

FLOW IN READING: EXPLORING OPTIMAL READING EXPERIENCES OF IRAQI EFL LEARNERS USING SELECT READING: UPPER-INTERMEDIATE TEXTS

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<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2025.1150>

Received: 14 November 2025 / Published: 26 December 2025

ABSTRACT

Flow is a state that individuals experience when they attain a balance between their skill set and the challenge at hand, and as a result feel clear, empowered and inherently satisfied while performing a task. The current study looks to address whether Iraqi EFL learners experience flow while reading upper-intermediate level texts and to explore which dimension of reading flow (absorption or smooth processing) contributes more strongly to the overall flow. The Reading Flow Short Scale (RFSS) developed by Thissen et al. (2018) was adopted to measure reading flow based on two factors: absorption and smooth processing. A total of 100 Female students were selected randomly from the population of the University of Kufa, College of Education for Girls, the English major. The quantitative analysis revealed that Iraqi EFL learners have a moderate but weak sense of reading flow while reading upper-intermediate level texts. The results obviously represent that Iraqi EFL learners experienced moderate reading flow where smooth processing is slightly more than absorption. Consequently, pedagogical mediations such as level-appropriate materials, vocabulary scaffolding, and strategy-based reading instruction are necessary to enhance both smooth processing and absorption, thus promoting more optimal reading experiences for Iraqi EFL learners.

Keywords: Reading flow, Optimal Experiences, EFL learners, Optimal Reading, Select Reading, Upper-Intermediate Texts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is an essential part of second language (L2) development and advancement, a cognitive as well as affective process to ensure learners' linguistic and academic success, emotional experience of using the L2 language learning and intercultural attitudes. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on understanding the qualitative nature of students' experiences of reading and the extent to which they are absorbed, focused and intrinsically motivated during reading. One important term used to describe such an optimal form of engagement is flow, a psychological state which Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990) categorizes as a deep concentration and enjoyment resulting from being completely absorbed in one activity. Flow is a state that people experience when they attain a balance between their skill set and the challenge at hand, and as a result feel clear, empowered and inherently satisfied while performing a task. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997), the term flow is defined as "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total engagement" (p.36). He emphasizes that one of the main components of optimal experiences is that learners derive pleasure from their activities, resulting in a perception that "...time no longer seems to pass the way it ordinarily does" (Csikszentmihalyi,

1990, p. 67). This is a consequence of strong focus. The effort and focus cause learners to lose track of time and disregard all negative aspects of life. The engagement in the task is so enjoyable that it motivates learners to foster their performance levels. This is what Csikszentmihalyi referred to as "optimal experience" or "flow experience," characterized by a heightened level of task engagement.

In reading settings, flow has been linked to learners' being able to process texts smoothly and continuously, as well as their ability to sustain attention and build integrated mental models or feel emotionally, cognitively absorbed by the material (Thissen et al., 2022). Flow has not only been reported to help EFL readers understand texts better, but it has also generated favourable attitudes to reading that promote long-term language acquisition (Krashen, 2011; McQuillan & Conde, 1996). Studies in second language acquisition (SLA) have found that flow can occur when reading materials are at the level of students' proficiency, interests and background knowledge (Egbert 2003; Kirchhoff 2013; Zare-ee 2013). Conversely, if texts are too difficult or do not match the linguistic ability of learners, students will be thrown off balance and experience frustration, poor comprehension and disappearing motivation (Arai, 2022).

While fostering the study flow is desirable for L2 reading, many EFL contexts are still textbook-driven and use books that may be inappropriate for students' current levels of proficiency. A significant disparity can be observed in the Iraqi EFL context. English department students may not be homogenised for their language proficiency but they are exposed to upper-intermediate level reading materials in the early stage of their academic study. Consequently, learners are often confronted with texts they can not fully understand. When the difference in difficulty between a textbook's assigned and one's actual level of comprehension is greater than can be handled, smooth processing of text as well as good comprehension suffer and thus, flow (a key element in meaningful and enjoyable reading) does not emerge. Studies have claimed text difficulty as an important contributory factor to readers' engagement and flow in reading intensive and extensive texts (Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017; Chiang, 2016; Yang et al., 2021). However, not much is known about how this problem occurs among Iraqi EFL university students who use the *Select Reading: Upper-Intermediate* textbook.

Given this gap, the current study seeks to address whether Iraqi EFL learners experience flow while reading upper-intermediate level texts and to examine which dimension of reading flow, absorption or smooth processing, contributes more strongly to the overall flow. Possessing knowledge about these dynamics is critically important because they have significant implications for selections of textbooks, instructional design, and reading instruction in Iraqi higher education.

This study aimed to explore whether Iraqi EFL learners have a high optimal experience in reading their curriculum articles, and experience a state of profound concentration, absorption, and easy engagement with texts. In addition, the study examined how Iraqi EFL learners perceive their experience in given texts and what obstacles may prevent their reading flow.

Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the following questions

1. To what extent do Iraqi EFL learners experience reading flow while reading the textbook: *Select reading: upper-intermediate* articles?
2. Which aspect of reading flow (absorption or smooth processing) donates more strongly to the overall flow experience among Iraqi EFL learners?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Flow as the Engine of Optimal Reading

The synthesis of the literature presents a compelling theoretical account where flow emerges not merely as one desirable reading experience among others, but as an essential psychological engine that drives and sustains optimal reading. This synthesis connects the cognitive processes of reading, the phenomenology of pleasure, and the conditions that enable such an experience.

The working hypothesis is that any immersive narrative engagement state, whether described as transportation, presence, or absorption, hinges on the reader's effective construction of a "vivid, multifaceted mental model of the story" (Thissen et al., 2022, p. 832). This construction is inherently a cognitively effortful activity involving text parsing, information integration, and the elaboration of situation models (Buselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). The central question, then, is how this demanding intellectual effort transforms into the subjectively effortless and pleasurable state described by Tucholsky (1932), where the reader becomes "insensible to these mentally effortful processes" (Thissen et al., 2022, p. 832).

The theory of flow is the best explains this change. Key to the process exists this perceived match between the reader's abilities and the difficulty level of the text (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Under this balance, the process of constructing mental models is an autotelic activity, beautiful in and of itself. The analogy of flow can also be directly transposed to the act of reading:

- 1) Clarity of Aims & Unambiguous Feedback: In reading, the aim is understanding, and the feedback is the successful incorporation of new textual knowledge into a coherent and evolving mental model. As Thissen et al. state that "If the reader can adjust, modify, and enhance his or her mental story model by incorporating new information from the text successfully, an experience of competence, coherence, and clarity arises" (Thissen et al. 2022, p. 833).
- 2) Blending of Action and Awareness & Disappearance of Self-Consciousness: This represents the "disappearing" of oneself into the book, where one's consciousness is fully immersed in the story world and self-consciousness about reading within a physical reality fades as perceived by both Tucholsky (1932) and Csikszentmihalyi's (1988) participants.
- 3) Distorted Sense of Time & Enhanced Concentration: The great degree of concentration needed to hold this psychological model causes a distortion in the perception of time and is a barrier to external distractions.

The sense of high processing fluency that characterizes a flow experience generating a positive feedback loop should in turn make the building of an elaborate and detailed mental story model more likely, thus opening up the space for other narrative-based components of pleasurable reading (Thissen et al., 2022, p. 833). In its mediating role, flow serves as the foundational mechanism upon which subsequent narrative pleasures, such as identification with characters or plot suspense, are enabled. This is an idea previously affirmed by early evidence which indicated that flow accounts for the effect of suspense and identification as well (Thissen, Menninghaus & Schlotz, 2020).

The application of such a framework in SLA is pertinent and indispensable. It has been accepted that native speakers and L2 learners share the same underlying reading flow (McQuillan & Conde, 1996; Kirchoff, 2013; Zare-ee, 2013). The antecedents of flow, self-selection, interest, skill-challenge balance and background knowledge—are equally, if not more important in an EFL field where the balance between challenge to anxiety can fast become linguistic difficulty. Krashen's (2011) contention that the "language acquisition occurs most effectively" during flow

states in reading (p. 82) underscores the potentially transformative nature of engendering this state. In addition, the connection between flow and increased L2 motivation and attitude (Piniel & Albert, 2017; Shernoff et al., 2003) makes flow not only a comfortable but an actively pursued result of an improved and more sustainable language learning experience.

To sum up, the literature builds a consistent perspective where the mental labour of creating an mental story model is carried out not as effortful work, but rather as a subjectively effortless and even enjoyable and pleasurable activity within the psychological state called flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Thissen et al., 2022). This state is created by the fine balance between the reader's abilities and the difficulty of text, as described in the flow channel model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Reaching such a condition for (EFL) learners would raise reading into the realm of an optimal activity, which is deeply engaging and autotelic in nature, rather than purely being a language-based exercise (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; McQuillan & Conde, 1996). Such experiences are not only intensely rewarding but are also the moments in which "language acquisition occurs most effectively" (Krashen, 2011, p. 82). Furthermore, by increasing intrinsic interest and positive emotions (Li et al., 2019; Özhan & Kocadere, 2020), flow contributes to both linguistic gains and personal fulfillment. Therefore, investigating methods to reliably induce reading flow is of paramount importance for advancing both the theoretical understanding and the practical pedagogy of EFL reading instruction.

Empirical Studies on Reading Flow

The studies that have already been seen on flow experience in SLA have indicated that L2 learners do experience it with a wide range of classroom activities (eg, Egbert, 2003; Kirchhoff, 2013; Zare-ee, 2013; Czimmermann and Piniel, 2016). Egbert's study of flow in the classroom is the first explicit application of flow to SLA and suggests that activities that are pitched at an optimal level could lead to flow and therefore better learning. Egbert's theoretical and empirical introduction laid the ground for subsequent empirical analyses of flow within language classes.

Quillan and Conde (1996) explored the conditions under which readers experience intense engagement in a text. The results indicated that flow is more often experienced during pleasure reading. Interest, perceived personal relevance or interest, and the reading of fiction influence the likelihood of experiencing optimal engagement during reading. Kirchhoff (2013) shows that students did experience the flow when reading. He investigated extensive reading among Japanese EFL learners and found that ER activities can foster flow when the texts are appropriate for learners and interesting to them.

Similarly, Zare-ee's (2013) studied EFL learners' flow experiences during reading English texts and revealed that in the case of appropriate reading tasks, flow can help improve students' interest in reading and lead to a better understanding of the texts. These learning tasks were found to generate a flow experience. Amini et al. (2016) also found that participants experienced flow during vocabulary learning sessions, and the level of flow was closely related to short-term and long-term retention of vocabulary. Arai (2022) investigated the correlation between perceived book difficulty and experiences of pleasure in intensive reading within foreign language learning from the perspective of flow theory. The finding supports the flow model, emphasizing the balance between challenge and skill, and highlights selecting books with suitable perceived difficulty that offered enjoyment in reading, learners felt motivated to engage in the task, thus generating a flow state. Several studies report that book difficulty may have a significant role in learners' impact in

reading (e.g., Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017; Chiang, 2016; Yang et al., 2021). The current study examined the correlation between perceived upper-intermediate texts' difficulty in the *select reading book* and Iraqi university EFL learners' optimal experience from the perspective of the flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975/2000), as an important reading objective in fostering engaged reading and enhancing reading comprehension.

3. METHOD

Participant

The participants of the study were selected randomly from the population of the University of Kufa, College of Education for Girls, the English major. All participants are EFL learners from at the second-year level. All participants are currently studying the upper-intermediate reading course offered by the English department based on their curriculum. They are native speakers of Arabic with two years of specialized English language study. The samples' ages range from 20 to 28 years. A total of 100 Female students were selected to collect the data for this study, with no male students included.

Instrument

Reading Flow Short Scale (RFSS)

The Reading Flow Short Scale (RFSS) developed by Thissen et al. (2018) was adopted. The scale was calculated as a first reading-flow measurement instrument, based on two factors: absorption and smooth processing. It comprises of 10 items, Participants rated each item on a five-point Lickert scale which ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Thissen et al. (2018) indicated that the composite reliability of Reading Flow Short Scale was measured for both the global flow score and its subscales, the measurement provided reliability estimate $\omega = 0.89$ [0.85, 0.95], for the global RFSS flow scale, $\omega = 0.77$ [0.68, 0.82] for Smooth Processing, and $\omega = 0.80$ [0.75, 0.85] for absorption.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative part of the research used a version of Thissen et al. Reading Flow Short Scale (RFSS) (2018) to assess Iraq EFL learners' reading flow during interaction with the Select Reading: Upper-Intermediate passages. The RFSS was chosen because of its strong theoretical base in Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory and established psychometric properties for measuring reading-specific flow experience. The scale includes ten items formed by two basic components related to reading flow: absorption and smooth processing. Participants rated each item on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

After the data collection, the questionnaire was coded and the data entered into the SPSS, version 20. The SPSS was selected due to it has a robust statistical analysis function to handle survey type of quantitative data in applied linguistics research. Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) statistics were computed for the overall RF level derived from RSFS side during reading, as well as how learners performed on individual RSFS sides. These numbers created a numerical value for the amount that participants claimed to have experienced reading flow and identified patterns of absorption or smooth processing during reading. The results of the statistical calculations in SPSS generated empirical data that answered questions connected with: is there, and to what level reading flow exists among Iraqi EFL learners.

4. RESULTS

Table 1. Descriptive Statistic of Overall Reading Flow (RQ1)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Overall Reading Flow	2.75	1.21

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the total reading flow experienced by Iraqi EFL learners while reading Select Reading: Upper-Intermediate texts. The average score of 2.75 (SD = 1.21) represents a moderate reading flow. This result suggests that learners occasionally experienced engagement and focus during reading; however, these experiences were not strong or sustained enough to reflect a full flow state. The moderate size of the standard deviation also suggests that there was considerable variation among readers, reflecting potential variations in individual differences in reading skills, strategy use, or experience with the text content.

Table 2. Item-Level Statistics of Reading Flow (RQ1)

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
I felt optimally challenged during reading	3.13	1.22
I read this text smoothly and fluently	2.91	1.14
I did not notice time passing during reading	2.75	1.28
I had no problem to concentrate during reading	2.71	1.15
My mind was totally clear during reading	2.52	1.25
I was completely immersed in what I was reading	2.70	1.28
Thoughts, emotions, and images emerged automatically and spontaneously	3.03	1.36
I knew on every page that I was able to grasp the story	2.77	1.21
I had the feeling that I understood everything during reading	2.41	1.08
During reading I became so oblivious that I was completely unaware of myself	2.53	1.11

Table 2 presents the distribution of learners' responses to each of the RFSS items. A score of highest mean was found for "I felt optimally challenged during reading" (M = 3.13, SD = 1.22), which means that many students thought the reading items in the idleness tasks were appropriately challenging. This matches the skill–challenge balance presented in flow theory. The item "Thoughts, emotions and images were automatic and free flowing" (M = 3.03, SD = 1.36) indicates moderate level of creative imagination- cognitive faculties engagement.

In contrast, items associated with deep understanding and cognitive clarity showed relatively low means. For example, Notably, the number of affirmatives to "I had the feeling that I understood everything during reading" (M = 2.41, SD = 1.08) and "My mind was totally clear during reading" (M = 2.52, SD = 1.25) points to learners' comprehension challenges. The time distortion scale and loss of self-awareness were also outside the spectrum of full immersion, as mean scores remained relatively low. Taken together, a fine grain analysis demonstrates that while some of the elements of flow were present, essential signs of optimal reading experience were weak.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics by Reading Flow Dimensions (RQ2)

Dimension	Observed Item (Indicator)	Item Code	Mean	Mean Range
Smooth Processing	I felt optimally challenged during reading	RF1	3.13	2.41 – 3.13
	I read this text smoothly and fluently	RF2	2.91	
	I had no problem to concentrate during reading	RF4	2.71	
	My mind was totally clear during reading	RF5	2.52	
	I knew on every page that I was able to grasp the story	RF8	2.77	
	I had the feeling that I understood everything during reading	RF9	2.41	
Absorption	I did not notice time passing during reading	RF3	2.75	2.53 – 3.03
	I was completely immersed in what I was reading	RF6	2.70	
	Thoughts, emotions, and images emerged automatically and spontaneously	RF7	3.03	
	During reading I became so oblivious that I was completely unaware of myself	RF10	2.53	

Table 3 compares the two components of reading flow: fluency and absorption. For easy processing items, the intermediate means (2.41–3.13) suggest moderate fluency, concentration and comprehension. However, the low scores on comprehension-type items indicate that smooth processing was often disturbed by linguistic or cognitive difficulties.

The size dimension (mean range = 2.53–3.03) was mostly weak. Items that reflected absorption, time distortion, and loss of self-awareness showed low ratings (indicating the learners did not often become immersed in the reading task). This imbalance suggests that learners devoted considerable cognitive effort to understanding the text, leaving limited capacity for immersive engagement. Flow theory states that flow cannot be optimal if both of these dimensions all are not present, and the lack of strong absorption constrains potential full reading flow.

Table 4. Interpretive Summary of Quantitative Findings

Research Question	Key Quantitative Result
RQ1: Reading Flow Level	Moderate overall reading flow (M = 2.75)
RQ2: Flow Dimensions	Smooth processing slightly stronger than absorption

Table 4 blends the quantitative findings in relation to the research questions. The results obviously represent that Iraqi EFL learners experienced moderate reading flow where smooth processing is slightly more than absorption. This design shows that reading was often an effortful academic task rather than an intrinsically enjoyable and immersive activity.

5. DISCUSSION

The quantitative results indicate that Iraqi EFL learners do not always reach an ideal reading flow state with Select Reading: Upper-Intermediate texts. While the texts were perceived to be just barely challenging and some focus could be held, problems with comprehension, clarity, and fluency limited students' reading experiences. The limited occurrence of absorption, in particular time loss and self-awareness-disruption suggests that reading seldom became an end in itself.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings are therefore congruent with Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) theory of flow and suggest the importance of a reasonably level match between skill and challenge. Although the level of difficulty might be at an appropriate level for some readers, linguistics complexity and lack of prior knowledge might have interfered with 'generative processing' that resulted in learning which involves transformational grammar learning through absorption. In an EFL context, where cognitive demands are already high, such disruptions can easily shift learners from engagement to effortful decoding, thereby limiting flow.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, The quantitative analysis revealed that Iraqi EFL learners have a moderate but weak sense of reading flow while reading upper-intermediate level texts. Some features of flow (i.e., moderate challenge and partial absorption) were experienced, however primary attributes of peak experience (i.e., deep immersion and effortless understanding) were mostly lacking. These results imply that the textbook as it is could not be adequate for helping in forming sustained reading flow. Thus, effective pedagogical interventions such as level-appropriate texts, vocabulary scaffolding, and strategy-based reading instruction are required to improve both the ease of processing and retention to generate more success in the Iraqi EFL learners' reading experience.

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