4 Personality and good language learners*

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This chapter addresses not just the "good" language learner, but those who may be considered among the best. They are distinguished by performance at "Level Four" (on a five-point scale) on an oral interview test that uses the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) level definitions (Federal Interagency Language Roundtable, 1999). Level Four proficiency, also referred to at one time by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages as "Distinguished" proficiency, implies almost no limitations on the ability of the individual to use the language, including control of multiple registers, fine lexical distinctions, and pragmatic skill close to native. Some refer to this level as "near-native" (Leaver and Shekhtman, 2002).

Those who achieve Level Four are among the true elite of good language learners. Achievement of Level Four in any skill is both very difficult and rare. It is almost never done in a classroom alone, though in the case of gifted learners, it may require only a short exposure to a foreign environment together with very advanced classroom work. For most, however, extended sojourns are the norm. But of course very few, even of those who spend a long time in a country, reach Level Four.

What characterizes Level Four achievers has been an open question for some time. Some of my own research has looked at this question, with intriguing results for motivation, aptitude, cognitive style, native language background, and personality. Personality has been defined as "those aspects of an individual's behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, thought, actions, and feelings which are seen as typical and distinctive of that person and recognized as such by that person and others" (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1998, p. 340). This chapter focuses on personality in particular, using data from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, McCaulley, Quenk and Hammer, 1998), a widely used personality inventory based on the theory of personality originated by Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1971) which measures personality according to four dichotomous scales (Myers *et al.*, 1998, p. 6):

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1 Extraversion–Introversion: Extraverts tend to focus on the outer world of things and people, whereas introverts focus more on their inner worlds of internal experiences, including concepts and feelings. They are abbreviated E and I respectively.
2 Sensing–Intuition: Sensing is oriented toward that which can be experienced through the five senses – facts and things, whereas intuition focuses on meanings, possibilities, and the relationships between or among concepts. People who prefer intuition often trust the information they receive without necessarily grounding it on concrete experience. Sensing is abbreviated S, and intuition with N, since I has already been used for introversion.
3 Thinking–Feeling: Thinking refers to making decisions and coming to conclusions primarily on impersonal grounds that takes into account logical consequences. On the other hand, Feeling judgment makes use of personal or social values to make decisions. Note that in this model, Thinking decision-making is not the same as intelligence, nor is Feeling judgment the same as emotion.
4 Judging–Perceiving: These terms refer to whether a person uses Thinking or Feeling judgment to deal with the outside world (Judging) or Sensing or Intuition to deal with the outer world (Perceiving). In practice, Judging types tend to want to come to closure quickly, and Perceiving types want to keep their options open and get all the information they need before taking action.

The four scales combine into 16 possible four-letter types, such as ENFP (extraversion-intuition-feeling-perceiving). We will see that some personality dispositions appear to be advantageous when people learn foreign languages to near-native levels of breadth and depth.

The study

What makes those who achieve Level Four different from those who do not achieve that level? To begin to answer this question, I have been examining data from the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and conducting interviews with members of the US diplomatic community for some time. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) is the training arm of the US Department of State. It provides full-time, intensive training in over 60 languages for periods ranging from 24 to 88 weeks, depending on the level of difficulty for native English speakers. The goal is to achieve functional, job-related proficiency for foreign affairs work abroad. For over ten years, the Foreign Service Institute has provided diagnostic and

learning advisory services to its language students through the Learning Consultation Service (LCS) which keeps data on individual learner differences based on results of both questionnaires and interviews.

Participants

The current sample was drawn from two databases kept on the learners, one up to 1999 and one from 2000 on. There were nearly 8,000 records and more coming in daily. This study used a sample from those data of 3,145, representing all the records at the time whose last names began with A-Ka (the remainder had not yet been checked and cleared of duplicate records). Of these 3,145, only 2% had achieved Level Four for either speaking/listening or reading or both according to the FSI Oral Proficiency Interview (for details of these measures, see pp. 63–64). The languages in which the Level Fours achieved their high ratings included Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Indonesian, Italian, Korean, Lao, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish. All were learned in adulthood. The average age of those in this sample was 38.4 (standard deviation of 11 years) and there were roughly equal numbers of males and females. Their median education was between the bachelor's and master's degrees. All of these language learners were adults who began the study of the languages in which they have achieved Level Four as adults.

Data collection and analysis

The primary independent measure in this study is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers *et al*., 1998), a questionnaire widely used by educational psychologists, counselors, and organization development specialists. It is a forced-choice, self-report inventory intended to sort individuals into one or the other pole of four main scales. Form M, the version of the MBTI currently used by the LCS, was standardized on a national (US) sample of 3,009 adults over 18, stratified for sex and race. Internal consistency reliability ranges from .90 to .94 on the four scales. Test–retest reliability ranges from .62 to .85. Concurrent validity has been found over a wide range of other personality measures, aptitude tests, and performance. Construct validity has been undertaken through multiple studies examining the degree to which the MBTI ratings differentiate different subpopulations (specifics are in the *Manual*, Myers *et al*., 1998).

The criterion measure used in this study was the FSI Oral Proficiency Interview. The test yields ratings ranging from 0 to 5 for speaking (the

S-score, which includes interactive listening comprehension) and for reading (the R-score). The full oral interview, including speaking, interactive listening, and an interactive reading test using authentic material, takes over two hours. R-3, for example, indicates reading proficiency level 3 ("professional" proficiency); S-2 represents speaking proficiency level 2 (working proficiency). Other levels are 0 (no proficiency), 1 (survival level), 4 (full professional proficiency, with few if any limitations on the person's ability to function in the language and culture), and 5 (equivalent to an educated native speaker). "Plus" scores (indicating, for instance, proficiency between S-2 and S-3) were coded as 0.5. Thus, for example, a score of S-2+ was coded 2.5. Most students enter FSI with goals of end-training proficiency ratings of S-3 R-3 for full-time training. Up to the present, no one has had an official goal of Level Four, though many overseas missions have indicated that it is highly desirable for some positions.

Analysis was done using SPSS for Windows, version 13. The tests used for the nominal variables that are the subject of this study were frequencies and crosstabs, with significance testing by Fisher's Exact Test.

Findings

The frequency figures show that ISTJ (introversion-sensing-thinking-judging) was the modal (most frequent) personality type in the non-Level Four sample with 266 cases (15.7% of the 16 types) and even with the Level Four group included it was still the modal type in the total sample at 272 (15.4%). The least frequent types were ISFP (introversion-sensing-feeling-perceiving) and ESFP (extraversion-sensing-feeling-perceiving) at 34 (1.9%) and 40 (2.3%) respectively. SP (sensing-perceiving) types were generally infrequent in all groups.

Table 1 displays the findings for the Level Four learners in standard "type table" array.

The only significant result was for INTJ types (introverted-intuitive-thinking-judging) who were significantly over-represented (sig = .027, $p < .05$) among the Level Four students.

In terms of discrete personality characteristics, the most common among those *not* achieving Level Four were E (extraversion), N (intuition), T (thinking), and J (judging). For those achieving Level Four, it was I (introversion), N (intuition), T (thinking), and J (judging). The least well represented, then, were I (introversion), S (sensing), F (feeling), and P (perceiving) for those who had not achieved Level Four, and E (extraversion), S (sensing), F (feeling), and P (perceiving) for those who had achieved Level Four. Intuition was significantly (.002) over-represented among those who had achieved Level Four.

Table 1 MBTI Type Table for Level Four students

ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
N = 6	N = 2	N = 5	N = 11
9%	3%	7.5%	16.5%
ISTP	ISFP	INFP	INTP
N = 2	N = 0	N = 2	N = 8
3%	0%	3%	12%
ESTP	ESFP	ENFP	ENTP
N = 1	N = 0	N = 5	N = 7
1.5%	0%	7.5%	10.5%
ESTJ	ESFJ	ENFJ	ENTJ
N = 3	N = 4	N = 5	N = 6
4.5%	6%	7.5%	9%

Notes:

N = number of Level Four students in each type.

% = number of Level Four students in the type as a percentage of the total number of Level Fours, rounded to the nearest 0.5.

Within the paired characteristics, intuitive-thinking types (NT) showed the highest frequency overall, whereas sensing-feeling (SF) types were lowest. Of those who had not achieved Level Four, EN (extraversion-intuition), IN (introversion-intuition), and IS (introversion-sensing) types were roughly the same in percentage, and ES (extraversion-sensing) types were considerably less. Of those who had achieved Level Four, EN (extraversion-intuition) and IN (introversion-intuition) types were clearly greater in number than ES (extraversion-sensing) and IS (introversion-sensing) types. Sensing-judging (SJ) types dominated among the non-Level Fours at 33.5%, with intuition-thinking (NT) types close at 32.4%. However, among those who achieved Level Four, intuitive-thinking (NT) types and introverted-intuitive (IN) types were significantly (.007 and .012 respectively) over-represented. Sensing-perceiving (SP) types trailed in both groups with 11.7% and 4.5% respectively.

Among the three-letter combinations, IST (introversion-sensing-thinking) was most frequent among those without Level Four (19.2%), whereas for those with Level Four, it was INT (introversion-intuition-thinking, 28.4%). The least represented combination in the non-Level Four group were those with ESF (extraversion-sensing-feeling) preferences (5.6%) and in the Level Four group those from the EST (extraversion-sensing-thinking), ESF (extraversion-sensing-thinking), and ISF (introversion-sensing-feeling) categories at 6%.

All the sensing types except ESFJ (extraversion-sensing-feeling-judging) are under-represented among those achieving Level Four. On the other hand, all those with NT (intuition-thinking) combinations are over-represented, although only INTJ (introversion-intuition-thinking-judging) is significant (.027).

Intuition

The most striking finding in these data is the importance of intuition among high achieving learners. Intuitives, whether the function is intro-verted or extraverted, concentrate on meaning, possibilities, and usually accept constant change. Intuitives tend to be oriented toward the future – what might be or what probably will be. They seek hidden patterns and are prone to make associations almost as second nature. They are known to have a strong interest and well-developed ability in reading.

In my own research, I have found that intuition (along with feeling and perceiving) correlates with thin ego boundaries – a kind of openness to experience. This is corroborated by correlations between intuition and "Openness" in the Big Five personality model (McCrae and Costa, 1989). Thin-boundary learners tend to be more receptive to peripheral learning and tolerant of ambiguity than their thicker-boundaried coun-terparts (Ehrman, 1999; Hartmann, 1991). Thus, we can guess that when it is necessary to adapt to unfamiliar ways of speaking, or to pick up native-like ways of self-expression, and read not only between but behind the lines as is needed at Level Four, a tendency to perceive the world in intuitive ways is likely to be helpful. Pattern matching and recognition is second nature to intuitives, which promotes another area of skill useful in dealing with such linguistic subsystems as register. Because the MBTI was intended to sort people into binary classes, since intuition appears to be an important characteristic of high achievers, the opposite end of the S–N pole (sensing) shows up as relatively less equipped for Level Four learning. There is more discussion of this issue below.

Intuition and thinking

Although intuition was found to be important, not all intuitives were found to be equally over-represented in the group of high achievers. One of these differences is between learners who prefer intuition with think-ing (NT), and those who prefer intuition with feeling (NF). The combi-nation of intuition and thinking shows up most often as an interest in intellectual mastery of the world, a liking for analysis as a way of dealing with information, and systems thinking. The specialty of this group

is strategic thinking. NT types may be perceived as arrogant by people of other personality types because of their dislike of what they see as incompetence and their very high levels of self-confidence in their domains of interest. At the same time, they are merciless with themselves, never satisfied with current achievement and always attempting to reach higher and higher. If a learner has taken language proficiency as a domain of competence and mastery, it is not surprising that the effort to learn more, deeper, wider, better continues on and on. An NT type on the track of mastery can be relentless. Furthermore, NT types are likely to gravitate naturally to metacognitive strategies such as goal-setting, self-assessment, and self-monitoring – they are also strategic thinkers, and high-level language learning can be something of a campaign.

   Another reason that NT types may have an apparent edge is their penchant for analysis and making relatively fine distinctions. One of the hallmarks of Level Four language is precision, especially lexical, including idioms and sayings, but also pragmatic and even grammatical. To achieve these, it is necessary to notice differences and to be able to pick out from the mass of language input what is important. It is not enough to say that two words mean "green," for instance, when one may refer to a clear bluish green, whereas the other is "dusty olive." If there are different words for these two types of green, the Level Four achiever for whom they are relevant, is likely to notice when and how they are used and to come to be able to use them without hesitation. This kind of "sharpening" and "field independence" (Ehrman and Leaver, 2003) is much more characteristic of NTs than of NFs.

Introversion and intuition

Not only are intuitives not all equal as Level Four learners on the thinking–feeling scale, they are quite different on the extraversion–introversion dimension as well. Much of the literature to date has indicated that extraverts are better language learners (Dewaele, 2005; Dewaele and Furnham, 2000; Hokanson, 2000; Naiman, Fröhlich and Stern, 1975; Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern and Todesco, 1978), although there are exceptions (Ehrman, 1994a, 1994b, 1996a). In the case of this study, introversion in combination with intuition is quite significantly over-represented. It appears that the combination of introversion, intuition, and thinking provides something of value. Perhaps introversion brings a sensitivity to archetypal, universal patterns. This is one of the theoretical characteristics of introverted functions: rather than being influenced primarily by outer-world data, they are shaped more by more general and internally accessed archetypes (Jung, 1971).

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The way this might work for language learning is that very good language learners react to every language as if it were essentially a manifestation of one language, as suggested by Saunders (1997). This supposes that language universals are roughly the same across languages. These universals correspond to archetypes and are thus especially available to introversion and to intuition. It would not be surprising then, that those with both introversion and intuition would be in tune with the universal substratum of language.

Introversion, intuition, and thinking

One might ask, if introverted intuition makes such a difference, why don't INFJ types, who also have introverted intuition, do equally well? This is where thinking comes in. Thinking promotes sharpening, or remembering differences and learning by means of those differences. This comes more naturally to thinking types than to feeling types, who have a tendency to level or merge different things in their perception. In summary, then, introverted intuition and sharpening (which comes more readily with thinking than with feeling) seem to be important factors in learning language to the Distinguished level.

Judging

In this study, judging is over-represented among those who achieve Level Four. Although judging (versus perceiving) usually represents a preference for an orderly, predictable life, the scale originated as a complex way to determine if the most preferred function is introverted or extraverted. For INTJ types, judging indicates that intuition is used in the introverted mode (sensitivity to archetypes) rather than the extraverted one (focus on the future and its possibilities).

Sensing

Another striking feature of the results of this study is that with the exception of ESFJ (extraversion-sensing-feeling-judging), all the sensing types are clearly (though non-significantly) under-represented among those achieving Level Four. Sensing is thus apparently as disadvantageous to high-level language learning as intuition is helpful to it. Why might this be?

Sensing types are attuned to the world as it is. Extraverted sensing types are highly aware of the present and the physical and factual aspects of the world. They are grounded in "what is." Introverted sensing types are focused on memories of experience as internal facts, but they do not

necessarily seek patterns and symbolic meaning, unlike intuitive types. Although this does not mean that sensing types cannot achieve Level Four, sensing is less likely to be attuned to underlying language structure and meaning systems.

Implications for the teaching/learning situation

For the FSI sample at least, intuition, especially introverted intuition, is over-represented among those who achieve very high levels of language proficiency. It is probably related to pattern recognition and analysis, receptivity to direct and indirect input, inferences, tolerance of ambiguity, orientation toward meaning, and sensitivity to universal aspects of language. Thinking appears to be another critical element, but only in combination with intuition: it seems to contribute sharpening tendencies that make possible the kinds of differentiation that promote precision of language. Sensing is under-represented in this sample, and it is possible that this may be at least in part a result of a literal, factual approach that is less oriented to meaning than is intuition.

In spite of the finding that INTJ (introversion-intuition-thinking-judging) personalities are significantly over-represented among the top language learners, teachers should remember that statistics do not predict individual achievement: they only suggest probabilities and directions for assisting those who may not have natural predilections that promote high level language learning. These results suggest that teachers might, for instance, help their learners by not insisting on participation in extraverted activities such as group work against students' natural inclinations, and by providing variety and alternatives in classroom activities to suit students' different personalities. Teachers might help their students to develop intuition by encouraging guessing and extracting meaning from context, to develop thinking by means of analyzing linguistic information, and to develop judging by bringing order into study activities (scheduling, for example).

Questions for ongoing research

The study reported in this chapter must be considered exploratory work. The sample is small and limited to FSI students, who themselves are not typical of language learners by virtue of age, experience, motivation, education, and the context in which they are studying. The participants were not randomly selected: they were those in the LCS database who were in that part of the alphabet that was selected as the source of data.

The MBTI is not the only personality instrument used in the LCS. The Hartmann Boundary Questionnaire also represents personality dimensions, particularly defensive style (Ehrman, 1999; Hartmann, 1991). More could also be learned by an analysis of the total score and the 12 subscales that constitute this measure. More could also be learned by examining the learning strategies used by the several MBTI types who do and do not achieve Level Four. This could be done through a measure for which data exist that examines learning strategies (for instance, the Motivation and Strategies Questionnaire, Ehrman, 1996b) and through interviews, some of which are already being conducted.

It appears to be nearly impossible for those who have begun language study as adults to reach Distinguished Proficiency (particularly in speaking) without at least some time spent where the language is spoken natively. However, the routes taken by various learners to reach their language proficiency vary greatly from one to the other. At one extreme are the few who have a great deal of classroom exposure to the language in their home country and have spent only a few weeks in a native-speaking environment (attested by Bernhardt, 2003). At the other extreme are those who have spent years immersed in the language and culture, with relatively little classroom work. Interviews and examination of learner files in the LCS would tell us much more about different paths to Level Four, including various mixes of classroom work and actual language immersion and use. An open question is the relative importance of formal instruction – perhaps some types need it more than others.

Finally, with a bigger sample of very high achievers, we would want to investigate whether there are differences among those who achieve this level in Western languages as opposed to those who succeed in non-Western languages that are very difficult for most native speakers of English. We would want to know if personality type interacts with language difficulty or language type.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, the best language learners tend to have introverted personalities, a finding which runs contrary to much of the literature, and, even, to pedagogical intuition. The best language learners are intuitive and they are logical and precise thinkers who are able to exercise judgment. However, it is clear from the fact that there are high-level language learners in a wide variety of personality categories that motivated individuals can become good language learners whatever their personalities.

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