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Exploring the Relationship between Global Personality Traits and Attitudes toward Foreign Language Learning

Jafar Pourfeiz [a]*

[a] *School of Foreign Languages, Hacettepe University, Ankara 06800, Turkey*

Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating the relationship between global personality traits and attitudes towards foreign language learning in a Turkish context. The participants were 157 university students majoring in English as a foreign language (EFL) at a state university. Goldberg's (2001) International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) was used to assess the participants' perceptions of global personality traits and the Attitudes towards Foreign Language Learning (A-FLL) scale (Vandewaetere and Desmet, 2009) was employed to measure their attitudes towards foreign language learning. Findings demonstrated statistically positive correlations between five big personality traits and attitudes towards foreign language learning. Findings also showed statistically significant relationships between cognitive component, affective/evaluative, and behavioral and personality components of attitudes towards foreign language learning (A-FLL) and Big-Five personality traits. Additionally, openness was the strongest predictor of cognitive component; conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability and openness were the predictors of affective/evaluative component, and emotional stability, agreeableness and openness were found to greatly contribute to the prediction of behavioral/personality component. Gender differences were also observed in exhibition subcomponent of behavioral component. Based on the findings of the present study and the diagnostic implications obtained regarding the participants' personality it becomes evident that getting a clearer picture of students' personality traits and their attitudes towards language learning at the beginning of the course might lead to better learning outcomes.

Keywords: traits; agreeableness; openness; foreign language learning

* Jafar Pourfeiz. Tel.: +90-539-594-8116
 E-mail address: jpourfeiz@hacettepe.edu.tr

1. Introduction

Intensive research into second or foreign language (L2) learning (Dörnyei, 2005, 2006; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014) has established the importance of recognizing individual differences in learning a L2. Indeed, identifying the factors underlying a long-term learning process of learning a L2 is regarded as a dominant objective of research in educational psychology. Although some researchers have so far been interested in cognitive ability as one important determinant of academic achievement (Gottfredson, 2003), recent research indicates that ability factors alone cannot account fully for individual differences and academic achievement (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2006; O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007). Indeed, a myriad of factors such as cognitive, affective, and behvioral factors have been found to be the determinants of successful language learning and academic achievements. Attitudes toward L2 learning (Gardner, 1985, 2001), and motivation (Dörnyei, 2014; Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013) have been the target of intensive research in L2 learning over the past five decades.

On the other hand, some important learner variables such as personality factors, notably Big Five personality traits (Goldberg, 1992) have not been investigated adequately enough in the L2 literature within the framework of individual differences. O'Connor and Paunonen (2007) argue that behavioral tendencies reflected in personality traits affect certain habits that can influence academic achievement. It is also suggested that personality traits may be especially significant predictors of post-secondary academic performance, since measures of cognitive ability might fail to predict academic achievement at higher levels of education (Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic, & McDougall, 2003; O'Connor and Paunonen, 2007). Moreover, Dörnyei (2005) asserts that ability and motivation as the two individual differences variables simply do not explain the whole picture of academic success since personality factors also play a powerful role as modifying variables in L2 learning and academic achievement. The present study, therefore, sought to examine the viable relationship between Big Five or global personality traits and attitudes toward foreign language learning among EFL learners in the under-researched context of Turkey.

2. Literature review

The term 'personality,' refers to a complex of all the attributes that characterize a unique individual. Pervin and John (2001) defined personality as a person's characteristics that "account for consistent patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving" (p. 4). Personality traits also concern the "generalized and personalized determining tendencies" which are also constant and enduring forms of a person's adjustment to his/her environment (Pervin et al., 2005, p. 226). Personality traits have been approached and conceptualized from a variety of theoretical perspectives and, despite diverse conceptualizations of the construct, these approaches have contributed to our understanding of personality traits as individual differences variables in learning experience and code of behavior. Mayer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) typology, Eysenck's three-dimensional model, and the Big Five model (Goldberg, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 2003) are the three personality traits taxonomies which have dominated research into second or foreign language (L2) learning.

The Big Five model, the focus of the current study, represents a taxonomy of the most basic and independent personality traits including extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and emotional stability as opposed to neuroticism (Dörnyei, 2005, Pervin et al., 2005). Research into the field of L2 learning and communication (Conrad & Patry, 2012; Dewaele, 2013; Ghonsooly, Khajavy, & Asadpour, 2012; Kayaoğlu, 2013; Oz, 2014) has established the significant role which personality traits play in motivation to learn a L2, development of speaking confidence and willingness to communicate in English, and language achievement. Using path analysis, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) found that global personality traits influenced L2 learning motivation and willingness to communicate through the mediation of intergroup attitudes toward language, L2 confidence and perceived communicative competence. Similarly, the findings of a recent study (Dewaele, 2013) revealed that extraversion and neuroticism significantly correlate with foreign language classroom anxiety. However, to the best knowledge of the researcher, no single study has reported a 100% correlation between all personality types and the L2 related variables measured thus far.

Over the past five decades, research into motivation and attitudes toward L2 learning has been dominated by Gardner's (1985) socioeducational model which posits that two basic sets of attitudes, i.e. attitudes toward learning situation and integrativeness, are key variables in motivation to learn a L2. The socioeducational model postulates

that some individuals learn another language in order to integrate and identify with another language community and culture. The meta- analysis of socioeducational model by Masgoret and Gardner (2003) revealed that attitudes are significant for language achievement. However, their role is indirect and mediated by motivation. Similar context-specific constructs with different labelling have been proposed to account for the integrativeness construct. Yashima (2002) proposed "Intercultural Posture" construct as a general attitude toward international community that influences motivation to learn a L2 through linking a series of attitude and motivation variables to the willingness to and frequency of communication in English. Inspired by the possible self theory, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) and Csizér and Dörnyei (2005) redefined integrativeness and relabelled it as "Ideal L2 Self", within motivational self-system framework, which represents "the L2-specific dimension of the learner's ideal self" (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005, p. 30).

Notwithstanding different views on attitudes toward foreign language learning and motivation, it can be concluded that personality traits and attitudes toward foreign language learning are interrelated. MacIntyre et al. (1998) assert that personality is central in setting the context for motivation to learn a L2 and L2 communication. Nonetheless, its impact is less direct through the mediation of other factors such as attitudes toward learning situation, L2 confidence and motivation. They further state that disposition to positive or negative reaction to foreign people aligned with positive or negative attitudes in a context with or without intergroup conflict underpins the social distance or harmony between groups. In view of all that has been mentioned so far, it is evident that personality traits can play a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward foreign language learning and can have the potential to affect certain habits which can impact on academic achievement. To the best knowledge of the researcher, however, there is scarce literature on the issue in the field of L2 research, more specifically in the under-researched context of Turkey. Therefore, the present study the present study sought to examine the relationship between global personality traits and attitudes toward foreign language learning. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are Turkish EFL learners' attitudes toward foreign language learning?
2. Is there any relationship between global personality traits and attitudes toward foreign language learning?
3. Can the variance in the participants' attitudes toward foreign language learning be predicted by personality traits?
4. Do the Turkish EFL learners differ in their attitudes toward foreign language learning in relation to gender?

3. Method

3.1. Setting and participants

The present study was conducted in a pre-service EFL teacher education program at a major state university in Ankara, Turkey. University students (*N*=157; female: 102, 65 %; male: 55, 35%) majoring in English as a foreign language (EFL) voluntarily participated in the study and gave consent for data collection. They ranged in age from 18 to 22 years (*M*=19.89, *SD* =.97).

3.2. Materials

Attitudes towards foreign language learning were measured by using attitudes towards foreign language learning (A-FLL) Scale (Vandewaetere & Desmet, 2009). The A-FLL consists of 31 statements which participants rate on a 7-point (ranging from "totally disagree" to "totally agree") Likert scale. It has three major components: cognitive component, affective/evaluative component with three sub-scales, and behavioral component with four subscales (Table1). The scores for factors are calculated by adding the scores on statements related to each factor. Higher scores represent more positive attitudes towards FLL. The internal consistency of A-FLL in this study was α= .90 for the entire scale.

Goldberg's (2001) International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) was used to assess the Big-Five personality traits. The 50-item version consisting of 10 items for each of the Big-Five personality traits was utilized in the present study. Participants were required to rate how well the items describe them on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "very inaccurate" to "very accurate". The internal consistency of the five subscales ranged from α=.89.

3.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

Data analysis was done to address the research questions formulated for the present study. The research data drawn from the sample were fed into the computer and statistical analyses were carried out using IBM SPSS 21 statistical package. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and means were employed to characterize the participants' perceived levels of global personality traits and attitudes toward foreign language learning. The independent samples T-test was used to unfold the role of gender factor in developing the participants' attitudes toward foreign language learning. Multiple regression analysis was also conducted to assess the predictive power of global personality traits vis-à-vis attitudes toward foreign language learning.

4. Results

Simple statistical analysis was employed to find out the levels of participants' attitudes towards foreign language learning and personality traits. When asked to rate their attitudes towards foreign language learning, 75% of the participants agreed with cognitive component, 80% with affective/ evaluate component and 65% with behavioral component of A-FLL. Overall, 75% of the participants expressed positive attitudes towards foreign language learning with higher mean score (M =71.92, SD =10.19) ascribed to affective/evaluative component. Furthermore, the highest mean score (M =37.94, SD =6.20) was observed in intrinsic motivation subcomponent of affective /evaluate component, while the highest mean score (M = 17.93, SD =2.97) was ascribed to exhibition subcomponent of behavioral component. Finally, the lowest mean score (M = 7.64, SD =2.52) was observed in inhibition subcomponent of behavioral component. With regard to personality traits, the findings revealed that the most dominant trait was agreeableness (76%) followed by openness to experience (69%), conscientiousness (66%), and emotional stability (56%). Extraversion emerged to be the least dominant personality trait (51%).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for personality traits and attitudes towards foreign language learning

Variables		Subcomponents	N	Mean	SD	%
Components of A-FLL	Cognitive	-	157	25.17	4.88	75
	Affective/Evaluative	Extrinsic	157	16.92	3.67	81
		Intrinsic	157	37.94	6.20	78
		Teacher Influence	157	17.08	3.79	81
	Total		157	71.92	10.19	80
	Behavioral	Inhibition	157	7.64	2.52	55
		Exhibition	157	17.93	2.97	85
		Tolerance of ambiguity	157	14.52	3.40	69
		Learning Effort	157	17.78	4.37	51
	Total		157	57.87	7.24	65
Personality traits	Extraversion	-	157	29.57	5.79	51
	Agreeableness	-	157	37.70	5.49	76
	Conscientiousness	-	157	32.96	4.51	66
	Neuroticism	-	157	27.75	5.83	56
	Openness	-	157	34.63	3.76	69

The results of Pearson correlations revealed that extraversion correlated significantly with cognitive and behavioral components, with a slight and effect size, respectively. Agreeableness correlated significantly with all three components of A-FLL with a strong effect size in affective/evaluative component and slight in the other

components. There was a statistically slight significant correlation among conscientiousness and all three components. Neuroticism correlated negatively with affective/evaluative and positively with behavioral components of A-FLL. Additionally, openness to new experience correlated significantly with all three components of A-FLL with a moderate effect size. Finally, personality traits, except for neuroticism, correlated positively with overall attitudes toward FLL. These are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Correlation between personality traits and attitudes toward foreign language learning

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1- Cognitive	1								
2- Affective/evaluative	.361**	1							
3- Behavioral	.460**	.362**	1						
4- Overall Attitudes	.684**	.839**	.758**	1					
5- Extraversion	.164*	.087	.322**	.231**	1				
6- Agreeableness	.207**	.513**	.298**	.483**	.222**	1			
7- Conscientiousness	.183*	.256**	.219**	.293**	.155	.316**	1		
8- Neuroticism	-.016	-.159*	.327**	.039	.421**	.025	-.114	1	
9- Openness	.382**	.370**	.358**	.473**	.149	.388**	.270**	.064	1

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if the Big Five personality traits significantly predict attitudes towards foreign language learning (A-FLL). The results revealed that openness to experience significantly contributed to the prediction of cognitive component of A-FLL and explained 17% of variance in this component (R^2=.17, F (1,151) =6.19, p<.01). The findings also indicated that agreeableness, emotional stability, and openness to experience as predictor variables explained 34% of the variance in affective/ evaluative component (R^2=.34, F (1,151) =15.17, p<.01). Concerning behavioral component, the results of multiple regression analysis revealed that emotional stability, openness to experience, and agreeableness accounted for 28% of the variance in behavioral component of A-FLL (R^2=.28, F (1,151) =17.07, p<.01). As shown in Table 3, agreeableness emerged as the strongest predictor of affective/evaluative component and neuroticism was the strongest predictor of behavioral component. Finally, personality traits accounted for 33% of the variance in attitudes toward foreign language learning.

Table 3. Coefficients of regression analysis

Predictors	Dependent variables	β	t	Sig.
	Cognitive	.342	4.181	.000
Openness to experience	Affective/ evaluative	.203	2.768	.006
	Behavioral	.266	3.502	.001
Agreeableness	Affective/ evaluative	.418	5.561	.000
	Behavioral	.187	2.458	.015
Neuroticism	Affective/ evaluative	-.194	-2.593	.010
	Behavioral	.305	4.352	.000

5. Discussion and conclusion

The present study sought to explore the relationship between global personality traits and language learners' attitudes towards foreign language learning in a Turkish context. The findings of the current study demonstrated important insights into personality factors influencing attitudes toward foreign language learning. The findings revealed that 75 % of Turkish EFL students have positive attitudes toward FLL. Similar results were found by other

studies (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2011; Oz 2014). Oz (2014) found that 73% of Turkish EFL learners' expressed positive attitudes toward FLL and computer assisted language learning.

The findings also showed positive correlations among personality traits and attitudes towards FLL. However, neuroticism correlated negatively with affective/evaluative component. This suggests that lower emotional stability may lead to language anxiety, create negative attitudes toward L2 learning, and, ultimately, result in poor language learning outcomes. Besides, there was no significant correlation between neuroticism and overall attitudes toward FLL. Moreover, except for extraversion and neuroticism, the rest of personality traits, i.e. agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness, correlated significantly with the three components of attitudes toward FLL. Extraversion and neuroticism, however, correlated significantly with cognitive and behavioral/personality components of A-FLL. These findings support the contention that one should not expect overall correlations among personality traits and language achievement (Dörnyei, 2005) and attitudes towards foreign language learning. Furthermore, the findings indicated that neuroticism was not the correlate of overall attitudes toward foreign language learning. This finding does not support the previous research. Dewaele (2013), for instance, found that learners with higher levels of neuroticism and lower levels of emotional stability are naturally inclined to worry more about communication in foreign language learning classroom. Similarly, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) reported that neuroticism has the potential to affect second language communication through the mediation of other motivational variables such as integrativeness. Contradictory results in L2 research puts emphasis on the complexity and the abstractness of personality traits with respect to attitudes and motivation to learn a L2.

Agreeableness and openness to experience among personality traits emerged to be predictors of attitudes toward foreign language learning and they accounted for 33% of the variance in attitudes toward FLL. This suggests that individuals with more openness to new experiences or intellect, and also helpful and straightforward people with higher levels of agreeableness are expected to display more positive attitudes toward foreign language learning and show more willingness to identify and interact with the members of the L2 community. This will, in turn, encourages them to envisage themselves as being more competent in L2 achievement. Stated otherwise, although there might be no direct relationship between some personality traits and attitudes, overall, personality traits have the potential to influence EFL learners' attitudes toward foreign language learning and, thus, should be taken into account in designing language learning curriculum, especially in teacher training programs. The findings corroborate previous research into personality traits which links personality traits and learning a L2. According to MacIntyre et al., (1998), personality traits contribute to the willingness to communicate, or the communicative behavior of L2 learners. Pavičić Takač and Požega (2011), for instance, found a significant relationship between personality traits (except for neuroticism and conscientiousness) and willingness to communicate among Croatian secondary language learners. Likewise, a study by Oz (2014) revealed significant correlations among personality traits, notably extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, and willingness to communicate in English among Turkish EFL learners. Babakhani (2014) also reported that personality traits predicted 13% of the variance in language achievement among Iranian students.

Findings of this study have implications for teachers and researchers in the field of L2 learning. Obviously, personality traits might not often directly correlate with attitudes, motivation, and language achievement since they often interact with various factors inherent in the social context of learning situation (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009, 2014). Contextual features might prevent from reaching significant correlation between personality traits and motivation for learning a L2, partially because of the flexibility of the variables. Dörnyei (2005, p.30) maintains that examining interrelationship of personality traits and other ID variables may also yield meaningful insights and "Even if personality factors do not directly determine the degree of an individual's academic success, they certainly shape the way people respond to their learning environment". Therefore, the dearth of direct correlation between personality traits and language achievement does not imply that personality traits have nothing to do with L2 learning and academic achievement. Rather, it puts more emphasis on the contention that more complex theoretical constructs are needed to account appropriately for the issue (Dörnyei, 2005; MacIntyre et al.1998).

From pedagogical perspective, it can be concluded that although attitudes toward L2 learning and L2 learning situation, integrativeness, and motivation are considered as central to success in learning a L2, personality traits can help students to use their specific strengths, e.g. their cognitive abilities, to balance and compensate for their weaknesses, e.g. lower foreign language anxiety (Dewaele, 2013), during L2 learning process. However, this study is not without limitations. The under-researched context f Turkey and the comparability and generalizability of

research results to other contexts are some of these limitations. To the best knowledge of the researcher, this study is the first to study the relationship between personality traits and A-FLL. Therefore, the results should be generalized cautiously and further research is needed of this interesting area of research, with better and broader design encompassing social climate where L2 learning takes place.

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