IN THE NAME OF GOD

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

The Role of Personality and EQ in English Language Teachers' Flow Experiences

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A Thesis Submitted to the English Department of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the M.A. Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Mashhad, Iran

September 2010

To my beloved parents,

and,

To my dear Sister

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere gratitude is expressed to all who have helped me in the accomplishment of this thesis since they have had a strong influence on my task.

First of all, I would like to thank my dear supervisor, Dr.Azar Hosseini Fatemi for her invaluable advice, encouragement and supervision throughout the course of the present study. Her ideas were truly inspirational and I am indebted to her for her continuous optimism and timely remarks.

I also feel deeply grateful to my Dear advisor Dr. Reza Pishghadam for his continuous support and encouragement from the very early stages of this research. His classes were always a true source of inspiration for us all and I know I will benefit from his intellectual ideas for a long time to come. Without his wise comments and persistent help the accomplishment of this thesis would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank the dear readers of this thesis; Dr.Hashemi and Dr.Ghonsooli whose comments will help me improve its quality.

My thanks are also due to my dear colleagues at Mehrsajjad, Shokooh, Safir, and Marefat institutes who kindly agreed to undergo the rigid procedure of the following study and who took time to fill in all the forms. I am grateful to them for their support and encouragement throughout the experiment. I also wish to express appreciation to the management and staff of the above mentioned institutes for their cooperation and assistance.

I also owe many thanks to my professors and classmates at Ferdowsi University for their help and encouragement.

Last but not least, I feel grateful to my Dear parents and sister for their moral support, encouragement and love throughout my university studies. They were

always there when I needed them and were supportive of me despite my shortcomings and for this I will always remain thankful.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EI: Emotional Intelligence

EQ: Emotional Quotient

EQ-i: Emotional Quotient Inventory

MSCEIT: Mayer, Salovey, Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test

ESM: Experience Sampling Method

ESF: Experience Sampling Form

NEO-PI-R: NEO Personality Inventory Revised

FFM: Five Factor Model

ABSTRACT

The Role of personality and EQ in English language teachers' flow experiences

Alireza Sobhanmanesh

The following study had three main objectives; first, to analyze the quality of experience of teachers in flow; second, to investigate the relationship between EQ and flow, and the Big Five personality traits and flow; and third, to find out the best predictors of flow. To this end, a sample of 75 English Language Teachers in the city of Mashhad (Iran) volunteered to take part in this study and filled out Experience Sampling Forms (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989), NEO Five Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and Emotional Quotient Inventory (Bar-On, 1998). The autotelic were first distinguished from the non-autotelic and their quality of life was analyzed based on the information that their Experience Sampling Forms revealed. Then, correlations and t-tests were run to find out the relationship between EQ and Flow, and personality and flow. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis was also utilized to find the best predictor of flow. In the first part, two daily activities were found to be the most effective in triggering the flow experience, namely, reading and studying, and giving lessons. The results of the second part exhibited a significant relationship between Emotional Intelligence subscales and the time these teachers spent in flow. All personality factors except for agreeableness also correlated with flow. The best predictors for flow were found to be two of the Big Five Factors, conscientiousness and openness to experience. The significance of these results is discussed in the context of the autotelic personality and its relationship with the Big Five Factors.

Keywords: autotelic teachers, the flow experience, emotional intelligence, personality, the Big Five

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Among the theories that provide explanations for mastery related behavior, flow theory closely examines the subjective experiences of people at peak moments of the activity. In this respect, it has been reported that the most positive experiences of teachers in classrooms is receiving students' positive feedback which is itself comprised of student attention and involvement (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003). In addition to providing explanations for competent and autonomous behavior, flow theory aims at enhancing the quality of subjective experience of people during the course of their lives. The dynamic nature of flow provides the potential for growth and development since a person who has experienced flow, will indeed seek to get back to the flow state which will not be possible without a boost in the subjective level of challenges and skills (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh & Nakamura, 2005). It is this feature of flow that would account for language teachers' tendency to think back on their experiences in the classroom and to try to come up with innovative ways in order to maintain their students' engagement, this time even at a higher level.

Flow is defined as intense involvement in an activity, so much so that one tends to forget about all other distracting factors. One is so immersed in the activity that time often tends to pass quickly. Attention is fully invested, and one feels completely in control whilst receiving regular feedback from the environment (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

In relation to flow theory's connection with personality it could be stated that certain personalities spend more time in flow, use their attention effortlessly, and

ascribe greater importance even to the seemingly unimportant activities around them. These individuals undertake tasks for the intrinsic rewards they find in them, not for external benefits (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Being referred to as autotelic personality, it would be of interest to determine what personality traits characterize such individuals.

It has also been demonstrated that some individuals are endowed with greater capacities for identifying and regulating their feelings. Such individuals receive a higher score on EQ (Emotional Quotient) tests and are consequently considered to have a higher overall EQ. The point of interest here is to establish whether higher EQ individuals enter flow more easily or stay in it longer than others. In other words, the present study seeks to determine whether autotelic teachers have greater abilities for managing and regulating their emotions, and if this ability could be related to their experience of flow.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Previous research has established that autotelic personalities spend more time in flow (Hektner & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), are more intrinsically motivated by the activity they are undertaking and consequently have a low wish to be doing anything other than the activity (LeFevre,1988). It is suggested that they may have a predisposition for being in flow and that they might be equipped with certain meta-skills for staying in flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihayli, 2002). However, more research needs to be done to shed light on the nature of these meta-skills and illuminate more the personality of autotelic individuals. It needs to be further established what qualities these individuals possess that enable them to stay in flow longer than the others. It is also of added importance to find what psychological tendencies make them invest more attention in even seemingly unimportant activities and what makes them, unlike others, to welcome new challenges and put themselves in more challenging situations and relish every moment of it. It would be interesting

to find what personality traits characterize these people and whether these people are more emotionally intelligent than the others or not.

In the field of personality psychology much attention has been paid to differentiation of people on the basis of their psychological characteristics. The investigations of the Big Five, personality typologies and Mischel's (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) if- then profiles have all gone into drawing differences between people and establishing their personality structures. As Funder (2001, p. 211) puts it, "The attempts to identify the fundamental aspects of persons may not have achieved consensus, but no one can argue that the issue has been ignored."

On the other hand, more research needs to relate such theoretical matters to their real life significance (Funder, 2001; Brackett, Mayer & Warner, 2004). Only a few studies (e.g. Brackett, Mayer & Warner, 2004) have examined the behavioral consequences of personality traits. Furthermore, the predictive power of EQ needs to be studied more (Brackett, Mayer & Warner, 2004). Paunonen and Ashton (2001) assessed the significance of the broad Five Factors and a number of narrower facets to predict 40 behavioral criteria. The broad Factors were related to a number of behavioral consequences, for instance Conscientiousness to study habits and Extraversion to frequent dating. Brackett, Mayer and Warner (2004) studied the criterion validity of EQ and related a number of behavioral variables subsumed in a measure called "Life Space", to high and low EQ and predicted that, for example, Low EQ males would more frequently have problematic interpersonal experiences and engagement in disruptive behavior than higher EQ males. Since flow is also a real life phenomenon, It can be of benefit to establish to what extent the Big Five traits and EQ can predict being in flow.

A number of studies have focused on educational contexts (e.g. Rathunde, 2003; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider & Shernoff, 2004). Rathunde (2003) demonstrated how Montessori high school students had a higher quality of experience and intrinsic motivation in comparison to traditional high school students.

In his study, not only did autotelic contexts significantly affect the amount of time the students spent doing things actively, but actually transformed their social relationships, causing the students to view their social environment as more friendly. Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider and Shernoff (2004) did a study on 526 students and corroborated the above results. In their study, one third of the students' time was spent passively during lectures, lecture recitations, exams and video watching. They recommended that students take part in activities that both engage the students and provide them with an acceptable level of challenge.

As it can be seen above, the great majority of the studies in educational contexts have centered on the quality of experience of the students whereas the teachers have been mostly neglected. This is all happening at a time when the few studies that do focus on the teachers, demonstrate that the flow experience of the students and teachers are in fact related. Zhu (2001, cited in Basom & Frase, 2004) used the ESM (Experience Sampling Method) to measure the frequency of teacher flow experiences. His results indicated that the teachers' flow experiences predicted students' level of cognitive engagement. He found that the students were %25 more cognitively engaged when their teachers were in flow. Therefore, it would be plausible to assume that autotelic teachers play a great role in facilitating the flow experience of the students.

More importantly, there has been a paucity of research as far as the quality of experience of English language teachers is concerned. Although research concerning flow is burgeoning in the area of education, very few studies have been applied to the domain of second language learning and those few that have (e.g. Egbert, 2003), mainly measure task motivation and the realm of autotelic behaviour has mainly remained untapped.

1.3. Significance of the Study

As it was mentioned above, autotelic teachers could significantly enhance the quality of the educational system. Frequent flow experiences both inside and outside the classroom could help the teachers to develop professionally, to increase their teaching knowledge as well as their content knowledge, and to develop innovative ways in order to continuously engage their students. The dynamic nature of flow makes the teachers reflect on their experiences in the classroom and the feelings of gratification causes the teachers to increasingly improve their skills in order to experience flow once more. In a study on teachers' optimal experiences, Delle Fave and Massimini (2003) reported that the most positive experiences the teachers had was receiving positive feedback from the students which was comprised of the students' attention and involvement. On the other hand, the most negative was mainly considered to be getting negative or no feedback from the students. It is in fact the enjoyment derived from the abovementioned attention and involvement that compels autotelic teachers to experience it again.

It would generally be intriguing to learn more about the autotelic teachers' personality characteristics and their EQ levels. The question is whether their personality traits distinguish them from non-autotelic teachers. As it was mentioned before, Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) believed that they are equipped with certain competencies that enable them to be in flow more than the others. The results of their personality tests should therefore confirm the differences. The second point of interest is determining whether they have extra capacities for identifying and regulating their feelings and emotions. Effective teachers are expected to have distinct abilities for managing their own emotions as well as the students' emotions and consequently establish a positive interpersonal relationship with them (Mortiboys, 2005). This study will also determine whether autotelic teachers are more emotionally intelligent than their non autotelic colleagues.

Such information could be of great value in the event of recruiting teachers. They are evidently more appealing options and the results that this study yields might facilitate the process of identification of such teachers for language institutes and academic centers. These institutes could enroll more autotelic individuals with specified personality characteristics and high levels of emotional intelligence in their Teacher Training courses and in time provide their systems with senses of efficiency, dynamism and professionalism.

The following study will also take an additional look into autotelic teachers' lives. According to to Delle Fave and Massimini (2003) reading, preparing for lessons and leisure are other sources of flow. Autotelic teachers enjoy designing original and innovative material, making creative lesson plans for their classrooms, and having structured leisure activities that are characterized by goal orientation and task achievement. Their life is marked by accepting new challenges and they are in search of self-actualization. This information will also be tested on the Iranian language teachers through the use of ESM questionnaires. It will be informative to see how Iranian autotelic teachers structure their lives.

The number of studies investigating flow in Asian countries has been quite limited (Asakawa, 2004), and this one could shed light on the behavior of Iranian autotelic personalities and make the process of comparing Iranian autotelic behavioral patterns with Western autotelic patterns possible.

Moreover, it is hoped that this study paves the way for more research on the experience of flow in the domain of second language learning. Research on the flow experiences of language learners and teachers, and on autotelic behaviour, could help enhance our understanding of these topics in this field and improve the quality of second language education.

1.4. Purpose of the Study

The present study seeks to investigate the quality of experience of English language teachers in flow and to find a relationship between their level of autotelism and the Big Five Personality traits listed in the NEO-PI-R as well as with EQ.

1.4.1. Research Questions

Q1: What is the quality of experience of English language teachers teaching in a number of language institutes in Mashhad?

Q2: Is there a significant relationship between English language teachers' level of autotelism and their level of EQ?

Q3: Is there a significant relationship between English language teachers' level of autotelism and their Big Five personality traits?

Q4: Is there a significant difference between the means of high and low flow groups with regard to their EQ scores?

Q5: Is there a significant difference between the means of high and low flow groups with regard to their personality traits?

Q6: What is the best predictor of flow as far as the Big Five personality traits and EQ variables are concerned?

1.4.2. Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were proposed based on the research questions above.

$H_0$1: There is no significant relationship between EQ and Flow.