# The Impact of Personality Traits on Students' Language Skills Achievement

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### Abstract

It is generally believed that success in foreign language learning varies depending on individual's characteristics such as learning strategies, intelligence, aptitude, motivation and personality traits. However, some researchers have recently found out that the importance of intelligence gradually declines after the high school level and at the same time, the role of personality factors takes an important role in students' language development. Thus this study aims to study the impact of personality factors on the language skills achievement of First Year English Specialization students at Yangon University of Foreign Languages. A study of 81 First Year English Specialization students' personality and language skills development is carried out to explore their diverse personalities even though they are studying in the same classroom context, receiving same language inputs. The instruments used in this study are the Myers Briggs Type Indicator for personality traits (1998) and for language skills achievement, their final examination results for two modules: Listening and Speaking Skills I and Reading and Writing Skills I. It is found that students' different personalities bring different achievement in these two modules.

**Key words: personality traits, language achievement**

## Introduction

It is generally believed that success in foreign language learning varies depending on individual's characteristics such as learning strategies, intelligence, aptitude motivation and personality traits. However, some researchers have recently found out that the importance of intelligence gradually declines after the high school level and at the same time, the role of personality factors takes one of the important roles in students' language development.

For these reasons, personality has become a particular focus of interest in the field of English language teaching. MaCaulley & Natter (1974) and Myers & Myers (1980) stated that personality traits make a difference in how people learn and what they learn. Thus it becomes an important paradigm in language learning. Researches on the relationship between personality and second language learning ability have been carried out in the last few decades. The results that are available, however, have sometimes been inconsistent because of methodological and conceptual differences in the way the studies were performed. No matter how the researches result in, it is worth studying this two-way relationship between personality and language learning because Ellis (1985) stated that personality can influence

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second language learning and second language learning can also influence personality development.

**Literature Review**

**Personality**

In the field of ELT, it is generally accepted that general intelligence may be able to predict what a person can do whereas personality type may predict what a person is likely to do. According to personality theories, every individual is different and in teaching/learning contexts, those individuals are characterized by their unique and fundamentally fixed pattern of traits, learning styles or points of view.

There has also been a view that personality consists of a multitude of specific traits such as anxiety, intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, social competence etc. Sometimes, it is argued that such multitude of specific traits cannot reveal an accurate profile. Nevertheless, personality has been studied in a variety of different ways by different researchers.

As there used to be a long list of personality traits, multi-trait models have been developed by several researchers. Some multi-trait models are able to offer more accurate profiles and thus have been widely accepted as providing the core features of personality. The three best known models are the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, (EPQ) (Eysenck, 1975), the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, MBTI (Briggs Myers, et al., 1998) and the Five Factor Model, (FFM) (Costa and McCrae, 1992). Of these three models, MBTI (Briggs Myers, et al., 1998) was used as an instrument of this research.

**MBTI indicator (Briggs Myers, et al., 1998)**

The MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) is one of the most widely used psychological tests which has a clear and direct relevance to learning. MBTI is made up of four dimensional scales of personality:

1. Extraversion vs. Introversion (Mind)
2. Sensing vs. Intuition (Nature)
3. Thinking vs. Feeling (Energy)
4. Judging vs. Perceiving. (Tactics)

Each of the four dimensions is independent of the other three, so they can be combined to produce 16 combinations. The explanation of 16 personality types is excerpted from Introduction to Isabel Briggs Myers published by CPP. Inc. and the detail explanation of these personality types is mentioned in appendix.

**Rationale for the study**

Yangon University of Foreign Languages is one of the most popular universities in Myanmar. Those who want to get a place at YUFL need to get high scores in their Matriculation Examination and out of eight undergraduate programmes being offered at

YUFL, the entry mark for English specialization is the highest. So, it may generally assume that when they graduate, those highly intelligent students' English language proficiency level should be at the top. However, it is found, in reality, that there are some students whose English language level is not satisfactory when they graduate. There are many crucial factors why they fail to meet the expected outcomes. Some of these factors include parental influence in major choice, motivation, learning strategies and personality traits. At YUFL, researches have been done for the first four factors and so it is necessary to study how personality traits shape the development of language skills. With this rationale, this study attempts to investigate the impact of personality traits on the language skills achievement of First Year English Specialization students at YUFL. The following research questions are of particular interest:

1. How do students' personality traits affect their speaking and listening skills development?
2. How do their personality traits affect their reading and writing skills development?

**Research Methodology**
**Participants**

The participants are 81 first year English Specialization students at YUFL: 10 male students and 71 female students. An average age is 17.6. They have to take three major modules and three minor modules in their first year: Listening and Speaking Skills, Reading and Writing Skills and Grammar as major modules.

**Instruments**

For this study, students are requested to complete 16 personality types questionnaires based on the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, MBTI (Briggs Myers, at al., 1998). The reason is that the MBTI has been researched for decades and proves that it has direct relevance to learning. To measure students' English language skills, the scores they got in their semester-end examination are used. The reason is the test items in the final examination question papers guarantee reliability and validity in assessing specific language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

**Data collection**

Firstly, with the help of the class coordinators, the MBTI was introduced to the first year English Specialization students. Students were explained the importance of the awareness of their personality traits in their studies, in their social life and even in their future career choice. With this motivation, all students willingly took the 15 minute-online survey and sent it back to the researcher via their coordinators. As their results were shown right after the completion of their survey, they were delighted and almost all of them accepted the results. Only three were not pleased with the results so the results of these three participants were excluded in this study.

To measure their language skills achievement, students had to take two semester-end examinations for both modules. Each lasted 3 hours, including a variety of test items for written examinations and also an oral tests which measured their speaking skills.

**Data analysis**

All the survey data are processed to place students' personality traits into MBTI 16 possible combinations: ISTJ, ISFJ, ESTJ, ESFJ, etc. For language skills development, the answer papers were assessed, using approved marking schemes. For oral tests, students' speaking abilities were evaluated by four experienced assessors.

**Findings and discussion**

According to the survey results, individual student's personality traits were analyzed in terms of MBTI keys. The results are shown in Figure 1, 2, 3 and 4 successively.
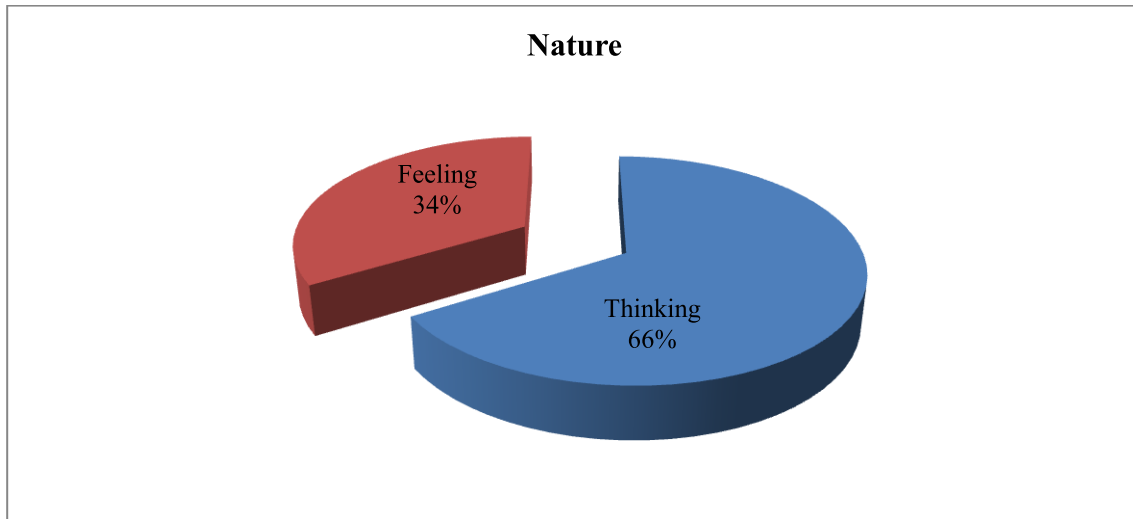
Figure 1 represents the personality trait that determines how participants interact with their environment. Out of 81, 36 participants accepted themselves as 'extraverted' while 45 as 'introverted'.

**Mind**

introverted
56%

extraverted
44%
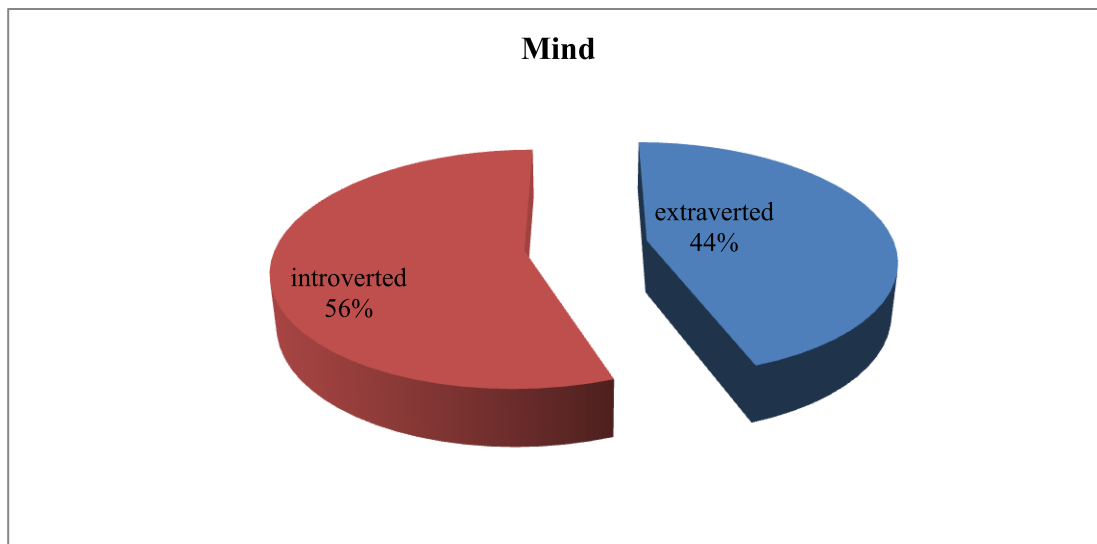
**Figure1: The ratio of introverted vs. extroverted**

Figure 2 denotes the personality trait that determines how students make decisions and cope with emotions. Out of 81 participants, 53 accepted themselves as 'thinking' while 28 as 'feeling'.

**Nature**

Feeling
34%

Thinking
66%

**Figure 2: The ratio of thinking vs. feeling**

Figure 3 illustrates the personality trait that shows where they direct their mental energy. Here, 30 participants accepted themselves as 'intuitive' while 51 participants as 'sensing'.

**Energy**

Intuition
37%
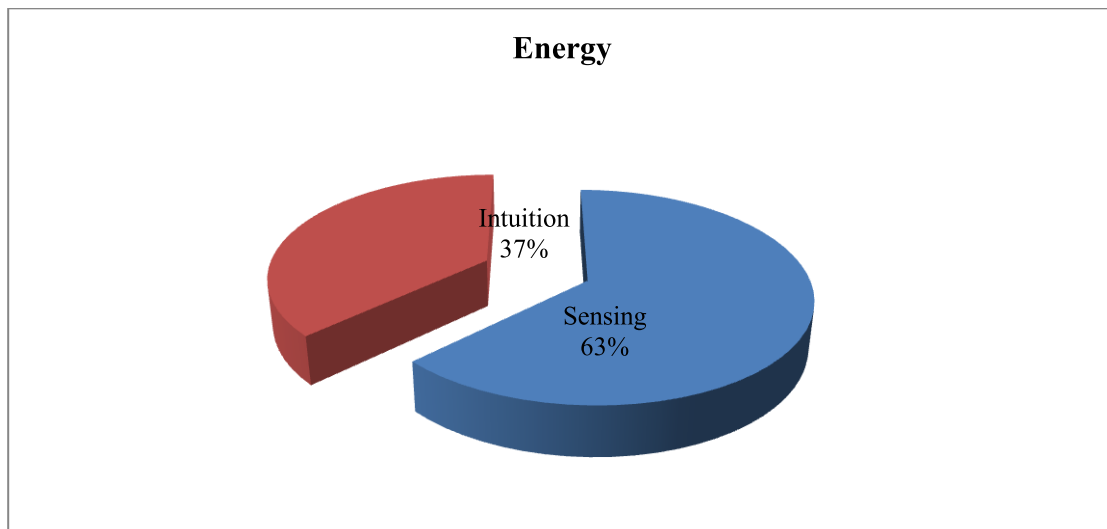
Sensing
63%

**Figure 3: The ratio of intuition vs. sensing**

Figure 4 signifies the personality trait that reflects their approach to work, planning and decision making. Out of 81, 44 participants accepted themselves as 'judging' while 37 participants as 'perceiving'.
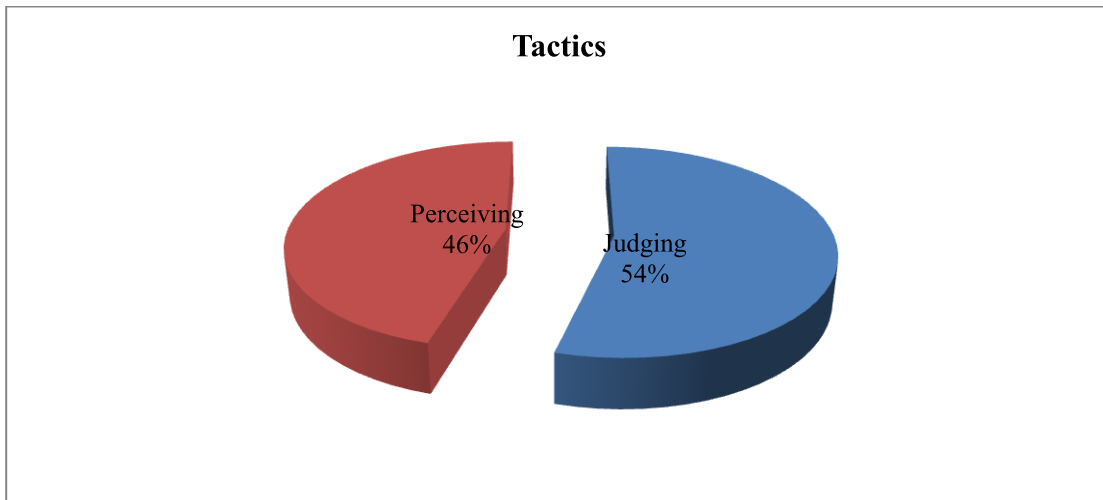


**Figure 4: The ratio of perceiving vs. judging**

As shown in Figure 1 to Figure 4, among the participants, there is a strong preference for introversion over extroversion, feeling over thinking, sensing over intuition and judging over perceiving.

To get a clearer and more picture of participants' personality traits proportion, the MBTI is used. The MBTI is made up of 4 bipolar scales which can be combined to produce 16 possible combinations. With the help of the survey tool, students' responses were group in terms of 16 combinations. Table 1 shows the results of the survey.

**Table 1: Statistical analysis of personality traits combination**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ISTJ**<br>**N=8** | **ISFJ**<br>**N=5** | **INFJ**<br>**N=2** | **INTJ**<br>**N=14** |
| **ISTP**<br>**N=4** | **ISFP**<br>**N=5** | **INFP**<br>**N=3** | **INTP**<br>**N=3** |
| **ESTP**<br>**N=8** | **ESFP**<br>**N=6** | **ENFP**<br>**N=2** | **ENTP**<br>**N=2** |
| **ESTJ**<br>**N=12** | **ESFJ**<br>**N=3** | **ENFJ**<br>**N=1** | **ENTJ**<br>**N=3** |

The following figure clearly displays the distribution of personality traits of the participants as assessed by MBTI.
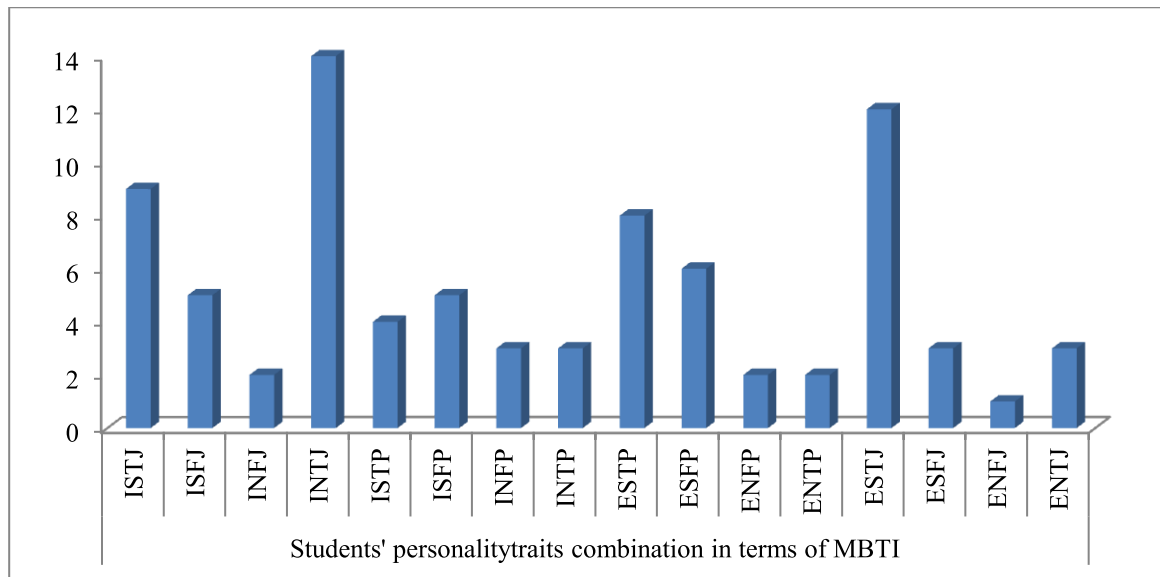


**Figure 5: Personality traits combination of the participants**

It can be seen in the figure that the most pronounced are INTJ, ISTJ, ESTP and ESTJ. 17.28% of participants claimed that they are introverted who enjoy thinking and judging in doing class activities, taking tests and other social work. Although they are introverted, they are more likely to be drawn by abstract possibilities, meanings and relationships and by the innovative and theoretical. 14.81% of the participants are extroverted who attend to concrete and practical facts. They make decision in impersonal and logical manner but deal with outside world with flexibility and freedom. 11.11% are also introverts but unlike the first group, they tend to follow a step by step approach and 9.87% claim that they are extroverts who also tend to follow a step by step approach.

To analyze the impact of these personality traits on the participants' language skills development, first of all, the exam scores of the two modules were compared. Not in conformity with theoretical claims, INTJ group got highest marks in both modules: average score of 75.21 in Listening and Speaking Skills and 70.71 in Reading and Writing skills. Although they themselves claimed that they are introverts, their exam scores in Listening and Speaking Skills are higher than those in Reading and Writing skills. Next to INTJ, ESTJ group scored 73.83 in average in Listening and Speaking Skills and 68.5 in Reading and Writing skills. It can be deduced that being an introvert or an extrovert does not have considerable impact on the language development. The influence of other personality types such as nature and tactics also decides the development of each language skill, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

Therefore, it is necessary to study the impact of each pair of personality traits on the participants' language achievement. Based on their personality preferences, the exam scores are analyzed. The results are shown as follows.

The participants who claimed themselves as extroverts feel energized, working in a team. Figure 6 reveals that in taking an examination, they do not make considerably different performance in both modules. The average score for Listening and Speaking Skills module is 70.71 whereas it is 69.72 for Reading and Writing Skills module.
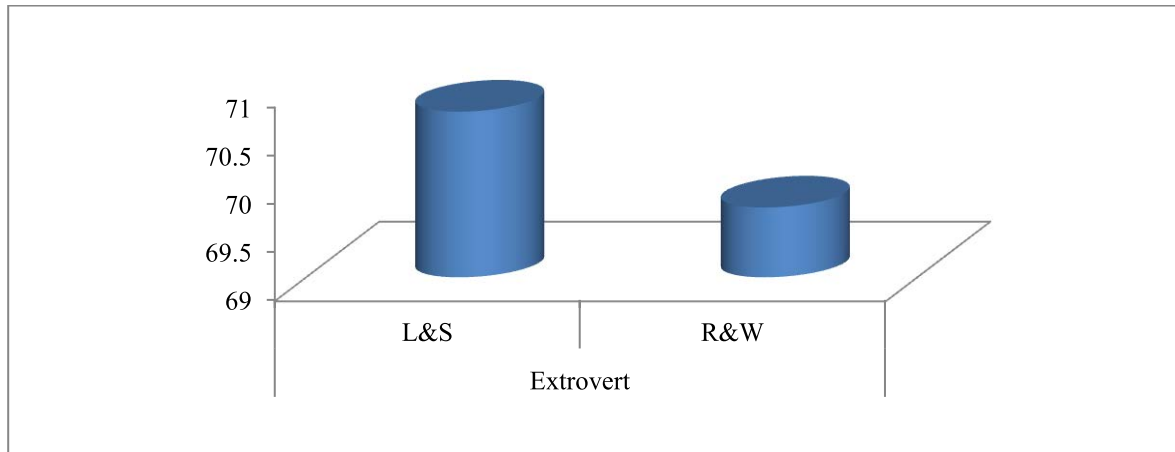


**Figure 6: Exam scores of Extroverts**

Introverts are more concerned with the inner world of ideas and are more likely to do better in getting things done alone. However, like extroverts, in taking an examination, they do not make considerable differences in both modules. The average score for Listening and Speaking Skills module is 74.86 whereas it is 72.34 for Reading and Writing Skills module.
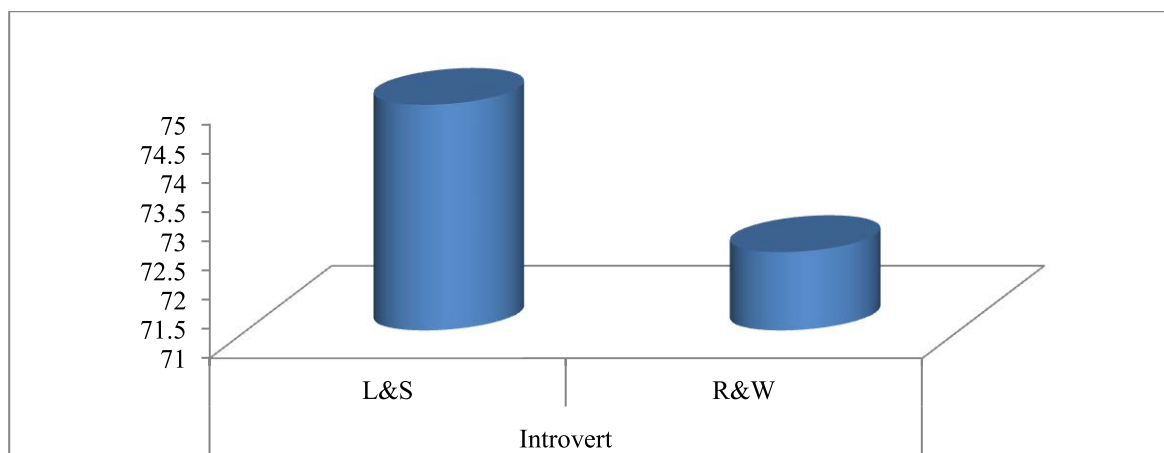


**Figure 7: Exam scores of Introverts**

Those who belong to sensing preference are regarded as closed type; they often find it difficult to communicate with other people spontaneously. Their personality type led them gain lower score in Listening and Speaking Modules.
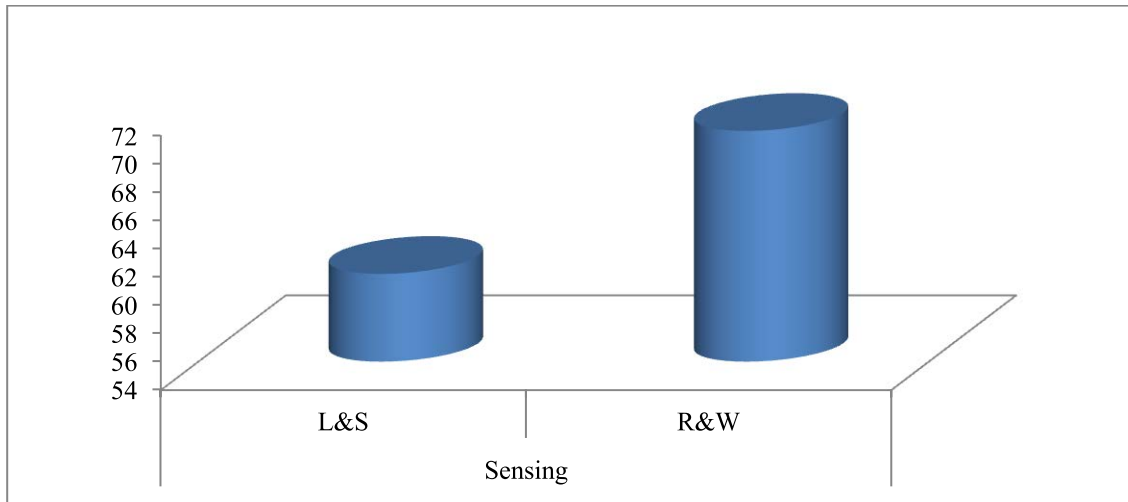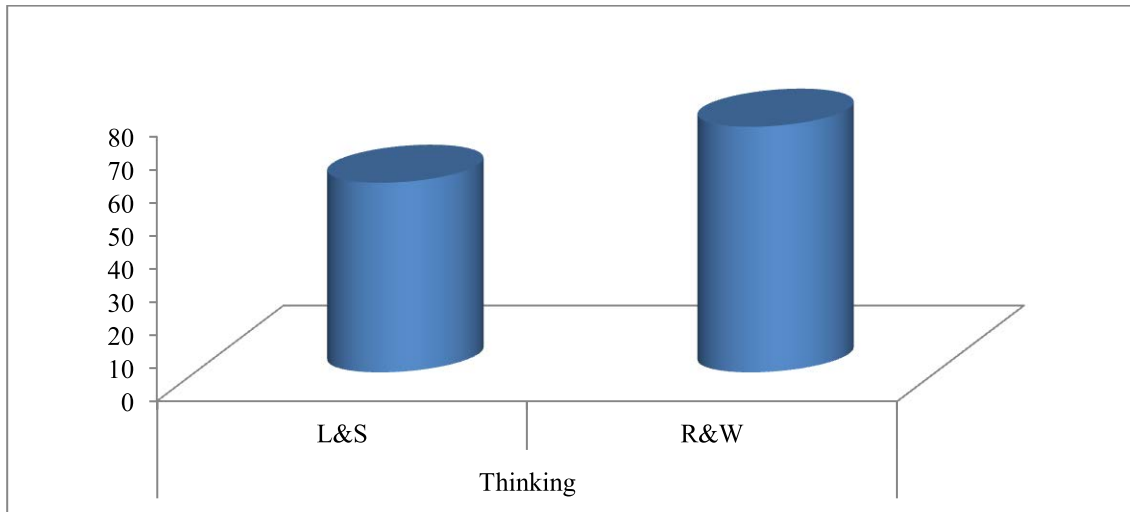


**Figure 8: Exam scores of Sensing Preference**

Those who belong to Intuition preference are open type and they can cope with abstract possibilities and meanings. This is one of the reasons why their Listening and Speaking Skills development is greater than Reading and Writing Skills Development. Their Reading and Writing Skills scores are below the average.
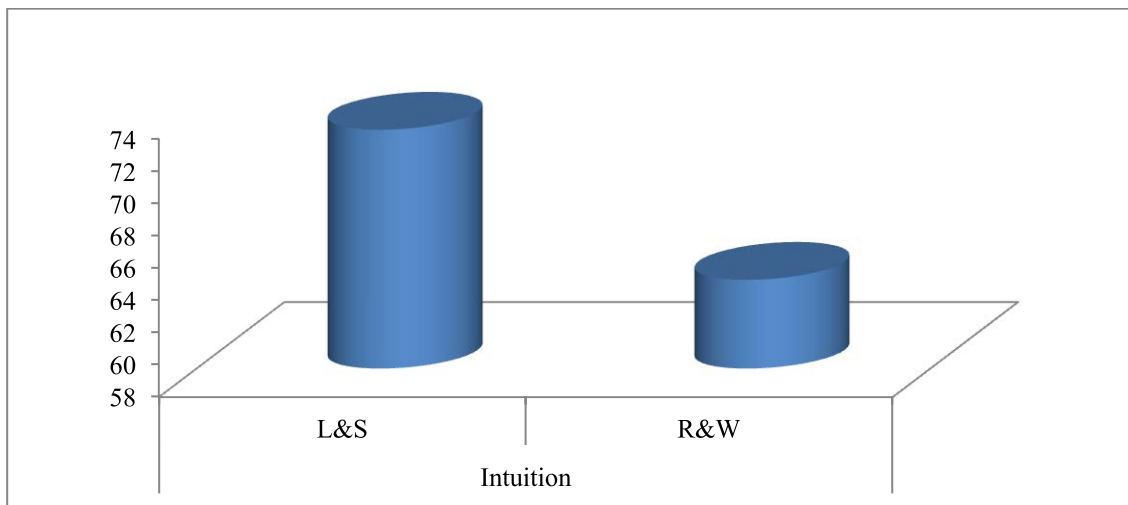


**Figure 9: Exam scores of Intuition Preference**

For thinking preference participants, they tend to make decisions, based on logical thinking. They seek factual clarity in solving disputes. Although their scores for Listening and Speaking Skills are not satisfactory, they did well in Reading and Writing Skills module.
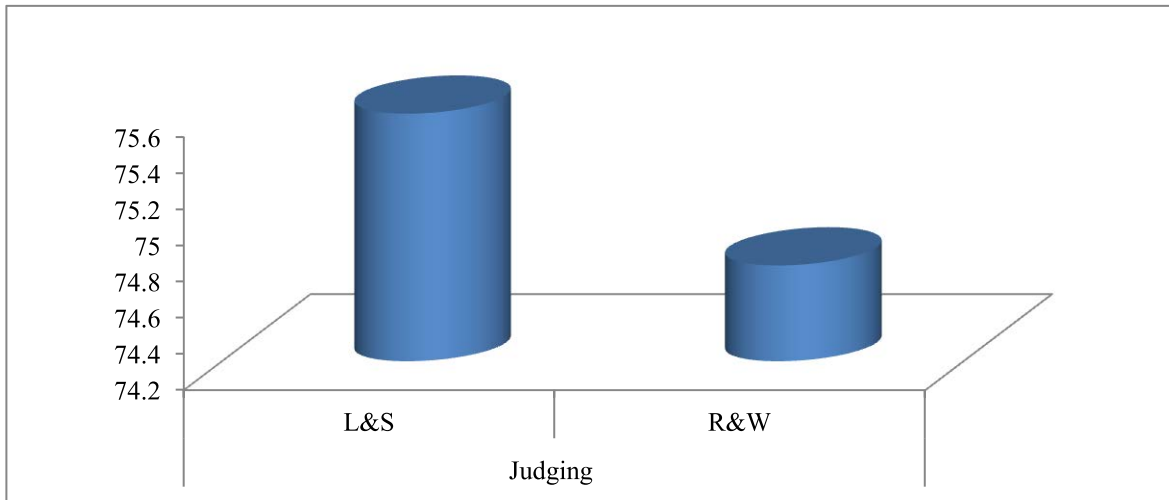


**Figure 10: Exam scores of Thinking Preference**

Participants who prefer feeling over thinking generally pay close attention to other people's needs and make decisions based more on personal values and the feelings of others. In taking examinations, their personality trait seems to hinder them from making right decisions. Those who get low marks in both modules are feeling preference. Their average score for Reading and Writing is 58.34.
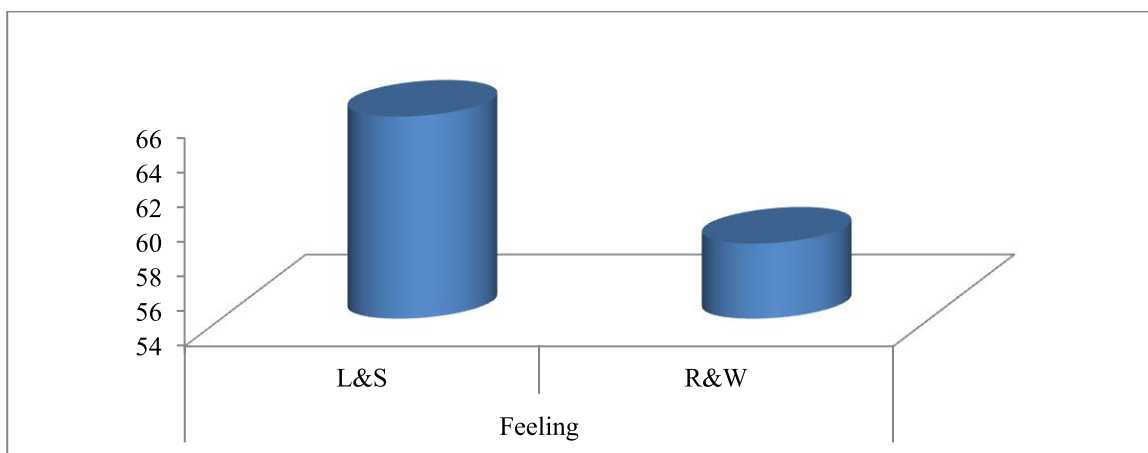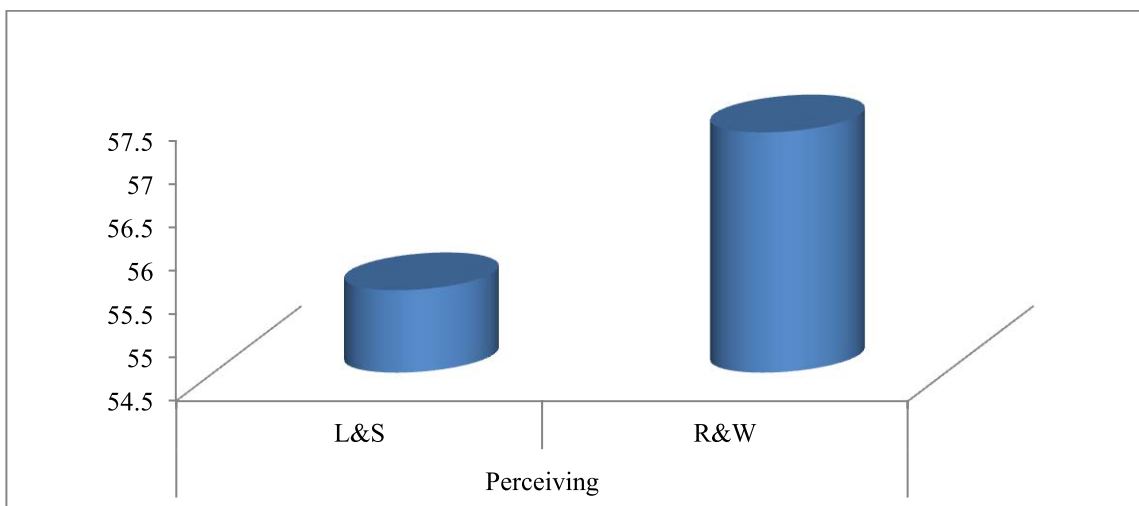


**Figure 11: Exam scores of Feeling Preference**

Those who prefer judging are likely to look for a planned and controlled life, seeking closure, preferring planning and regulation. This personality trait brings them success in language learning. Their average scores are 75.57 and 74.73 in Listening and Speaking Skills and Reading and Writing Skills respectively. Participants who are always at the top and highly conscientious are judging preference.



**Figure 12: Exam scores of Judging Preference**

Those who are perceiving preference are the weakest students in class. Their personality trait takes them away from hard work and so they get just above the pass marks in both modules.



**Figure 13: Exam scores of Perceiving Preference**

Based on the MBTI evidences, Sharp (2005) suggested that it is necessary for ELT teachers to aware that 'those with a thinking preference were found to prefer analysis of language data and have a greater ability to see details rather than the global picture. Those with a feeling preference saw the things more globally and sought holistic strategies such as guessing, predicting and paraphrasing with avoidance of grammar analysis. Judgers need more direction and clear grammar rules. Intuitive students were more likely to use abstract principles of language in a more divergent and feel relaxed with guessing, prediction and other compensation strategies.'

According to the results of this study, it is found out that participants who prefer judging and introversion could do well in their language tests while those who prefer perceiving are weak in their language skills. In Figure 14, it can be seen that some personality traits such as extroversion, introversion, judging and perceiving do not have much difference in achievement of all four language skills. However, for sensing, intuition, thinking and feeling preferences their language skills developments are considerably different.
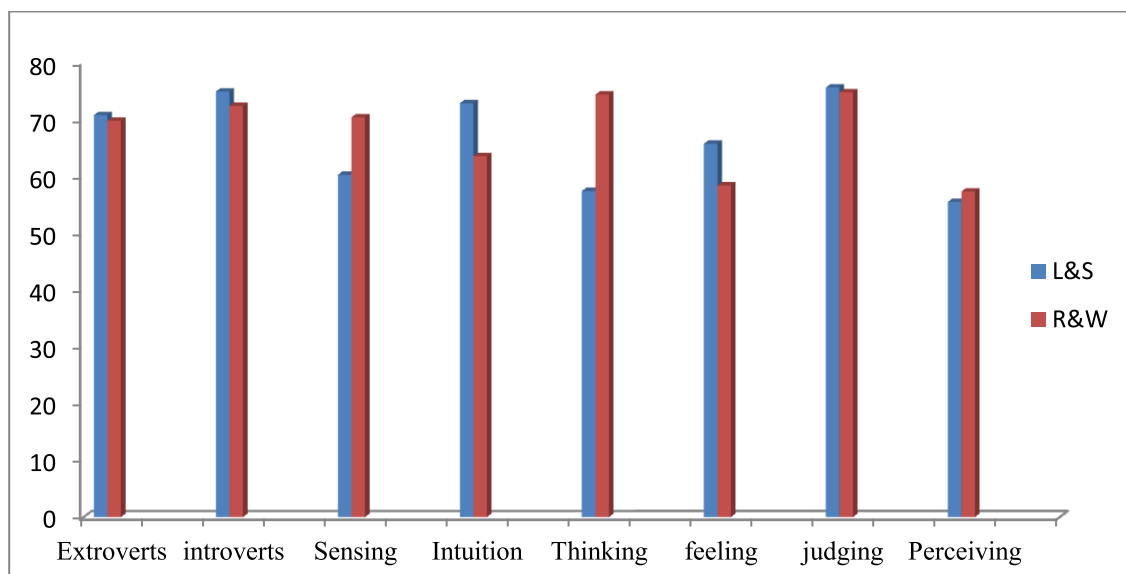


**Figure 14: Skills development determined by personality traits**

**Conclusion**

This study finds out the impact of participants' personality traits on their language skills achievement using MBTI tool and language skills tests. Deviating from general assumption that says extroverts are better language learners than introverts, most of the clever students committed themselves as being introverted. But according to MBTI explanation, introversion does not solely 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. In this sense, it can be deduced that extroversion or introversion alone does not directly affect a

person's language achievement. Moreover, other traits like judging, intuition and sensing are found directly related to language achievement. Therefore, it can be said that this study can demonstrate the impact of personality traits on the language skills achievements to some extent. However, it fails to provide more detail statistical evidence. Instead of exclusively exploring the relationship between personality traits and language skills achievement, it is necessary to consider the different learning strategies of the participants as one part of this study so that precise statistical evidence can be found and the profound results will definitely contribute to the improvement of English Language learning and teaching environment.

As resulted in this study, participants have gained awareness of their own personality traits so that they may self-consciously change their personality patterns to become more motivated to learn English as their specialized language and lead to better performance in language learning. And thus their better-quality personality patterns will help them get onto the right track for their education and career.

In addition, it is believed that knowing students' personality traits are helpful to ELT teachers. Today's language classrooms are more and more similar to operation fields, challenging teachers to motivate and arouse students' interest in English and its culture, to increase their linguistic knowledge and to enhance their self-value. Therefore, teachers need to prepare to get records of motivation level, intelligence, self-esteem and personality traits of their students. Carrying out surveys on their students' motivation level, intelligence, self-esteem, anxiety and personality traits, etc. and giving feedbacks to them can also create more and more harmonious classroom environment. Based on the personality traits of the better students, teachers can create more challenging classroom activities to make students more matured, more critical and more proficient in English language. On the other hand, based on the personality traits of the weaker students, teachers can modify the lessons and classroom activities so that the weaker ones become more and more confident in learning, more and more involved in classroom activities and will change their personality patterns by themselves.

Therefore it is believed that although it has some limitations, this study can make positive contribution to the field of English language teaching to some extent.

**Appendix**
**MBTI indicator (Briggs Myers, et al., 1998)**
The MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) is one of the most widely used psychological tests which has a clear and direct relevance to learning. MBTI is made up of four dimensional scales of personality:

1. Extraversion vs. Introversion (Mind)
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Each of the four dimensions is independent of the other three, so they can be combined to produce 16 combinations. The explanation of 16 personality types is excerpted from Introduction to Isabel Briggs Myers published by CPP. Inc.

1. ISTJ: This type represents people who are quiet, serious, earn success by thoroughness and dependability. They are practical, matter-of-fact, realistic, and responsible. They decide logically what should be done and work toward it steadily, regardless of distractions. They take pleasure in making everything orderly and organized their work, their home, their life. They value traditions and loyalty.

2. ISFJ: This type represents people who are quiet, friendly, responsible, and conscientious. They are committed and steady in meeting their obligations. They are thorough, painstaking, and accurate. They are also loyal, considerate, notice and remember specifics about people who are important to them, concerned with how others feel. They love to create an orderly and harmonious environment at work and at home.

3. INFJ: This type represents people who seek meaning and connection in ideas, relationships, and material possessions. They want to understand what motivates people and are insightful about others. They are conscientious and committed to their firm values. They could develop a clear vision about how best to serve the common good. They are organized and decisive in implementing their vision.

4. INTJ: This type represents people who have original minds and great drive for implementing their ideas and achieving their goals. They quickly see patterns in external events and develop long-range explanatory perspectives. When committed, they organize a job and carry it through. They are skeptical and independent, having high standards of competence and performance for themselves and others.

5. ISTP: This type represents people who are tolerant and flexible, quiet observers until a problem appears then act quickly to find workable solutions. They analyze what makes things work and readily get through large amounts of data to isolate the core of practical problems. They are interested in cause and effect, organize facts using logical principles, value efficiency.

6. ISFP: This type represents people who are quiet, friendly, sensitive, and kind. They enjoy the present moment, what is going on around them. They like to have their own space and to work within their own time frame. They are loyal and committed to their values and to people who are important to them. They dislike disagreements and conflicts so they do not force their opinions or values on others.

7. INFP: This type represents people who are idealistic, loyal to their values and to people who are important to them. They want an external life that is congruent with their values. They are curious, quick to see possibilities and can be catalysts for implementing ideas. They seek to understand people and to help them fulfill their potential. They are adaptable, flexible, and accepting unless a value is threatened.

8. INTP: This type represents people who seek to develop logical explanations for everything that interest them. They are theoretical and abstract, interested more in ideas than in social interaction. They are quiet, contained, flexible, and adaptable. They have unusual ability to focus in depth to solve problems in their area of interest. They are skeptical, sometimes critical, and always analytical.

9. ESTP: This type represents people who are flexible and tolerant. They take a pragmatic approach focused on immediate results. Theories and conceptual explanations bore them as they want to act energetically to solve the problem. They focus on the here-and-now, and they enjoy each moment that they can be active with others. They also enjoy material comforts and style and learn best through doing.

10. ESFP: This type represents people who are outgoing, friendly, and accepting. They are exuberant lovers of life, people, and material comforts. They enjoy working with others to make things happen. They bring common sense and a realistic approach to their work, and make work fun. They are flexible and spontaneous, adapt readily to new people and environments. They learn best by trying a new skill with other people.

11. ENFP: This type represents people who are warmly enthusiastic and imaginative. They see life as full of possibilities. They make connections between events and information very quickly, and confidently proceed based on the patterns they see. They want a lot of affirmation from others, and readily give appreciation and support. They are spontaneous and flexible; often rely on their ability to improvise and their verbal fluency.

12. ENTP: This type represents people who are quick, ingenious, stimulating, alert, and outspoken. They are resourceful in solving new and challenging problems. They are good at generating conceptual possibilities and then analyzing them strategically. They are also good at reading other people. They feel bored by routine, and will seldom do the same thing the same way, apt to turn to one new interest after another.

13. ESTJ: This type represents people who are practical, realistic and matter-of-fact. They are decisive, quickly move to implement decisions. They organize projects and people to get things done, focus on getting results in the most efficient way possible. They take care of routine details. They have a clear set of logical standards, systematically follow them and want others to also. They are forceful in implementing their plans.

14. ESFJ: This type represents people who are warmhearted, conscientious, and cooperative. They want harmony in their environment; work with determination to establish it. They like to work with others to complete tasks accurately and on time. They are loyal, follow through even in small matters. They notice what others need in their daily lives and try to provide it. They want to be appreciated for who they are and for what they contribute.

15. ENFJ: This type represents people who are warm, empathetic, responsive, and responsible. They are highly attuned to the emotions, needs, and motivations of others. They find potential in everyone, want to help others fulfill their potential. They may act as catalysts

for individual and group growth. They are loyal, responsive to praise and criticism. Being sociable, they facilitate others in a group, and provide inspiring leadership.

16. ENTJ: This type represents people who are frank, decisive, assume leadership readily. They quickly see illogical and inefficient procedures and policies, develop and implement comprehensive systems to solve organizational problems. They enjoy long-term planning and goal setting. They are usually well informed, well read, and enjoy expanding their knowledge and passing it on to others. They are forceful in presenting their ideas.

## Acknowledgements

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