Gender and personality differences and unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language

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To my parents for their never ending love and support

And

To the memory of the late Dr. Mirhasani

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Abstract

Unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language (UTC) which refers to the tendency to avoid oral communication may be caused by situational variables. However, personality traits of individuals may also be a determining factor in UTC. This study has focused on the relationship between personality traits and students' UTC. Also, the role of gender in the levels of UTC has been investigated. In so doing, two questionnaires of NEO Five Factor Model (NEO-FFM) of personality and UTC scale for unwillingness to communicate were administered to 250 participants. Step-wise multiple regression and t-test were used to analyze the predictive power of the Big Five personality factors with respect to UTC and to find the difference between males and females in this regard. The results showed that from the five factors of personality, extraversion was the best predictor of UTC. The second and third predictive variables were neuroticism and conscientiousness. While extraversion and conscientiousness had a negative relationship with UTC, neuroticism had a positive correlation. Also, no significant difference between the two groups of males and females was observed. The results of the study were discussed by bringing evidence from the literature. Implications of study were also elaborated upon.

Key words: Unwillingness to communicate, Personality, Gender

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Chapter One
Introduction

1.1. Introduction

With an increasing emphasis on authentic communication in L2 learning and instruction, willingness to communicate on the part of learners is deemed to have multiple advantages such as an increase of exposure and practice in authentic L2 communication, and development of learner autonomy (MacIntyre et al., 2001; Kang, 2005).

The importance of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) arises from the research of interaction-driven L2 development. Researchers in this area have contended that language learning is facilitated through meaningful interactions. It is assumed that more interaction leads to more language development and learning (Mackey & Gass, 2006).

Despite the importance of WTC, inevitably, there are always many students who, due to a plethora of reasons, are unwilling to communicate (UTC) in a second language. This reluctance to communicate "stems from a variety of causes, such as apprehension, low self-esteem, lack of communicative competence, anomie, alienation, and introversion" (Liu & Jackson, 2008, p.71).

One of the most recent studies done in the area of willingness to communicate is that of Liu and Jackson (2008). This study led to a highly validated scale for measuring unwillingness to communicate (UTC) in a foreign language. The unwillingness to communicate scale (UTS), as developed by Liu and Jackson (2008), has been adapted from earlier versions of unwillingness to communicate scale (UTCS; Burgoon, 1976), and the willingness to communicate scale (WTCS; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987) and it has got two main components: Approach avoidance, and reward.

In another line of research, a number of researchers in SLA have attempted to explain what factors can affect individual differences in the success of SLA. Such researchers have identified many affective variables such as personality, attitude, motivation, self-esteem, self-confidence, perceived competence, and language anxiety as influencing individual differences in SLA (Ellis, 1994; Barraclough, Christophel, & McCroskey, 1998; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Noels & Clement, 1996; Noels et al., 2000; Noels, Pon, & Clement, 1996).

Among these variables personality difference has attracted much attention during the last years (e.g. Griffiths, 1991b; Goldberg, 1993). Personality has been defined as "the relatively enduring style of thinking, feeling, and acting that characterize an individual" (Costa, McCrae, and Kay, 1995, p. 124). The literature on willingness to communicate (WTC) has referred to personality as a quite relevant factor (e.g. McCroskey & Baer, 1885; MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre, Babin, & Cl´ement, 1999; MacIntyre, 2007).

Although some debates still exist regarding the construct validity, the correct number, appropriate level of measurement and precise nature of the personality factors (e.g. Schmitt and Ryan, 1993; Becker, 1998; Cheung et al, 2001; Blackburn et al. 2004 among others), the five-factor model (FFM) of personality traits, developed by Costa and McRae (1992), has established itself as the predominant model of personality trait structure (e.g. Barrick & Mount, 1993; Digman, 1990; McRae, 2002; McCrae et al., 2004; Ones et al., 2007; Yoon, Schmidt, & Ilies, 2002).

The personality labels proposed by Costa and McRae (1992) in their inventory include: neuroticism (emotional instability), extraversion (sociability and energy level), openness to experience (intellectual curiosity and aesthetic sensitivity level), agreeableness (level of interpersonal trends towards coming close to or rejecting others), and conscientiousness (level of self-control and self-determination) (Salgado, 1997).

Although the studies which have considered personality as a determining factor in students' willingness to communicate in the second language are not scant, they have focused mainly on the construct of extraversion/introversion (e.g., Bush, 1982; Griffiths, 1991b; Kiany, 1998; Strong, 1983; see Ellis, 1994 on the importance of extraversion/introversion) not on the totality of individuals' personality structure.

The need for a comprehensive study on the relationship between personality traits and students' UTC has been emphasized by Liu and Jackson (2008) as well. Another dimension which needs further scrutiny in the study of unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language is the role of gender. Although there have been a few studies which have addressed this question (e.g. Baker & MacIntyre, 2000, MacIntyre et al., 2002;

MacIntyre et al., 2003b), their findings have been limited to a specific context, and hence not generalizable to other contexts.

Having considered the lack of a comprehensive research, the researcher in this study tries to conduct a more thorough analysis on the role of Big Five personality factors in predisposing the students for different patterns of unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language. The role of gender on students' unwillingness to communicate is another motivating issue for this study.

1.2. Statement of the problem and significance of the study

While willingness to communicate has been reported to be relevant to personality traits of individuals (e.g., MacIntyre, 2007; MacIntyre et al., 1998), surprisingly few studies in the literature have investigated the relationship between different personality types and the willingness to communicate in the second language.

In fact, there has not been a comprehensive study to show how different types of personality characteristics can be related to the students' zeal or reluctance to communicate in the second language. More precisely no study has so far investigated which of the Big Five personality traits is a better predictor of unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language.

Considering the fact that achieving communicative competence is the ultimate goal of many language education programs, it is quite legitimate to investigate students' personality traits to see if their personality characteristics affect their general orientation towards communicating in another language. If this question is answered, language teachers can better decide how to help those reticent students who seem to be permanently silent.

Also, it is not yet clear whether there is a significant difference between males and females with respect to their overall unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language. Thus the role of gender on willingness to communicate in a foreign language needs further scrutiny.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: the first purpose is to examine if Big Five personality factors significantly predict students' unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language. The second purpose is to examine whether there is any difference between male and female students and their unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language.

1.3. Research questions and hypotheses

The study has been motivated by the following research questions:

1) Is there any relationship between Five Factor Model (FFM) personality variables and unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language?

Null hypotheses (N1): There is no significant relationship between Five Factor Model (FFM) personality variables and unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language.

2) Is there any difference between male and female students in their unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language?

Null hypotheses (N2): There is no significant difference between male and female students in their unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language.

1.4. Definition of the key terms

***Personality*:** Personality has been defined as "the relatively enduring style of thinking, feeling, and acting that characterize an individual" (Costa, McCrae, Kay, 1995, p. 124). In this study, personality is operationally defined as personal characteristics according to the "Big Five" traits: neuroticism (emotional stability), extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness (Coasta, McCrae, 1992).

***Big Five or Five Factor Model (FFM)*:** Five factor model is a comprehensive representation of the structure of personality traits. According to the FFM, personality traits can be adequately described in terms of five bipolar, broad factors or dimensions (Costa & McCrae, 1988; 1992; Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993; Hogan, Hogan, &

Roberts, 1996). Each of these five basic dimensions is defined by groups of related personality traits. The five factors, and their basic definitions, as measured by the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) are as follows:

***Neuroticism (or Emotional Stability)*:** "Neuroticism concerns the degree to which the individual is insecure, anxious, depressed, and emotional versus calm, self-confident, and cool" (Salgado, 1997, p. 30).

Extroversion: "Extroversion concerns the extent to which individuals are gregarious, assertive, and sociable versus reserved, timid, and quiet" (Salgado, 1997, p. 30).

Openness to Experience: "Openness to experience defines individuals who are creative, curious, and cultured versus practical with narrow interests" (Salgado, 1997, p. 30).

***Agreeableness*:** "Agreeableness concerns the degree to which individuals are cooperative, warm, and agreeable versus cold, disagreeable, and antagonistic" (Salgado, 1997, p. 30).

Conscientiousness: "Conscientiousness measures the extent to which individuals are hardworking, organized, dependable, and persevering versus lazy, disorganized, and unreliable" (Salgado, 1997, p. 30).

***Willingness to communicate (WTC)*:** Willingness to communicate in an L2 is defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (MacIntyre, et al., 1998, p.547).

***Unwillingness to communicate*:** According to Burgoon (1976), "unwillingness to communicate is simply the tendency to avoid oral communication; or the predisposition that individuals with communication reticence exhibit" (p.62).

1.5. Limitations and delimitations

In interpreting the findings of the current study some limitations must be taken into account:

1. Due to some limitations for the researcher random sampling techniques could not be used. Instead convenient sampling which was more practical was utilized.
2. There was not a balance between male and female participants in the sample. The reason was that in all classes there were comparably much more male students than female ones. Because of this problem only 50 male students participated in the study.
3. There were 80 questions in self report questionnaires hence it must have been boring for the participants. Therefore, some of the participants might not have been attentive enough to the last questions which were testing student's unwillingness to communicate.
4. The findings can be generalized only to students majoring in English at university level not anyone learning a foreign or second language.

Chapter Two
Review of Literature

2.1. Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an account of the relevant literature on the main variables of the study, namely personality and (un)willingness to communicate in the foreign language. In so doing, first the literature on personality has been elaborated on drawing upon the most important studies done in the realm of personality. Then, the studies on willingness to communicate and unwillingness to communicate in a foreign language have been explained in separate sections. Also, some references have been made to studies on the relationship between gender and both personality and unwillingness to communicate. Finally, a summary of the related literature is presented at the end of the chapter.

2.2. Personality

In this section, the related literature on personality structure, early developments in personality measurement, the trait theory of personality measurement, lexical hypothesis, the evolution of Big Five as one of the most valid models of personality, cross-cultural studies of Big Five, studies on Big Five and other relevant variables, and gender differences in Big Five are explained in detail.

2.2.1. Personality structure

Personality is a complicated concept that has had several distinct meanings over the course of history. Within psychology, however, it refers to "individual differences in psychological dispositions: that is enduring ways in which people differ from one another in their typical ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling" (Halsam, 2007, p.15). Costa, McCrae, and Kay (1995) have defined personality as "the relatively enduring style of thinking, feeling, and acting that characterize an individual" (p.124).

Many psychologists think that the best unit for describing personalities is the trait, and "the structure of personality is the organization of traits" (Halsam, 2007, p.18) According to McCrae & Costa (1997) personality structure is typically summarized in terms of a relatively small number of factors, and a factor is a form of statistical evidence that a trait exists. In fact, one of the basic assumptions of the studies on personality is that personality structure involves the investigation of the covariation among traits.

"Traits seem to be vital for the study of personality because any science involves detecting and explaining some consistent patterns" (Halsam, 2007, p.18). "Traits may change over time, but they shouldn't change rapidly or chaotically; they should tend to be stable attributes of the person" (Halsam, 2007, p.18). In general, the stronger the trait is in a person, the more likely that person is to manifest behavior related to that trait. Thus, the trait is more likely to be observed (Johnson, 1997; McCrae & Costa, 1997).

Although still there are some arguments against the concept of trait claiming instead for situationally-specific patterns of behavior (e.g. Kenrick & Funder, 1998), many scholars (e.g. Hogan, Hogan, & Roberts, 1996; Johnson, 1997) justify the trait concept to imply consistent reaction to similar situations over time, not consistent reactions across different situations. According to Carducci (1998) "concern with the consistency of behavior are at the heart of some of the most controversial debates in personality psychology. The degree of behavioral consistency is influenced by the extent to which situational factors, as well as one's personality, determine thoughts, feeling, and behavior" (p.5)

2.2.2. Early developments in personality measurement

Personality psychology in the late 19th century has tried to follow hard sciences by devoting a huge amount of attention to psychometric measurement (Winter & Barenbaum, 1999). According to Winter and Barenbaum (1999) the writings of British scientist and statistician Sir Francis Galton (1884) was among the first attempts in the modern emphasis on precision and measurement. Galton (1884) states that "the character which shapes our conduct is a definite and durable 'something' and therefore … it is reasonable to attempt to measure it" (p.179 cited in Winter & Barenbaum, 1999).

Another figure who exerted a tremendous influence on the early studies in measurement of individual differences was Charles Spearman (Cattell, 1965, cited in Hill, 2003). Spearman collected a large number of measurements of mental ability and correlated them in every possible way, displaying the results in a correlation matrix to be used as the input data in the factor analysis. Spearman observed the principle of positive manifold which states that all tests of ability show positive relations with one another, and it can therefore be assumed that they all measure one common factor (Jensen, 1986, cited in Hill, 2003).

Therefore, the earliest studies related to personality had focused on individual differences through *quantitative research techniques* (Hill, 2003). According to Grimm and Yarnold (1995, cited in Hill, 2003), the works of Francis Galton, Charles Spearman and also Karl Pearson altogether led to the concept of the statistical correlation, and these procedures became associated with the "individual differences" branch of psychology.

Later, from these works, factor analysis was used in the field of personality to identify a small number of factors to represent the basic dimension of personality. These factors have come to the basis of personality structure by summarizing and clarifying the pattern of covariation among personality traits. Based on this technique a number of psychologists turned to factor analysis as a means to arrive at a systematic classification of personality (Hill, 2003).

2.2.3. The trait theory of personality measurement

In the early history of personality measurement three other figures have also been quite influential in promoting the trait theory: Gordon W. Allport, Hans J. Eysenck, and Raymond B. Cattell. However, recent development in personality theory mostly owes the efforts of two figures: Paul Costa and Robert McCrae. In this section the ideas of the first three figures are presented. In the following sections the recent developments which led to Big Five personality factors are explained.