

The Reading Matrix  
Vol. 6, No. 2, September 2006

## STUDENT WRITING, PERSONALITY TYPE OF THE STUDENT AND THE RATER: ANY INTERRELATIONSHIP?

Fahimeh Marefat  
fmarefat@gmail.com

### Abstract

The way we learn is very much affected by our personality. Practitioners have proposed that an understanding of personality type can help teachers explain why students approach tasks differently: some are successful, while some fail to participate in class activities (Oxford & Ehrman, 1990; Wilz, 2000). Meyers-Briggs's theory, anchored in Jung's work, introduces four different character types: Introvert/Extrovert, Sensitive/Intuitive, Thinking/Feeling, and Judging/Perceiving. The Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a 93-item paper-and-pencil inventory, helps, as a reliable instrument, identify students' personality types. The current study aims at discovering the relationship, if any, between learner personality type and his writing ability in the first place and then between rater personality and his rating procedure. Eighty-six male and female graduate and undergraduate EFL students and their teacher who rated their essays participated in this study. The average of each learner's scores on two in-class writings, as well as midterm and final exams served as an index of his writing ability. The participants were also asked to fill out the MBTI questionnaire with two options for each item. Individuals were classified on the basis of their self-reported preferences. Analysis of data indicated that the only dimension showing significant impact across writing ability was the S/N preference. Surprisingly, a link was observed between rater personality and her rating procedure.

---

"We, ignorant of ourselves, Beg often our own harms." (Shakespeare, Anthony & Cleopatra)

**Why bother learning about personality types?** People differ from one another depending on the way they perceive the world. In fact, our personality affects the way we learn. Practitioners have proposed an understanding of personality type (how we interact with the world and where we direct our energy, the kind of information we naturally notice, how we make decisions) can help explain why we learn differently (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Ehrman, 1994; Wilz, 2000). According to Ehrman and Oxford, studies investigating psychological types are promising in that they offer "an accessible conceptual framework for language trainers and learners .... greater self-regulation and better learning performance" (1990, p. 324). Learners can actually move out of their "comfort zone" and try other preferences, like hand preferences. In line with others, Wilz (2000) expresses the dire need for personality type understanding on the part of the teacher:

An awareness of student personality types allows teachers to have a better understanding of the classroom dynamics and to be better able to determine what

kinds of classroom activities and strategies would be most effective with a majority of students in the class (p, 29).

Inspired by such studies that underscore investigation into learner characteristics, the present study examines the relationship between psychological type as measured by the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to writing ability. This study aims to shed light on the way personality preferences interact with writing ability. Would the preferences influence the individual expressing himself? Would, for instance, someone connected with the introvert pole write better than the person being classified under the extrovert pole? It is also the aim of this research to see if any trace can be found in the rating process as regards learner and rater personality type.

**General characteristics of the MBTI Inventory:** People are unique individuals and are born with preferences. The MBTI instrument is used to understand personality differences; it describes various behavior patterns that in turn affect the way we function in the world. The intention, being noble, is to help people understand themselves and others better. Primarily, the inventory was used in workplaces. It was reasoned if individuals learned what vocation best matched their personality type, then they would enjoy their jobs, feel happier, more productive, and more creative. And this would automatically make life more peaceful (Myers & Briggs, 1998).

Depending on whether the individual shows a preference for the outer world or is energized by an inner world of ideas, he is extrovert or introvert (**E/I**), respectively. Whether the individual processes the data concretely or abstractly classifies him as sensing or intuitive (**S/N**). Next comes decision making. If the method adopted is more of a logical and objective fashion, then thinking is the dominant character type; if, on the other hand, decision is made more subjectively, the personality type is feeling (**T/F**). It is interesting to note that this dichotomy has been shown to be affected by gender. And finally the way you organize the outside world determines whether you are a judging or perceiving person (**J/P**), the former being more systematic while the latter more random.

An advantage of this inventory is that type is not “reductive”. The classification is merely for the sake of practical purposes, it is not meant to “pigeonhole people.” Rather it reminds one of “the increased respect for the complexity of human nature” (Callahan, 2000, p. 61). In fact, no one type is preferred over the other. All are “equally valuable.” Ehrman and Oxford (1995) report split-half reliability of .87 and test-retest reliabilities are, .70 - .85. Construct validity of the inventory is supported by many studies of occupational preferences and creativity (see Ehrman & Oxford, 1995, for details).

**Past Empirical Research:** In a qualitative study in 1990 and using the MBTI, Ehrman and Oxford worked with 20 Foreign Services Institute (FSI) students. Their study showed “some language learning advantage for introverts, intuitives, feelers, and perceivers” (p.323). In a follow-up study in 1994 on 831 FSI students, Ehrman found that “introverts, intuitives, and thinkers were better readers. Sensing types were disadvantaged for both reading and speaking.” A subsequent study by Ehrman and Oxford (1995) suggested that extroverts are good candidates for good language learners as they speak out and interact.

From among the studies aiming at highlighting teacher role in strategy training two are reported here. Hismanoglu (2000) emphasizes the importance of language learning strategies in foreign language learning and teaching. He defines the concept of language learning strategy, gives a summary background on language learning strategies, , and

outlines the taxonomies of language learning strategies proposed by several researchers. He also takes into account the teacher's role in strategy training.

Zhenhui (2001) highlights the significance of the degree of congruence between teacher and learner styles. The study suggests the teacher to take into consideration learner preferences and to teach learners to employ different and various learning styles, "encouraging students to diversify their learning style preferences." This way the learners will become more effective.

Giving it a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) flavor, Beauvois and Eledge (1996) were interested to qualitatively and quantitatively analyze the attitude of the university students, as determined by the MBTI, toward the use of CMC in their French course. Both introvert and extroverts, the study describes, found the experience of using local area network (LAN) beneficial.

**Personality type and writing preference:** To delve into the relationship between student reflective writing and teacher feedback, Callahan (2000) conducted a study with student teachers. Using the MBTI inventory, she chose as raters three students whose types completely differed from hers. They read other participants' reflective writings and tried to identify the writers' types. Analysis of the data revealed that as writers students need to go beyond their own preferences and familiarize themselves with other options. The readers who comment on student writing with eagerness can have a pivotal role in helping students "build upon their won preferences and develop their less preferred approaches" (Callahan, 2000, p. 72).

As the current study is concerned with student writing and his MBTI index, below comes an interesting brief analysis of the relationship between reflective writing and character types as depicted by Callahan (2000).

Those with **E** preferences best respond to reflecting about the outer world. As one might expect, they are better talkers than writers and so do not go for keeping journals or preparing portfolios, where metacognitive processes are involved. In a word, for these students, reflecting on their writing processes seems "awkward." Moreover, this camp wishes the teacher to set goals for them. Reflection for students with **I** orientation is pleasant and quite "natural." Their journals tend to be quite "voluminous." As opposed to their **E** counterparts, the **I** group finds setting goals and standards an interesting task. As for the teacher, the dynamics of class work is greatly affected by teacher personality type. Teachers with **E** preferences would not choose to assign reflective writing, while the teachers with **I** preference would include and even emphasize such assignments.

The written product of students with an **S** preference is lengthy and detailed. Such individuals find reflective writing an opportunity to go back and see if they have missed anything. In contrast, **Ns** find "reading between the lines" and metaphoric use of language a fun. Interestingly, **N** writers put their readers in situations to discover the unstated details. An **S** teacher would certainly reward specific elements, while a teacher with too much reliance on intuition must appreciate concrete thinking, too.

As regards the **T/F** dichotomy, it can be said that the **T** group is interested in describing their strengths and weaknesses in writing. This group, as opposed to the **F** group, reveals rich notions in their protocols that would otherwise remain hidden. If asked to name some elements of successful writing, the **T** group's response would be "organizational

patterns” and “rhetorical features” while the **F** people would be excited by a piece that evokes a strong feeling. Teachers with a dominant **T** preference would welcome impersonal reflective writings whereas those teachers with **F** preferences would comment more on the thinking quality of the writer.

With **J/P** preferences in mind, the reader would agree that the first group would set goals for future improvement easily; they offer tidy, organized projects. In contrast, the latter would resist explorations on their future planning and find it difficult to draw conclusions. In fact, their work is always in progress. A judging teacher would certainly appreciate an organized, neat portfolio handed to her as an end-of-the-semester assignment; a teacher with a **P** preference would find a last-minute reflective writing invaluable.

**Research Questions:** A study attempting to characterize student and teacher character types would clearly shed light on aspects that are not directly visible to the teacher. Aiming at discovering these new horizons, the present research addressed the following questions:

1. Is there any relationship between student personality type and his writing ability?
2. Is there any relationship between rater and student personality type?

**Participants:** In the spring semester of 2003-4, and fall semester 2004-5, 42 male and 44 female EFL students at undergraduate and graduate levels doing their advanced writing or essay writing courses took part in this study.

**Writing ability:** The average of each learner’s scores on two in-class writings as well as midterm and final exams was used as an index of writing ability. The writing scores ranged between 12 and 19.25.

**Instrument:** The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Form M is a 93-item, paper-and-pencil inventory. There are two options for each item. Individuals are classified on the basis of their self-reported preferences. The Persian version of the questionnaire as translated and validated by Hoseini (2003) was used in this study. Below are offered two sample items (the original and the Persian translation) to give the reader a feeling of the questionnaire.

**PART I. Which answer comes closest to describing how you usually feel or act!**

1. When you go somewhere for the day, would you rather ...
  - \_ plan what you will do and when, or
  - \_ just go?

**Part III. Which answer comes closest to describing how you usually feel or act!**

59. When you start a big project that is due in a week, do you ...
  - \_ take time to list the separate things to be done and the order of doing them,
  - \_Or plunge right in?

**Procedure:** The first phase of the survey was completed after the final exam scores were announced. As it was summer time and there was no access to students, the inventory was sent to them via email along with a letter giving them some tips as to how to fill out the questionnaire.

For the second phase, the students were asked to fill out the forms in the class. The researcher was available for any question. Based upon the directions available in the MBTI form, the students were instructed not to spend too much time on one question if they were not sure about it. They could skip the question and return to it later. Also, they were assured that the information about their character type would be treated as confidential.

When I reported them their type along with a short descriptor interpreting the four-letter types, a considerable percentage, via email or in person, expressed their surprise at how closely the profile had reflected their real selves.

**Data Analysis:** The personality inventories completed, the next step was to determine which dimensions of personality were more dominant. The independent variables were the four indices of the MBTI: extroversion-introversion (E/I), sensing-intuitive (S/N), thinking-feeling(T/F), and judging-perceiving(J/P). Each individual was assigned to either level of each independent variable based upon the scoring instructions contained in the MBTI manual.

**Findings:** Firstly, a summary of descriptive statistics that would help the reader to appreciate the coming tables is offered. The frequencies for 8 possible types are depicted in table 1. Tendencies in this sample are towards I, S, T, and J.

**Table 1.** Frequencies of personality types

Type	E	I	S	N	T	F	J	P
Frequency	38	48	48	38	55	31	65	21

Surprisingly, with this small population, all 16 conceivable type combinations were observed, though the frequency in two cases was as low as 1. The majority of the participants (19.8%) had ISTJ preference and ESTJ students ranked second with a percentage of 12.8%. ISTPs and INFPs had the lowest frequency, 1.2 percent. It is interesting to note that the highest mean (17.41) was observed among the INTJs, with the third highest frequency of 9.3%. Table 2 summarizes the type combinations in the study.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for the writings of the 16 type combinations

Type	Mean	SD	Number	Percent
<u>ESTJ</u>	<u>15.57</u>	<u>2.04</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>12.8</u>
ESTP	15.26	1.41	2	2.3
ESFJ	15.54	2.47	6	7.0
ESFP	16.50	4.24	2	2.3
ENTJ	15.63	2.32	8	9.3
ENTP	16.87	1.24	2	2.3
ENFJ	16.62	.17	2	2.3
ENFP	16.60	1.31	5	5.8
<u>ISTJ</u>	<u>16.26</u>	<u>1.61</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>19.8</u>
<b>ISTP</b>	<b>12.50</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1.2</b>
ISFJ	15.46	2.66	8	9.3
<b>INFP</b>	<b>17.00</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1.2</b>
<i>INTJ</i>	<i>17.41</i>	<i>1.53</i>	8	9.3
INTP	16.37	1.73	6	7.0
INFJ	16.65	1.54	5	5.8
ISFP	17.13	2.30	2	2.3

Addressing the first research question, whether any relationship can be established between the personality types and writing ability, a factorial analysis was conducted with the writing score as the dependent variable and the four MBTI indices as the independent variables. Results, as shown in table 3, revealed no main effect for any of the factors. Though not significant, sensing/intuitive is the best candidate for the likely effect. In fact, sensing students had different writing abilities than those with intuition, the means being 15.79 and 16.58, respectively.

**Table 3.** Factorial ANOVA Results

Source	SS	DF	MS	F	Sig.
EI	.0072	1	.007	.002	.966
<b>SN</b>	<b>14.661</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>14.661</b>	<b>3.732</b>	<b>.057</b>
TF	5.537	1	5.537	1.409	.239
JP	.148	1	.148	.038	.846
EI*SN	2.076	1	2.076	.528	.470
EI*TF	.531	1	.531	.135	.714
EI*JP	3.763	1	3.763	.958	.331
SN*TF	3.076	1	3.076	.783	.379
SN*JP	.889	1	.889	.226	.636
TF*JP	8.039	1	8.039	2.046	.157
EI*SN*TF	1.792	1	1.792	.456	.502
EI*SN*JP	.207	1	.207	.053	.819
EI*TF*JP	8.032	1	8.032	2.044	.157
SN*TF*JP	6.983	1	6.983	1.778	.187
EI*SN*TF*JP	.266	1	.266	.068	.795
ERROR	275.00	70	3.929		
TOTAL	2715.18	86			

Next, to discover whether any difference existed between the extroversion/introversion pair and other pairs, 4 paired t-tests were run. Group means and standard deviations are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Paired T-test results for the four dichotomies (males, females and total)

Male (df=40)				Female (df= 42)				Total(df=84)			
Type	Freq.	Mean	Sig	Type	Freq.	Mean	Sig	Type	Freq.	Mean	Sig
<b>E</b>	13	15.33	.907	<b>E</b>	25	16.15	.099	<b>E</b>	38	15.87	.499
<b>I</b>	29	16.03		<b>I</b>	19	16.76		<b>I</b>	48	16.35	
<b>S</b>	24	15.23	.335	<b>S</b>	24	16.34	.146	<b>S</b>	48	<b>15.79</b>	.012
<b>N</b>	18	16.67		<b>N</b>	20	16.5		<b>N</b>	38	<b>16.58</b>	
<b>T</b>	26	15.88	.983	<b>T</b>	29	16.34	.399	<b>T</b>	55	16.13	.442
<b>F</b>	16	15.78		<b>F</b>	15	16.55		<b>F</b>	31	16.15	
<b>J</b>	31	15.85	.938	<b>J</b>	34	16.30	.079	<b>J</b>	65	16.08	.665
<b>P</b>	11	15.84		<b>P</b>	10	16.8		<b>P</b>	21	16.30	

As is clear from table 4, females were more of the **E** type while most males were **Is**. Both groups were mostly of the **S**, **T**, **J** types. Regardless of the gender, most of the participants were introvert, sensing, thinking, and judging. As far as males are concerned, no significant difference was observed between the four dichotomies of **E/I**, **S/N**, **T/F**, and **J/P**. Among girls some traces of difference could be noticed concerning **E/I** and **J/P** dichotomies. Moreover, a look at the total column makes it clear that in this study extroversion-introversion, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving dichotomies appear to have no relationship with writing ability. The difference between **S/N** is meaningful, statistically speaking. A plausible explanation of such significance is that sensing/intuitive is the scale that directly addresses how people like taking information in, i.e., to learn. In this study sensing types did better than intuitive writers. This finding is different from prior research where **Ns** showed some learning advantage (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990), were excellent readers (Ehrnam, 1994), and were good candidates for learning languages (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). The reported studies, however, never addressed writing ability. One may also think of other potential reasons for this striking difference. May be this is due to small size of the learners or it can be attributed to the personality type of the rater. Yet, the researcher copied and pasted the data twice just to get a feeling of how things would appear in a bigger sample. No difference was traced!

Overall, the present study yielded no consistent pattern to clearly distinguish **Es** from **Is**, **Ts** from **Fs**, and **Js** from **Ps**. Between. Only the sensing/intuitive dimension showed a difference. How you gather information is directly related to the way you learn, generally speaking, and particularly the way you learn language. Moreover, the study demonstrated that gender did play a role: No meaningful difference was observed among male participants, but as for the females, being **S** or **N** affected their writing performance.

The second research question was posed to detect any relationship between rater and learner personality types. In, MBTI terms, the researcher is an **ISTP**, with all dimensions being very clearly marked: (**E**=7, **I**=14, **S**=16, **N**=10, **T**=22, **F**=2, **J**=8, **P**=14. The reader remembers from table 2 that this type was the least frequently observed. Also it was pointed out that the individuals in this study showed a great tendency toward the **ISTJ**. So the dimensions the rater and most participants had in common were **I**, **S** and **T**. The **Ss** care for details and produce lengthy pieces. In retrospect, I have always attached a great significance to details and have often encouraged the other party, **Ns**, to improve their essays by adding details. And when thinking about the **T** dimension, I find that in academic writing the thinking element seems more relevant than feeling. In fact, organizational patterning and the rhetorical devices do count in writing. There is another side to the coin. The **INTJs** enjoy the highest mean in writing ability. Interestingly enough, here with this group there are two common dimensions, the **I** and **T** preferences. That could explain partly why these types scored highest. Similarly, Alfallahy (2004), interested in discovering the relationship between student, peer, and teacher assessments on the one hand and some psychological and personality traits on the other, reported high correlations among the three types of assessment, with learner trait being a crucial factor at work.

Of course, generalizing the findings of this research to the population has its limitations and any attempt to do so should be with caution. One of the limitations was the small number of students involved, 86. Researchers have reported samples twice as big, and even more. Additionally, one may refer to the homogeneity of the participants. The performance range observed was 7.25 (19.25-12). Probably more heterogeneous participants would reveal a

different pattern. Next, having just one rater in this study makes the generalization of the outcomes rather risky. Still one more factor could be added to the list: the essay topic which was never controlled. It might just be the case that different topics opting for different rhetorical organizations could introduce still different impacts.

This study was, however, its own reward. The teacher learned about the types issue. As a teacher, now I understand how unfair my previous evaluations were. In retrospect, I think I unjustly pushed them to the direction I favored. This familiarity was quite awakening to me. Interpreting student writing this time around, I'll be more careful. As a result of my conscious application of the MBTI, I believe I'll be better able to read and respond effectively to student writing in future.

The participants, too, came to know their types. Discovering that other types also exist, they find it easier to try others preferences as well (Callahan, 2000). Leaving his own "comfort zones", to borrow the term from Ehrman and Oxford (1995), would benefit the learner. Offering some practice and training, it may be argued, would pave the way for the learners. Indeed, materials developers can best facilitate this task by offering "a variety of carefully constructed writing prompts" (Callahan, 2000, p. 74). According to Ehrman and Oxford (1995), studies aiming at investigating psychological types are promising in that they offer "an accessible conceptual framework for language trainers and learners ...greater self-regulation and better learning performance" (p. 324).



### References

- Alfallahy, I. (2004). The role of some selected psychological and personality traits of the rater in the accuracy of self- and peer- assessment. *System*, 32 (3), 407-26.
- Bailey, P., Onwuegbusie, A. J., & Daley, C. E. (2000). Using learning style to predict foreign language achievement at the college level. *System*, 28, 115-33.
- Beauvois, M. H., & Eledge, J. (1996). Personality types and megabytes: student attitudes toward computer mediated communication (CMC) in the language classroom. *CALICO Journal*, 13, 19-45.
- Callahan, S. (2000). Responding to the invisible student. *Assessing Writing*, 7 (1), 57-77.
- Ehrman, M. E. (1994). The type differentiation indicator and adult foreign language learning success. *Journal of Psychological Type*, 30 (1), 10-29.
- Ehrman, M. E., & Oxford, R. (1990). Adult language learning styles and strategies in an intensive training setting. *Modern Language Journal*, 74 (3), 311-27.
- Ehrman, M.E. & Oxford, R. (1995). Cognition plus: correlates of language learning success. *Modern Language Journal*, 79 (1), 67- 89.
- Hismanoglu, M. (2000). Language learning strategies in foreign language learning and teaching. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6 (8), n.p.
- Hoseini, K. (2003). *On the relationship between personality type and performance in the IELTS Test*. Unpublished MA thesis, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran.
- Myers, I. B., & Briggs, K. C. (1998). Myers- Briggs Type Indicator. STEP I/Self-Scorable, Form M. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Wilz, B. (2000). *Relationship between personality type and Grade Point Average of technical college students*. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-Stout.
- Weigle, S. C., Boldt, H. and Valsecchi, M.I. (2003). Effects of task and rater background on the evaluation of ESL student writing: a pilot study. *TESOL Quarterly*. 37(2) 345-54.
- Zhenhui, R. (2001). Matching teaching styles with learning styles in East Asian contexts. [\*The Internet TESL Journal\*](#), 2 (7), n.p.

The researcher is assistant professor, her area of interest being writing and the related issues.  
 Fahimeh Marefat  
 English Department, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages of  
 Allameh Tabatabaai University  
 Allameh Tabatabaai Street  
 Pol-e-Modirat  
 Chamran High Way  
 Tehran. Iran.