The present study investigates personality dimensions and learning styles of four talented foreign language learners. As both foreign language teachers and learners face the difficulties associated with language learning on a regular basis, it may be important to find certain behavioral patterns that could serve as guidelines in making the process more comfortable and effective for all parties.

The instruments used in the research were the MBTI test to identify participants' orientation on personality dimensions and Kolb's Learning Style Inventory to examine their learning style preferences. The aim of the research was to explore the idea of any commonalities in personality profiles of talented language learners as well as in the learning styles they prefer to apply. The research results suggest that no specific psychological type was identified within the group of participants even though they all scored high on personality dimensions Thinking and Judging. On the measures of preferred learning styles they all scored high on the abstract conceptualization dimension and two learner types were distinguished: Assimilators and Convergers. The conclusion is that learners' different psychological types and learning styles require a more specific teaching approach that would cater for their individual needs.

Keywords: personality dimensions, learning styles, gifted students, foreign language learning.

Introduction

The concepts of giftedness and talent are far from being new constructs as they have been recognized and investigated by researchers for centuries – both on theoretical and empirical grounds. Even though it is generally assumed that gifted individuals and those with special talents and exceptionally high abilities in certain domains can be identified with relative ease, giftedness and the related notion of talent are not easily explained in scientific terms.

The earliest and long prevalent views of giftedness were those based on the psychometric definition of intelligence suggesting that giftedness is a high general intellectual ability (Terman & Oden, 1947) measured by the IQ coefficient. Over time, broader views of the concepts of giftedness and intelligence have gained acceptance, among which Gardner's construct of
‘multiple intelligences’ (Gardner, 2003) has drawn particular attention. The reason for this is that it suggests that there are as many as eight different types of intelligence, which include linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist. Such recognition of the multi-componential nature of mental abilities implies a certain degree of variation within individuals regarding their specific abilities in the sense that a person may excel on one dimension and have weaker abilities on another.

Similarly, research on the source and structure of talent has been mostly based on a model of distinct faculties where abilities in specific domains are adjacent to each other and hence linguistic talent, for example, is comparable to that of musical, logical, spatial, etc. (Gardner 2003). Even though the terms talented and gifted are quite frequently used interchangeably, there are views that place giftedness at a hierarchically higher position suggesting that it refers to the highly above average competence, whereas talent is seen as highly above average performance in a particular field (Gagne, 1995). What is implied by this distinction is that giftedness is to be understood as potential and talent as achievement. From this aspect, talent is a phenomenon rather easily detected, especially by experts in the relevant field, yet it remains an elusive concept because it relies on some sort of innate ability without which no amount of effort or experience can deliver levels of performance associated with the talent per se.

With regard to linguistic talent, particularly in the realm of second and foreign language learning, the most readily observable fact is that most language learners find the process extremely demanding and frustrating. In addition, learning endeavor of this sort typically results in low or mediocre levels of foreign language mastery regardless of the amount of time and effort invested (Bley-Vroman, 1989; Long, 2007). The focus of this paper will be on the exceptionally successful language learners whose level of attainment has been detected as outstanding in the context of foreign language learning. Even though an abundance of research studies have been concerned with factors that prevent language learners from becoming highly proficient in an additional language, the aim of this paper is to investigate whether there are certain psychological commonalities within the group of learners who stand out significantly in terms of their achievement in the field. In order to do so, psychological profiles of the selected learners have been built and their learning strategies investigated.

Theoretical background

Personality and learning. Personality is understood as the complex of the attributes that make every individual unique and constitute a consistent pattern in apparently random behaviors (Dornyei, 2005). There have been a vast number of approaches to the study of personality but what they all have in common is the insistence on the idea of stable patterns. Some of the early proposals included a myriad of narrowly defined traits which were later substituted by broader secondary dimensions. However, those have now been found lacking, as they cannot accommodate for every personality construct.

It is clear that personality dispositions are factors that significantly affect human behavior, but the issue of interest in this study is the extent of impact these behavioral determinants have on the process of learning. There have been a number of studies investigating correlations
between personality and academic achievement (e.g. Charmore-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003a, 2003b; Cross, Speirs Neumeister & Cassady, 2007; Farsides & Woodfield, 2003; Sak, 2004). It cannot be said that the related studies deliver a clear picture of the nature of the personality-learning relation but even so, it appears that certain regularities have been identified.

Researchers that attempted to relate academic success with measures of the four personality dimensions of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) with a focus on academically gifted adolescents (e.g. Cross et al, 2007; Mills & Parker, 1998; Sak, 2004) found that there is a significantly larger proportion of introverts in this group than in the general population. Academically gifted individuals were also identified as having higher orientation toward the intuitive type which is generally associated with autonomy, creativity, intellectuality, managing abstract symbols and preference for theorizing and hidden meanings. They also appear to be more frequently identified as thinking types on the MBTI who emphasize logic and objectivity in reasoning in contrast with the feeling types who appreciate human relationships in their judgments as well as society's values. Another type more present among the academically gifted than in the general population is the perceiving type, which is characterized as being spontaneous, receptive and understanding with a flexible way of life.

**Personality and language learning.** As stated earlier, it has been a longstanding observation that for the majority of the population learning an additional language (L2) is an endeavor fraught with difficulty, and that only few L2 learners achieve levels of attainment comparable to those of native speakers. This has led researchers to look into the possible correlations of this kind of linguistic giftedness and personality features (Dornyei, 2005).

It is interesting that most studies dealing with the extraversion-introversion dimension and L2 learning have delivered confusing results suggesting that the role of this trait in learning an L2 is insignificant or that the results are mixed. Dornyei (2005) explains this by suggesting that the poor reputation of this variable in the realm of L2 learning is the result of not distinguishing properly the effect of the dimension between oral and written language tasks. By doing so a much clearer picture emerges implying that extraverts score better on complex verbal tasks because they are more resilient to situations characterized by interpersonal stress. On the other hand, under conditions of increased pressure the production of introverts falls back to being supported by controlled processing because automaticity of speech production is inhibited by higher levels of arousal. This overloads introverts' working memory and as a result their speech slows down, they tend to make more errors and have difficulty with producing utterances of greater length. Nevertheless, L2 learning involves a number of learning tasks and processes that are not restricted to conversational contexts and it appears that these aspects of learning can be related more easily to the introvert. What this means is that both extraversion and introversion may have positive features in the context of L2 learning. This is particularly interesting when taking into account the fact that in most other academic domains of learning introverts seem to have a notable advantage.

Another relevant factor in the realm of L2 learning is a positive attitude toward the L2 community. In terms of personality features, a positive attitude toward a foreign culture requires openness, curiosity and appreciation of different cultural values and ways of life (Dornyei, 2005). This further implies that all L2 learning involves, at least to some extent, the need and desire to integrate into the larger community of either L2 native speakers,
L2 learners or the global community of L2 users as is the case with L2 English (Dornyei, 2005). Striving in this direction relies on the personality factors of empathy, appreciation of interpersonal relationships and societal values in general.

Learning styles. As researchers cannot seem to reach an agreement on whether learning styles vary in terms of their field dependence-independence, the following remarks will mostly focus on learning styles in general and not on learning styles in the field of L2 learning. Learning styles are most commonly understood in the broad terms of preferred, habitual ways of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills (Dornyei, 2005). Or, to put it differently, when considering learning styles we refer to individual approaches to learning or the way a person perceives, interacts with and responds to the learning environment. It is logical and easily observable that different people approach the same learning task in different manners as is the assumption that variability in these approaches is not infinite but reveals the existence of certain patterns i.e. learning styles.

According to Ehrman (1996), the intensity of a learning style can range from a mild preference to a strong need which is why some of the style dimensions are also sometimes listed as major personality components. As suggested by Rayner (2000) the individual’s approach to learning encompasses two levels of functioning, the first having to do with the way a person thinks and processes information i.e. the cognitive level and the second, more external and less stable one, which is related to the learner’s continuing adaptation to the environment during the concrete learning activity. What follows from this distinction is that cognition is at the core of learning styles, which makes it difficult to make a clear distinction between intelligence, personality dimensions and learning styles.

Method

Participants. The study participants were four students enrolled at the Faculty of Economics in Subotica, University of Novi Sad, who had just completed their two-year English course as a regular part of the curriculum. The participants were screened for their L2 English skills which were considered exceptional in comparison with their colleagues’ performance. They exhibited high levels of proficiency at the morphosyntactic and semantic level of L2 performance and also in the domain of pronunciation.

Instruments. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) was used to assess the psychological types of the participants. MBTI dimensions, unlike some other traditional scales, do not range from positive to negative but point to different aspects of one’s personality which in each of 16 possible combinations can have a positive or negative interpretation in a particular domain of life.

Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory (LSI) was used to assess the preferred learning styles of the participants. Version 3 of the instrument was used (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2001). Possible combinations of the scores on the two dimensions allow for four basic learner types. Again, it is important to note that no value judgment is made about any of the learning styles as it is suggested that in every style position one can be successful in a different manner.

Procedure. The testing took place on July 10, 2017 at the Faculty of Economics in Subotica, University of Novi Sad. The tests were administered to students by their English
teacher who explained what they should do and made sure they understood the instructions. It was also made clear that there are no right and wrong answers on either of the tests because they are revealing of different aspects of their dealing with everyday situations and the learning content. The participants were made aware that their identities will be kept anonymous and that the test results will be used for scientific purposes only. The testing took approximately forty minutes. The results of both tests were analyzed by a psychologist who wrote the reports provided in the results section of the paper.

Results

MBTI personality types. The psychological profile of the first participant (P1) is ENTJ. According to his score on the Extraversion/Introversion dimension (90/10), it is clear that he is a pronounced extrovert. Typical extroverts are assertive and speak their mind freely while finding great excitement in the world of interpersonal relationships. With regard to the Sensing/Intuition dimension (40/60), P1 is more oriented toward the intuitive type who is not concerned with concrete facts but prefers the abstract and imaginative while focusing on the possibilities emerging from the recognized patterns and meanings in the data. As the thinking type on the Thinking/Feeling dimension (65/35), when making decisions and arriving at conclusions P1 is slightly more inclined to rely on logic and follow the rational principles of the mind which allows him to be objective. Finally, his high score toward the judging type on the Judging/Perceiving dimension (95/5) is indicative of his preference for planning and order when dealing with everyday situations. Clear rules and guidelines are something judging types feel comfortable with, they are focused on meeting deadlines and do not like having to improvise (Dornyei, 2005).

The second participant’s profile is INTJ. P2 is an introvert (40/60) but not as pronounced as P4. This means that she appreciates interpersonal relationships but at the same time exhibits a tendency to enjoy the company of her own thoughts and take some time for solitude and contemplation. On the Sensing/Intuition dimension (45/55) she does not rely that much on the information gathered through the senses but is more concerned with the abstract and hypothetical, leading her to generate ideas based on deeper meanings of things and situations. Her score on the Thinking/Feeling dimension (55/45) suggests that her decisions are supported by logic but concern for others may decide on the way she will present and explain them to other people in order not to significantly affect cooperation. In her dealings with everyday situations she is a planner and appreciates order and structure without leaving much room for spontaneity and improvisation as indicated by her result on the Judging/Perceiving dimension (90/10).

The other female participant’s profile is ESTJ. P3 is another typical extrovert (80/20) who feels energetic when engaged in different kinds of social activities and has no difficulty in presenting herself to others. On the Sensing/Intuition dimension (55/45) she is inclined to be slightly more concerned with practical issues and with what actually happened rather than with open ended options. According to her score on the Thinking/Feeling dimension (65/35), when evaluating and deciding she is guided by reason and logic and does not easily allow emotions to interfere with her judgment. She also tends toward the judging type on
the Judging/Perceiving dimension (85/15), who appreciates careful planning, finds comfort in routine and tradition and is not in agreement with spontaneous and flexible life styles.

The last participant has the highest orientation toward Introversion (30/70) within the group. This makes him more passive and reserved in social contexts. P4’s score on the Sensing/Intuition dimension (75/25) implies that his understanding of the world is based on factual detail and experience, which allows him to be realistic and focus on the concrete while denying the effect of the possible and imaginary. As suggested by his result on the Thinking/Feeling dimension (65/35), in the process of drawing conclusions and evaluating, he appreciates the soundness of logical reasoning and tends not get distracted by other people’s feelings and attitudes. Finally, he also appreciates the order and structure of the comfort zone and does not easily adapt or improvise, which can be concluded based on his score on the Judging/Perceiving dimension (90/10).

**Learning styles.** On measures of the participants’ preferred learning styles, at first glance their results indicate low variability as three (P1, P2 and P4) out of the four participants belong to the group of Assimilators (reflective and abstract), which means that they tend to learn best by carefully observing and then trying to fully understand the meaning of ideas and situations.

Assimilators have a tendency to take a concise and logical approach. They require clear explanations and are good at understanding a wide range of information and organizing it into a logical format. They are more attracted by the logical soundness of theories and concepts than by approaches based on practical values. Their interests are focused around ideas and abstract concepts and not around people. This style of learning is frequently found among academics as their careers require assimilation of disparate theories and observations in a reflective manner which then results in the generation of new ideas without much consideration of the extent of their practical application. When in formal learning environments they prefer reading, lectures, and analytic models and like to have enough time to think things through (Kolb et al., 2001).

However, one of the participants (P3) belongs to the group of Convergers (abstract and active). People falling into this category according to their learning preference are good at solving problems and tend to use their knowledge to find solutions to practical issues. They are attracted to technical tasks and problems that require practical application of ideas and theories as opposed to reflective understanding. Because of their orientation toward abstract conceptualization they appreciate thinking and logic but are also driven by the need to actively test their ideas and probe their usefulness (Kolb et al., 2001).

Based on the results obtained, it can be said that all four participants have a strong tendency toward abstract conceptualization (both Assimilators and Convergers by definition have high scores on this dimension). Also, it may be important to note that even though three of the participants exhibited orientation toward reflective observation, the scores of P1 and P2 were also quite high on active experimentation. This may indicate that they are sometimes capable of actively trying things out for themselves and are not always passive observers who do not feel comfortable with having to get involved in an activity without sufficient theoretical and instructional support. On the other hand, P4 appears to be a typical assimilator who is content with theoretical speculation.
Discussion

Based on the MBTI test results, all four participants appear to belong to different psychological types (ENTJ, INTJ, ESTJ, and ISTJ). When analyzing separate dimensions of their profiles, identification of two extroverts and two introverts is in line with the conclusions of previous studies in the field (Dornyei, 2005). Even though introversion as a personality trait has been much more frequently identified among the academically gifted than in the general population, in the realm of foreign language learning introversion has not been proved to be a critical factor. According to the frequency of introverts and extroverts among talented language learners, both introversion and extraversion appear to have positive features. Therefore, within the scope of the present study, it is not surprising that both of the types have been identified.

Another point noted in the theoretical part is that among the academically gifted intuitive types are more present than sensing types. Even so, the study results indicate that individuals with highly developed foreign language skills may not depend on intuition to support their language learning skills. Two of the participants fall into the category of intuitive types, but the other two have been identified as the sensing type. L2 learning success of the sensing pair may be explained by the fact that one of the strengths of sensing preference is a high ability to memorize facts and details. This ability is frequently favored in school and university settings as it may significantly contribute to receiving good grades. In terms of their learning styles they both exhibit a rather strong preference toward abstract conceptualization, which may have contributed to their ability to understand and successfully manipulate the elements of the complex and abstract system of L2. Language learning is generally believed to be an excessively demanding cognitive task and these participants’ high orientation toward the abstract as well as their high scores on the thinking dimension may be responsible for their success in L2 learning.

Apart from their differences in how they approach the world and gather information about it, all the participants tended toward the thinking and judging ends of the two other personality dimensions. Thinking types are, once again, more present in the population of the academically gifted as this orientation allows them to make decisions and reach conclusions based on impartial views and to be led by reason and logic rather than by feelings. In this light, identification of the whole group within the thinking type may be revealing of the need for this orientation to fully understand the complexity of an abstract and logical L2 system. The ability to recognize patterns, make generalizations and at the same time be observant of discrete linguistic anomalies required from language learners allows them to appreciate the consistencies of the system but also to be open to novelty and ambiguity in language learning.

Participants’ high scores on the judging dimension are revealing of their orientation toward careful planning and appreciation of order and structure. Even though perception has been identified as a more favorable tendency among the academically gifted, this may not be the case in the field of language learning. L2 learning requires a systematic approach due to the nature of the learning content and it may be that this tendency for planning and order has contributed to the participants’ high linguistic achievement. Another point made by the psychologist is that high scores on the judging dimension may be indicative
of the participants’ need to impose order and structure on their lives because they live in a society of many political and economic contradictions (Benet-Martinez & Oishi, 2006). Living in socio-economic conditions that imply high levels of uncertainty may have led the participants to try to make more sense of the turbulent environment in which adaptation and improvisation are a way of life. Therefore, by applying a judging approach in the micro environment of their daily lives the participants may be attempting to find comfort in the sense of more predictive and favorable outcomes they believe careful preparation may offer.

Finally, in terms of preferred learning styles three of the participants belong to the group of assimilators and one to the group of convergers. Both of the learning styles identified require high scores on the dimension of abstract conceptualization with the difference that assimilators also score high on reflective observation and convergers on active experimentation. As suggested by the psychologist, this also may be the consequence of environmental requirements. Namely, the study participants are all part of the educational system that puts emphasis on theoretical investigations of the learning content with limited opportunities for practical application. The ex-cathedra approach dominating formal classrooms in the country encourages individual work and long hours of listening and reading without much opportunity for active experimentation. Instead, reproduction of the information received through the teacher’s lectures and course books is highly regarded and in most cases constitutes the basis for good grades. Unfortunately, not much experimentation and practical experience is involved in the curriculum and this may be the reason why the participants have developed learning styles that mostly focus on theoretical and reflective observation.

*Implications for teaching.* The differences identified in personality features as well as preferred learning styles suggest that individual learners may need a different teaching approach. Unfortunately, this is not always possible especially in large classes, which is usually the case in high schools and at faculties that attract and enroll huge numbers of students. Taking an individual approach requires work in smaller groups which allows teachers to accurately assess and cater for the individual needs of their students.

Developing foreign language skills in formal learning environments typically involves a wide a range of activities (reading, listening, writing and speaking) which can be approached in different manners (individual work, pair work, group work, simulations of real life situations, case studies, participation in projects, etc.). It appears that in this kind of learning environment that allows for multiple variations, almost any personality profile can find something they feel comfortable with.

Even so, teachers should be aware that there are always students who need more encouragement to get engaged in certain types of activities. Some of them may feel uncomfortable or bored with speaking or writing tasks (e.g. introverts in role plays or group work and extroverts when expected to produce pieces of formal writing) and an enthusiastic and understanding teacher may find ways to encourage them to participate and praise them afterwards for the effort invested. Also, given that L2 learning is a demanding task which requires a substantial amount of time and effort and is frequently associated with feelings of anxiety, boredom, embarrassment and even frustration, the L2 aspects being taught should be approached in a number of ways so that different types of learners would be interested and at ease during class.
It is interesting to note that certain relationships have been found between language teaching approaches and personality dimensions (Sharp, 2005). On the Thinking/Feeling dimension, learners with thinking orientation are more inclined toward detailed linguistic analysis of the data while those with feeling preference feel more comfortable with guessing and paraphrasing without grammatical analysis as they tend to see things more holistically as opposed to thinkers and their interest in detail. Learners with judging tendencies appreciate clear guidelines and grammatical rules while intuitive types are inclined to manipulate abstract principles of language in a rather divergent way and are flexible in using guessing, predicting and other ‘compensation’ strategies.

With regard to learning styles, as indicated previously, all of them can be seen as equally effective but teachers should be aware of the differences in preferred approaches and try to organize L2 classroom activities in a way that allows learners in all four learning positions to be positively excited about and successful in developing their L2 skills.

**Conclusion**

The results of the study of four talented language learners suggest, as expected, that no single personality profile can be identified in individuals with highly developed linguistic abilities. As implied in the literature, both extrovert and introvert types are likely to be found in the group of talented language learners, which was confirmed by the study results. With regard to other MBTI dimensions, it appears that orientation toward intuition is not a necessary condition for high achievement in the domain of foreign language learning. However, all of the study participants demonstrated tendencies toward the thinking and judging types.

Thinking dimension scores may be explained in terms of the nature of linguistic systems, which are highly abstract and complex and require the ability to pay attention to rich linguistic detail and then make generalizations based on recognized patterns. This, of course, does not mean that feeling types are poorer language learners but may be traced back to teaching methodologies which often place great importance on an extensive analysis of syntactic structures. This approach to L2 teaching, even though at times found convenient by teachers, is usually not welcomed by learners who are inclined to see things more globally and get annoyed and bored with such focus on detail.

Another personality dimension on which the participants scored high is the MBTI judging dimension. This, again, does not necessarily imply that it is a feature relevant for success in L2 learning but may be a result of other, more global factors of the environment. However, it is important to note that no general assumptions are being made about the frequency of this particular type in specific cultures because the sample is far too small to make any kind of general predictions which would require investigation far beyond the scope of the research.

When it comes to learning styles identified in the group of participants, the presence of high scores on abstract conceptualization may be interpreted as a consequence of the requirements of the educational system. As indicated earlier, learning preferences are viewed in a value-neutral fashion suggesting that one can be successful in any style position, only in a different way.
References:


ПРОФИЛИ ЛИЧНОСТИ И СТИЛОВИ УЧЕЊА ТАЛЕНТОВАНИХ УЧЕНИКА СТРАНОГ ЈЕЗИКА

Айсірақії

У раду се даје јриказ исјараживања димензија личности и сијилова учења чејворо шаленишованих ученика сијрано језика. Са обзиром на што се и наставници и ученици језика регулоно сусочавају са моћешкоћама јовезаним са учењем сијрано језика, било би корисно јеродаћи одређене шаблоне јонашања који би служили као смернице да се јроцес учињу јошнијим и ефикасијним за све учеснике. Инсирериме и коришћени у исјараживању су МБТИ тест за утврђивање јоафила личности и Колбов инструмент за одређивање јереферирана стиила учења. Циљ исјараживања је био да се размойри идеја о јоїенцијалним заједничким карактеристикама у јоафилима личности и сијиловима учења шаленишованих ученика сијрано језика. Резултати исјараживања имплицирају да не јошосио је једништов јсихолошци јоиш у јрори учешника мага са сви оснаварен рос крезултати на димензијама Мишлења и Просуђивања. На кораре јереферираних сијилова учења, код свих учешника је учен висок резултати на димензији айсірақінне концепцијализације и два јиша учешника су идентификарана: Теоретичар и Праимајичар. Закључак је да различити јсихолошци јоафили и сијилова учења које примењују захбривају другачији јеаишови јрисдуй који би завољио њихове индивидуалне јоиребе.

Кључне речи: димензије личности, сијилова учења, даровити учешници, учење сијрано језика.