

## **The Relationship between Iranian EFL Students' Personality Characteristics and their Assertiveness: A Case of Postgraduate Students**

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Received:

Accepted:

.....  
Online publication: 2020.3.18

### **Abstract**

Various studies suggest that it is important to determine students' personality characteristics and assertiveness and make them aware of these differences in order to improve learning process and outcomes. This study aimed to find out how much of the variance in postgraduate students' assertiveness is explained by five personality characteristics (i.e., Openness, Neuroticism, Extroversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) and which one of these characteristics significantly predicts the students' assertiveness. To this end, 66 postgraduate students within the age range of 22 to 35 participated in this descriptive correlational study. They were majoring in English language teaching at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch, Tabriz, Iran. The College Self-expression Scale (CSES) and Big-Five Personality Inventory were used to assess the students' level of assertiveness and their personality characteristics, respectively. In order to answer the research questions, a multiple linear regression analysis was carried out. The results revealed that about 14 percent of the postgraduate students' assertiveness is explained by five personality characteristics and out of them, only Extroversion has a significant contribution to their assertiveness. The pedagogical implications are presented for teachers, students, syllabus designers, and materials writers.

**Keywords:** Assertiveness, Personality characteristics, Postgraduate, Students

### **Introduction**

Today, knowledge about students' personality differences and their influence on the process and outcome of learning is one of the noticeable objectives in foreign language learning settings. Blair (1982) expressed that because of the numerous learner variables that appear to the process of language learning the emphasis on the individual differences among learners is pertinent in modern language teaching and its associated learning environments. Brown(2000), and Carrel, Prince, and Astica (1996) stated that in addition to cognitive factors, motivational, affective, personality, and demographic factors of the learners are the most important elements for succeeding in second language learning and out of these factors personality is considered to be of great importance (Carrel et al., 1996).

McCrae and Costa (1990) defined personality traits as "dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions" (p. 29). They are common to laypersons who use a large number of vocabulary of trait descriptive adjectives (such as nervous, enthusiastic, original, accommodating, and careful) to describe themselves and others. McCrae and Costa (1996) tentatively identified personality with basic tendencies and the dynamic processes by which they affect other elements. They indicated that many traits can be accounted for by five major factors including extroversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience.

According to Phares (1991), personality traits should be taken into consideration because personality is one aspect of the learner characteristics and it is also a main psychological mechanism that directs behavior and causes individuals to have their own particular sets of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the form of the fix combination of personality characteristics. Allport (1937) asserted that for the most effective use in the classroom, a sufficient knowledge of personality differences is necessary by both teacher and student. This is because of the fact that personality characteristics never happen in two persons in a similar way.

Psychological literature has also documented the important role of individual differences in foreign language learning. In this regard, Ellis (1985) suggested that personality factors are important in the development of linguistic abilities. Dornyei (2005) also supported his view and points out

that individual differences are the most consistent predictors to determine whether or not learning outcomes are successful. Among different individual factors, personality traits are believed to have heavy implication in the learning process in general, and have been identified as "powerful modifying variables" (Dornyei, 2005, p. 24) which "shape the way people respond to their learning environment" (Dornyei, 2005, p. 30).

In addition to personality, assertiveness is another individual characteristic that, according to Lizarrage, Ugrate, Gradelle, Elawar, and Iriate (2003), represents one's ability of self-expression and defending it. A person who is well-assertive can express his feelings and interests properly and without any anxiety. According to McVanel and Morris (2010), a person who has the ability of self-expression or, in other words, assertiveness, assumes responsibility for his behaviors, choices, and mistakes, has high self-esteem, and behaves the people with honesty and mutual positive attitude. Rusinko, Brad Ley, and Miller (2010) posit that such people tend to conflict, have internal concerns, and can demonstrate their thoughts and feelings in a violent and aggressive way.

In this regard, assertiveness is one personality factor that can affect learners' behaviors mainly in oral and interpersonal communication. Wilson and Gallois (1993) indicate that lack of assertiveness among some of the EFL learners results in their inability in expressing their interests, ideas, and feelings easily, appropriately, and without any stress. Therefore, assertiveness is necessary especially for young people to select the appropriate behavior for the specific situation based on their understanding, knowledge, and skills (Bulkeley & Cramer, 1994).

In the last 20 years, quite a number of studies have investigated the role of personality traits in the learning process (e.g., Furnham, 1992; Sadeghi, Kasim, Tan, & Abdullah, 2012; Threton & Walter, 2009). For instance, Furnham (1992) examined the relationship between learning styles and personality traits and found statistically significant relationships between learning styles and psychoticism, neuroticism, and extroversion.

Fazeli (2011) worked on the relationship between the conscientiousness and use of the English language learning strategies. It was indicated that as the conscientiousness level of learners increased, they used more memory

strategies, and as their conscientiousness level decreased, they used fewer memory strategies. It was also revealed that when conscientiousness trait level was increased, higher average of cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies were used.

Amani hafshejani, Fatehzade, and Yousefi (2013) examined the relationship among female high school students' attachment styles, big five personality characteristics, and their assertiveness in Falavarjan. The sample consisted of two hundred girls in different grades that were randomly selected. In the study, they used Revised Adult Attachment Scale Collins and Read (RAAS), NEO personality inventory, and Assertiveness Scale for Adolescents (ASA). The descriptive statistics and multiple regression was used to find out the relationship among the variables. The results of the study indicated a negative relationship between anxious attachment and assertiveness, a positive and significant relationship among conscientiousness, extroversion, and openness to experience, and negative and significant relationship between neuroticism and assertiveness. In addition, regression analysis showed that conscientiousness and anxious attachment are the main predictors of assertiveness.

Miri and Shamsaddini (2014) studied the effect of different personality traits on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning. Sixty male and female learners at the intermediate level participated in their study. The results showed that different personality traits have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learner's vocabulary knowledge.

Ostovar, Taheri Khorasani, and Rezaei (2015) also studied the relationship between personality dimensions (introversion, extroversion) and self-assertiveness with social anxiety among university students. The sample consisted of 360 individuals at Islamic Azad University, Arsanjan Branch selected by Morgan table. Correlation analysis, t-test and regression were used to test the research hypothesis. Significant correlations were found between the dimensions of personality and Social Avoidance and Distress in New Situations (SAD-N) dimension. In addition, regression analysis showed that self-assertiveness was a more powerful predictor of Social Anxiety than personality dimensions.

Bagherian and Mojambari (2016) examined the relationship between the BIG Five personality traits and the level of assertiveness. In the study, they used the 60-item NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI). The sample consisted of 430 participants with different age groups, between 18-50, from Alborz University. The regression analysis was utilized to figure out the relationship between variables. The findings of the study showed that there was a negative relationship between neuroticism and assertiveness, and a positive relationship between extroversion and conscientiousness with assertiveness. There was no relationship between openness and agreeableness with assertiveness. The research also showed that neuroticism can be the predictor of assertiveness.

Although several studies have been previously undertaken in the area of personality characteristics and assertiveness of undergraduate students, these studies have not come up to the same results (e.g., Bagherian & Mojambari, 2016; Bouchard, Lalonde, & Gagnon, 1988; Cote & Moskowitz, 1998; Lefevre & West, 1981; Kirst, 2011; Ostovar, Taheri Khorasani, & Rezaei, 2015; Ramanaiah & Deniston, 1993; Vestewig & Moss, 1976). For this reason, more research was recommended by the researchers in this area. In addition, to the knowledge of the researchers, no studies were conducted on postgraduate students. Therefore, this study aimed at contributing and complementing to the existing literature by exploring the relationship between assertiveness and personality characteristics among postgraduate learners in the context of Iran where English is taught and learned as a foreign language. In this regard, the following research questions were posed:

1. How much of the variance in Iranian postgraduate EFL students' assertiveness is explained by their personality characteristics?
2. Which personality characteristic is the best and significant predictor of Iranian postgraduate EFL students' assertiveness?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Sixty-six Iranian EFL students (male and female) were selected based on convenience sampling among postgraduate students, majoring in English

Language Teaching, at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch, Tabriz, Iran. Forty-nine of the students were females and 17 of them were males within the age range of 22 to 35. All of the students had L2 language background because they had studied English courses at the BA level and secondary school before. The students' first language was Persian and Azari and their foreign language was English. Their proficiency in English was at the advanced level.

### **Instruments**

In this study two instruments were utilized: The Big Five Inventory (BFI) and College Self-expression Scale (CSES), which are explained below.

#### ***The Big Five Inventory (BFI)***

Benet et al.'s (1998) Big-Five Personality Inventory was used to assess the five personality dimensions of neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. It consists of 44 descriptive phrases about oneself, to which one agrees or disagrees. The students were asked to answer the 44 phrases on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". All negatively keyed items were reverse-scored. Also, the scale scores were added up by averaging the items for each scale. The BFI scales has an internal consistency of .83 (John et al., 2008), and a three month test retest reliability of .84 including all scales (Rammstedt & John, 2007). Further, validity correlations of the personality dimensions of this questionnaire have shown to be neuroticism=.52, extroversion=.67, openness=.60, agreeableness=.48 and conscientiousness=.47(John et al., 2008). In this study, the internal consistency of each category of the questionnaire was obtained through Cronbach's Alpha and the results showed an acceptable reliability: Neuroticism (.59), Extroversion (.65), Openness (.75), Agreeableness (.62), and Conscientiousness (.68).

#### ***College Self-expression Scale (CSES)***

Galassi et al.'s (1974) the College Self-expression Scale (CSES) was employed in this study which included 50-item self-report measure that evaluates three dimensions of assertiveness (e.g., negative, positive, and self-denial) suitable for university learners. Negative assertiveness consists

of negative feelings including disagreement, irritation, discontent and justified anger. Positive assertiveness involves positive feelings such as love, approval, affection, agreement, and admiration. Self-denial consists of exaggerated concern for the feelings of others, undue interpersonal anxiety and excessive apologizing. Students were asked to answer the items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*almost always*) to 4 (*never or rarely*) in order to measure students' level of assertiveness in a variety of interpersonal contexts. The negatively phrased items were reverse-scored. The total score obtained by adding the items of the questionnaire was considered as the students' assertiveness scores. The internal consistency of the questionnaire calculated through Cronbach's alpha was .75, indicating an acceptable reliability of the questionnaire.

### **Procedure**

The data collection for this study took place in Autumn, 2017 at Islamic Azad university, Tabriz Branch. The researchers were able to access 66 postgraduate students in ELT who accepted to participate in the study. Before distributing the research questionnaires, the researcher explained the project to the participants in order to guarantee their cooperation. The BFI and CSES questionnaires were administered so that the personality types and assertiveness levels of the participants could be found out. All the participants were given an oral description of the objectives and procedures of the study. The students were asked to fill out both questionnaires and they were assured that the results would be kept confidential. After collecting the data, appropriate statistical tests were used to answer the research questions.

### **Design**

The study adopted a descriptive and quantitative correlational design. The variables of the study were Big five personality traits and assertiveness. In addition, the five factors of conscientiousness, neuroticism, extroversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience were considered as predictor variables and assertiveness as predicted variable.

## Data Analysis

The collected data were entered into the SPSS 22 for further analysis. To answer the research questions, a multiple linear regression was used and the related assumptions were also checked and the alpha level for significance testing was set at  $p < .05$ .

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

First, the descriptive statistics of the mean and standard deviations for the Iranian learners' five main personality characteristics and their assertiveness scores were computed. Table 1 displays the results of descriptive statistics of this test.

Table1

*Descriptive Statistics for the Learners' Five Personality Characteristics and Assertiveness*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Assertiveness	113.86	15.03	66
Extroversion	25.35	4.79	66
Agreeableness	30.67	4.74	66
Conscientiousness	32.14	5.41	66
Neuroticism	24.48	4.44	66
Openness	33.71	6.45	66

As it is indicated in Table 1, the mean score of the Iranian students' assertiveness was 113.86 with the standard deviation of 15.03, while, the mean scores of the learners' personality characteristics were as follows: Extroversion (M= 25.35, SD= 4.79), Agreeableness (M= 30.67, SD= 4.74), Conscientiousness (M= 32.14, SD= 5.41), Neuroticism (M=24.48, SD= 4.44) and Openness to experience (M= 33.71, SD= 6.45).

### Checking the Assumptions

Before running the multiple linear regression, the related assumptions were checked and the results are presented below.

#### *Multicollinearity*

In order to check for the assumption of multicollinearity the correlations among the five personality traits and assertiveness were obtained (see Table 2).



Table 2  
*Correlations between Assertiveness and Five Personality Characteristics*

		Assertiveness	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Pearson Correlation	Assertiveness	1.00	.34	.05	.14	.05	.23
	Extraversion	.34	1.00	.25	.41	.05	.40
	Agreeableness	.05	.25	1.00	.44	-.14	.44
	Conscientiousness	.14	.41	.44	1.00	.01	.56
	Neuroticism	.05	.05	-.14	.01	1.00	.03
	Openness	.23	.40	.44	.56	.03	1.00
Sig(1- tailed)	Assertiveness	.	.00	.34	.13	.33	.03
	Extraversion	.00	.	.02	.00	.36	.00
	Agreeableness	.34	.02	.	.00	.14	.00
	Conscientiousness	.13	.00	.00	.	.47	.00
	Neuroticism	.33	.36	.14	.47	.	.39
	Openness	.03	.00	.00	.00	.39	.

Note. N=66

As is illustrated in Table 2, there was a significant moderate and positive relationship among assertiveness and Extroversion ( $r=.34$ ,  $P=.00$ ), nonsignificant small and positive relationship between assertiveness and Agreeableness ( $r=.05$ ,  $P=.34$ ), nonsignificant small and positive relationship between assertiveness and Conscientiousness ( $r=.14$ ,  $P=.13$ ), nonsignificant small and positive relationship between assertiveness and Neuroticism ( $r=.05$ ,  $P=.33$ ), and significant small and positive relationship between assertiveness and Openness to experience ( $r=.23$ ,  $P=.03$ ). In addition, there was not a high correlation between the components of personality traits. In other words, in order to avoid multicollinearity there should not be a high correlation of up around .8 or .9. Therefore, this assumption was met.

### **Outliers**

Residuals statistics including Mahalanobis Distance was used to check for the outliers (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Residual Statistics Using Mahalanobis for the Outliers of Five Personality Characteristics*

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	101.24	127.17	113.86	5.54	66
Std. Predicted Value	-2.28	2.40	.00	1.00	66
Standard Error of Predicted Value	2.35	7.05	4.29	.91	66
Adjusted Predicted Value	101.59	130.59	113.72	5.75	66
Residual	-22.19	40.94	.00	13.97	66
Std. Residual	-1.53	2.82	.00	.96	66
Stud. Residual	-1.58	2.97	.00	1.01	66
Deleted Residual	-23.67	45.43	.14	15.48	66
Stud. Deleted Residual	-1.60	3.18	.01	1.03	66
Mahal. Distance	.71	14.28	4.92	2.56	66
Cook's Distance	.00	.22	.02	.04	66
Centered Leverage Value	.01	.22	.08	.04	66

Dependent Variable: Assertiveness

The results in Table 3 specified that the maximum value for Mahalanobis Distance was 14.28, which was less than the critical value for five independent variables (20.52), as stated by Pallant (2013). Thus, it can be concluded that there was no outliers.

### ***Normality***

In order to determine the normality of the distribution of the residual errors, the plot of regression standardized residual was obtained (see Figure 1).

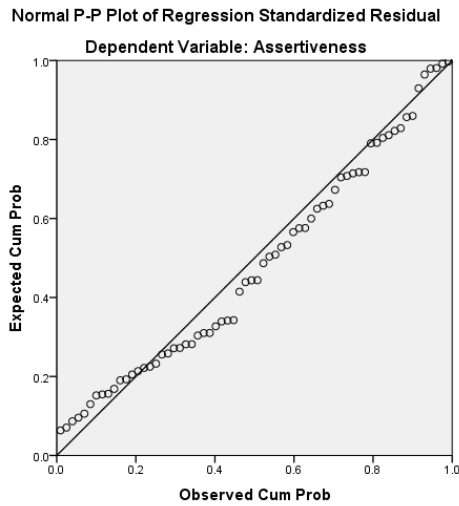


Figure 1. The Normality Plot

As Figure 1 shows, the points in the plot lie in a reasonably straight diagonal line from bottom left to the top right, so the normality assumption was met.

**Linearity and Homoscedasticity**

In order to check for Linearity and Homoscedasticity assumptions, scatterplot was obtained (see Figure 2).

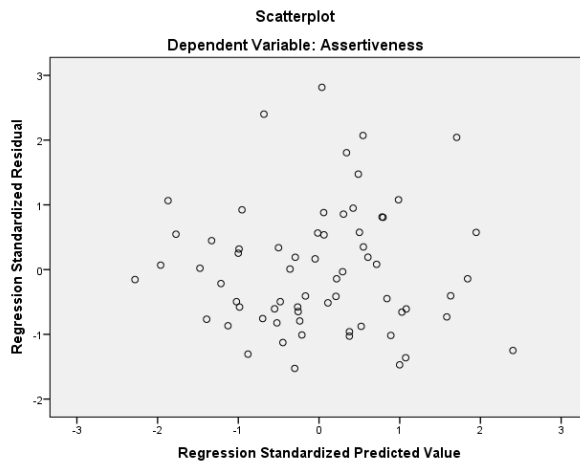


Figure 2. Scatterplot

As it is clear from Figure 2, the points are roughly rectangularly distributed with most of the scores concentrated in the center around zero point. Therefore, there was no violation of the assumptions of Linearity and Homoscedasticity. In this regard, the results of assumptions' checking legitimized the running of multiple linear regression test.

### **Research Question 1**

After checking for the assumptions, a standard multiple linear regression was run. In order to answer the first research question, "How much variance in Iranian postgraduate EFL students' assertiveness is explained by their personality characteristics", the results of "Model Summary" in multiple linear regression analysis is presented (see Table 4 ).

Table 4

*Results of Model Summary for Assertiveness and Five Personality Characteristics*

Model Summary<sup>b</sup>

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.37 <sup>a</sup>	.14	.06	14.54

a. Predictors: (Constant), Openness, Neuroticism, Extroversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness

b. Dependent Variable: Assertiveness

As Table 4 indicates, R Square value is .14, which shows that about 14% of the variance in the assertiveness of the students is explained by the five personality characteristics.

### **Research Question 2**

In order to find which one of the big five personality traits significantly predicts the students' assertiveness, the coefficients table of the conducted multiple-linear regression is reported (see Table 5).

Table 5  
Coefficients for Assertiveness and Five Personality Characteristics Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations		Collinearity Statistics		
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	85.10	17.98		4.73	.000	49.14	121.06					
Extroversion	.99	.42	.32	2.34	.023	.14	1.84	.34	.29	.28	.79	1.27
Agreeableness	-.22	.44	-.07	-.50	.620	-1.11	.67	.05	-.06	-.06	.73	1.36
Conscientiousness	-.12	.43	-.04	-.28	.779	-.98	.74	.14	-.04	-.03	.60	1.65
Neuroticism	.09	.41	.03	.21	.836	-.74	.91	.05	.03	.03	.97	1.03
Openness	.36	.36	.16	1.01	.316	-.35	1.08	.23	.13	.12	.61	1.64

a. Dependent Variable: Assertiveness

As illustrated in Table 5, the magnitudes of tolerance (should be more than .10) and VIF values (should be less than 10) indicated that the interaction between personality trait components and assertiveness leads to collinearity. Therefore, the multicollinearity assumption was not violated and we can safely interpret the results. As it is shown, in the standardized Beta coefficients column, Extroversion has the largest value ( $\beta = .32$ ), followed by Openness ( $\beta = .16$ ), and Agreeableness ( $\beta = .07$ ). It means that the Extroversion made the strongest contribution to explaining the dependent variable 'assertiveness', when the variance explained by all other variables in the model was controlled for. In other words, the Extroversion component was a statistically significant predictor of Iranian students' assertiveness ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $p = .023 < .05$ ), which is the answer for the second research question.

## Discussion

Human beings as learners are different in many respects. They behave differently from time to time and from one situation to another. In many educational systems, emphasis has been mostly on learners; their preferences, styles, personality traits, etc. The results of various studies suggest that it is important to determine students' personality characteristics and assertiveness and make them aware of these differences.

The current study examined the relationship between Iranian EFL students' personality characteristics and their assertiveness. It was revealed that about 14 percent of the students' assertiveness was related to the overall

personality traits. The specific aim was to determine which component of personality traits is the best and significant predictor of assertiveness.

The results of data analysis showed that all of the personality traits do not have the same degree of contribution to assertiveness. Only one of the personality traits (i.e., Extroversion) made a significant contribution to explaining the assertiveness. In other words, the Extroversion component acts as the predictor of the assertiveness skill of postgraduate students, majoring in English teaching at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch. Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Openness, and Neuroticism did not have any significant contribution to the dependent variable 'assertiveness'.

The findings illustrated previous adversary results between agreeableness and assertiveness (Bouchard et al., 1988; Ramanaiah et al., 1993). The findings of this study match with those of Ramanaiah et al. (1993) in that they found no significant relationship between personality trait of agreeableness and assertiveness. The contradictory findings of two mentioned studies can be justified in this way that in the study of Ramanaiah et al. (1993), the relationship was found between the total assertiveness and agreeableness; while, in the study of Bouchard et al. (1988) the relationship was estimated among different assertive behaviour (i.e., interpretation of negative feelings, interpretation of positive feelings, refusal behavior) and agreeableness.

The results of the present study is compatible with the findings of Kirst (2011) that showed more extroverted students have significantly higher levels of assertiveness. Likewise, the study by Bagherian and Mojembari (2016) reflected a significant positive relationship between extroversion and assertiveness. The reason can be due to the fact that both assertive and extrovert persons are willing to participate in different situations and communicate freely with different people. Therefore, it is not surprising to find a direct relationship between an individual person's extroversion and assertiveness.

The results of the study is not in agreement with Cote and Moskowitz (1998) and Vestewig and Moss (1976) studies in which they stated that there was a significant positive correlation among extroversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experiences and negative significant relationship between neuroticism and assertiveness. It can be due to the

reason that neurotic individuals incline to experiment feelings like anger, guilt, anxiety, envy, and depressed mood (Mathews, Ian, & Whiteman, 1998, as cited in Amani Hafshejani et al., 2013). These individuals cannot strongly respond to the environmental stress because for them even the ordinary situations are threatening (Barrick & Mount, 1991).

Carrel et al. (1996, as cited in Sadeghi et al., 2012) believe that second language teachers should try to recognize and understand main individual differences among their students. This would help them identify their personalities and use different methodologies accordingly, which would result in a sensitive and effective instruction. For instance, since extrovert students are more willing to participate in language learning, teachers should help the more quiet students to participate in the language classroom and “come out of their shells” (Kezwer, 1987, p.55). In this regard, teachers can individualize instruction by streaming the students based on whether they are more or less extrovert and, in this way, teaching can match personality styles of the students (Chastein, 1975, as cited in Kezwer, 1987).

Adequate knowledge of assertiveness skill and desirable personality behavior are requirements of a successful language performance. That is why EFL learners can make use of the results of this study in that they can be aware of personality traits. Being aware of the type of personality can help learners know their abilities and devise ways for improving their weaknesses and changing the negative ones and fostering their strength especially in educational settings to reach their aims. In addition, they can develop their assertiveness skill because it can help them to express their needs and negative and positive thoughts easily without being anxious and feeling guilty (Eslami, Rabiei, Afzali, Hamidizadeh, & Masoudi, 2016). As Eslami et al. (2016) point out, a person who is assertive can build a close relationship with other people and express his/her views freely without violating their rights.

The results can be useful for EFL teachers in that they can provide opportunities for the students to practice their assertiveness skills and personality behaviors. One way is through setting up assertiveness training sessions to train and inform the learners of the skills related to assertiveness. It is because assertiveness training helps individuals in changing their views

about themselves, providing ways of expressing their moods and thoughts logically, and boosting their self-confidence which, in turn, can increase their motivation in learning (Phares, 1991).

According to Allport (1937), personality characteristics never happen in two persons in the similar way; thus, to make the use of methodologies more effective in the classroom, teachers need to increase their knowledge of personality differences and assertiveness.

In addition to the teachers, syllabus designers and material writers need to be familiar with the learners' personality differences to gain insights into the learners' differences and understand the diverse needs of the learners in order to plan for the education improvement.

This study was carried out among postgraduate university students majoring in ELT, and as there have already been studies among undergraduate students, future research can be done among the junior and senior secondary school students. It would also be a good idea to contrast students' assertiveness at the pre-university and university levels to determine the responsible factors in the increase or decrease of their assertiveness. This can help the teachers to work on the problematic areas and boost their students' confidence in second/foreign language learning. The variable of gender was not considered in this study, further research can compare male and female students' personality traits with regard to the factor of assertiveness.

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