

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**ASSESSING COMPONENTS OF FLOW IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
LEARNING ACTIVITIES**  
MA Thesis

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## **ABSTRACT**

Students' productivity is directly linked to their mental state or state of consciousness. With the positive psychology turn at the end of the 1990s and the present Estonian education strategy explicitly focusing on the subjective well-being of students, research into mental states or states of consciousness in education is timely. Flow, also known as "optimal experience", is a state of consciousness in which one is both feeling and working at their best. With the aim of potentially increasing flow opportunities in the foreign language classroom, the current thesis presents an exploratory study into the flow potential of language learning activities.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two main chapters, a conclusion, a list of references, and six appendices. Chapter I, the literature review, covers the background and previous research into flow theory, flow theory in education, and flow theory in language learning. Chapter II, the empirical study, gives an overview of the study, where experts, teachers, scored a selection of language activities according to four components of flow using an adapted assessment form from a validated flow scale. The evaluation was followed by a focus group discussion. The results are analysed and placed within the field of research into flow in the realm of language learning.

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## INTRODUCTION

The economically dominant West has been becoming increasingly more interested in practices such as meditation and mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn 2017), and broader notions, like emotional intelligence, multiple intelligences, and psychological well-being. These, in turn, relate well to society-level organisational principles, such as the much-publicised Gross National Happiness (GNH) and the field of happiness economics in general (Stevenson 2010). The present trends seem to suggest that our focus is moving away from a material definition of happiness, meaning, and fulfillment, as a noticeable number of people, in historical terms, have achieved financial well-being (Worstall 2016), but have not found the satisfaction they had always associated with it. Perhaps the interest in all of the abovementioned notions and practices can be explained by a sizeable number of people having their Maslowian basic needs met. They are subsequently now focusing their attention more on their higher psychological needs and self-actualisation needs on a societal level (Morava 2016).

Research has suggested that less than 3% of a person's happiness is the result of external factors such as income, socioeconomic status, and, marital status (Lykken and Tellegen 1996: 186). With most of us spending our days working, it is illustrative to look into how happy our work makes us. A recent Gallup World Poll into worker engagement found that only 15% of employees worldwide (examples: 30% in the USA, 6% in Japan) felt engaged at work and that the majority of workers "hate their job and especially their boss" (Clifton 2017). A suggested reason for this was the outdated management practices: the manager was proficient at filling out forms, but not at having "high-development conversations" (Clifton 2017). The trend of leaders

changing from “command-and-control managers to high-performance coaches” (Clifton 2017) is a theme that educators should be familiar with as student-centered teaching gains traction around the world (Richmond 2014), including in Estonia (Pullerits 2013, Ministry of Education 2017). The change in leadership preference could be further mirroring our wish to fulfil our higher needs.

Psychology in education, which has for the most part found itself in the position of aiding those with trouble coping, is seeing changes, too. Resources in schools have traditionally been directed at students who suffer from learning disabilities or behavioural disorders. With the rise of positive psychology at the end of the 1990s, this has started changing as people are now focusing on proactively bettering their lives with the use of psychology, not just reacting to problems (Wallis 2005). Positive psychology might be behind the changes that we are seeing within education around the world: from gifted children being recognised as special needs students (Finn Jr. 2012) to the inclusion of mindfulness practices in education (Walton 2016). Many schools have reacted to the disorders of our times, including ADHD, anxiety, and depression (sometimes more than one at a time) that affect increasingly more students (Olivardia 2020), including in Estonia (Jung 2020), by starting to teach meditation, which has led to “reduced crime and dropout rates” (Fisher 2015) and “benefits children’s brains and behaviour” (Walton 2016). It has also been found that “students who are taught to be in touch with their emotions do better academically” (Deruy 2016).

There seems to be little doubt as to the effectiveness of meditation or mindfulness practices as tools to help students cope and succeed, but could they just be coping mechanisms, when the whole world of work needs to be reworked? Unhappy workers are, statistically speaking, previously unhappy students, the latter

having been found to be bored 70% of the time and stressed 80% of the time they spend in school, according to a survey of high school students in the US (Watson 2015). With the modern-day worker expecting a lot more from a job than a secure paycheck, the idea that work is a means to self-actualisation (Pedraza 2013, Beaton 2016) seems to further suggest that we are striving, as a society, towards a sense of happiness based on the fulfilment of our highest need. As the younger generations' expectations for their workplace change, so, it would follow, do our expectations of what an education should provide and look like on a societal level. In short, perhaps self-actualisation is no longer a privilege but a birthright.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of the most prominent figures in positive psychology, suggests, in timely fashion, that there is a very systematic way in which we all can approach life and all our daily activities that will lead to fulfillment, enjoyment, and happiness (Starr 2010). By entering a state of consciousness called *flow* we can radically increase the quality of our lives and potentially solve all of the previously mentioned smaller and bigger challenges affecting our society today. Flow can be characterised as a state of deep concentration or immersion, where one is simultaneously calm, energetic, and happy, while following a personal passion with diligence (Csikszentmihalyi 1990:3). He would most certainly suggest that the lack of job engagement that we are seeing reflects a lack of flow in our lives. Csikszentmihalyi holds that flow is made up of ten necessary components, such as a balance between skill and challenge, clear goals, immediate feedback, and a sense of being in control, which can be affected both from within and without – in other words, we can consciously create flow opportunities (1990: 49). Flow theory advocates learning to master our attention to achieve self-actualisation by leading a life of purpose that is deeply aligned to our innermost passion, which could, taking



into consideration the ongoing changes in our social landscape, explain the theory's popularity.

Flow has been of interest to the world of education for four decades now, with research into its applicability starting soon after Csikszentmihalyi's first publications in 1975. Research has touched upon, for example, pedagogical systems (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi 2005), schools (Whalen and Csikszentmihalyi 1991), and instructional design (Chan and Ahern 1999). The first research into flow in foreign language teaching appeared in the 1990s (Schmidt and Savage 1992; Schmidt et al 1996) and the early 2000s saw the publication of Joy Egbert's widely-cited article "A Study of Flow Theory in the Foreign Language Classroom", which both measured flow in the foreign language classroom and considered it "an interesting and useful framework for conceptualising and evaluating language learning activities". While flow is far from a mainstream approach in the educational context, with the majority of language education worldwide still being traditionally "test-driven" (Finch 2007: 231), calls for an "integrated, holistic teaching philosophy" (Finch 2007: 231), such as flow, to result in "more meaningful and effective language learning" (Finch 2007: 231) seem to have become necessary as language teachers are faced with students who are emotionally disaffected (Brown and Fletcher 2006) and disengaged (Skinner et al 2008).

One of the aims of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020, the current iteration of the Estonian education strategy from the Ministry of Education and Research, is changing our approach to learning. Among the learning objectives in the strategy that pertain to the changes in the approach to learning are self-regulation, independence, and subjective well-being (Ministry of Education and Research 2018). These objectives, supporting the broader goals of self-fulfilment as the "realisation of

one's interest and abilities", openness, and lifelong learning, match the aims of flow theory, supporting individuation and a search for personal meaning. The strategy also pertains to changes in school culture, such as increased "freedom of action" for teachers and students, further allowing for self-determination, which is directly connected to intrinsic motivation, one of the foundational aspects of flow theory. As such, it is possible to make an argument that a widespread orientation towards self-actualisation the West, the Estonian education strategy, which aims at self-fulfilment, and flow theory, which provides the tools that allow us to be our happiest and most productive, are all aligned.

With language teachers very possibly being among those making the most out of the freedom allowed for by the education strategy, with their selections of learning materials being sourced from all corners of the world, to keep their students engaged, it is of interest to consider the materials that have been published in Estonia in terms of their ability to bring about potential opportunities for flow. The present research seeks to measure a cross-selection of activities from the *I Love English 7 Student's Book* against four components of flow utilising a combination of linear scale assessments and an open-ended question, followed by a focus group discussion. The *I Love English* series is the most widely used series of English language learning materials in Estonia, thus having an effect on a significant number of students. The present study, very possibly the first of its kind, is motivated by the wish to answer the question of whether the activities in the *I Love English 7 Student's Book* could potentially promote flow experiences in the students and, ultimately, support the national educational strategy.

# **1 CHAPTER I: LITERATURE REVIEW**

## **THE CONCEPT AND RELEVANCE OF FLOW AND ITS RELATION TO EDUCATION AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Chapter 1 will cover the literature review on flow theory in relation to education and language learning. Section 1.1 will introduce and define flow, give a brief overview of its history, its current status and research, and go over the components of flow that are central to the study. Section 1.2 will give a short introduction to the breadth of research on flow in education. Section 1.3 will discuss research into flow in the field of foreign language, mainly English, teaching and learning.

### **1.1 A Brief Overview of Flow**

“Flow is an optimal state of consciousness, a peak state where we both feel our best and perform our best” (Kotler 2014: 11). Flow theory is fundamentally about finding happiness, which comes about as the result of doing something that one finds intrinsically rewarding. As we become immersed in such an activity, we experience the state of flow, which is so pleasurable that we want to keep on doing whatever it is that brings it about. In the process, we become more skillful and must choose outlets that are increasingly more challenging to keep flow occurring. Our motivation helps us overcome any difficulties on the path. As any activity can be reorganized to be more conducive to achieving the flow state, the ultimate aim is to live one’s life in a way so as to be in as much flow as possible (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 230). Flow is universally available, it does not discriminate between different professions or activities: it can be experienced by a welder or a professor, when participating in a

sport or reading a book (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 42). As such, it is of no surprise that companies like Microsoft, Toyota, and Ericsson have all made flow a “critical piece of their strategy and culture” (Kotler 2014: 86).

Entering the state of flow is not arbitrary, but something that we have control over. While Csikszentmihalyi initially suggested eight components to flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 49), his later suggestions and current research have settled on 10 (Kotler 2014: 105-106). The ten components are: a balance of skill and challenge, clear goals, direct and immediate feedback, concentration, absorption, a loss of the feeling of self-consciousness, a lack of awareness of bodily needs, a sense of personal control, a distorted sense of time, and finding whatever one was doing intrinsically rewarding. Of the 10 components the first three are considered to be conditions for flow, while the rest describe what one is experiencing in the state of flow. Flow exists on a continuum and when all the components are present one experiences (macro-)flow, when a few are present, one can experience microflow (Kotler 2014: 106-107).

Flow is commonly measured with the Flow Questionnaire, Experience Sampling Method (ESM), or alternative measuring tools that have been developed, most notably the Flow Scales (the Flow State Scale or FSS and the Dispositional Flow Scale or DFS) by Jackson and Eklundh (Jackson and Marsh 1996; Jackson and Eklund 2008), who found the previous measuring tools lacking. ESM, developed by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (Egbert 2004: 554), has been widely used by the former from as early as in the 1970s (Hektner et al 2007: 8). Also referred to as the daily diary method, ESM is a longitudinal research methodology that has the participants report on their thoughts, feelings, environment and the activities they are participating in. Participants report using their smart devices immediately in response to randomly

timed, messaged requests to do so (Hektner et al 2007:3). Interviews are also commonly used to ascertain whether a participant experienced flow in accordance to how they described their experience and whether the components of flow were present. The current thesis will make use of the FSS, as it has both been verified and was found to be suitable for adaption, in combination with a focus group discussion, which could be viewed as a type of interview.

The recent years have seen flow expand into areas such as programming, marketing, and media consumption. The central aim for many of these studies is the notion of curating for flow, i.e., finding and creating optimal practices and settings to promote flow. A study into a non-invasive means of recognising when a programming trainee is in flow has led to the successful testing of a prototype system able to predict the flow state (Zheng, Z. et al 2019: 300). Research into advergames, i.e., games created solely to promote a company or its product, has shown a positive correlation between the game's ability to create flow and an increase in sales (Steffen, C. et al 2015: 188). A study into media consumption on a streaming media device led the authors to suggest that the variables of flow and perceived usefulness were a strong indication of a viewer's intention to consume (Yang, H. and Hwansoo Lee 2018: 1). Just as it is possible to assist in bringing about flow experiences by working with extrinsic factors in these fields, it is possible to do the same in language learning by, for example, designing activities that take into consideration the components of flow.

## **1.2 A Brief Review of Studies into Flow in the Broader Field of Education**

Being a theory of motivation within the study of positive psychology, the initial fields of application for flow theory were naturally the ones nearest to it: psychotherapy, occupational therapy (Emerson 1998: 37), and education, an ideal

candidate for all that the theory could provide (Snyder and Lopez 2001: 99). In terms of application, Csikszentmihalyi differentiates between the extrinsic and the intrinsic. If the former seeks to change the environment for it to be more conducive towards the experience of flow, the latter works with the humans inhabiting the environment to assist them in going into flow. For best results, the extrinsic and intrinsic aspects are both taken into consideration. In education and language learning, this would amount to both making sure that the surroundings and tools the students have to work with, e.g., the classroom setting or their study materials, can bring about flow and that the students themselves learn to control their experience and act in ways that are conducive to going into flow.

Studies within the realm of education have looked into, for example, pedagogical systems (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi 2005), schools (Whalen and Csikszentmihalyi 1991), and instructional design (Chan and Ahern 1999), as examples of the extrinsic aspects of flow, as well as intrinsic motivation (Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi 2011), interest (Schiefele and Csikszentmihalyi 1994), and affect and exam performance (Schüler 2007), as examples of the intrinsic aspects of flow. In a comparison of student motivation and quality of experience between a traditional school environment and that of a Montessori school, the students from the latter scored higher in affect, feeling energetic, intrinsic motivation, flow experience, and undivided interest (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi 2005: 341). The Key School in Indianapolis, USA was created explicitly with flow theory in mind: students spent two hours each week in the Flow Activities Room with the aim of following their interests by being able to try out a variety of stimulating activities. The initial results of a study into the effectiveness of the room suggested that flow was a “consistent experiential outcome” of the activities undertaken (Whalen and Csikszentmihalyi 1991: 23). A

study in instructional design looked into both the content of an activity and its presentation to determine whether either or both were conducive to intrinsic motivation and lead to flow, and found a definite correlation between content and flow (Chan and Ahern 1999: 151).

The intrinsic applications of flow theory in education pertain to working with the individual to help them attain flow (Snyder and Lopez, 2001: 99). Besides different forms of therapy, an outlet for this in an educational setting would be coaching and counselling. The research presented here focuses more on the individual than on the environment. A study into attentional involvement, focusing on two aspects of intrinsic motivation that led to enjoyment – (1) a balance of skills and challenges and (2) doing something that one considers important – found that attentional involvement is an important facilitator within intrinsic motivation (Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi 2011: 263-264). Another study into intrinsic motivation showed, among other things, interest to be a stronger predictor of quality of experience in class than achievement motivation and ability (Schiefele and Csikszentmihalyi 1994). Furthermore, flow has been found to be experienced during exam performance only by students who expect to succeed, but not those who fear failure (Schüler 2007: 222). The intrinsic and extrinsic dichotomy can also be represented in terms of “contextual variables” and “learner characteristics” which come together to influence “psychological states” (Figure 1). The study in this thesis will focus, according to the model, on the contextual variables of task features as they can affect the subject’s psychological state, i.e., lead to flow.

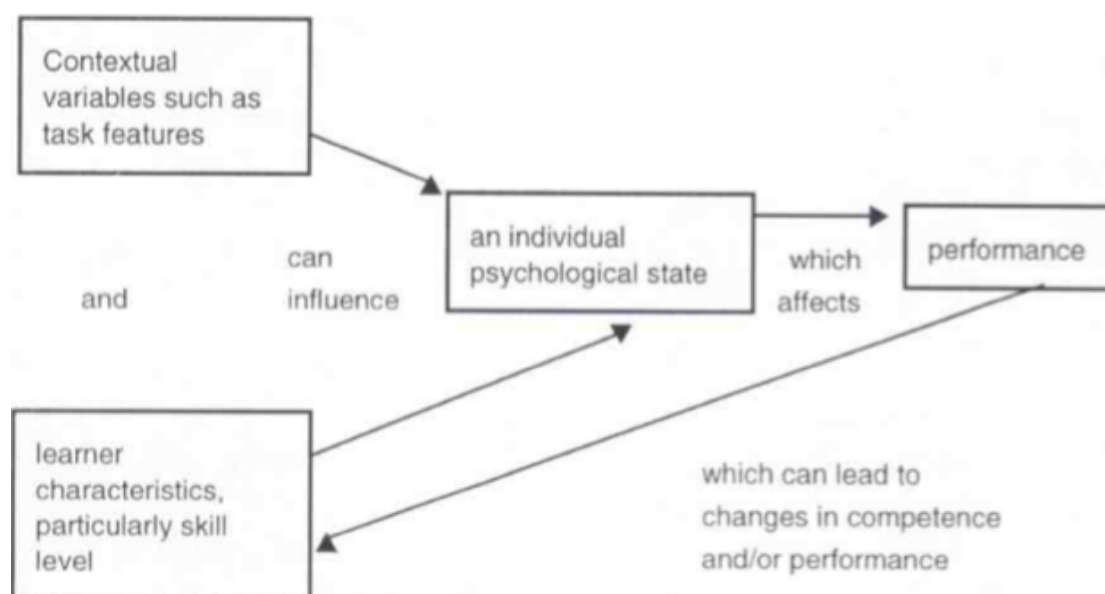


Figure 1: Simplified Model of Flow and Learning (Egbert 2004: 551)

### 1.3 Flow in the (English) Language Learning Setting

Referred to as one of the “early papers” to have looked at aspects of positive psychology in the field of applied linguistics (Dewaele et al 2019: 3), Joy Egbert’s “A Study of Flow Theory in the Foreign Language Classroom,” a combination of an extensive literature review and a study published in 2003 (revised in 2004), is one of the most widely referred to articles in the field. The early studies into flow in the foreign language classroom tried to measure whether flow actually existed in the foreign language classroom. In what is possibly the first study in the subfield, the language study experiences of 16 Thai students were compared to their experiences in other activities during work and leisure time (Schmidt and Savage 1992: 14). The results suggested that while the students experienced flow in both their language studies and other activities, it was far from clear-cut, with the conclusive suggestion being that Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of intrinsic motivation was lacking on two counts, being both “simplistic and ethnocentric” (Schmidt and Savage 1992: 25). The second study, conducted with 1554 adult learners in Cairo, Egypt, pointed out,



similarly, that a challenge when studying motivation in students could be differences among cultures, countering Csikszentmihalyi's claim that flow is a universal phenomenon (Schmidt et al 1996: 14-15). Nevertheless, the authors found their study to confirm his theory of motivation (Schmidt et al 1996: 55). Egbert's own study into flow in the foreign language classroom was able to confirm the existence of flow and, equally importantly, assert that teachers could facilitate flow in the classroom through developing tasks that are more conducive to flow experiences (Egbert 2004: 575-576). She suggested that computer and reading tasks were "excellent candidates" for eliciting flow as they allow the students to "experience various levels of challenge and control" (Egbert 2004: 565). Critical of ESM (Egbert 2004: 555), Egbert's study combined a short participant recall survey utilising the Likert scale and short interviews, supported by the gathering of perceptual data about the environment in which the study was performed and the behaviour of the students during the data gathering period. The survey was intended to score certain components of flow on a seven-point Likert scale, which ranged from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". She argued, referring to Csikszentmihalyi, that a score of "5", which was the equivalent of "Agree", would be a reasonable threshold of flow (Egbert 2004: 570). She suggested the following relationship, based on the previously mentioned components of flow, between flow and foreign language acquisition, where TL stands for target language (Figure 2). Previous studies have confirmed both the possibility of flow existing in the foreign language classroom and that some tasks are better at eliciting flow than others.

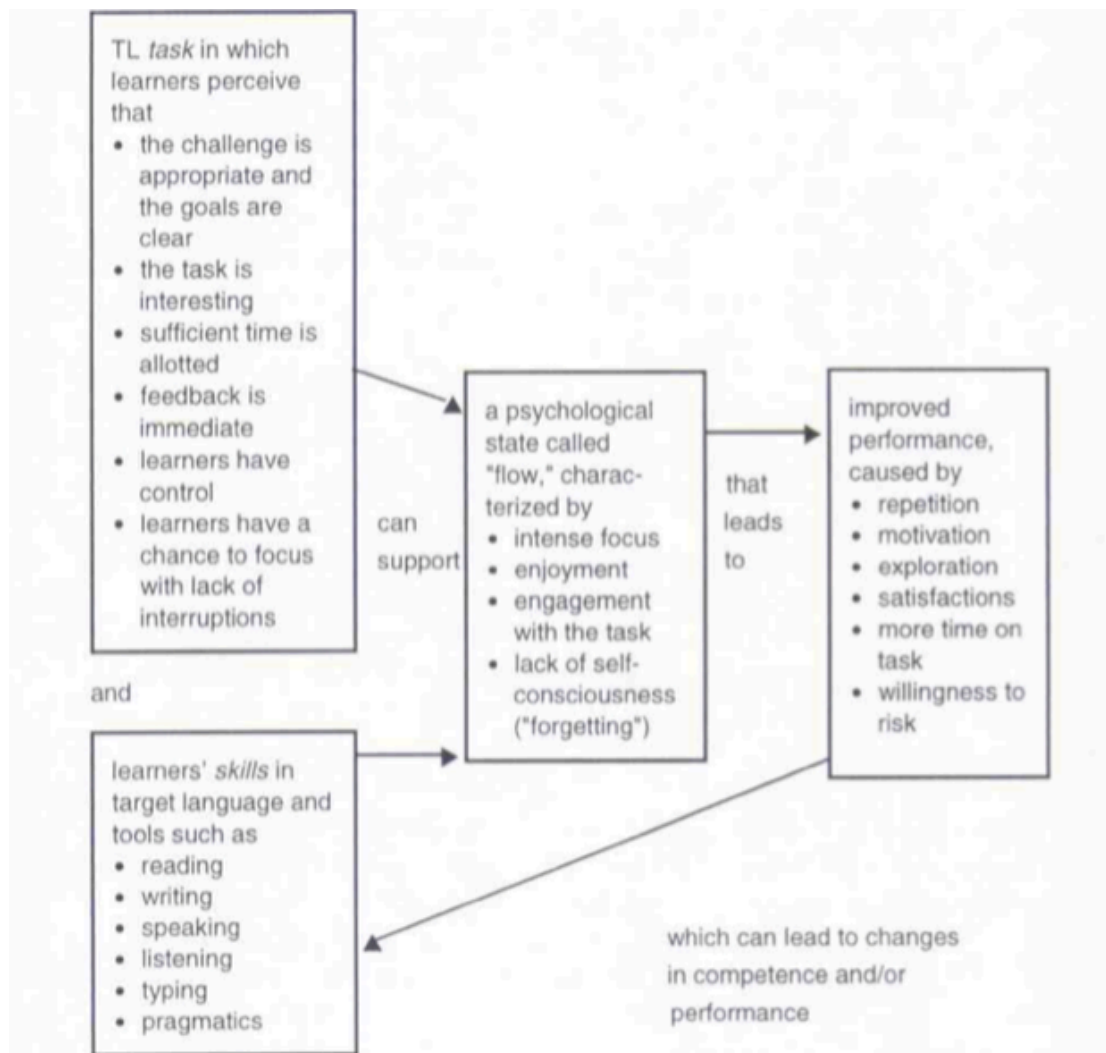


Figure 2: Model of the Relationship Between Flow and Language Acquisition (Egbert 2004: 554)

A study into the content-based classroom suggested that well planned, content-based learning, which aims to facilitate students' language learning through studying content, can lead to students experiencing flow (Grabe and Stoller 1997). A study into intrinsic motivation, an important component of flow, claims that a very strong interest that is followed out of one's choice, is inherently followed by flow, which in turn is the reason why some students persevere in their studies in the face of challenges and others do not (Abbott 2000). In a study of flow during reading concluded that students attained flow when (1) reading for pleasure, (2) interested in

the text (when assigned in school), (3) viewed text as beneficial personally or intellectually, (4) read fiction as opposed to non-fiction (McQuillan and Conde 1996: 109), suggesting the importance of the component of finding an activity intrinsically rewarding. As such, whether students experience flow or not depends on the nature of the activities that they are undertaking – as suggested by the abovementioned research, if the components of flow are not present in the activity, making it intrinsically rewarding, flow will not ensue.

### **1.3.1 The Four Components of Flow Assessed In the Study**

The following studies are relevant to the four components of flow that will be measured in the present thesis: a balance of skill and challenge, clear goals, direct and immediate feedback, and a sense of personal control. Being perhaps the most salient of the components of flow suggested by Csikszentmihalyi, a balance between skill and challenge has been the subject of more flow-related research than any of the other components.

The first component that must be present for flow to occur says that the skill of the student has to match the difficulty or challenge of the task at hand. Central to Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory is the idea that skills and challenges have to match for flow to occur (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 50). If the student's skills are higher than the skills required by the task, the student becomes bored. On the other hand, when the student's skills are (significantly) lower than what the task requires, the student becomes anxious (Figure 3) (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 74). Studies have shown that a slightly higher challenge level will also bring about flow (Shernoff et al: 2003; Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi 2012). The flow channel suggests that as one of

skills or challenges increases (or decreases, for that matter), the other must also increase (or decrease).

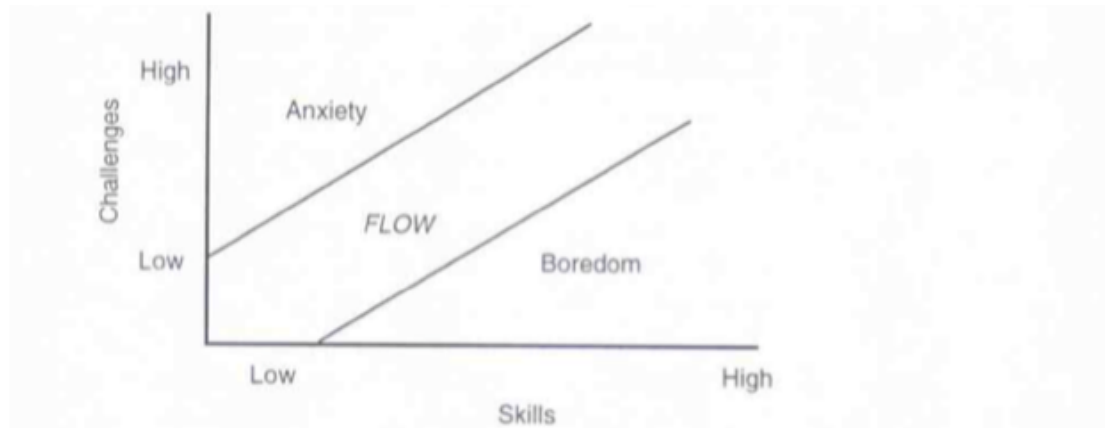


Figure 3: The “Flow Channel” Where Skills and Challenge are Balanced (Egbert 2004: 556)

A study into the conditions of flow in reading confirmed that the combination of intrinsic motivation and sufficient challenge were central to experiencing the state of flow (McQuillan and Conde 1996: 126). Another study that aimed to clarify the relationship between the balance between skill and challenge and enjoyment by studying chess players, who are ranked and thus have an objectively measurable skill level, confirmed that a balance leads to enjoyment, while blowout wins or losses were less enjoyable (Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi 2012). With the aim of also testing the universality of the component, an ESM study conducted with Japanese college students resulted in positive feedback in regard to a connection between enjoyment of experience and a balance between skill and challenge (Asakawa 2014). Language acquisition must take place in a setting that does not promote language anxiety, which has a significantly detrimental effect on language acquisition (Mantou and Noels 2020; Zhang 2019). People want to engage in activities, which they find enjoyable

and which do not cause them anxiety or stress in the negative sense, further enforcing the idea that a balance between skill and challenge is necessary when undertaking language activities (Schmidt et al: 1996: 54).

The second and third components of flow that have to be present are clear goals and direct and immediate feedback. Clear goals entail that the person undertaking an activity knows exactly what is necessary to achieve success in a particular endeavour and how to achieve it. Direct and immediate feedback ensures that the person always knows how they are doing and what must be done so as to keep on one's set course. Goals must be "clear and attainable", not generic, but ones that have been personally generated, and realistic, i.e., suitable for the level of the student (Whitson and Consoli 2009). Short-term goals can be set to achieve long-term goals and success will lead to an increase in intrinsic motivation, leading to a virtuous circle (Whitson and Consoli 2009). Thus, in a language learning setting it is important both that the goals of the task are clear, i.e., what one must do and how one must do it, and that the student gets direct and immediate feedback about how they are doing so as to change their behaviour to be able to reach their goal.

The last of the four components of flow under consideration is a sense of personal control. It is important to note that especially within the framework of education, the component could be said to consist of two distinct parts: rules and responsibilities, i.e., a framework of what is allowed and possible, and a feeling of autonomy and possibilities for self-expression within that framework (Whalen 1997: 3). Students must feel that the "learning environment was under their control" (Shernoff et al 2003). Bearing this in mind, it is no surprise that Csikszentmihalyi titled the chapter on the component as "The Paradox of Control (1990: 59)". Control means creating an environment that is safe through regulation, but allows for

maximum growth expression and autonomy suitable to the level of the students. The teaching process is one where the student becomes increasingly more adept at the subject he is studying and is being taught: just as one starts to learn to ride a bicycle with training wheels, the rules of the classroom, the freedom and complexity contained within a task must also consider the level of the student. The core of the paradox is that rules are there to aid and promote growth, but too much, and a student will be left feeling as if he or she has no say in the process. For the present study a sense of personal control has been translated into the notion of closed-endedness and open-endedness to mirror the freedom and complexity an activity can provide. To keep the necessary level of nuance in the evaluation, the teachers must take into consideration the level of autonomy they believe to be suitable for the students.

Previous research into flow and language learning has suggested that flow can exist in the foreign language classroom. As different language learning activities have been used to elicit flow, it has been shown that some activities are more conducive to flow than others. The activities that are conducive to flow are the ones that activate flow components. Since activities affect whether one enters a state of flow or not, the types of activities available in teaching materials need to be studied more closely. While particular language learning materials themselves have not been researched so far, as much as could be determined within the present thesis, in terms of their potential to potentially elicit flow experiences, understanding which tasks could potentially elicit flow, and why, is important so as to make better language material choices. Another innovative aspect is to involve teachers, the “curators” of a lesson, in the assessment of common language learning activities to determine which ones they believe could possibly elicit flow experiences in their students.

## **2 CHAPTER II: A STUDY EVALUATING COMPONENTS OF FL IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

Chapter 2 focuses on an explorative, collaborative study undertaken by three teachers of English in Estonia in May of 2020. This chapter includes the research question, a detailed overview of the procedure of the study (the methodology), a discussion of the results, the outcome of the study, and suggestions for future research.

### **2.1 Research Question**

The aim of the study was to find out whether language activities in the widely used *I Love English 7 Student's Book* could potentially assist in inducing the state of consciousness known as flow in the students undertaking them. As flow is considered to be a positive state which is conducive to both learning and mental well-being, research into flow in the (English) language learning context will potentially suggest a set of criteria for teachers to focus on when they pick activities for a language class. As a result, the following general research question was posed: Can activities in language learning textbooks enable students to achieve flow, a higher level of consciousness? Sub-questions for this inquiry are: (1) Do common language learning activities enable macro- or microflow?; (2) Which flow components do language learning activities enable?

### **2.2 Materials Analysed in the Study**

The study was undertaken using activities from the *I Love English 7 Student's Book*, which is meant for 9th form students. The *I Love English* series is probably the

most popular resource used in English language teaching in Estonia. A set of teaching materials for each form usually consists of, but is not necessarily limited to the Student's Book, the Workbook, the Teacher's Book, Tests, and a CD (Studium 2018). The series follows a recognisable formulaic structure throughout, with activity types generally repeating year after year, while the content becomes increasingly more complex.

The Student's Book was considered the most suitable of the materials in the set to analyse as the Workbook consisted, almost exclusively, of standard grammar and writing activities, while the former also included activities for the skills of reading, listening, and speaking. For the current study, six of the most popular types of activity in the book covering all four of the skills were chosen: one from both reading and listening and two from writing and speaking (examples of the activities can be found in Appendix 5). This choice reflects the limited choice of activity types available for the skills of reading and listening. Each of the activity types was represented by two activities, for a total of 12 activities. Each one of the 12 activities was scored by two experts.

<b>Skills</b>	<b>Activity Type 1</b>	<b>Activity Type 2</b>
Reading	Read (the text)	x
Writing	Finish the sentences	Find, write, and learn
Listening	Listen (and read)	x
Speaking	Ask and answer the questions	Talk about/Describe

Table 1: The Activity Types Represented in the Study



The selection was motivated by the wish of covering as many of the activities in the book as possible and as many of the different language learning skills as possible, i.e., popularity and breadth. The aim of the selection was to make sure that the later analysis would be based on a good representation of the material. While different approaches could very probably bring to light further detail, as could be the case, for example, with categorising activities according to the number of students they are meant for (e.g. work in pairs, group work), or looking at the whole body of activities, these approaches were considered beyond the limitations of the thesis.

### **2.3 Participants**

Three experts participated in this study, all of whom had previous experience as English teachers. The first expert had 3.5 years of teaching experience with grades 1-12, the second had 8 years of teaching experience with grades 5-12, and the third had 15 years of teaching experience with grades 1-12. Of the experts the latter two are presently working as teachers. Of the three experts one had completed their MA studies in the MA Teacher of Foreign Languages (specialising in teaching English) studies, while two were nearing the completion of their studies in the same programme. As educational psychology is a part of the teacher training programme, all experts are considered to have at least a rudimentary grasp of it. Two of the three teachers were initially unfamiliar with the flow state, but achieved a sufficient understanding by reading a significantly condensed overview of it. All experts have extensive experience with different language learning materials and resources. All experts were intimately familiar with the *I Love English* series of language materials.

<b>Expertise</b>	<b>Expert 1</b>	<b>Expert 2</b>	<b>Expert 3</b>
Teaching experience (years)	(3.5)	8	15
Classes taught (range)	1-12	5-12	1-12
Level of Education	(MA Teacher of Foreign Languages, English)	MA Teacher of Foreign Languages, English	(MA Teacher of Foreign Languages, English)
Pedagogical psychology	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)
Flow Theory	Yes	(Yes)	(Yes)
Language learning materials and resources	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2: The Experts' Expertise

## 2.4 Procedure

The experts were first presented with an Introduction to the study (available in Appendix 1), then had to agree to and sign a Letter of Consent (Appendix 2), and finally were required to read an overview of flow theory before moving on to the study. They completed an assessment form (available in Appendix 3), which included six compulsory parts: five linear scale statements and one open-ended question. The assessment form started with a compulsory request for the name of the activity that was being scored so as to organise all the answers and to make sure each question was answered twice and ended with an optional open-ended question, which was meant for any further comments. The assessment was later followed by a focus group discussion (questions available in Appendix 4), which marked the end of the study.

### **2.4.1 The Assessment**

The assessment form was used to separately assess each of the twelve activities from the six categories. The linear scale statements were adapted from the validated Flow State Scale (FSS, Long version), a scale of 36 questions that were used to describe and measure performance along the components of flow (Jackson and Marsh 1996). The wordings of the questions were slightly altered to suit the teacher-student paradigm, as the scale was initially used for measuring sport performance. The open-ended question was adapted from Andrew G. S. Pask's design of an adaptive teaching machine, which showed keen awareness of the necessity of balance between skill and challenge in learning (Pask 1957). The aim of the open-ended question was to elicit more detailed commentary from the experts regarding this central condition.

The statements and questions were all linked to particular components of flow. While flow measures personal experience, the conditions and at times some of the other components can also be analysed from an impersonal perspective. This is especially relevant in the current case, as a teacher plays a very significant role in the evaluation and choosing of materials for use by students. All of the three conditions were scored: clear goals twice, direct and immediate feedback once, and a balance of skill and challenge once. Clear goals was scored twice as there are two components in the context of language activities that needed to be measured in terms of goals: the student needs to both know what to do and how to do it. A salient component for analysis, a sense of control, was assessed in terms of the closed-endedness or open-endedness of the activities. This is, again, something that teachers are in a position to assess and is extremely important with agency, individuation, and intrinsic motivation being central to both flow theory and the Estonian educational strategy.

<b>Component of Flow</b>	<b>Assessed</b>
A balance between skill and challenge	Yes
Clear goals	Yes
Direct and immediate feedback	Yes
Concentration	No
A loss of the feeling of self-consciousness	No
Distorted sense of time	No
Personal control over a situation	Yes
The activity is intrinsically rewarding	No
A lack of awareness of bodily needs	No
Absorption	No

Table 3: The Components of Flow Assessed

Each teacher had to assess eight activities and got to assess at least one activity from each learning skill category. The total of 24 evaluations meant that each of the twelve activities was assessed by two experts. The data collected in the first part of the study, in the form of scores for the activities, was used to ascertain how many, if any, of the activities ended up being considered by the teachers to be potentially good candidates for bringing about the flow state in students. The survey responses were analysed and the activities ranked, both individually and as averages for the three participants. The data was used in the second part of the study, the focus group discussion, with the aim of ascertaining whether the panel was in agreement over the results, i.e., whether they collectively came to the same conclusion about the scoring and the takeaways.

### **2.4.2 Focus Group Discussion**

The second part of the study, the focus group discussion, consisted of open-ended questions pertaining to the usefulness of flow theory in the context of (language) education and teachers' practices in choosing learning materials for the English language lesson. The aim of this part of the study was to: (1) see what the teachers thought about the evaluation, i.e., whether they considered using flow as a criterion for study material choices for the English language lesson a useful concept; (2) discuss potential shortcomings of the activities in the Student's Book as far as the scores of any or all of the four components that were being assessed; (3) discuss the implications of the importance of flow theory for students, curriculum designers, and policymakers.

## **2.5 Results**

The present section will cover the results of the study. The results from the assessment will be presented with figures, followed by an overview of the focus group discussion. The most important trends will be outlined and the percentages of activities that have scored "4", the threshold of flow, or above, provided.

### **2.5.1 The Assessment**

The first statement was: "In the current activity it is clear for the student what to do." This statement referred to the clear goals component and condition of flow, the first of the two statements about this condition. The results of the responses show this to be the statement with the highest uniformity and lowest variance in the responses: 19 answers out of 24, or a total of 79.2% of the responses were "Very

much”. The first statement crossed the flow threshold according to 100% of the responses.

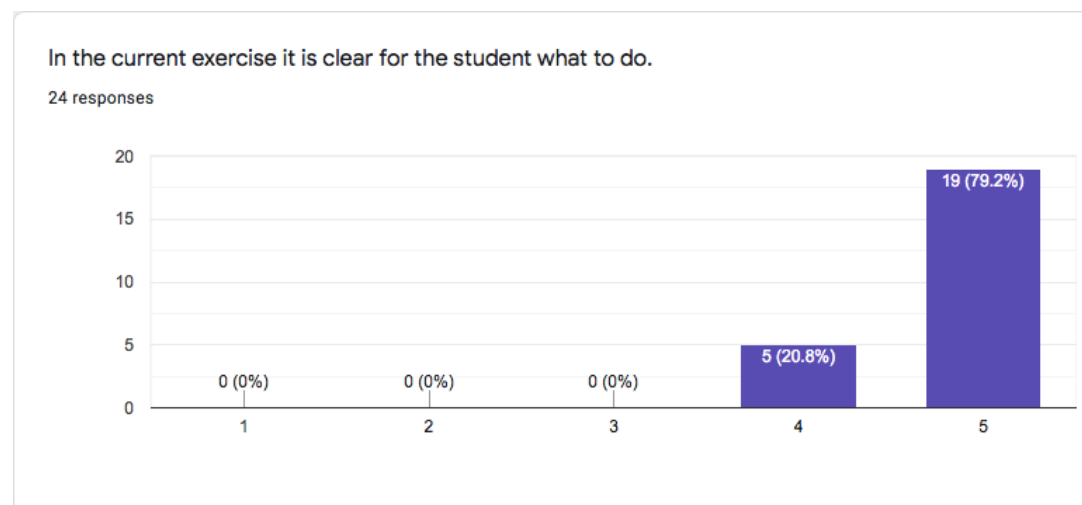


Figure 4: The Results of the Evaluation of the Component of Clear Goals (1)

The second statement was: “In the current activity it is clear for the student how to do it.” This was the second of two statements that referred to the clear goals condition of flow. The total of responses for “4” and “5” was 95.8%; only one response was lower than a “4” on the linear scale. The second statement crossed the flow threshold according to 95.8% of the responses.

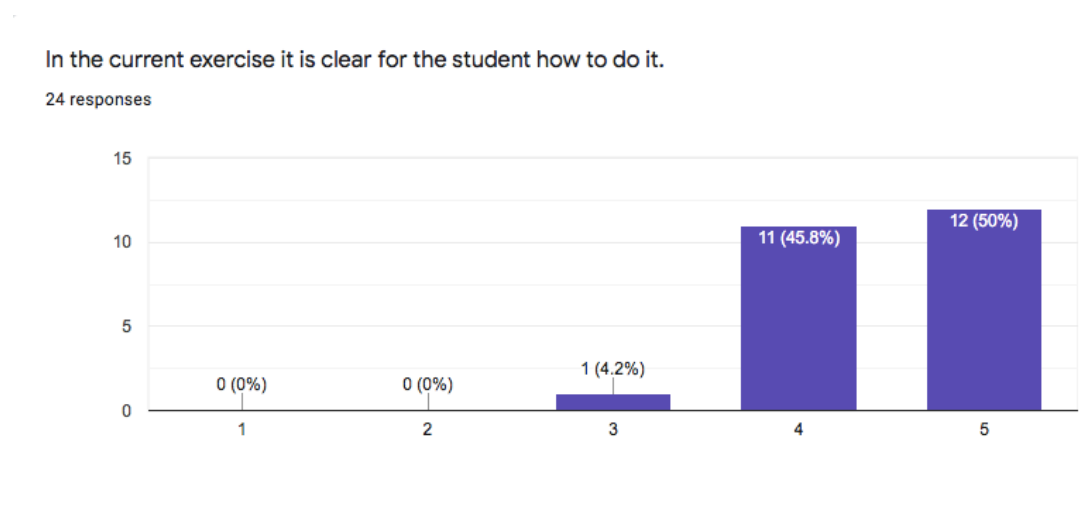


Figure 5: The Results of the Evaluation of the Component of Clear Goals (2)

The third statement was: “In the current activity it is possible for the student to know how well he or she is performing.” This statement refers to the direct and immediate feedback condition of flow. Variance was high, although ultimately relatively uniform. The majority of the activities were assessed with a “3” (45.8%) and a total of 91.6% of the responses were either a “3” or fell within one point of “3”. The third statement crossed the flow threshold according to 29.2% of the responses.

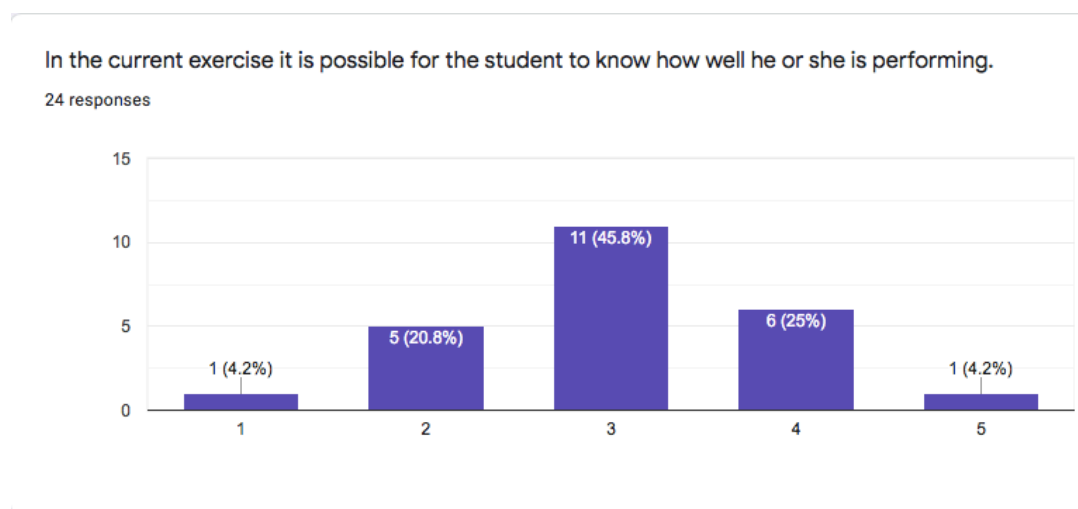


Figure 6: The Results of the Evaluation of the Component of Direct and Immediate Feedback

The fourth statement was: “The current activity allows students to have full control over their activity (responses).” This statement refers to the component of having a sense of personal control and was translated into the notion of closed-endedness and open-endedness of activities, which give the student diametrically opposite amounts of control over their responses. Variance was again high with scores “1” to “4” all being represented. Distribution was higher on the lower end of the scale: the most popular score was “1” with a total of 45.8% of the responses. The fourth statement crossed the flow threshold according to 16.7% of the responses.

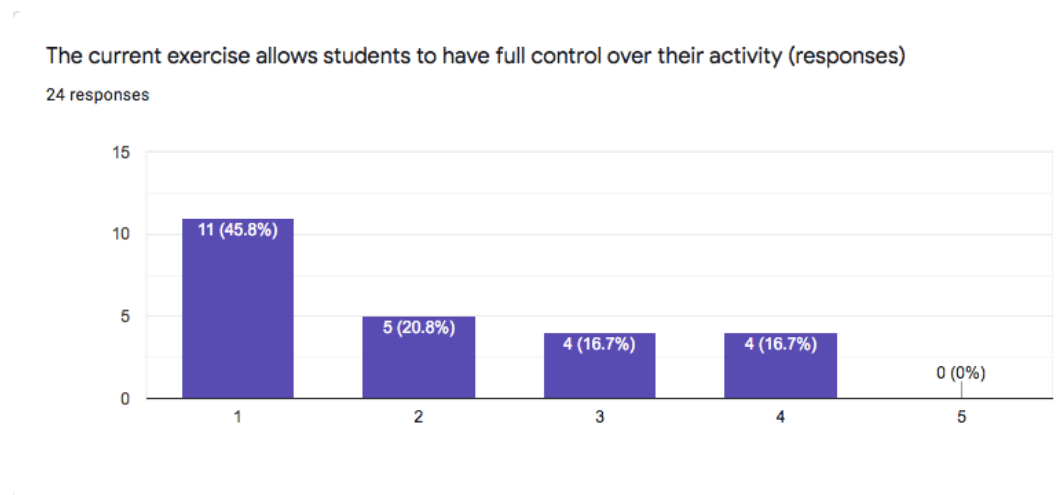


Figure 7: The Results of the Evaluation of the Component of A Sense of Personal Control

The fifth statement was: “The current activity has a balance between the student’s skills and the challenge that the activity provides.” This statement refers to the condition of having a balance between skill and challenge. Variance was high with distribution being higher on the higher end of the scale. More than half, a total of 52.5% of the answers were either a “4” or a “5”. The second statement crossed the flow threshold according to 52.5% of the responses.

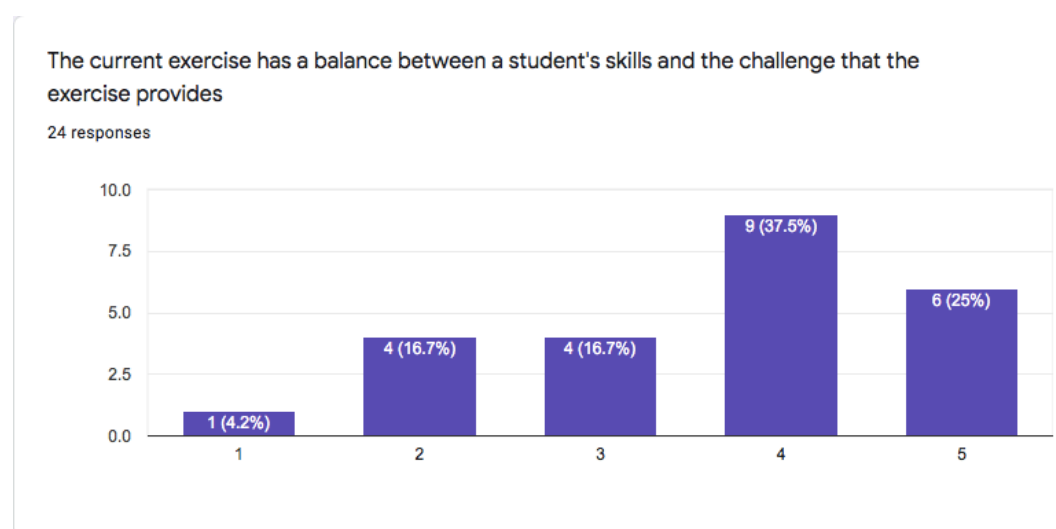


Figure 8: The Results of the Evaluation of the Component of A Balance Between Skill and Challenge



The last part of the assessment form was the following open-ended question: “Taking into consideration the level that the students should have achieved by the current stage in their studies (up to this lesson, including this activity), how would you describe the activity considering both the level of the information presented in terms of its suitability for his or her level of understanding and the level of the challenge of the activity in terms of its suitability to keep him or her engaged? For example: (1) If the rate of information dispersal is too slow: the student becomes bored; if too fast: the student becomes discouraged; (2) If the challenge of the activity is too low: the student becomes bored; if too high: the student becomes discouraged. How well, in your opinion, are these conditions met?” This question also refers to the condition of a balance between skill and challenge. The following observations could be made:

- While commenting on the level of the activity in relation to the student, activities were referred to as being of a “good level” or “suitable level” when there was a balance between skill and challenge;
- An activity could be “of a suitable level” but one that students would find boring;
- Referring to an activity as “easy” or “not challenging enough” was done in the same breath as mentioning that the activities were “repetitive” or that “students in general find the answers easily”, and that “all the tasks are very similar to each other and are not challenging enough”, while also mentioning that “nothing in the task relates to the student”; differentiating, in the process, between form and content.

### **2.5.2 Focus Group Discussion**

The focus group discussion followed the Focus Group Questions that were prepared for the study. The focus group discussion was in English and lasted a total of 2 hours and 15 minutes.

The first question in the study was about the evaluation and the instrument (the assessment form). The experts found the assessment form easy to fill in and the supporting material in the form of the overview of flow to be relevant and necessary. They suggested adding comment sections below each linear scale statement in the future, so that teachers could explain their choices. They found the components of flow theory and their expressions in the instrument helpful in suggesting why students might be bored, anxious, not immersed, i.e., not in an optimal state for studying, and what could be done about it. The experts knew the activities did not work and now they knew why. They said that they would be using the criteria that were represented by the components of flow in the assessment form in the future when thinking about their activity choices. It was also suggested that flow might be something that needs to be measured in a different context – perhaps not just within a activity, but also within the totality of a language class.

The second question in the study was about the relevance of flow in the realm of education and its stakeholders: teachers, students, curriculum designers, and policymakers. The experts all thought that flow was a relevant concept that deserved more attention, especially as it tied in well with student-centered learning, which is the aim of the Estonian education strategy. They also thought flow was important because it was directly linked to the mental well-being of both students and teachers. Teachers in Estonia were said to be in a much better position than elsewhere, according to the experiences of the experts, who had seen education systems from

different teacher exchange programmes and visits, because of the relative freedom that Estonian teachers have in curating their teaching processes. The experts were also curious about teachers experiencing flow in their work. It was suggested that Estonian students must learn to enjoy or focus more on the process of learning and less on the outcome. Focusing on the outcome, it was said, was counterproductive, with students ultimately internalising less and going on to view learning as a chore – something outside of themselves, done for someone else. “Do-did-done-forgotten” was used to describe this practice. Furthermore, it was suggested that if students learned about flow they would be themselves more able to control their experience of learning and life, which tied in with the notion of lifelong learning that Estonia was aiming for. As far as curriculum designers go – it was hoped for that they would all have experience in teaching in schools and be well-versed in pedagogical theory. When talking about policymakers it was once again stated that there was no conflict between flow theory and the Estonian education strategy.

The third question in the study pertained to the Student’s Book in terms of flow theory. The experts suggested that they are not partial to the series and feel that they cannot “sell” it to the students because they themselves do not believe the book works. They have never experienced students being enthusiastic about the material – never have they had to ask a student: “Finished already?!”. While in a certain sense the series made the teacher’s life easy, it came at the price of being boring for both teachers and students. They believed that one of the core problems with the series is that the students do not find it relatable. Something else that was brought up was that the book exuded a “correctness” – it was too safe in terms of content, but perhaps more importantly, the experts felt that the students did not have enough opportunities of making and learning from their mistakes. Overall, the experts thought that the

activities (in terms of form/structure/strategy) were too easy, the idea of “activity/workbook fatigue” was brought up to suggest a state that comes with material that is too repetitive and predictable. These points were once again related to a previously stated notion that students “do activities”, but do not “learn from them”. It was suggested that the material also focused too much on developing language skills and knowledge, but not developing “the student as a whole”. It was suggested that perhaps flow theory could be used to create a guideline for teachers to help them pick course books.

## 2.6 Discussion

The present section will discuss the findings and implications of the study. The aim of the exploratory study was to ascertain whether activities in the *I Love English 7 Student's Book* could potentially bring about flow. The further aims of the study were: to find out whether microflow, if not macroflow, was possible, and which flow components language activities enabled and which not (see Appendix 6).

The first component to be measured, the condition of clear goals, was scored very highly and with very high frequency – a close to 100% average over the two linear scale assessments with all but one response being rated “4” or above. This suggests that microflow, resulting from students knowing both what to do and how to do it, could be present. The high scores suggest, and this was corroborated during the focus group discussion, that the activity descriptions are easy to understand and straightforward, and that the students are well versed in the rather limited repertoire of activity types. The only question that the student could pose in regard to the component would be whether a particular activity would be done as a speaking or writing activity.

But there could very well be a flipside to this particular case of ease: while it is clear what to do, the activities themselves have become too familiar, which could pose a problem if the student is not overly motivated to begin with. First of all, few students are happy to constantly be doing the same types of activities and those who are could have a psychological predisposition towards minimal variety, or could be very disciplined and motivated – two types of student who usually do not make up the majority in a class. What is most probably happening in most cases is that students, knowledgeable of the task type and thus the strategy of solving the task, end up completing the task without giving it much consideration and thus learning relatively little. A case for a larger variety in activity types is easy to make, both to ensure that the students are paying attention to their activity and to keep them from getting bored.

The second component to be measured, direct and immediate feedback, showed high variance in scoring, with 45.8% of the responses being a “3” and a total of 29.2% scoring “4” or above. With less than a third of the responses suggesting the possibility of flow, it would be fair to say that this component is posing a problem in the attainment of flow. Direct and immediate feedback is feedback received while undertaking a task that allows the recipient to alter his or her behaviour to achieve the goal they are trying to attain. In a learning environment, this translates into a student being in an active role and more in control of their learning. When students cannot get the feedback they need quickly enough, they will most probably not be able to stay in flow as they cannot move forward with their work and could grow frustrated as they wait to get the teacher’s attention. Another aspect of this condition is that at any given time, a student knows how well he or she is doing. With a lot of the activities, the student will only find out how he or she did once the class starts checking the answers together.

There are two further observations that should be made: (1) a teacher-centered praxis seems to often be imbued, if not in theory then in practice, with a distrust of students and especially their willingness, interest, or ability to learn; (2) a teacher-centered approach does not seem to appreciate learning through making mistakes. Both observations might suggest a lack of resources. In a class of 30 students it is extremely challenging to make sure that each student is getting the attention and guidance that they need to align themselves with the class, i.e., become intrinsically motivated to something diligently. As such, teachers often have a “battle” mentality in the classroom, where they feel they have to battle and subjugate the students so that the latter will do what needs to be done. Making mistakes, the more idiosyncratic, the worse, also means that resources will have to be spent on correcting the mistake. While this is definitely a challenging problem, we now have more resources and computers will increasingly start sharing certain burdens, allowing teachers to automatise checking activities and certain types of feedback about an activity, and focus more on coaching and a personalised approach. Freeing the teachers from having to give certain types of feedback will also free the students from having to wait for it. It is very possible that computers will start giving students feedback about, for example, their grammar studies that is more in-depth than we can presently imagine.

The third component to be scored, a sense of personal control, showed high variance with most of the responses being in the lower end of the scale, 45.8% of the responses being a “1”. With a total of 16.7% of the responses being a “4” or above, microflow occurrences due to a sense of personal control seem to be occur rarely. This component was measured using the analogy of closed-ended and open-ended activities. The vast majority of activities in the Student’s Book were closed-ended

activities, such as cloze or matching activities. A large classroom that uses a teacher-centered approach is the norm around the world and in these settings it is unthinkable to have one teacher working with 30 students doing a significant number of open-ended activities. Open-ended activities, again, need more resources for their checking. It is not unreasonable to suggest that not all classrooms have the potential to take on such responsibility. As we are now on a societal level focusing more on a student-centered approach, the author believes that increasingly more control will be transferred to the students by teaching them new skills that will in turn support the control that they are being given.

The fourth component to be scored, a balance between skill and challenge, showed high variance and a relatively high concentration, a total of 52.5%, of the responses being “4” and above, making it the second best candidate for potential microflow occurrences. While the Student’s Book agrees with the state curriculum, the experts did not feel that many of the activities had the right balance, suggesting multiple times that the activities were too formulaic and required very little effort. The students would be skilled at applying the strategy, but that would not be the skill that the component had in mind. On more than one occasion, the adjective “boring” was used in relation to activities. In the discourse of flow, “boring” is a very specific term that describes a state where skills are high and challenges low, potentially further supporting the claim that the activities are too simplistic and rote.

In conclusion, of the four components of flow measured, clear goals scored very highly, suggesting that students know what they need to do and how they need to do what they need to do. The skills and challenges were, more often than not, balanced, although more variety in activity types would definitely be of benefit. Two of the four components, direct and immediate feedback and a sense of personal

control both scored very low in terms of microflow potential. In total, taking into consideration only the four components that were measured, none of the 12 activities scored were found to have the potential of bringing about macroflow. Common problems with the activities were their formulaic, rote nature, minimal individuation, low creativity required, content that is not considered very relatable to the students, and a strong dependence on the teacher. It could be argued that these activities still carry the hallmarks of a teacher-centered approach that is best suited for an authoritarian leadership style and large classes. As large classes and teachers used to teacher-centered learning are still very much the norm, it would seem that the *I Love English* series currently has an important role to play, with few schools having the resources to ensure small classes. Nevertheless, with the Estonian education strategy explicitly moving towards a student-centered teaching style, opportunities for flow should become increasingly more prevalent. Advances in computer technology, updated teacher training, changes in education strategy, and the freedom given to teachers to experiment should all work in favour of optimal experience.

## **2.7 Future Research**

The current study was limited in the number of participating experts. Expanding the pool of experts would give more weight to the results and might affect the average distribution of the scores. Feedback from the experts could also elicit more discussion points and both the problems that teachers face and the ways they try to solve them.

For the assessment form, a previously validated scale was adapted to fit the needs of the present study. A limited number of assessments were used to measure a limited number of flow components, as the majority of flow components would need



the subjects to be students as we are interested in their experiences while working on the activities. Future research should make use of the whole scale and apply the scale to students, which could give a much better understanding of the potential shortcomings of the teaching materials and what could be done to rectify the situation.

This study used the Student's Book from the *I Love English* series. Future research could look into other series of study materials and analyse them to see how they perform against this material. The experts taking part of this study also suggested that it would be helpful to create a guideline for teachers to help them pick course books or study materials. Guidelines for picking materials or to promote flow opportunities could thus be another outlet for adapting flow theory to the realm of education.

## CONCLUSION

The recent decades have witnessed the rise of positive psychology and the increasing popularity of one its most prominent theories: flow theory. The current iteration of the Estonian education strategy, with its focus on student-centered learning and subjective well-being, seems to fit seamlessly with flow theory. In view of the relevance of flow theory to modern-day education into consideration, it also has to be studied in the language learning context. The aim of the present thesis was to assess English language learning activities through the prism of flow theory. The primary research question set out by the thesis was: “Can activities in language learning enable students to achieve flow, a higher state of consciousness?”

According to the literature review, flow has, due to its applicability, been widely researched. Within the field of education, flow has inspired research ranging from studies into pedagogical systems (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi 2005) to affect and exam performance (Schüler 2007). Language learning has been researched since the 1990s, with the early 2000s signalling a coming of maturity in the field. As flow has been shown to exist in the language learning class (Schmidt et al 1996; Egbert 2004), it is of interest to consider the different elements that play a part in fostering potential flow opportunities. One of the central elements in any class is the study materials used. As there has seemingly been no research about them in relation to flow theory, the present thesis tried to address that research gap.

The findings of the study indicated that while the goals of the activities, the what and the how, could be said to be clear, and more often than not, skill and challenge present were balanced in the activities, there was, overall, a lack of direct and immediate feedback and a severe lack of a sense of personal control. As such,

taking into consideration just the four components measured, the results predicted potential microflow opportunities resulting from the first two components, but very few, if any, microflow opportunities resulting from the last two components. The results suggest that macroflow (or just flow) is probably out of the question for any of the activities as none scored highly enough on all four components simultaneously, a requirement for macroflow.

Being a small-scale exploratory study, there were multiple limitations which future research can address. Besides a larger number of participating experts, a change in the class of experts would be relevant: students need to give feedback about their personal experiences while solving the activities. This study only used a very limited amount of assessable statements from a validated scale and future research should incorporate more, if not all, of the statements in the scale. While the results, i.e., that language learning activities from the *I Love English 7 Student's Book* most probably do not bring about the state of flow, were not necessarily surprising, the takeaway for the experts was that they now had the theory as a framework to refer to when assessing activities and the tools to pinpoint where something might go wrong.

In a broader context, flow mirrors the trends in the current Estonian education strategy, which is moving in the direction of student-centered teaching and also names subjective well-being as one of its five learning objectives. The author would not be surprised to see more research and studies into the subjective well-being of students in Estonia and believes such research to be relevant, as mental well-being in Estonia is a sensitive subject and research done in recent years has shown the population, especially teenagers, to be subject to what has been called the “plague of the modern times” – depression (Kaukvere 2018; Jung 2020).

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## APPENDIX 1

### Introductory Letter

Dear Collaborator,

You are taking part in research, which has as its aim to suggest whether or not language activities commonly used in the English language classroom in Estonia could assist in the occurrence of flow in the students undertaking them.

Flow is a positive state of consciousness that can be described as one of deep concentration, where one is simultaneously calm, energetic, and happy. It is the result of the experiencer following an innermost passion with diligence.

According to the originator of flow theory, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow has eight dimensions that make up this complex phenomenon. We will be evaluating the activities according to four: a balance between skill and challenge, clear goals, immediate feedback, a sense of being in control of our actions.

You will be asked to assess a selection of activities from the *I Love English 7 Student's Book* from 2018. This final installment in the most popular English language learning study material series in Estonia is meant for students of the 9<sup>th</sup> form.

You will be asked to assess each activity in light of the four previously mentioned dimensions. To assist you in the evaluation process and a later focus group meeting, you will be provided with a brief, condensed introduction to flow theory based on the work of Csikszentmihalyi.

Following the evaluation, the participants will hold a focus group meeting in the form of a conference video call to discuss their evaluation experience and their thoughts on the relevance and applicability of flow theory in the educational setting.

Your research package will include: a consent form, an overview of flow theory, a link to the evaluation form, pictures of the activities you will be evaluating, and a form where you can mark off the activity that you assessed.

If at any time during this study you need clarification or further guidance, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you,

Sten Kaptén

## APPENDIX 2

### Letter of Consent

#### Informed consent for participants

Dear Participant,

I am collecting data as part of my MA thesis study on “Evaluating Preconditions of Flow in English Language Learning Activities” at the University of Tartu.

This research aims at gaining knowledge about the extent to which certain preconditions of the flow state are met within the English language activities in the *I Love English 7 Student's Book*. This knowledge could potentially assist teachers, students, curriculum designers, and policymakers to make better-informed decisions about learning materials.

Besides using an evaluation form, I plan to use a semi-structured interview (in an online focus group meeting) to collect data about teachers' perceptions on the potential benefits of flow theory within education and, more specifically, language learning. I plan to assess the activities according to four dimensions of flow and wish to find out whether the teachers find this to be a helpful approach.

If it were suitable for you, I would like to audio-record the online focus group meeting, so that I can analyse it in detail later on. During this study, I am not interested in your personal information. No personal information about you will be shared or publicised, and any information you provide will be anonymised before publication.

## Data collection

- The focus group meeting will be audio-recorded. The recording will be saved in m4a format.
- Additional text data will be collected using a Google docs Form to be analysed later. The assessment data will be digitised and stored in xlsx format.
- Both kinds of data will be stored securely on Google drive (under a password-protected personal account), and backed up on a password-protected personal computer.
- This data will be stored for no longer than 5 years.
- At any point, you can request to withdraw your data from the study, or from this storage.

## GDPR art. 13 requirements:

- Data Protection Officer (at the University of Tartu): [andmekaitse@ut.ee](mailto:andmekaitse@ut.ee)

## Consent Sheet

I understand that the project is designed to gather information for study purposes and further development of data visualisations and other technologies to understand evaluating preconditions of flow in English language learning activities.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time.
2. I understand that participation involves taking part in an online focus group meeting organised by a researcher from the University of Tartu. The meeting will last up to 50-60 minutes.
3. I agree to my interview being audio recorded.
4. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview, I have the right to decline to answer any question, or to end the interview.
5. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.
6. I understand that (anonymised) extracts from my interview may be quoted in research publications.
7. I have the right to ask access, rectification, or erasure of my data (*as long as it is possible to pinpoint my identity from that data*).
8. I have read and understood the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
9. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

*Signature of the participant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Please write your name and sign.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*Signature of the researcher*

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Data Collector

Name : Sten Kapten

Email : [stenkapten@gmail.com](mailto:stenkapten@gmail.com)

Institute : Department of English Studies, University of Tartu

Signature :

## APPENDIX 3

### Assessment Form

# Assessing Components of Flow in English Language Learning Activities

Form description

Email address \*

Valid email address

This form is collecting email addresses. [Change settings](#)

Name the activity that you are evaluating. \*

Chapter-activity, e.g., 3-1a.

Short answer text

In the current activity it is clear for the student what to do. \*

Is the activity description clear?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much

In the current activity it is clear for the student how to do it. \*

Are the instructions for the activity clear?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much



In the current activity it is possible for the student to know how well he or she is performing. \*

Does the activity offer constant feedback that lets the student know how he or she is progressing?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much

The current activity allows students to have full control over their potential responses. \*

Having control in this case pertains to how much freedom the activity allows for the student, i.e., whether the exercise is more closed-ended or open-ended. This must take into account the amount freedom the student is able to handle.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much

The current activity has a balance between a student's skills and the challenge that the activity provides. \*

The student's skills match the challenge of the activity.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much

Taking into consideration the level that the students should have achieved by the current stage in their studies (up to this lesson, including this exercise), how would you describe the activity considering both the level of the information presented in terms of its suitability for his or her level of understanding and the level of the challenge of the activity in terms of its suitability to keep him or her engaged? For example: (1) If the rate of information dispersal is too slow: the student becomes bored; if too fast: the student becomes discouraged; (2) If the challenge of the activity is too low: the student becomes bored; if too high: the student becomes discouraged. How well, in your opinion, are these conditions met? \*

The ideal situation for the student to perform an activity would be one where both the information and challenge presented to him or her are sufficiently complex or sufficient to maintain his or her interest, but not so complex as to discourage him or her.

Long answer text

Any further comments?

Long answer text

## **APPENDIX 4**

### **Focus Group Questions**

#### Focus Group: Discussion Questions

1. What did you think about the evaluation and the instrument (the assessment form) that you were using for the evaluation?
2. Is flow relevant in the realm of education?
  - If yes, then how?
  - How could it be relevant to:
    - teachers;
    - students;
    - curriculum designers;
    - policymakers?
3. What did you think about the Student's Book in terms of flow theory, what perceptions did you have about the activities?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## APPENDIX 5

### Activity Examples

The following are examples of the actual activities used in the study from the *I Love English 7 Student's Book* from 2018. The activities have been abridged where necessary. Each activity title is followed by the chapter, activity, and page numbers in brackets.

#### Reading:

1. Read part 2 of the story. Put the beginnings (A-F) in the correct places (1-5) in the text. There is one extra beginning. (1-6, pg. 12)

A They thought that

C To his surprise

E You Were here first

#### Writing:

1. Find, write, and learn. (4-9, pg. 32)

1 millegi eest tänulik

5 end süüdi tundma

2. Finish the sentences. (13-3, pg. 80)

1 William Shakespeare is one of the world's...

#### Listening:

1. Listen to and read the dialogues. (1-2a, pg. 8)

1      A. I'm sick and tired of cleaning up the mess you always leave after your breakfast.

2      B. I'm sorry. I was afraid of missing the bus. I promise to get up earlier tomorrow.

Speaking:

1. Ask and answer questions. (17-9, pg. 110)

1 What does the word *wetland* describe?

2. Talk about the air. Use the titles of the paragraphs in activity 6b as prompts. (2-9, pg. 19)

## APPENDIX 6

### Evaluation Data Figures

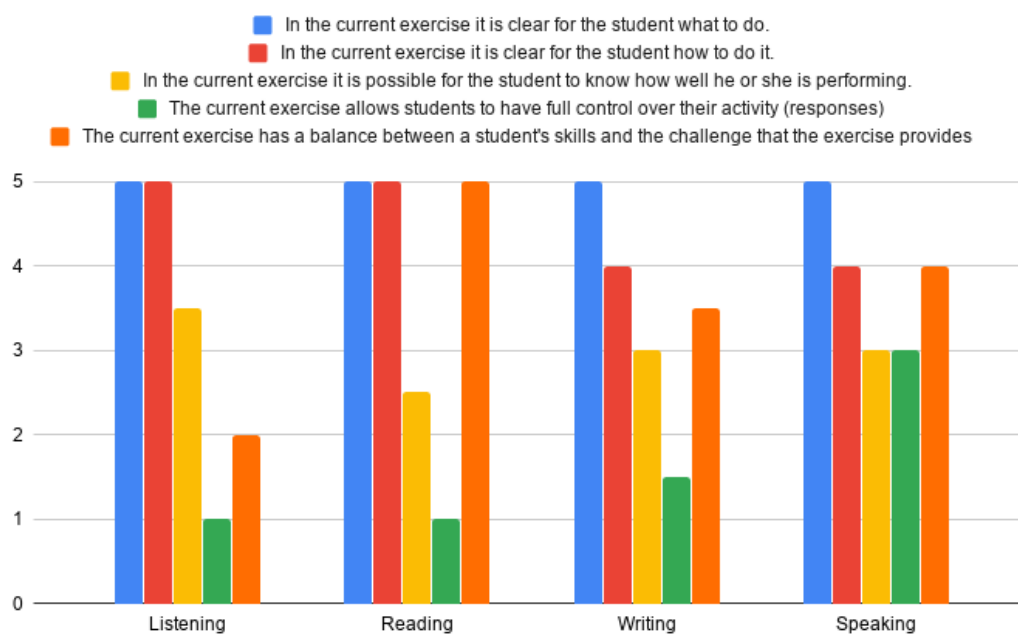


Figure 9: The Results of the Evaluation Sorted According to Skill

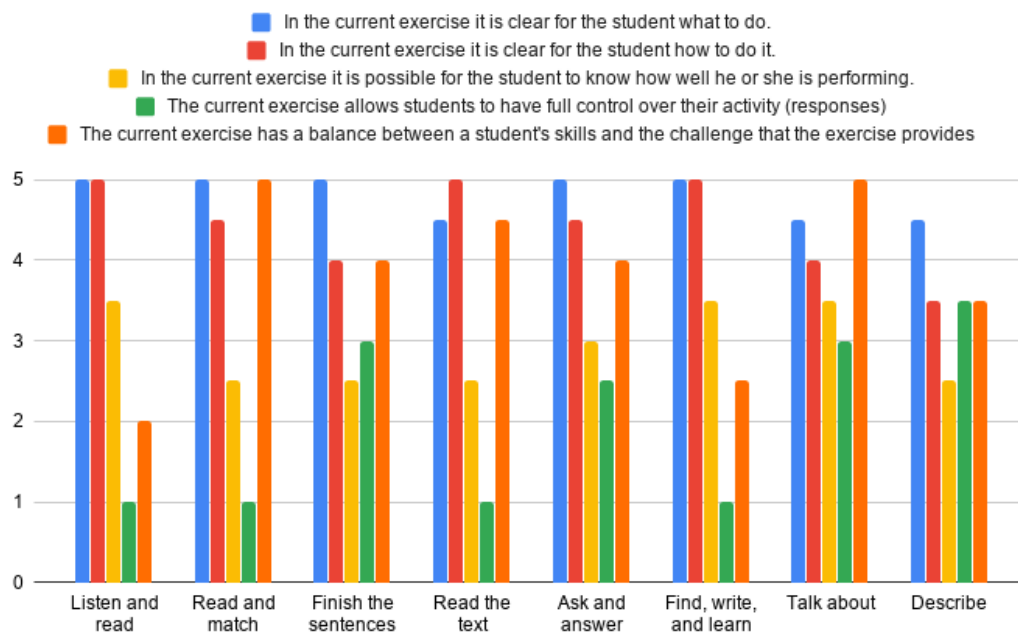


Figure 10: The Results of the Evaluation Sorted According to Activity Type

## APPENDIX 7

Table of Data from the Assessment Form

Activity type (Foundational Skill) (Designation)	In the current activity it is clear for the student what to do. Clear goals	In the current activity it is clear for the student how to do it. Clear goals	In the current activity it is possible for the student to know how he or she is performing. Direct and immediate feedback	The current activity allows students to have full control over their potential responses. A sense of personal control	The current activity has a balance between a student's skills and the challenge that the activity provides. A balance between skill and challenge
<b>Listen and read (L) (1-2a)</b>	5	5	4	1	2
<b>Listen and read (L) (1-2a)</b>	5	5	3	2	3
<b>Listen and read (L) (13-4a)</b>	5	5	2	1	2
<b>Listen and read (L) (13-4a)</b>	5	5	2	1	5
<b>Read and match (R) (1-6)</b>	5	5	3	1	5
<b>Read and match (R) (1-6)</b>	5	4	3	1	5
<b>Read the text (R) (13-6)</b>	4	5	2	1	4
<b>Read the text (R) (13-6)</b>	5	5	3	3	4
<b>Ask and answer (S) (16-11)</b>	5	5	3	4	4
<b>Ask and answer (S) (16-11)</b>	4	4	3	2	4

<b>Ask and answer (S) (17-9)</b>	5	4	4	2	4
<b>Ask and answer (S) (17-9)</b>	5	5	4	3	5
<b>Talk about (S) (2-9)</b>	5	4	3	3	5
<b>Talk about (S) (2-9)</b>	4	4	3	3	3
<b>Describe (S) (4-10)</b>	4	4	2	4	4
<b>Describe (S) (4-10)</b>	5	3	4	2	5
<b>Finish the sentences (W) (13-3)</b>	5	4	3	2	4
<b>Finish the sentences (W) (13-3)</b>	5	4	1	4	4
<b>Finish the sentences (W) (15-2)</b>	4	4	2	4	4
<b>Finish the sentences (W) (15-2)</b>	5	4	4	1	2
<b>Find, write, and learn (W) (18-5)</b>	5	5	3	1	3
<b>Find, write, and learn (W) (18-5)</b>	5	5	3	1	3
<b>Find, write, and learn (W) (19-5)</b>	5	4	4	1	2
<b>Find, write, and learn (W) (19-5)</b>	5	5	4	1	2

## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Sten Kapten**

### **Evaluating Components of Flow in English Language Learning Activities** ***Flow* eelduste olemasolu hindamine inglise keele harjutustes**

Magistritöö

Aasta: 2020

Lehekülgede arv:

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva magistritöö eesmärk on hinnata *flow*-nimelise positiivse teadvusseisundi (tõlgitud nii “kulgemiseks” kui ka “voogamiseks”) eeldusteesinemisi inglise keele ülesannetes. Ülesannete valik on tehtud õpikust *I Love English 7 Student's Book*. Tulenevalt suurest ülemaailmsest huvist vaimse heaolu vastu ja Eesti tasandil riiklikus haridusstrateegias subjektiivse heaolu seadmine üheks viiest õpieesmärgiks, on teadustöö vaimu- ja teadvusseisundite suunal igati aktuaalne. Antud magistritöö on esimene, kompav samm kohaliku õppematerjali hindamisel läbi *flow* prisma, sooviga tuvastada valitud ülesannete võimekust tuua potentsiaalset esile muutuseid õpilaste teadvusseisundis ja toetada seeläbi nii nende subjektiivset heaolu kui ka õpitulemusi.

Antud töö koosneb sissejuhatausest, kahest peatükist ja kokkuvõttest.

Esimeses peatükis on tutvustatud *flow* teooriat ja sellealaseid uurimustöid laiemalt, seejärel hariduses ning lõpuks kitsamalt võõrkeeleeõppe kontekstis. Kuigi kirjandusest tuleb esile toetavaid eeldusi antud uurimuse läbiviimiseks, nt mitmetes uurimustes *flow* tuvastamine võõrkeeletunnis, on õppematerjalide säärasel viisil analüüsimine siiski tõenäoliselt esmakordne.

Teine peatükk annab ülevaate läbiviidud uurimusest ning sisaldab ka tulemusi ning nende analüüsi. Uurimuse raames hindasid kolm õpetajat vastavalt eelnevalt valideeritud *flow* skaalale, mis sai kohandatud antud uurimuse otstarbeks, valikut inglise keele ülesannetest. Hindamisele järgnes fookusgrupi vestlus. Väheüllatavalt selgus, et vaatluse all olevad ülesanded ei võimalda tõenäoliselt *flow*'d esile kutsuda tulenevalt teatud komponentide puudulikkusest esinemisest ülesannetes. Antud uurimus on aga näiteks nii osavõtjate arvu kui ka vaatluse all olevate komponentide hulga osas väikesemõõduline. Teatud komponente on *flow* kontekstis võimalik hinnata ainult osavõtjatel, siinkohal siis õpilastel, ning just õpilaste kaasamine uuringusse võiks olla järgmine, suur samm.

Märksõnad: inglise keel, keeleõpe, inglise keele õpetamine, õppematerjalid, teadvusseisundid, *flow*



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