

Individual Differences and Teaching Style

Jane Nakagawa

Aichi University of Education, Japan

Summary

This paper reports on the use of MBTI (Myers Briggs Type Indicator) and multiple intelligences (MI) (Gardner, 1993) theory in one course of several intending to prepare university seniors in Japan for language teaching careers.

To demonstrate the influence of individual differences on teaching style, students self-assessed their Myers-Briggs type, were grouped into similar-Myers-Briggs type groups, and then created jointly with groupmates an EFL lesson plan where they were asked to incorporate into the lesson tasks and activities calling upon a variety of MI. After lesson plans were completed, the lessons were evaluated/contrasted by everyone in the class. Subsequently, students commented on the process of learning about MBTI and MI and of creating a lesson in similar-type groups.

Purpose and Rationale

The MBTI and MI encourage self-understanding of one's intellectual strengths and weaknesses, and appreciation of others' differing gifts. It was hoped that by introducing students to MI and MBTI, students would gain an understanding of how their individual preferences influence their teaching style. Another aim was to foster understanding and appreciation of teaching and learning styles different from their own. A goal was to develop the concept that each kind of teacher or student has differing talents that can be encouraged and utilized in a classroom setting, rather than a fixed idea of what a "good" or "bad" teacher or "good" or "bad" student is.

Cultural Background

It is commonly believed that traditional Japanese classrooms tend to emphasize an instructional approach which is well-organized and teacher-centered. Although of course many exceptions exist, a common image of an English as a foreign language course at the pre-university stage in Japan is a course focusing especially on memorization of lexical items and grammatical rules and utilizing translation in order to help students pass multiple choice paper tests emphasizing linguistic accuracy, a required part of college entrance examinations (see e.g. Bronner, 2000; Gorsuch, 1998; Guest, 2000; Higgins and Tanaka, 1999; Tsukada, 2001; and Raush, 2000). However, one

who observes EFL courses taught by Japanese teachers may find some attempts to incorporate communicative teaching methodology, often blended with a more traditional approach aimed at satisfying the need for students to do well on entrance tests. (It should be noted that oral proficiency is not tested on entrance tests, but some teachers wish to attempt to alleviate the problem of students not attaining oral proficiency in English despite many years of language study, or make a course appealing to students by including oral practice. Other than the influence of entrance tests, another reason for less focus on oral proficiency may be, in some cases, the teacher's own deficits in oral proficiency.)

Brief Overview of MI and MBTI

Gardener's (1993) MI theory posits various kinds of intelligences, all of which are considered valuable and important. The intelligences introduced to students in this course were the following:

Linguistic (verbal ability)

Logical-mathematical (use of numbers and reasoning)

Visual-spatial (spatial sense; drawing, designing, and arranging)

Bodily-kinesthetic (movement; use of one's body, as in sports or dancing)

Musical (appreciation for and/or skilled in music)

Interpersonal (ability to work with others)

Intrapersonal intelligence (self-understanding)

Naturalist intelligence (noticing and ability to classify the natural world)

The MBTI is a psychological assessment instrument based on C. G. Jung's theory of psychological types. It contains four indices which describe what people notice and how they develop conclusions regarding their perceptions. The four indices are as follows (Myers and McCaulley, 1985; Fairhurst and Fairhurst, 1995):

Source of Energy

EI Extraversion/introversion E—feel energized when they are with others

I—feel energized when they are alone

Processes of Perception

SN Sensing/iNtuition S—perception based upon the 5 senses

N—perception based on intuitively grasped meanings, relationships and possibilities

Processes of Judgement/Evaluation

TF Thinking/Feeling

T—decision based logical consequences

F—decision based on personal/social values

Style of Dealing With the Outside World

JP Judging/Perceiving

J—preference for using T/F to deal with the outer world (likes to come to a conclusion)

P—preference for using S/N to deal with the outer world (preference for taking information)

The four indices can be seen as continua. In other words, a person could be highly, moderately, or slightly extraverted or introverted, sensing or intuiting, thinking/feeling, or judging/perceiving.

One's Myers Briggs type can be represented by choosing one item from each index that best describes oneself. For example, an ENFP is a person who is Extraverted, Intuitive, Feeling and Perceiving.

While one's Myers-Brigg type is thought to reflect inborn psychological preferences, life experience and cultural factors are thought to influence one's type or the expression of it. For example, introversion appears to be socially-sanctioned in both Japanese and Korean cultures (Horikoshi, 1996; Park, 1996). In Japan, one could say an attention to details and appearances and respect for orderliness and tradition is also favored, in other words a sensing-judging orientation would also appear to be socially sanctioned (for readers interested in a fuller introduction to Japanese cultural attributes, Sugimoto, 1997 and Gudykunst and Nishida, 1994 are some recommended sources).

Student Introduction to MBTI and MI and Self Assessment of Myers Briggs Type

Students were introduced to MI theory through reading (excerpts from Kagan and Kagan, 1998; and Brown, 1980), lecture, and group work as well as to Myers-Brigg types through readings (excerpts from Brown, 1980; Lawrence, 1993; and Fairhurst and Fairhurst, 1995), lecture and group work.

Following these activities, the 16 students enrolled in the course were asked to self-assess their own Myers-Briggs type.

The results were as follows:

INFP, five students

ISFJ, three students

ISFP, three students

ESFJ, two students

ESFP, one student

INFJ, one student

ISTP, one student

It can be noted that the class was dominated by feeling types (15/16), introverts (13/16), sensing types (10/16), and perceiving types (10/16). All students were female except for one ISFP student.

Grouping of Students for the Lesson Plan Activity

The goal was to make 3 or 4 groups of about equal size in order to have teams of 3-4 students considered ideal in size for a cooperative peer group (small groups are favored in classrooms utilizing a cooperative learning approach as this one did; for more information on the use of small groups in cooperative learning classrooms, see, e.g., Johnson Johnson and Holubec, 1998).

Although cooperative learning practice emphasizes the use of heterogenous groups, similar-type was the grouping criteria. The rationale was that similar-type groups would create distinct lessons which could later be compared profitably with the lesson plans of other similar-type groups. In other words, type differences were expected to lead to differences in the content and style of the lesson plans and these differences were predicted to be noticeable and contrastable.

Our class grouping ended up as follows:

Group 1—IN(F) group: INFP (5 students); INFJ (one student)

Group 2—S(F)J group: ISFJ (3 students); ESFJ (two students)

Group 3—SP group: ISFP (3 students); ISTP (one student) [ESFP (one student) absent on the group formation and lesson plan creation days]

Since only one extraverted student was present on the day we created the groups, an “extraverted” group could not be created. Similarly, since there was only one student with a Thinking preference and only one NJ student, T and NJ preferences could not be used as criteria for similar-type groups.

Lesson Plan Activity

Overview

After grouping students as explained above, students were given a handout that contained four possible prompts for an English lesson. Each group was instructed to choose one of the four materials and then to base an EFL lesson on the materials (a) keeping in mind a potential student class diverse in terms of MI and (b) attempting to consciously incorporate into the lesson as many MI as possible/reasonable.

Two of the prompts were English song lyrics “Wonderful World” (Cooke, 1960) and “Mother” (Lennon, 1970). Another prompt was a short English contemporary poem and the 4th prompt was a short comic strip teaching young people to protect themselves from STDs/HIV infection. The two songs were played for the class in the event any group was to choose either of them for the lesson plan activity and wanted to be familiar with the music. All groups chose one of the two songs as the springboard for their lesson.

The groups were instructed to, when ready or the time was up, write down the lesson plan created by the group and be able to tell for whom the lesson was intended (e.g., 2nd year Japanese junior high school students, 3rd year high school students studying Japanese in Australia, etc.). They were also instructed to tell approximately how many minutes they thought would be needed for students to complete the lesson their group created.

The next step was for each group to make a final copy of the lesson plan on a large piece of paper (one paper per group) using paper and a colored pencil set and erasers provided by the teacher.

Time Required

Grouping the students by type, explaining the lesson plan activity, and having groups create and write down their lesson required two 90 minute class periods in consecutive weeks. (MI and MBTI were explained in previous weeks). An additional 90 minute period was required for students to respond to a questionnaire about the activity upon its completion.

It was noticed that the SP group seemed to finish the lesson plan activity by the end of the second class meeting, while NF and SJ groups stayed a few extra minutes (roughly 15 minutes into the lunch hour) to finish putting the lesson plan to paper.

Post-Activity Questionnaire

After completing the lesson plans, students received photocopies of all lessons and a questionnaire (see Appendix A). Because the photocopied lessons were black and white versus color copies, the original lesson plans were passed around from student to student for inspection and then hung on a classroom wall for viewing so that students could also notice not just differences in the content of the lessons, but differences in the way the lessons were reproduced on paper including colors used.

Predictions About Lesson Plans Based on Student Self-reported MBTI Type

Below I will describe my predictions about each group's lesson plan, considering the MBTI types of the students in each group. The information about Myers Briggs types upon which I based my predictions and later analyzed the lessons may be found in Lawrence, 1993; Fairhurst and Fairhurst, 1995; Pearman and Albritton, 1997; and Myers and McCaulley, 1985.

Group 1

This group contained all the intuitive students in the class. All students in this group also had preferences for feeling and introversion, and all but one for perception.

Intuitive learners like innovation and tend to dislike repetitiveness, memorization, and routine. They are often comfortable with abstraction and symbolism and are good with language. They tend to grasp "the big picture" rather than be concerned with details.

NFs are thought to be enthusiastic, insightful and non-conformist. Introverted students tend to be introspective. Feeling students are believed to make decisions based on their personal values, more so than on impartial reason.

Perceiving students are believed to like to explore many possibilities and gather a lot of information. NPs are believed to like activities which are open-ended and allow for spontaneity; NFPs are thought to especially value personal freedom; INFPs are thought to enjoy tasks in which they can use their inspiration.

It was predicted based on this information that this group's lesson would be nontraditional and emphasize engaging the creativity and imagination of the students in relatively open-ended activities.

Group 2

Sensing and judging distinguished Group 2 from Group 1 and Group 3 (the sensing and perceiving group). The ratio of introverted to extraverted students in this group was 3:1 for the group and lesson creation class meetings (3:2 for the subsequent period that included evaluation of the lessons).

SJ students would be expected to prefer lessons based on known facts rather than abstract possibilities. The combination of S and J would suggest a preference for order, a command of fact and skills, (a high degree of) structure, tradition, conservatism, linearity, and patience with details and routine. SJ teachers "prefer to use tried and true methodology and often model their teaching style on traditional

techniques they experienced as students” (Fairhurst and Fairhurst, 1995; p. 41). SJs are believed to be good with details.

All students in this group reported a preference for feeling (as was true of group 1). Both STJS and SFJs reportedly prefer having the teacher tell them what is “correct,” and having the teacher provide a well thought out and structured plan for students to follow, but the F preference might result in allowing for some student choice and self-expression compared to an STJ preference. ISFJs are often characterized as “obedient.”

It was predicted that this group’s lesson would be the most traditional, teacher-centered, orderly, linear, and accuracy-oriented due to the SJ preference, but due to the F preference allowing for some student self-expression and showing concern for students.

Group 3

An SP orientation distinguished this group from the others. Additionally, four of the five students in this group reported a preference for introversion, and four for feeling versus thinking.

The S preference reflects an interest in immediate, sensory experience, while the P preference indicates curiosity and adaptability. S types (including students of both groups 2 and 3) reportedly are good at precise work (especially if they are also introverted) including memorization and other accuracy-oriented tasks. They can often work steadily in a step-by-step way and may be viewed as more practical and careful than intuitives. Sensing students are thought to prefer instruction that has an identifiable connection to the real world. They are assumed to like “hands on” kind of tasks. The P preference suggests Group 3 students would like “discovery” tasks and the chance to follow impulses.

SPs are believed to be especially astute observers of the sensory world and who might prefer sensory-rich instruction and be good with tools and materials. They also are thought to like variety, physical mobility, and risk taking. Introverted SPs might be expected to be especially good at drawing and model-making.

It was expected that Group 3’s lesson would be less traditional in style than Group 2’s, but more so than Group 1’s. It would be more “down to earth” or practical than group 1’s, but allowing more creativity, especially creativity which would involve the senses and skills such as drawing, than Group 2’s.

Analysis of Lesson Plans

Visual Appearance of the Lesson Plans

The SP (Group 3) lesson plan used ten different colors, contained about ten drawings/symbols, and was easy to read. The SJ (Group 2) lesson used only three colors and had no drawings; it was easily the plainest of the three visually. The NF (Group 1) lesson used five colors and few drawings/symbols other than a simple box and a star. We might infer that the SP preference for exploring possibilities within immediate, sensory experience resulted in the stronger visual impact compared to the other two lessons, whereas the SJ preference could be seen as having resulted in a no-frills, business like and matter of fact presentation style.

Content of the Lesson Plans

Group 1's Lesson

This lesson focused on the students' subjective contributions versus teacher input. Indeed the teacher's input is not required whatsoever during execution of this lesson. Unlike the other two lessons, there is no emphasis on linguistic accuracy. Rather than emphasizing details, students make a summary of the song in groups of three. Next, student ideas are collected, but not checked for "accuracy". Students freely choose from a list of ideas, many of which are abstract (e.g. love, wisdom, peace) and reflect on their choice. Finally, they make poems and share the poems with others.

This lesson emphasizes the creativity and innovation of students, which we might expect from a type characteristically concerned with fostering student growth and potential, self-expression, creativity, symbolism, and flexibility.

Group 2's Lesson

As was predicted, the SJ lesson contained traditional (for Japanese foreign language teaching) instructional elements such as choral practice, grammar explanations, translation, and a focus on accuracy. The first step of the lesson is a traditional warm up activity where the students are invited to imagine what the song is about before listening to it. The middle steps of the lesson, focusing on accuracy and grammatical forms, help guide the students' interpretations of the song. Toward the end of the lesson (after grammatical explanations and translation of lyrics) students discuss first in small groups, then with the whole class, the meaning of the song. Thus we can find a linear pattern beginning with the students' initial guessing about the meaning of the song and ending with the students' revised, informed response which has been influenced by teacher-led accuracy-focused activities.

Interestingly and not surprisingly given an SJ preference for doing things in a clear established order, Group 2 added the caveat that students would have already have learned adverbs and relative pronouns before undertaking this lesson.

Group 3's Lesson

The SP lesson contained more traditional elements such as translation, choral singing, and a listening cloze, but asked students to draw their impression of the song twice with colored pencils. It combines accuracy-focused activities (but which may initially involve guessing) such as cloze, and translation, with hands-on creative, sensory activities involving drawing. As in Group 2's lesson, student's creative output is solicited twice, the second time as a revised impression following teacher-led, accuracy-focused comprehension activities. As with Group 2's lesson, the lesson begins with students first listening without any explanation, and ends with choral singing. Students being given the chance to check answers with classmates before checking with the teacher in the 4th step of the plan allows some discovery learning and more learner—(v. teacher) input, as do the drawing activities. Teacher and students are responsible for explaining the meaning of different stanzas.

In sum, this lesson blended traditional (e.g. teacher-led translation, choral response) and nontraditional (student-centered) elements including drawing, as predicted by the dominant personality types.

Student Comments Regarding the Project Revealed in Written Answers to Questionnaires

Group 1 Student Comments

Nearly all students in this group said they wished for more time to work on their lesson which was not a surprise, both given their types (five of six were INFPs who we would expect to be introspective and want to explore many possibilities before coming to a conclusion), and having observed them work on the lesson in class (as noted above, only the SP group appeared to finish on time; the other two groups stayed some minutes over into the lunch hour to work a little bit more). Members described teamwork in the group as either fair or good. About whether it was difficult to do this activity, one wrote: "Yes, it was. We took for a long time to come up what we do next, because we hoped to make more interesting lesson." Another wrote "I thought it was difficult to make the lesson which is able to attract students". Significant may be the students' desire to make an interesting lesson; in other words, their belief that instruction should be fun (or their idea of fun).

As far as their own view of the strong points of their lesson, students mentioned such things as students would get an overview (versus a focus on details) and the chance to express themselves. One wrote:

In Japan, there are many English lessons that many students copy the blackboard and they don't have the chance to speak English in spite of English lessons. In our lesson, students have the chance to listen, speak, read and write English. And they make poems. It's important to create.

Another wrote:

Students don't read and translate mainly, but think the summary of this material and their minds deeply.

As far as the weak points of their lesson, answers varied. One student mentioned students would not learn about grammar from this lesson. Another said there should be more speaking and reading required of students. Another said it may be difficult for students to write a poem with the last line stipulated. As far as the value for students of their lesson, most students emphasized the lesson allowing for self-expression of students.

Regarding the good points of other group's lessons, some students said that although they didn't like it personally, Group 2's lesson might be good for some students and/or useful for entrance test preparation. The drawing activity of Group 3's lesson was popular. Others commented on what they saw as a beneficial variety of activities included in both of the other groups' lessons.

All students in this group commented that they believed it was easier to collaborate with teachers of the same type (since they would have similar thinking), but that it is beneficial to work with teachers of a different type in order to obtain more varied input to create a stronger or better lesson.

Group 2 Student Comments

All students in this group commented that making the lesson plan was a challenging activity. The reasons they gave for this were different, however, such as wanting to teach the song's connotation to students was difficult to do, keeping in mind different kinds of students was difficult, or because group members hesitated before giving opinions. One student cited her inexperience as a teacher as making the task difficult. However, all members described the group's teamwork skill as "good" except for one who described it as "fair." Member opinions as to whether they had enough time to complete the activity varied, but most seemed to say they had enough

thinking time though some wanted more time simply to commit the lesson to paper or go over finer details with the group. This did not surprise me as SJs characteristically like to reach decisions and come to conclusions quickly, but are also more detailed oriented and concerned with getting those details right.

While all of Group 1's students said they believed they would themselves enjoy the lesson they created if they were the student, the answers of Group 2 were "no" (1 student); "yes and no" (1 student); and "yes" (3). This could suggest that making a fun lesson was not necessarily as fundamental a goal compared with Group 1.

All students in this group noted different strong/weak points in their lesson. Good points in their view included the variety of activities, trying to take into account learner differences, including student guessing and discussion as activities, and an accuracy focus. Weak points included that translation might be boring or that the students might soon forget the lesson content. As far as the chief value of their lesson, most students noted such things as the variety of activities, and that students could also guess and/or use the imaginations a little.

As far as what they liked about other group's lessons, all members commented on the creative aspects of the other two, either the poem writing activity of group 1's lesson or drawing activity of Group 3's lesson.

As far as collaborating with teachers of the same v. different type, as with Group 1 students thought that working with the same type of person is easier, but that working with someone with a different personality may lead to a more varied lesson. One mentioned that discussions in a mixed group might be difficult, but worthwhile.

Group 3 Student Comments

Two students in this group believed this activity was not difficult. A third said it was a little difficult and a fourth said it was difficult to consider various types of students. All noted that they had good teamwork and one noted (as the teacher did) that this group was the first to finish. All said they had enough class time to complete the activity.

Strong points they noticed were the painting activity and that the lesson took into account various kinds of student personalities and abilities. Weak points noted by students varied and included omission of bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, students should compare their paintings with each other, and that the lesson was a little vague. All members said they would enjoy the lesson themselves as the student, or at least the parts which involved listening to music and painting.

As far as what they liked about the other group's lessons, two students mentioned the poems, one said the grammar focus of Group 2's and the 4th said discussion.

Most students said it was easier to create a lesson with teachers of the same type, but better to work with teachers of different types to get more varied ideas. However, one student said that it is better to create a lesson with someone of the same personality type, because otherwise the lesson might be confusing for students.

General Comments from Students of all Groups

As far as what governed the group's choice of the material, the comments of group members focused on the chosen material being the easiest to understand, the easiest to work with, or that they liked the music or thought students would like the music/words of the song.

Nearly every student in the class commented that it was important for the teacher to consider a student's personality and various abilities (MBTI and MI) when planning lessons; only one student disagreed, saying to consider MI is not important/is difficult.

At the end of the term, students anonymously answered questions in an overall course evaluation. Students rated the course highly, particularly this activity and the discussions about MBTI which they claimed to be enlightening and helped to shape a new view for them about learners. Students also reported that this course contained their first introduction to the theories of MI and Myers-Briggs psychological types.

Conclusion

It appears that students found the project useful and important as a possible way of understanding themselves and their students, and keeping in mind the goal of being aware of and even trying to cater to the needs, personalities, and learning styles/abilities of various students in a classroom. Students also claimed to consequently be able to value the teaching styles of those in the course which were different from their own.

As the teacher of this course, I learned a lot about my students, was satisfied with the results, and was reminded of my own teaching preferences. I expect to repeat this activity in next year's course.

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About the Author

Jane Joritz-Nakagawa is an Associate Professor at Aichi University of Education where she teaches courses in English, English teaching methodology, cross-cultural communication and gender. Originally from the USA, Japan has been her home since 1989.

Appendix A

(Post-activity questionnaire)

About your group's lesson

1. Was making the lesson plan with your group difficult?
2. Did you have a difficult time deciding how to make your lesson?
3. How would you describe the teamwork in your group?
4. Did you have enough time to prepare the lesson?
5. What do you think are the strong points of your group's lesson?
6. What do you think are the weak points (if any) of your group's lesson?
7. If you were a student yourself, would you enjoy this lesson?
8. What value does your lesson have for the target student group?
9. Which MI does your lesson utilize?
10. Do you think it is important to consider MI when making a foreign language lesson? Why/why not?
11. Why did your group choose the material it did (of the 4 choices)?

About the other groups' lessons

12. Which activities that other groups came up with do you think are good ones?
13. Do you think it would be easier to prepare a lesson with others of the same/opposite psychological (personality) type?
14. Do you think it would be better to work with others of the same/opposite psychological (personality) type?
15. Write any additional comments/concerns as you wish.