

‘That’s why I do it’: *flow* and EFL teachers’ practices

Christine M. Tardy and Bill Snyder

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997) concept of flow describes a mental state resulting from peak experiences in which the level of challenge is high, but manageable given a person’s skills. Because flow occurs at peak moments, these moments can motivate teachers, possibly shaping their classroom practices and giving them insight into their teaching beliefs. This exploratory interview study examines ten EFL teachers’ flow experiences at work, and considers their implications for teacher education. The teachers all reported experiencing flow, and key categories relating to its occurrence were derived from their descriptions. Based on this study, we suggest that the concept of flow provides a tool for understanding more about teachers’ practices, beliefs, and values in their teaching. We conclude by considering ways in which flow may be incorporated into teacher development programmes, and investigated in future research.

Background

Imagine an ideal lesson. The planned activity goes better than imagined, and 20 minutes slip by without the teacher even thinking about the time. Or, a chance comment by a student turns into a discussion that engages and energizes everyone in the room. After the class, the teacher recalls the situation to a colleague, commenting on its success. The teacher later wonders, ‘What happened today? How can it happen again?’

Psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has used the concept of *flow* to describe the mental state of people at peak moments of experience, like that described above. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997: 29–33), flow emerges ‘when a person faces a task with a clear set of goals that require appropriate responses’, and when he or she receives immediate feedback on their success in meeting goals. Flow tends to occur when the level of challenge in a task is high, but manageable given the person’s skills in completing the task. In flow experiences ‘attention becomes ordered and fully invested’, leading to a loss of self-consciousness, and a distorted sense of time. We may experience flow, for example, when exercising, writing a letter, or reading a book. A feeling of flow may make us want to persevere when faced with a difficult task. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) suggests that flow can occur in teaching as the teacher works to interest and motivate students to pursue educational goals.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997: 33) has described flow experience as ‘a magnet for learning’, because continued realization of flow requires new challenges and the development of new skills. It is this aspect of flow that has been of particular interest to educators. van Lier (1996) sees flow as a concept that can expand the discussion of motivation in second language learning beyond the traditional instrumental/integrative dichotomy. Studies of flow in learning are beginning to emerge, such as Abbott’s (2000) examination of two boys who experienced flow in classroom writing tasks in which they held a large degree of autonomy. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) proposes that in investigating flow in learning it is important to examine the experiences not only of students, but of teachers as well, because the motivation provided by teachers’ sense of flow may be essential to effective teaching—particularly if the ultimate goal of teaching is to inspire a desire to learn rather than to transfer information. Furthermore, if flow occurs at peak moments, it is likely that these are the moments that motivate teachers in their work, possibly shaping their classroom practices. To our knowledge, no study has investigated the flow experiences of teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL).

Research on flow experiences fits well within current research directions in teacher education, in which teacher educators have increasingly focused on the teacher rather than specific teaching methods (see, for example, Prabhu 1990). Freeman and Johnson (1998) offer a model of the teacher knowledge-base in which teachers’ experiences, beliefs, values, and practices play a fundamental role. Recent research agendas have called for further investigation into this type of teacher knowledge, how it is acquired, how it changes, how it unfolds over time, and how teachers use such knowledge to make sense of the classroom (Richards 1994; Golombek 1994). We feel that an exploration of teachers’ flow experiences fits within these theoretical frameworks, and can illuminate our understanding of language teaching from the perspectives of teachers. More specifically, this exploration provides teachers with a way to reflect on what they perceive to be successful teaching moments, and helps them develop what Prabhu (1990) has called a ‘sense of plausibility’ in their practice.

Drawing on Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow, and current discussions of teachers’ knowledge, the exploratory study described here investigates the role of flow in teachers’ professional lives. Our primary research question was, do EFL teachers experience flow in their professional lives? If so, how do they describe flow experiences? Finding that the answer to the first question was overwhelmingly positive, we ask here an additional question: What relevance might teachers’ flow experiences have for teacher education and development?

Methodology

This study was conducted with 10 teachers of first-year English at a private university in Turkey. The participating teachers were working in an EAP programme in which individual teachers designed content-based, integrated skills courses based on programme-wide objectives and goals. The teachers are described in Appendix 1.¹

Teachers participated in a one-on-one open-ended interview with a researcher, discussing their flow experiences in their jobs. At the beginning of each interview, the participants read a short description and two examples of flow, and were then given the opportunity to clarify with the interviewer their understanding of flow (see Appendix 2). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.² Our analysis is limited to one data source collected at a single point in time, and should be interpreted as such; as the purpose of this study was exploratory, we feel that these limitations are acceptable. Additionally, the definiteness, consistency, and specificity of our participants' replies support our belief in the validity of the data. After identifying key patterns in the interview transcripts, we have categorized the data into five characteristics of teachers' flow experiences. These categories are described below.

Characteristics of teachers' flow experiences

Interest and involvement

Our teachers said that their experiences of flow occurred at times of high interest and involvement in their work, corroborating Csikszentmihalyi's model. When this interest and involvement was not present, they did not experience flow:

Hillary: [Flow] definitely doesn't ever happen for me when I'm grading. Grading is always like I have to force myself to do it, and it's always kind of painful for me. I don't like doing it.

Caren: The concern that some other activity is more deserving of your attention [can block flow].

Didem: If [students] have some negative electricity, it is not good. If it is early in the morning, it's difficult to achieve [flow]. A lot of latecomers we have. In the afternoon classes, they are tired. They always have excuses. And sometimes I don't feel like I have the energy to warm them up, to motivate them. And, if they don't want to participate and be involved, it's difficult to have any flow.

Didem's quote above also suggests that interest encompasses not only the teachers' interest, but also their perceptions of their students' interest. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) argues that these interests are interrelated. That is, the teachers' engagement in the subject matter provides a model for students that demonstrates the value of learning for its own sake, and serves to motivate and engage students. Al's description of the high point in a successful lesson illustrates how the students' interest and involvement may contribute to a teacher's feeling of flow:

Al: . . . the class was taken over by the students, and there was a broad range of participation and full engagement even from the students who weren't talking, and I knew one way or the other they were all engaged with the material and they themselves were in some ways lost.

Teachers' feelings that flow tended to occur when students were more personally interested and involved is corroborated by research that suggests that contextualization, personalization, and choice can increase intrinsic motivation and learning (Cordova and Lepper 1996). It is likely that the flow experiences described in our study were largely influenced by the teaching environment, in which contextualization and

personalization figured prominently; that is, the content-based curriculum contextualized language experiences within content learning, and provided students a fair amount of choice in thematic content.

Authentic communication

These teachers often perceived flow to emerge when they felt classroom communication to be authentic, and not mechanical. van Lier (1996) defines authenticity as

a *process* of engagement in the learning situation, and as a *characteristic* of the person engaged in learning. As such, authenticity relates to who teachers and learners are and what they do as they interact with one another for the purposes of learning . . . In the classroom, authenticity relates to processes of self-actualization, intrinsic motivation, respect and moral integrity in interpersonal relations. (p. 125)

These teachers repeatedly referred to such processes as they described flow experiences in which classroom interactions became 'real' and purposeful.

Al: [the students] weren't thinking so much about language, they were thinking about some kind of idea that was forcing them to use all the language that they knew in order to communicate what their feelings were about that idea.

Hillary: . . . they got really involved, and so the discussion just moved itself forward and we got away a little bit from these things we were discussing, but they suddenly became real, like it wasn't discussing these artificial things for a purpose anymore, but really discussing things that they were interested in.

Hillary's comment also illustrates the connection between interest/involvement and authenticity. In the above descriptions of flow, teachers considered classroom communication to be authentic when the students became involved enough to forget the 'purpose' of the lesson, pursuing their own interests instead.

Spontaneity/ unpredictability

Flow was seen by the teachers here as something that could not be planned or predicted, but seemed to arise rather spontaneously:

Gina: It's not something that's really pre-planned. So, a series of things like 'well, we'll do this, and we'll do this, and we'll do this, and it will equal a flow experience in the class'. I don't think so, because that would be too planned . . . I think you can plan toward it, that you can be very well prepared and just sort of hope that it happens. So, when you know exactly what you're going to say, I don't think that it happens then.

Data grouped under both Authenticity and Spontaneity suggest that, for these teachers, flow may be related to issues of autonomy. For teachers, autonomy is the freedom to allow real student interests to enter the classroom, and to pursue these interests even if they do not coincide with the intended lesson plan. The teachers in our study were working within an environment that allowed for a fair degree of teacher autonomy in course and material design, as well as lesson planning. It is possible that

such ‘autonomy-supporting environments’ (Abbott 2000) provide more opportunities for flow because the teacher is free to allow unpredicted moments of interest to change the direction of the lesson, potentially leading to further student engagement and authentic communication.

Teacher-student dialogue

The interaction between teacher and student was important to these teachers’ flow experiences, as they described the relationship between teacher and student as dialogical, each playing a necessary role in the achievement of flow in the classroom.

Yasemin: . . . the teaching and the flow of the feeling of the instructor does not depend only on ourselves, it depends on the students.

Funda: [Flow is] when you feel that you’re part of the group, and we share our experiences, we exchange our ideas, opinions about various topics.

Isaac: I felt like I was totally with them . . . it’s got to be a two-way thing . . . It’s between. That’s the whole point of it, I think, is that you’ve kind of like . . . you’ve made a connection.

This dialogical engagement between teacher and student supports Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) view that the mutual influence of teacher and learner is an essential part of education. Other studies in education have similarly found a relationship between teacher enthusiasm and immediacy (nonverbal and verbal behavior that reduces physical or psychological distance between teachers and students) and student motivation (Patrick, Hisley, and Kempler 2000), and have suggested that increased student interest may lead to increased learning. Such a relationship between teacher immediacy and enthusiasm and student motivation is exemplified in Didem’s description of a lesson involving student presentations:

Didem: . . . I saw that they were very enthusiastic about it, and as I nodded my head and as I approved what they were doing, they were getting more [enthusiastic].

Moments of learning

Finally, the teachers in our study described flow as occurring at moments in which they perceived learning to occur, for both themselves and their students [emphases added in the quotes below]:

Isaac: Sometimes you think, ‘OK, let’s take that path then’, and then try and come back and see where it leads us. Because then it, you know, it gets the students engaged, it keeps them awake, it keeps them—it gets them to remember more from the lesson than they could if you just kind of try and get them to complete activities.

Al: If it were really flow, I wouldn’t be needed, and so I would be thinking, ‘Wow. I wish all the classes were like this’, and that’s about all I would be thinking at the moment. I think that would represent total flow. Not, ‘We gotta get through this thing so that I can get to the next one’, but just, ‘this is so good. I’ll let it go on as long as it needs because this is what has to be happening for a class to work’.

Didem: When I teach [this grammar activity], I feel very flow to the students because I feel that I am teaching it to the new learners ... *and I will see how they realized the rules for the first time.*

Caren: I guess that's sort of a lot of where this thing comes in is that there's some sort of question or problem present in the work, for example, how was I going to sequence this unit, and what I'm doing before, and the timing and everything else, and then there's this answer that just appears and *it's that finding the answer and working it through and putting it into tangible form on paper and doing whatever you need to do to make that answer become reality.*

As flow is considered to be a peak moment, it is not surprising that teachers would describe peak moments in a classroom as those in which they believe learning is taking place. For example, describing flow experiences gave teachers the opportunity to reflect upon *when* they perceive learning to occur in the classroom, and when they personally feel most engaged, involved, and excited about their teaching.

Discussion

One goal of this study was to determine whether or not the concept of flow has relevance to EFL teachers; toward that, our first research question was simply, 'do teachers experience flow?' The teachers we interviewed told us that they *do* experience flow in their work, both in and out of the classroom. A closer look at the data reveals a more interesting insight, which is that in this study many classroom descriptions of flow occurred when teachers felt that learning was happening. Our interviews thus allowed for the unanticipated effect of providing teachers with a way to talk about their beliefs and values in addition to their practices. That is, as teachers described peak moments in their classrooms, they provided us with insights into their personal beliefs of effective teaching and learning. For example, different teachers described flow as occurring when students were engaged, or intellectually challenged, or taking responsibility, or authenticating/personalizing the classroom material, or communicating for real purposes. We do not claim that these moments in fact reflect student learning, but that they reflect the individual teachers' perceptions of learning. In other words, they can provide insight into the knowledge that a teacher draws upon when making sense of the classroom (Richards 1994; Golombek 1994).

We would like to point out further that discussions of flow allowed both us, and those in our study, to discuss an aspect of teaching that is often overlooked—that is, the *positive* moments in teaching. As pointed out at the start of this article, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) suggests that these peak moments are important, because they can motivate teachers in their work. This suggestion was corroborated in our study by Isaac, when we asked him whether he had ever experienced flow in his work. He answered definitively: 'Oh yeah—that's why I do it.' If, as Csikszentmihalyi suggests, a teacher's sense of flow can inspire motivation in students, then these moments in the classroom become crucial on many levels.

Implications for teacher education

We see much resemblance between these teachers' flow descriptions and what Prabhu (1990: 172) calls a teacher's 'sense of plausibility', defined as 'a concept of how learning takes place and how teaching uses or supports it'. When a teacher's sense of plausibility is engaged in the teaching situation, the teacher is involved and not mechanical, and the activity of teaching is productive. Based on his theory, Prabhu recommends putting effort into activating and developing teachers' individual senses of plausibility by having them continually explore and articulate these senses. Similarly, Johnson (1992, 1996) stresses the importance of *sense-making* for teachers, developing a sense of awareness of *what* teachers do and *why* they do it. She suggests that teacher education should provide opportunities for teachers to refine their perceptual knowledge (practice) through ongoing reflection, exploration, and articulation of their work. Incorporating discussions of teachers' flow experiences into teacher education classrooms may provide one way to encourage such exploration, reflection, or sense-making. It allows teachers to articulate what they perceive to be peak moments of teaching, and to then reflect on why those moments stand out for them.

We would like to emphasize that we do not equate flow experiences with 'good teaching', nor do we believe that flow derives from some natural gift for teaching. Rather, we believe that flow experiences are likely to be crucial moments for teachers because it is here that they feel most positive about their teaching. Experiencing flow in their work may help to explain why teachers 'stick with it', despite the often minimal external rewards. Flow experiences may further shed insight as to why teachers adopt particular practices in their classrooms; if they experience a technique as leading to a desired outcome (i.e. a 'peak moment'), they may be more likely to repeat similar practices in subsequent lessons. As such, flow experiences are likely to be important in shaping what teachers do, and why they do it, thus having implications for teacher development.

Discussions of flow can provide valuable opportunities for teachers to become more aware of how different tasks affect them and their students. Teachers can be helped to develop a sensitivity to classroom moments in which they perceive authentic involvement and learning to be happening, and to adopt flexibility when appropriate, following those moments to their conclusions rather than rigidly adhering to a plan. Reflection on flow can be presented as a way to help develop these particular abilities.

Based on a conviction of its importance for teachers, and bolstered by this exploratory study, flow has been introduced into the methodology curriculum of the MA TEFL programme at Bilkent University, where one of the authors teaches. The teacher-learners in the programme have responded enthusiastically, incorporating flow in their classroom and thesis research, or developing workshops on flow to share with colleagues at their home institutions. Graduates of the programme make reference to flow in conversation and correspondence, sharing observations on how flow figures in their practice. One teacher-graduate reflected that flow has become a tool for her continued teacher

development, with ‘contributions to my teacher identity and to my approach to the job of teaching, to problems and to solutions’.

Implications for further research

This exploratory study provides a glimpse into the ways in which 10 teachers experience flow in their work. We’d like to stress that these teachers were working within a content-based curriculum in which they were allowed a fair degree of autonomy. Similar studies conducted in other contexts are likely to find that teachers experience flow in different classroom activities, or different aspects of their jobs than those described here. Further research could consider the influences of conceptual knowledge (theory) and perceptual knowledge (practice) in relation to flow. While it seems as though both types of knowledge can (and do) influence a teacher’s practice, the nature and extent of these influences may vary over time and in different contexts (Grabe, Stoller, and Tardy 2000); the concept of flow may provide one way to understand better how and when teachers draw upon different knowledge types. Studies could investigate teachers’ descriptions of flow as novice teachers, experienced teachers, and teachers facing new contexts, including teaching practices in teacher education programmes. Longitudinal research with individual teachers over time and in different settings might explore the interrelations between theory, practice, and teachers’ self-described ‘peak moments’ at different stages of their professional lives.

Because our study has only examined flow from teachers’ perspectives, we caution against interpreting the causes of these flow experiences, or the ways in which students may experience the same events. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) suggests that a teacher’s flow experience in the classroom may at times arise from an excess of self-involvement, rather than from a dialogue with learners. In part, teacher educators can address this possibility by stressing the importance of attention to learners as teachers evaluate their own experiences. The potential for shutting out students again emphasizes the need for research into students’ perceptions of flow in the classroom; such a triangulated view of flow experiences may help confirm the basis of teachers’ flow experiences. We view flow as a useful concept for teachers and teacher educators to invoke when considering not only what teachers do in their practice, but how and why they do it.

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Notes

- 1 The names assigned to the teachers are pseudonyms.
- 2 We have chosen to report the participants’ exact words. Modifying their words might have improved clarity in some cases, but only at the risk of imposing our own interpretations on the teachers’ statements.

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The authors

Christine M. Tardy is a doctoral student in English Language and Linguistics at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. She has taught ESL/EFL in the U.S.A., the Czech Republic, Japan, and Turkey. She is interested in second language writing and in teacher education.

Email: tardy@purdue.edu

Bill Snyder is Visiting Assistant Professor in the MA TEFL Programme at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. He has taught ESL/EFL and Applied Linguistics courses in the U.S.A., Russia, and South Korea. He is interested in teacher education and the development of teacher knowledge.

Email: wsnyder@bilkent.edu.tr

Appendix 1
Backgrounds of
teacher participants

Teacher	Nationality	Self-reported L1	Yrs of teaching experience (Yrs in current position)	Educational background
Al	American	English	8 (3)	BS, Education; MA, English
Brian	British	English	20 (1)	MA, Linguistics; MA and PhD, Multilingual/Multicultural Education
Caren	American/ Turkish	English	5 (1.5)	BA, Anthropology; MA, TESL
Didem	Turkish	Turkish	9 (2)	BA, ELT; MA, ELT
Elizabeth	American	English	5 (2.5)	BA, History; MA, TESL
Funda	Turkish	Turkish	30 (0.5)	2 Diplomas, TEFL; Diploma, English Language and Literature; MA, ELT
Gina	American	English	5 (2)	BA, Creative writing; MFA, Creative Writing
Hillary	American	English	5 (3)	BA, Music and French; MA, Foreign Language Education (EFL)
Isaac	British	English	7 (2)	BA, English; MA, Critical Theory
Yasemin	Turkish	German	4 (2)	BA, American Literature; MA, British Literature

Appendix 2
Interview prompt

Please read the quotations below. The later quotations are examples of people describing their own flow experiences:

The metaphor of ‘flow’ 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. Athletes refer to it as ‘being in the zone’, religious mystics as ‘being in ecstasy’, artists and musicians as ‘aesthetic rapture’. Athletes, mystics, and artists do very different things when they reach flow, yet their descriptions of the experience are remarkably similar.

– psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi on *flow*

You’re right in the work, you lose your sense of time, you’re completely enraptured, you’re completely caught up in what you are doing ... when you are working on something and you are working well, you have the feeling that there’s no other way of saying what you’re saying.

– a poet describing a flow experience

When you're climbing, you're not aware of other problematic life situations. It becomes a world unto its own, significant only to itself. It's a concentration thing. Once you're in the situation, it's incredibly real, and you're very much in charge of it. It becomes your total world.

– a climber describing a flow experience

Interview questions

- 1 Have you ever had an experience like this at work? Please describe it.
- 2 How about in other areas of your work? Please describe.

Follow-up areas:

What prevents flow?

Are there times when flow is more or less likely to occur?