



FLOW THEORY

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ABSTRACT

It is very natural that people get bored or anxious at work or in the classroom while doing some activity or assignment or in any activity, like painting a picture, playing a chess or surfing on the web, etc. So, how can a person, who is in the state of either anxiety or boredom, get more enjoyment and not lose interest while doing some kind of activity?

Examining and understanding flow theory is crucial to organize classroom activities and optimizing educational systems in all levels.

Introduction

Flow theory was born when researchers set the goal of understanding how participants feel when they are engaged in a certain type of enjoyable activity and what the reasons are for this high level of enjoyment. Analyzing the essence of enjoyment, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi introduced the flow theory in the 1970s.

Main Part

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi studied maximum engagement in the activity and getting maximum enjoyment from it at the same time and he came up with the theory of flow. According to this flow theory, to reach the state of flow, one should balance challenge and skills, that is to say, the activity you are doing should be neither too high nor too low for your skills level in terms of difficulty. If a person is bored, then it means his/her skills are high,

but the challenge is low, so a person loses interest and may stop the activity. If a person is anxious while doing the activity, then it shows that the challenge is high and his/her skills are not up to that. So, when these two things, skills of a person and challenge of an activity, come into balance, flow happens.

The following conditions happen when a person experiences flow: equilibrium of skills and challenge, opportunities for high concentration, definite task goals, positive feedback on performance, a sense of control, low level of self-consciousness and the feeling that time passes more quickly.

In the first section of the paper relationship between flow and learning is described. Flow depends on both individual characteristics and conditions in the environment. Despite some studies done in the area, it is still unclear in exactly what



educational contexts flow may happen and how it affects students' learning process.

Earlier example of a study which touches upon such an issue like flow was Krashen's "Forgetting principle" which says that input is so interesting, a learner forgets that a message is in a foreign language.

Moreover, another two studies on flow that were done by Schmidt and Savage(1992) with 16 Thai students (first one) and, in the second study, Schmidt, Boraie and Kassabgy(1996) with Egyptian learners reported that learners experienced flow in learning contexts.

Most of the researches done on the flow theory used one of two ways to collect data: participant-recall surveys and Experience Sampling Method (ESM). However, both of these methods have a problem in the way that the resulting data from the ESM may not specifically reflect language learning activities and learner recalls may not show participants' true experience.

There are four components that constitute the flow experience. They are: challenge and skills, attention, interest and control. As I mentioned above, balance between skills and challenge is crucial for flow to happen, and I do agree with the statement that unintentionally focused attention is a requisite for flow and if attention is pre-planned and consciously paid, then flow is prevented. And when it comes to interest, if student-generated topics and ideas are used while planning classroom activities, students maintain interest throughout a task process. As for control, if learners have a sense of control and freedom as to, for example, decision-making, choosing learning strategies, it increases their motivation and leads to flow. Still, however, there are some other theories or, at least,

opinions concerning those four conditions, put forward by different researchers, which holds a bit different stance on the issue.

Speaking of some barriers for flow to happen in the classroom, for example, beginner level learners' insufficient knowledge may put an obstacle on the way they achieve flow. Another thing is that, teacher-centered methods of teaching do not create the necessary situation for flow. Moreover, if learners do not know well how to use computer, or any other tool, it prevents them from getting absorbed in task at hand.

Reading and computer-based tasks are said to generate flow. McQuillan and Conde (1996) reported that some of their non-native English speakers experienced flow while reading in English. And, likewise, Ghani and Deshpande(1994) observed flow on their participants during computer tasks.

Here is one field-based study to explore ways to examine whether flow exists or not in language classroom. A class (13 students) of secondary school Spanish learners and their teacher took part in this study. Students' ages ranged from 14 to 18. Twelve participants described their motivation as instrumental, that is to say, extrinsic, because they would be using it in their jobs or in college. Only one participant had an integrative motivation.

The Spanish course was scheduled in an 8-week long, 3-hour daily engagement with a break for lunch. The teacher followed the district curriculum and used teacher-centered methods.

After explaining the procedure and getting their permission, researchers visited the class once in a week during the quarter. The seven tasks with different focus,



organization and process were used to see which of them is good for flow to occur. And they used both quantitative and observational sources of data to answer the study questions.

First, participant background information about past learning experiences was collected and, second, perceptions survey based on questionnaire was carried out and, third, by using a checklist observational data was acquired. In it observers noted the number of times and specific time for disruptions during performance of students. Fourth, they collected task products, like transcripts, copies of all email messages of all students. Fifth, they conducted post task interviews involving stimulated recall with participants. On-on-one interviews between a participant and the researcher started with the opening question "What was your experience with this task?"

Among tasks, there were teacher-created tasks (tasks 1,4 and 7); Mystery email tasks (2 and 3); electronic chat (tasks 5 and 6). During the performance of each task, researchers observed individual participants' process of doing those tasks.

Survey, observational, anecdotal and product data were used to answer the two study questions. The first question was "Does flow occur in the language classroom?" From those data researchers found out that all participants, except for one, experienced flow during one of more of the tasks. The highest degree of flow was for task 5.

Second question of the study was "During what kind of tasks might flow occur in the language classroom?" They categorized tasks, based on level of flow that they engendered across participants, as "high flow" tasks (only Task 5), "moderate flow"

tasks (tasks 2,3,4) and "low flow" tasks (tasks 1 and 7).

Survey results included the means for each task over all students and tasks 2,3 and 5 (email and chat) indicated a pattern of flow for these activities. The researchers said that tasks were not as similar as they had deemed so before.

Then, based on observations, they calculated the mean scores for each task which show how many participants experienced control, focus, interest and challenge in relation to each task. Four highest mean scores were for tasks 2,3,5 and 6. Reasons for this result could be that because these tasks (2,3,5 and 6) interested students due to their newness, and also because students met some level of challenge from these tasks.

Coming to challenge-skills balance in those tasks, although participants had some problems with the tools and some questions about the tasks, students experienced some level of flow, and the highest level in task 5.

Analyzing attention levels, when students were interviewed after task 6, they did not report language issues, and they showed enthusiasm in the task. Talking and interacting with native speakers may have held them interested leading to high attention levels. As for task 7 (reading), one participant said that it did not excite her curiosity and was boring. So, we can say, although reading is most often associated with flow, but choosing the reading material affects the flow experience.

Regarding interest levels, two participants after finishing tasks 2 and 3(email sessions) said they liked the activities and wanted to do again, so, it seems that interest is directly related to control what



you choose what to say and do what you want while learning something new.

About control, researchers concluded that although tasks and tools were chosen by instructors, but control in what to do in these tasks and tools helped some students to achieve flow.

In conclusion, researchers found out that they could not fully explain flow experience. In general, the higher level of opportunities for flow on four dimensions (challenge and skills, attention, interest and control) the more probable that students achieve flow. Teachers, by developing tasks leading to flow, at least theoretically facilitate the flow experience. And also, computer-based tasks provided opportunities for flow. Routinely done activities may hinder flow. The findings of the study also indicate that although participants' perceptions of flow differ, the patterns of flow across tasks are relatively

similar and, so, there are flow-supporting activities.

Conclusion

Suggestions for further studies in the area of flow are that the impact of flow on language acquisition should be addressed. Because the present study was not meant to observe learning outcomes. They had the assumption that if SLA principles are followed and students reach flow, then they are learning something. Moreover, future research ought to encompass a closer analysis of each of the components of the flow theory. Furthermore, the use of computers in language learning environments should be considered to see if it stimulates flow and ultimately leads to learning outcomes.

Overall, flow theory presents a chance to conceptualize and assess language learning activities and suggest some new insights in our understanding towards language learning and teaching.

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