

## **THE EFFECT OF DIFFERENT PERSONALITY TRAITS ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY LEARNING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A person with higher social abilities can achieve more success and happiness in social interactions. Personality traits are known as one feature of interpersonal communication which demonstrates individuals' ability to behave in society. In educational setting, learners can take the advantages of positive personality traits to achieve success in their course of study. The present study investigated the impact of Iranian EFL learners' personality behavior on their vocabulary knowledge. The participants' ( $n=60$ ) level of language proficiency was determined based on their performance on Oxford Placement Test (OPT). A syllabus-based test of vocabulary was provided for learners to measure their vocabulary knowledge. The reliability of the test was checked through a pilot study. The participants also filled an 80-item self-perception questionnaire developed by Townend (1991). Based on learners' performance on questionnaire, they were divided into four main groups of personality traits (i.e., assertiveness, aggressiveness, submissiveness and passiveness). The results of one-way ANOVA indicated that personality behavior groups were significantly different from each other regarding their performance on vocabulary knowledge test. It was also reported that assertive learners outperformed on vocabulary knowledge test. The results of this study may help EFL learners to develop their positive personality skills and achieve success in language learning.

**Keywords:** *Individual Differences, Interpersonal Communication, Personality Traits, Vocabulary Knowledge*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Interaction is one of the basic needs of human for living in a social community. Communication in any form is known as the most important channel for social interaction that happens all the time. Interpersonal communication is one form of communication process that does not take place all the time, but it emerges in collective relations such as discussions, business, classroom, etc. (Wood, 2010). Different people react differently to similar actions, events or situation in their social relations (Allport, 1937, cited in Mischel, 1986). They employ different approaches toward interaction to people, answering the questions and overcoming the problems and challenges. When two people use different kinds of communication tools and skills to convey meaning, the process of interpersonal communication happens. Interpersonal communication is a goal-driven interaction between at least two people that typically occurs in a face-to-face environment (Long & Vaughan, 2012). This matter is significant in language learning since the ultimate purpose of learning a language is communication. Based on the difference in personality nature of individuals, they act differently in different communicative situations. Therefore, interpersonal communication can be studied as a subject in the area of individual differences.

The issue of individual differences is one of the potential reasons for learners' different behaviors in language learning context. Individual differences, as Crozier (1997) stated, may lead to academic success or failure in foreign or second language learning. Individual differences provide evidence to predict scores on tests of academic achievement. Crozier (1997) also suggested that personality behaviors are as important as intelligence in educational achievement. Personality is a developing system of those distinctive emotional, cognitive, and spiritual attributes that manifest themselves in the individual's characteristic behavior at any point in the life course (McMartin, 1995).

Second language researchers have long been aware that personality factors are significant in determining a theory of second language learning. Affectivity is a personality trait within human that may contribute

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to success or failure in learning. Assertiveness as a kind of personality factor with great influence on the quality of people's lives may be a determining factor in language learning context. Knowledge of various personality traits, affective factors and their influences on language learning are crucial to every language teacher or practitioner (Brown, 2000). Crozier (1997) mentioned some of the important personality traits with regard to the individual differences among learners as anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, shyness, aggressiveness, etc. Consequently, learners' success or failure is partly due to factors such as aptitude, personality, the use of learning strategies, cognitive style and motivation.

Undoubtedly, knowledge of second language vocabulary plays significant role in language learning (Zimmerman, 1997; De Bot *et al.*, 1997). The role that vocabulary knowledge plays in second and foreign language acquisition was neglected for a long time. However, vocabulary is currently receiving increased emphasis in the language teaching curriculum. This is due to several reasons, such as the influence of comprehension-based approaches to language development, the research efforts of applied linguists, and the exciting possibilities opened up by the development of computer-based language corpora (Nunan, 1999). Research on second language vocabulary acquisition as a separate area of study emerged in 1980s and subsequently it has been developed by increasing number of investigations in the recent decades. The large and rich body of studies has been conducted on different aspects of vocabulary such as the role of frequency of exposure in vocabulary enhancement, the role of input, intake and output on retention of word meanings, strategies of vocabulary learning, and vocabulary acquisition through reading and the effect of computer instruction on reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

Social skills play a significant role in individuals' lives. A person with higher social abilities can achieve more success and happiness in his/her social interactions. This issue is highlighted when it is considered in teaching and learning environment. The inability of some English Foreign Language learners in interpersonal communication and oral argumentation may be partly due to lack of assertiveness. Apparently communication and expressing ideas are among the most important components of language learning.

### **Review of the Literature**

Generally, people respond differently to the same situation. People employ different approaches toward communicating with others, responding to questions and solving the problems they face. People also behave differently in learning context; each of them practices a special kind of learning style (Brown, 2000). For instance, some people learn better with pictures and visual materials, some learn better with repetition and some others get better results when learn through participation.

It has been observed that some students perform better and obtain better results in educational settings; generally they are more successful than some others. Individual differences may account for differences in learners' level of attainment and the rate at which they learn. The fact that people learn in different ways and each individual needs a particular kind of learning and teaching strategy raises our awareness of individual differences. Teachers and educators need to identify and understand students' individual differences in order to provide successful and effective instruction.

These issues raised the interest of different scholars to investigate how individual differences affect the language learning process. Allport (1937, as cited in Mischel, 1986) is among the first people who spoke about the importance of individual differences. Mischel (1986) quoted from Allport (1937) that no two people respond identically to the same event. Each person's behavior is determined by a special trait structure. He believed that traits never occur in any two people in exactly the same way: They operate in unique ways in each person. According to Mischel (1986), Allport claimed that since any trait is unique in a person rather than common among many people, it cannot be studied by making comparisons among people. Consequently, Allport provoked the thorough study of individuals through intensive and long-term case studies. However, he also believed that due to shared experiences and common cultural effects, most people tend to develop some roughly common kinds of traits and they can be compared on these common dispositions. Mischel (1986) stated individuals often differ in their responses and reactions to the same psychological stimulus. That is, when different people are encountered with the same event – the social encounter, the same test question, the same frightening experience – each of them reacts in a somewhat different way (Mischel, 1986).

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A common difference between individuals is the difference between males and females which act as a variable in a very large number of scientific studies. Just to mention one among all, Ottenbreit (2003) investigated how individual differences measurement of gender role predicted attributions to discrimination and self-concept. The study was conducted to determine how and when women perceive subtle forms of discrimination, and how these perceptions then influence the self-concept. The results of study revealed that the perception of traditional roles predicted a decrease in self-concept for those with less traditional attitudes, but predicted a slight, but non-significant increase in self-concept for those with more traditional attitudes.

The speed with which an individual performs mental operations was the subject of a number of studies as a factor affecting the individual performance. The scholars investigated several models that have been proposed to explain the determinants speed of processing. Cacciari *et al.*, (2007) investigated learners' comprehension of idioms with an early versus late point of idiom identification. They also assessed whether individual differences in speed of processing significantly affected idiom meaning activation. The results of study revealed that, in both fast and slow participants the activation of ambiguous idioms meaning at the beginning facilitated early and late identification of idioms. The two groups differed in the amount of time required for activating the idiomatic meaning.

Accordingly, individual differences can be among the predictive factors of educational success particularly in language learning. Dörnyei and Skehan (2005) considered learners' differences such as aptitude, styles and strategies as a sub-area of second language acquisition. They also quoted from Oxford (1990) and Wenden (1991) that language learning strategies reflect learner's active contribution to enhancing the effectiveness of his or her learning. Individual differences include several factors such as age, gender, aptitude, motivation, personality, styles, etc.

From a general perspective, personality is a way of life in such a way it determines one's view of life. A number of definitions have been proposed for personality but no single meaning is accepted universally. The word personality is derived from *persona*, which has its origin in Latin, referring to the actors' mask and to a character in dramatic performance. Oxford Dictionary (2008) defined personality as 1- the various aspects of a person's character that combine to make him different from other people; 2- the qualities of a person's character that make him interesting and attractive.

Personality is one of the developing characteristics of humans. In other words, as the time goes on personality develops. Two classic definitions are often used for personality. According to Allport (1961, cited in Mischel, 1983) personality is a psychophysical system of the person's dynamic organization that creates the person's characteristic patterns of behavior, thoughts and feelings. Here the emphasis is on the patterns of behavior within individuals. Child (1968, as cited in Houston, 2005) provided another definition of personality as the stable and internal factors which make person's behavior consistent from one time to another and different from the behavior other people would manifest in comparable situations. In this definition, the consistency of behavior within individuals and difference of behavior between individuals are emphasized.

Although the history of personality traits - the distinguishing characteristic of one's personal nature - refers to Aristotle age, Allport (1937, as cited in Matthews, *et al.*, 2003) provided a comprehensive theory to describe the personality traits. In his view, traits are organized mental structures which vary from one person to another and initiate and guide the behavior. Personality has been conceptualized from a variety of theoretical perspectives, and at various levels of abstraction (John *et al.*, 1991; McAdams, 1995, as cited in John & Srivastava, 1999). Each of these levels has made unique contributions to our understanding of individual differences in behavior and experience. One of these levels is '*personality traits*' (John & Srivastava, 1999).

Researchers, as well as practitioners in the field of personality assessment, have been encountered with a confusing array of personality scales with little guidance and no overall rationale at hand on how to categorize them (John & Srivastava, 1999).

The issue of classifying and naming things is a main characteristic of most sciences in their early efforts to find order. This effort is known as the *trait approach* in psychology. This approach seeks to label

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measure and classify people with the trait in terms of everyday languages in order to compare their psychological attributes (Mischel, 1986). Recent theories of personality look at traits as continuous rather than discrete attributes. In other words, although there are categories of traits to compare people, they are used as a continuum representing how high or low each individual is on any particular dimension. They believe that all people potentially have each of the traits, but the extent to which they realize them in actual behavior would vary among people. For example, it could not be possible to place people into two different groups of 'sociable' versus 'unsociable'. Instead, they are identified according to the amount of sociability each person exhibits in his/her performance. Personality theorists considered the frequency of traits amounts as a normal distribution polygon, so some people will be very high in sociability and others very low, but most people will be somewhere in the middle (Houston, 2005). Trait is a temporally stable, cross-situational individual difference.

Michel (1986) defined 'trait' as consistent differences between the behavior or characteristics of two or more people. He quoted from Guilford (1959) that a trait is any distinguishable, relatively enduring way in which one individual varies from another (Michel, 1986). According to Mischel *ibid*, traits are continuous dimensions. On such dimensions differences among individuals are arranged in terms of the degree of the quality the person has.

Traits have been of great interest to personality psychologists because they explain much of what defines the individual person. Traits according to McCrae and Costa (1999) point to more-or-less consistent and recurrent patterns of acting and reacting that simultaneously characterize individuals and differentiate them from others; and they allow the discovery of empirical generalizations about how others with similar traits are likely to act and react.

Buss (1996) mentioned that personality traits are relevant to social adaptation. McCrae and Costa (1999) argued that people with different personality traits go through the task of survival and reproduction in different ways. For example, in order to keep their mates, extraverts show off, agreeable men express affection, and men low in consciousness try to make their mates jealous. Personality traits affect their ability to make strategic alliances and to compete with others for resources.

Traditional approaches to language teaching did not pay attention to vocabulary instruction. Allen (1983) enumerated two reasons for their neglect. First, learners thought that all they needed to know is the large number of word lists along their meanings and second, some specialists believed that the meanings of words could not be taught perfectly, so it is better not to teach them. Thus, for the decades grammar was thought as the most important prerequisite for language learning.

The significance for the role of vocabulary instruction stemmed from the findings related to vocabulary knowledge and its relationship with language skills. Certainly, without profound knowledge of vocabulary, learner's performance on other language skills will be declined. According to Meara and Fitzpatrick (2000), vocabulary knowledge is playing an important role when learners perform several linguistic activities. They further state that when second language learners read, write, speak, and listen, it is essential to have enough vocabulary knowledge to understand and to be understood.

Regarding the importance of vocabulary knowledge in academic situations, Donley and Reppen (2001) state that vocabulary is a particularly crucial component of language development, because students will be unable to function in academic courses if they lack the vocabulary and related study skills to understand lectures, class discussions, and course texts. Furthermore, in the study of Meara and Fitzpatrick (2000), it has been empirically supported that there is a high correlation between the level of vocabulary knowledge and reading ability.

By the same token, words play an indispensable role in human communication. Mattheoudakis (2008) notes that ignorance of vocabulary can hinder communication more seriously than ignorance of grammar and/or phonology, and that effective communication in L2 is primarily based on learners' knowledge of the semantic and pragmatic features of the language. Now, language teachers generally accept importance of vocabulary, and are investigating the effective ways to enhance learners' vocabulary knowledge.

Gass (1999) confirms the significance of word knowledge and states that "knowing a lexical item means knowing a number of things — most often, meaning. In fact, this is what is commonly intended when one

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is talking about or measuring vocabulary knowledge. Following the same idea, Richards and Renandya (2002) say vocabulary is the core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often achieve less than their potential. Read (2004) also believes that second language learners are typically conscious of the fact that limitations in their vocabulary knowledge affects their ability to communicate effectively in the target language. This gives vocabulary study a salience for learners that may be lacking in the acquisition of other features of the language system.

Some researchers state that contextual information does not necessarily guarantee vocabulary learning. The words to be learned may be presented in isolation (decontextualized word lists) or in context (Groot, 2000). Groot suggests that presentation in word lists seems a good shortcut because it takes less time than contextual presentation and yields excellent short-term results, but for long-term retention, this approach is often disappointing, and contextual presentation seems advisable. The experimental results suggest that an approach combining the two methods is most suitable.

All in all, the number of vocabulary learning studies that focused on interpersonal features of communication is very limited. The above-mentioned theoretical and empirical backgrounds of the main concepts in this study provided helpful insights in order to conduct a study to address the objectives of this study.

#### **The Research Questions**

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions are proposed:

1. Do different features of personality traits have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning?
2. Is there any significant difference among EFL learners' personality traits and their vocabulary knowledge?

#### **The Research Hypotheses**

Based on the above research questions the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H<sub>01</sub>. Different features of personality traits do not have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning.  
H<sub>02</sub>. There is not any significant difference among EFL learners' personality traits and their vocabulary knowledge.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Participants**

A sample of 60 (out of 64) male and female Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students were selected in order to participate in this study, based on their performance on English language proficiency test, i.e., Oxford Placement Test (Edwards, 2007). The test had criteria to distinguish learners' level of language proficiency. The intended level of language proficiency for the participants of the study was intermediate level. Four learners were considered to be outliers and were thus excluded from the study. They were all native speakers of Persian. Their level of education varied from high school to university. Their intention for learning English was to improve their proficiency in English skills. They studied English at English language institutes located in the city of Kangan, Bushehr, Iran. Their age range was between 18 to 25 years old. The participants of the study received vocabulary instruction along with other language components in their general English course.

Prior to the main study, a pilot study was performed to determine the reliability of vocabulary test. It was used to measure the vocabulary knowledge of the participants. A group of 20 intermediate EFL learners with almost similar age, sex, and proficiency level was selected to take part in the pilot study. To avoid transferring the content of research from the participants of the pilot study to those who took part in the main study, the participants were selected from two different language institutes. The test was administered to the learners and the results of item analysis reported one item with item facility of 85 percent and two items with item facility of 25 and 20 percent. Thus, these three items were modified and the final version of the test was prepared to be implemented in the main study. Also, the results of Cronbach's reliability analysis ( $r = 0.82$ ) showed a satisfactory level of test reliability.

The first step of this study was the administration of language proficiency test. The participants will participate in a language proficiency test in order to determine their level of language proficiency. Then,

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the homogenous sample of the participants was given the personality traits questionnaire. After a brief explanation about the questionnaire and providing the necessary instruction for answering the questionnaire items, the participants were asked to read and answer the questionnaire. At the end of the study all participants took vocabulary test in order to test their vocabulary knowledge.

**Materials**

The materials employed in this study included a standard language proficiency test, a personality trait questionnaire and an English vocabulary knowledge test. In order to determine the level of participants, a standard language proficiency test namely, Oxford Placement Test (Edwards, 2007) was used in this study. The test contained 50 multiple choice questions assessing students' knowledge of key grammar and vocabulary from elementary to intermediate levels. Personality traits questionnaire was used as a key instrument of researcher to run this study. This questionnaire was introduced by Townend (1991) and its purpose was to identify the students' thoughts, ideas and emotions and those of others. Townend (1991) classifies people into two groups of assertive and non-assertive. Non-assertive people are also grouped as aggressive, submissive and passive. The questionnaire was composed of 80 items with 'yes' and 'no' options for respondents stating their agreement or disagreement. The questionnaire included four sub-scales of assertive, aggressive, submissive, and passive. Each of these sub-scales was consisted of 20 questions that were shuffled in the questionnaire items. After reading each item, the testee needs to examine the particular questioned behavior introspectively; if the questioned attribute is present in his behavior with high degree of frequency he should answer "yes", otherwise he should choose "no". Actually the answer sheet displays a binary choice. The person version of the questionnaire was used in this study. In order to measure the learners' knowledge of vocabulary, they were required to take a vocabulary knowledge test. This test was extracted from different parts of the vocabulary course book that was used for instruction, i.e., Oxford Word Skills (Gairns & Redman, 2008). The test was composed of 40 multiple-choice items. In order to determine the reliability of the tests and ensure the compatibility of the test to the learners' level of vocabulary knowledge, this test was pilot studied on the learners ( $n = 20$ ) who were similar to the learners of the main study in terms of age, sex, and proficiency level.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Prior to the main study, a pilot study was performed on 20 EFL learners of the same age and proficiency level in order to check the internal consistency or reliability of the researcher-made vocabulary knowledge test. Descriptive statistics of the pilot test on vocabulary knowledge test, such as mean, standard deviation (SD), standard error of measurement (SEM) and the item facility (IF) index of the test items are provided in Table 1. The items with facility index above 0.63 were too easy and below 0.33 were too difficult. Three items (two difficult and one easy) were revised.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the pilot study on vocabulary knowledge test**

	Mean	SD	SEM	IF < 0.33	0.33 ≤ IF ≤ 0.63	IF > 0.63
Pretest and Posttest	13.8	6.71	3.44	2	27	1

In order to test the reliability of the tests, Cronbach's alpha analysis was performed, the results ( $r = 0.82$ ), as is shown in Table 2, indicated that the vocabulary knowledge test had a satisfactory level of reliability.

**Table 2: Reliability Statistics of the vocabulary knowledge test**

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Pretest and Posttest	.82	40

All participants of the main study ( $n = 64$ ) took part in a proficiency test called Oxford Placement Test (Solutions). The purpose of the proficiency test was to manifest the learner's homogeneity or to show whether the learners' knowledge of English is at the same level.

According to Oxford Placement Test (Solutions) (2007), the intermediate learners are those who attain 31 and above (out of 50) on grammar and vocabulary section and 8 and above (out of 10) on reading. The

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total score should not be less than 39. As Table 4.3 shows, four participants could not attain the intended scores for intermediate level of language proficiency; therefore, they were excluded from the sample.

In order to ensure the homogeneity of the participants, the participants were randomly assigned to two groups and their scores were compared by a t-test analysis. The results, as shown in Table 3, showed that there is not any significant difference ( $t_{2,58}=.75, p>.01$ ) among selected participants for intermediate level.

**Table 3: Independent samples test of scores on language proficiency test**

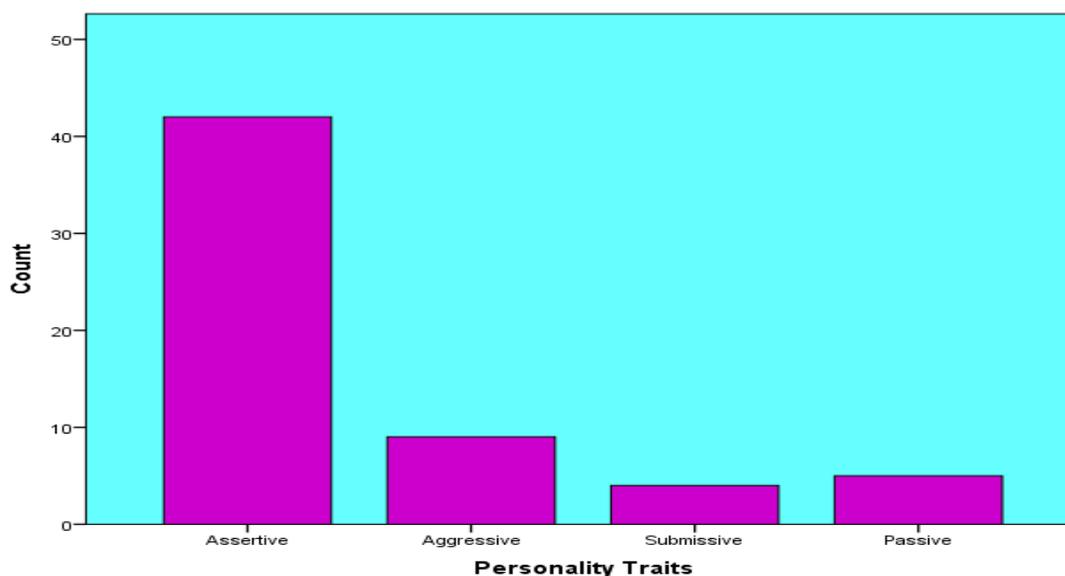
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
OPT Equal variances assumed	1.583	.213	.750	58	.456	.62054	.82704	-1.034	2.276

The personality questionnaire was administered on participants. The descriptive statistics of this administration appears below in Table 4. The mean for assertiveness is 12.40 that is the highest among other variables of personality.

**Table 4: Descriptive statistics of the obtained scores on personality questionnaire**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Assertiveness	60	3.00	18.00	12.4000	3.76063
Aggressiveness	60	2.00	16.00	7.6667	3.86495
Submissiveness	60	1.00	13.00	6.1333	3.29080
Passiveness	60	.00	18.00	6.7167	4.24700

Figure 1 describes the frequency and percentage of participants according to their dominant personality behavior.



**Figure 1: The percentage of dominant personality behavior of the participants**

The vocabulary knowledge test was performed in order to measure the participants' current knowledge of lexical items. The descriptive statistics related to this test is provided in Table 5.

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**Table 5: Descriptive statistics of vocabulary knowledge test**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Vocabulary Knowledge Test	60	10	40	30.78	8.099

In order to verify the first hypothesis in finding whether different features of personality traits do not have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning, a one way ANOVA was performed between the personality traits and vocabulary knowledge test. The results are provided in Table 6.

The results of ANOVA indicated that there is a statistical significant difference ( $F_{3, 56} = 4.03, p < .05$ ) among four groups of Iranian EFL learners regarding their performance on vocabulary knowledge test. In other words, the personality traits have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, the first null hypothesis of this study is not accepted.

The second null hypothesis of the study was indicated that there is not any significant difference among EFL learners' personality traits and their vocabulary knowledge. Regarding the results of one way ANOVA, the F value was significant, therefore Scheffe post hoc multiple-range tests were performed to investigate the location of differences (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Scheffe post hoc multiple range test for four groups of study**

Dependent Variable: Vocabulary		95% Confidence Interval					
Scheffe	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Assertive		Aggressive	3.089*	1.341	.024	.42	5.76
		Submissive	3.503*	1.458	.019	.60	6.41
		Passive	3.725*	1.458	.013	.82	6.63
Aggressive		Assertive	-3.089*	1.341	.024	-5.76	-.42
		Submissive	2.414*	1.813	.020	-3.20	4.02
		Passive	2.636*	1.813	.027	-2.97	4.25
Submissive		Assertive	-3.503*	1.458	.019	-6.41	-.60
		Aggressive	-2.414*	1.813	.020	-4.02	3.20
		Passive	2.222*	1.901	.007	-3.56	4.01
Passive		Assertive	-3.725*	1.458	.013	-6.63	-.82
		Aggressive	-2.636*	1.813	.027	-4.25	2.97
		Submissive	-2.222*	1.901	.007	-4.01	3.56

The results of Scheffe post hoc test indicate that regarding the performance on vocabulary knowledge test, personality traits were significantly different from each other in all cases. Therefore, there is a strong evidence to reject the second null hypothesis of the study.

The results of this study confirmed that different personality behaviors have a significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge. It was also found that there is a significant difference between different personality traits regarding their vocabulary knowledge.

This study found different results comparing to those of Omid (2004). He investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL students' assertiveness and their ability in argumentative speech and oral proficiency. A negative relationship was found between students' assertiveness and their ability in argumentative speech. In addition a negative correlation was found between students' assertiveness and their mastery of oral proficiency. Thus, the results of this study contradict the findings of Omid (2004).

The results of this study also were in line with what Erton (2010) found. He measured the reflections of different personality types in students' developing different learning styles for themselves. The results showed that there is not a statistically strong, but a low relationship between the personality traits of the learner, the way he/she establishes the learning styles and reflects these characteristics into success while learning a foreign language.

The present research also identified assertiveness as a personality factor that makes positive changes in learning behavior such as increasing self-confidence, and consequently, initiates improvement in learners'

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language skills. Passiveness, submissiveness and aggressiveness were also presented as negative personality factors that may hinder the process of language learning.

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