

A Reaction Paper on Big Five Personality Traits and Language Learning

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Abstract – The present paper discusses five psychological items influencing educational environments especially language classes. These items are known as “Big Five Personality Traits” which play an important role in learning a new language because language learning is all a matter of the ability to communicate well with others and all the factors which help this process or make it harder count.

Keywords: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, language proficiency

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In contemporary psychology, the "Big Five" factors are five broad domains or dimensions of personality that are used to describe human personality. The Big Five framework of personality traits from Costa and McCrae (1992) has emerged as a robust model for understanding the relationship between personality and various academic behaviors. According to Costa and McCrae (1992), the Big Five factors are Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism.

1.1. Openness

Appreciation for art, emotion, adventure, unusual ideas, curiosity, and variety of experience. Openness reflects the degree of intellectual curiosity, creativity and a preference for novelty and variety a person has. It is also described as the extent to which a person is imaginative or independent, and depicts a personal preference for a variety of activities over a strict routine. High openness can be perceived as unpredictability or lack of focus. Moreover, individuals with high openness are said to pursue self-actualization specifically by seeking out intense, euphoric experiences, such as skydiving, living abroad, gambling, et cetera. Conversely, those with low openness seek to gain fulfillment through perseverance, and are characterized as pragmatic and data-driven – sometimes even perceived to be dogmatic and closed-minded. Some disagreement remains about how to interpret and contextualize the openness factor.

As it is mentioned above, openness in any individual can be considered as a very helpful mental aid. When a person is courageous enough to experience new opportunities, for sure,

they won't be afraid or shy of trying to learn a new language. Certainly learning a new language demands enough courage and curiosity because it pushes a language learner to study more and not be frightened of seeing themselves in a completely new environment in the classroom or in the country where the new language is spoken. Nobody will be successful in learning a new language while they are forced by their parents or other factors like their job. Even if they improve, that will be very slow.

1.2. Conscientiousness

A tendency to be organized and dependable, show self-discipline, act dutifully, aim for achievement, and prefer planned rather than spontaneous behavior. High conscientiousness is often perceived as stubborn and obsessive. Low conscientiousness means being flexible and spontaneous, but can be perceived as sloppy and unreliable.

The first behavior which is a must for every language learner is having a plan or a study program which makes their studies disciplined. Because language items that we learn can be forgotten very soon and when we do not follow whatever the teacher has thought, we will easily forget them and it will be regarded as a weakness for each language learner who does not have a program or plan to study their lessons. There are some language learners who are very busy because of their job or because they are married and they have children so they have to handle loads of responsibilities. Such learners usually attend their classes in the afternoon or after work. They feel tired and sleepy and always tell their teachers that they did not have time to do their homework or review what their teacher had thought before. Usually experienced teachers know immediately that punishment cannot be a good option to react against such language learners because they are not free teenagers who have a lot of time and they just like to escape from their duties. Therefore, the teacher manages class time in a way that he or she can cover all the activities in the class because the teacher knows his students will not devote any time to study. Class environment must be a fun one to attract them.

1.3. Extraversion

Energy, positive emotions, assertiveness, sociability and the tendency to seek stimulation in the company of others, and talkativeness. High extraversion is often perceived as attention-seeking, and domineering. Low extraversion causes a reserved, reflective personality, which can be perceived as aloof or self-absorbed.

Everybody who starts to learn a new language, does it to be able to communicate with people from another country and culture and communication means being sociable and eager to talk and share feelings or points of view with others. The main purpose of language learning is understanding other language speakers and also being understood by them. Now imagine a student feels shy to speak in a language class or maybe on the whole that person is not talkative. Such a student will not improve as fast as those talkative and sociable students because those active ones talk and their teacher sees what their weak points are and they will be corrected while those quiet ones lose such an opportunity.

1.4. Agreeableness

A tendency to be compassionate and cooperative rather than suspicious and antagonistic towards others. It is also a measure of one's trusting and helpful nature, and whether a person is generally well-tempered or not. High agreeableness is often seen as naive or submissive. Low agreeableness personalities are often competitive or challenging people, which can be seen as argumentative or untrustworthy. Finally, Agreeableness refers to being helpful, cooperative, and sympathetic towards others (Costa and McCrae, 1992).

Honestly, all of us have experienced classmates who did not have any agreeableness with others in the class. They used to think all their classmates were their enemies or rivals so they had to defeat us badly. They never shared their activities with us and always behaved in a way that felt like we owed them something. In a language class this kind of characteristic can be shown in different ways. They may not feel friendly enough while facing or communicating with others. Therefore, they might not be very successful in doing pair works in the class or they cannot accept doing class projects or tasks out of class with others. Lack of agreeableness can be a big problem the same as being reserved because they lose communication opportunities and vice-versa. Those who are friendly with their classmates and accept language learning as a teamwork in the class have loads of chances to work on their listening and speaking and also other team activities which finally leads to their own language development.

1.5. Neuroticism

The tendency to experience unpleasant emotions easily, such as anger, anxiety, depression, and vulnerability. Neuroticism also refer to the degree of emotional stability and impulse control and is sometimes referred to by its low pole, "emotional stability". A high need for stability manifests as a stable and calm personality, but can be seen as uninspiring and unconcerned. A low need for stability causes a reactive and excitable personality, often very dynamic individuals, but they can be perceived as unstable or insecure. Neuroticism refers to degree of emotional stability, impulse control, and anxiety.

There are a large number of students who have no control on their stress or anxiety when they enter a class or when they are to take a test. Unfortunately high levels of stress can cause a lot of problems for language learners. They may feel they will not learn the language or that language learning seems like something beyond their abilities. Those students who are relaxed and do not suffer from stress enjoy their time which is spent in the class. They enjoy learning the new language and the new opportunity which is facing them. They are confident and can concentrate well, therefore, they understand what is taught in the class very well whereas those who are always under stress just spread negative energy wherever they go and not only they themselves do not improve or learn their lessons like other classmates but also they make others feel bad too so it is possible that others prefer to avoid them and this leads to a solitary situation which can even increase their stress in turn.

Language proficiency (LP) has various definitions. A brief account of LP is as follows: "A person's skill in using a language for a specific purpose. Whereas language achievement describes language ability as a result of learning, proficiency refers to the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak or

understand language. Proficiency may be measured by the use of a proficiency test” (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992, p.204).

Some researchers like Kommaraju, Karau, & Schmeck (2009) worked on the relationship among each of big five factors and academic motivation whereas other researchers like O’Connor and Paunonen (2007) worked on the relationship between the Big Five personality dimensions and academic achievement.

There are some related studies in the literature. Only a handful of studies have examined the relation of personality traits to aspects of academic motivation (e.g., Busato, Prins, Elshout, & Hamaker, 1999; Kanfer, Ackerman, & Heggstad, 1996, as cited in Komarraju & Karau, 2005). More recently, Kommaraju et al (2009) found that conscientiousness is related across all three motivation dimensions, and in particular, it was found to have positive relationship with intrinsic motivation and negative relationship with amotivation - students who are more organized and disciplined are most likely to be motivated and are less likely to be disengaged. A similar positive relationship was found between openness and intrinsic motivation – students who are intellectually curious are more motivated in learning and schoolwork. In addition, agreeableness has been found to be negatively associated with amotivation while extraversion and neuroticism was positively related with extrinsic motivation. The researchers, however, reported that neurotic individuals tend to score higher on amotivation.

O’Connor and Paunonen (2007) carried out a research on the relationship between the Big Five personality dimensions and post-secondary academic achievement, and found some consistent results. A meta-analysis showed Conscientiousness, in particular, to be most strongly and consistently associated with academic success. In addition, Openness to Experience was sometimes positively associated with scholastic achievement, whereas Extraversion was sometimes negatively related to the same criterion, although the empirical evidence regarding these latter two dimensions was somewhat mixed. Importantly, the literature indicates that the narrow personality traits or facets presumed to underlie the broad Big Five personality factors are generally stronger predictors of academic performance than are the Big Five personality factors themselves. Furthermore, personality predictors can account for variance in academic performance beyond that accounted for by measures of cognitive ability.

Although there are many researchers who explored the relationship between personality traits and academic performance (Eysenck, 1967; Cattell & Butcher, 1968; Kline & Gale, 1971) but there are several researchers (Mehta & Kumar, 1985; Dollinger & Orf, 1991; Green, Peters, & Webster, 1991; Rothstein, Paunonen, Rush, & King, 1994; Allik & Realo, 1997) who concluded that personality is not significantly related to academic achievement to be of real significance in educational settings.

2. CONCLUSION

Big five personality traits are five important psychological dimensions which are inseparable from educational environments. It is somehow hard for teachers to recognize all their students’ feelings or attitudes and then try to behave in a way that does not seem threatening or to teach in a way that motivates all students. This is the students who must be aware of their own

feelings and be honest with themselves because usually teachers try their best in class to both respect the students and also do their best to teach the target language. Despite all a teacher does in a class to provide a good environment in the class, there are some students who suffer from different kinds of negative feelings which act like barriers for their language learning. We as teachers or learners must consider all big personality traits, openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism as important items which may help or vice-versa stop our development. At least teachers can mention them in the classroom and discuss them with the students. They can negotiate their advantages and disadvantages and also teachers can ask their students to brainstorm their ideas and suggest solutions which may actually seem very practical and helpful for their classmates who are suffering from such feelings.

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