

# Flow and Extensive Reading in EFL

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## Abstract

This present paper aims to uncover what prevents EFL (English as a foreign language) learners from continuing to read English extensively and what encourages them to do it better by the concept of *flow* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. *Flow* is a state of mind when we feel happy by doing what we like to do and get involved in it. *Autotelic*, one of major elements of *flow*, will support the concept of Free Voluntary Reading. Optimal experience, another major element of *flow*, will be an ideal state of reading a book extensively. The nine elements of *flow* are powerful to explain about the requirement of extensive reading (ER).

Keywords: Flow, Reading Stamina, Extensive Reading, EFL

## 1. Introduction

Steven Pinker says<sup>1</sup> that language is a human instinct, but written language is not as is mentioned in Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, which says that man has an instinctive tendency to speak, as we see in the babble of our young children; whilst no child has an instinctive tendency to brew, bake, or write. That is why a habit of reading has been encouraged at home, school and other educational facilities. In-school free reading programs such as Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), and Self Selected Reading (SSR) have been introduced since more than half a century ago. The project of "morning reading" was started in a high school in Chiba more than 20 years ago and dramatically spread all over Japan. The present number of schools that have introduced the "morning reading" project is over 24,000. Hayashi (2007) says that the behavior of students improves when the "morning reading" project works well at school. Yamamoto (2010) explains that the project as well as extensive reading programs for learners in EFL or English as a foreign language may develop *Reading Stamina*, which is considered under the umbrella term, *Intelligence Stamina*, and therefore the students can control their behavior well. This paper is an attempt to propose that the concept of "*flow*" by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi will contrib-

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<sup>1</sup>Forward for "*Why Our Children Can't Read And What We Can Do About It*" (McGuinness, Diane, 1997, NY: Touchstone.)

ute to an explanation of in-school reading programs in the first language and ER programs in EFL.

## 2. EFL Reading and Reading Stamina

Reading English as a foreign language is a challenge for many EFL learners. They need to have rich English vocabulary, know the rules of syntax, and paragraph structures. In addition to that they have to follow the storyline by processing the linguistic information through the text automatically.

Reading a story printed on pages is different from reading just a passage on one page, a paragraph or a sentence. Those learners who can read 100-English-word-passages within one minute cannot always read a 6,000-English-word-passage within one hour. We need some kind of stamina to keep reading English. Yamamoto (2008a, 2008b) calls this stamina *Reading Stamina* and he defines it as part of *Intelligence Stamina* (Yamamoto, 2010).

Those who do not have enough reading stamina cannot read English extensively, but extensive reading will enable them to build their reading stamina. Now we face a chicken-or-egg problem.

It is not as easy as we expect to read English books extensively. There are several factors that prevent EFL learners from reading English extensively.

First, the learners are not accustomed to reading English extensively because they are not trained to do this at school in Japan. They have not experienced reading for such a long time in their regular English reading class. Many EFL learners tend to lose their concentration easily somewhere along the way to comprehending the story when they start to read some pages of an English book. The Course of Study by MEXT<sup>2</sup> does not prepare any courses of extensive reading. Not many schools have a regular extensive reading class. In a traditional English class in Japan, understanding one or few paragraphs by putting it into Japanese with some explanation of the sentence structures is the main activity of reading, taking a whole lesson for about an hour, which is categorized as intensive reading. Those paragraphs usually contain many difficult words and sentence structures. They have to spend a great amount of energy to grasp the meanings of a few paragraphs. The students would feel it difficult to read those passages in one go without its model translation. Table 1 shows the list of differences between the extensive reading class and the traditional reading class.

Second, the Japanese learners of English are considered to be rich in vocabulary and know English grammar well due to the training of intensive reading. However, they feel uneasy when they read English without confirming the translation of it in Japanese. It seems even difficult for them to read English textbooks that are for those who two or three years junior to them. They seem to have declarative knowledge of English rather than conceptual knowledge (Table 2). Yamamoto (2003) finds that 12<sup>th</sup> graders feel it difficult to read English textbooks for 8<sup>th</sup> graders if they are not

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<sup>2</sup>Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology in Japan

Table 1: the list of differences between the two types of reading class

	ER class	Traditional Reading class
textbooks	Leveled readers, Graded Readers	MEXT authorized textbooks
Choice of books	Learners can choose books	Usually learners have no choice
translation	No translation task	Translation task mainly
Amount of reading	Read extensively	Read intensively
Reading pace	individually	Together at the same speed
After reading	Reading log	Quizzes or tests
Comprehension	Content-based	Structure-based

Table 2: Types of knowledge and its use

I thought I learned it but cannot use it well.	I thought I learned it but cannot use it properly in the context.	I can use it properly in the context.
declarative knowledge	procedural knowledge	conceptual knowledge
Knowing that	Knowing how	
inexpert	routine expert	Adaptive expert
conscious learning	unconscious learning and automaticity in the fixed context	unconscious learning and automaticity in different contexts
explicit knowledge	implicit knowledge in the fixed context	implicit knowledge in different contexts

allowed to access the Japanese translation of them. It will be very difficult even for university students to read high school textbooks for 10<sup>th</sup> graders smoothly for half an hour (Yamamoto, 2011).

Third is lack of experience of selecting English books. Almost all the EFL learners are not accustomed to choosing English books by themselves. They tend to choose English books inappropriate for their reading abilities or have no idea about what to do. If they are told to choose books as they like, the books they will choose should have the words and grammar taught in class before, but may not be understood well because they are not sight vocabulary that is processed automatically in their mind yet.

### 3. How to Read English Books with Pleasure

ER like Free Voluntary Reading is considered “pleasure reading.” It seems that the topics and the contents are important when the readers enjoy the stories. It is true, but one more thing needs to be mentioned. They are to reach the end of the book or they will not be pleased. Readers will be satisfied with their reading when they manage to reach the last page of the book and understand

what the writer wants to tell the readers. If the readers wonder what the ending is on the way to the last page, they will be more pleased when they know the ending. In order to reach the last page, they have to keep reading. It will be difficult as long as the readers struggle with understanding the meanings of many words appearing in the story and structures that are too complicated for the readers to comprehend it in one reading.

## **4. Processes and Models of Reading**

### **4.1. Processes of Reading**

Wolf (2008) says that expert readers give attention to letters in the first 0 to 100 milliseconds, doing the three cognitive operations: to disengage from whatever else we're doing, to move our attention to the new focus (pulling ourselves to the text), and to spotlight the new letter and word. Expert readers are said to recognize a letter and it changes the visual cortex of the brain between 0 and 150 millisecond. In 100 to 200 milliseconds, they connect letters to sounds and orthography to phonology. In 200 to 500 milliseconds, they get to all that they know about a word.

Reading is a complex combination of processes. Grabe (2008) lists up 10 processes of reading by fluent readers:

1. A rapid process
2. An efficient process
3. A comprehending process
4. An interactive process
5. A strategic process
6. A flexible process
7. A purposeful process
8. An evaluative process
9. A learning process
10. A linguistic process

Grabe and Stoller (2011) divide reading into two types of processing: lower-level processes and higher-level processes. Lower-level processes include word recognition, syntactic parsing (word integration), meaning proposition encoding. Higher-level processes include text model of comprehension, situation model of reader interpretation, background knowledge use and inferences, and executive control processes. Both lower-level processes and higher-level processes are aspects of working memory processing.

Figure 1 shows a pyramid of the subtasks of reading processes. Readers read a book by doing those subtasks at the same time. They have to do those subtasks with less energy because reading is a marathon of cognition. Readers with dyslexia use a tremendous amount of effort and energy.

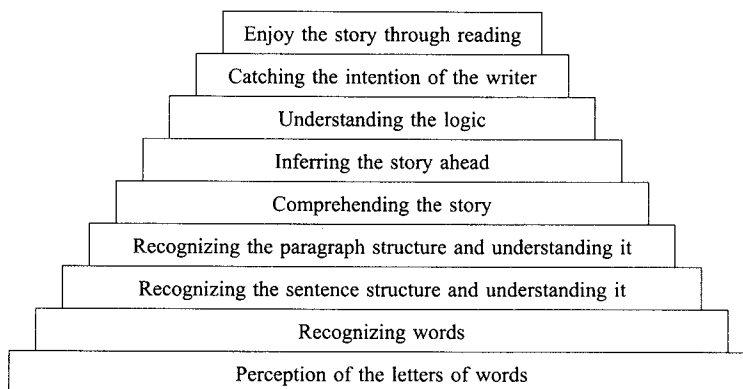


Figure 1: Pyramid of the subtasks of reading processes

Therefore, they find it hard to continue reading for lengthy periods. Readers in EFL have also similar problems.

#### 4.2. Models of Reading

Reading models are categorized into word recognition, story comprehension, and others. Research on word recognition has several models such as the logogen model, search model, interactive activation model, distributed representation model, and some are related to connectionism and mental lexicon. These models are basically examined within a few seconds.

Grabe and Stoller (2011) show that there are two ways of viewing models of reading. One is metaphorical models of reading such as Bottom-up models, Top-down models, and Interactive models. The other is specific models of reading such as the Interactive Compensatory Model and Word Recognition Model. In metaphorical models of reading, it seems that a modified interactive model, or a hybrid bottom-up/top-down model will be a useful interpretation of general reading comprehension processes.

#### 4.3. Involved in reading

An expert tennis player may make his or her racket a part of his or her arm and use it like his or her own hand naturally. We may apply this idea to conceptual knowledge. Expert readers may enter into the story of the book when they read it and become part of the book. The reader will become the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle in each scene of the story while he or she reads the book. Comprehension comes when the last piece goes to the proper place. Skilled persons make the tools part of their body or mind and assimilate it as if it was part of the body. Ichikawa (1975) calls it ‘*kumikomi*,’ or assimilation. The concept of *flow* will allow us to understand ‘*kumikomi*’ in reading by learning how to experience *flow*.

## 5. Flow

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is an American professor who introduced *flow* when he was at Chicago University more than thirty years ago. He noticed that people have quite similar *flow* experiences when each of them feels happy, no matter how different they are in ages, sexes, fields, cultures, or countries. His examinees are chess players, rock climbers, dancers, artists, and surgeons who report that they feel happy, lose their sense of time, and do not need anything else when they dedicate themselves to doing their work. They do not even want to be rewarded with money or fame when they are involved with the activity. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) calls this optimal experience *flow*.

The metaphor of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. For athletes it is “being in the zone,” for religious mystics, it is being in “ecstasy,” and for artists and musicians it is aesthetic rapture. Athletes, mystics, and artists describe their experiences similarly when they reach *flow*, though their acts are quite different from each other. We assume that readers in ER will be in the state of *flow* as his examinees in various fields.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) suggests that there are nine main elements of *flow*. Those elements may give us hints of success in ER:

1. There are clear goals every step of the way.
2. There is immediate feedback to one’s actions.
3. There is a balance between challenges and skills.
4. Actions and awareness are merged.
5. Distractions are excluded from consciousness.
6. There is no worry for failure.
7. Self-consciousness disappears.
8. The sense of time becomes distorted.
9. The activity becomes autotelic.

### 1. Clear goals

People get *flow* easily when they face a clear set of goals that require appropriate responses, such as chess, tennis, or poker, which have goals and rules for action. The players just try to do the right thing in the right way according to the rules for the goals. ER will be successful when the readers have clear goals and rules on ER. The ER program called “Yomu-bee” in Yamanashi, directed by Kanatani in 1989 has a clear goal of reading leveled readers and graded readers extensively by taking a marathon as an analogy. The learners attending the project keep their reading record based on difficulties of ER books they read like 0.2 km and the goal is of course 42.195 km.

Sakai and Kanda (2005) set up a goal of one million English words. Thanks to the research of Toyota National College of Technology by Nishizawa, Yoshioka, and Fukada (2010), it is verified that one-million-English-word-reading is worthwhile.

## **2. Immediate feedback**

The readers can receive immediate feedback if they choose slim volumes of leveled readers for ER. They can easily reach the end of the book and understand the story fully in a short time. Reading a book cover-to-cover gives the readers a sense of satisfaction.

Keeping a reading log will increase immediate feedback. The teachers should assist the ER learners to keep reading log by themselves.

## **3. A balance between challenges and skills**

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) says that the *flow* experience acts as a magnet for learning – that is, for developing new levels of challenges and skills. If the challenges and skills meet ideally, a person would be constantly growing while enjoying whatever he or she did. You will be in a state of *flow* in ER English books extensively if you select the right level of English books on the basis of your reading stamina, and then you will develop your reading stamina gradually. Cautions: do not take thick books, graded readers that seem easy to read but which are long enough for the readers to run out their reading stamina are best.

## **4 & 5. Actions and awareness merged and distractions are excluded from consciousness**

When the readers enter the world of the story and become like one of the characters, their reading is merged and any distractions are excluded from their consciousness. The school library is a good place to read and facilitate access to the book world because it is basically a quiet place. The students know that they are supposed to be quiet there. The books surround the students and a silent pressure is exerted on them.

## **6 & 7. There is no worry about failure and self-consciousness disappears**

While the readers are in *flow*, they are too involved to be concerned with failure. It is like a feeling of total control. If the readers read a lot of slim books and gain a lot of successful experiences, it will build their secure feeling about reading English books and make them feel that they will reach the end of another English book easily the next time too.

## **8 & 9. The sense of time becomes distorted, and the activity becomes *autotelic***

The term *autotelic* literally means “a self that has self-contained goals,” and it reflects the idea that such an individual has relatively few goals that do not originate from within self

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). You are in a state of *flow* when the task you have to do and your abilities for the task are well-balanced. In a state of *flow*, you do not want any extrinsic rewards but keep seeking an optimal experience and you are autotelic just like a kid who plays with sand in the kindergarten (Yamamoto, 2006). The readers will forget time when they are in a state of *flow* just as kids forget time when they are involved with sand-play. Those readers who take a glance at the clock or the watch covertly show that they are not in a state of *flow* and need to change their books because the books do not fit them at that time. The reason may be that the book level and their reading stamina are not balanced well. They may overestimate their reading stamina and have chosen more difficult books than they can read. They may be just sleepy then and lose concentration easily, so they should choose easier books. Such advice should be given to the learners but it is impossible for the teachers to give it to them if they read ER books outside the classroom. That is why it is better to have in-school ER class regularly.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) the *flow* experience acts as a magnet for learning – that is, for developing new levels of challenges and skills. When the book level and the readers’ reading stamina meet well, they would be constantly developing their reading stamina more while enjoying whatever books they read.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper proposes that the concept of “*flow*” by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi will give us hints of teaching how to read English extensively in the in-school reading programs in the EFL context. The nine elements of *flow* suggest what we need in order to succeed in our ER: ER books should be chosen by the students properly. The instruction of choosing books is very important. Reading stamina of the students may change due to their physical condition. If they feel sleepy, then let them choose easier books than usual. The class environment for ER should be carefully organized. The challenge and the skills should be matched. The research of investigating *flow* in ER will be a further challenge to be addressed.

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