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Focus on
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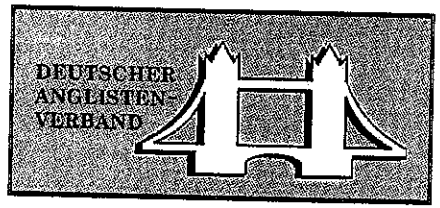

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Focus on Affect in Language Learning

Focus editors
JANE ARNOLD
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Optimal Experiences in the Foreign Language Classroom: Flow States in Speaking Tasks

1. Introduction

Few studies to date have tested the relationship between flow experiences and language learning. Some of the literature in this field, however, has already proved that flow exists in the foreign language classroom under specific circumstances (Egbert 2003), especially in reading, written, and computer-based tasks. The purpose of this study was to investigate if flow states could also be experienced in speaking tasks. It also analyzed the factors that intervene during flow states, and pointed out the aspects that must be taken into account to promote flow states in speaking tasks. 29 undergraduate intermediate-level students completed a modified version of a perception questionnaire (Webster, Trevino and Ryan 1993) that assessed different variables, and were video-recorded during speaking tasks. Results indicate that flow can be experienced in speaking activities under certain conditions.

Flow is a state of optimal experience characterized by intense focus and complete involvement in a task. The forerunners of flow states studies (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; and Jackson and Marsh 1996) have indicated that a combination of different conditions is necessary for flow states to occur: (a) a perceived balance of skills and challenge, (b) opportunities for intense concentration, (c) clear task goals, (d) feedback that one is succeeding at the task, (e) a sense of control over oneself and the environment, (f) a loss of self-consciousness, (g) a transformation of time, (h) merging of action and awareness, and (i) the autotelic or enjoyable nature of the experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1989; 1994). The nature of these factors is still a matter of discussion.[1]

The flow state may be experienced in a variety of life domains (Kowal and Fortier 1999), including work and leisure (Csikszentmihalyi 1989; Wells 1988), education (Carli, Delle Fave and Massimini 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen 1993); sport and physical activity (Grove and Lewis 1996); music (O'Neil 1999; Sheridan and Byrne 2002), etc.

The theory of flow is not age-specific (Ellis, Voelkl and Morrise 1994). Diverse studies have been conducted in different age subject groups and flow states may occur provided the characteristics of the flow condition intervene. However, age can be a factor that may influence how flow is experienced. For instance, Yair (2000) studied the influence of engagement in flow theory and found sixth and eighth graders were more engaged than tenth and twelfth graders. Also, Wong and Csikszentmihalyi

1 The accuracy of this combination of conditions has not been determined and may vary depending on different factors (culture, context, etc.). See, for instance, Jackson and Marsh (1996), who reported that the transformation of time and the merging of action and consciousness appear not to be universally important, or Schmidt and Savage (1992), who found that Thai students could reach the flow state with leisure activities that entailed low challenge or did not require sophisticated skills to accomplish the tasks.

(1991) indicate that adolescents in school settings appear rarely to experience flow.[2] Similarly, flow theory is not gender-specific, but flow experiences may differ depending on sex. For example, in Finn and Cox's (1992) study, females reported being more engaged in classrooms than males. As occurs with other psychological constructs, such as self-esteem (Mruk 2006) or anxiety (Onwuegbuzie, Ros and Ryan 1997), the state of flow is a phenomenological experience influenced by individual, contextual, and situational factors. Egbert clarifies that "although flow is something individuals experience, it does not occur in isolation; rather, it depends on both individual characteristics and conditions in the environment" (2003, 500). Thus, reactions and experiences are not necessarily consistent (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 1987). However, Schweinle, Turner, and Meyer's (2008, 137) study with young adolescents determined that "classroom experiences [...] are situation-specific rather than person-specific," and thus "more strongly related to the immediate context across the school year."

In the educational context, flow states have been connected to favorable learning outcomes (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 1993). The flow theory, encompassing affect, motivation and cognition (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura 1989), indicates that optimal classroom experiences occur due to feelings of enjoyment and engagement (i.e. concentration, clarity, pride) in carrying out tasks. In flow states feelings, including emotions and moods (Schweinle et al. 2008), seem to influence behavior positively with higher motivation (Jackson 1992; Jackson 1995; Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi and Delle Fave 1988) and intense mental effort (Larson 2000). Moreover, flow states generate a willingness to repeat those learning performances, as Shernoff put it:

> Because the flow state is intrinsically rewarding, individuals seek to replicate flow experiences. This introduces a selective mechanism into psychological functioning that fosters growth (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002). As individuals seek to master new challenges, they develop a greater level of skill. Once mastered, they must identify progressively more complex challenges to create an ideal match for their skills. Flow thereby invokes a growth principle, in which a more complex set of capacities is sought after and developed. (Shernoff 2003, 161)

The present study is focused on the area of foreign language learning, which often represents a difficult experience for learners. For example, Guiora describes it as "a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" (1983, 8). Moreover, many studies (e.g. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Muchnick and Wolfe 1982) have confirmed that learning a foreign language is the most anxiety-provoking school subject and that it may undermine the learners' self-concept with resulting low levels of self-esteem (Rubio 2007). The purpose of this study is to contribute to the enhancement of the difficult process of learning a language by investigating if flow states can be experienced when doing speaking activities in the foreign language classroom (FLC).

2 Many other studies have later confirmed that teenagers may experience flow states in school settings, e.g. Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1993). Furthermore, teenagers may enjoy a better quality of experience because they "have more autonomy to choose additional courses or match courses to their abilities [...] and interests" than younger students, providing high school students a choice that allows their control

2. The flow theory and language learning

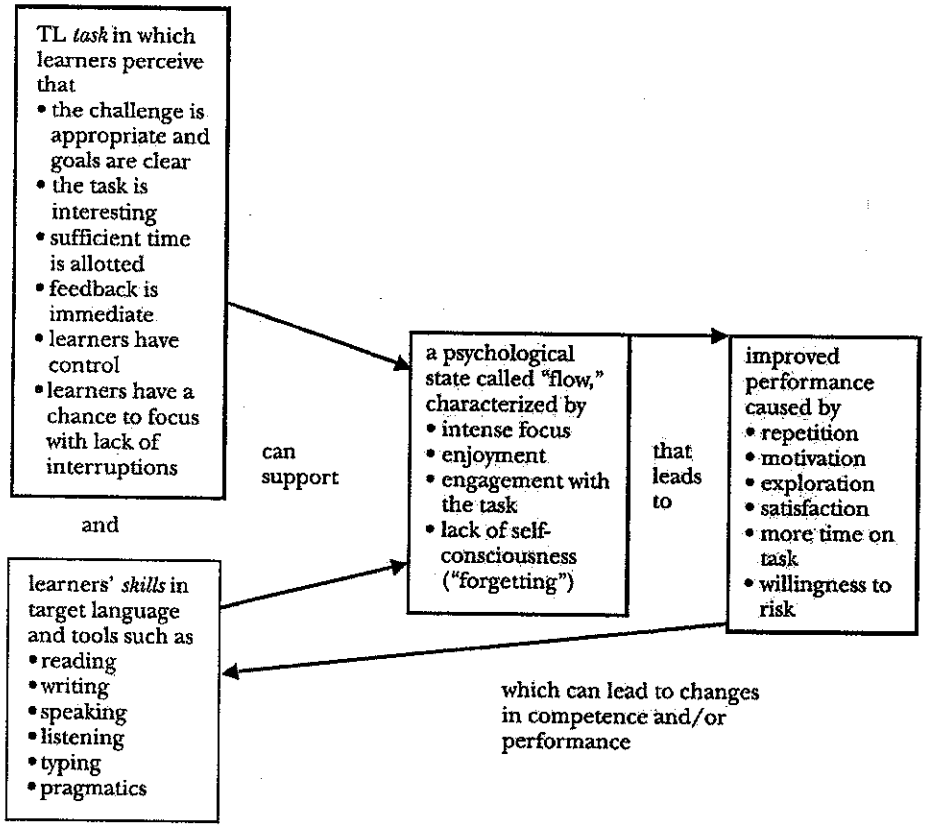
The first accounts of flow in the field of language learning were found in Krashen's Forgetting Principle, which consisted in a loss of foreign language awareness when the input was relevant and interesting to the learners (Krashen 1982). Arnold and Brown (1999) and Brown (2007) also mention the state of flow when referring to positive emotions and motivation in the language classroom, and present a brief summary of the conditions to facilitate flow experiences. Some studies have reported that flow states can exist in the process of foreign language learning. For example, Schmidt and Savage (1992) discovered that Thai students could experience flow states learning a foreign language both within and outside of class, with the same results as those experienced with other activities, such as work or leisure. Later, Schmidt, Boraie and Kassabgy (1996) showed similar results with Egyptian learners of English, and Abio (2006) with Brazilian students of English. There is also a study reporting flow states during foreign language teaching practice (Tardy and Snyder 2004). Egbert (2003) develops a simplified model of flow and language learning. According to this model, contextual variables, such as task features, and learner characteristics, particularly skill and level, can influence an individual's psychological state, which affects performance and can lead to changes in skill development and subsequent learning. Taking into consideration the general literature and previous studies in the field of language acquisition, she designed the Model of the Relationship Between Flow and Language Acquisition (Figure 1).

Egbert emphasizes that TL (target language) tasks have a central role in flow and specifically refers to learning activities where attention is focused on meaning rather than merely on language, such as those used in the Task-Based approach (Prabhu 1990). This can, of course, be a controversial model, since none of the studies above have researched students' cognitive processes to ascertain whether students had focused on meaning or forms while doing their tasks.[3] In many contexts, language learning is conceived by teachers and students as a solely linguistic issue. In the area of language acquisition studies, it would be interesting to know if flow states can be experienced when doing activities focused on language and structures and based on repetition, such as drills. In fact, Jones suggests that many types of activities can excite learner interest and induce flow, and pinpoints that "even drill and practice activities can help maintain a level of involvement on the part of the learners" (1998, 207, as cited in Egbert 2003, 505). Egbert also indicates that "flow experiences might occur in the language classroom during a clear, interesting, and achievable task" (2003, 500).

The task and the individual's skills together with the use of tools (e.g. typing, pragmatics) promote flow, therefore leading to improved performance. Although the model has been derived from the theoretical and pedagogical positions of some researchers (cf. Egbert 2003), it still needs to be revised and further developed. For instance, the learner's competences are not mentioned, leaving the learner's *tools* as a general learning device.

3 Although some researchers use the term *task* in the field of language learning as a piece of work that has specific goals, a clear purpose, and is focused on meaning (Brown 2000; Prabhu 1990), in this article the word *task* is used to describe any piece of work in the learning process.

Figure 1: *Model of the Relationship Between Flow and Language Acquisition (Egbert 2003, 502)*



A focus has also been placed on the conscious versus non-conscious process of language learning and flow experiences. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) and subsequent researchers have indicated that people experience flow when attention is unintentionally focused, and state that flow cannot occur when using conscious strategies. A great deal of literature in the field of language acquisition has discussed this issue. For instance, Krashen's Acquisition-Learning hypothesis (1985) indicates that there are two independent processes for getting knowledge about the target language: *the process of acquisition* and *the process of learning*. The former is subconscious and requires meaningful interaction in the target language in which speakers are concentrated not on the form of their utterances, but on the communicative act. The latter is the product of formal instruction, which results in conscious knowledge about the language. Current research cannot offer definitive conclusions on the issue, and some researchers state that "it is impossible to choose between them on empirical grounds" (Hulstijn 1990, 30); however, there is a clear connection between subconscious attention to language input and focus on communicating and meaning rather than planning and form. Although conscious attention can lead to language acquisition (cf. Swain 1998), subconscious processes seem to be more related to flow experiences. In fact, in Abbot's (2000) study students could not experience flow while writing when language output was monitored.

3. Flow and skills

Although skills are usually developed in the FLC in an integrative manner, some studies have found flow experiences when there was a focus on specific skills. For instance, Turbee (1999, in Egbert 2003) found the MOO (multi-user object-oriented) computer learning activity to be conceptually tied to flow theory. Learners from many different parts of the world connect through the internet to chat and participate in a virtual world community to solve problems, play games, etc. Galan and Maguire also report from class observation that flow might exist in the FLC when students use the internet, concretely creating their website according to their preferred topic of interest: "[...] many get into a creative and cooperative flow very quickly and the centre of attention is their own creation" (2000b, 10). Abbot (2000) also observed flow experiences of young children in self-sponsored writing, and Galan and Maguire affirm that "one of the most powerful instances of flow takes place precisely when pupils are writing essays" (2000a, 1). Trevino and Webster (1992) add that computer-based writing, such as writing emails (e.g. *keypal* exchanges), might also promote flow states. McQuillan and Conde (1996) find instances of flow with reading activities. Actually, Csikszentmihalyi notes that "among the many intellectual pursuits available, reading is currently perhaps the most often mentioned flow activity around the world" (1990, 117), and Krashen specifies that "free voluntary reading" is perhaps the most enjoyable type of reading activity (2003, 23).

The issue of flow states in listening activities in the FLC has not been researched yet, although some studies (Brett 2000) also describe listening activities as potentially enjoyable and comparable to other learning experiences that can be flow-generating. Galan and Maguire suggest that states of flow may exist during listening activities with video material in the classroom:

> We feel that the flow students experience while watching the film in a foreign language enables them to understand the film in question and, more lastingly, boosts their belief in their own learning powers. (Galan and Maguire 2000a, 1)

The purpose of this study is to find out if flow states can be reached when practicing speaking activities. Galan and Maguire's article is the only reference that addresses this skill. Through classroom observation, they concluded that flow states may happen, and set a specific activity sample:

> Another example of where the teacher can apply flow in the classroom is in the area of enhancing speaking skills. The goal is revision of foreign language vocabulary done in pairs using crosswords. Both participants have the same crossword but each has the words filled in where her partner has blanks. The task is to give your partner oral clues in the foreign language to enable her to fill in the blanks; she does the same for you. Students turn their attention to getting the message over in a communicative way and quickly get so swept up in the task that many become oblivious to the passing of time, even the bell ringing. This has been a recurring experience over the years with different classes, not a one-time coincidence. (Galan and Maguire 2000a, 1)

Accordingly, these authors match the experience with the learning outcomes: "We are able to measure to some extent our students' learning in this activity because they later write an essay based on the vocabulary practiced" (Galan and Maguire 2000a, 1). Galan and Maguire also presume that flow might exist in other moments in the classroom as well, such as assessing students' works: "Another surprising moment of flow is when we return the compositions to the pupils" (2000b, 10).

4. A study of flow and speaking activities

4.1 Research questions

The main aim of this study is to investigate if flow states can be experienced in speaking activities in the FLC. It also analyzes the factors that intervene in the process of flow generation. Therefore, the following questions have been addressed:

1) Does flow occur in speaking activities in the foreign language classroom?
2) What factors intervene in the process of flow generation?

4.2 Participant data

One class (29 students) of second-year university students from the English as a Foreign Language Teacher Training degree at the University of Huelva (Spain) and their teacher participated in this study. All the data were collected during different tasks carried out during the course Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. Students' proficiency levels were varied (from intermediate to advanced), and all the students were able to carry out a normal conversation in English, but many had some difficulties when discussing academic issues. 3 students were males and 26 females and their ages ranged from 19 to 26 years. Explanations about the intentions of the study were given to all participants and their approval was obtained to collect the data.

4.3 Course background

Foreign Language Teaching and Learning is a compulsory course in the English as a Foreign Language Teacher Training degree. The course goals are focused on developing students' communicative competence and other competences related to the field of language learning and teaching. Therefore, it can be considered a content-based course. Students attend class six hours a week during the Spring Semester to study and discuss theoretical and practical issues related to language teaching. The tasks from which the data have been gathered were implemented around midterm. Most students had taken courses together during the previous three semesters and therefore knew each other well. Moreover, from the very beginning of this course different activities were carried out to provide a positive affective climate and to encourage students to communicate. Many of the activities implemented throughout the course were learner-centered, based on group work and peer work to avoid students' feelings of apprehension in a teacher-controlled environment. Occasionally, students were told to consider errors as a natural element in the process of language learning. Tasks were focused on meaning. The class was conducted exclusively in English.

After completing an external official *student satisfaction questionnaire* about different aspects of the course (planning, methodology, evaluation, and satisfaction), 26.09% of students reported being interested in the course, and 73.91% being very interested. The degree of difficulty of this course was rated as follows: 8.70% low, 30.47% average, 56.52% high, and 4.35% very high. For the item "I attend class" the responses were: 0% never, 0% sometimes, 4.35% usually, and 95.65% always. Students gave an average score of 4.93 (*SD* 0.25), out of 5, to satisfaction with the teacher's methodological procedures, and an average score of 4.91 (*SD* 0.29), out of 5, to general satisfaction with the course.

4.4 Tasks

Data was collected from seven tasks that were implemented in different sessions throughout the course. Tasks lasted between 10 and 30 minutes. The seven tasks that were included in this study are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: *Task Descriptions*

	Task	Organization	Procedure
	Answer and discuss questions	Whole group, in pairs	Participants stood in pairs and answered questions about the appropriate use of native and foreign language in the FLC. Every new question involved pair change.
	Cloze text	Groups	Participants filled out a cloze text referring to the same issue as in Task 1.
	Discussion and game (stake game)	Groups and whole group	Participants were given a list of different ways for teachers to use native and foreign language in the FLC for them to choose the most important aspects. To follow up, groups played a game where they "bought" their preferred choices.
	Lesson plan: topic choice and levels	Groups	Participants worked in groups to choose the topic and level of a lesson plan.
	Lesson plan: methodology	Groups	Participants worked in groups to design the methodology of their lesson plan.
	Lesson plan: objectives	Groups	Participants discussed in groups the formulation of the objectives of their lesson plan.
	Lesson plan: activity design	Groups	Participants worked in groups to choose the activities and materials of their lesson plan.

To do all tasks goals and time were specified. The topics of discussion dealt with practical issues related to language teaching and learning, therefore they led to real-life interactions with a concrete purpose. Following the suggestions of some researchers (Whalen 1997; Abbot 2000; Schweinle et al. 2008) on how to favor flow generation, all tasks were learner-centered (except task 3, part 2) and interactive. Because

McQuillan and Conde found that tasks that induced flow "usually contained some new or relatively unfamiliar aspects" (1996, 126), we included tasks that would be new to students and different from what other courses offered.

4.5 Collection of data

Six instruments were used to collect the data: Official documents of participants' language levels, a student's satisfaction questionnaire, a perception questionnaire, video recording, observational notes, and students' production. We used students' grades of English to see if there were cases where the English proficiency level could be a problem for oral communication and consequently prevent flow generation. Also, we used a student satisfaction questionnaire to know students' ideas about some aspects of the teaching methodology, such as interest in the course and perception of its difficulty.

A perception questionnaire was administered as the main reference data source for this study. We used the questionnaire from Egbert (2003). Accordingly, we replicated Egbert's method from her study with a different focus (speaking skills) and different complementary sources of data. The Likert format questionnaire surveys four flow conditions: interest, control, focus, and challenge. Because of contextual reasons, Egbert's original questionnaire was modified and items 11 and 14 were eliminated. Four calculations were computed: median (number of participants experiencing flow), average (percentage of participants in flow for each task), means over all tasks from participant surveys, and means of each task across the four flow dimensions.

Observational data was collected by means of a video camera recording and instructor notes about external disruptions or any other circumstance that might have created an obstacle to flow generation. This information was used to support quantitative data and to give evidence of flow states and explain certain attitudes or students' responses. The instructor notes were not considered as consistent data in the form of a categorical analysis, since the instructor taught his class in the normal way, assessing students' progress and answering their questions. In this way we eliminated the presence of an external observer and avoided students' distractions and collected the data in a normal class setting.

Students' work from the tasks subjected to analysis was reviewed to check if students' had completed the tasks and achieved the objectives.

4.6 Procedure

After informing students about the purpose of the study and obtaining their consent for the administration of questionnaires and video recording, tasks were implemented in different sessions and questionnaires were administered after the tasks. The instructor took notes when any problematic element arose during task realizations. Only English was used for these tasks and for all classes during the course. To prevent students from using their native language instead of English, the Chungopoint Method (Rubio 2006) was used in these tasks and in all classes during this course.[4]

4 Although some studies report that neglecting L1 can prevent students from working collaboratively (eg. Scott and De la Fuente 2008), in our case students were used to using L2 in class naturally from the beginning of the course to discuss aspects related to language teaching.

4.7 Results and discussion

Objective 1. Does flow occur in speaking activities in the foreign language classroom?

As in Egbert's study (2003, 510), in order to address this question we calculated the average of each student's questionnaire responses, and we designated an average of 5.0 (equivalent to *agree* on all questions) or above to consider a flow experience to have occurred. Although this data does not capture an exact experience condition, it serves to establish a range of intensity, and supported by observational data, it yields more reliable results.

Almost all students reached flow on most tasks; only two students never did. Nine students experienced flow during all tasks, and thirteen students reached flow on most tasks (that is in at least 60% of the tasks). Three students rarely experienced flow (on less than 50% of the tasks). See Table 2 for the number of participants in flow for each task.

Table 2: *Number of Participants in Flow*

	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4	Task 5	Task 6	Task 7
	N=23	N=23	N=23	N=24	N=24	N=20	N=27
*	20	13	21	17	17	18	21
		Note: N= participants attending class		* Number of participants in flow			

Results from the questionnaire indicate that flow states can be reached with speaking tasks in the FLC. The video recording information corroborates these results. In Task 1 two students seemed to be distracted and uncomfortable because of being video recorded, and they looked at the video camera on many occasions. These were precisely the two students that, according to the questionnaires, never reached flow. The rest of the class did not pay attention to the recording. On one occasion, the teacher took the video camera and changed its position, but students seemed to be very concentrated on the task at hand and did not notice. In Task 2 students also were seen to be concentrated on the task at hand. At the beginning students asked about the time assigned for it, and when the teacher answered that they had only five minutes, they showed concern on their faces. Conti (2001) has acknowledged that sufficient time must be allotted for the flow states to occur; otherwise individuals could feel stressed in the situation, and the autotelic (intrinsically enjoyable) experience could be undermined.

There is an interesting piece of data drawn from the video recording of Task 3. At the middle of the task one student leaves the classroom (also reported in the teacher's observation notes). Accordingly, this student scores 2 on the questionnaire, indicating that she did not experience flow in the activity. This gives evidence of validity of her scores, since she reported having experienced flow in the other activities.

Objective 2. What factors intervene in the process of flow generation?

The second research question does not address the different speaking tasks that can be implemented in the FLC, such as roleplays, drama, etc., but the specific tasks chosen

for the study that were part of the course methodology. We also followed Egbert's (2003) analysis procedures to determine which tasks engendered the highest levels of flow across participants. To do so we first established the following measure designation based on participants experiences: "high flow" (two-thirds or more), "moderate flow" (one-third to two-thirds), and "low flow" (one third or less). As we can observe in Table 3, the average of students reaching flow was high on all tasks, except for moderate on Task 2. Task 3 was the most flow-promoting. Correspondingly, the means of each task scores above 5, except for Task 2, which was close to that number, as we can see in Table 4.

Table 3: *Percentage of Students in Flow for Each Task*

	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4	Task 5	Task 6	Task 7
*	0,86	0,56	0,91	0,7	0,7	0,9	0,78
	High	Moderate	High	High	High	High	High
	* Sts in flow						

Table 4: *Means over all Tasks from Students Surveys*

	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4	Task 5	Task 6	Task 7
Average	5,41	4,75	6,17	5,29	5,51	5,96	5,66

Video recordings also reveal that students showed much enthusiasm and enjoyment during Task 3, and that might have influenced students' responses on the questionnaire.

Results reveal that flow states can be experienced when certain methodological procedures are followed. If we observe the tasks studied, we can see that flow occurred when students were working in groups or in pairs, when tasks were learner-centered. We have also seen that flow can occur in tasks that require experiential and reflective cognition (Norman 1993). Jones (1998) explains that experiential cognition results when reacting to events efficiently and effortlessly and reflective cognition requires comparison and contrast of thought, of decision making, leading to new ideas and novel responses. Jones declares that "it is likely that in order to reach flow one must use both types of cognition [...]. In working with complex tasks, it is usually necessary to combine both reflective and experiential cognition [...]" (1998, 207), as it is the case with the tasks included in this study.

It is interesting to note that participants experienced flow during Task 1, which consisted of speaking turns, standing up and changing partners with a new question every three minutes. Egbert points out that "focused attention may not be possible for learners in language classes in which there are innumerable interruptions and participation involves the performance of many separate tasks" (2003, 506). In our case, students had interruptions which may have paused flow states, but they seemed to go back into flow states soon. This suggests that a sequence of micro-flow experiences can lead to a general conception of the flow experience, and opens up the possibility of designing flow-generating tasks in the educational setting that are composed of different stages or integrated activities. Also, in this line of inquiry it would be interesting to do further research to learn about the nature of interruptions and their effects upon flow generation.

The questionnaire measured four main elements of flow theory: control, attention, interest, and challenge and skills. The scores of these elements are shown in Tables 5 and 6. As we can see, the tasks are multicolinear on the four dimensions (i.e. there were consistent scores among the dimensions).

Table 5: *Observations of Flow Dimensions for Each Task: Mean*

	Control	Attention	Interest	Challenge	Mean
Task 1	6	6	6	6	6
Task 2	6	6	6	6	6
Task 3	7	7	7	7	7
Task 4	6	6	6	6	6
Task 5	6	6	6	6	6
Task 6	7	7	7	7	7
Task 7	6	7	7	7	6,33333

Table 6: Observations of flow dimensions for each task: average

	Control	Attention	Interest	Challenge	Average
Task 1	5,15217	5,26087	5,43478	5,69565	5,38587
Task 2	4,97826	5,02174	4,78261	4,82609	4,90217
Task 3	5,67391	6,13043	6,36957	6,47826	6,16304
Task 4	5,30556	5,69444	5,38889	5,52778	5,47917
Task 5	5,55556	5,94444	5,41667	5,63889	5,63889
Task 6	6,03333	6,06667	5,96667	6,16667	6,05833
Task 7	5,5	5,28571	5,7619	5,47619	5,50595

Control scores are very similar in all tasks. Task 2 offers the lowest score, maybe due to the time restrictions students had when doing the task. Instructions on how to do the task were given and the teacher was constantly supervising and assessing students' progress, including constructive feedback in his repertoire, which may have helped to promote feelings of control over the tasks (Thanasoulas 2000). Because tasks were learner-centered, students still had opportunities for self-expression and autonomy, which some researchers have claimed favors control of the task at hand (Whalen 1997).

According to Table 6, attention was high during the tasks. This is an interesting result because these tasks, apart from the inherent difficulties with oral expression, required a considerable amount of mental effort and complex cognition due to the task demands. This supports some studies that indicate that flow states can "be found in a wide range of activities that demand concentrated cognitive effort" (Conti 2001, 4)

in contrast to others that describe the experience "as the effortless involvement [...]" (Byrne, Raymond and Carlton 2003, 279). Also, these results suggest that focus can still be present in spite of the natural class interruptions due to teacher's instructions, peer disturbances, external noises, etc.[5]

Whether students' noticing language output was conscious or subconscious is not certain in this study. As has been acknowledged in this paper, much of the research in the field of language acquisition has investigated which processes would lead to optimal learning experiences, but we still do not have conclusive results on the issue; however, many influential researchers emphasize the importance of subconscious processes of learning (Brown 2007; Krashen 2003). Also, the tasks in this study are related to task and content-based learning, in which the effective learning experience is considered a subconscious process (Prabhu 1987). Participants in many flow instances describe their experience as an "*unintentionally* focused attention" process (Egbert 2003, 504). This seems to have been our students' experience too.

Data results are also homogeneous for the *interest* factor. Students showed a great deal of interest in the course (26.09% of students reported to be interested and 73.91% to be very interested), which may have positively influenced the arousal of flow states. Also, care was taken to create a non-threatening environment with leaner-centered activities and some explanation to students that language mistakes were part of the learning process, and that students would benefit from their positive attitude toward participation and risk-taking. It seems that students found the tasks interesting, possibly due to their meaningful nature and their authenticity. Also, an important aspect of the working process was cooperative learning, which many researchers have indicated leads to positive affective reactions on the part of students (Casal 2007) and to motivation-related factors (Johnson and Johnson 1985).

The results of the flow dimension of challenge and skills also show that these factors support the development of flow. Task 2 seemed the most difficult activity for students, and scores were lower than other task scores, but still moderate (4.8/7). The results confirm that when designing tasks it is important to provide a balance between students' level and challenge in order to promote flow states and ensure that engagement is first established and subsequently maintained (Rogoff 1990). This has been the case in our study, where the difficulty of the task itself is added to the difficulty of doing the task in the foreign language. The results confirm that having to use the foreign language for oral activities is not necessarily an obstacle for the generation of flow.

Could flow result in speaking activities with lower level students? As Egbert indicates,

> beginning-level students may lack sufficient competence to perform well in the TL. This lack of competence may pose a barrier to becoming absorbed in tasks in the language [...]. If beginning students have opportunities to participate in interesting and appropriately challenging activities in the language, however, flow might result. (Egbert 2003, 506)

Although Egbert's suggestion that to promote flow an increase in interest and challenge can compensate for a lack of skills is somewhat contradictory, taking into account her finding that the four dimensions were multicolinear, it could be an interesting line of inquiry for future research on oral production skills.

5 However, it should be noticed that some researchers have observed that task-related feedback can interfere with authenticity and meaningfulness of the interaction (Robinson 1997).

4.8 Conclusions, limitations and future research

The results of this study have shown that flow can be experienced in speaking activities in the foreign language classroom. This finding corroborates previous research that claims that flow may occur in the foreign language classroom, and extends the presence of flow to the skill of speaking, as well as the writing, reading, and computer-based tasks studied previously. However, it would be useful to have further research providing more qualitative data from the participants. Self-reports, interviews and case studies would help to complement the available data.

We have also shown that teachers can promote flow through the use of specific activities, but future research could explore which factor is most effective in producing flow and how the factors are related.

The results of this study do not totally support Egbert's conclusions that indicate that "the patterns of flow across tasks are relatively similar and that we can, therefore, talk about tasks that support flow" (2003, 514). In the light of our results we do not think that flow processes are produced mainly by the use of particular tasks associated with work on a skill, but rather by activities that are carried out under specific methodological circumstances in a given situation. If we take this into consideration, we could then talk about flow instances rather than flow tasks, and we could hypothesize that flow also exists in other classroom work provided the right specific circumstances in the classroom exist. Future research will then be more effective if more attention is paid to the factors rather than to the task itself.

Egbert (2003) has pointed out that the literature on flow studies in the academic context has not yet addressed the effect of flow on language learning outcomes. Theoretically, flow has been linked to intrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation to positive learning outcomes (Kowal and Fortier 1999). Field-research would be pertinent to fill this gap.

We have pointed out in this paper that learning a foreign language can be a difficult experience for many students. In the light of flow theory and our results, we think that the implementation of flow-based activities can enrich the experience and foster better learning outcomes.

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