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An Investigation on Reading Flow Experience Among EFL Indonesian Students

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Abstract. This study investigated students' perception of flow experience (FE) when reading extensively and conditions that enabled FE. The participants were 36 EFL students from a private university in West Java, Indonesia, who were involved in an extensive reading (ER) program using the XReading application. This study is a quantitative study in which data were collected through questionnaire distribution and students' reading results in Xreading. Regarding the findings, it was found that the students experienced flow during their extensive reading. Specifically, although when joining ER for two semesters, the students experienced flow, the flow experience in the two semesters was high. Second, the study found that the most significant condition for the students to experience flow is feedback. Third, the correlation result between students' flow and the numbers of words they read in the first and second semester were respectively not statistically significant and technically a positive correlation. However, the relationship between the variables is weak in the second semester. The result also showed that in the 2nd semester the larger the number of words read, the higher the students' flow experience is which indicated that more often the students do ER, the bigger their chance to experience flow. Therefore, increasing students' opportunities for experiencing flows could improve the quality of their language learning.

Keywords: *Flow, Extensive Reading, Optimal Experience*

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INTRODUCTION

Reading in the context of language learning plays an important role. Babayan (2019) addressed that much literature in ELT affirms that reading is crucial in foreign language learning. Ali et al. (2022) mentioned that reading can assist foreign language learners when they do not have enough exposure to the language. However, keeping learners interested in reading in the target language is not easy, leading to questions on which approach should be implemented to motivate learners to read L2 texts as much as possible and make them independent readers. One approach that is becoming popular to encourage learners to read more – hence, learn better – is the extensive reading (ER). Ali et al. (2022) synthesized the findings from research on ER in various countries in the past decade and found out that ER activities have helped learners to develop their language skills, as well as improve their vocabulary and grammar.

There is a growing interest in the area of extensive reading, which is an approach for teaching and learning reading which focus is on encouraging learners to read a massive amount of reading material (Kirchhoff, 2013). It is important to motivate and engage the learners in their reading to ensure their success in their extensive reading programme. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) introduced the theory of motivation and engagement in the field of psychology, suggesting some conditions that can create the “optimal experiences” that deal with human’s most enjoyable moments. The optimal experiences can lead to the state of “flow”, which Csikszentmihalyi (2014) defined as “a holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement”. The optimal experiences can occur only when the person doing flow activities is totally immersed in what he or she is involved in. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), there are nine conditions to experience flow: clear goals, immediate feedback, equivalence between challenges and skills, deep concentration, self-control, forgotten problems, loss of self-consciousness, altered sense of time, and autotelic experience.

In order that flow experience can be generated, the design of the activities must be carefully considered (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow activities must match the learners’ present skills; yet provide suitable challenges that do not trigger learners’ anxieties or boredom (Rathunde, 2003). The balance between skills and challenges is crucial to make sure that those doing the activities can embrace the feeling of success. This will motivate the learners to continue doing more activities and with the previously acquired skills, the learners challenge themselves with more difficult tasks (Egbert, 2003, p. 502).

Egbert (2003, 2004) stated that the Flow Theory can be implemented in the foreign language learning (FLL) research as it may offer a new framework for investigating language learning activities. This is in line with Csikszentmihalyi (1990), who argued that when language learners are doing reading activities, they will experience flow as well as identifying the process of reading as a reward when they enjoy what they read. Such enjoyment can occur only when challenges and abilities are harmoniously combined, making it possible for the learners to be immersed in the reading activities they are doing. This is shown by the learners’ loss of self-focus

and concerns; besides, they might even lose track of time ([MacIntyre, 2016, pp 9-10](#)).

However, there were only few research done to study flow in the areas of L2 learning and SLA ([Cho, 2018; MacIntyre, 2016](#)). A study investigating the presence of Flow Experience (FE) in translation tasks was done by [Mirlohi et al., 2011](#). There were also other studies on intercultural and intracultural tasks, task complexity and modality ([Cho, 2018](#)), and Extensive Reading ([Fongpaiboon, 2017; Kirchhoff, 2013](#)). All of these studies indicate that FE occurs in language learning, although how much learners are immersed in their tasks is influenced by various factors, such as learner characteristics and environmental conditions ([Egbert, 2003](#)); also external conditions such as time, boredom, and health ([Fongpaiboon, 2017; Kirchhoff, 2013](#)). Therefore, there will be variations in learners' flow experience, not only among the learners themselves but also across tasks and activities ([Mirlohi et al., 2011, p. 265](#)).

Currently, very limited research discusses flow experience in extensive reading activities in L2 contexts. The first empirical study on the relationship between flow experience and ER was done by [Kirchhoff \(2013\)](#), examining 64 Japanese EFL learners' perception of flow when they were involved in ER. In her argument, she stated that extensive reading (ER) characteristics resemble the flow experience conditions. She also argued that when learners had become used to reading in English, such conditions would facilitate the emergence of a flow-like experience ([Kirchhoff, 2013](#)). In her study, Kirchhoff employed questionnaires to obtain data on how many times the learners experienced flow-like occurrences together with descriptions of the conditions that created flow, as well as learners' reading speed and amount of reading. She did the research for two successive years, with an updated questionnaire spread to the learners in the second year, focusing only on specific elements of FE. The findings of her research showed that flow experiences were perceived by the participants when the extensive reading met the following factors: the content of graded readers that matched the learners' interest (40%), a reading location that was quiet (27%), as well as the learners' abilities that match graded reader level that they choose (12%). She also found that the amount of reading did not correlate with flow-like experiences and argued that the quantity of reading was affected by many factors. In an agreement with [Grabe \(2008\)](#), [Kirchhoff \(2013\)](#) claimed that the flow experience aids learners' engagement with their extensive reading, so extensive reading can be suggested to be one of the learning approaches that promote the effectiveness of language teaching as long as flow conditions are included.

A more recent study on ER and flow experience was conducted by ([Fongpaiboon, 2017](#)). The study investigated the perception of FE in ER and the conditions attributed to FE. Fongpaiboon involved 68 second-year undergraduate Thai students to be the participants in her research. They were first-semester students from the Department of Applied Computer Science and Civil Engineering who had joined an English reading course. To obtain data, she implemented both quantitative and qualitative instruments: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was used to obtain demographic data on the participants and statistical data on participants' attitudes toward reading, flow state

scale, and ER tracking sheet. The flow state scale questionnaire included nine conditions of flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009); namely, clear goals, immediate and unambiguous feedback, skills-challenges balance, concentration on the task at hand, sense of control, action-awareness merging, loss of self-consciousness, transformation of time, and autotelic experience. The result of Fongpaiboon's study showed that FE happened during ER. Besides, the result indicated that FE is strongly associated with the frequency of students' reading extensively but only slightly related to the amount of time students spent on ER.

Thus, both the studies of Fongpaiboon (2017) and Kirchhoff (2013) indicate that FE does occur in ER and that how much time spent on reading does not correlate with the occurrence of FE. However, in Kirchhoff's study, there was no correlation between flow experience and the number of extensive readings done by the learners. This suggests that more studies are needed to yield more information on this issue.

In addition, Kirchhoff (2013) pointed out that readers' positive motivation to read might be withdrawn when confronted by negative motivational influences. This issue was also addressed by Fongpaiboon's (2017) as the gap in her study, that there was no post-reading activity which allowed learners to share what they have read with others in the class. This hindered the learners from sharing personal meaning and value obtained from the reading, which should be beneficial when the learners can be involved in a reading community. Therefore, Fongpaiboon recommended creating a reading community in class to positively engage students in reading and increase their motivation to read in large amounts.

In Indonesia, it is noticeable that the interest in implementing Extensive Reading (ER) is growing (Waring & Husna, 2019). However, no studies have discussed FE in Extensive Reading Programs in Indonesia. Previous studies on ER were focused on how to implement ER in Indonesia (Anandari & Iswandari, 2019), teachers' and students' perception of a post-ER activity (Hadiyanto, 2019), the potential of ER to develop critical thinking skills (Husna, 2019). The findings of these studies revealed some challenges in ER implementation along with the benefits and promising results of having ER in the EFL learning program. This encourages for more ER initiatives to take place in different contexts in Indonesia. With this in mind, this study aims to investigate flow experiences in students who joined an ER program in a private university in Indonesia. The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. To what extent does FE take place in students' ER?
2. What are the conditions that students consider enabling FE in ER?
3. Is there any correlation between students' flow and the sum of words they read?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative method. Thus, the study aimed to gather numerical data to uncover trends and evaluate some relationships of the chosen variables which in this study was related to flow and students' extensive reading.

Participants

This study involved 36 undergraduate students who enrolled in two reading courses at a Private University located in Indonesia. Specifically, it was in West Java.

Data collection: research instrument and research procedure

The study was conducted during the participants' 1st and 2nd semesters. The data-gathering instruments used were a questionnaire and document analysis from Xreading, an online library that consists of different levels of graded readers. The instruments were used to obtain participants' reading data and flow of experience. When completing the survey in the last meeting of each semester, the participants were asked to state their choice, which was in the form of a survey with a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was adopted from [Fongpaiboon \(2017\)](#). It contained 36 items that specifically ask for:

Topic	Item number
1. clear goal	1, 10, 19, and 28
2. students' immediate feedback as well as unambiguous feedback	2, 11, 20, and 29
3. skills-challenges balance	3, 12, 21, and 30
4. students' ability to concentrate on the task at hand	4, 13, 22, and 31
5. students' control	5, 14, 23, and 32
6. students' action-awareness merging	6, 15, 24, and 33
7. students' loss of self-consciousness	7, 16, 25, and 34
8. time transformation	8, 17, 26, and 35
9. autotelic experience	9, 18, 27, and 36

We calculated the internal consistency of 36 items in the survey. The alpha coefficient of the calculation was 0.89, which showed the items' consistency. Thus, this study could be conducted.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following parts present the results and discuss this study.

Result

Each result of the following research questions will be presented respectively. To what extent does FE take place in students' ER? 2. What are the conditions that students consider enabling FE in ER? 3. Is there any correlation between students' flow and the sum of words they read?

3.1 Flow experience

To answer research question number 1, "what extent does FE take place in students' ER?", the result of the questionnaire is presented in [Table 1](#). It is shown that the final mean scores of flow survey in the 1st and 2nd semesters were respectively 3.96, SD = 0.69, M = 3.68, SD = 0.70. This indicated a high point which showed that the students have experienced a high flow during their extensive

reading practice in class; however, their experiences in the first and second semesters are a bit different with higher flow experience in the first semester.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of flow state scale in the 1st and 2nd semesters

Semester	The 1 st semester			The 2 nd semester		
Flow state scale items	M	SD	ME	M	SD	ME
Goal	3.79	0.76	High	3.42	0.86	high
Feedback	4.22	0.58	very high	3.99	0.64	high
Balance	3.92	0.61	High	3.73	0.57	high
Concentration	3.81	0.65	High	3.58	0.62	high
Control	4.01	0.75	High	3.56	0.74	high
Awareness	3.81	0.61	High	3.49	0.75	high
Consciousness	4.03	0.63	High	3.84	0.63	high
Time	3.99	0.88	High	3.81	0.80	high
Experience	4.06	0.74	High	3.72	0.68	high

In order to test the significance of participants' mean scores, one sample t-test was conducted by applying a hypothesis mean score of 3.41 as the starting point of a high flow experience (FE) level. In the following Table 2, it was found that the mean scores of students' FE after undergoing ER in the 1st and 2nd semesters were significant, respectively ($t = 6.144$; $p = .000$; $t = 6.335$, $p = .000$). Thus, it conformed the hypothesis that students' FE mean scores would reach a high level (3.41). In detail, statistically significant differences took place in the flow conditions in the first semester. In that semester, there were only 6 flow conditions found to be statistically significant. Concentration, control and goal were found not statistically significant.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of students' flow conditions and One sample t-test in the 1st semester

Flow state scale items	M	SD	ME	T	P	Meaning
Goal	3.79	0.76	high	3.00599	.004	Significant
Feedback	4.22	0.58	very high	8.466095	.000	Significant
Balance	3.92	0.61	high	5.012818	.000	Significant
Concentration	3.81	0.65	high	3.654201	.000	Significant
Control	4.01	0.75	high	4.775766	.000	Significant
Awareness	3.81	0.61	high	3.873588	.000	Significant
Consciousness	4.03	0.63	high	5.84051	.000	Significant
Time	3.99	0.88	high	3.960302	.000	Significant
Experience	4.06	0.74	high	5.28973	.000	Significant
Total	3.96	0.69	high	6.144387	.000	Significant

Note: Significant at $p < .05$

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of students' flow conditions and One sample t-test in the 2nd semester

Flow state scale items	M	SD	ME	T	P	Meaning
Goal	3.42	0.86	high	0.046298	.963	Not significant
Feedback	3.99	0.64	high	5.371697	.000	Significant
Balance	3.73	0.57	high	3.352232	.001	Significant
Concentration	3.58	0.62	high	1.690283	.099	Not Significant
Control	3.56	0.74	high	1.236297	.224	Not significant
Awareness	3.49	0.75	high	0.668734	.508	Significant
Consciousness	3.84	0.63	high	4.116058	.000	Significant
Time	3.81	0.80	high	3.017277	.004	Significant
Experience	3.72	0.68	high	2.762318	.009	Significant
Total	3.68	0.70	high	6.335501	.000	Significant

Note: Significant at $p < .05$

3.2 Conditions enabling flow experience in extensive reading

Table 4 shows students' reading flow in the 1st and 2nd semesters which shows the findings for research question number 2, "What are the conditions that students consider enabling FE in ER?" In the first semester columns, the scores acquired suggest that students did experience flow during their Extensive Reading (ER). Eight out of nine conditions of flow get high scores in the Likert scale, while one of the conditions, *feedback*, scores very high (4.22). There are three other conditions which show a mean score above four, they are: *experience*, *consciousness*, and *control*, respectively.

In terms of flow state items, there are several items that gets very high scores. The item with the highest score belongs to the condition of *feedback*, in which the item 2 regarding the enjoyment of reading graded readers that they chose. The second highest score in the flow scale item 6 about ER that takes place routinely and without any effort which belongs to the condition *awareness*. It is worth noticing that even though the average score for the condition of *concentration* gets the second lowest score, one of the items in that flow condition item 31 regarding forcing oneself to stop ER, is scaled very high (4.31). However, another item in *concentration*, item 4 about controlling one's my mind so that he or she can concentrate on their graded readers scores the lowest. The condition of flow with the lowest score is *goal*, with its item 1 about setting goal of how many pages and minutes he or she would read and spend.

These findings indicate that in the first semester the students experience flow highly, and the main reason is because they enjoy the reading material. The students are also encouraged to read because they realized that doing extensive reading improves their reading abilities, hence they find that extensive reading is worth doing. The students also enjoy the freedom to set the reading goals, and to

have freedom in choosing the time and place to do their extensive reading. However, the fact that in doing the extensive reading the students are free to set their own goal makes them difficult to set how many pages and how much time they would spend on reading, and their concentration during extensive reading still need to be controlled.

The last three columns of Table 4 present students' reading flow in the 2nd semester. It is shown that the students also experience flow in the 2nd semester. However, there is no flow condition that gets a very high score in the 2nd semester; however, all the nine conditions of flow still achieve high scores with *feedback* as the highest and *goal* as the lowest. Three other flow conditions: *consciousness*, *time* and *experience* are the second, third and fourth highest scores.

In terms of the items in each flow condition, only one item in the category of *feedback* that deals with students' freedom to choose material for their extensive reading (item 2) gets a very high score. This is still the same as the result in the first semester. More flow items are in the moderate scales, with the item regarding the regular occurrence of extensive reading in the condition of *awareness* having the lowest score (2.81).

Although the students still experience flow in the second semester, the scores for each flow condition is not as high as those in the first semester. Also, there is no flow condition that gets a very high score in the 2nd semester; however, all the nine conditions of flow still achieve high scores with *feedback* as the highest and *goal* as the lowest. Three other flow conditions: *consciousness*, *time* and *experience* are the second, third and fourth highest scores.

As previously mentioned, the flow condition *feedback* regarding the enjoyment of reading graded readers that they chose scores highest in both semesters. Other flow conditions show high scores without any significant gap in the scores between the 1st and 2nd semesters. The flow condition that gets the lowest score is also the same in both classes, that is *goal*. In general, the result in the 2nd semester is lower than the 1st semester, with the widest gap in the flow condition *control*.

One of the items in the *balance* category indicating students' feeling of their reading abilities to read extensive reading material that are more challenging (item 21), shares the same score (3.42) in the two semesters. More flow scale items with moderate scores appear in the 2nd semester, with the biggest gap between the 1st and 2nd semesters in the *goal* category, is in the students' perception toward achieving goals successfully (item 19). Some other items with big gap between the 1st and 2nd semesters are items 32 and 14. Both items belong to the flow condition *control*. However, there is one item in the category of *consciousness* in which the score in the 2nd semester is higher than that in the 1st semester. The flow item is item 16 that mentions students who were not worried about the researchers' thought of their readings.

These findings indicate that even though in the 2nd semester the flow condition seems to be lower than when the students are in their 1st semester, the students still find their extensive reading material enjoyable which results in their experiencing flow. As mentioned above, the flow condition *control* in the 2nd

semester decreases considerably, as there are two flow scale items whose score becomes moderate in the 2nd semester. This indicates that students need more motivation in doing extensive reading as they do not find the freedom to manage time, place and strategies in doing the reading important. The only item showing an increase in the 2nd semester is about how the students feel about researchers thought of their reading. It seems that as the students have done similar activities in extensive reading in the 1st semester and they do not find how researchers take part in their reading, in the 2nd semester they do not consider the researchers as an important factor.

Table 4 Flow conditions in the 1st and 2nd semesters

Semester	The first semester		The second semester	
	M	SD	M	SD
Flow state scale items				
Goal	3.79	0.76	3.42	0.86
Feedback	4.22	0.58	3.99	0.64
Balance	3.92	0.61	3.73	0.57
Concentration	3.81	0.65	3.58	0.62
Control	4.01	0.75	3.56	0.74
Awareness	3.81	0.61	3.49	0.75
Consciousness	4.03	0.63	3.84	0.63
Time	3.99	0.88	3.81	0.80
Experience	4.06	0.74	3.72	0.68

3.2 The correlation between students' flow and the sum of words they read

To answer research question number 3, "Is there any correlation between students' flow and the sum of words they read?", the study used a Pearson test. In the first semester, the association between the two variables would not be considered statistically significant (P: .477346, R: 0.1223). In the second semester, although technically a positive correlation, the relationship between the variables is weak, as it is indicated by the value which is near to zero. The nearer the value to zero, the weaker the relationship is (P: .007 [significant], R: 0.4391).

Discussion

This part discusses the results that were presented in the previous part. In regard to the presence of FE in students' ER, it can be states that it occurred. It is similar to the study of [Fongpaiboon \(2017\)](#). The finding of the high mean score is also similar to the finding of [Fongpaiboon \(2017\)](#). However, the mean scores in this study is slightly bigger that the study of her study which only reached 3.64. This finding shows that students do experience flow in their Extensive Reading (ER). If the students keep experiencing flow in their ER, they will likely read routinely in their lives ([Day & Bamford, 1998](#)).

Considering the conditions that students consider enabling FE in ER, it was found that there were only six flow conditions which were statistically significant. Three conditions namely concentration, control and goal were found not

statistically significant. These findings are different from [Fongpaiboon's \(2017\)](#). Her study found that six flow conditions:

1. Immediate and unambiguous feedback
2. Autoelic experience
3. Sense of control
4. Skill-challenge balance
5. Clear goals
6. Loss of self-consciousness

were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. However, in terms of awareness merging of students' actions, the conditions of students' concentration while working on a task, as well as the transformation of time, there was no difference. It indicates that the differences might be due to many factors which are embedded in different variables of the contexts.

An interesting finding in the flow condition items is that students' motivation to do the extensive reading decreases, which influences how they perceive their flow experience. The finding supports the argument that over a long period of time, students' motivation to read would fluctuate greatly. Although the students still experience flow in the second semester, the scores for each flow condition is not as high as those in the first semester. Also, there is no flow condition that gets a very high score in the 2nd semester; however, all the nine conditions of flow still achieve high scores, with *feedback* as the highest and *goal* as the lowest. Three other flow conditions: *consciousness*, *time* and *experience* are the second, third and fourth highest scores.

Another finding which is also important is that it seems that as the students have done similar activities in extensive reading in the 1st semester and they do not find how researchers take part in their reading, in the 2nd semester they do not consider the researchers as an important factor. The finding of the mean score is similar to the result of [Fongpaiboon's \(2017\)](#) which also got a high mean on the item. The participants in her study also did not show concern about what the researcher thought about their readings. However, in terms of the exact mean score, her study which was 3.9 was slightly higher than the mean scores of this study which were 3.72 and 3.78 respectively for the 1st and 2nd semesters

The finding related to students' flow and the sum of words they read shows that the two variables are not considered statistically significant. In the second semester, although technically a positive correlation, the relationship between the variables is weak. These findings indicate that the more often the students do ER, the bigger their chance to experience flow. The finding is in line with [Kirchhoff's \(2013\)](#) who stated that FE is positively influenced by one's reading habit. In other words, the students who tend to experience flow are likely to become lifelong readers ([Day & Bamford, 1998](#); [Grabe, 2008](#)).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussions, it can be summarized that regarding the first research question about the occurrence of FE in students' ER, the students experience flow highly when involving in extensive reading in their 1st and 2nd semesters. Regarding the second research question, this high flow experience is

mostly occurred because of the students' interest in their reading material. Thus, it can also be concluded that the most significant condition for the students to experience flow is *feedback*. From this finding, it can also be concluded that the students still rely on external motivation to be able to experience flow.

The students' reliance on external motivation is also supported by the finding that the flow condition *goal* gets the lowest score in both semesters. In doing extensive reading, the students are free to set their own goals weekly. Therefore, the low score in this flow condition indicates that the students are not familiar in doing their own goal setting regularly to reach the given goal for each semester. This also shows that they depend on external rewards or encouragement to keep them on track when doing extensive reading.

Concerning research question 3 about the relationship between students' flow and the numbers of words they read in the first and second semester, the finding shows that the results were respectively not statistically significant and technically a positive correlation. However, the relationship between the variables is weak in the second semester. The result also showed that in the 2nd semester the larger the number of words read, the higher the students' flow experience is which indicated that more often the students do ER, the bigger their chance to experience to flow.

The students' reliance on external motivation is also supported by the finding that the flow condition *goal* gets the lowest score in both semesters. In doing extensive reading, the students are free to set their own goals weekly. Therefore, the low score in this flow condition indicates that the students are not familiar in doing their own goal setting regularly to reach the given goal for each semester. This also shows that they depend on external rewards or encouragement to keep them on track when doing extensive reading. Therefore, discussing the benefits and a good practice of ER from time to time is also necessary so that students will not forget that their ER activities are not in vain.

This study has some limitations which further studies can address. First, further studies can replicate this study and include more participants so that its findings will have more potential to be generalized to other samples from the same population than the findings of this study. Second, this study has not investigated students' flow and their book difficulty perceptions. The further studies can examine that to know how students' book difficulty perceptions might influence their ER and also examine other factors that interrupt students' flow when doing ER. Third, this study did not include any interview. Thus, further studies can get more rich data by interviewing its participants.

Despite the limitations, the findings of this study have shed some light on ER in Indonesia that it can indeed allow students to experience enjoyment in reading. However, teachers' encouragement is needed in the process. Experiencing flow and getting teachers' encouragement can reassure students to keep reading and be autonomous language learners outside their classroom.

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