

A study on the relationship between extroversion-introversion and risk-taking in the context of second language acquisition

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Abstract

Two of the most examined dimensions of personality that have an affective influence on language learning are extroversion-introversion and risk-taking. In the paper we first define and look at the different studies conducted to examine the relationship between the two factors and second language acquisition (SLA). Results show that extroverts seem to take full advantage of language-use opportunities as they tend to be sociable, and are more likely to join groups, more inclined to engage in conversations both inside and outside the classroom. However, results have also concluded that a more introverted personality may be better suited to classroom learning, especially reading and writing skills. Risk takers; who are believed to be inherently extroverts, are more likely to take their existing language system to the limit. Such learners are more likely to change and more resistant to fossilization. Language proficiency is influenced directly by classroom participation which reflects, among other things, the contributing influences of risk-taking.

Keywords: extroversion; introversion; risk taking; second language acquisition; personality

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1. Introduction

Several possible aspects of personality have been proposed over the years. However, those of extroversion/introversion and risk-taking are most frequently examined by research in second language acquisition (SLA). Skehan (1989) considers three crucial factors of language learning. They are:

- Intelligence
- Risk-taking ability
- Extroversion/introversion

He also 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. In the following sections, we will first define and then take a look at the different studies conducted to examine the relationship between the two factors and SLA.

2. Extroversion/Introversion

The notion of extroversion/ introversion stems from trait theories of personality developed in psychology. Trait theorists try to identify this in a human being's personality that is relatively stable, and it is believed, at least partly innate. The majority of studies on the personality research in SLA have looked at the relationship between the extroversion-introversion dimension of personality and different linguistic variables. Extroversion and Introversion are used to gauge two styles. Of course, everyone is extroverted or introverted in some degree, but not in the same degree. Extrovert characters tend to be gregarious, while the introverted tend to be private. The activity of the extrovert is seen as directed towards 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 are easily distracted from studying, partly as a result of their gregariousness and partly because of their weak ability to concentrate for long periods.

On the other hand, introverts are quiet, prefer reading rather than meeting people and talking to others, have few but close friends and usually avoid excitement (Eysenck & Chan, 1982). 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.

Many SLA theorists claimed that extroverts are the better language learners. Extroverts, who tend to be sociable, are more likely to join groups, more inclined to engage in conversations both inside (Cook, 1991) and outside the classroom (Swain, 1985). As such, they take full advantage of language-use opportunities. It has been suggested that extroverted learners will find it easier to make contact with other users of the L2 and therefore

will obtain more input. The classroom learner may also benefit from being extroverted by getting more practice in using the L2. Furthermore, extroverts are believed to be prone to risk-taking and are likely to try out a larger amount and variety of word types and grammatical structures at a higher speech rate.

In recent years, a more nuanced perspective on the relationship between extroversion and SLA has emerged. Since extroversion is considered to be stable personality variable, its effect should appear in both L1 and L2 languages. Most studies reveal a positive relation between degree of extroversion and various measures of L1 fluency. This is also shown by some experiments, such as measuring a pictorial stimulus test on a sample of Spanish speaking adolescents who learn English as a second language (Rossier, 1976). There are positive correlations between extroversion scores and utterance length, amount of filled pauses and speech rates.

Some studies have shown that introversion or extroversion do not have a significant impact on second language learning in the classroom. Gardner and Clément (1990) determined that both types of learners had equal opportunities for achievement, and that language teachers should address the needs of both personality types. However, in a study by Wakamoto (2000), with 254 Japanese students learning English as a Foreign Language as participants. Results show that extroversion did have a connection to the learning strategies employed by language learners. Wakamoto surveyed junior college students in an English language course for their learning preferences and matched these results with personality types. The study found that extroverts used more *functional strategies* and *social-affective strategies* in language learning than introverts. Extroverts tended to focus on meaning rather than form – a strategy which has been confirmed as contributing to success in L2 acquisition by Brown (2001). Extroverts asked more questions than their introverted counterparts. Wakamoto concluded that extroverts will ask for clarification more readily than introverts, thus improving their chances for input essential for developing an inter-language.

Furnham (1990) quotes a study conducted by Thorne (1987) which examined the interaction between introverts and extroverts. The study mixed and matched partners of extroverts and introverts in conversational situations. When introverts were paired with introverts, the conversation they engaged in focused on *problem talk* according to Thorne. On the other hand, extroverts with extroverts showed a wide range of topics and more claims of common ground. Furnham (1990) concludes from this study and subsequent observations that extroverts talk more are more impulsive and take more risks with speech than introverts. Introverts are more careful with speech and more focused on form: vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

Some recent studies have proposed a different construct which is directly related to extroversion versus introversion. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) propose that there is a *Willingness to Communicate* factor in L2 acquisition which is connected to communication apprehension or anxiety in L2 contexts as suggested by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). Thus *the global trait of introversion contributes to both communication apprehension and the perception of communicative competence, and self-esteem was found to play a role in developing communication apprehension* (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). In other words, introverts are less likely to talk and have a lower self-confidence in their second language. Self-confidence has been linked to success in second language acquisition in natural settings. According to a study by Gardner and Clément (1990), self-confidence is one cause of motivation in acquiring a second language. Clément and his colleagues defined self-confidence as *a combination of low levels of language-specific anxiety, confidence in one's language skills, and self-perceptions of high levels of proficiency*.

From these studies, it would seem that an extrovert with an outgoing personality and more tolerance for risk would be a better language learner than the more introverted personality who is more conservative and more self-conscious. According to Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982),

... in nearly all the studies conducted to determine the personality characteristics associated with successful L2 learning, researchers have concluded that lower anxiety levels and a tendency to be outgoing were connected with successful L2 acquisition.

Extroverted individuals may be more fluent when speaking in a second language. When fluency in oral performance is concerned, people can feel obviously that extroverted students achieve greater fluency in an oral production task compared to introverts. Significant correlations were also found between extroversion and global impression scores, and state anxiety and clause accuracy scores. Participants who were more extroverted produced better global impressions and those who were experiencing higher levels of state anxiety made more errors in their spoken use of clauses.

However, as stated earlier, some researchers have not found a significant difference between extroverts and introverts in terms of achievement in second language acquisition in classroom environments. In fact, a more introverted personality may be better suited to classroom learning. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) write,

... for academic achievement in general, introversion is usually the more desirable end of the trait dimension. But for language learning, the desirable end may be either extroversion or introversion, depending on the learning context and instructional methods.

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.

3. Risk-taking

The second personality factor with a close bearing on language learning is risk-taking. It has been suggested that a tendency to take risks is associated with success in second language learning. Risk taking has been defined as *a situation where an individual has to make a decision involving choice between alternatives of different desirability; the outcome of the choice is uncertain; there is a possibility of failure* (Beebe, 1983). Risk-taking is an ability of being eager to try out new information intelligently regardless of embarrassment. Risk-taking is not only an affective domain in personality factors but also one of the important parts in learning second language. Because of a strong intention of achieving success on learning something they yearn for mastering, language learners are willing to absorb new knowledge from their teacher spontaneously but how to interact with teacher? The easiest manner is to take the risk. Although it may be impulsive and too awkward to make a mistake, a good learner should require this characteristic to succeed in second language acquisition.

According to Brown (1994),

... interaction requires the risk of failing to produce intended meaning, of failing to interpret intended meaning, of being laughed at, of being shunned or rejected. The rewards, of course, are great and worth the risks.

In other words, risk-taking is a crucial interactive process to learn a language in the ESL/EFL classroom. Therefore, if a language learner interacts with the teacher, he/she can acquire a foreign language without much difficulty. In addition, according to Brown (1994),

... the key to risk-taking as a peak performance strategy is not simply in taking the risks. It is in learning from your 'failures'. When you risk a new technique in the classroom, try a new approach to a difficult student, or make a frank comment to a supervisor, you must be willing to accept possible 'failure' in your attempt. Then, you assess all the facets of that failure and turn it into an experience that teaches you something about how to calculate the next risk.

In this case, it is essential to accept the fiasco and internalize it as the learning experience. Afterwards, language learners can master that language gradually.

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 (1961) 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 (1989) 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.

The notion of risk as being integral to successful learning is widely accepted amongst classroom practitioners, especially those involved in teaching English to speakers of other languages. Skehan (1989) has shown that language proficiency is influenced directly by classroom participation which reflects, among other things, the contributing influences of risk-taking. 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 (1986) has elaborated on the four dimensions that underlie the risk-taking construct. They are:

1. Lack of hesitancy about using a newly encountered linguistic element;
2. Willingness to use linguistic elements perceived to be complex or difficult;
3. Tolerance of possible incorrectness or inexactitude in using the language; and
4. Inclination to rehearse a new element silently before attempting to use it aloud.

Skehan (1989) noticed that within the field of second language acquisition, 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. Theories and research reveal that extrovert people tend to take risk of making mistakes and interact more with people. So, this helps them to learn better in L2, especially in communication aspect (Oxford & Ehrman, 1993).

As stated earlier, many of the strategies associated with good language learners involve a willingness to take risks. Beebe, in 1983 presented data from Puerto Rican bilingual (Spanish– English) children. The children were interviewed on four occasions, once by a monolingual English interviewer, once by a bilingual (Spanish dominant) interviewer, once by a bilingual (English dominant) interviewer, and once, in groups of three children, by all three interviewers. Beebe (1983) operationally defined risk taking in terms of a number of factors, among them, number of attempts to use particular grammatical structures, avoidance, amount of talk, and amount of information volunteering. The results showed that risk taking was greatest with the monolingual interviewer. This suggests that learners' willingness to take risks may depend on the situation, not just on their general type.

Ely (1986) found a correlation between risk-taking tendencies and classroom participation, but the relationship with actual success was relatively weak. This reinforces the idea that personality affects language learning in a much more local manner, helping on specific tasks but not necessarily affecting longer-term success. To say that an individual is a risk taker is to say that she or he generally is more willing to take risks than the average person. Thus, risk taking should be based on a background of general behavior. For this reason, the important work of Kahnemann, Slovic, and Tversky (1982) cannot be ignored. They found that individuals are

generally risk-averse when contemplating a gain, but risk-seeking when contemplating a loss. To give common examples, if we have an opportunity to make a financial gain, we generally prefer conservative, but safer, investments. If we are threatened with a loss, we are much more willing to undertake risky actions that could ameliorate our losses if successful.

It is important to recognize that gain and loss are subjectively determined, not necessarily objective. Kahnemann, Slovic, and Tversky (1982) determined that the same objective situation could be presented to subjects as either a gain or a loss. They described this as a framing problem. They found that when the situation was framed as a gain, subjects were generally risk-averse, but when it was framed as a loss, they were risk-seeking. Thus, a risk taker should undertake relatively riskier activities in either situation, but this personality trait is not necessarily more important than the framing. What we would need to know in studies of second language learning is whether the learners frame their situations in terms of gain or loss. For example, imagine that a student is called on in a language class. If the student believes that there is the chance of getting a poor grade (loss), she may try almost anything. If she looks upon this as a chance of getting extra credit (gain); he or she may be much more conservative. The student's evaluation of the situation (i.e., its potential outcome) may be much more important than the student's general personality trait for taking risks. It is important to consider that two learners faced with the same situation may frame the situation differently, one as a gain and the other as a loss.

Referring to the silent students in a class, Brown (1994) says,

...the silent student in the classroom is one who is unwilling to appear foolish when mistakes are made.

Self-esteem seems to be closely connected to a risk-taking factor: when those foolish mistakes are made, a person with high global self-esteem is not daunted by the possible consequences of being laughed at. Beebe (1983) noted that fossilization, or the relatively permanent incorporation of certain patterns of errors, may be due to a lack of willingness to take risks. It is safe to stay within patterns that accomplish the desired function even though there may be some errors in those patterns. Therefore, those silent students may fall behind other active students because of their language ego and general self-esteem. If teachers give them proper encouragement to increase their self-confidence, they would like to learn a foreign or second language without fear of being wrong when they try to guess the new information they read. Johannessen (2003) proposed the following methods in order to give them confidence to learn:

1. Break instruction into small steps and provide short activities, chosen and sequenced by the teacher.
2. Cover material thoroughly and at a moderate pace, give plenty of practice, immediate clear feedback, and specific praise.
3. Have students work as a whole class so that the teacher can supervise. Avoid individualized, self-paced, or independent work.
4. Maintain a level of difficulty that guarantees high rates of success.
5. Ask convergent questions- one correct answer.
6. Make sure to call on everyone, and stay with a student until a question is answered.
7. Avoid interruptions, open-ended questions, and nonacademic conversations.
8. Emphasize short, frequent paper-and-pencil exercises, not games, arts, crafts, discovery or inquiry learning activities, and interest centers because these are less helpful for learning.

Consequently, Johannessen (2003) explained that the best way to reach these most reluctant students was through direct instruction with a heavy emphasis on basic skills. Nevertheless, when students still have problems,

the teacher should evaluate the competence of each student and give them support by encouragement.

So, the teachers should provide their students with a sense of security and encourage them to voice their opinion. Once the students are not afraid of being blamed and humiliated when they talk, they will take part in the class willingly and do well in second language acquisition. Thus, risk-taking is one of qualities in the affective domain of the personality factors and associated with success in second language learning.

4. Conclusion

Such personality factors as tolerance of ambiguity, empathy, self-esteem, inhibition, and intelligence have also been addressed by SLA research, but it is also argued that the two most important factors are extroversion/introversion and risk-taking. According to Hurd (2002),

... extrovert students tend to participate more in classroom interactions, worry less about accuracy and have a tendency to take risks with their language, all of which are assets when it comes to communicative oral competence. In the other respect, extroversion may well have a role to play in the development of oral skills, but introversion may be of even more significance for the independent language learner; given its positive correlation with meta-cognitive skills and their link with autonomy.

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