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## Personality Traits and Performance in Listening for Minimal Pairs

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to compare the performances of EFL learners belonging to various personality groups in listening tests. A group of 30 high school EFL learners were selected for this study. All of them were at low-intermediate level of general English proficiency. Based on Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality questionnaire (2017), these participants were classified into four pairs of contrasting personality groups. The analysis of the participants' personality types was conducted online and took about twenty minutes. Then, they took a test of listening for minimal pairs. Scores of contrasting personality groups were compared with each other by running four paired t-tests. Results obtained by these t-tests showed that intuitive participants outperformed sensing ones, and perceiving participants outperformed judging ones in the listening test. No significant difference was found between the performances of contrasting personality groups in the two pairs of extrovert/introvert and thinking/feeling. Flexibility, adaptability, and being open to a larger set of options are suggested to be possible reasons behind the success of these groups. However, the influence of large set of interacting factors that might have a significant impact on the performance of people in listening test cannot be denied. Depending on the type of listening test, some of these factors might play a more significant role compared to other competing factors.

**Keywords:** *Personality traits, Listening, Minimal pairs, Extrovert, Introvert*

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### 1. Introduction

The relationship between personality traits and performance on various linguistic tasks has been the subject of a large body of research projects in recent years (e.g. Carrell, Prince, & Astika, 1996; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Ehrman, 1990; Oxford & Ehrman, 1988; Yazdani Fazlabadi & Khatin-Zadeh, 2016; Zare-Behtash, Bakhshizadeh Gashti, Khatin-Zadeh, & Banaruee, 2017; Banaruee & Yarahmadzahi, 2017). Some findings (e.g. Askari, Khatin-Zadeh, & Banaruee, 2017; Oxford & Ehrman, 1988; Yazdani Fazlabadi & Khatin-Zadeh, 2016; Banaruee, Khoshshima, & Askari, 2017) have suggested that some personality groups perform better in certain linguistic activities. Any linguistic activity involves a set of cognitive operations. The manner in which various elements interact with each other can be extremely complex in some linguistic tasks. The first thing that must be

done is to identify all influential factors that are involved in an activity. Then, the influence of each element must be closely examined to find which ones play a more significant role in a given activity.

A personality test is a questionnaire that aims to measure people's personality traits and their psychological character. Over the past decades, various personality tests have been developed by researchers in psychology and language studies to classify people into various groups. The first group of personality questionnaires was developed in 1920s (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2008). Among a number of questionnaires that were developed by experts of the field, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1962) has been one of the most popular ones. This questionnaire was inspired by Jung's (1923) ideas about personality. Based on this questionnaire, people's personalities are grouped into four pairs of opposite types: extroversion /



introversion, sensing / intuition, thinking / feeling, and judging / perceiving.

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between personality traits of low-intermediate L2 learners on the basis of Myers-Briggs personality questionnaire and their level of success on listening for minimal pairs. The study focused on high school EFL learners. If it is demonstrated that such a relationship exists, we have to find some explanation for it. In such a case, a number of questions is raised; for example, 'How do various influential elements interact with each other?' 'Which factors play a more significant role in a given linguistic task?' There is no doubt that the type of an activity determines the influential elements. Administering a test of listening for minimal pairs, this study tried to investigate the existence of possible influential factors in this particular test of listening.

## 2. Literature Review

Extensive research administered by educational psychologists and teacher demonstrate that learning procedures differ from every individual to one another due to the existence of biological and psychological variations (Banaruee & Askari, 2016; Khatin-Zadeh et al., 2017; Banaruee, Khoshsima, & Khatin-Zadeh, 2017; Khatin-Zadeh, Khoshsima, & Banaruee, 2017; Zare-Behtash et al., 2017). Banaruee et al. (2017) argued that the preference of a learner and his learning style is as important as the personality traits the learners have, and play vital roles in language classrooms. Khoshsima and Banaruee (2017) declared that all of the students have personal characteristics associated with their learning processes and they may indicate even the type of errors learners confront in the learning process.

According to Keirse and Bates (1984), extrovert people are sociable and external, while introverts are interested in internal reactions. They add that sensing people are mainly reliant on experience and actuality, while intuitive people are speculative and imaginative. While being objective and analytic is the main characteristic of thinking people, being subjective is one of the dominant features of feeling people. Finally, while judging people are fixed and decided, perceiving people are flexible and open to various options (pp. 25-26). Brown (2007) says that sensing people are experience-oriented and rely on facts. On the other hand, intuitive people are fiction-

oriented and hunching. Sensing people are realistic, but intuitive ones are speculative (ibid).

The existence of possible relationship between personality and performance in L2 learning has been the subject of a number of past empirical studies (e.g. Askari et al., 2017; Carrell, Prince, & Astika, 1996; Zare-Behtash, Khatinzadeh, & Banaruee, 2017; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995, 1989; Banaruee, Mohammadian, & Zare-Behtash, 2017; Ehrman, 1990, 1989; Moody, 1988; Khatin-Zadeh, Bakhshizadeh Gashti, & Banaruee, 2017; Oxford & Ehrman, 1988; Zare-Behtash & Banaruee, 2017). In their study, Ehrman and Oxford (1990) found that extrovert L2 learners are more successful in employing social strategies in the process of language learning. Results of another study conducted by Wakamoto (2000) indicated that sensing learners tend to use memory strategies; on the other hand, intuitive learners displayed a higher tendency to use compensation strategies. In a study conducted on Iranian L2 learners, Yazdani Fazlabadi and Khatin Zadeh (2016) found that sensing and thinking learners were relatively more successful in cloze passage tasks.

According to Dewaele and Furnham (2000), extrovert bilinguals are more fluent than introvert bilinguals. Accordingly, Gan (2011) found that there is no significant correlation between extroversion/introversion and L2 learners' oral performance. In a study conducted on a group of Iranian L2 learners (Soleimani, Jafarigohar, & Ramezani, 2013), no significant correlation was found between extroversion / introversion and the performance on multiple-choice and true false tests.

Having administered a test of listening for minimal pairs, researchers of this study tried to examine the possible existence of a relationship between the personality of high school EFL learners and their performance in the listening test. Myers-Briggs personality questionnaire was used to classify L2 learners into four pairs of contrasting personality groups. In this way, this study tried to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between personality groups of people and their performance in listening for minimal pairs?
2. If there is a significant relationship between personality of people and their

performance in listening for minimal pairs, which characteristics of people could be the cause of strong/weak performance in listening for minimal pairs?

**3. Methodology**

**3.1 Participants**

Participants of this study were selected from high school EFL learners in ‘Better Language Academy’, one of the language institutes in Bandar Abbas, Iran. This group consisted of 30 Iranian EFL learners, all boys, at low-intermediate level of English proficiency. They were 13-15 years old.

**3.2 Materials**

The Myers-Briggs personality questionnaire was used to classify participants into various personality groups. In addition to this questionnaire, a listening test was used. This test consisted of 20 items. In each item, participants were expected to distinguish between minimal pairs. The aim of this test was to investigate the ability of various personality groups of high school EFL learners to distinguish between words which were similar in pronunciation.

**3.3 Procedure**

The Myers-Briggs personality questionnaire was given to the participants. The answers were analyzed by software online ([www.humanmetrics.com](http://www.humanmetrics.com)). Based on the answers, participants were included in various personality groups. Then, the test of listening for minimal pairs was administered. This test was administered in 20 minutes. Before answering the questions, participants were provided with clear oral instructions in order to make sure that they knew how to answer the items. In each pair of personality groups, the performances of two contrasting groups in listening test were compared with each other. For example, the contrasting personality groups of extroverts and introverts were compared with each other by a t-test. The aim was to find which personality group was more successful in listening test. The same procedure was used for the other three pairs of contrasting personality groups.

**3.4 Data Analysis**

For each pair of four personality traits, participants were classified into two contrasting groups. Scores of contrasting personalities in listening test were compared with each other by running four t-tests. The P-value obtained in each t-test could show us if there was any significant difference between the performances of

contrasting personality groups. Results obtained by these four t-tests could indicate which group of personality types performed better in listening for minimal pairs. The unequal number of participants in contrasting personality groups could not create any problem for the study because running a t-test does not require the equal number of participants in the two groups. However, in this study, it was made sure that each personality group consisted of an acceptable number of participants.

**4. Results**

Based on the results obtained by Myers-Briggs personality questionnaire, participants were classified into contrasting personality groups. Numbers of participants in all groups have been given in Table 1.

*Table 1: Numbers of participants in various personality groups*

1		2		3		4	
Extrovert	Introvert	Sensing	Intuitive	Thinking	Feeling	Judging	Perceiving
18	12	13	17	16	14	18	12

In each pair of personality traits, the sum of participants is 30. For each pair, two sets of scores in listening tests were compared with each other by a t-test. Therefore, four t-tests were run to compare the scores of participants in four pairs of personality groups. Results of these four tests for extrovert / introvert, sensing / intuitive, thinking/feeling, and judging / perceiving have been given in Table2, Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5.

*Table 2: Results of t-test for extrovert/introvert*

	Paired Differences		t	df	P-value
	M1-M2	95% Confidence interval of the difference			
Extrovert/Introvert	0.06	From -1.90 to 2.01	0.0583	28	0.9539

In Table 2, P-value is larger than 0.05. This indicates that the difference between the performances of extroverts and introverts has not been statistically significant.

*Table 3: Results of t-test for sensing/intuitive*

	Paired Differences		t	df	P-value
	M1-M2	95% Confidence interval of the difference			
Sensing/Intuitive	-1.86	From -3.48 to -0.23	2.3431	28	0.0297

In Table 3, P-value is smaller than 0.05. This indicates that the difference between the performances of sensing participants



and intuitive participants has been statistically significant.

*Table 4: Results of t-test for thinking/feeling*

	Paired Differences		t	df	P-value
	M1-M2	95% Confidence interval of the difference			
Thinking /Feeling	0.17	From -1.61 to 1.94	0.1922	28	0.8490

In Table 4, P-value is larger than 0.05. This indicates that the difference between the performances of thinking participants and feeling participants has not been statistically significant.

*Table 5: Results of t-test for judging/perceiving*

	Paired Differences		t	df	P-value
	M1-M2	95% Confidence interval of the difference			
Judging/Perceiving	-1.58	From -3.05 to -0.11	2.2024	28	0.0360

In Table 5, P-value is smaller than 0.05. This indicates that the difference between the performances of judging participants and perceiving participants has been statistically significant.

## 5. Discussion

As was mentioned in the results, in two pairs of personality groups, no significant difference was found between the scores of contrasting personality groups. These results were in accordance with Gan (2011) who found that there is no significant correlation between extroversion/introversion and L2 learners' oral performance. And also reaffirmed Soleimani, Jafarigohar, and Ramezani's (2013) study, they found no significant correlation between extroversion / introversion and the performance on multiple-choice and true false tests. On the other hand, intuitive participants performed significantly better than sensing participants, and perceiving participants were significantly more successful than judging participants. In other words, in the two pairs of sensing/intuitive and judging/perceiving, there was a significant difference between the performances of contrasting personality groups in the listening test. This finding contradicts with Yazdani Fazlabadi and Khatin Zadeh (2016) they claimed that sensing and thinking learners were relatively more successful in cloze passage tasks, though the task they examined was not listening.

The question raised here is that why in these two particular types of pairs the

performances of participants were different? Why did intuitive participants perform better than sensing participants? Why did perceiving participants perform better than judging participants? It might be said that some specific characteristics of intuitive and perceiving people put them in a stronger position in this particular type of listening test.

As was mentioned in the introductory parts of this article, there are some features that distinguish intuitive people from sensing ones. While intuitive are speculative and hunching, sensing people are realistic and experience-oriented. This might be one of the differences that make the performance of intuitive people better. Because of its nature, listening for minimal pairs is a test that requires listeners to be good speculators. The listener has to react promptly to a stimulus that takes place in a very short period of time. High reliance on information received through the senses might be a weakness for sensing people in this type of listening. This characteristic might function as an inhibitor for listeners to provide a prompt reaction in response to a rapid stimulus.

Another distinguishing characteristic between these two groups is that intuitive people are open to possibilities while sensing people are oriented toward actualities. Being open to possible alternatives could play a significant role in the success of intuitive people in listening for minimal pairs. On the other hand, sensing people restrict themselves to a limited set of actual or highly-possible options. Generally, it seems that considering a large set of possibilities and not being restricted by a limited set of options are important features that improve the performance of intuitive people in listening for minimal pairs.

The data given in Table 5 indicates that perceiving participants performed better than judging ones. When we look at the distinguishing characteristics of judging and perceiving people, we might be able to explain the better performance of perceiving participants in listening test. As was mentioned, perceiving people are pending and flexible. On the other hand, judging people are settled and decided. While perceiving people are flexible and adapt as they go, judging people are fixed and plan ahead. All of these differences suggest that perceiving people can adapt to the pressure of a listening test that requires the test-taker to be flexible and open to

options. Listening for minimal pairs is a test in which the test-taker has to be a flexible decision-maker rather than being fixed and settled. In other words, adaptability and tentativeness make perceiving people more prepared for this type of listening test. On other hand, decisiveness could be a weakness for judging people in tests of this nature.

To sum up, results obtained in this study suggest that some personality traits might have a noticeable impact on the performance of test-takers in listening for minimal pairs. However, it should not be ignored that cognitive processes involved in listening are very complex and a very long list of factors might interact with each other throughout the process of listening. Personality traits might be just one small part of these influential factors. Depending on the nature and requirements of the listening test, some factors might become more important. Therefore, it can be said that it is the nature of listening test that determines which factor is more important in the performance of test-takers. If a complete picture of these complex processes is going to be presented, all of these factors must be included at the same time. This is a question that can be met in future research projects.

## 6. Conclusion

Results obtained in this study indicated that personality traits of people might have some kind of impact on their performance in listening for minimal pairs. In the two pairs of sensing/intuitive and judging/perceiving, a significant difference was observed between the performances of contrasting personality groups. In this study, intuitive participants performed better than sensing ones, and judging participants performed better than perceiving ones. On the other hand, no significant difference was found between the performances of contrasting personality groups in the two pairs of extrovert/introvert and thinking/feeling. Flexibility and adaptability to the context of listening test were suggested to be key factors in the success of intuitive and perceiving participants. It was proposed that those listeners who are open to a larger set of possible options perform better in listening for minimal pairs. However, the influence of a large set of other factors that have some kind of impact on the performance of listeners is a question that cannot be ignored. There might be a large number of interacting factors that influence

the performance of people throughout listening test. Depending on the type of listening test, some of these factors might play a more significant role compared to other competing factors. A comprehensive study must include as many as influential factors. It is a question that has to be addressed in future studies.

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#### Appendix: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality questionnaire

1. You find it difficult to introduce yourself to other people.  
Agree         Disagree
2. You often get so lost in thoughts that you ignore or forget your surroundings.  
Agree         Disagree
3. You try to respond to your e-mails as soon as possible and cannot stand a messy inbox.  
Agree         Disagree
4. You find it easy to stay relaxed even when there is some pressure.  
Agree         Disagree
5. You do not usually initiate conversations.  
Agree         Disagree
6. You rarely do something just out of sheer curiosity.  
Agree         Disagree
7. You feel superior to other people.  
Agree         Disagree
8. Being organized is more important to you than being adaptable.  
Agree         Disagree
9. You are usually highly motivated and energetic.  
Agree         Disagree
10. Winning a debate matters less to you than making sure no one gets upset.  
Agree         Disagree
11. You often feel as if you have to justify yourself to other people.  
Agree         Disagree
12. Your home and work environments are quite tidy.  
Agree         Disagree
13. You do not mind being at the center of attention.  
Agree         Disagree
14. You consider yourself more practical than creative.  
Agree         Disagree
15. People can rarely upset you.  
Agree         Disagree
16. Your travel plans are usually well thought out.  
Agree         Disagree
17. It is often difficult for you to relate to other people's feelings.  
Agree         Disagree
18. Your mood can change very quickly.  
Agree         Disagree
19. You rarely get carried away by fantasies and ideas.  
Agree         Disagree
20. You often find yourself lost in thought when you are walking in nature.  
Agree         Disagree
21. If someone does not respond to your e-mail quickly, you start worrying if you said something.  
Agree         Disagree
22. As a parent, you would rather see your child grow up kind than smart.  
Agree         Disagree
23. You do not let other people influence your actions.  
Agree         Disagree
24. When you sleep, your dreams tend to focus on the real world and its events.  
Agree         Disagree
25. It does not take you much time to start getting involved in social activities at your new workplace.  
Agree         Disagree
26. You are more of a natural improviser than a careful planner.  
Agree         Disagree
27. Your emotions control you more than you control them.  
Agree         Disagree
28. You enjoy going to social events that involve dress-up or role-play activities.  
Agree         Disagree
29. You often spend time exploring unrealistic and impractical yet intriguing ideas.  
Agree         Disagree

30. You would rather improvise than spend time coming up with a detailed plan.  
 Agree       Disagree
31. You are a relatively reserved and quiet person.  
 Agree       Disagree
32. If you had a business, you would find it very difficult to fire loyal but underperforming employees.  
 Agree       Disagree
33. You often contemplate the reasons for human existence.  
 Agree       Disagree
34. Logic is usually more important than heart when it comes to making important decisions.  
 Agree       Disagree
35. Keeping your options open is more important than having a to-do list.  
 Agree       Disagree
36. If your friend is sad about something, you are more likely to offer emotional support than suggest ways to deal with the problem.  
 Agree       Disagree
37. You rarely feel insecure.  
 Agree       Disagree
38. You have no difficulties coming up with a personal timetable and sticking to it.  
 Agree       Disagree
39. Being right is more important than being cooperative when it comes to teamwork.  
 Agree       Disagree
40. You think that everyone's views should be respected regardless of whether they are supported by facts or not.  
 Agree       Disagree
41. You feel more energetic after spending time with a group of people.  
 Agree       Disagree
42. You see yourself as very emotionally stable.  
 Agree       Disagree
43. Your mind is always buzzing with unexplored ideas and plans.  
 Agree       Disagree
44. You would not call yourself a dreamer.  
 Agree       Disagree
45. You usually find it difficult to relax when talking in front of many people.  
 Agree       Disagree
46. Generally speaking, you rely more on your experience than your imagination.  
 Agree       Disagree
47. You worry too much about what other people think.  
 Agree       Disagree
48. If the room is full, you stay closer to the walls, avoiding the center.  
 Agree       Disagree
49. You have a tendency to procrastinate until there is not enough time to do everything.  
 Agree       Disagree
50. You feel very anxious in stressful situations.  
 Agree       Disagree
51. You believe that it is more rewarding to be liked by others than to be powerful.  
 Agree       Disagree
52. You have always been interested in unconventional and ambiguous things, e.g. in books, art, or movies.  
 Agree       Disagree
53. You often take initiative in social situations.  
 Agree       Disagree
54. If the room is full, you stay closer to the walls, avoiding the center.  
 Agree       Disagree
55. You have a tendency to procrastinate until there is not enough time to do everything.  
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