

# Topic Interest in Reading in a Japanese EFL Context: Flow Theory

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between topic interest and engagement in reading in English within the framework of flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It is a motivational theory proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). The study addresses the following research questions: 1) Does topic interest have effect on engagement in reading in English? 2) Is there any relationship between reading proficiency and engagement in reading in English? 3) Is there any relationship between prior knowledge and topic interest? 24 public junior high school students (17 eighth graders and 7 ninth graders) in Nagoya city, Japan participated in the study. They selected three from twelve different reading topics by themselves: two of them were topics they were interested in and one of them was a topic they were not interested in, and read them all. After reading them, the students answered the questionnaires measuring the flow state and the question of the existence of prior knowledge for each topic. These results suggest that topic interest would have effect on engagement in reading in English regardless of reading proficiency in English and prior knowledge of the topics for Japanese junior high school students.

## Keywords

topic interest, engagement in reading in English, flow theory, reading proficiency, prior knowledge, Japanese junior high school students

## Introduction

In most cases, if learners' motivation is sufficient, they can acquire practical knowledge of second language (L2) regardless of language aptitude and other cognitive characteristics (Dörnyei, 2001). Motivation is a driving force to make people's consciousness go to English learning, start learning English, and keep the learning (Sakai & Koike, 2008).

## 1 Literature Review

### 1.1 Flow Theory

The current study investigates the motivation of reading in English within the framework of flow theory advocated by Csikszentmihalyi. Flow theory represents the mechanism of psychological state corresponding to intrinsic motivation in Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The "flow" that forms the core of flow theory refers to optimal experience, that is, pleasant experience accompanied by intrinsically motivated self's immersive sensation. When in the flow state, we show high level of concentration enough to lose time sense, enjoy activities, and experience high level of satisfaction, a sense of controlling the situation and increase in self-esteem (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

### 1.2 Topic Interest

Learners' personal interest in text enhances their intrinsic motivation and deepens their understanding of text in the first language (L1) (Schiefele, 1999; Fulmer & Frijters, 2011). Grabe (2009) describes "personal interest" in text as one of the factors that motivates reading in L2.

## 2 The Current Study

### 2.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the relationship between topic interest and engagement in reading in English in a Japanese EFL context within the framework of flow theory. Concerning the effect of topic interest on enhancing reading motivation in L2, the suggestions in the West contexts and the study targeting university students in Japan (Fukaya, 2011) have been mentioned so far. However, is it possible to apply the effect of topic interest on reading motivation in L2 for Japanese junior high school students?

## 2.2 Research Questions

Research Questions of the study are as follows. 1) Does topic interest have effect on engagement in reading in English? 2) Is there any relationship between reading proficiency in English and engagement in reading in English? 3) Is there any relationship between prior knowledge and topic interest?

## 2.3 Method

### 2.3.1 Participants

The participants in the study were as follows. 1) Number: 24 students (10 girls and 14 boys), 2) Grade: Eighth (n=17) and ninth (n=7) graders (Aged 13–15), 3) Form of activity: activities outside the curriculum, 4) School: In a public junior high school in Nagoya city, Japan

### 2.3.2 Procedures

The participants selected three topics from twelve different reading topics which the author prepared in advance by themselves. Two of the three topics were the topics they were interested in. One of the three topics was the topic they were not interested in. These topics were from English newspaper articles for junior and senior high school students published in Japan, consisting of about 150 words. After reading each topic, the participants answered the same questionnaire measuring Flow State, which are called Flow Short Scale (FSS) and the question of the existence of prior knowledge. English test of *Hyojun Gakuryoku Kensa Kyokenshiki* NRT by *Toshobukasha* was utilized to operationalize the construct of reading proficiency in English.

## 2.4 Result

### 2.4.1 Analyses for Research Question 1

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare engagement in reading in English in the topic interest and topic non-interest conditions. There was a significant difference in the flow scores (the scores of FSS) of topic interest ( $M=41.4$ ,  $SD=16.03$ ) and topic non-interest ( $M=37.2$ ,  $SD=13.85$ ) conditions;  $t(23)=2.77$ ,  $p=.011$ ,  $d=.57$ , 95% CI[1.07, 7.31], power=.76.

### 2.4.2 Analyses for Research Question 2

A Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between reading proficiency in English and engagement in reading in English. There was little correlation between reading

proficiency in English and the flow scores of topic interest for the eighth graders;  $\rho=.044$ ,  $n=17$ ,  $p=.868$ .

### 2.4.3 Analyses for Research Question 3

McNemar's Tests were computed to assess the relationship between prior knowledge and topic interest. There was little correlation between prior knowledge and topic interest; 1)  $p=.453$  and 2)  $p=.687$ .

## 3 Main Discussion

Topic interest would be responsible for buffering attribution for difficulty with the reading activity such as effort and ability (Fulmer & Frijters, 2011).

## 4 Conclusion

These results suggest that topic interest would have effect on engagement in reading in English regardless of reading proficiency in English and prior knowledge of the topics for Japanese junior high school students.

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