

## **Personality**

SLA researchers have recently directed their attention to the affective domain of second language acquisition or what Brown (2007, p. 152) calls “the emotional side of human behaviour in the second language learning process”. In this regard, a number of personality traits have been suggested as likely to affect second language learning. These affective traits include, among others, self esteem, extroversion, anxiety, inhibition, and risk taking.

### **1. Self-esteem**

According to the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2002, p. 475), self-esteem is “a person’s judgment of their own worth or value, based on a feeling of ‘efficacy’, a sense of interacting effectively with one’s own environment”. In other words, self-esteem is the overall evaluation that a person makes of herself. Three levels of self-esteem have been described in the literature (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 155): (1) general or global self-esteem (general self assessment), (2) situational or specific self-esteem (one’s self evaluation in particular situations such as home, work, or on particular characteristics such as intelligence, communicative ability, etc.), and (3) task self esteem (one’s self evaluation on specific tasks within specific situations). Adelaide Heyde (1979), in a study of the effects of self-esteem on oral performance, found that all levels of self-esteem correlated positively with learners’ performance in the second language, with the highest correlation in the case of task self-esteem (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 155). Put differently, learners with high self-esteem tend to achieve a higher level of performance in the L2 than learners with low self esteem. Because self-esteem affects the anxiety and inhibition levels of the learners and consequently their achievement in L2 learning, teachers should understand and foster self-esteem in their students. The use of motivational strategies is one successful way to do this.

## **2. Extroversion**

The personality trait of extroversion-introversion is an important factor in the acquisition of a second language. An extrovert is “a person whose conscious interests and energies are more often directed outwards towards other people and events than towards the person themselves and their own inner experience” (The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 2002, p. 195). An introvert, in contrast, is “a person who tends to avoid social contact with others and is often preoccupied with his or her inner feelings, thoughts and experiences” (ibid.). In other words, extroverts are often sociable, active, and risk-taking. Introverts, on the other hand, are often less sociable, quiet, and reserved. Many studies have found a strong correlation between extroversion and success in language learning, especially in the mastery of communicative skills. One explanation for this may be the sociability of extrovert learners which results in more opportunities for face-to-face interaction and consequently more input. However, other studies have found that introvert learners were significantly better in their pronunciation.

## **3. Anxiety**

Charles Spielberger (1983) defines anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 161). Put in simple words, anxiety is a feeling of tension or stress as a reaction to certain situations. Research on anxiety distinguish between ‘trait anxiety’ (a permanent characteristic of one’s personality) and ‘state anxiety’ (temporary, experienced in certain situations). In connection with language learning, two types of anxiety have been suggested: (1) facilitative anxiety (motivating the learner to work harder) and (2) debilitating anxiety (inhibiting, leading the learner to avoid the learning task) (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 162). In the language classroom, teachers should assess what kind of anxiety their students are facing. Moreover, they should know that “both too much and too little anxiety may hinder the process of successful second language

learning” (Brown, 2007, p. 163). In other words, teachers should ensure that the classroom atmosphere and the instructional activities are organized in a way to help minimize learners’ high levels of anxiety.

#### **4. Inhibition**

Inhibition refers to a mental state in which a person’s behaviour is restrained. This aspect of personality is closely related to self-esteem. The more self-esteem a learner has, the less inhibited he is, and vice versa. In the context of language learning, inhibition is believed to discourage “risk-taking which is necessary for progress in language learning” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 61). In other words, inhibited learners, because of lack of confidence, tend to avoid using the language they are learning more freely. This situation prevents them from getting the kind of language practice they need in order to succeed. In the classroom, teachers can play a major role in helping their students overcome inhibition. This can be done through the creation of learning contexts in which learners feel free to take risks and practice the language they are learning.

#### **5. Risk-taking**

Risk-taking is “a personality factor which concerns the degree to which a person is willing to undertake actions that involve a significant degree of risk” (Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 2002, p. 460). In the context of language learning, risk-taking refers to the learner’s tendency to guess and communicate in spite of the mistakes that he or she may make. Risk-taking is closely related to anxiety and inhibition. Learners with low levels of anxiety and inhibition are usually risk-takers. Researchers suggest that risk-taking is an important feature of successful second language learning.

Therefore, teachers in the classroom should create an environment that “stimulate self-confidence, and encourage participants to experiment and to discover the target language, allowing themselves to take risks without feeling embarrassed” (Dufeu, 1994, as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 160).