



**Language learning and awareness of personality type in Chinese settings  
by Alastair Sharp, Ph.D.**

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**Abstract**

In order to provide successful instruction, teachers need to learn to identify and understand their students' individual differences. A feature of individual differences, which enters almost every area of life is that of personality type. This can be assessed with an instrument known as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Briggs Myers, 1998). This article will identify MBTI preferences among a group of Chinese university students studying English in Hong Kong and suggest that a knowledge of personality type is important for both teacher and student in maximizing learning success. Brief comments will be offered comparing results with other MBTI studies in Chinese contexts.

**Introduction**

Language learning success is associated with a range of factors, including age, sex, motivation, intelligence, anxiety, learning strategies, and language learning styles. The last of these has received some attention, but there has been a neglect of certain traits

within the typology of learning styles. Affective / temperament traits as personality indicators have been less well researched and although there are a variety of reports in western settings (e.g. Moody, 1988; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Carrell, et al , 1996; Kiany, 1997; Oxford, 1997; Dewaele & Furnham, 1999) there has been a scarcity of research for non-western cultural groups. This short article describes some preliminary research which intends to go some way in correcting this omission.

Learning styles in L2 have been described as analytical v. global and reflective v. impulsive. They have also encompassed what has been called experiential learning and sensory learning (Reid, 1995). One categorization, the study of field dependence/independence, has been heavily researched, but has continued to yield a variety of often conflicting results (e.g. Chapelle & Green, 1992; Violand-Sanchez, 1995). A more sophisticated system for describing learning styles has been developed from the use of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). This inventory is restricted to those with training in cognitive psychology and this may account for its less frequent mention in learning style research, an area mainly undertaken by linguists. The MBTI is based on Jungian psychology and is used to describe different personality types and the different ways individuals with these traits approach a task. Four bi-polar scales are used: Extraversion-Introversion, Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling, and Judging-Perceiving. MBTI theory believes that people have individual preferences concerning what they pay attention to, how they make decisions, draw conclusions and how they approach, and respond, to tasks.

A brief summary of the four dimensions is given below:

Extroversion (E) –Introversion (I). An Extrovert is said to receive energy from outside sources, whereas an Introvert is more concerned with the inner world of ideas and is more likely to be involved with solitary activities. This trait does not just describe whether a person is outgoing or shy, but considers whether a person prefers working alone or feels energized and at home working in a team.

Sensing (S) – Intuition (N). A Sensing preference relies on gathering information through the five senses, attending to concrete, practical facts. Sensors are less likely to see the ‘bigger picture’ and more likely to follow a step by step approach. An Intuitive thinker is more likely to be drawn by abstract possibilities, meanings and relationships and will be drawn by the innovative and theoretical.

Thinking (T)- Feeling (F). A Thinking person is more likely to prefer decisions made in an impersonal, logical, objective manner. A Feeling person will make decisions based more on personal values, relationships and the feelings of others. Women are more likely to be Feelers.

Judging (J) – Perceiving (P) . This personality preference describes how a person deals with the outside world. The Judger is more likely to look for

a planned and controlled life, seeking closure, preferring planning and regulation. The Perceiver deals with the outside world through sensing or intuition, but prefers spontaneity, flexibility, freedom and autonomy and ‘playing it by ear’.<sup>i</sup>

The scales do not suggest that we are cut off from operating one side of the pole or the other, but rather that we have a preference in the same way that we have a preference for being left or right handed. Each of the four dimensions is independent of the other three, so the bi-polar scales detailed above combine to yield 16 possible combinations, ISTJ, ESTJ, ISFJ, ESFJ etc.

The MBTI was developed from Carl Jung’s theory of psychological type and were considered to reveal differences within and across cultures. Kirby & Barger (1998:369) have reported on a wide range of studies, which they consider provide “significant evidence for the reliability and validity of the MBTI in a variety of ...groups with different cultural characteristics”. They cite hundreds of studies, which have reported on the high validity of MBTI in different cultural settings, including Korea, Nigeria, Mexico and Brazil. There is a vast literature supporting the validity and reliability of MBTI. Interested readers should consult Briggs Myers (1998) for more information.

#### Classroom relevance

A few comments are given below relating personality indicators to classroom practice. This information is offered to help clarify the relevance of the four indicators to language

learning experiences. While it is recognized that the ability of teachers to take student personality into account may be limited by class size, it is felt that an *awareness* of these individual differences by both student and teacher is essential for the most effective use of the methodologies available in the classroom.

There is some clear evidence that extroverted students learn foreign languages better because of their willingness to interact with others and because of their reduced inhibitions. Extroverted students are more likely to prefer interactive role-plays and group work (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). Introverted personalities may not have so many friends, and have a preference for working in pairs or smaller groups. They may prefer individual activity, perhaps with one clear purpose. Working in groups may well be less successful, because of a reluctance to participate in speaking activities.

Sensing students use strategies, which prefer concrete facts and use a methodical approach, with less interest in the abstract principles of language. Thus, teaching suggestions might include making learning goals very clear and consistent. Sensing learners are less likely to be creative (Sharp, 2003). Intuition students may use abstract principles of language in a more divergent way and feel relaxed with guessing, predicting and other “compensation” strategies.

Those with a Thinking preference, rather than a Feeling preference prefer more analysis of language data and have a greater ability to see details rather than the global picture. They prefer learning strategies that dissect and analyze and find contrasts and cause-

effect relationships. Thinkers are less likely to guess or use compensation strategies like paraphrasing. Those with a Feeling preference see things more globally and seek holistic strategies such as guessing, predicting, paraphrasing, with avoidance of grammatical analysis. Differences between Thinking and Feeling seem to relate to *field independence and field dependence* - the degree of ability to separate insignificant detail from significant detail. Field dependence types performed best in classrooms where there was less language analysis. Field independent were better in classrooms where analytical concerns dominated. It may be that field dependent (Feeling) students outperform field independent (Thinking) (Abraham, 1985).

Judgers need clear direction and clear grammar rules. Perceivers accept higher levels of confusion and are more persistent in their language learning, treating language learning more like a game (Ely, 1989). Cross-culturally there may be a strong connection between Judging and Perceiving and learning strategy use. Perceivers often use more communicative strategies and are generally better language learners than Judgers (Horning & Sudol, 1997).

Below I describe some preliminary work to collect data on MBTI from a group of Hong Kong students. This data will form the basis for a developmental study in which associations between MBTI, strategy use and language proficiency will be considered.

## **Methodology**

The MBTI was administered in this study to 112 English major students at a Hong Kong university. (92 female, 20 male, mean age 24). All had entered the university with 2 'A' level GCE passes, in addition to a minimum D grade in the HK *Use of English* exam. All students were Cantonese speaking, of Chinese ethnic origin. The first session took 2 hours, attendance was voluntary and great care was taken to explain that the MBTI was not a test and that there were no right or wrong answers. MBTI form G was used. A 125 item glossary provided translations of difficult words, phrases or idioms into Chinese. In addition the consultants who administered the MBTI were Cantonese speakers and provided occasional verbal translations when requested and when they thought it appropriate.

After the results were tabulated, students received a report form with their preference scores. During the 2 hour feedback session preferences were discussed with students and it was pointed out how an understanding of type would help student to be aware of their own natural strengths and that it would help in developing motivation and potential areas of growth.

## **Results**

As would be expected, subjects were distributed fairly evenly throughout the type classification tables. However, the results show clear preferences for a number of categories. ISFJ is the most pronounced, (12.5%), ISTJ, INFP and ENFP (8.9%) and ISFP, 9.8% (table 1, below). There is a strong preference for Sensing over Intuition

(table 2) for both sexes (table 5). There is also a clear preference for Feeling over Thinking (table 2 ), the latter being just as pronounced for males and females (table 5). Both males and females have a preference for Introversion and Sensing, although this preference is stronger for males (table 5). There is also a preference for Perceiving over Judging for both males and females (table 5).

**Type Distribution: All participants, N= 112**

<u>Key</u> E – extroversion I - introversion	T - Thinking F - Feeling
S – Sensing N - Intuition	J - Judging P - Perceiving

Table 1

ISTJ N=10 (8.9%)	ISFJ N=14 (12.5%)	INFJ N=2 (1.7%)	INTJ N=5 (4.5%)
ISTP N=5 (4.5%)	ISFP N=11 (9.8%)	INFP N=10 (8.9%)	INTP N=3 (2.7%)
ESTP N=5 (4.5%)	ESFP N=8 (7.1%)	ENFP N=10 (8.9%)	ENTP N=3 (2.7%)
ESTJ N=7 (6.3%)	ESFJ N=6 (5.4%)	ENFJ N=7 (6.3%)	ENTJ N=6 (5.4%)

Table 2

E 46%	S 60%
I 53%	N 40%
T 39%	J 49%
F 61%	P 51%

**Distribution by gender****Table 3: Male distribution N=20**

ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
N=3	N=3	N=1	N=1
15%	15%	0%	5%
ISTP	ISFP	INFP	INTP
N=0	N=2	N=3	N=1
0%	10%	15%/	5%
ESTP	ESFP	ENFP	ENTP
N=3	N=0	N=1	N=1
15%	0%	5%	5%
ESTJ	ESFJ	ENFJ	ENTJ
N=0	N=1	N=1	N=0
0%	5%	5%	0%

**Table 4: Female distribution N=92**

ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
N=7	N=11	N=2	N=4
8.9%	12%	2.2%	4.1%
ISTP	ISFP	INFP	INTP
N=5	N=9	N=7	N=2
5.1%	9.2%	7.6%	2.2%
ESTP	ESFP	ENFP	ENTP
N=2	N=8	N=9	N=2
2.2%	8.7%	9.2%	2.2%
ESTJ	ESFJ	ENFJ	ENTJ
N=7	N=5	N=6	N=6
7.6%	5.1%	6.5%	6.5%

Table 5: male and female distribution

<u>I</u>	E	S	N
Male =70%	Male =30%	Male =70%	Male =30%
Female = 51%	Female =49%	Female =59%	Female =41%
T	F	J	P
Male =35%	Male =65%	Male =45%	Male =55%
Female = 38%	Female=62%	Female=44%	Female=47%

**Discussion**

Studies using MBTI with Chinese cultures have been small in number. Those that are available are referred to below to enable comparison with the current study.

Huang & Huang (1992) assessed university students (n=280), Yao (1993) looked at school administrators (n=293) & Broer & McCarly (1999) management students (n=119). All three studies found that a large percentage of Chinese subjects preferred Sensing. This result is replicated in the current study for Hong Kong Chinese students. Sensing may be preferred because it relates to the strategy of memorizing facts and details (a strength of sensing) required for success in school exams and university entrance. Information gathered through the senses therefore, is likely to predominate rather than the use of imagination and intuition.

There was also a dominance of Introversion over Extroversion in all three studies and in the current study. Huang & Huang (1992) quotes a variety of sources which indicate a Chinese predilection for Introversion. They suggest that introversion was not only a trait of Chinese living in Taiwan (where their study took place), but also of Chinese living in

other parts of the world. Chan & Eysenck (1981) found in a study in Hong Kong that even those brought up under a British educational system scored higher for introversion on the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire.

Given that the total number of subjects in the studies being considered here is small (total n=804) and that there are vocational and educational biases in the samples, it would not be advisable to make generalizations about the Chinese population. However it is interesting to note that there are very high percentages supporting both Introversion and Sensing. Further work needs to be done with larger samples to see if there are consistent patterns associated with students' subject majors at university.

### **Conclusion**

This study is presented in the belief that a knowledge and awareness of personality type on the part of students will allow the development of natural strengths and predispositions, suggest areas for growth and help motivation. For teachers, such an awareness will also have beneficial effects, aiding in methodological choices, helping in the recognition of individual differences and improving teacher-student understanding. Future work on this project, to be reported later, will encompass study of the complex associations between MBTI, strategy use (as measured by the Strategies Inventory of Language Learning, SILL) and language proficiency.

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<sup>i</sup> For a detailed description of these types see Briggs Myers et al., 1998

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