

The Challenge of Learning to Listen: From the Perspective of Flow Theory

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Abstract

This is a preliminary case study of the challenges learners face when engaged in listening tasks in L2. I explore this issue in light of Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989) and discuss what can be optimal learning experiences in this specific language-learning activity to see if the theory could provide language learners and teachers with fruitful insights into learners' thoughts and emotions. It is also suggested that extensive listening (EL) might not be taken as a simple application of the idea of extensive reading (ER) to the listening domain. I make use of the interview data of the two successful learners and investigate the legitimacy of the four dimensions in the state of 'flow' that Egbert (2003) advocated. The learners, who experienced a voluntary listening class for two semesters, talked about their task engagement. Their comments suggest that these dimensions should be refined to accommodate both analytical and holistic approaches to the theory, and that the studies of optimal learning experiences in the language-learning context could be pursued further, especially with regard to the alleged importance of challenge-skill balance, attention control, and automaticity development.

Key Words:

Attention, Automaticity, Extensive Listening, Flow Theory, Listening Fluency, Positive Psychology

Introduction

When I did a presentation on this topic in class and asked expert learners of foreign/second languages (my classmates, doctoral students) if they had had experiences of any 'flow' state in their language learning, most of them had a frown on their faces. Some grinned, some sighed, some showed irritation or suspicion, and others said, "No way!" This was disheartening, because if we have not had such experiences, our students may not have – and probably will not have – either. We should be role models. Flow state might not be a necessary or sufficient condition of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), but it is worth asking why we have such a negative outlook on the existence of optimal experience in language learning.

It is said that positive psychology developed as a response to the previous bias toward pathology and the treatment of mental illness, as well as the long-term neglect of the positive functioning of the human mind in the field of psychology (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology can be about (1) subjective experience, (2) personality traits of individuals, and (3) values at the group level (Seligman 2002, p. 3). It could be anything good we have in our lives: anything that can enhance life, growing, and learning. Any approach – cognitive, emotional, personal, interpersonal, social, ethical, or constructivist, among others – can be possible. Flow theory, which is about optimal experience, establishes the nature and conditions of enjoyment of an “activity rewarding in and of itself” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 89). Flow is “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Do L2 learners and/or our students undergo such optimal learning experiences in their learning history? Can teachers help them experience such an optimal state in learning?

In this paper, I review the literature that has investigated the state of flow in general and in instructed language-learning situations in particular, and then I move on to the difficulties novice L2 learners have in listening. Little research has been done on the challenge of extensive exposure to aural language in the foreign-language-learning (EFL) context and its learning outcomes despite recent interest in the ‘input-flood’ approach in reading (e.g., Baw, 2007; Brown, Warring, & Donkaewbua, 2007; Elley & Mangubhai, 1981). I present interview data on two learners who completed a voluntary comprehensive listening course. In the semi-structured interviews, they talked about (1) how and how much they became involved in the activities in the course, and (2) in what ways they thought they were happy about the experience and the outcomes. Their narratives on their subjective experiences may shed light on the ideas of Extensive Listening (EL) and Intensive Listening (IL) as leaning tasks on the one hand, and on the dimensions of flow state in language-learning situations defined in Egbert (2003) on the other. Possible directions for future research on the concept of flow and its applications to L2 learning theory and pedagogy, as well as the contributions to the well-being of L2 learners, are suggested.

Theoretical Considerations

Flow Theory

The state of flow has been observed and investigated during a variety of physical activities like sports (Jackson & Marsh, 1996; Tenenbaum, Fogarty, & Jackson, 1999), in which individuals are so engaged and absorbed in the activity that they can carry themselves to “higher levels of performance” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 74). This optimal state has also been detected in some mental activities such as reading, playing chess (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and even writing (Abbott, 2000; Larson,

1988). The state of flow is generated when we have established order in the mind where there is chaos in the normal state. When we have control of what is happening in our mind, we find the mental activity rewarding and feel ourselves in inner harmony with the environment. We are intrinsically motivated and happy.

One of the most salient characteristics of flow is the perfect balance that develops between the challenge that the task poses and the skills that the individual possesses. If the task is too challenging, the individual will not dare to hang on. If the task is too easy, he or she will get bored and lose interest. The best balance between the person and the activity should be achieved so that the challenge can allow us to expand our skills and our *self* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3). This idea is similar to the concept of comprehensible input in SLA (e.g., Krashen, 2004) and the zone of proximal development (ZDP) of the socio-cultural approaches (e.g., Lantolf, 2006). This “growth-enhancing” aspect of flow theory has been researched extensively in psychology (Asakawa, 2004, p. 125).

However, this balance does not seem to be the only condition of the state of flow, but rather just one of several dimensions of the construct. Jackson and Marsh (1996) postulated other eight variables following Csikszentmihalyi (1990), and Tenenbaum et al., (1999) tested the construct’s validity and the generalizability of the scale of Jackson and Marsh (1996) based on the conditions of flow in sport. The conditions (variables) are (1) challenge-skill balance, (2) action-awareness merging, (3) clear goals, (4) unambiguous feedback, (5) concentration on the task at hand, (6) a sense of control, (7) loss of self-consciousness, and (8) the transformation of time. This reductionist approach tries to look at the phenomena of flow experience analytically. Moreover, a holistic approach also seems to be feasible. This fulfilling experience called flow is (9) ‘autotelic’ to see it as a whole. ‘Auto’ means self and ‘telos’ means goal in Greek. The experience is the end in itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 67), not a means to the end, and it eventually helps develop our *self*.

In addition to the presences of a ‘best balance’ between the challenge and the person’s skills (1), the individual is also so involved in and focused on the activity (5) that there should be a sense of automaticity about the action at hand (2), even though the individual is functioning at the maximum potential. Participants know what they are doing (3), and can confirm that they are doing right because of the clear feedback (4). It is possible to establish control over attention in flow (6), and participants become involved in the activity to the extent that they may lose awareness of time passing (8), as well as self-consciousness (7), which gets in the way of the concentration of psychic energy. As a result, they will feel that they are doing something for its own sake (9). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) emphasizes repeatedly that the autotelic experience is subjective. People subjectively figure out what they enjoy and how they enjoy it. They see it as good and enjoyable because they think “it has potential to make life more rich, more intense, and meaningful” (p. 70). Feeling flow, or having flow experiences, improves the quality of life because people are “masters of our own fate” (p. 3).

Another interesting aspect of the past studies on flow concerns the figurative expressions that

participants or interviewees use to describe the state. Jackson and Marsh (1996), for example, reported that athletes had used such expressions as ‘in the groove’ to describe the dimension (2) of action-awareness merging, and ‘leaves you on a high’ to depict the state (9) of autotelic experience. Fifth graders in Abbot (2000) used the expressions, ‘blinking out’ and ‘having the touch’ to portray their writing experiences, and the researcher used these phrases as the title of her paper. It is intriguing to ask why people use metaphorical terms to represent their experiences, and I will discuss this later in the discussion section.

Flow Theory in SLA

The field of SLA was slow in establishing the application of flow theory. Schmidt and Savage (1992) studied the motivational states of Thai learners of English based on this theory, and Egbert (2003) was the first study on the role of flow in a major journal. In the same vein, Dörnyei (2005) stated that “flow theory specifies the task conditions under which flow can occur” (p. 82). Accordingly, four conditions of flow in SLA are explicitly defined and designated in the relationships between the individual and the task, as follows:

1. Individuals experience flow when the task is perceived to be just balanced with their skills—in other words, there is a match between task challenge and the individual’s abilities to carry out the task.
2. Individuals who are ‘on task’ unintentionally exert focused attention. The focus in flow is characterized by intense concentration and automaticity (Egbert 2003, p. 504).
3. Individuals find the task (and the learning material) interesting in itself and absorbing.
4. Individuals perceive themselves as exercising control in performing the challenging task.

One of the most controversial criteria might be the second. The apparent paradox of conscious attention we exert in concentration and automatic behavior in skilled performance should be explored in relation to the issues of consciousness, attention, noticing, incidental learning, to name a few areas in research on SLA (e.g. Hulstijn, 2003; Schmidt, 1990; Segalowitz, 2003; Skehan, 1998), and also in relation to action-awareness merging—the second criteria of flow theory in general—which was referred to in the previous subsection. It is difficult to discuss all of these issues in detail in this paper, but I will get back to this enigma of intense concentration and automaticity in the case study section and discussion section below. Also, the third condition, interest, has to be discussed not just in terms of the content and the kind of the tasks at hand but also in relation to how challenging and enjoyable the task is perceived as being by the learners.

Developing Listening Fluency in Flow

Listening in L2 is a challenge. Cutler (2000; 2002) and Cutler and Clinton (1999) explained why it is difficult for L2 listeners to process a new language. Culter's psycholinguistic model shows that listening is "a mix of language-universal and language-specific processes" and that the procedures of speech segmentation that listeners learned in L1 acquisition possibly hinder them from learning another set of specific procedures of a new language (Cutler, 2002, p. 17). If the L2 listening skills of the learner do not match the challenge of the L2 message, the learner does not understand the message and ends up being left in chaos. The balance of the task challenge and the skill of the listener seems to be of top-most importance in L2 listening.

How can the listener keep paying attention to the aural message coming into awareness if he or she has much difficulty in understanding the message? An appropriate amount of quality attention should be invested to achieve the goal of comprehending the message. What Cutler (2002) established in theory as to what an L2 listener is doing makes us guess that the amount will be 'large' and the quality will be 'high' to achieve the balance with the skill. The listener must be struggling for establishing control over attention by means of focused concentration of his or her mind. However, 'concentration' can be a fragile construct. It can easily be broken if there is not an appropriate balance between task and ability.

How can the listener be absorbed in the listening activity and find that aural activity interesting and engaging if the act of listening is not enjoyable? The mind of the listener will fall prey to other mental activities, such as interfering thoughts, and lose order in consciousness. In our everyday terms, our minds 'drift away', which is the deadly enemy of flow, the optimal experience of mind. The listener may give up attempting to understand the message, feeling vulnerable and powerless. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) uses the word entropy, which is high when one's mind and mental energy lack order, when we are not focused, when we are not in control of our inner functioning, and when we are too self-conscious. In other words, our attention needs to be well honed. The listener may feel anxious, bored, or irritated, and may lose self-esteem or confidence in performing the task of listening in L2, and ultimately might not care what the message is all about.

On the other hand, if listening in L2 is enjoyable and fruitful, it can resemble a situation in which a small child is listening to a bedtime story – the act of listening is fun and meaningful, and we may safely say that the child is experiencing flow (Sawyer, personal communication, 2007). In language classrooms, Nation (2006) introduces more than a few techniques for developing fluency in listening. One of them is 'Listening to Stories' (Nation 2006, p. 129). In this activity, the teacher chooses stories of interest and reads them aloud for the students in class. He also suggests using graded readers as sources of listening materials, and some teachers and researchers have implemented EL as learning activities as either in-class or out-of-class learning activities (Brown et al., 2007; Croker, 2005; Rines, 2003). However, the learning outcomes do not seem to have been 'extensively' promising.

In second language learning (ESL) context reported in Elly (1989), the program was successful and the prospect was encouraging, but not in foreign language learning (EFL) settings (Waring, 2003; Waring & Brown, 2003). The transfer of theory on the development of reading fluency to the area of listening fluency—which appears theoretically feasible and reasonable because reading and listening are both receptive skills—is not likely to happen as we previously expected. Why do the academic achievements possible in ER (Day & Bamford, 1998; Elly 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1981; Hafiz & Tudor, 1990; Hayashi, 1999) not occur in EL? Also, the initial research findings of flow in reading (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989) were remarkable and promising, and we are all hoping for the successful application of the input flood approach to listening fluency development.

However, it appears that liking and enjoyment of listening in L2 was not promoted, that vocabulary gains from listening were less than from reading, and that fluency development was not fostered (Brown et al., 2007; Waring, 2003; Waring & Brown, 2003). Simply equating ER and EL, with the exception of different perceptive modes, might possibly be a myth. Most importantly, in this article EL might not be able to provide the participants with the optimal experience of enjoyment, including focused attention and a sense of control, among other things. On the contrary, learners could feel aversion or boredom—far from being in flow.

One previous study on reading and listening rates (RR and LR, respectively) of Japanese EFL learners might be of help in understanding this discrepancy. Hirai (1999) showed that RR and LR were similar in L1 and even in L2 among more proficient learners, while for less proficient learners their LR was slightly slower than their RR, and LR of some of the weaker learners could not even be measured. The researcher speculated that (1) weaker learners did not recognize words rapidly and accurately, and (2) their syntactic and vocabulary knowledge was limited. She also supposed that word recognition speed might be important in fluent listening and reading. Developing automaticity in word recognition in either mode can be seen as one of the aspects of developing language proficiency. It is also easy to presume that fluent listening takes more elaborated skills than fluent reading because listeners do not have control of the speed in the case of receptive listening. Participants in the study seemed to be at the mercy of the recording speed.

Another important question to consider is why the participants in the studies in Waring and Brown (2003) did not find the listening activity enjoyable. This is a fatal blow to the idea of flow inducing listening activity in SLA settings. One possible reason is that learners did not listen to self-selected titles. Not all of the graded readers are accompanied by recordings, and it is obvious that users of graded reader recordings for listening had fewer choices. Most notably, the recordings are usually oral readings of written passages. Stories are originally meant to be read, not to be listened to, and thus many of them are monologues, and so possibly monotonous. These recordings are different from *live* readings of books by teachers, which were used in previous successful vocabulary learning projects

through listening (Elley, 1989; Sénéchal & Cornell, 1993), and the learning context was also distinct from the book flood attempt made almost twenty years ago, which successfully nurtured a book-loving culture (Elley & Mangubhai, 1981). Participants might not be ‘hungry’ listeners or learners, who crave for stories that are shared.

The other concern is that most ER projects have been centered around the idea of vocabulary building by means of guessing meanings of new words from context, and the vocabulary gains have not been as promising as expected in the L2 learning context (Laufer, 2003; Waring & Takaki, 2003). Increase in L2 vocabulary size need not be the only or top-most goal of implementing a naturalistic approach such as fluency building in L2 instructed settings. Listening extensively can be used as a way of developing procedural knowledge with a view to improving automaticity of word recognition and/or easier processing of aural text, with less cognitive load and with more emotional gain. Teaching listening fluently can be supplemented, for example, by explicit instruction of supra-segmentals so that listeners can cope with natural speech, which is full of sound modifications such as elision, elimination, and merging of sounds. This may be helpful to reduce the cognitive load. Instructional EL tasks can also be integrated into ‘input plus activities’ as suggested by Rosszell (2006). He questioned the legitimacy of one of the conditions of Waring (2003) and Waring and Brown (2003) – listening without being constrained by pre-set questions or tasks – and proposed that vocabulary acquisition through ER could be accompanied by the explicit study of words and that it can be enriched through productive, interactive, and creative exercises “to develop vocabulary skills beyond a shallow, receptive knowledge” (Waring & Brown, 2003, p. 397). If learning gains are tangible, the affective domain may also be nurtured.

In summary, some innovations are necessary to make use of so-called EL as an efficient means of developing expertise and creating the sort of good L2 listeners that Goh (2005) defined, and to teach listening skills that Rost (2002) described and promoted. Learning to listen extensively and enjoyably, in its genuine sense, should not be just about exposure of passive recipients to extended speech, which is supposed to be fun.

Case Study

Comprehensive Listening Project

Two teachers attempted to make a drastic change in the way they fostered listening fluency in their voluntary English classes (Fryer & Carter, 2007). They named their course Comprehensive Listening (CL) to remedy the unsuccessful previous EL projects and to provide learners with chances to experience listening to English in full flow. Ten students volunteered to attend the course, which consisted of two 60-minute classes a week over two 13-week semesters. One class was a theory-based class and the other was a skill-development class. In the theory-based class, students learned the

sound system of the English language, with a focus on connected speech, and they had to recycle the knowledge in follow-up listening tasks which are composed of productive, interactive, and collaborative activities. In this class, both EFL and authentic materials were used. In the skill-development class, radio dramas and TV shows were chosen according to the students' interest. Word-by-word dictation of radio dramas was the out-of-class activity, and the students were given concrete feedback in class on what they had caught from the recording. Summary writing of the same radio dramas and other TV shows were the in-class activity. Students were encouraged to find out how what they had learned in the theory-based class could be used in the skill-development class to enhance their learning experiences. Details of this voluntary challenge listening course are in Fryer and Carter (2007).

Interviews

I had a chance to interview two of the students who were in the voluntary CL course. The informal interviews were conducted in Japanese in one of the classrooms of their school right after the two semesters. The students and I had not known each other before these interviews, and questions addressed to them were from the teachers and from me (Appendix A). The teachers were interested in the students' impressions about the course: what they benefited from, how they coped with authentic materials, how they felt about the coordination of the theory-based class and the skill-development class, and what could have been done differently.

The interview data were partly for formative evaluation from their students, and the academic results *per se* will be reported elsewhere. I was most interested in their attitudes or changes in their attitudes toward listening in their L2 – how they evaluated the learning tasks, the course organization, their own efforts and performance, and their achievement – because the very basic tenet of the optimal experience is the subjective (positive) assessment by the participants. I was also curious about their meta-cognitive awareness of listening in their L2 because the participants should know what they are doing in the learning experience – i.e., have a sense of control. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed in Japanese and translated into English by the interviewer. They were then coded, memos were added, and they were analyzed, following the procedures of Miles and Huberman (1994). The codes were chosen based on the four conditions of flow theory in SLA by Egbert (2003), as well as some others described in Csikszentmihalyi (1990) that were used in Jackson and Marsh (1996) and supported in Tenenbaum et al., (1999). However, the questions that the two teachers and I had prepared prior to the interviews did not function well enough to bring to light what the participants had in mind because their feedback was unexpected in many ways. I had to ask questions I had not even thought of beforehand. The names of the two students I use in the following sections are pseudonyms.

Fumio

Fumio is a sophomore student who majors in economics. He had a reason to attend the extra

listening course – his TOEIC Bridge score went down at the end of his first year compared with what it had been when he started at the university. He was not happy because he liked English and saw that some of his friends in the class improved their scores even though they were not working hard and were fooling around. He made up his mind to change his situation in the second year, especially since he felt that he needed to do something before job hunting the next year. He saw a flyer describing the course, and he applied for it.

It was not either that the voluntary class went smoothly right from the beginning or that Fumio found it beneficial. The class started as a larger group, and in the group there were Chinese students and female students whose proficiency seemed to be much higher than his. The learning materials, CD recordings of dramatized stories (audio) and TV cartoon films (audio-visual), were ‘authentic’ in that native speakers enjoy them in their ordinary lives, but not for language-learning purposes. Thus, Fumio felt that he was left out of the classroom activities. He said, ‘I felt myself ignored. I was on the point of disliking the class’. ‘Empty’ is the word Fumio also used, which indicates that he must have been feeling alienated. The material was also ‘long’ compared with the ordinary EFL/ESL learning materials. The radio drama is about an hour long in all, and the TV cartoon series programs are also 20–30 minutes long. The participants were supposed to listen extensively in L2. Fumio was unhappy and discouraged.

However, things began to take a better turn for him in the second semester. Only three students, all beginners or false beginners, stayed in the class. The others got busier with job hunting and seminars because they were the third year students. Fumio liked this smaller group although the challenge of the learning materials was kept the same. The audio and multimedia materials used in the project were far beyond the current skill levels of the participants’ listening comprehension, but the teacher in the skill-development class changed his approach to meet the needs of the three students who were weaker, less skillful, and less experienced in L2 listening. The students were given the recording of the audio materials and had to work on the dictation task and summary writing task and finish them before the class.

Fumio: I listened to the recording many times. I was so tired after working on the dictation about half an hour without any break.

All of the students came to class earlier and wrote their transcriptions on the board. When the teacher arrived, he provided his own transcription so that the learners could compare it with theirs. They call the transcription by their teacher the ‘answer (key)’.

Fumio: I was happy when the sound sequence which had had no meaning suddenly became meaningful after our teacher wrote down what he heard in the recording.

Fumio: I appreciate it. Our teacher thought a lot about us and about what we needed.

He began to see his teacher as a caring person who could see and feel the needs of his students.

Fumio also began to see what he would need to do to make use of the extra L2 listening class. He decided not to take any classes on Monday the second semester because he knew that he would need one day off to do the assignment of dictation and summary writing. He made a study plan: 'Half an hour here, half an hour there to finish, so that I could cover the parts for the next meeting'. Because the task needed concentration and dedication, Fumio could not go on longer than half an hour on the tasks, and he found his way of dealing with the assignments. This applies not just to a short-term study plan, but to a long-term plan as well. 'I thought I should do this in my second year. I may not have enough time next year because of job hunting and seminar work'. Moreover, he analyzed the benefits of this class in addition to the classroom activities. Fumio enjoyed listening to two teachers talk to the students in the course—the extra class gave him a chance for *live* listening, which he could not experience by using audio and audio-visual materials. He saw some extra gains and appreciated them.

Fumio: We had two teachers who had different accents, different personalities, different approaches to teaching, and different interests.

Fumio: This is learning, but other subjects are not. Steady, but secure steps toward learning in the true sense of the word.

The other teacher, who took care of the theory section, broke the good news to Fumio just before the interview—his score on the TOEIC Bridge, which had gone down from 140 to 120 in the first year, had jumped up to 152 in a year. He was elated to hear the score on the one hand, but on the other hand he was not preoccupied with the increase. He said, "Test scores partly depend on luck." He was not too concerned with the increase probably because he knew that he was still in the process of learning: "Madamada-desukara-ne." [I still have a long way to go.] Also, it was because the experience itself was rewarding: "Yattemasita-ne, tokoton." [I was really doing it. I was into it.] He seemed to see values in the quality of experience over and above his impressive performance on the test. It might be that he had been developing enough skills to find delight in what he was experiencing. In the interview, he was already talking about what to do next.

Fumio: I'm wondering how I can keep up the skills I have acquired by working hard. After the course, nobody will give me any tasks to do. I have to figure it out myself. (I need to find) something I will enjoy doing and from which I learn to be better in English.

Kenji

Kenji is also a sophomore in the Commerce Department. He said, “I admit I like English.” He also likes surfing, which is his life now. This is his logic: foreigners are good at surfing, and they are also good at speaking in English, so therefore I need to learn English to be better at surfing (he said this half seriously and half jokingly). Later, he made it clear that he would like to join online chatting on some surfers’ Websites, where surfers from around the world share their experiences and techniques in English. He needs to learn to communicate with them in English to be a skillful, ‘cool’ surfer. This seems to be an instrumental motivation—he wanted to learn English for practical purposes. Another reason he gave me was that English is a skill he needs to be successful in the future. He said, in a light tone, “Eigo kurai dekinya.” [This is not a big thing, but still we need to be able to use English.] This is different from an extreme view of English as a ‘must’ for a world citizen, and it is also different from seeing skill in English as an object of admiration. His remarks and reasons for learning English reminded me of the internalized form of external regulation in the self-determination continuum (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). He also described himself as being ‘stubborn’.

Kenji: I’m a person like if I was told not to come, I would definitely come no matter what. I have guts.

Theoretically complicated discussion aside, his motivational orientations seemed to be complex and were probably related to his identities as a surfer, a university student, a user of a foreign language, and a future job hunter, among others (Norton, 2000).

The materials given in this course seemed to be above him, too, so there was an apparent gap between the challenge and his skills. Still, he did not give up. He had a clear goal, and the feedback was immediate and concrete—the participants had a task to complete in one week, and they were given the transcription and model summary in class. Kenji’s comments highlighted his self-evaluation of the achievement. He could see it on the board, and the development of his listening skills was tangible.

Kenji: At the beginning, I did not understand what’s going on (in the radio drama) at all. I could not even catch names of the characters.

Kenji: There was a huge difference (in my self-perceived confidence in English ability) between the beginning and the end. At the end, I thought that this (what I caught listening) should be almost IT (what the story was all about).

He also liked the combination of the theory course and the skill-building course.

Kenji: Theory and practice come together. I noticed what I learned in theory in the actual recordings. Flow of natural speech has rules. (I was intrigued to know that.) Those rules are really working in the real world.

However, why did the unbalance between the challenge of L2 listening and the task challenge not discourage Kenji, or hinder his active involvement in learning?

Kenji: I believed in what we were doing. I was confident that this way of learning would work.

Kenji: I believed that I could improve my listening skills this way. I invested so much effort, time, and energy. I thought it would not make sense if I did not get better in listening comprehension.

The teacher who took care of the skill-building course used this way of learning he himself had made use of when he was learning a foreign language. His students trusted him, tried his method, and felt it was working. The teacher and the students were in control of what they were doing, which must be one of the important reasons that Kenji and others could stay engaged in the tasks. Also, the learners and the teacher developed a trustful relationship while working together toward a goal.

At the same time, Kenji and others were not just doing what they were told to do. Their class activities were modified by what the learners wanted to do in class. First, their teacher was not thinking about checking all of the dictations because the aim of the course was to expose the students to natural language usage. In other words, the dictation activity was part of the course content, but not the main part. Dictation is for intensive listening, not for extensive listening. However, in his first class of the second semester, the teacher did the transcription on the whiteboard himself so that the students could fill the gaps in their transcriptions and see the mistakes they had made; this helped the learners get out of the “sea” of incomprehensible input. Fumio and Kenji were finally happy because they understood what was said in the radio drama. From the next meeting through the last, the students and their teacher continued this approach toward learning to listen. All three of the survivors of the course could share and compare their own dictations, and later their teacher provided what he had caught from the recording. Kenji commented that it was like *discovery* learning. The students exercised control in deciding what they did and helped organize the course content.

Challenge, Attention, Interest, and Control

When we look over the components of the flow experience of the learners in this program, there is a dilemma right from the start. The balance between challenge and skills is the hallmark of the flow state. As was discussed above, the audio and multimedia materials used in the project were far beyond the current skill levels of the participants' listening comprehension. As Schmidt and Savage

(1992) suggested, this condition might be just one of the factors that could affect the motivation or task involvement of language learners, and one of their conclusions was that the effect of the balance on the motivational variables was not “linear” (p. 20). Also, perception of the balance is subjective, so an external assessment of the balance may not matter much.

One possible way to avoid undermining the legitimacy of this criterion is to take a fresh look at skills involved in listening in L2. A good combination of top-down and bottom-up processing strategies should be made use of in skillful listening (Goh, 2005; Rost, 2002, 2005). Thus, another important skill of fluent listening may be tolerance of ambiguity (Furnham, 1995). Skillful listeners would not even try to listen to everything: Effective listeners make reasonable choices about what to keep and what not to keep, or what to attend to and what not to attend to. If this construct is one of the significant skills or one of the essential elements of listening expertise, it should be cultivated through learning experiences. This is selective listening, and the learners seemed to have or were developing this capacity. Also, this strategic skill can be under subjective judgments, too.

Fumio: I am now more comfortable even when I do not understand.

Kenji: For me, ‘feeling’ is important. Nantonaku [This might be it] is okay with me. I did it my own way. I put down the sound information I got through my ears. And then, in class, I thought that’s it. Right or wrong, I enjoyed it.

This consideration on experiencing flow state in listening activities is related to the topic of attention as well. The basic formula in SLA is as follows: conscious attention is necessary to notice a new language form or item, and this is a prerequisite for learning (Schmidt, 1990, 2000). Flow theory predicts that the activity becomes automatic in flow because attention is concentrated on the task at hand when the person is absorbed in it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989). One important aspect of language learning with regard to attention is the development of automaticity, which can be effortless and could be achieved with less mental energy—i.e., attention (Segalowitz, 2003). The experience of automatic processing of the aural information is what “listening fluency” is about, and this was exactly the goal the teachers wanted to pursue when they organized the course. The interviewees did not give me much clue about what was happening in their mind in relation to these concepts (attention and automaticity), except for the length of time that was manageable (quoted above: half an hour) and a change in mental attitude toward the task. Kenji became more “relaxed” about learning to listen because of this course, and that is a positive development.

The participants in the course seemed to be interested in the listening activities, although Kenji did not care about what learning materials were chosen, while Fumio mentioned his preference. He made more efforts when he liked the listening materials. In general, it is easy to speculate that

interesting tasks and interesting materials are more flow-inducing and help facilitate learning more than less interesting tasks and/or materials. However, interest is an intriguing concept. We use the word daily, but we do not know what it really is and how it works in classroom settings (Bergin, 1999). Also, in previous studies done in the field of SLA in relation to the flow experience of learners (Schmidt & Savage, 1992; Egbert, 2003), the dimension of interest was seen to be important for sustaining attention, but neither study found it to be a component of overwhelming importance. In the case of children's bedtime stories, curiosity can be a key to maintaining interest and consequently task-engagement and concentration. In classrooms, on the other hand, there are additional factors of individual differences like those observed in this case study and previous studies, and situational influences must also be considered, as suggested in Bergin (1999).

The last dimension of optimal experience focused in SLA is control. This aspect was discussed in relation to Kenji's comments above, and more elaborate discussion may be possible in terms of agency (McKay & Wong, 1996) and classroom discourse structures (Gee, 1996). These themes are too big to discuss here, but considering that the two interviewees were proud that they themselves took control of the direction of learning in the program, they seem to have exercised agency even when the learning materials were given. When many skilled learners left the project, the classroom discourse changed, and the survivors came up with ways to cope with the challenging materials. They listened to them selectively when they worked alone before the class, but when they worked together in class they wanted to get the whole transcript. In other words, they enjoyed a sense of control over their own learning process.

Discussion

After transcribing the interviews, I realized that the two students had been talking about just part of their classroom activity—their dictation exercise was the main focus of their talk. However, the listening course contained considerably more activities, such as a timeline and a character development profile, among others (Fryer & Carter, 2007, pp. 121–122). The teachers organized the activities to cover both bottom-up and top-down approaches to listening comprehension. Also, the course was designed to cover not just the receptive orientation but also the other three orientations proposed by Rost (2002): constructive, collaborative, and transformative.

However, the dictation activity followed by classroom activities of sharing the dictations and checking with the native speaker's transcription was the most impressive of all the activities for them. The students were interacting actively with the aural text in both working alone and in sharing with their classmates and the teacher, and the students were in the process of co-constructing meanings in their learning context. The students were anticipating what would be happening next in the story or finding out what the covert messages were that hinted at the next development. However, as far

as the type of activities was concerned, the two students liked that particular assignment most. They worked on the assignment because they liked it, and they ‘thought and felt’ it was effective. In light of the theory of optimal experience and the motivational orientations of learning, this idea of ‘subjective assessment’ of learning on the part of the learners should be examined more thoroughly in future research. The theory of flow endorses the harmony of what we do and how we feel about it. When we commit ourselves to do something, we need integration of our cognitive and emotional powers. We do what we do because ‘we think and believe’ that it will accomplish, not because it will actually achieve the goal, which is always uncertain.

To make learners develop fluency in listening may be more difficult than language-learning theories and pedagogies tell us it is. Even when students learn to listen for fun and do it extensively, they may prefer to have some particular learning tasks or activities that enhance learning. L2 listeners, especially beginners, may need some devices to keep their attention active and their consciousness alert and working so that their minds do not drift when they encounter unknown words and unidentified streams of speech. This might indicate that using EL in instructed language learning, whether as an out-of-class or in-class activity, is different in at least some ways from using ER. There are some possible reasons for this, one of which is that comfortable listening is more sensitive to unknown words (Nation, 2001). Another is that L2 listening may be more effortful than L1 listening for adult learners of L2. However, this is still a speculation and needs to be studied further. Yet another reason is that listeners have less control than readers. We cannot go back and review the spoken text as we can do with a written text. The mental energy needed to pay attention to aural input may be particularly vulnerable to distractions. Is flow more difficult to achieve in listening than in reading or writing? The answer is probably yes. However, this is just a tentative answer because we do not yet know what flow is in SLA contexts or in listening.

It is not certain whether the two learners experienced flow in their EL activities, and it is useless to ask them if they did or did not. Yet, suppose they did for the sake of the present argument. The four dimensions of flow proposed by Egbert (2003) seemed to be shaky and fragile, not to say dubious, and the challenge-skill balance seems to be less important than it has been said to be. “Attention as psychic energy” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 30) is hard to conceptualize in theory in terms of the development of automaticity of action-awareness merging. How can consciousness be controlled in language learning situations? Interest seems to be more difficult to utilize in classroom settings than naïve views on the issue suggest, and control of one’s learning process also appears to be subjective, although it appears to be an important component in learning.

Language learning, especially for adults, is effortful. Flow is a harmonious, effortless state. How can we reconcile the two in formulating the optimal experience in language learning? Is flow theory incompatible with language learning? Or is the reductionist approach taken in Egbert (2003) in SLA and Jackson and Marsh (1996) and Tenenbaum et al., (1999) in sports, in studying flow experiences, not

appropriate for investigating the enjoyable and rewarding experience of language learning? There are no simple, quick, straightforward answers to these questions. Let us suppose that language learning can create flow and that those who learn a language can experience flow when they are truly involved and engaged in the task at hand. What will the experience be like?

The experiences of the two avid learners in the listening program might be insightful. They were absorbed in the dictation task and engaged in listening to the aural text. They believed it would work for them, and they enjoyed the task itself and were aware that they were making progress. The learning seemed ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ to them, and this awareness helped them stay persistent in the learning method and maintained their motivation. They also took responsibility for their own learning.

Studies of optimal experiences like flow may as well take a holistic view as well as a componential view. There may be four essential aspects in language learning or nine important dimensions in flow experiences in general, but the sum of the four or the nine might not generate the enjoyable experience desired. In this sense, the fact that those people who claimed that they had experienced flow used figurative expressions to describe the feelings and emotions may suggest the holistic nature of flow. This insight should be considered and investigated in further research. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) used the term ‘autotelic’ to describe this type of experience, and Asakawa (2004) made use of the same term to describe a type of personality and individual differences. He also referred to a cultural perspective of flow and studied a Japanese word *jyujitukan* – fulfillment – as a culture-specific aspect of psychological well-being. Whether ‘being autotelic’ denotes the person or the experience, whether it is culture specific or universal, it may have to be taken as a whole, not just as a sum of separate pieces.

Schmidt and Savage (1992) took an approach to the autotelic experience similar to that of Asakawa (2004). They emphasized the cultural difference and introduced the Thai word *sanuk* – engaging and fun – to describe the optimal experience that seemed to be particular to Thai people. They described the original idea of flow as a Western construct and suggested that “this model is not universal” (p. 22). They also wrote, “In Csikszentmihalyi’s world view, happiness is hard work” (p. 22). Although the culture-specific perspectives are useful on the one hand, it is a rather agreeable proposition on the other hand that we are happy when we enjoy the process of working hard for a goal. It is plausible that regardless of culture human beings experience enjoyment coping with a challenge and being successful from their subjective viewpoint. The theory of flow needs to be studied from both perspectives: specific to cultures, and universal to the human species.

The experience of the two learners showed the heuristic aspect of language learning as well. They were happy because they were involved in a “discovery” process or exploratory learning experience, and they discovered much in the process. Sound spelling connections and changes of sound in normal speech are among the things they noticed and learned. They also found and were surprised by the fact that native speakers could not catch everything in the recordings either. This is what listening in a natural environment of language use is like, but at the same time it was a nice surprise to the novice

learners, and they were happy to know that.

Schmidt and Savage (1992) also pointed out that the theory is too simplistic. Flow theory predicts that people get anxious when the task is too challenging and that they get bored when the task is too easy. There could be a variety of emotions involved in terms of the ill balance of the challenge and skill. Fumio, for example, said he had been ‘irritated’. Also, the two interviewees were dumbfounded when I asked them if they were anxious or nervous to be assigned the challenging assignments. They did not even understand the question, although they knew the expression, “Fuan-ni-naru” (to become anxious).

Kenji: Why do I have to feel nervous because I started from almost zero, from scratch? It’s stupid to feel anxious because I do not understand. Of course, I do not understand. I’m a beginner.

Language teachers knew that anxiety can undermine learning even before Horwitz and her colleagues started scientifically measuring foreign-language classroom anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Classroom teachers have been thinking of ways to reduce anxiety and to make the learners more relaxed in order to improve learning outcomes. It should also be noted that ‘anxiety’ has been a term with a negative connotation in language learning. However, we should give a second thought to the fact that in this case study the two novice learners, who were given challenging tasks, did not even understand what being nervous in a foreign language classroom was like. Moreover, researchers who see a potential in flow theory should consider an enormous range of emotions outside of the flow channel. We experience a wide variety of emotions, and emotions are essential to human behavior and experience.

At the same time, while flow theory may not be able to overtly and/or substantially contribute to the field of SLA, the focus on integration of the thoughts and emotions of the learners is one of the most important contributions flow theory and positive psychology can make to learning theories and pedagogy. *The Psychology of the Language Learners* by Dörnyei (2005), for example, dealt with flow theory in less than one page in the chapter on motivation, which is an even briefer treatment than anxiety receives – five pages. Is the happiness of learners only one-fifth as important as learners’ anxiety, which consists mainly of negative feelings and emotions against learning L2? Teachers and researchers could be more concerned about the positive experiences of learners than heretofore has been the case.

One last implication for future research concerns group flow. The dictation task was fun for the learners partly because they shared their assignments with peers and interacted with their teacher, who also worked on the same task in class. The task “provided students with a chance to learn from each other and share triumphs and frustrations” (Fryer & Carter, 2007, p. 117). In fact, the possible importance of group flow was referred to in Seligman (2002) as a positive subjective experience at the

group level. In other words, the study of flow might have to have a broader perspective. Flow can be induced not just by the relationship between the task and the person, and not just among individuals in the group of learners, but also in the learning context as a whole as an interaction of the persons, the activities, and the learning settings.

Seligman's episode or epiphany of Nikki, who inspired him to delineate the field of positive psychology, is symbolic of human strength. "And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch" (Seligman, 2002, p. 4; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). Fumio's statement will be an epiphany in teaching and learning to listen in a second language. "Even native speakers cannot catch everything. That was quite something."

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Why made you take the extra course?
2. Tell me about the course. What activities motivated you most, for example?
3. When did things change for you?
4. How did you cope with the assignments?
5. Has there been a reduction in anxiety?
6. When you took the TOEIC Bridge, did you feel it was easier?
7. What strategies – listening and learning – have worked well for you?
8. Was it a problem that the theory and practice class are taught by different teachers?
9. How could we help you more?
10. Do you want to take the same course next year?