to accomplish communicative tasks. For other participants, it is associated with experimenting with word uses and becoming

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comfortable when ridiculed by native speakers for making mistakes or using awkward lexical combinations. The highly proficient non-native speakers interviewed went through an experimental phase, in which they made a conscious effort to be proactive and learned to accept or disregard jokes and ridicule.

> Cristina: Oh, another piece of advice, take risks and use the words, even if you're not sure of what they mean. People may make fun of you or joke. That happened to me many times. It happened, but you just have to be persistent, I guess, and take that risk.

From the perspective of many participants, shedding one's inhibitions, developing a relatively 'thick skin', and risking the possibility of making mistakes is the only way high oral proficiency can be achieved and this requires perseverance and persistence.

The data of this study corroborate Ely's (1986) research findings that risk-taking has a positive impact on second language proficiency, as these learners try out or practice words or expressions they are not completely sure of. In contrast, the findings are inconsistent with the research claim that successful second language learners are moderate or calculated risk-takers who only experiment with words or expressions they have learned (Beebe, 1983), as they do not want to be the target of ridicule. The successful second speakers interviewed for this study reported that their approach was to keep taking risks in spite of being occasionally ridiculed for imprecise lexical use.

VI.2.3. Self-esteem

Self-esteem results from a subjective evaluation of one's worth based on the sum of one's skills and talents. An interesting idea that came up in the interviews is that one does not have to be perfect and that confidence results from embracing one's strengths and talents, while acknowledging one's weaknesses.

Comparisons with native-speakers may be damaging for second language learners' self-esteem, leading to the realization that they may not reach that level of proficiency, while the acknowledgement of their own progress and talents might actually boost their self-esteem. Instead of comparing themselves with native speakers, second language learners may gain more from valuing their own progress and giving themselves credit for how much they have accomplished compared to a previous stage in their language learning process.

The most confident second language speakers applied the *deflection* technique of evaluating the language performance of target models (English native speakers) as imperfect, and susceptible to mistakes:

> Adi: Sometimes I made mistakes and I even asked people to correct me, but I was never afraid. Even native speakers make mistakes, mainly grammar mistakes, and I can catch them … A good second language learner is confident about his ability to succeed. You need a lot of confidence and determination to succeed and I am a confident person.

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Instead of getting frustrated by the mistakes that were an inherent part of their learning journey, successful learners like Adi reframed their thinking approach and established a more realistic expected response, believed in positive reinforcement and gave themselves credit for how much they actually achieved.

Not everybody is naturally self-confident, but self-confidence can be constructed or cultivated by reframing beliefs to be more permissive, and expressed in the positive: 'I deserve to be successful and I can succeed.'

Participants may have felt at times marginalized or ridiculed for their imperfect mastery of English, but they constantly resisted marginalization by negotiating a more powerful identity for themselves and generating *a counter-discourse* (McKay & Wong, 1996), through the deployment of several thought-reframing techniques such as acknowledgement of one's talents and accomplishments, comparisons with themselves at a previous second acquisition stage rather than with native speaker models, and evaluation of target language models as imperfect and susceptible to mistakes.

VI.2.4. Intellectual Curiosity

All the people interviewed revealed intellectual curiosity as a common characteristic. They are all individuals who thrive on discovering new things and never get tired of learning.

> Veronica: I had a desire to learn new things and discover the world in Canada.
>
> Sandhya: It's my interest in learning, I like to take courses, I like to meet lots of progressive people, communicate, share ideas, and continue my education.
>
> Iulia: By nature, I'm a curious person, so I've always wanted to know what this is and what that is, and how you use this and you use that, and being in a technical field, I am analytical so to speak. It's impossible to be analytical and not learn new things, because you need to associate things and to make new connections between what you know and what you don't…

In the above excerpts, intellectual curiosity is the key quality that underpins the constant desire to learn new things and discover the world.

VI.2.5. Perfectionism

Most participants mentioned that it was really important for them to do things well and accomplish tasks to the best of their ability. They define themselves in terms of their performance and they always aspire to do better:

> Mimosa: I'm a perfectionist and I feel embarrassed when I don't say things right. My attitude is to learn better, to listen carefully when other people talk. I know how to listen.

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Perfectionists take pride in their achievements and like to compare their performance and success with that of other people, who had the same start. In some cases, even the motivation behind achieving high English proficiency was attributed to their highly competitive nature:

> Researcher: Why was it important for you to know English well?
>
> Bojana: It's my personality, I am very competitive. Whatever I do I like to do very, very well. I like to be the best, if it's possible.

Some participants compare their progress against an internal norm set by themselves rather than against the pace and acquisition rate of other learners. They are competitive learners who do not wait for other people to tell them what to do, but take their learning process into their own hands, set measurable goals for themselves and make clear plans on how to accomplish them.

A perfectionist nature was also reflected or associated with perseverance and persistence. Some participants clearly attributed their success in language acquisition to their cultivated positive mindset that did not consider failure as a viable outcome:

> Blazenka: I am very persistent, if I decide to do something, then I will do everything in my power to achieve it. I am a perfectionist in the fields that interest me. For me to be failure was not an option, so I was really persistent ...

Extreme perfectionism can be counter-productive (Elliot & Meltsner, 1993, p. 18), as winning and infallibility may be considered the only reasons for self-worth or inner value. Nevertheless, the perfectionist tendencies of the participants in this study are mitigated by their willingness to admit their limitations, learn from their experiences, and give themselves credit for what they have accomplished while looking forward to new challenges and opportunities.

VI.2.6. Tolerance of Ambiguity

Even if the majority of participants displayed some perfectionist traits, they also revealed tolerance of ambiguity, which is a characteristic that in second language acquisition can be defined as the ability to cope with uncertainty in communicative situations, by guessing words from the context or 'gambling' with new lexical items. One might argue that perfectionists do not normally tolerate ambiguity well and are tense and anxious in unpredictable situations (Elliot & Meltsner, 1993). However, most participants understanding of perfectionism is more in the lines of excellence-seeking, rather than super-human goal getting. They do not embark on an unrealistic quest for perfection but for excellence and are aware that everybody makes mistakes.

Research suggests that people gather information either in a *perceptive* or in a *receptive* way (Brown, 2000). Perceptive second learners try to fit all the new linguistic information they encounter into their existing mental schema and are very intolerant of ambiguous contexts. Receptive second learners do not make immediate judgements nor try to force new information into a preconceived mental system, but constantly adjust

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and calibrate their existing knowledge. Receptive second learners are comfortable guessing words from the context, experimenting with new lexical items, and do not rush to the dictionary when they encounter an unknown word.

Even if most participants emphasized that for efficiency's sake making inferences from the linguistic context is essential, a small number of participants expressed their need for certainty and considered that looking up words in a dictionary provided the most accurate answers.

Another interview question that was designed to probe ambiguity of tolerance in second learning inquired about ways of dealing with an unknown word. The overwhelming majority expressed their preference for guessing the lexical meaning from a written or spoken context, followed by asking someone else, and finally by looking it up in a dictionary.

> Researcher: When you encounter an unknown English word, what do you normally do (ask someone else, look it up in a dictionary, guess its meaning, etc.)?
>
> Bojana: I try to guess it from the context. First I guess the meaning from the context and, if it's still not working, then I ask someone, if that person wants to answer, and the last choice is to look it up in a dictionary.
>
> Cristina: If I see the word in a sentence or in a context, I'll try to guess it. I don't worry too much about the exact meaning or definition, but I'll try to guess it overall. If I have people around me, I will ask immediately. If there's nobody else, just me, and I have a dictionary, I'll look it up only if it's very important to me.

Most participants can be considered moderately receptive learners, as they indicated that it is worth attempting to make guesses, but that a dictionary can provide precision of meaning afterwards.

VII. Conclusions

The personality traits that emerged as being associated to success in acquiring close-to-native competence in a second language are outgoingness, risk-taking, self-esteem, intellectual curiosity, perfectionism, and tolerance of ambiguity. Exceptional learners are critically aware of the personality traits associated with successful second language vocabulary acquisition and, if they do not naturally have them, they cultivate them, adopting a second language learning persona. Risk-taking meant venturing into unsafe territories in conversations, disregarding jokes and ridicule for imprecise lexical use and self-esteem was perceived as arising from an acknowledgement of one's strengths as well as weaknesses. Intra-comparisons (with own progress) and deflection (target model perceived as imperfect) were the main techniques used to boost self-confidence. Perfectionism and intellectual curiosity, a desire to learn and discover new things and concepts were perceived as driving forces behind success in second language vocabulary acquisition. Perfectionism was understood as the effort to do one's best

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under any given circumstances and constantly aspire to do better. Tolerance of ambiguity was moderately associated to second language vocabulary acquisition, as most participants expressed their preferences for guessing lexical meaning from the context, but also emphasized the usefulness of subsequent dictionary use or someone else's explanations as semantic validation strategies.

The process of data collection and analysis generated a combination of personality characteristics that might explain the exceptionality of a relatively small number of adult English non-native speakers who achieve close-to native proficiency, while the vast majority fossilize or plateau around an intermediate level. From a socio-psychological perspective, this particular set of innate or 'cultivated' personality traits might be conducive to significant gains in second language proficiency.

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Die Rolle der Persönlichkeitsmerkmale für einen erfolgreichen Zweitspracherwerb

Die vorliegende Arbeit situiert sich im aktuellen Kontext der angewandten Linguistik. Eine psycholinguistische Analyse von Faktoren, die zu einem erfolgreichen Zweitspracherwerb führen können, ist im Kontext der Globalisierung, des Migrationsphänomens und der symbolischen Beseitigung von Grenzen von aktueller Wichtigkeit. Ziel der vorliegenden Studie ist es, Persönlichkeitsmerkmale zu untersuchen, die eine Erklärung dafür liefern könnten, warum einige Erwachsene über eine muttersprachähnliche Kompetenz in der Zweitsprache verfügen, währen die meisten Erwachsenen nur ein bestimmtes Niveau (teilweise mit fossilisierten Sprachkenntnissen) erreichen.

Der Artikel beginnt mit einigen theoretischen Betrachtungen über die aktuellen Forschungsrichtungen der angewandten Linguistik und geht dann auf den Paradigmenwechsel von der deskriptiven, strukturalistischen Perspektive der 50er-60er Jahre über die generativen sowie kognitiven Theorien der 70er-80er Jahre bis zur heutigen Beschäftigung mit der Rolle der Persönlichkeitsmerkmale sowie der affektiven Variablen ein. Der zweite Teil der Arbeit besteht in der Vorstellung der benutzten Methodologie, der so genannten „grounded theory method". Die Grundlage der Studie bilden Daten, die durch Interwiews mit Migranten in Kanada gewonnen wurden, die über eine hohe Kompetenz in der Zweitsprache verfügen. Die Forscherin analysiert die angeborenen sowie die „angeeigneten" Persönlichkeitsmerkmale, die als wesentlich für den Erwerb einer hohen kommunikativen Kompetenz in der Zweitsprache identifiziert wurden: eine extrovertierte Haltung, die Fähigkeit gewisse Risiken bei der Sprachverwendung einzugehen, Selbstvertrauen, intellektuelle Neugier, eine Dosis Perfektionismus und die Toleranz für linguistische Ambiguität.

University of Calgary
Canada

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