



Personality and Second Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationships which exist between personality and second language learning and adds to the data available on the use of a highly respected personality indicator, the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Language learning and academic success are both highly correlated with intelligence, but research suggests that the importance of intelligence declines after high school age, partly because of the stronger effects of personality. This study places emphasis on the importance of personality in learning success and examines research evidence on the issue, discussing some of the inconsistent results that have been obtained. A study of 100 Hong Kong university undergraduates was carried out to add to this research base. The instruments used were the MBTI for personality traits, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (S.I.L.L.L.) for learning strategies and a standardized test for language proficiency. Significant statistical relationships were not found and the reasons for this are discussed.

Keywords: Personality, Second language learning, Intelligence, Hong Kong

1. Introduction

The relationship between personality and second language learning ability, has received some research interest in the last few decades. The results that are available however, have sometimes been inconsistent, often because of methodological and conceptual differences in the way the studies were performed. This article will consider some of the research evidence which has examined these relationships and details a recent study of undergraduate students in Hong Kong which aimed to determine not only the connections between personality, language learning and learning strategies, but also to add to the available data on the personality profiles of Chinese students.

The study will first briefly clarify what might be meant by the terms intelligence, learning strategies and personality, before presenting details of the Hong Kong data collection.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

According to Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham, (2005, p. 40) researchers in cognitive psychology agree on a definition of intelligence which states that it.....

"...is a very general mental capacity that, among other things, involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly and learn from experience.... it reflects a broader and deeper capability for comprehending our surroundings- 'catching on' 'making sense' of things, or 'figuring out' what to do...."

Many of the elements in the definition of intelligence given above have also been described as indications of the 'good language learner' and have been tabulated in lists of learning strategies that such learners use (Oxford, 1995). Learning a second language successfully requires using reasoning and problem solving abilities and it requires the ability to use and apply strategies which try to make sense of the structure and use of a new language, a clear overlap with definitions of intelligence. Strong elements of successful language learning have been the use of what are called *cognitive strategies* (the direct processing of language, e.g. memorizing, inferring meaning, solving problems, identifying or making sense of relationships) and *metacognitive strategies* (thinking about those processes). Both of these have been identified as of crucial importance in strategy research. (O'Malley, et al. 1985a). Attempts have been made to teach strategies for language learning, but these have not met with much success (Hassall, 1984, O'Malley, et al. 1985b). Among the reasons for this may be the fact that the ability to use strategies is related to general intelligence and thus subject to the same developmental, social and genetic influences which limit the effects of direct teaching.

Research has provided evidence of the power of general intelligence in predicting academic performance, including second language learning success (academic performance being estimated by written or oral examinations, continuous assessment, group work, essays or dissertations). (Gagne & St Pere, 2001, Neisser, et al. 1996, Sternberg & Kaufman, 1996). However, there is also evidence that general intelligence (as measured by IQ tests) is often not highly correlated with academic performance. (Singh, & Varma, 1995). Ackerman (1994) and Jensen (1980) report a

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