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THEORY OF FLOW: IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract

The article discusses the Theory of Flow and its implications for foreign language teaching and learning. The author reviews the existing research on flow, provides the definition of the construct, and details flow conditions and components. The author focuses on the definition of flow as the optimal zone for human learning and discusses the potential of flow in foreign language education. Specifically, it is the desire to raise one's skill in order to keep the balance between shill and challenge, and continue experiencing flow, that makes flow an excellent vehicle for learning. Moreover, the merging of the awareness and action, characteristic to flow, can lead to the loss of foreign language anxiety, which can lead to foreign language learners' higher willingness to communicate in a foreign language. The current article does not present an empiric study; rather it presents a brief review of the existing research literature on the topic.

Keywords: Flow, positive psychology, foreign language (FL) education, optimal learning, intrinsic motivation, autotelic experience.

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1. Introduction

Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989, 1990, 1996, 1997) defines flow as an experiential state characterized by intense focus and complete involvement which leads to improved performance on a given task. One of the important characteristics of flow is that people, while in this state, are "so involved in an activity nothing else seems to matter; experience itself so memorable, they seek it out even at great cost, for sheer enjoyment" (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). By interviewing people from various backgrounds about their flow experiences, Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) identified the phenomenological characteristics of flow as follows:

From rock climbers to chess players to accomplished scientists and artists, optimal experiences in diverse activities were often described in similar terms: intense concentration and absorption in an activity with no psychic energy left over for distractions, a merging of awareness with action, a feeling of control, loss of self- consciousness, and a contraction of the normal sense of time (p. 137).

Flow, therefore, is defined as a psychological state in which one's awareness merges with the action, when one's concentration, interest, and enjoyment are at the highest, the experience itself is rewarding, or "autotelic", and is, therefore, intrinsically motivating. Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) describe flow as the "subjective buoyancy of experience when skillful and successful actions seem effortless, even when a great deal of physical or mental energy is exerted" (Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 137). This is what flow means. What are the conditions under which it occurs?

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), certain psychological states are determined by different combinations of high and low challenges and skills. As opposed to apathy (resulting from low challenge and low skill), relaxation (coming into play under the conditions of high skill but low challenge), and anxiety (born of low skill and high challenge), flow is the result of the combined high skill and high challenge, as can be seen in the Model of Flow proposed by Whalen (Whalen, 1997):

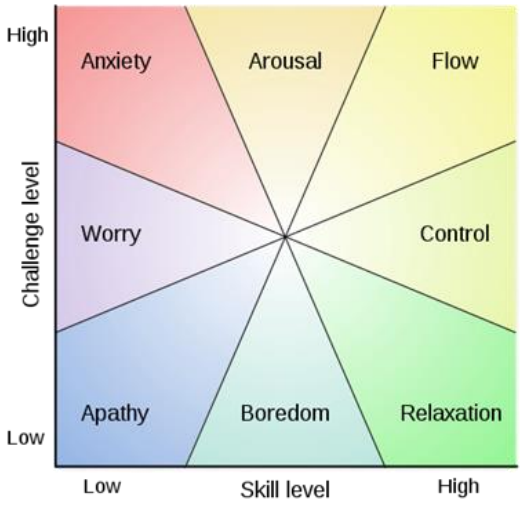

Figure 01. Whalen's model of flow

The chart above represents the necessary conditions for flow and other psychological states, with flow occurring at the intersection of high challenge and high skill and neighboring arousal and control.

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Apathy is the direct opposite of flow, whereas worry, anxiety, boredom, and relaxation are also incompatible with flow.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Flow potential for human learning

Flow can be present, in fact, in any human activities requiring a certain level of mastery and posing a certain level of challenge. According to Egbert (2003), flow has been investigated in various activities, such as dancing, surgery, reading, rock climbing, doing math, creating art, playing chess or video-games, and the list can go on. Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) note that the theory of flow is inherently related to learning, whether it is learning how to play chess, or learning math or foreign languages. As applied to education, learners experience flow when the task's challenge is high but not much beyond their current skill level. The ultimate goal of an effective teacher is, therefore, to have a good grasp of the skill level of their students and to continuously provide them with learning tasks at a challenge level matching their skill level. If the task's challenge is too low, learning becomes boring. If the challenge is too high, learning can be stalled by students' anxiety. The balance between high challenge and high skill leads to success at a given task, which "motivates the person to repeat the task at a more challenging level and to use the skills gained previously to accomplish the more difficult task" (Egbert). The more skillful people become, the more challenge they need to stay in the flow. Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi (Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) note that "in order to maintain the enjoyment of flow, people must continually engage in new challenges to match their increasing skills, and they must perfect

their skills to meet the challenges" (Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi, p. 4). This "addictiveness" of flow make it a perfect vehicle of learning. In a foreign language (FL) classroom, the main responsibility of "flow-minded" educators would be monitoring the growing skill level of their students and raising the difficulty of learning tasks in order to sustain students' flow.

Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (Nakamura, Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) specify that it is challenging assignments that slightly stretch one's skills that lead to flow. This cognitive area that is "slightly beyond" the current skill level is similar to Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) also note that "much like Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, the level in which most learning occurs is just one step beyond the skills one has already mastered" (Shernoff , Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 132). When children learn a new skill (for example, drawing a horse) the challenge level can far exceed their beginning skill level and they can be overwhelmed by this task. To reach flow, they need to increase the skill level (e.g., learn how to draw a horse following the teacher's instructions) until it matches the challenge. On the other end of the continuum, if the challenge is lower than their initial skill level (e.g., students are to draw a ball), students will neither learn anything, nor will they experience flow (as they will be in the state of boredom). According to Vygotsky when a task is easy and learners can do it on their own without any help, it is within their "comfort zone". If all the work a learner does is in the comfort zone, no learning will take place and the learner will eventually lose interest. When the activity is too hard, the learner becomes frustrated and in the "frustration zone" learners are likely to give up. The area between these two zones is the zone of proximal development and that is where all learning occurs. Just as Vygotsky's "comfort zone" and "frustration zone" delineate the borders of ZPD,

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flow in Csikszentmihalyi's theory borders on the states of relaxation and anxiety. Vygotsky emphasized the collective nature of ZPD by defining it as one step further from the level of skill or knowledge previously attained by the learner which he or she achieves "under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978). The role of the teacher in facilitating flow among students should include providing increasingly challenging learning material to them but it is not limited by it. Teachers can also serve as role models for their students and help them increase their skill level, thus sustaining the state of flow in their classroom.

It must also be noted that not only high challenge and high skills can cause flow. Schmidt and Savage (Schmidt and Savage, 1992), who conducted a study of flow in an EFL context in Thailand, found that leisure activities that neither presented high challenge nor required high skill also led students into flow. It has been concluded that flow can occur even when the challenge and skills are low (even though it had been previously thought to result in apathy), as long as the skill level is in balance with the challenge. Another model of flow was, therefore, suggested, which shows that flow is available at any developmental level and is not only a domain of highly skilled "experts", but of "novices" as well:

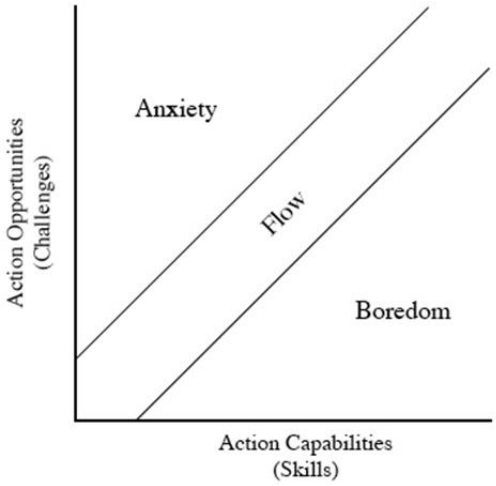

Figure 02. Csikszentmihalyi's Model of Flow

The discovery of the fact that flow can exist in the conditions of low skill and challenge has important implications for foreign language teaching and learning at the beginning/lower intermediate level as it suggests that flow can be experienced by learners at any proficiency level. Schmidt and Savage (Schmidt and Savage, 1992) hypothesize that other variables might have come into play in their study, such as control and interest, which allowed for flow to occur even when the task was not challenging. Indeed, flow involves the complex interplay of a number of variables, which are discussed in the next section.

3. Research Questions

3.1. Flow conditions and components

According to Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 2007), the following conditions must be present for flow to occur:

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(1) *Clear task goals*. Flow is possible when learners know exactly what they are doing and what their aim is. Conflicting requirements breed confusion and are not conducive to flow.
(2) *Balance between challenges and skills*. Flow occurs when the task's challenge is at the peak of or slightly beyond the students' skills. Too difficult task will lead to frustration, whereas too easy tasks result in boredom.
(3) *Immediate feedback*. To maintain the state of flow one needs to know how well one is doing by getting feedback from their peers or mentors.
(4) *Concentration, interest, and enjoyment*. These three components should occur simultaneously in order for flow to be present. Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) noted that school students can be forced to exert high levels of concentration but, if their heart is not in the activity, flow does not occur.
(5) Taking into account Schmidt and Savage's (1992) report, *control* over the activity should be added to the list of necessary conditions of flow. The possibility for learners to exercise at least some degree of control over the learning tasks is very important as it makes learning more meaningful for them and gives them agency.

4. Purpose of the Study

Another question is how flow manifests itself – what signs can show us that the person is in the state of flow? Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) identified several components of flow, in which the "optimal experience" manifests itself and which help identify flow and "measure" its intensity:

(1) *Merging of action and awareness*. While performing an activity which does not involve flow, people tend to get distracted and think about unrelated things. In the state of flow, people give their undivided attention to the task at hand.
(2) *Complete absorption in the activity*. Concentration on the present moment leaves no room for distractions, anxieties, and insecurities.
(3) *Loss of reflective self-consciousness*. People tend to lose much of their mental energy on what others think about them. In the state of flow you are so deeply engaged in the activity, the burdensome considerations of what image you produce to others cease to exist. This allows you to both boost your performance and set your anxiety aside.
(4) *Activity becomes "autotelic"*. Flow-conducive activities are intrinsically rewarding and people tend to replicate and seek for such experiences due to the enjoyment they provide.
(5) *The subjective perception of time is altered*. Time usually "flies" when you are absorbed in an intrinsically rewarding activity.

5. Research Methods

It has also been suggested (Chen, Wigand &Nilan 1999) that the dimensions of flow can be categorized into three stages: *antecedents of flow* (matching levels of skills and challenge; clear set of goals; timely feedback); *flow experiences* (merging of action and awareness; sense of control over the activity;

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concentration); and *flow effects* (loss of self-consciousness; time distortion; the feeling that the activity becomes autotelic). Flow experiences and flow effects can be used to identify flow, including in the classroom environment.

At the same time, the components of flow make this state an extremely valuable tool for FL learning. The disappearance of self-consciousness and anxiety in the state of flow is the factor that can lower foreign language (FL) anxiety and raise FL students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in FL. People who have experienced flow describe it as being "in the zone" or "in the groove" (Egbert, 2003, p. 499), in which all concerns, anxieties, and fears cease to exist, albeit temporarily. Due to its positive, energizing effect on human emotions, flow, which is characterized by the feeling of spontaneous joy, even rapture, has been used in Occupational Therapy and is the cornerstone of Positive Psychology. As a state of complete absorption in an activity, flow represents the ultimate experience in harnessing human emotions in the process of performing and learning. These characteristics of flow allow researchers (Egbert, 2003) to call it the "optimal experience". As such, Flow can be extremely beneficial in education because, being an intrinsically rewarding experience, it can draw students' intrinsic motivation to learning.

6. Findings

According to Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi, 2007), flow in a FL classroom increases FL learners' intrinsic motivation for FL studies. The researcher maintains that when it comes to FL learning at public schools, intrinsic motivation is much more important than extrinsic motivation. The latter involves a clear understanding by learners of the extrinsic advantages and rewards they can achieve as a result of learning, such as obtaining a better job in the future. Prospects of a better employment and other future benefits can motivate high school students and adult FL learners but not elementary school children, for whom landing a more lucrative job is a rather remote concern. The most effective way to enhance motivation in younger FL learners is to "make children aware of how much fun learning can be" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2007). Undoubtedly, intrinsic motivation is accessible to learners of all ages but it is especially important for younger ones, who are still "in touch" with the flow experienced in childhood games. Csikszentmihalyi (2007) argues that enhancing student intrinsic motivation by making learning engaging and enjoyable through flow is very useful, especially in high needs public schools:

In the first place, it is something teachers can do something about. Second, it should be easier to implement - it does not require expensive technology, although it does require sensitivity and intelligence, which might be harder to come by than the fruits of technology. Third, it is a more efficient and permanent way to empower children with the tools of knowledge. And finally, this strategy is preferable because it adds immensely to the enjoyment learners will take in the use of their abilities, and hence it improves the quality of their lives (Csikszentmihalyi, 2007, p. 3).

However, it is not only motivation that can improve as a result of flow in learning. Since flow "encourages people to perform the activity repeatedly and engage in exploratory behaviors, people push themselves to higher levels of performance" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2007). This propensity of learners to replicate flow activities multiple times "because they are so enjoyable" (Shernoff&Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 132) makes flow particularly attractive in the domain of FL learning, where the ancient Latin principle "repetitioest mater to acquire new skills that will match the increasing studiorum" ("repetition is mother of

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learning") reigns supreme in FL classrooms around the globe. On the other hand, in order to maintain the flow, the learners will seek level of challenge. On this ground, it can be claimed that flow, as the state of "optimal performance and optimal learning" (Egbert, 2003), contributes to successful internalization of external FL input by learners.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, flow can play a highly beneficial role in education due to its positive influence on student intrinsic motivation and engagement with the subject. In terms of FL learning, it adds three more positive factors: (1) students tend to replicate experiences leading to flow, which helps to practice and regurgitate language material and, eventually, internalize it; (2) in order to stay in flow, students will seek to raise the level of challenge and this will result in the acquisition of new language skills; and (3) by immersing themselves in the activity and receiving positive emotions, students lose self-consciousness and lower their affective filter, which leads to higher communicative confidence and higher WTC in FL. The advisability of fostering flow among FL learners in public schools can hardly be overestimated. However, the reality is such that the theory of flow has been rarely used in public education to date and there is still little research on flow in FL education.

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