Castledown

Review of
The Big Five in SLA

TOMOHITO HIROMORI ᵃ

ᵃ Meiji University, JAPAN
hiromori@meiji.ac.jp

The Big Five in SLA by Ewa Piechurska-Kuciel, Springer International Publishing, 2020, 238pp., €103.99 (Hardcover) €85.59 (eBook). ISBN 9783030593230.

Let us say that a group of students starts learning a second/foreign language simultaneously in a new school year. Even if they learn the language from the same teacher, with the same materials, in the same place, and over the same period, within a few months, there will be a large (or at least not a small) difference in their learning outcomes. Why, then, do such differences occur even when students learn the same language from the same teacher for the same period and in the same way? In past research on second language acquisition (SLA), the above differences among learners have been studied from the perspective of individual differences (IDs). Early studies on IDs listed the characteristics of so-called "Good Language Learners" (e.g., language aptitude, motivation, learning styles and strategies). Subsequent studies attempted to classify these factors into several categories rather than simply listing them. As a result, it became clear that some ID factors commonly appear in many studies. A representative factor among them is personality. As Eysenck (1994), a well-known psychologist, puts it, "Although human beings differ from each other in numerous ways, some of those ways are clearly of more significance to psychology than others. Foot size and eye color are presumably of little or no relevance as determinants of behavior (although foot size may matter to professional footballers!), whereas personality appears to play a major role in influencing our behavior" (p. 1).

The Big Five in SLA examines the role of personality in the field of SLA. The author, Ewa Piechurska-Kuciel, focuses on the "Big Five" model, which has been very influential in general personality research. One of the main features of this book is that it covers a wide range of relevant

research, especially after the 2000s. There are about 800 books and journal articles in the References section, and the Author Index contains a list of over 1,300 names of people. This shows how this book comprehensively and systematically summarizes the past research related to this topic. The book consists of four chapters, the first two dealing with personality research in psychology and the consecutive two within the discipline of SLA. Chapter 1 reviews the basic definitions of personality and then summarizes personality research to date in three approaches (i.e., psychoanalytic, learning, and humanistic approaches) and two theories (i.e., type theories and trait theories). Type theory is a way of thinking that attempts to explain human personality through several distinctive types. In our daily lives, we often describe ourselves and the people around us as "kind," "stubborn," "active," and so on. Although this way of thinking is intuitive and easy to understand, it does not mean that we can classify all the people in the world as typically "kind" or typically "stubborn." It is also difficult to deal with people who are "kind but stubborn." This is where Trait Theory comes in. Trait Theory tries to explain human personality as a combination of traits. By taking this view, we can describe people's personalities as a combination of various traits: for instance, one person is kind and active but not stubborn, and another person is kind but stubborn and not very active. A typical model of personality that takes this view is the Big Five.

Chapter 2 reviews the origin, structure, and specific consequences of each of the five traits that comprise the Big Five model (i.e., Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness). As mentioned earlier, we use a variety of adjectives to describe each other's personalities. The researchers collected a list of such adjectives, asked raters to evaluate many people's personalities based on the list, and then repeatedly analyzed the results using a statistical technique called factor analysis. The five traits listed in the Big Five model are considered common factors extracted from such repeated surveys. In general, we tend to associate each trait with either positive or negative images, but according to the author, this is not necessarily correct. Neuroticism, for example, tends to have undesirable emotions such as depression, anxiety, and anger, and it often has negative consequences, such as the inability to cope with stress and various psychiatric disorders when this trait is strong. On the other hand, vigilance, which is observed in high levels of neuroticism, promotes greater preparedness and may have a positive influence on academic achievement. Thus, each trait has a different influence depending on its interaction with a particular situation or context.

Chapter 3 is a comprehensive review of research on the Big Five model in the context of SLA. In the beginning, the basic terminology of SLA (e.g., second/foreign language, acquisition/learning, naturalistic [informal]/classroom [formal] context) is briefly explained in an easy-to-understand manner. According to the author, SLA has a close relationship with psychology, and research focusing on individual traits in the Big Five has been conducted for a long time. A typical example would be extraversion. We tend to think that extraverts are more active, cheerful, and talkative, and therefore better suited to learning languages. However, this chapter shows that high extraversion is also related to the tendency to seek out stronger stimuli, and if these stimuli are not met, the motivation to learn is likely to decrease. Specifically, since extraverted learners have a strong desire to interact with others, they are more likely to prefer interaction- and output-oriented activities. However, they are not expected to be inclined towards input-oriented activities such as spending time reading foreign books or continuously listening to foreign language radio. On the other hand,

introverted learners are expected to prefer input-oriented activities, while they are more likely to resist pair or group interaction. This reluctance also applies to speaking activities, but it may not be as much of an inconvenience in cases such as writing where students can learn silently by themselves. Thus, while neither extraversion nor introversion impedes language learning, they may have different and more suitable learning methods. For this reason, many studies have been conducted on extraverts/introverts in relation to learning styles and strategies.

Finally, Chapter 4 integrates existing theoretical and empirical research findings on personality in SLA, examines directions for future research related to the Big Five model and offers some concrete pedagogical suggestions for more effective language learning. Many research findings are presented in this book, but the results are not always consistent and are sometimes mixed and inconclusive. As reasons for this, the author cites theoretical problems (i.e., there are various theories and approaches, and it is difficult to integrate them) and empirical problems (i.e., there are a certain number of studies in which the methodological rigour is not always sufficient). In order to make further progress in this field of research, the former issue in particular needs to be resolved, and I believe that the series of studies by Dan McAdams (e.g., McAdams, 2009; McAdams & Pals, 2006) provides a hint for the solution. For example, McAdams and Pals (2006) pointed out that personality research has focused too much on basic traits such as characteristic patterns (in other words, the Big Five traits) and has proposed a comprehensive framework that includes other personality traits (e.g., motives, goals, strategies; influenced by basic traits) and life narratives (an individual's narrative identity). We tend to think of personality as a unitary concept, but as the Big Five model and McAdams' new Big Five framework show, it is a collection of subtly differentiated traits and personal life narratives.

Our personality plays a role in the process of how we learn a foreign language. It will have an impact on the kind of learning environment we choose, and conversely, it is formed by the various influences of the surrounding environment. In other words, our personality and our environment interact dynamically to define our learning behaviour and learning outcomes. Considering this, in empirical studies of ID factors such as personality, it is essential to use a holistic/integrative perspective, not focusing only on specific personality trait(s) but also taking other related factors into account at the same time. The more studies that can depict the multifaceted nature of personality, the better we will understand our own personality.

References

Eysenck, M. W. (1994). *Individual differences: Normal and abnormal*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

McAdams, D. P. (2009). *The person: An introduction to the science of personality psychology*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new Big Five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist, 61*(3), 204–217.