The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and its Role in the Adult ESL Classroom

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Abstract
Why is it that Aisha never talks during group work? Why does Sultan always need me to tell him what to do? And why do they both insist on completing their projects at the last minute? These are the types of questions we have all asked ourselves during our teaching careers, and the answer may be quite simple: Personality. This workshop paper presents the Jungian theory behind the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) with the aim of raising awareness about how the theory can be applied in the ESL classroom through the use of simple and engaging activities. It will highlight the research projects that have used the tool to measure student performance and attitude, present activities teachers can use in the classroom to help students understand their differences and finally address some criticisms of the MBTI tool. The workshop asserts that in order to help students reach their full learning potential, teachers should provide a balanced curriculum in relation to personality in order to foster development of students' weaker cognitive functions.

Keywords: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, MBTI, Jung, Personality types, extravert, introvert

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Instruction

The study of personality types in Western civilization dates as far back as Hippocrates' and Galen's four humors theory which remained largely unchanged until the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Arguably one of the most seminal works in this latter period appeared in 1923 with the publication of Carl Jung's *Personality Types* which introduced the world to the terms extraversion and introversion and later became the inspiration behind the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)- a psychometric assessment tool which helps to categorize people as one of sixteen personality types. In 1943, at the age of 68, Katharine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Myers launched the first MBTI assessment which was originally designed to help women chose a career that matched their personality. Since that time the MBTI has undergone more than a dozen revisions and today consists of a paper-based 96-item forced choice questionnaire and an online version of 124 questions. The MBTI is available in over 30 languages, is used by the majority of Forbes 100 companies and hosts annual conferences, including Miami, London, San Francisco and Dubai. According to CPP, the company which owns the rights to the tool, more than 1.5 million formal assessments are completed each year. Research using the MBTI is also vast. A brief search on EBSCOhost of "Myers-Briggs Type Indicator" will reveal over five thousand hits spanning several decades of research. In light of the MBTI's global appeal, it is therefore useful for educators to familiarize themselves with the concepts of the MBTI theory in order to better serve their students and thus gain a greater insight into the cognitive functions and psychological preferences at play in the classroom.

Overview of The MBTI

The sixteen personality types (Figure 1) are composed of one mode taken from each of four dichotomies which are identified by the MBTI questionnaire. These dichotomies include Extraversion - Introversion (E-I), Sensing - Intuition (S-N); Thinking - Feeling (T-F) and Judging - Perceiving (J-P). Note that because an I is used for Introversion in the first dichotomy, an N is used in the second dichotomy to signify Intuition.

ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
ISTP	ISFP	INFP	INTP
ESTP	ESFP	ENFP	ENTP
ESTJ	ESFJ	ENFJ	ENTJ

FIGURE 1: The Sixteen Personality Types of the MBTI

At the outset of this theory, it must be stressed that no person functions on only one side of each dichotomy; we all use both- though not with equal comfort. An effective way to highlight this concept of preference on a dichotomy is to asking students to write their name on a piece of paper then ask them which hand they preferred to write with and why. The enquiry will most likely yield an answer such as, "It was more comfortable" or "I always write with this hand". Then, assuming students are not ambidextrous, if you ask them how it feels to write their names with their opposite hand, they will most likely reply "It's difficult" or "It feels un-natural". Hence, the

same can be said for the four MBTI dichotomies; we hold a preference for one side over the other because it is a natural, or innate, preference (Weinstein, 2015).

Extraversion – Introversion (E-I)

This dichotomy signifies how people energize mentally, or psychically. Extraverts energize by active engagement with the outer world, for example with people or animals, and they seek stimulation in oral discourse while Introverts seek the more private, reflective inner world of ideas. For instance, an extravert who learns she has successfully met the English language test requirements for university entry will share the news with peers and teachers inside and outside the classroom face-to-face or through social network sites; she will feel energized by the whole experience. On the other hand, an introvert achieving the same English language test requirements will feel energized merely by mentioning her success to a few close peers or celebrating the success intimately with family and friends.

Research into the E-I dichotomy

Briggs-Myers, McCaulley, Quenk & Hammer, (2009) suggest that during face-to-face communications, such as office hour and academic advising, extraverts see phatic communion as essential to the engagement whereas introverts may tend to see it as a waste of time. Extraverts may also see silence as a rejection, so it is therefore in the interests of the introvert advisor to contribute regularly to the conversation. Predictably, research also supports extraverts' preference for face-to-face classes unlike introverts who rate online classes more highly (Harrington and Loffredo, 2010; Goby, 2006). It has also been found that introverts become more complimentary of group work as they progress through university (Felder, Felder & Dietz, 2002). In terms of maturity and academic progression this finding seems to support the idea that being able to operate on both sides of the E-I dichotomy is an indicator of a more socially intelligent individual.

E-I Activity

After consulting the facets in the Appendix, the teacher describes the features of the E-I dichotomy on either side of the whiteboard then asks students to stand on the side of their preference. Students who remain ambivalent even after some coaxing can form a third group in the middle. Next, the teacher encourages discussion within each group by asking students to describe or even sketch their preferred study environment while the two group secretaries take notes on the board to describe that environment. The resulting board analysis should reveal contrasting descriptions such as, *activities, noisy, group work* (Extraverts) as opposed *to quiet, peace, nature* (Introverts). The middle group may show a blend of both dichotomies.

Sensing – Intuition (S-N)

The S-N dichotomy is the first of the two cognitive functions. The S-N scale denotes the cognitive function of learning style, or how people prefer to receive information. A sensing type prefers to learn in a more sensory environment with proven methods. Sensory learners have a great memory for aspects they consider important to them and are more aligned to curricula that are grounded in facts and details. Meanwhile, Intuitive learners are more comfortable with abstraction and prefer to explore their learning environment if it means they can innovate and create. Intuitives tend to be more focused on theories, are driven by the possibilities offered by what they learn

and are more likely to challenge the boundaries of traditional methods. In terms of learner ratios, teachers can expect around 1 in 3 learners to type as Intuitive.

Research into the S-N dichotomy

Studies on the S-N dichotomy support the notion that S types prefer a more practical, systematic, and proven method of learning with a focus on facts and memorization compared to N types who adopt a greater preference for more theoretical approaches. N types are also more comfortable working in an environment which offers exploration and creativity with little focus on step-by-step approaches (Barret, 1991; Felder, Felder & Dietz, 2002; Jenson & Bowe, 1997; Rosatti 1997; Ayoubi & Ustwani, 2013). As teachers, we tend to teach the way we like to learn, and given that approximately one in three students is an N-type, it would be fair to assume that most students would prefer an S-type teacher. However, research appears to contradict this assumption as N-types have been over-represented in educator of the year awards and on student evaluation surveys (Moehl, 2011; Rushton, Morgan & Richard, 2006; Kent & Fisher, 1998; Provost, Carson & Biedler, 1987). Moehl (2011) suggests this is because N-types' talent for innovation fosters a fresh and dynamic classroom-especially when matched with an Extravert preference. In relation to interpersonal communications, N-types as team leaders may frustrate S-type team members if the instructions they disseminate are vague and/or abstract. This is because N-types may have trouble explaining their abstractions as they tend to make cognitive leaps from ideas to outcomes with little regard as to what lies in between. Awareness of this cognitive behavior will serve a team well if the N-type leader is aware that S-type team members will require details as well as ideas.

S-N Activity

Using the facets in the appendix, describe the features of the S-N dichotomy and ask the students to self-select Sensing or Intuition as their learning preference. Again, students who remain ambivalent even after some coaxing can form a third group in the middle. Ask each group either to draw a map to a nearby location or plan a dinner for the class. Alternatively, they could observe a painting such as *Dogs Playing Poker* by C.M. Coolidge for one minute before brainstorming what they remembered on a shared flip board. The map and dinner party activity should yield marked S-N differences in the details, such as landmarks, street names or seating arrangements and menu etc. Likewise, the Coolidge painting should elicit S-type attention to colours, and setting while the N-types will attempt to see patterns and add a narrative element to the art work (Holm, 2012).

Thinking – Feeling (T-F)

The second cognitive function indicates how people reach conclusions, or make decisions. According to MBTI theory, Thinking types have a preference for using logic with a focus on equality whereas Feeling types prefer to make decisions based on the potential impact on people or the individual. Examples of the T-F dichotomy abound in the news media (the Syrian refugee crisis and the 2016 US presidential campaign to name a few) and in our professional lives when teachers resort to applying policies solely on the strength or weakness of their relationships to students.

To the Thinking type, a sound, logical argument is difficult to challenge whereas Feeling types seek outcomes which yield harmony and a win-win situation for all people concerned. It is important to note that Feeling is not the same as Intuition; the former identifies how we make decisions while the latter indicates how we prefer to receive information.

Research into the T-F Dichotomy

A longitudinal study over 5 years by Felder, Felder & Dietz (2002) tracked students on a Chemical Engineering major and found that attrition rates for T-types were lower than for F-types. The authors suggest that this was due to the impersonal nature of the discipline. They also found a significant difference in Thinkers' (53%) and Feelers' (27%) representation in graduate school. The T-F dichotomy also represents emotional intelligence (EI), or a person's skill in reading other people's emotions by decoding subtle paralinguistic and non-verbal cues.

T-F Activity

After describing the facets of the dichotomy (see Appendix), students should self-select either T or F and join their appropriate group to analyze and discuss the following scenario:

You are a final exam invigilator on duty outside the exam hall.
The exam policy states that students will not be allowed into the exam hall after 9:00am.
It is 9:02am. A final year student arrives late for the exam (worth 35% of his grade).
The student tells you he will fail his final year if he doesn't sit the test.
Will you allow the student inside the hall or not?

Allow several minutes for discussion and justification before eliciting feedback on the group's decision. A successful exercise will highlight the 'person or policy' ambivalence within the F-type group while the T-type group will be more inclined to apply the policy with regards to fairness for all. This exercise should help to amplify why groups will often find themselves locked in a disagreement and should therefore help them to deconstruct these disagreements and approach them with greater meta-cognitive awareness.

Judging – Perceiving (J-P)

In relation to students, this dichotomy is the one which requires the most attention as it represents how individuals organize their outer world; it is also the dichotomy which invariably raises conflicts in a team's time management and priorities. The Judging types are early starters who plan their time and gain satisfaction from the closure of tasks that may have been thoughtfully prioritized on a to-do list. On the other hand, Perceiving types have a more spontaneous, flexible and casual attitude towards life. They are stimulated and energized by the pressure of a looming deadline. They need to be sure they have all the information available, so remain open to change. Judging types are likely to interpret the Perceiving types as uncooperative, unwilling and even lazy, so it is in the team's and the teacher's interests to raise awareness of this potential difference during the norming phase of team projects.

Research into the J-P dichotomy

The J-P dichotomy provides an indicator of a student's level of preparedness for prioritizing and organizing their workload at university. J-types are known to be more effective at time management and consequently display a higher level of academic self-esteem. They are also more likely to report they completed more work than was required of them during group projects. J-types were also more likely to exceed employers' expectations and maintain job security (Felder, Felder & Dietz 2002; Schaefer, 1994).

J-P Activity

On one side of the whiteboard, write *Work before play* and on the other side write *I can play any time*. Ask students to stand beside the statement they most relate to before directing each group to generate discussion as to why they made their selection. At the plenary stage, elicit the thoughts of each group by asking them to justify their preference. Feedback should yield comments such as "It would be irresponsible of me to ignore my work. I couldn't relax" (J-types) and "I can't start any work until I am satisfied that I've at least had a good time" (I-types).

Criticisms of The MBTI

Contemporary personality assessment tools such as the NEO-Pi, E-Qi, the Murphy-Meisgeier Type Indicator for Children (MMTI) and Big Five can be sourced to the decades' long work of Katharine Briggs, Isabel Myers and Carl Jung, yet these tools have been dismissed by critics as pseudoscientific because they do not fulfill the codes of the scientific method (Grant, 2013). They argue that the results of an MBTI are often not repeatable and the dichotomies are not falsifiable (Krznaric, 2013). It is therefore understandable that people may harbor reservations about psychometrics because they risk being pigeon-holed by unreliable tools. Nevertheless, unlike the sciences which can use tried and tested tools to measure temperature, height and weight etc., measuring a personality requires initiative and creativity on the part of psychologist because it deals with abstractions. To date, the MBTI is arguably one of the best tools we have available to analyze behaviours and attitudes of people. Moreover, with the increasing gains made in the emerging field of neuroscience, the task of mapping the human brain is surprisingly yielding results which appear to at least support the E-I dichotomy (Cohen, Young, Baek, Kessler, & Ranganath, 2005; Wright, Williams, Feczko et al., 2006; Grimm, Schubert, Jaedke, Gallinat & Baiboui, 2012).

Conclusion

Academic maturity in the context of the MBTI can be defined as a student's natural ability to apply the appropriate mode at the appropriate time across the four dichotomies regardless of his/her four-letter personality type. When applied individually, these dichotomies provide an accessible paradigm for both teachers and students to examine their own cognitive behaviors especially when this awareness raising is approached using the exercises outlined in this paper and thus gain greater intra and interpersonal awareness.

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Appendix

Facets of the Four MBTI Dichotomies

The facets, or sub-personalities, of the MBTI can be used to self-report preferences as a preliminary step in identifying a person's type until a full MBTI assessment can be completed with a certified practitioner.

Extraversion	**Introversion**
Initiating	Receiving
Expressive	Contained
Gregarious	Intimate
Active	Reflective
Enthusiastic	Quiet

Sensing	**Intuition**
Concrete	Abstract
Realistic	Imaginative
Practical	Conceptual
Experiential	Theoretical
Traditional	Original

Thinking	**Feeling**
Logical	Empathetic
Reasonable	Compassionate
Questioning	Accommodating
Critical	Accepting
Tough	Tender

Judging	**Perceiving**
Systematic	Casual
Planful	Open-Ended
Early Starting	Pressure Prompted
Scheduled	Spontaneous
Methodical	Emergent

(Quenk, Hammer & Majors 2001, p. 12-13).