Personality: A Determining Factor in Becoming a Successful Language Learner

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Resumen

La presente investigación es un estudio de caso cuyo propósito fue investigar los tipos de personalidad que poseen los aprendices de una segunda lengua exitosos en cinco escuelas primarias del circuito 03 en Pérez Zeledón. La importancia de este estudio se fundamenta en la relación entre la personalidad y el rendimiento académico de los niños en la materia de inglés. Los profesores de dicho idioma pueden recurrir a esta investigación para identificar asuntos de personalidad en los estudiantes con el fin de ayudarles a ser exitosos en su aprendizaje del lenguaje. El instrumento que se utilizó para llevar a cabo el estudio fue un cuestionario. De este, se analizaron las respuestas de los estudiantes con base en las características dadas para los cuatro tipos de temperamento existentes: sanguíneo, melancólico, y flemático. Al final, se pudo concluir que la personalidad es un factor determinante en el aprendizaje de los estudiantes, a pesar de no ser el único, ya que la mayoría de los aprendices con un desempeño lingüístico destacado se podrían adscribir a un tipo particular de personalidad-temperamento. Este documento también ofrece un número de recomendaciones para las autoridades del Ministerio de Educación Pública (MEP), escuelas de I y II ciclo, y maestros de inglés para poder lidiar apropiadamente con los asuntos de personalidad presentes en el aula.

Palabras clave: personalidad, temperamento, adquisición de un Segundo idioma, inglés como lengua extranjera, niños.

Abstract

This research was a case study whose purpose was to investigate what personality types are shown by successful second language learners at five elementary schools of the educational district 03 in Pérez Zeledón. Its importance lies in the fact that it shows the relationship between personality and children's academic performance in English as a subject matter. English teachers might use this research to identify their students' personality traits and, thereafter, help them become successful language learners. The instrument used to conduct the study was a questionnaire in which students' responses were analyzed in the light of the

features entailed in the four different temperament types proposed by Hippocrates: sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic. In the end, the researchers concluded that although personality was not the only determining factor in the students' learning process, most of the language learners with a remarkable linguistic performance could be ascribed into a specific type of personality-temperament. In addition, this paper offers a series of recommendations for the Ministry of Public Education (MEP, as it is referred in Spanish) authorities, primary schools, and teachers to appropriately deal with personality issues in the classroom.

Keywords: Personality, temperament, second language acquisition, English as a foreign language, children.

1. Introduction

Since 1994, the Costa Rican governments have put a strong emphasis on the teaching of English in elementary public schools. The attention given to this subject matter is, as pointed out by Ministry of Public Education (MEP) (2001), a response to the needs of the global economy and an attempt to contribute to the development of the country (p. 16). Some issues concern all the participants that are part of the English as a foreign language (EFL) programs at this point of the educational system; students' personality is one of them. Kinsella's work (as cited in the MEP, 2001) stressed that personality influences people's approach to learning a language. Considering this fact, personality requires more attention in elementary schools, for this factor "may determine even the channels... [that people] use to absorb, process, and retrieve new knowledge" (p. 31). In the end, children's personality in addition to children's strategic age in elementary school is determining to ensure the acquisition of a second language (L2). With this premise in mind, the next research is a case study whose purpose was to investigate what personality types are shown by successful second language learners at five elementary schools of the educational district 03 in Pérez Zeledón.

Scholars have argued that, due to individual differences upon learning a language, personality is a key factor to reach a high linguistic performance. Ellis (1989) sustained that the route which people undergo when learning a second language (L2) is highly influenced by factors such as age, learning style, aptitude, attitude, motivation, and personality (p. 99). In regard to personality, Sepehri, Rakshani, Keshavarz, and Kiani (2013) remarked that "developing understanding of personality typology, personality traits, thinking styles, and learning styles theories is a... useful way to improve teachers' knowledge of motivation and behavior of students" (para. 2). Conducting research on this factor is of upmost importance because teachers may obtain a clearer view of how to deal with the different personality types in the classroom. In this way, the diverse personalities shown by students can be tackled by devising strategies to ensure learners' optimal language learning regardless of their personality traits.

2. Literature Review

The next section explains some theoretical considerations that require to be examined in the light of the existent theory and previous research.

2.1. Defining Personality

Defining *personality* is a challenge given that it is perceived differently depending on the field. However, Child (as cited in Eysenck, 2014) provided a definition that can be applied to different scenarios. This author described personality as "more or less stable, internal factors that make one person's behavior consistent from one time to another, and different from the behavior other people would manifest in comparable situations" (p. 38). In other words, personality traits are persistent through time and vary in every person; this situation makes creating typologies to better comprehend people's personality necessary. For instance, it is feasible to find people with *introvert* and extrovert *personalities*. Frey (as cited in Eysenck, 2014) referred to the introvert as "an individual in whom exists an exaggeration of the thought processes in relation to directly observable social behavior, with an accompanying tendency to withdraw from social contacts" (p. 57). On the contrary, the extrovert is considered "an individual in whom exists a diminution of the thought processes in relation to directly observable social behavior with an accompanying tendency to make social contacts" (Eysenck, 2014, p. 57). This dichotomy helps to identify the features that make each person's personality different, but it is also crucial to be acquainted with the types of temperament that account for people's character.

Modern psychology specialists still draw many conclusions on people's personality by resorting to theories like the Four Temperaments by Hippocrates. Childs (1995) summarized the features of each temperament as follows "[1] Choleric (bad-tempered, passionate, and irascible); [2] Sanguine (cheerful, confident, and optimistic); [3] Phlegmatic (stolid, unemotional, unexcitable); and [4] Melancholic (dejected, pensive, and depressed)" (p. 4). All in all, the temperament is simply a component of people's personality which contributes to explain their behavior. This taxonomy has been especially useful to conduct pedagogic studies because teachers are able to understand what occurs in the classroom in a full-fledged way. In the same vein, it is imperative to remark that the types of personality-temperament are not always immutable, as people can change their behavior due to external factors that influence the way in which life is perceived (Hurlock, 2000). Teachers need to take this aspect into account to be ready when students change their conduct in the classroom. Therefore, the types of temperaments and the eventual changes that people suffer in this regard need to be present in a teacher's mind to carry out the tasks of their profession successfully. In the case of English language teaching professionals, they must associate personality with the way in which a second language is learned.

2.2. Research on Personality and Second Language Acquisition

Understanding the process by which a person learns an L2 demands knowing the role of personality to acquire linguistic competencies. Many SLA experts, such as Fillmore, Strong, Dulay, Burt, Rossier, and Krashen (as cited in Ellis, 1989) have developed their own studies in order to relate personality to language learning. In their findings, the widely accepted hypothesis that "extrovert learners learn more rapidly and are more successful than introverted learners" could not be proven. Even so, Rossier (as cited in Ellis, 1989) found that there is a relationship between extrovert personalities and learners' high fluency (p. 220). In the same work, Ellis also made reference to Fillmore's research, who found that children

interacting with ease progressed faster in their learning process than those who did not (p. 220). Another chief aspect of personality that has been under study is inhibition. According to Krashen (as cited in Ellis, 1989), the hypothesis that learners inhibited to take risks advance more slowly in their learning is true. Regardless of Krashen's recognized authority on the topic, Ellis dared to refuse his arguments claiming that adolescents, who are socially inhibited to take risks, can learn the language without major complications (p. 221). Hence, the research carried out on personality and language learning in the last decades has revealed that there is some degree of relationship between these variables, yet the results are not completely validated.

3. Main Body

This section describes the methodology, the instruments, as well as the setting and the participants of the study and discusses the main findings obtained through the data analysis.

3.1. Methodology

The approach of this research is qualitative. Denzin and Licoln (as cited in Gall, Gall and Borg, 2003) mentioned that a qualitative research has several methods in its emphasis because it involves an "interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter" (p.24). In the light of this premise, this qualitative study is an attempt to interpret students' personality as a determining factor in their L2 learning process. In addition, this research has a descriptive scope because the information collected will be explained and described using as reference the theory addressed earlier in the study. The design used for this research is case study because the investigators chose a phenomenon as the object of study in order to propose some useful materials that would help sanguine learners to be exposed to activities that fit their types of temperament. Moreover, this case study intends to help language instructors and other researchers to have a wider picture of the influence that a child's temperament may have on his/her L2 learning process.

3.2. Instruments

The instrument used to collect the information needed was a questionnaire with leading questions that would help researchers determine the types of temperament that the learners had. The data garnered were interpreted and analyzed through a triangulation process along with theory and with the help of a professional in the field of psychology.

3.3. Setting and Participants

A total of 75 students were selected for this study and their grades were higher than 90. This number was vast enough to validate the administration of the instruments. The participants' ages ranged from nine to 15 years old. However, the predominant ages in the participants were 11 and 12. In order to carry out this case study, the researchers used the convenience sampling method due to the administrative staff and teachers' availability in the five elementary schools where the research was held. The schools visited for research purposes were: José Breinderhoff, Los Ángeles, Daniel Flores Zavaleta, IDA Jorón, and Hernán

Rodríguez Ruiz. All these education centers are part of the school district 03 in Pérez Zeledón County. The researchers went to the previously mentioned institutions to administer the questionnaire to the 75 participants so as to gather reliable data to enrich the main objective of this case study.

3.4. Data Analysis

In this section, the information collected through the questionnaires is analyzed and shown. First, the following graph displays with percentages the participant learners' favorite subject matters in elementary school.

Students' Favorite Subject Matter
Source. Questionnaire administered to the participant learners
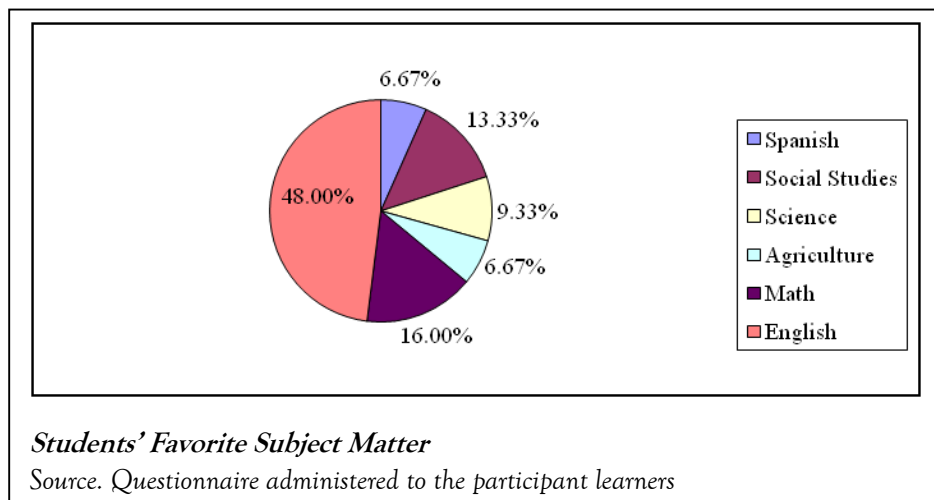
The previous graph makes evident how students preferred the English language over the other subject matters. The fact that English is likeable for students might work to explain why their grades are higher than 90 in this subject matter. The reality is that students show extrinsic motivation. Motivation and personality are related factors to ensure students' success when learning a second language.

Temperament	Absolute value	% of Relative value
Melancholic	18	24
Phlegmatic	11	14.67
Sanguine	40	53.33
Choleric	6	8
Total	75	100

Students' Types of Temperaments
Source. Questionnaire administered to the participant learners

The previous chart shows the absolute and relative values of the types of temperament analyzed in the five schools chosen for this research. This table exhibits data in terms of the

different types of temperament found in the participants of the five institutions altogether. The predominant type was the sanguine. According to the theory of this study, leaner with sanguine temperament are cheerful, confident, and optimistic. This predominance of the sanguine temperament supports Krashen's hypothesis that extrovert learners learn faster and are more successfully than introverted learners.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

After conducting this study, two conclusions can be drawn. First, English is a subject matter towards which most successful language learners feel a high degree of affinity. Second, even though personality was not the only factor influencing the students' learning process, most of the language learners with high linguistic performance held a sanguine type of personality-temperament. The previous finding suggests that the successful learners of second language under study were cheerful, confident, and optimistic. Such features also describe people with extrovert personalities. As a result, this research supports those studies that sustain the relationship between extrovert personalities and ease to learn an L2.

In the light of these findings, different suggestions can be provided to MEP's authorities, teachers, and students. First, it is imperative for the curriculum developers at MEP to contemplate that the learning of an L2 is linked to the learners' personality. Theoretical aspects related to personality types must be discussed more in depth in the syllabus for I and II cycles. In the case of teachers, although the current syllabus barely suggests how to deal with personality in the classroom, they must frequently resort to these theories so that they, as language teaching professionals, can assist their students in their learning process by reflecting upon such theoretical considerations when planning a lesson and treating students. Additionally, it is both MEP's and teachers' task to maintain English as a subject matter of preference for any language learner regardless of his or her degree of success. Finally, learners are called upon to look for strategies to facilitate their own learning and develop autonomy. In the beginning, they may need the teachers' guidance to do it, but only under such circumstances can people undertake the route to become fully competent in the target language.

Action Plan

Besides these recommendations, the researchers propose an action plan that tackles the need to involve the different personality types in the classroom with activities that can increase students' joy, confidence and optimism. Augmenting these qualities is essential because they are identifiable in learners with a sanguine temperament and extrovert personalities. Basically, the action plan consists of a sample of engaging activities that can be used at the different stages of the lesson plan format provided by the MEP. It is expected that teachers can implement this plan in 40 minutes. The activities suggested are related to one cognitive target stipulated in the syllabus for II Cycle: "Socializing" for 5th grade. One important aspect that makes these activities appealing to students is that they are based on authentic materials and tasks that resemble real-life situations.

References

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Appendix 1

Instrumento N° 1
Dirigido a estudiantes de II ciclo

El siguiente cuestionario está dirigido a alumnos de II ciclo. Conteste en cada caso lo que se le solicita, se le agradecerá profundamente la veracidad en las respuestas dadas.

1- Escuela: _____

2- Dirección: _____

3- Edad: _____

4- Nacionalidad:

( ) Costarricense ( ) Nicaragüense ( ) Panameño   ( ) Otro: _____

5- ¿De las siguientes materias cuál es la que más le agrada?

( ) Español   ( ) Estudios Sociales   ( ) Matemáticas

( ) Ciencias   ( ) Agricultura   ( ) Inglés

6- ¿De las siguientes materias cuál es la que más fácil?

( ) Español   ( ) Estudios Sociales   ( ) Matemáticas

( ) Ciencias   ( ) Agricultura   ( ) Inglés

7- ¿Le gusta compartir con sus amigos el tiempo libre?

( ) sí

( ) no

8- ¿Sí en el aula los compañeros hacen desorden, qué hace usted?

( ) hace desorden también

( ) le dice a la maestra o maestro

( ) se queda en su lugar hasta que pase el desorden

9- ¿Considera algunas veces que no puede hacer algo aunque en realidad sí puede?

( ) sí

( ) no

10- ¿Le cuenta a su maestra o maestro cuando tiene algún problema?

( ) sí

( ) no

11- ¿Prefiere algunas veces estar solo?

( ) sí

( ) no

12- ¿Tiende a necesitar más tiempo para elaborar los exámenes?

( ) sí

( ) no

13- ¿Le ha pasado que se encuentra en el aula pero usted está pensando en algo distinto?

( ) sí

( ) no

14- ¿Cuándo sucede una pelea entre compañeros qué hace?

( ) la observa

( ) le dice a la maestra (o)

( ) trata de ignorarla y se retira

15- ¿Cuándo se enoja pierde el control?

( ) sí

( ) no

16- ¿Guarda los secretos que le confían?

( ) sí

( ) no

17- ¿Le ha dicho alguna persona como su mamá, papá o maestra (o) que usted es inquieto?

( ) sí

( ) no

18- ¿Alguna vez se ha peleado con alguien?

( ) sí

( ) no

19- ¿Qué prefiera hacer en su tiempo libre?

( ) ver televisión

( ) leer un libro

( ) practicar algún deporte

20- ¿Ha estado alguna ocasión en la escuela sin querer hacer nada?

(   ) sí

(   ) no

21- ¿Piense en lo que le gustaría ser en el futuro?

(   ) sí

(   ) no

22- ¿Cree tener muchos amigos?

(   ) sí

(   ) no

23- ¿Cuándo se siente mal por algo lo dice?

(   ) sí

(   ) no

24- ¿Se siente triste cuando su mamá o maestra (o) le llaman la atención?

(   ) sí

(   ) no

25- ¿Le gusta ser parte de la directiva del aula?

(   ) sí

(   ) no

26- ¿Se lleva bien con los compañeros?

(   ) sí   (   ) no

27- ¿Cuál fue la última nota que obtuvo en una prueba de Inglés?

(   ) menos de 65

(   ) entre 65 y 79

(   ) entre 80 y 89

(   ) entre 90 y 100

28- ¿Ha vivido alguna vez en un lugar donde se hable Inglés?

(   ) no

(   ) sí, donde? _____

29- ¿Vive con alguien que hable o y trabaje en Inglés?

( ) no

( ) sí, quién? _____

30- ¿Tienen en su casa el servicio de televisión por cable?

( ) sí

( ) no

31- ¿Le gusta participar activamente en las lecciones de Inglés?

( ) sí

( ) no

32- ¿Recibe ayuda de sus padres cuando tiene que estudiar Inglés?

( ) sí

( ) no

33- ¿Hay en su comunidad bibliotecas?

( ) sí

( ) no

34- ¿Hay en su comunidad campos deportivos?

( ) sí

( ) no

35- ¿Le agrada como su maestro (a) imparte la lección de Inglés?

( ) sí

( ) no

36- ¿Qué materiales utiliza él / ella para ejecutar su lección de Inglés?

( ) la pizarra solamente

( ) carteles

( ) grabadora

( ) televisor

( ) computadora

37- ¿Realiza su maestro prácticas orales en la lección de Inglés?

(   ) sí

(   ) no

38- ¿Escriben mucho en la lección de Inglés?

(   ) sí

(   ) no

39- ¿Cuánto tiempo ha recibido inglés?

(   ) 1 año

(   ) 2 años

(   ) más de 3 años

(   ) más de 5 años

 Muchas gracias por su colaboración.

Appendix 2

Ministerio de Educación Pública
Oficina de Lenguas Extranjeras

Sample Unit Plan

School: _____ Teacher: _____

Level: 5ᵗʰ grade   Time from: _____ to _____   (40 minutes)

Cognitive Target: *Socializing*

Linguistic Objectives	*Functions and Language*	*Procedures*	*Values and Attitudes*	*Evaluation of learning outcomes*
LISTENING • Understanding explicit information. • Identifying the main points of an oral stimulus. SPEAKING • Asking for and giving information about different topics. • Maintaining a conversation stating acceptance and denial.	FUNCTIONS • Greeting, introducing and saying good bye. • Extending invitations. • Accepting and rejecting invitations. • Asking for and giving information. • Recognizing the importance of English. LANGUAGE • Formal and informal greetings (review) • Extending, accepting and refusing invitations EXPRESSIONS • Would you like to	*-Warm-up:* Students watch a video about famous people sending greeting to their fans. Students take notes in a worksheet provided by the teacher. Afterwards, students are asked to say who they saw and provide some phrases for greetings and introductions that they could pick from the video. Video taken from *-Presentation:* The teacher explains some expressions for greetings,	• Politeness in the social interaction manners. • Respect for differences among people. • Self confidence.	• Check pronunciation and listening comprehension. • Generate questions and answers about different topics. • Express ideas, opinions and information on different topics.

	come to my party? • Yes, I would like to... I'd like to • I'm sorry, I need to study tonight. • What do you do on weekends? • Would you like to exchange mail with me? • My interests are ... • Why is English so important in the world today? Because... • Would you mind passing me the glue? • Please, lend me your notebook?	introductions and leave-takings by using an illustrated handout. **-Practice:** Students listen to a conversation of people socializing and complete it with some phrases studied in the presentation. Then, students practice the dialogue in pairs. **-Consolidation:** Students imagine that they are a cocktail party in which they introduce themselves, greet people and say leave takings. Students take up the role of a famous person mentioned in an information card and make short conversations with their classsmates.		

Taking Notes

Instructions: Watch the video "Celebrities surprising fans" in which famous people greet their fans. Take notes on the people you see and some greeting and introductions mentioned in the video. Use the following chart to write down your notes.

Famous People	Greetings and Introductions

Greetings

Hi!

Hello!

How are you?

How are you doing?

How do you do?

I'm fine, thanks / I'm ok.

I'm very well / I'm not very well

Good morning

Good afternoon

Good evening

Good night

Introductions

Hi! My name is Mark. What's your name?

Nice to meet you. It's nice meeting you.

Hi. I´m Lucy.

Nice to meet you too.

It's a pleasure.

Leave-takings

Bye, bye / Goodbye.

See you later / tomorrow. See you.

Have a nice day / weekend.

Nice to meet you. It was nice meeting you.

Time to Listen and Practice!

Instructions: Listen carefully to the conversations and complete the following dialogues with expressions related to greetings, introductions, and leave-takings. Then, practice the dialogues in pairs.

1. A: Good morning!

B: _____ Anna!

_____?

B: Fine, _____.

How are you?

B: _____

2. A: Good morning Anna!

B: _____, Dave.

_____?

B: I'm doing

_____, thanks.

Coffee?

A: Yes, please.

3. A: Good morning, everybody.

B: Good morning Anna!

_____?

B: _____, How are you, Chris?

B: _____

Taking up a Role

You are Pharrell Williams. You are an American singer. You are 41 years old and you live in Virginia. You are single. You like music and fashion.	You are Miley Cyrus. You are an American actress and singer. You are 21 years old and you are from Nashville, Tennessee. You're single.
You are Jennifer Lopez. You are an American singer. You are divorced. You are years old and you live in New York. You like dancing.	You are Cristiano Ronaldo. You are a Portuguese soccer player. You are 29 years old and you are single. You like soccer and fashion.
You are Bruno Mars. You are an American singer. You are 29 years old, and you are from Honolulu, Hawaii. You are single.	You are Demi Lovato. You are and American singer and actress. You are 23 years old, and you have a boyfriend. You are from Texas.
You are Ariana Grande. You are an American singer. You are 22 years old. You are single. You are from Florida, USA.	You are Justin Timberlake. You are an American singer and actor. You are 34 years old, and you are married.