Perceived Book Difficulty and Pleasure Experiences as Flow in Extensive Reading

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Abstract

In second or foreign language (L2) extensive reading (ER) studies, learners have been encouraged to read easy books despite the lack of consensus concerning how to define book difficulty. In light of previous studies reporting that book difficulty can play an important role in learners' affect in ER (e.g., Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017; Chiang, 2016; Yang et al., 2021), the present study explored the relationship between perceived book difficulty and pleasure experiences from the perspective of the flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975/2000), as an important reading purpose in ER is for pleasure. Ninety-nine Japanese university students participated in a flow questionnaire survey, five of whom also participated in the follow-up interviews. It was found that some characteristics of flow were found in relation to the difference in perceived book difficulty, and that the participants' perceptions were affected by some factors related to the flow theory.

Keywords: extensive reading, perceived book difficulty, pleasure reading, flow, motivation

In general, second or foreign language (L2) extensive reading (ER) can be defined as "an approach to language teaching in which learners read a lot of easy material in the new language" (Bamford & Day, 2004, p. 1). In this definition, however, it is ambiguous what reading material can be defined as "easy." The same applies to other definitions such as "well within [learners'] linguistic competence" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. xiii) and "books which are at the right level" (Nation & Waring, 2020, p. 5). The ambiguous concept of book difficulty might result in various ways of interpreting suitable book difficulty and inconsistent implementation of ER in the classroom (Arai, 2019).

What constitutes suitable book difficulty for ER has been inconsistently defined in ER studies. On the one hand, a number of ER researchers referred to Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis as a theoretical background of ER (Chiang, 2016). In this hypothesis, Krashen advocated "comprehensible input" represented as "*i* plus 1," where "*i*" stands for a language learner's linguistic level and "plus 1" means the element slightly beyond this level. On the other hand,

however, Day and Bamford (1998) introduced "*i* minus 1," where book difficulty is below the learners' own linguistic levels.

Despite the lack of the discussion as to which concept, namely "*i* plus 1" or "*i* minus 1," could be more suitable for ER material until recently, some empirical studies (e.g., Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017; Chiang, 2016; Yang et al., 2021) have suggested that the difference between "*i* plus and minus 1" would be important when it comes to learners' affect in ER programs such as reading anxiety, motivation, and reading attitude. Although it is doubtful whether their ways of operationalizing "*i* plus and minus 1" was appropriate in their studies, it could be pointed out that the difference in book difficulty can be an important factor in ER readers' affect. Based on the findings, the present study aimed to explore the relationship between book difficulty and ER readers' pleasure experience as an affective phenomenon during reading in light of the fact that ER has also been called pleasure reading (Day & Bamford, 1998). Examining this relationship might fill some gaps in the ER literature, such as the importance of perceived book difficulty and the discussion of what constitutes suitable book difficulty for ER programs.

Literature Review

Defining book difficulty: Perceived book difficulty

As discussed above, there have been two concepts of appropriate book difficulty for ER proposed in the previous literature: "*i* plus 1" and "*i* minus 1." In addition, some recent studies (Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017; Chiang, 2016; Yang et al., 2021) found that the difference could be important when it comes to ER readers' affect. For instance, Bahmani and Farvardin found that the participants who had read "*i* minus 1" books experienced lowered reading anxiety while those who had read "*i* plus 1" had heightened reading anxiety after the four-month ER program. Similarly, Chiang reported that reading "*i* minus 1" books contributed to positive attitudes toward L2 reading at the end of the program. However, Yang et al. found that reading "*i* plus 1" books statistically significantly improved reading motivation.

It is true that results of these studies suggested the importance of the difference between "*i* plus/minus 1," but they had a critical limitation in operationalization of "*i* plus and minus 1." For example, Bahmani and Farvardin (2017) assigned the participants to either the "*i* plus 1" or "*i* minus 1" group by using a placement test based on the six levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001). However, the intervals of the CEFR's six levels could be too approximate to define "plus and minus 1." Furthermore, Chiang (2016) and Yang et al. (2021) used graded readers (GRs) for the purpose of assigning the participants to reading either "*i* plus 1" or "*i* minus 1" books despite the lack of discussion as to whether one GR grade level corresponded to "plus and minus 1." Because of the lack of information from GR publishers concerning how GRs are developed (Holster et al., 2017), further discussion should be encouraged on the ways of operationalizing "*i* plus and minus 1" in detail.

Previous ER studies have provided some suggestions for defining "plus and minus 1." For example, lexical coverage, or how many words readers know in the reading material, is often

referred to in the discussion on suitable book difficulty for ER. However, most of the previous studies on lexical coverage did not require students to read extensively, making it difficult to generalize the findings to ER programs. For example, some assigned them to read small numbers of pages (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2011), and others calculated lexical coverage only through a corpus analysis (e.g., Nation, 2006). In addition, lexical information on the text might not be enough because of other factors affecting book difficulty such as readers' background knowledge and the syntactical difficulty (Gillis-Furutaka, 2015). To sum up, lexical coverage may not be sufficient to explain the whole picture of suitable book difficulty for ER.

Instead of lexical coverage, the present study operationalized book difficulty as perceived book difficulty for the following two reasons: (a) empirical evidence from previous studies and (b) a reading purpose of ER. First, Holster et al. (2017) found that perceived book difficulty by means of the participants' subjective rating of their books "provided valid measurement of book difficulty" (p. 236). Their findings could encourage perceived book difficulty to be used for operationalizing ER book difficulty. However, this should be explored in more detail, especially in terms of the relationship between students' perceptions of book difficulty and the outcome of their reading experience.

Second, as Day and Bamford (2002) advocated, one of the important reading purposes in ER programs is for pleasure. The idea of reading extensively for pleasure experiences is compatible with the use of perceived book difficulty because both concepts are subjective experiences during reading. As Csikszentmihalyi et al. (2005) put it, a reader's "decisions either to continue reading the novel or to put it down will be based primarily on the extent to which she finds the book involving and interesting" (p. 604). As a case in point, using perceived book difficulty may contribute to the discussion on the suitable book difficulty in pleasure reading from the readers' perspective.

Defining pleasure experience: Flow

As discussed above, the importance of pleasure and enjoyment in ER has been emphasized in previous L2 reading studies. For instance, Elgort and Warren (2014) found that reading enjoyment was closely related to incidental vocabulary learning. Based on these studies, L2 ER researchers have generally considered pleasure experience as one of the important characteristics of ER practice (e.g., Nation & Waring, 2020).

However, it is still unclear as to what pleasure experience is. Ro (2018) found that his student called Sam "gained pleasure from finishing what he started" even if the books were difficult (p. 793). In other words, Sam may have felt pleasure not because he was interested in the books, but because he was trying to "be a 'good student'" who had to finish reading any book (p. 784). Therefore, Ro's study may suggest that there should be various meanings of pleasure for individual ER readers, which raises the question of how to measure pleasure.

Addressing this issue, the present study defined pleasure as flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975/2000) in light of the following two reasons: (a) the relationship between flow and book difficulty; and (b) the compatibility between flow and ER. Before discussing these two reasons, an overview of the flow theory is provided below.

Engeser and Schiepe-Tiska (2012) defined flow as a perceived state "in which an individual is completely immersed in an activity without reflective self-consciousness but with a deep sense of control" (p. 1). As part of his exploration of human beings' happiness, Csikszentmihalyi (1975/2000) hypothesized that flow experiences could improve the quality of life and lead to happiness.

When a person is in the flow state, they concentrate intensively on what they are doing. In addition, the person feels that their action and consciousness are being sufficiently merged for them to lose their self-consciousness (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Furthermore, the person successfully controls their own actions. The flow state also encourages the person to feel that time passes quickly. Finally, the person is intrinsically motivated. In summary, the flow state has five characteristics: (a) intense concentration; (b) action-consciousness merging; (c) control over action; (d) a sense of time distortion; and (e) intrinsic motivation.

The flow state can be experienced when the person who is doing something has "clear proximal goals" and can get "immediate feedback about the progress being made" during the action (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 195). In addition to these conditions, flow can be engendered when there is a balance between perceived challenges of the task with which the person is engaged and their perceived skill. This balance should be at their maximum level, suggesting that the higher perceived difficulty should match the higher perceived proficiency. The flow-generating balance between task challenges and skills has been considered as "the fundamental characteristics of an enjoyment activity" and "a central element of flow theory" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. xvi).

The idea of the well-balanced relationship between perceived difficulty and proficiency could be the first reason mentioned above for employing the concept of flow to define pleasure experience in the present study: the relationship between flow and book difficulty. As Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p. 91) suggested, "[I]t is the subjective challenges and subjective skills, not objective ones, that influence the quality of a person's experience," which will be compatible with the present study's definition of book difficulty as perceived book difficulty. On top of that, the suggestion that the combination of higher perceived difficulty and perceived skills can contribute to flow experience could impart implications to previous ER studies that discussed the difference between "*i* plus 1" and "*i* minus 1" (e.g., Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017; Chiang, 2016; Yang et al., 2021). For example, Egbert (2003) suggested in her second language acquisition (SLA) research that flow will be generated through Krashen's (1985) comprehensible input (i.e., "*i* plus 1"). However, such findings may be inconsistent with those reported in Bahmani and Farvardin and Chiang, who pointed out that "*i* minus 1" books positively contributed to the learners' affect. The discussion on the difference in book difficulty should be encouraged further because none of the previous studies employed perceived book difficulty or the flow theory to identify suitable reading material difficulty for ER.

In addition to the necessity of defining pleasure as flow experience because of the relationship between flow and book difficulty, the second reason for applying the flow theory is the dearth of research on flow in L2 ER studies. More specifically, the ER researchers have recognized the

importance of flow in ER programs. Among others, Grabe (2009) suggested that flow is "a strong rationale for promoting extensive reading" (p. 181).

In other words, these studies suggested that flow experiences should be explored more in ER programs. Contrary to this encouragement, however, to the best of the present author's knowledge, there is only one study that has empirically examined flow in L2 ER (Kirchhoff, 2013). Kirchhoff conducted a questionnaire survey to examine whether Japanese college students could experience flow in the 15-week ER program, and found that the participants "often experienced flow-like concentration" (p. 208). However, one limitation of the study is that she did not report the descriptive statistics for the results of the questionnaire, making it unclear as to how the author identified these "flow-like" experiences. Furthermore, in light of the multifaceted nature of flow experience (Rheinberg & Engeser, 2018), it cannot be denied that a quantitative questionnaire survey alone was not enough to understand what the readers had experienced in ER. This highlighted the necessity for a mixed methods approach to examine flow experience during ER. Therefore, in light of the dearth of such insights about the possible relationship between flow and ER, more studies on flow in the ER classroom should be encouraged.

To sum up, the present study operationalized pleasure experience as flow mainly from two perspectives: (a) the relationship between flow and book difficulty and (b) the compatibility between flow and ER. As Yamashita (2015) has suggested, pleasure could be measured in the form of flow because "the concept of flow has been used in examining the pleasure or optimal experience during reading" (p. 172). With the above as the background, the following two research questions are addressed in this study:

1. What characteristics of flow can be found in L2 ER in relation to perceived book difficulty?
2. What are individual ER readers' perceptions of (a) book difficulty and (b) pleasure?

Method

Participants and study context

A total of 99 Japanese university students at a private university participated in this study. Among them, 43 participants (male: 29; female: 14) are referred to as the 2019 cohort comprising non-English-major second-year students aged about 19 and 20. The 2020 cohort comprised 56 (male: 29; female: 26; other gender: 1) Japanese university students at the same private university. As with the 2019 cohort, they were non-English-major second-year students aged about 19 and 20 who were taking the ER course taught by the same professor to fulfill graduation requirements. While information on the participants' English proficiency measured by proficiency tests was not collected from both cohorts, Table 1 shows the 2020 cohort's perceived (or self-assessed) English proficiency on the scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), also discussed in the next section. In light of the positive skewness of the frequency distribution in Table 1, it could be said that the participants perceived their English proficiency as modest.

Table 1

Frequency Statistics for the 2020 Cohort Participants' Perceived English Proficiency (N = 56)

Option	1 (low)	2	3	4	5 (high)
n	6	19	24	7	0

The data were collected twice: in the second half of the academic year in 2019 (the 2019 cohort) and in the first half of the academic year in 2020 (the 2020 cohort). While the former read extensively in the actual classroom, the ER program for the latter was held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The two cohorts were conceptualized as separate groups because the difference in class management and the degree to which the participants had experienced ER in both programs would make it difficult to interpret a combined result. In addition, as discussed later, a modified questionnaire and study procedure was employed for the 2020 cohort.

Nine (male: 4; female: 5) students were purposefully sampled from the 2019 cohort for the follow-up interviews (see the data collection section below), five of whom (male: 1; female: 4; all aged 20) agreed to participate in the interviews. The number of the participants was considered reasonable in light of Creswell and Creswell's (2018) suggestion on the sample size in qualitative research on phenomenology. The criteria for sampling were the participants' ratings of perceived book difficulty ("*i* plus 1," "*i*," and "*i* minus 1") and the total scores of a flow questionnaire (High, Middle, and Low), discussed in more detail in the Materials section. Table 2 summarizes the participants' profiles. Minori, whose score on the flow questionnaire was higher than many participants, rated her book difficulty as "*i* minus 1." However, Aoi chose "*i* plus 1" and earned a lower score than many participants. The others rated their book difficulty as "*i*," but the scores varied (i.e., Daichi: High; Sakurako: Middle; Mio: Low).

Table 2

Participant Profiles in the Follow-up Interviews (the 2019 Cohort)

Pseudonym	Minori	Aoi	Daichi	Sakurako	Mio
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female
Faculty	Law	Law	Law	Law	Law
Perceived difficulty level	"*i* minus 1"	"*i* plus 1"	"*i*"	"*i*"	"*i*"
Flow score	56 (High)	44 (Low)	62 (High)	48(Middle)	32 (Low)
Experiences of ER before	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Book the participant was reading	*Who was Leonardo da Vinci?*	*When we were orphans*	"Kino" (by Haruki Murakami)	*Dolphin music*	*Shakespeare's stories twelfth night*

Materials

The participants were required to complete a questionnaire on flow experiences in ER, which had been developed originally for this study and prepared in Japanese.

The questionnaire administered to the 2019 cohort (see Appendix A) comprised five open-ended and multiple-choice questions. The open-ended questions were designed to examine what they were doing (Question 1) and feeling while reading (Question 2), and the reason for this feeling (Question 3). The multiple-choice questions were about the participants' perception of book difficulty on a 5-point Likert scale shown in Table 3 (Question 4). Also, their flow experience was measured in the form of 12 items based on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree) to report the level of their agreement with each item (Question 5). The meanings of the scale for book difficulty were explained to the participants in detail with some chances for practice before the questionnaire survey administration. For example, the first option "*i* minus 2 or below" was explained as "a text easier or much easier than my standard of English proficiency (i.e., my English proficiency minus 2 or below)." The second multiple-choice question had four subcategories: "Attention" (four items taken from Kirchhoff [2013] and back-translated by a Japanese graduate student majoring in English education), "Enjoyment" (two items taken from Egbert [2003], and back-translated as above), "Interest" (three items taken from Kirchhoff [2013], and back-translated as above), and "Motivation" (three items). They corresponded to the three aspects of flow state advocated in previous studies (e.g., Hektner et al., 2007): cognition (concentration), emotion (enjoyment), and conation (interest and motivation).

Table 3

Scale Used for Evaluating Book Difficulty and its Meanings

Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Meaning	"*i* minus 2 or below"	"*i* minus 1"	"*i*"	"*i* plus 1"	"*i* plus 2 or above"

The questionnaire was modified for the 2020 cohort (see Appendix B) based on the results from the 2019 cohort. First, the question about what the participants had been doing was deleted because almost all of the participants from the 2019 cohort answered, "I was reading." Second, the question on the participants' feelings was subdivided into three open-ended questions corresponding to the three aspects: what they were thinking (Question 1), feeling (Question 2), and wished to do during reading (Question 3), for the purpose of asking them to describe cognition, emotion, and conation in more detail. Each open-ended question asked the participants to report the reasons for their answers as well. Third, two questions were added: a question on the reasons for perceived book difficulty (Question 4) and one on reporting about their perceived English proficiency (Question 6), because the flow theory emphasizes the importance of the relationship between perceived difficulty and proficiency. Finally, the wording of some items was revised to make it easier to understand.

Data collection

The present study was conducted in the aforementioned one-year-long 90-minute ER course. The students were required to read extensively in the classroom. However, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the 2020 cohort attended the ER program online via Zoom, a videoconferencing platform.

The data collection procedure was based on the experience sampling method (ESM) often used in flow studies (Hektner et al., 2007). The original ESM aims to sample subjective experiences that can be forgotten quickly by requiring its participants to report their states immediately after a beeper they always carry is set off. Instead of asking them to carry a beeper, however, the present study conducted a one-shot ESM. More specifically, first, the participants were told to read without being informed of when to stop reading. Then, after 5 minutes, they were asked to stop reading and to complete the questionnaire immediately so that they would not forget what they had been feeling during reading.

From the perspective of ecological validity, administering the 5-minute ER programs was not unusual in the classroom settings in light of Tanaka and Stapleton (2007), who confirmed the effectiveness of 5-minute ER on reading comprehension and fluency. In addition, it was even possible to concentrate and generate flow in 5 minutes (e.g., Saiki & Inoue, 2011). Furthermore, Christandl et al. (2018) found that the longer their participants were told to do tasks, the likelier they were to experience flow, even when the actual duration of the tasks was shorter than what they had been told, justifying the one-shot ESM in this study because of the fact that if the participants were asked to read for longer than 5 minutes it would encourage them to experience flow.

The present study did not specify the books the participants read during the data collection. Some of them read the books they had chosen at the university's library again from where they had put them down before; others started to read class readers their teacher had assigned as part of the term paper assignment at the end of the semesters.

After the questionnaire survey and its data analysis, 60-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted in Japanese for the five participants from the 2019 cohort. In addition to spontaneous questions, there were some prepared interview questions about which the participants had been informed in advance including ones on perceived book difficulty, pleasure experiences, the ER program, and their ER experiences.

Before consenting to participate in the present study, the students in the ER course were informed of their anonymity, the voluntary nature of study participation, and the non-disclosure of recorded interview data. After the interview, the participants were paid 2,000 yen as a token of appreciation. In addition, a short debriefing session was conducted so that the participants could ask any questions.

Analyses

As for the flow questionnaire, the responses to the multiple-choice questions were computer coded and analyzed using SPSS version 26. The data were summarized as descriptive statistics. The responses to the open-ended questions were translated into English and open coded by the present author. The codes and categories, reported in the Results section, inductively emerged from the data and were analyzed descriptively. Two Japanese graduate students majoring in English education also coded a quarter of the randomly selected data set deductively. The simple percentage agreements were 82.3% in the data from the 2019 cohort, and 84.1% from that from the 2020 cohort, which suggested good levels of agreement (Mackey & Gass, 2016). The disagreements were resolved through discussion after coding.

As for the interviews, the entire conversations were audio-recorded after the participants' consent to recording was obtained. The data were transcribed manually. After that, the present author open coded the data manually with the codes and categories that inductively emerged from the data, as reported in the Results section. After adding his interpretations to the relationships among the categories, he sent the interpretations to each participant for member checking. Finally, the present author translated all the transcriptions into English for reporting the findings in this study.

The questionnaire survey was descriptive in nature in order to explore "what rather than how or why something has happened" (Nassaji, 2015, p. 29). The latter questions, namely the how and the why, were explored in more detail in the interviews, which thus provided the answers to Research Questions 1 and 2, showing how they play complementary roles to each other in the understanding of the relationship between book difficulty and flow. The results relating to both research questions will be synthesized and discussed at the end of the Discussion section.

Results

Questionnaire survey results. Table 4 displays the overall descriptive statistics for the flow questionnaire and the values of Cronbach's alpha of the subcategories: "Attention" (Items 2, 4, 7, and 11), "Enjoyment" (Items 1 and 5), "Interest" (Items 3, 6, and 9), and "Motivation" (Items 8, 10, and 12). As for the 2019 cohort, among others, "Motivation" had a lower value of Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .53$) than the others ("Attention:" $\alpha = .85$; "Enjoyment:" $\alpha = .86$; "Interest:" $\alpha = .90$). A possible reason for the smallest value could be Item 12: "I wish the class would be over soon." If the item is excluded from the category, the value improves to .65. In light of the fact that the class was held in the fifth period on Friday of the final week in December 2019, it was possible that the research design might have affected the responses unintentionally. This could also explain the small mean value Item 4 had pertaining to the sense of time distortion, because the participants might have wanted to go home as soon as possible. Except these items, however, the descriptive statistics showed that the items with negative statements (i.e., Items 3, 5, and 7) had smaller mean values than other items, suggesting that the participants generally enjoyed reading books that were interesting to them. However, some items (e.g., Items 7 and 11) had larger standard deviations ($SD = 1.45$ and 1.41), meaning that some participants did not concentrate on reading with varying levels of attention.

Table 4

Overall Descriptive Statistics for Flow Experiences

Item[b]	Mean	*SD*	Min	Max	Skew	Kurtosis
The 2019 cohort (*N* = 41)[a]						
Category 1: Attention (α = .85)						
2. I was absorbed in the book.	3.8	1.24	1	6	-0.563	-0.420
11. I concentrated on the book.	3.8	1.41	1	6	-0.409	-0.604
7. I was thinking about other things than the book.[c]	3.2	1.45	1	6	0.053	-1.271
4. I forgot about the passing of time.	2.7	1.23	1	6	0.341	0.125
Category 2: Enjoyment (α = .86)						
1. I enjoyed reading the book.	3.9	1.28	1	6	-0.699	0.062
5. I was bored with reading the book.[c]	2.8	1.34	1	6	0.589	0.017
Category 3: Interest (α = .90)						
9. The book was interesting.	4.0	1.24	1	6	-0.424	-0.212
6. The book aroused my curiosity.	3.6	1.30	1	6	-0.058	-0.068
3. The book was not interesting.[c]	2.5	1.23	1	6	1.149	1.625
Category 4: Motivation (α = .53)						
12. I wish the class would be over soon.[c]	4.0	1.18	1	6	0.254	0.080
10. I want to read more books like this one.	3.5	1.19	1	6	0.016	-0.807
8. I want to keep reading for a long time.	3.1	1.14	1	6	0.122	0.294
The 2020 cohort (*N* = 56)						
Category 1: Attention (α = .74)						
10. I concentrated on the book.	4.2	1.22	1	6	-0.478	-0.291
2. I was absorbed in the book.	4.1	1.11	1	6	-0.636	0.059
4. I forgot about the passing of time.	3.3	1.39	1	6	0.000	-0.992
7. I was thinking about other things than the book.[c]	2.8	1.52	1	6	0.601	-0.771
Category 2: Enjoyment (α = .74)						
1. I enjoyed reading the book.	3.9	1.08	1	6	-0.107	0.288
5. I was bored with reading the book.[c]	2.4	0.99	1	5	0.168	-0.413
Category 3: Interest (α = .75)						
9. The book was interesting.	4.0	0.98	2	6	-0.395	-0.285
6. The book aroused my curiosity.	3.7	1.25	1	6	-0.089	-0.508
3. The book was not interesting.[c]	2.4	0.93	1	5	0.254	-0.056
Category 4: Motivation (α = .81)						
11. I want to read more books like this one.	4.1	1.23	2	6	-0.029	-1.092
8. I want to keep reading for a long time.	3.5	1.45	1	6	-0.092	-1.003
12. I wish the class would be over soon.[c]	2.7	1.24	1	6	0.675	0.268

Notes. SD = standard deviation; Min = minimum; Max = maximum; Skew = skewness.
[a]Two participants' responses were missing.
[b]Items are displayed in order of the mean values.
[c]These were items with negatively worded statements.

Similar results were obtained from the 2020 cohort. This study was conducted at the beginning of the class, and Item 12 had a smaller mean value ($M = 2.7$) like other items with negative statements (i.e., Items 3, 5, and 7) than the other items. In addition to the values of Cronbach's alpha that were above .70, which was an acceptable level of internal consistency (Larson-Hall, 2009), it could be said that the participants generally concentrated, enjoyed, were interested, and motivated to read on.

Next, Table 5 shows descriptive statistics for the flow questionnaire from the perspectives of perceived book difficulty levels. While many participants from the 2019 cohort chose "*i*" (Option 3) for perceived book difficulty, no one used the "*i* plus 2 or above" (Option 5) option. The same applied to the 2020 cohort. For a further analysis, both "*i* minus 2 or below" and "*i* minus 1" options (Options 1 and 2) were merged into one category because only three participants chose the former, which made it difficult to compare them with the other options.

Table 5

Subgroup Descriptive Statistics for Flow Experiences

The 2019 cohort (*N* = 41)	1 · 2 (*n* = 9)[a]		3 (*n* = 20)[b]		4 (*n* = 12)[b]	
Item[c]	*Mdn*	*Q*	*Mdn*	*Q*	*Mdn*	*Q*
9. The book was interesting.	4	1.5	4	2	4	2
12. I wish the class would be over soon.	4	2.5	4	2	4	1
1. I enjoyed reading the book.	4	2	4	2	4	2
2. I was absorbed in the book.	4	2	4	2	4	1
11. I concentrated on the book.	4	3	4	2	4	1
6. The book aroused my curiosity.	3	2.5	4	1	3.5	1
10. I want to read more books like this one.	3	2	3.5	2	4	2
7. I was thinking about other things than the book.	3	3	3	3	3.5	2
8. I want to keep reading for a long time.	3	1.5	3	2	3.5	1
5. I was bored with reading the book.	3	1.5	2.5	3	3	1
4. I forgot about the passing of time.	3	1.5	3	3	3	0
3. The book was not interesting.	3	1	2	2	2	1
Total[d] (Without Item 12)[e]	35	11.5	45.5	16.75	42	9
The 2020 cohort (*N* = 56)	1 · 2 (*n* = 16)[a]		3 (*n* = 25)		4 (*n* = 15)	
Item[c]	*Mdn*	*Q*	*Mdn*	*Q*	*Mdn*	*Q*
10. I concentrated on the book.	4	2	4	1	4	2
2. I was absorbed in the book.	4	2	4	1	4	2
11. I want to read more books like this one.	4	2	4	2	4	2
9. The book was interesting.	3.5	1.75	4	1	4	1
1. I enjoyed reading the book.	3.5	1	4	1	4	2
6. The book aroused my curiosity.	3	1	4	2	4	2
8. I want to keep reading for a long time.	3	2	4	3	4	2
4. I forgot about the passing of time.	3	2.75	3	2	4	3
7. I was thinking about other things than the book.	2	2.5	2	2	2	3
12. I wish the class would be over soon.	3	2	3	1	2	1
5. I was bored with reading the book.	3	1	2.5	1	2	1.25
3. The book was not interesting.	3	1	2	1	2	2
Total[d]	46	20.5	47	13.5	54	14

Notes. Mdn = median; *Q* = semi-interquartile range.
[a]Because Option 1 was chosen only by three participants in each cohort, it was combined with Option 2.
[b]One participant's response was missing.
[c]Some items with negative statements (Items 3, 5, 7, and 12) were reversed to calculate the total scores.
[d]The maximum score is 72 (i.e., 12 6-point Likert scale items).
[e]Because of the unreliable result of Item 12 in terms of Cronbach's alpha, the descriptive statistics was also calculated without the item. The maximum score is 66 (i.e., 11 6-point Likert scale items).

The results from the 2019 cohort showed that, despite the small and varied sample sizes across the subgroups, the "*i*" and "*i* plus 1" (Option 4) groups had the higher medians of total scores (*Mdn* = 45.5 and 42) than the "*i* minus 1 or below" (Options 1 and 2 combined) group (*Mdn* = 35). Furthermore, the "*i*" group had a larger value of semi-interquartile range than the "*i* plus 1" group (*Q* = 16.75 and 9). These results suggested that, although those who had read "*i*" or "*i* plus 1" books obtained higher total scores of the flow questionnaire than the "*i* minus 1 or below" group, some participants in the "*i*" group may have scored lower than those in the "*i* plus 1" group.

Similarly, in the 2020 cohort, the "*i* plus 1" (Option 4) group had a higher median of the total score (*Mdn* = 54) than the "*i* minus 1" group (*Mdn* = 46), which was consistent with the results from the 2019 cohort, and even the "*i*" (Option 3) group (*Mdn* = 47). Despite the small sample sizes, it could be pointed out that the participants reading "*i* plus 1" books were more likely to have flow experiences than other participants.

The flow questionnaire also asked the participants to describe their reading in their own words. As for the 2019 cohort, their responses to the question concerning their feeling during reading could be categorized into (a) concentration, (b) distraction, and (c) others. As for the first category, 22 out of 46 responses suggested that the participants concentrated on reading. For example, eight participants reported their concentration as represented by a response: "I was concentrating on the book's content and its comprehension." In addition, five participants reported their willingness to read on including stating: "I wanted to read a little more." Furthermore, five responses showed the participants' positive emotions during reading including: "I was feeling good." Finally, four responses suggested the participants' absorption as represented by a response: "I was enjoying being in the world of the story." As for the second category, 14 out of 46 responses showed some participants did not concentrate on reading because some of them were sleepy (e.g., "I was sleepy."), or thinking about something else (e.g., "I was thinking about after-class schedule."). Finally, others were related to the 10 out of 46 responses from which it was unclear whether participants concentrated on reading or not, including "I felt nothing particular."

The 2020 cohort was asked to describe (a) their feeling, (b) thinking, and (c) their wishes during reading. As for their feelings, 56 responses were categorized into (a) value and (b) reason. First, value could be subdivided into 24 positive (e.g., "I was relaxed."), 17 negative (e.g., "I was tired."), and 15 other (e.g., "Same as always.") responses. Second, reason could be subdivided into either reading (33 responses; e.g., "Because I was concentrating on the book.") or content (23 responses; e.g., "Because I was reading an original novel of my favorite film.").

As for what the participants were thinking, there were two categories: content (38 responses) and content-irrelevant (18 responses). The former showed that they were thinking about book content, or something related to it (e.g., "I wanted to know more about the content."). However, the latter suggested that they were thinking about other things than book content (e.g., "I was thinking I wanted something to drink.").

Finally, what the participants wanted to do during reading was categorized into either reading (28 responses) or others (25 responses). The former reported that they wanted to keep reading (e.g., "I didn't like to stop reading here."), while the latter showed that they wanted to do things other than keeping reading (e.g., "To change clothes.")

In summary, the questionnaire survey results from the two cohorts revealed (a) that many participants reported some characteristics of flow experience (e.g., concentration), and (b) that those who read "*i* plus 1" books would generally get higher total scores on the flow questionnaire than those who read "*i* minus 1" books.

Interview findings. The follow-up interviews were conducted with five of the participants. Table 6 summarizes the information obtained from the interviews on reasons for taking the ER course, their preference of book difficulty, their reasons for perceived book difficulty, and pleasure experiences during ER. It was found that four participants took the ER course because they considered it easy to earn credits. In addition, the interviews revealed that there were various perceptions of book difficulty and pleasure experiences. As for the perceived book difficulty, Aoi and Mio did not refer to lexical difficulty. Instead, book length was mentioned most frequently among the five participants. In addition, it was found that the participants had different views of suitable book difficulty in terms of "*i* plus and minus 1," suggesting that the participants had various preferences with book difficulty.

Table 6

Reason for the ER Course Registration, Difficulty Preference, Reason for Book Difficulty, and Pleasure Experience

Participants	Reason for taking the ER course	"*i* plus 1" vs. "*i* minus 1" Preference	Reason for book difficulty	Pleasure experience
Minori	Interested in ER	"*i* plus 1"	illustrations, reading speed, vocabulary	book content, free book choice
Aoi	Easy to earn credits	"*i* minus 1"	book length, prior knowledge, reading time	group work, reading as relaxation
Daichi	Easy to earn credits	it depends	book length, genre, grammar, vocabulary	a sense of achievement, self-esteem
Sakurako	Easy to earn credits	"*i* minus 1"	book length, genre, vocabulary	free book choice, reading in English
Mio	Easy to earn credits	"*i* minus 1"	book length, content, grammar	free book choice, improvement of reading speed

Similarly, there were varied perceptions of pleasure in ER, some of which may not be related to the flow theory. For instance, Aoi said that she felt pleasure being at rest in the ER class amid her busy extra-curricular activity as a club manager. This may not confirm the flow theory, which suggests that flow can be generated when higher perceived challenges match higher

perceived skills. Nevertheless, many participants had book choice in common as pleasure experiences in the ER classroom.

For the purpose of exploring the reasons for various meanings of book difficulty and pleasure, five flow-related categories that emerged from each participants' interviews should be discussed below: (a) interaction with external factors; (b) need of goals; (c) choice of books; (d) motivation; and (e) different types of pleasure.

First, the various perceptions were affected by some external factors, reinforcing the idea that flow can be a product of interactions between a person and the environment. For example, Aoi had a busy campus life as a club manager, which had forced her ER to be just a relaxation, although she believed that "if there were an abundance of time, I think it's so good to make it a habit to read as a hobby." These examples suggested that their perceptions would have been affected by interactions with the environment inside and outside the classroom.

Second, the goals for the ER course could affect perceptions. For example, Daichi first started his ER partly because of the course credits as he said, "I only ever read for assignments." One day, however, he found that his ER would be useful for preparing for TOEIC and began to read in greater earnest. This was consistent with his idea that learners should read "*i* plus 1" books at the second half of the ER course.

Third, four participants commented on their feelings of pleasure when choosing books to read by themselves. For example, Minori compared this kind of pleasure with her flow-generating hobby: playing the piano. She said that her motivation for playing the piano for a long time was "not practicing the same songs, but I've tried to find and buy new piano scores by myself...scores that I want to play," which was similar to book selection on the ER course.

Fourth, while the flow theory views intrinsic motivation as an important feature of flow state (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), many participants in this study took the ER course mainly for the purpose of earning credits, which could be extrinsically motivating. However, it might be possible that learners will gradually become intrinsically motivated through ER practice. This type of transformation from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation was observed in Mio's experience of her cheerleading. Although she had had a sense of obligation to continue her cheerleading in her high school days, she felt a sense of loss after quitting cheerleading. She commented: "Cheerleading became a part of my life, and if I quit it my life would become lazy, so I'm continuing cheerleading." This sense of obligation was, according to Mio, similar to the feeling that she had in the ER course "in that someone told me to do it." In other words, this example may suggest that learners who started ER with external motivation can gradually change it into an intrinsically motivating activity.

Finally, the idea of pleasure was not monolithic. For example, Sakurako described her experience in the ER course as "requiring perseverance," but at the same time she felt pleasure when, as she said, "I felt the improvement [of my English ability] through the year," although "of course, we cannot realize much improvement in a short time, so...perseverance." This example suggested that, while it was difficult for her to concentrate on a book and easy to get

distracted, she felt pleasure at the end of the course. This meant at least two types of pleasure experience: short-term and long-term ones.

Discussion and Conclusion

Research Question 1: What characteristics of flow can be found in L2 ER in relation to perceived book difficulty?

In the present study, the present author conducted two questionnaire surveys on flow experiences in an ER course. Forty-three (the 2019 cohort) and 56 (the 2020 cohort) Japanese university students completed the questionnaire. Their responses suggested that there were some fragmented characteristics of flow experiences during their reading, such as concentration, willingness to read on, and positive emotion. These results were consistent with Kirchhoff (2013), who found flow-like experiences in her ER program. In addition, it was found that those who read "*i* plus 1" books had higher total scores on the flow scale than those who read "*i* minus 1" ones. Although it is difficult to compare the groups due to the small sample sizes, this result confirmed the flow theory that advocates the balance between higher perceived challenges and higher perceived skills, as well as with previous studies (e.g., Egbert, 2003). Furthermore, the result was consistent with Yang et al. (2021), who found that "*i* plus 1" reading contributed to their students' reading motivation compared with "*i* minus 1" reading. However, the result was inconsistent with other studies (e.g., Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017; Chiang, 2016), who suggested that "*i* minus 1" reading can be positively related to ER readers' affect. Nevertheless, the finding that the results were compatible with the flow theory could suggest that many participants had flow experience during ER, and that ER was a flow-generating activity. The conclusion that the participants found flow in their reading was also supported by the finding from the 2020 cohort where there was a similar pattern between the participants' perceived English proficiency (Table 1) and their perception of book difficulty (Table 5) in terms of the frequency distributions of their numbers. This was analogous to the higher-challenge versus higher-skill balance that the flow theory advocates. Finally, the results could show that the difference in perceived book difficulty might play an important role in the quality of flow experiences, suggesting the need for further discussions on this topic. It is true that this study was not designed to test any causal relationship between the "*i* plus 1" reading and flow experience. However, some participants in the follow-up interviews (e.g., Minori) also suggested that they preferred "*i* plus 1" books to "*i* minus 1" ones and experienced flow.

To sum up, flow was observed in the ER course, and the difference in perceived book difficulty might be important enough to affect the quality of flow experience.

Research Question 2: What are individual ER readers' perceptions of (a) book difficulty and (b) pleasure?

The findings in the follow-up interviews could provide an answer to the second research question pertaining to various perceptions of book difficulty and pleasure experience despite some commonalities among the five participants: book length for perceived book difficulty and book choice for pleasure experience. First, the finding that book length might affect the perceptions of

book difficulty coincided with that of Holster et al. (2017), who suggested that book length is a good predictor for perceived book difficulty. In addition, the finding was consistent with the discussion in the literature review section on the importance of factors other than lexical information that affect book difficulty (e.g., Gillis-Furutaka, 2015). Second, the finding that freedom of book choice was perceived as a pleasure experience by most participants was supported by the previous literature (e.g., Macalister, 2015).

The results of the interviews also revealed that there were five issues related to the flow theory that could explain the reasons for various perceptions: (a) interaction with external factors; (b) need of goals; (c) choice of books; (d) motivation; and (e) different types of pleasure. For example, the importance of goals in ER was consistent with the idea that a clear goal is a prerequisite for generating flow, while freedom of book choice was also similar to the concept of control during the flow state. The finding that there were different types of pleasure, as represented by the short- and long-term pleasure, confirmed Ro's (2018) finding that pleasure was not a monolithic concept.

However, one of the main differences between the findings in the present study and the flow theory would be that the participants were not always motivated intrinsically as represented by the motivation for course credits and assignments. However, in light of the finding that the participants started to appreciate the importance of ER and be motivated to read on, the transformation from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation through ER practice should be emphasized instead of the question of whether to be motivated extrinsically or intrinsically. The participants in the present study showed that, despite their extrinsic motivation in the beginning of the course, they had gradually found their most suitable book difficulties and pleasure experiences through the program.

In other words, this finding has provided empirical support for Mori's (2015) model for motivating readers in ER programs. Mori pointed out that extrinsic motivation is also needed at the beginning of the programs if the readers can be intrinsically motivated. In addition, she suggested that choice would play an important role in this motivational change, which leads to successful ER practice and autonomous readers in the long run. This view is consistent with the findings in the present study in that choice would contribute to the participants' pleasure experience.

Furthermore, the findings were similar to the concept of emergent motivation (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005). The concept suggested that even if learners are not motivated to do something at the beginning, they will gradually be motivated "as they become engaged in the activity, and due to the quality of the experience" (Piniel & Albert, 2019, p. 583). Such engagement will be possible when learners "find flow in it" (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005, p. 603), meaning that the participants who succeeded in finding flow in the present study could (and did) become intrinsically motivated. Therefore, finding flow can contribute to the successful experiences of ER in the long run.

To summarize, there was a complex relationship between book difficulty and pleasure experiences, which was related to the learners' various perceptions and preferences, as well as different factors affecting each learner's ER practice. The present study has emphasized the

importance of individual learners' choice of books to find their own flow-generating balances between perceived book difficulty and pleasure experiences, which may lead to intrinsic motivation and successful ER experience, as Mori (2015) has suggested.

The present study has some limitations to be considered for further studies as represented by the following five issues related to the research design. First, the descriptive statistics with small samples was not generalizable to other samples from the same population. Second, the questionnaire survey did not assess the participants' reading comprehension. Because there may be a relationship between the degree of comprehension and perception of book difficulty, future studies should be encouraged to explore this relationship. Third, the present study did not have a non-ER control group, without which it cannot be certain as to what extent the generation of flow could be attributed to ER. Fourth, the sampling of the interview participants should have been based on the descriptive statistics for the flow scores such as medians and maximum and minimum scores, without which the sampling could be considered arbitrary. Finally, because the one-shot ESM after five-minute reading could not reveal the whole picture of flow experiences in the ER classroom, further research is needed to employ ESM at multiple time points.

Despite these limitations, the present study offers some implications for ER studies and practice. First, further studies and practice should be encouraged (a) to explore the relationship between perceived book difficulty and pleasure experiences; (b) to examine flow experience in ER; and (c) to discuss the difference in book difficulties and its effects on students' experience of ER. Second, the present study conducted the one-shot ESM after five-minute reading and found some characteristics of flow in the ER programs. In light of the lack of enough discussion on the task duration to generate flow, the findings may provide some insights for the flow theory and ER programs where students read for about five minutes only (e.g., Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007). Finally, ER teachers could also encourage their students to find their own best balances between suitable book difficulty and pleasure experiences, which would enable them to keep reading autonomously inside and outside the ER program.

Acknowledgement

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Appendices

Appendix A

The Questionnaire Employed for the 2019 Cohort (Administered in Japanese)

Question 1. 記入の指示がある直前まで、何をしていましたか。[Describe what you were doing just before you were told to stop reading.]

Question 2. 記入の指示がある直前まで、どのような気分でしたか。[Describe your feeling just before you were told to stop reading.]

Question 3.
なぜそのような気分だったのですか。できる限り詳しく説明してください。[Describe the reason(s) for the feeling in as much detail as possible in your own words.]

Question 4.
その本の難易度はどれくらいでしたか。最も当てはまる数字に○をつけてください。[Choose the best number for describing the difficulty of your book.]

1. 易しい：「自分のレベル‐2」以下　[Too easy: your level minus 2 or below]

2. 少し易しい：「自分のレベル‐1」[Easy: your level minus 1]

3. ちょうどよい：「自分のレベル±0」[Almost the same level as yours]

4. 少し難しい：「自分のレベル＋1」[Difficult: your level plus 1]

5. 難しい：「自分のレベル＋2」以上 [Too difficult: your level plus 1 or above]

Question 5.
記入の指示がある直前までのあなたの状況について、最も当てはまる数字にそれぞれ○をつけてください。[Read the following items about the situation just before you were told to stop reading and choose the best number for each item.]

1: 全く当てはまらない [I strongly disagree.] 2. 当てはまらない [I disagree.] 3. あまり当てはまらない [I slightly disagree.] 4. やや当てはまる [I slightly agree.] 5. 当てはまる [I agree.] 6. とてもそう思う [I strongly agree.]

[1] 本を読んでいて楽しかった　　[I enjoyed reading the book.]

[2] 物語に引き込まれていた [I was absorbed in the book.]

[3] この本の内容は面白くなかった [The book was not interesting.]

[4] 時間が経つのを忘れていた [I forgot about the passing of time.]

[5] 本を読んでいてつまらなかった [I was bored with reading the book.]

[6] この本が好奇心を引き立てた [The book aroused my curiosity.]

[7] 本の内容以外のことを考えていた [I was thinking about other things than the book.]

[8] ずっと読み続けていたい [I want to keep reading for a long time.]

[9] この本の内容は面白かった [The book was interesting.]

[10] もっとこうした本をたくさん読みたい [I want to read more books like this one.]

[11] 本の内容に集中していた [I concentrated on the book.]

[12] 早く授業が終わってほしい [I wish the class would be over soon.]

Appendix B

The Questionnaire Employed in the 2020 Cohort (Administered in Japanese)

Question 1.
記入の指示がある直前までの読書中の気分とその理由を詳しく記してください。
[Describe (1) your feeling just before you were told to stop reading and (2) its reason(s) in as much detail as possible in your own words.]
Question 2.
記入の指示がある直前までの読書中に考えていたこととその理由を詳しく記してください。 [Describe (1) what you were thinking just before you were told to stop reading and (2) its reason(s) in as much detail as possible in your own words.]
Question 3.
記入の指示がある直前までの読書中にしたかったこととその理由を詳しく記してください。 [Describe (1) what you wished to do just before you were told to stop reading and (2) its reason(s) in as much detail as possible in your own words.]
Question 4.
読んでいた本の難易度はどれくらいでしたか。最も当てはまる数字に○をつけてください。また、その選択肢を選んだ理由を詳しく記してください。 [Choose the best number for describing the difficulty of your book. Describe the reason(s) why you think so in as much detail as possible in your own words.]
1. 易しい：「自分のレベル - ２」以下 [Too easy: your level minus 2 or below]

2. 少し易しい：「自分のレベル - １」[Easy: your level minus 1]

3. ちょうどよい：「自分のレベル±０」[Almost the same level as yours]

4. 少し難しい：「自分のレベル + １」[Difficult: your level plus 1]

5. 難しい：「自分のレベル + ２」以上 [Too difficult: your level plus 1 or above]
Question 5.
記入の指示がある直前までのあなたの状況について、最も当てはまる数字にそれぞれ○

をつけてください。[Read the following items about the situation just before you were told to stop reading and choose the best number for each item.]

1: 全く当てはまらない [I strongly disagree.] 2. 当てはまらない [I disagree.] 3. あまり当てはまらない [I slightly disagree.] 4. やや当てはまる [I slightly agree.] 5. 当てはまる [I agree.] 6. とてもそう思う [I strongly agree.]

[1] 本を読んでいて楽しかった   [I enjoyed reading the book.]

[2] 物語に引き込まれていた [I was absorbed in the book.]

[3] この本の内容は面白くなかった [The book was not interesting.]

[4] 時間が経つのを忘れていた [I forgot about the passing of time.]

[5] 本を読んでいてつまらなかった [I was bored with reading the book.]

[6] この本が好奇心を引き立てた [The book aroused my curiosity.]

[7] 本の内容以外のことを考えていた [I was thinking about other things than the book.]

[8] ずっと読み続けていたい [I want to keep reading for a long time.]

[9] この本の内容は面白かった [The book was interesting.]

[10] 本の内容に集中していた [I concentrated on the book.]

[11] もっとこうした本をたくさん読みたい [I want to read more books like this one.]

[12] 早く多読の時間が終わってほしい [I wish the class would be over soon.]

Question 6.

自分の英語力はどれくらいだと思いますか。最も当てはまる数字(1～5)に○をつけてください。[Choose the best number for describing your English proficiency from 1 (Low) to 5 (High).]

About the Author

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