

A literature review on the relationship between personal traits and language learning

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언어학습과 성격특성의 관계에 대한 문헌 분석 연구

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Abstract This is a literature review study on personality traits' role in language learning. Personality traits play an important role in language learning. In order to review research outcomes in recent studies, articles related to language learning and personality traits were collected through research databases such as ProQuest, Google Scholar, and EBSCO. Based on the analysis of collected literature, this study revealed that extraversion and openness to experience are the personality traits leading to the successful language learning. More specifically, extraversion was related to speaking skills while openness to experience was related to listening. It is also important to note which learning strategies are more likely to be utilized in second language learning and personality traits that are more likely to use them. These findings focus on writing skills, listening skills, and speaking skills. Further studies in the field are suggested.

Key Words : Personality traits, Language acquisition, Language learning, Listening skills, Writing skills, Speaking skills

요약 이 연구는 언어를 학습하는데 있어서의 학습자의 성격특성이 어떤 역할을 하여 어떤 관계를 가지고 있는지를 알아보는데 그 목적이 있다. 이를 위해서 기존의 연구를 분석하여 제시하였다. 즉, 최근의 연구들을 검토하기 위해서 언어학습과 성격특성에 관련된 연구들을 ProQuest, Google Scholar, 그리고 EBSCO 등의 데이터베이스를 통하여 추출하였다. 추출된 연구들을 검토하고 선정 및 정리하여 언어학습의 영역 즉 쓰기, 듣기, 말하기의 영역에서 성격특성이 어떤 역할을 하고 있는지를 문헌별로 정리하고 그 의미를 도출하였다. 문헌연구의 결과 외향성 및 개방성의 특성은 언어의 학습을 성공적으로 이끄는 데에 기여를 하고 있음을 확인하였다. 또한 외향성은 말하기에, 개방성은 듣기에 연관되어 있음을 연구들은 보고하고 있었다. 또한 학습자의 성격특성은 개인의 언어학습의 전략에도 관계되어 있고 전략수립에 영향을 미치고 있음이 확인되었다. 이같은 결과를 바탕으로 앞으로의 연구 방향에 대한 제언을 하였다.

주제어 : 성격특성, 언어획득, 언어학습, 듣기 기술, 쓰기 기술, 말하기 기술

1. Introduction

Personality traits seem to play a very important role in language learning. Why is it that some people find it particularly difficult to

learn a language, while others seem to have relative-ease picking up a foreign language? As many studies have shown, people with certain personality traits seem to perform better when

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it comes to language acquisition than others, specifically those who are extroverted [1-5] and express openness [1-3]. Before researching the implications of personality traits in language learning, it should be defined. Hofstede and McCrae [6] define personality as “collective mental characteristics (p. 53).”

Currently, research around this topic is growing as learning second and/or foreign languages become more popular due to a massive international diaspora and intergenerational shifts in languages due to immigration. Therefore, it is timely to see how certain traits motivate humans to learn a foreign language, so that language teaching and learning can be efficiently facilitated. This literature review focused on reviewing literature on how certain personality traits help students become more successful with language learning. These reviews are valid because most studies empirically tested their assertions with relevant sample populations (e.g., university students) to see if personality traits affected language learning or not. In previous studies, data collected usually from a student sample population through the use of various personality tests. For example, in students from the Lingnan University were administered the Myers-Briggs Type Inventories (MBTI) [7] and Oxford’s Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) [8] to assess which personality traits the participants exhibited and the strategies they had a propensity to use [1]. Respectively, these tests were translated into their native languages [8]. In Asmalı’s study [3], which was conducted at a state university in Turkey, 22 students were also given MBTI’s and SILL’s to determine whether or not personality traits affected their ability to learn a foreign language.

Some studies assessed personality traits

differently by using different tests to assess personality traits. For example, Obraliç and Mulaliç [2] conducted a study using the Big Five Personality Traits questionnaire at the International University of Sarajevo. Also, in Kato’s study [5], which was conducted at universities in Tokyo and in the Saitama prefecture, used the New Personality Index (NPI) tests instead of MBTI for 187 students. Despite using different types of tests, most of them looked at Extraversion, or traits associated with sociability [1-5]. Other traits were also examined: for example, the trait Openness to experience was found to be significantly correlated to language learning achievement [2]. The findings from this literature review suggested that this trait may help students with regards to motivation [2]. Reviewing these studies was extremely relevant to this paper as they looked at second language learners over several decades. The objectives of this study are as follows:

Research objective 1: To address which personality traits account for learning a language.

Research objective 2: To analyze the outcomes of previous studies in terms of personality traits’ effects.

Research objective 3: To find out which personality traits are advantageous in different language learning skills (i.e., listening, writing, and speaking) and language learning strategies (cognitive and metacognitive).

2. Research Method

In order to conduct a proper literature review, the procedures suggested by Snyder [8] were followed. In his study for literature review research, he has suggested dividing the methodologies into four phases: designing the review, conducting the review and search

articles, analysis, and writing the review.

2.1 Phase 1: Designing the review

In the first phase, articles were collected based on relevancy to the study through the use of several database searches, such as ProQuest, Google Scholar, and EBSCO. Since it is planned as literature review in the field, the potential audience are any persons who work in the language acquisition field and/or anyone who may be interested in learning a foreign language. This paper's purpose is to defend claims that personality traits can be attributed to successful or unsuccessful foreign language learning. The following terms were chosen, with an expert agreement, in order to conduct searches: "personality traits," "language learning," and "language acquisition,".

2.2 Phase 2: Conducting the review/search articles

Initially, ProQuest was used in order to search for articles in the field of personality traits and language learning. The goal was to find tangible evidence to our research question. With this initial search, a total number of 22,943 results were gathered. Furthermore, by narrowing this search, said terms yielded a total of 90 articles. Specifically, articles that had quantitative methodologies were selected in order to gather more cohesive and empirical studies. To further identify relevant articles, the authors decided to only use scholarly journals as they related more to this literature review. In order to find how personality traits affected specific language skills, the search was narrowed down to three terms, which were "personality traits," "language learning," "learning strategies," and "writing/listening/speaking skills." This allowed the authors to not only reflect on how personality traits generally affected

language learning, but to further hone in on how personality traits may affect different aspects of this process.

2.3 Phase 3: Analysis

The information needed for abstraction are those which deal with learning strategies, personality traits, and language learning. In other words, articles which only focused on these three concepts were utilized for writing this literature review. These articles were then organized by storing them into a GoogleDrive, so that the authors could access them easily for collaborative work, whenever they were needed. These articles were also organized based on certain classifications, which were defined by whether the articles focused on the writing, speaking, or listening skills of the participants. Articles which identified specific learning strategies were also a focal point for this literature review.

Another feature of these selected studies, which the authors felt was important to identify, was the fact that most of the research utilized participants who were students of the English language. There were, however, two articles that were exempted from this category [6,8]. In Hwu's research, participants were Spanish language students while Moody looked at students of several foreign languages. It is also important to note that this literature review did not look at gender or ethnic differences in learning a language since the authors felt that they were irrelevant to this research. This was confirmed by an expert. The data that was collected had participants of many different genders, ethnicities, and nationalities. Specific types of language skills were also used to classify the articles used for this literature review. The authors defined these skills as writing, speaking, and listening skills.

This study also focused on identifying personality types' correlation to language learning skills they utilized.

2.4 Phase 4: Writing the review

The authors of this literature review specifically followed the procedures of Levy and Ellis [11] in writing the results of the review. In order to gather updated information on this topic, reviews on the articles that were published within a period of ten years were rearranged with the exception of one article, which the authors felt was relevant to this literature review because of its subject matter. Publication sources were also excluded from this study since it wasn't relevant.

3. Results

As previously stated, this literature review studies focused on several aspects of language learning, in particular writing skills, listening skills, reading skills (See Table 1 for a summary), and learning strategies in view of learners' personality traits. Most of these studies also seemed to focus on extraversion as a specific trait that seemed to have a positive correlation with acquiring a language [1-5]. This was not the case in all of the studies researched as some studies identified other personality traits that were essential to successful language learning.

Table 1. Language learning skills and personality traits

Language Learning Skills	Traits with positive correlation	Traits with negative correlation
Writing	<i>Extraversion</i> , [12] <i>Introversion</i> , [15]	<i>Neuroticism</i> , [13] [14]
Listening	<i>Openness</i> , [16]	<i>Neuroticism</i> , [14] [17]
Speaking	<i>Neuroticism</i> , [18]	<i>Neuroticism</i> , [14]; <i>Openness</i> , [18]

According to Zarei and Rahmani [19], metacognitive strategies seem to play an important role in how well people learn a language. In terms of identifying language learning strategies, Kato [5] chose to define them by social strategies and pleasure-oriented strategies, which she characterized as communicative strategies. Essentially, these strategies are linked to extraversion since it is a trait that is associated with higher levels of sociability. Openness also seems to be a trait correlated with language learning and participants who exhibited openness to new experiences were more successful at learning a language [2]. Openness is another trait that can be associated with sociability. On average, language learners who were more social than their counterparts seem to fare better with language learning than those who were less social [1-5]. Not only does openness seem to be an important communicative skill, but there also seems to be a correlation with openness and listening skills. Since a language is primarily a tool for communication, the most important aspect of learning a language would be to speak it. Therefore, those who are more social are more likely to have greater rates of success than those who are not.

3.1 Personality traits' role in writing skills

In a study conducted on Taiwanese students [19], students' writing skills were evaluated on how well they responded and commented on each other's Facebook posts. Neuroticism had a negative correlation with writing skills and those who exhibited extraversion had higher rates of success [12]. However, other studies have contradicted these results. In a study conducted on Iranian students which studied writing skills among participants who were either introverted or extroverted, the researchers

found that participants who were more introverted performed better on writing tasks than those who were more extroverted [15]. They also found that introverts exhibited a higher level of language use and were more successful in regards to how they utilized vocabulary [15]. Another study that contradicted the hypothesis that extraversion is a variable correlated with better writing skills in a foreign language found that there was no significant difference between writing ability in a second language and having the introversion or extraversion trait [20]. A trait that was excluded in these two studies was neuroticism [15,20]. According to Azarfam and Baki [13], anxiety, which is a symptom that corresponds with neuroticism, seems to play a significant role in affecting students' performance. Although extraversion/introversion may not play a significant role in how well people perform their writing skills, exhibiting anxious and or neurotic behavior may play a role in students' performance.

There could also be some sampling bias in these studies. For example, in the study performed by Bouroujeni et al. [15], the participants were all undergraduate students majoring in English Translation and Teaching and students from other majors were excluded. When gathering a sample population, it is important to have variability [21]. In other words, they should have looked on how students from other majors might have performed. Therefore, these data findings may have incorrectly identified extraversion as a negatively-correlating trait.

3.2 Personality traits' role in listening skills

Not only does openness seem to be an important communicative skill, but there also seems to be a correlation with openness and

listening skills. Fayyaz and Kamal [21] found that openness is positively correlated with listening skills. They also found that agreeableness does not seem to affect listening ability in any significant way, however, neuroticism did affect listening ability quite negatively [21]. It seems natural that neuroticism would have a negative impact on learning in general since it can lead to a decrease in motivation. Another personality trait that was positively correlated with high use of metacognitive strategies was conscientiousness [17]. Conscientiousness is a personality trait which is defined by self-disciplined and self-motivated [17]. Respectively, it seems that there would be a more significant correlation between good listening skills and openness since openness conveys receptivity as it is a passive trait. However, it is important to note that extraversion isn't necessarily connotated with egoism.

3.3 Personality' traits' role in speaking skills

Examining speaking among different sample populations proved to show varied results. Hsin-Yi and Kelsen [22] conducted on 329 Mandarin-speaking undergraduate students focused on how personality traits affected speaking skills. They found that "extraversion was the only personality trait that correlated with presentation skills" [22p.769]. Similarly, Esmaeeli et al. [23] found a high correlation between speaking ability and emotional intelligence, which was characterized by intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, stress management, adaptability and general mood. In contrast to these findings, a study conducted on 120 Iranian students found that there was no correlation between extraversion and learners' willingness to communicate and they found positively correlated to WTC was neuroticism

[18]. These findings are unusual as this seems to be a trait that is negatively correlated with learning [2,14]. Agreeableness and Conscientiousness also seemed to have a negative correlation to WTC [18]. They also seemed to have stated that extraverted people are more likely to express anger [18]. According to Obralić and Mulalić [2, p. 79] neuroticism can be characterized by “instability” and “impulsive behaviors.” Therefore, this seems to be contradictory to their definition of extraversion. Neuroticism also seems to be correlated with negative attitudes towards foreign language learning, which may result in poor language performance [24]. If this is the case, it seems that the reviewers may have made an error applying the correct definition to extraversion.

3.4 Personality traits' role in language learning strategies

The use of different learning strategies and how different personality types may use them when learning a second language. Table 2 summarizes relations between language learning strategies and personality traits. Asmali [3, p. 17] defines cognitive strategies as “mental strategies that learners use to make sense of their learning” while metacognitive strategies are defined as strategies that “[help] the learner regulate their learning.”

Table 2. Language learning strategy and personality traits

Language Learning Skills	Traits correlation
Cognitive strategies	Positive correlation: <i>Openness to experience</i> , [25]; <i>Intuition</i> , [10]
Metacognitive strategies	Positive correlation: <i>Openness to experience</i> , [26-27]; <i>Conscientiousness</i> , [26]
Memory strategies	Positive correlation: <i>Agreeableness</i> , [3]
Social strategies	Positive correlation: <i>extraversion</i> , [26-27]

Asmali's study [3] found that Agreeableness was significantly correlated to the use of memory strategies. Cognitive strategies were associated positively with the Openness to experience trait, while Neuroticism was negatively correlated with cognitive strategies [25]. In a different study, participants who scored on the extraversion scale used more social strategies and found that those who scored high in Conscientious and Openness to experience traits used metacognitive skills [26,27]. However, Hwu [10] found that students who exhibited Intuition used more cognitive strategies than those who exhibited Sensing. According to this research, those who exhibit Openness to experience seem to use a wider range of learning strategies when it comes to studying a foreign language. People who are more open to new experiences and that are receptive to constructive criticism, may have an easier time learning the language.

Interestingly enough, Fayyaz and Kamal [16] did not seem to find a significant correlation between extraversion and metacognitive strategies. Furthermore, individuals who scored higher on the neuroticism scale used less metacognitive strategies than those who scored higher on the extraversion scale [17]. In fact, extraversion showed a positive correlation to metacognitive strategies [17]. Those who are extraverted will most likely use social strategies which may give them an advantage when it comes to learning socially. Those who may have neurotic traits may have a harder time being critiqued and could cause them to withdraw from the classroom; and therefore, this could negatively impact their learning when it comes to imploring learning strategies.

4. Conclusions and Suggestion

Given that most of these studies were

conducted in the last couple decades, they are extremely relevant to today's studies that examine the roles that personality traits play in language acquisition. It seems that extraversion and openness to experience are the personality traits that most successively learn languages. This, however, may correlate exclusively to specific language learning skills, such as extraversion and speaking, or openness and listening. It is also important to note which learning strategies are more likely to be utilized in second language learning and personality traits that are more likely to use them. By identifying these strategies, this literature review can narrow down the most successful language learning strategies, so that educators can encourage students to use them in the classroom. In terms of overall language learning achievements and its relation to personality traits, one study found that openness was the trait that was most correlated to success in language learning [28]. These findings can be supported by the other findings that also noted a correlation between openness and successful language learning.

One particular topic that wasn't examined was the relationship between culture, personality and language learning success. Although not all of the articles used were conducted on students from majority Muslim populations, some of them looked at sample populations from Iran. As Islam encourages proselytizing [29], this may inadvertently influence people who come from an Islamic tradition to behave more extrovertedly than someone from a culture that values more restrained behaviors. Similarly, extroverted behaviors are considered "ethical" [29]. Additionally, personality traits are generally influenced by culture [6]. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the relationship

between personality traits and cultural background as individuals are both culturally and individually multifaceted. In other words, culture and personality traits are not mutually exclusive concepts, but rather are confounding. Furthermore, highlighting the specific personality traits that are correlated with success can provide insight on how educators can improve second language learning in and out of the classroom.

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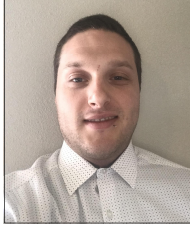
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