PREDICTING EFFECTS OF PERSONALITY TRAITS, SELF-ESTEEM, LANGUAGE CLASS RISK-TAKING AND SOCIABILITY ON CHINESE UNIVERSITY EFL LEARNERS' PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Although the interactive effects of different variables in language learning have increasingly become the focus of recent research, the interaction of such variables as personality traits, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability has not been much investigated. Hence, the present study explored the predicting effects of these variables on Chinese EFL learners' performance in English at the tertiary level. A 68-item survey involving 934 first-year undergraduate non-English majors revealed that: (1) the majority were moderately extroverted, moderately inclined to anxiety and fears, and moderately prone to be influenced by social desirability but tended to be dependent and gentle; the participants were moderately satisfied with themselves and believed they were good and worthy; and the majority were moderately risk-taking and sociable in English class, (2) personality traits, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability were generally significantly correlated with one another and with the students' performance in English, and (3) overall self-esteem, language class risk-taking, language class sociability, and two personality variables – P (psychoticism) and L (lie) proved to be powerful predictors for the students' performance in English. As such, personality traits, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability are important factors affecting language learning outcomes.

Keywords: personality, self-esteem, risk-taking, sociability, performance

Introduction

It is widely noticed that students may attain differing levels of achievement in second or foreign language (SL/FL) learning, even in the same learning situation. In order to understand this phenomenon, researchers have explored numerous factors that may affect language learning with focus on cognitive (e.g. language aptitude, cognitive ability, strategy use), affective (e.g. anxiety, motivation, self-confidence), personality (extroversion, locus of control), and/or demographic (e.g. age, gender) variables (Brown, 1987; Ehrman & Oxford, 1990, 1995; Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997; Zhang & Liu, 2008). Even so, as Gardner *et al.* (1997) state, there is a lack of research that concurrently examines the relationships between all these variables. This study is an attempt to better understand the relationship between the variables as they apply to a group of Chinese university-level EFL students.

Employing statistical procedures to analyze data, the present study aims to investigate the predicting effects of personality traits, self-esteem, and language class risk-taking and sociability on Chinese university EFL learners' performance in English. For this purpose, the present research recruited first-year undergraduate non-English majors from three EFL contexts in China.

Literature review

Personality traits

Since people with varying personality traits perceive the world and interpret it in different ways, they may respond to the same situation differently. Thus, personality traits make a difference in how people learn and what they learn (McCaulley & Natter, 1974; Myres & Myres, 1980).

Among the hundreds of personality tests which have been developed for medical, educational and occupational purposes, two tests have been commonly used by researchers in the field of language learning and teaching: the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ).

Developed in 1975, the 100-item Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) was later reduced to include 48 items and has been used in various educational settings (Eysenck, 1974; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1979; Kiany, 1997). It measures three dimensions of a person's personality: extroversion (E), neuroticism (N) (or emotionality), and psychoticism (P) (or tough-mindedness). Apart from these, it has a lie scale (L) to measure the extent to which respondents are influenced by social desirability in answering the questionnaire. An individual who scores high on extroversion (HE) is oriented towards the external world, while an individual who is low on extroversion (LE) is withdrawn and more concerned with inner states of mind; an individual who is high on neuroticism (HN) is more inclined to anxiety and fears; and a person with a low score on neuroticism (LN) is psychologically well-balanced (or stable). Psychoticism (P) is a dimension that can be exhibited by people belonging to all these four types at varying degrees. A person who is high on the psychoticism scale is relatively tough-minded, aggressive and cold, whereas, a person with a low score on the P scale tends to be dependent and tender-minded.

Tender-minded rationalists tend toward principles, intellectualism, idealism, optimism, religiousness, free will, monism and dogmatism, while tough-minded empiricists tend toward facts, sensationalism, materialism, pessimism, irreligiousness, fatalism, pluralism and skepticism. … The tough think of the tender as sentimentalists and soft-heads while the tender feel the tough to be unrefined, callous, or brutal. (James, 1907, cited in Foust, 2007, p. 12).The role of personality in language learning has long been noted and explored (Brown, 1987; Busch, 1982; Cameron, 1990; Carrell, Prince, & Astika, 1996; Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Hurd, 2006; Hwu, 2007; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Riding & Banner, 1986; Robinson, Gabriel, & Katchan, 1994; Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2002; Wakamoto, 2000). The studies have revealed that certain personality variables such as extroversion, assertiveness, emotional stability, and conscientiousness are conducive to second language learning. For example, Robinson *et al.*'s (1994) study showed that individuals with high neuroticism (N) and extroversion (HN/HE) scores did better on the oral tests than on the written tests when compared with participants with high neuroticism and low extroversion scores (HN/LE). Nevertheless, some research fails to support this finding (Busch, 1982; Wilson & Lynn, 1990) and some suggests that introverts are not necessarily disadvantaged (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). For example, Ehrman and Oxford (1990) found that introverts did as well as extroverts in language learning. Thus, the reasons for the mixed findings may be that the studies have used different instruments to measure personality characteristics with a heterogeneous or a small group of learners and/or that the researchers investigated different

aspects of language learning. The findings might be more consistent with a larger and homogeneous sample.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to 'the evaluation a person makes and customarily maintains with regard to him- or herself' (Coopersmith, 1981, p. 5). It denotes an attitude of approval or disapproval towards oneself and implies the extent to which one believes him/herself capable, significant, successful and useful. This attitude also carries 'positive and negative affective connotations and is intertwined with intellectual and motivational processes' (Coopersmith, 1981, p. 5).

A favorable attitude towards oneself has been considered to be important by several personality theorists as well as psychologists (Coopersmith, 1981; Rogers & Dymond, 1954). They found that people who frequently seek psychological help often report suffering from feelings of inadequacy and see themselves as helpless and inferior, as incapable of improving their situations, and as lacking the inner resources to tolerate or to reduce the anxiety readily aroused by everyday events and stress. People whose performance does not match their personal aspirations evaluate themselves as inferior no matter how great their achievements. People with high self-esteem are more creative, and more likely to assume an active role in social groups and to express their views frequently and effectively. Students with greater self-esteem are more likely to be successful academically in school (Dalgas-Pelish, 2006; Ja, Huai, & Guo, 2007; Pepi, Faria, & Alesi, 2006; Rayle, Arredondo, & Kurpius, 2005; Stringer & Heath, 2008), happier (Zhang, 2005), less anxious (Situ & Li, 2007; Wray & Stone, 2005), and to adopt higher quality learning strategies (Watkins, 2000).

Language class risk-taking and sociability

The classroom is a critical place for student interpersonal and educational development (Pierce, 1994). As Krupa-Kwiatkowski (1998, p.133) claimed, 'interaction involves participation, personal engagement, and the taking of initiative in some way, activities that in turn are hypothesized to trigger cognitive processes conducive to language learning'. Since oral participation is the most observable behavior, much research has focused on it and its

relationship with students' English proficiency or performance (Ely, 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Spada, 1986; Swain, 1985; Tsou, 2005).

Though many second/foreign language (SL/FL) learners, especially Asian language learners reported a desire to be active and independent learners and to be involved in interpersonal interactions in the target language (Liu & Jackson, 2011; Littlewood, 2000), in numerous SL/FL learning situations, learners, especially Asian learners, have been observed to be quiet in language classrooms, rarely responding to teachers' questions, or actively taking part in classroom interactions (Jackson, 2001, 2002; Liu, 2006; Saito & Ebsworth, 2004; Tsui, 1996; Zou, 2004). These behaviors are frequently interpreted by teachers and researchers as a lack of motivation, cultural differences, low proficiency in target language, pursuit of perfection, peer pressure, fear of losing face, habit, lack of confidence, and so on (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Flowerdew, Miller, & Li, 2000; Jackson, 2002; Liu, 2006; Zou, 2004). Meanwhile, it has been found in some research that the more proficient students tend to be more active in classroom communication (Liu & Jackson, 2009), that passive participation in classroom activities negatively affects the students' performance in English, especially oral English (Ely, 1986; Liu, 2006), and that students' actual participation is closely related to a series of variables such as willingness to communicate, motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, self-confidence, and global personality traits (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003; Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004).

As Skehan (1989) claims, various factors affect the learning of English, such as self-esteem, language aptitude, motivation, and personality traits. Though much research has been done to explore the interactions of different variables and their effects on the outcome of SL/FL learning, the variables investigated in individual studies are limited and many have not been included here. Moreover, as reviewed above, personality traits, self-esteem, and language class risk-taking and sociability have all proved to be influential factors in language learning, yet they have rarely been researched simultaneously in the same SL/FL learning situation. This, coupled with the fact that mixed findings were uncovered in existing studies, is exactly why more research is required in this area. Situated in Chinese EFL contexts, the present research attempts to investigate the interrelationships of personality traits, self-esteem,

language class risk-taking and sociability, and their predicting effects on English language learning. To achieve the purpose, the following research questions were formulated:

(1) What are the profiles of Chinese university students' personality traits, self-esteem, and language class risk-taking and sociability?

(2) How are the students' personality traits, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability related to one another?

(3) How far do the variables impact on the students' performance in English?

Research design

Participants

The participants were 934 (587 male and 347 female) randomly chosen first-year non-English majors from various disciplines such as Law, Engineering, Mechanics, and Economics and Management at three Chinese universities representing three different ranks of state-owned universities (top-rank, intermediate-rank, and low-rank, which had 366, 323 and 245 participants respectively for the present study). All the students were enrolled in credit-bearing and compulsory English courses offered by their universities. With an age range from 13 (only one student who did exceptionally well in his studies) to 21 and an average age of 18.49, the majority (451/48.3%) of the participants were aged 18, followed by the group aged 19 (315/33.7%), and then came the group aged 20 (97/10.4%) and 17 (53/5.7%).

Instruments

For this study, students completed the 48-item Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the 6-item Language Class Risk-Taking Scale, the 4-item Language Class Sociability Scale, and the background questionnaire, as detailed below.

The Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ). The 48-item Eysenck Personality Questionnaire was used in the present study because this revised form proved to be more valid and reliable than the original 100-item EPQ (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985) and because it was easier to execute. It aimed to measure four dimensions of students' personality, with 12 items for each dimension. For this scale, each item had two descriptors – 'No' and 'Yes' with values of 1 to 2 assigned to them respectively. Thus, each dimension has a possible score range of 12 to 24 (see Appendix 21-68).

The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES). This 10-item self-esteem scale, developed by Rosenberg (1965) to measure overall feelings of self-worth or self-acceptance, has been widely used in numerous studies on self-esteem (Dalgas-Pelish, 2006; Pepi *et al.*, 2006; Rayle *et al.*, 2005; Stringer & Heath, 2008). It includes two dimensions – positive self-esteem (PSE) and negative self-esteem (NSE), with five items for each. The items are answered on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' with values of 1 to 4 assigned to them respectively, and thus the RSES has a possible score range of 10 to 40 (see Appendix 11-20).

Language Class Risk-Taking Scale (LCR). The LCR scale, a 6-item measure developed by Ely (1986) taps the extent to which learners take risks using the target language in class. Learners who risk using the target language more often are reportedly more willing to communicate with others in class. To fit the English classrooms in Mainland China, the word *Spanish* in Ely's original LCR scale was changed to *English* in the instrument used for the present study, as done in Liu and Jackson's (2008) study. Having five descriptors ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree' with values 1 to 5 assigned to them respectively, the LCR has a possible score range of 6 to 30 (see Appendix 1-6).

Language Class Sociability Scale (LCS). The original LCS measure, a 5-item scale designed by Ely (1986), indexes the extent to which learners enjoy interacting with others in class in the target language. Like the LCR scale, the word *Spanish* in the original LCS items was replaced by the word *English*. To better fit the present research, which observed a variety of activities such as pair work, group work and presentations in the lessons studied, the original LCS item, 'I'd like more class activities where the students use Spanish to get to know each

other better', as done in Liu and Jackson's (2008) study. Having five alternatives ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree' with values 1 to 5 assigned to them respectively, the LCS has a possible score range of 4 to 20 (see Appendix 7-10).

Preliminary statistical analyses revealed high internal consistency for the measures (see Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of the instruments (N = 934)

Name of the instrument	No. of items	Reliability	Mean item-total correlation (p = .01)
P	12	.48	.45
E	12	.78	.76
N	12	.77	.75
L	12	.63	.61
RSES	10	.34	.16
LCR	6	.614	.43
LCS	4	.635	.45

Notes: P = psychoticism; E = extroversion; N = neuroticism; L = lie; RSES = Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale; LCR = Language Class Risk-Taking Scale; LCS = Language Class Sociability Scale

The background questionnaire. The background questionnaire aimed to gather the respondents' demographic information such as name, gender, department, university, and English-learning time.

Performance in English. All the participants' scores in the mid-term exam administered during the ninth week of the term were collected as their performance in English (Aida, 1994; Liu, 2006). The test consisted of listening, reading, and writing, but excluded speaking in that it was more challenging and time-consuming to administer. In the present study, only the total score was used for statistical analysis.

Procedure

30 intact classes at three universities answered the survey in 15 minutes during a normal class session of the eighth week of the first 16-week term of the academic year 2007-2008.

Of 1121 collected questionnaires, 934 were complete for statistical analyses (others were discarded because of incompleteness). In the following week, the students took the mid-term exam of the course which was used as a measure of their performance in English.

Data analysis

For each measure, the mean, standard deviation, median, mode, maximum, minimum, skewness and kurtosis were calculated to determine the profiles of the students' personality traits, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability. Then, relationships between these measured scales and the students' performance in English were investigated in terms of correlation analyses and regression analyses.

Results and discussions

Profiles of the students' personality traits, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability

To describe the profiles of the participants' personality characteristics, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability, the means, standard deviations, medians, modes, ranges, skewnesses and kurtoses of the four scales of the EPQ, the two dimensions of the RSES, the LCR, and the LCS were computed. When doing so, the researchers adjusted the values assigned to the alternatives of some items, as specified in Eysenck *et al.* (1985), Rosenberg (1965), and Ely (1986). Thus, the higher the SES score, the higher self-esteem the respondent reported to have; the higher the PSE score, the higher positive self-esteem; the higher the NSE score, the lower negative self-esteem. The higher the LCR or the LCS score, the more risk-taking or sociable the respondent was in English classrooms.

Since the LCR consists of 6 items, a total score of more than 24, 18 to 24, and less than 18 on the scale implies that the respondent is highly, moderately, and low risk-taking in English classrooms respectively. Likewise, a total score of more than 16, 12 to 16, and below 12 on the 4-item LCS represents high, moderate, and low sociability in English class respectively. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Personality traits of the participants (N = 934)

	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Mode	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
P	14.56	1.80	14	14	12-22	.769	.510
E	18.97	3.08	19	19	12-24	-.214	-.806
N	18.15	3.04	18	20	12-24	-.094	-.846
L	17.69	2.36	18	18	12-24	.126	-.455
SES	26.74	2.73	27	26	18-36	-.149	.426
PSE	14.13	1.71	14	14	5-20	-.078	1.61
NSE	12.6	2.01	13	13	5-20	-.333	.949
LCR	16.40	3.72	16	16	6-30	.269	-.023
LCS	13.09	2.82	13	12	4-20	-.091	.085

Notes: P = psychoticism; E = extroversion; N = neuroticism; L = lie; RSES = Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale; PSE = positive self-esteem; NSE = negative self-esteem;

LCR = Language Class Risk-Taking Scale; Language Class Sociability Scale

As noted in Table 2, the actual score range for E, N, and L was 12 to 24, while that for P was 12 to 22. The mean scores for the four scales were 14.56 (SD = 1.8), 18.97 (SD = 3.08), 18.15 (SD = 18.15), and 17.69 (SD = 2.36) respectively, all of which were near the scale midpoint 18, except the P mean. And a normal distribution was observed for each scale, as supported by the skewness and kurtosis scores presented in Table 2. All these suggest that most participants were high on E, N and L, but moderate or even low on P, as found in Eysenck *et al.*'s (1985) study. Namely, the majority of the respondents were moderately extroverted, moderately inclined to anxiety and fears, and moderately prone to be influenced by social desirability. Meanwhile, the majority reported to be dependent and tender-minded. This might be due to the fact that more than 90% of this generation were the only child in their family who were normally treated as princes or princesses as a result of the family planning policy executed since early 1970s in China.

As Table 2 shows, the RSES had an actual score range of 18 to 36, with a mean of 26.74 (SD = 2.73), a median of 27 and a mode of 26, all slightly exceeding the scale midpoint 25. The skewness and kurtosis scores implied a normal distribution for the RSES. All these imply that the participants had moderate but not high self-esteem for themselves. Meanwhile, a mean of 14.13 (SD = 1.71), a median and mode of 14 on PSE, all exceeding the scale midpoint 12.5, suggest that the respondents generally had (fairly) high positive views toward themselves. Likewise, a mean of 12.6 (SD = 2.01), a median and mode of 13 on NSE, all slightly above the scale midpoint 12.5, indicate that more than half the students generally did not hold low self-esteem. And a normal distribution occurred for both PSE and NSE, as evidenced by their skewness and kurtosis values which rarely exceeded 1. All these results clearly suggest that the participants tended to feel worthy and proud of themselves, as found by Suo and Suo (2007). Unlike their Japanese counterparts who often reported to have low self-esteem (Brown, 2008), these Chinese participants might have been greatly influenced by the predominant philosophical idea long held by the Chinese that 'I am born to be useful' (Feng, 2004).

Table 2 also shows that the LCR had an actual score range of 6 to 30, with a mean of 16.40 (SD = 3.72), a median and mode of 16, which fell below the scale midpoint 18. This indicates that the majority of the participants were only moderately or even not risk-taking in English class. Likewise, the actual LCS score range in the present study was 4 to 20, with a mean of 13.09 (SD = 2.82), a median of 13 and a mode of 12, which slightly exceeded the scale midpoint 12, implying that the participants were moderately or even strongly sociable in English classrooms. Consistent with those revealed in Liu and Jackson's (2008) study of a sample with similar backgrounds, these findings are further confirmed by the skewness and kurtosis values which were generally far below 1, denoting the occurrence of a normal distribution for both scales.

Correlations among the measured variables and the students' performance in English

Correlational analyses revealed the relationships between the measured variables and the students' performance in English (see Table 3).

Table 3: Correlations between the measured variables and the students' performance in English (N = 934)

Variables	E	N	L	RSES	PSE	NSE	LCR	LCS	Performance
P	-.047	.041	-.084*	-.025	-.035	-.003	.076*	-.082*	-.116**
E	1	-.221**	.033	.357**	.236**	.285**	.222**	.287**	.062
N		1	-.233**	-.305**	-.113**	-.320**	-.147**	-.142**	-.073*
L			1	.071*	.008	.090*	.005	.042	-.049
RSES				1	.681**	.781**	.208**	.179**	.181**
PSE					1	.074*	.110**	.191**	.172**
NSE						1	.188**	.082*	.101**
LCR							1	.226**	.168**
LCS								1	.160**

Note: ** = p < .0l; * = p < .05

As Table 3 shows, among the correlations between the personality subscales and the RSES and its two subscales, the RSES significantly negatively correlated with N (r = -.305, p < .01) but positively with E (r = .357, p < .01) and L (r = .071, p < .05). It was the same with PSE (r = -.113 and .236 for N and E respectively, p < .01). Likewise, NSE was significantly negatively related to N (r = -.320, p < .01) while significantly positively related to E (r = .285, p < .01) and L (r = .090, p < .05). In other words, a respondent who reported to have greater self-esteem, higher positive self-esteem, or lower negative self-esteem tended to be less inclined to anxiety and fears (N), but more extroverted (E) and easier to be influenced by others, as found in previous studies (Dalgas-Pelish, 2006; Pepi *et al.*, 2006; Situ & Li, 2007; Stringer & Heath, 2008; Wray & Stone, 2005).

The RSES and its two subscales were also significantly positively correlated with the LCR (r = .208, .110, and .188, for the RSES, PSE and NSE respectively, p < .01) and the LCS (r = .179, .191, and .082, for the RSES, PSE and NSE respectively, p < .05). This clearly suggests that a person with greater self-esteem, greater positive self-esteem, or lower negative self-esteem tended to be more risk-taking and sociable in English classrooms.

Meanwhile, the LCR was significantly positively related to P (r = .076, p < .05) and E (r = .222, p < .01), but negatively to N (r = -.147, p < .01), and the LCS was significantly positively correlated with E (r = .287, p < .01), but negatively with P (r = -.082, p < .05) and N (r = -.142, p < .01). Alternatively, the respondent who was more tough-minded or more aggressive (higher on P) was prone to be more risk-taking but less sociable in English class; the student who was more extroverted (higher on E) was likely to be more risk-taking and more sociable in English classrooms; and the participant who reported to be more inclined to anxiety and fears (higher on N) tended to be less risk-taking and less sociable in the class. At the same time, the L (Lie) scale was merely insignificantly positively related to the LCR and the LCS.

Further, the LCR and the LCS were significantly positively correlated with each other (r = .226, p < .01). Namely, a more risk-taking student tended to be more sociable in English class.

Finally, among the four EPQ scales, only P and N were significantly but negatively related to the students' performance in English (r = -.116 and -.073 for P and N respectively, p < .05). All the RSES scales, the LCS, and the LCR were all significantly positively correlated with the latter, with coefficients ranging from .101 to .181 (p < .01). This further supports numerous existing studies (Hwu, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 1994; Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2002; Wakamoto, 2000). That is, an individual who reported to be more tough-minded (higher on P) or more inclined to fears and anxiety (higher on N) tended to perform worse in the mid-term exam. Conversely, a student who reported to have greater global self-esteem, higher positive self-esteem, or lower negative self-esteem tended to score higher in the test; so did a student who reported to be more risk-taking and/or more sociable in English class.

As such, it is clear that the students' personality characteristics, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability were closely related to one another and might work together to affect the students' performance in English.

The regression model

The results of the correlational analyses discussed previously show numerous bivariate relationships, which failed to indicate the influence of one variable on another. Better clues were provided by multiple regression analyses. A stepwise method was employed in forming regression models, with performance in English being the dependent variable and the other variables as independent ones. Altogether five models were resulted with the change in R^2 being all significant: .033 for model 1 (RSES, p = .000), .018 for model 2 (RSES, LCR, p = .000), .015 for model 3 (RSES, LCR, P, p = .000), .009 for model 4 (RSES, LCR, P, LCS, p = .004), and .005 for model 5 (RSES, LCR, P, LCS, L, p = .026). Table 4 reports coefficients from the regression models, as well as their levels of significance.

Table 4: Regression coefficients and significance

		RSES	LCR	P	LCS	L
Performance in English	β	.138	.125	-.120	.099	-.071
	t	4.199	3.759	-3.716	2.977	-2.223
	p	.000	.000	.000	.003	.026
	VIF	1.072	1.095	1.021	1.089	1.010

As can be seen, all the coefficients were statistically significant at the .000 level except the LCS (p = .003) and L (p = .013). Among the five included variables, the RSES was the most powerful predictor (β = .138, *t* = 4.199), followed by the LCR (β = .125, *t* = 3.759), P (β = -.120, *t* = -3.716), the LCS (β = .099, *t* = 2.977), and L (β = -.071, *t* = -2.223). The RSES, the LCR, and the LCS were positive predictors, while P and L were negative ones. Strangely, when working alone, L was just negatively correlated with the students' performance in English; but when interacting with other variables, it became a powerful predictor for the latter.

Thus, it can be drawn that such individual differences as personality traits, self-esteem, and language class risk-taking and sociability all exerted certain impact on the students' performance in English.

Conclusions and implications

Several conclusions concerning students' personality traits, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability, and their performance in English in the Chinese EFL context are warranted from the results of this study.

First, analyses of the data revealed that the majority of students were moderately extroverted, moderately inclined to anxiety and fears, and moderately prone to be influenced

by social desirability but tended to be dependent and tender-minded, that the participants were moderately satisfied with themselves and believed they were good and useful, and that the majority were moderately risk-taking and sociable in English class. Second, correlational analyses indicated that personality traits, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability were generally significantly correlated with one another. For example, a person with higher self-esteem tended to be more risk-taking and sociable in English classrooms. Meanwhile, these variables were generally significantly related to the students' performance in English. Among them, the RSES, the LCR, P, the LCS, and L proved to be powerful predictors for the latter. Clearly, such individual differences as personality traits, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability interacted with one another to yield certain impact on the students' performance in English.

Thus, to better students' performance in English, it is crucial to maintain and raise their self-esteem, especially in a Chinese EFL context where face value is highly held (Bond, 1996; Liu, 2006). Some studies suggest that teachers can help learners develop positive situational self-esteem by assessing their progress realistically (Oxford, 1990) and by discounting the areas in which students do not have peak performance (Harter, 1986). For example, teachers can supervise learners in setting realistic goals during the course of learning a SL/FL, and praise them when the goals are accomplished. Meanwhile, teachers can scaffold topics and activities in terms of familiarity and difficulty to better suit the learners and the context, so that the students may feel (more) assured of themselves in accomplishing the tasks, as suggested in Liu (2006). If a student's self-esteem is enhanced, he/she may become more likely to take risks when using the target language in class and socialize with others as well in the class.

Although personality traits are relatively stable across time, it's highly possible to identify students' personality characteristics, which can help orient them to adopt learning strategies that may be more appropriate to them, as suggested in Oxford and Ehrman's (1995) and Ehrman and Oxford's (1995) studies. With a knowledge of students' personality characteristics, teachers are able to know what kind of students may be more inclined to high self-esteem, class risk-taking and sociability. By offering more help to these students, the teachers may help improve their learning outcomes. This, however, is easier said than done. To really understand individual students' characteristics requires great effort (e.g.

patience, perseverance and long-time observation, etc.) on the teachers' part and the students' active cooperation.

Finally, since the participants of the present study came from three universities representative of varying ranks of institutions in China, the findings can thus be generalized to other EFL contexts in the country. Even so, it should be noted that the present study did not take such variables as gender, discipline and proficiency into consideration, an exploration of which shall be interesting and thus can be the focus of future studies.

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Biodata

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Appendix: The survey

Direction: This survey aims to help better understand individual differences and their roles in English learning. Please answer the following items by circling the letter of the alternative which appears most applicable to you. We would urge you to be as accurate as possible since the success of this investigation depends upon it. All the data produced will be used only for research.

1. I like to wait until I know exactly how to use an English word before using it.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I don't like trying out a difficult sentence in class.	1	2	3	4	5
3. At this point, I don't like trying to express complicated ideas in English in class.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I prefer to say what I want in English without worrying about the small details of grammar.	1	2	3	4	5
5. In class, I prefer to say a sentence to myself before I speak it.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I prefer to follow basic sentence models rather than risk misusing the language.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I think learning English in a group is more fun than learning on my own.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I enjoy talking with the teacher and other students in English.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I enjoy interacting with the other students in the English class.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I think it's important to have a strong group spirit in the English classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
11. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	1	2	3	4	
12. At times, I think I am no good at all.	1	2	3	4	
13. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	1	2	3	4	

14. I am able to do things as well as most other people.	1	2	3	4	
15. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	1	2	3	4	
16. I certainly feel useless at times.	1	2	3	4	
17. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	1	2	3	4	
18. I wish I could have more respect for myself.	1	2	3	4	
19. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	1	2	3	4	
20. I take a positive attitude toward myself.	1	2	3	4	
21. Does your mood often go up and down?	1	2			
22. Do you take much notice of what people think?	1	2			
23. Are you a talkative person?	1	2			
24. If you say you will do something, do you always keep your promise no matter how inconvenient it might be?	1	2			
25. Do you ever feel 'just miserable' for no reason?	1	2			
26. Would being in debt worry you?	1	2			
27. Are you rather lively?	1	2			
28. Were you ever greedy by helping yourself to more than your share of anything?	1	2			
29. Are you an irritable person?	1	2			
30. Would you take drugs which may have strange or dangerous effects?	1	2			
31. Do you enjoy meeting new people?	1	2			
32. Have you ever blamed someone for doing something you knew was really your fault?	1	2			

33. Are your feelings easily hurt?	1	2			
34. Do you prefer to go your own way rather than act by the rules?	1	2			
35. Can you usually let yourself go and enjoy yourself at a lively party?	1	2			
36. Are all your habits good and desirable ones?	1	2			
37. Do you often feel 'fed-up'?	1	2			
38. Do good manners and cleanliness matter much to you?	1	2			
39. Do you usually take the initiative in making new friends?	1	2			
40. Have you ever taken anything (even a pin or button) that belonged to someone else?	1	2			
41. Would you call yourself a nervous person?	1	2			
42. Do you think marriage is old-fashioned and should be done away with?	1	2			
43. Can you easily get some life into a rather dull party?	1	2			
44. Have you ever broken or lost something belonging to someone else?	1	2			
45. Are you a worrier?	1	2			
46. Do you enjoy co-operating with others?	1	2			
47. Do you tend to keep in the background on social occasions?	1	2			
48. Does it worry you if you know there are mistakes in your work?	1	2			
49. Have you ever said anything bad or nasty about anyone?	1	2			
50. Would you call yourself tense or 'highly-strung'?	1	2			
51. Do you think people spend too much time safeguarding their future with savings and insurances?	1	2			
52. Do you like mixing with people?	1	2			

53. As a child were you ever cheeky to your parents?	1	2			
54. Do you worry too long after an embarrassing experience?	1	2			
55. Do you try not to be rude to people?	1	2			
56. Do you like plenty of bustle and excitement around you?	1	2			
57. Have you ever cheated at a game?	1	2			
58. Do you suffer from 'nerves'?	1	2			
59. Would you like other people to be afraid of you?	1	2			
60. Have you ever taken advantage of someone?	1	2			
61. Are you mostly quiet when you are with other people?	1	2			
62. Do you often feel lonely?	1	2			
63. Is it better to follow society's rules than go your own way?	1	2			
64. Do other people think of you as being very lively?	1	2			
65. Do you always practice what you preach?	1	2			
66. Are you often troubled about feelings of guilt?	1	2			
67. Do you sometimes put off until tomorrow what you ought to do today?	1	2			
68. Can you get a party going?	1	2			