

A Qualitative Study on Subjective Attitudes and Objective Achievement of Autotelic and Non-autotelic Students of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract Csikszentmihalyi (Flow. Harper and Row, New York, 1990), who introduced the concept of autotelic personality, claims that an autotelic individual is the one who performs certain actions for their own sake, rather than in order to achieve some external goals. Moreover, autotelic personalities have a greater ability “to initiate, sustain, and enjoy optimal experiences. The mark of the autotelic personality is the ability to manage a rewarding balance between the ‘play’ of challenge finding and the ‘work’ of skill building. Thus autotelic individuals should enjoy clear advantages in realizing the development of their talents to the fullest extent” (Csikszentmihalyi et al. in *Talented teenagers: The roots of success and failure*. Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 80, 1993). The present paper seeks to depict the qualitative research on the differences between autotelic and non-autotelic English philology students, namely their subjective attitudes and objective achievements in the process of learning English as a foreign language.

Keywords Flow • Autotelic personality • Optimal experience • Motivation

1 Introduction

Considering Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura’s (1989) findings, it appears that the autotelic students are those who can find and actively create optimal challenges by fully using their psychic energy, and who enjoy their activities in flow. Thus, the autotelic personality seems to be a construct which reflects individual differences in internal, attentional processes, such as intrinsic motivation, rather than differences in structural life circumstances that people consciously or unconsciously select or engage in their lives. Assuming that flow exists and that autotelic personalities have the tendency to position themselves in situations which enable more frequent

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experiences of flow states (Asakawa, 2004), it seems necessary to analyse possible differences between autotelic and non-autotelic students in their attitudes to the foreign language learning procedures. Therefore, the aim of the present paper is to present the results of a qualitative study on the differences between autotelic and non-autotelic students. Both the flow theory and further research on autotelic and non-autotelic students imply that the autotelics' perceptions of challenges and skills are more balanced (Asakawa, 2004). Therefore, it can be expected that autotelics recognise English tasks as more important for them than non-autotelics. Similarly, the autotelics should perceive the English tasks as more difficult and interesting than non-autotelics. From this perspective it is also important to investigate whether autotelics declare to be more successful in English than non-autotelics, and whether they would opt for English if they had a choice to select a field of studies. Moreover, it is essential to investigate the difference between autotelics and non-autotelics as far as their foreign language competence is concerned, that is, whether their subjective attitudes toward success in FLL processes matches with the objective achievements analysed on the basis of their final written and oral practical exam.

The purpose of the research is manifold. In this chapter the qualitative part on subjective attitudes and objective achievements of autotelics and non-autotelics in the process of learning English as a foreign language is going to be investigated. Essentially, the paper attempts to respond to the following research question:

RQ: Do autotelic and non-autotelic students of English philology differ in their subjective attitudes and objective achievements in the process of learning English as a foreign language?

2 Method

2.1 Participants

The data were collected at The Karkonosze State Professional School of Higher Education in Jelenia Góra. A total of 140 English Philology students (from year one to year three) volunteered to participate in the study and completed the questionnaire. The sample comprised of 46 males and 94 females with ages ranging from 19 to 24 years, the average age was 20.6.

2.2 Instruments

The present part of the study was conducted with the three major instruments for data collection, including: (a) the *Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI)* and the *Flow Scale questionnaire* (these scales were designed to assess autotelic and non-autotelic

students of EFL), (b) the *Experience Sampling Method (ESM)* devoted to the foreign language process, and (c) *school records* (practical English final exams).

2.2.1 Intrinsic Motivation Inventory and Flow Scale Questionnaire

IMI is a multidimensional measurement device intended to assess the participants' subjective experience related to the target activity in a laboratory experiment related to intrinsic motivation. The purpose of the IMI was to assess the participants' intrinsic motivation. The IMI scale, formulated by McAuley, Duncan, and Tammen (1987), consisted of 45 items; a 7-point Likert scale was used with the minimum number of 45 points, and maximum 315. The instrument assesses the participants' interest/enjoyment (e.g. *I enjoyed doing this activity very much*), perceived competence (e.g. *I think I am pretty good at this activity*), effort (e.g. *I put a lot of effort into this*, value/usefulness (e.g. *I believe this activity could be of some value to me* or some open questions e.g. *I think it is important to do, because it can _____*), felt pressure and tension (e.g. *I did not feel nervous at all while doing this*), perceived choice while performing a given activity (e.g. *I felt like it was not my choice to do this task*), and experience of relatedness (e.g. *I felt really distant to this person*). During the research the scale's reliability was assessed by the author of the study in terms of Cronbach's alpha and it was .71.

The next scale applied was the Flow Scale which was developed by Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993). The Flow Scale was supposed to assess students' quality of experience as a function of perceived challenges and skills, and therefore, the optimal state of mind—flow. Thus, the aim of the scale was to identify autotelic and non-autotelic students. The Flow Scale consisted of 28 items. A 7-point Likert scale was used with the minimum numbers of 28 points, and maximum of 196. The sample items on the scale were as follows: *My mind isn't wandering, I am not thinking of something else, I am totally involved in what I am doing, My body feels good, I am so involved in what I am doing I don't see myself as separate from what I am doing*. Apart from that there were also open questions to which the participants were supposed to give brief responses and explain what activities can evoke or lead to the experiences as formulated in the questions, e.g.: *Do you ever do something where your concentration is so intense, your attention so undivided and wrapped up in what you are doing that you sometimes become unaware of things you normally notice (for instance, other people talking, loud noises, the passage of time, being hungry or tired, having an appointment, having some physical discomfort)?* The scale's reliability was estimated by means of Cronbach's alpha and it was .85.

On the basis of the Flow Scale, the results of the sample were divided into four quartiles. For the sake of the study only two extreme quartiles were taken into consideration. Therefore, the lower quartile (≤ 69) which comprised of 35 students. They formed the group of non-autotelics. The upper quartile (≥ 95) comprised of 37 students who formed the group of autotelics.

2.2.2 Experience Sampling Method Questionnaire

The ESM questionnaire was adapted from Moon (2003). Its aim was to examine the students' attitude to the EFL process. It included items like: *When you complete English tasks you treat them more like play, more like work, none of the above, both of the above*. Apart from that there were also questions concerning high challenge/high skills relationship, perceived success, perceived benefits and perceived choice. The perceived challenges (*Levels of challenges of the activity*) and perceived skills (*Level of your skills in the activity*) were used to determine the flow condition and the other experiential conditions of the flow theory—*anxiety, relaxation and apathy*. The sample questions were e.g. *My abilities in English in comparison to challenges are...* or *The challenges in comparison to my abilities in English are....* All the items were evaluated on a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from 1—*very low* to 9—*very high*. The questionnaire consisted of multiple choice and open-ended items, e.g. *What were the reasons that caused you to decide to study EFL, or What has determined your attitude towards EFL? Has anything happened, or have you done anything which could have affected how you feel about studying English?* For the sake of the present paper we discuss the qualitative part of the research only.

2.2.3 School Records

The school records comprised of the final practical English exam grades. They were placed on a Likert scale from 2 to 5, meaning: 2(F), 3(E), 3.5(D), 4(C), 4.5(B), 5(A).

As far as the qualitative part of the research is concerned, the participants were supposed to give their responses to the open questions. They were asked to explain briefly what activities can lead to experiencing the examined feelings.

2.3 Procedure

The data collection procedure took place in June 2006 (the collection of the final practical exam grades) and from December 2006 to January 2007. There were three questionnaires in Polish applied during the experiment. In December 2006 all the students (140) were given Questionnaire 1 which consisted of IMI and the Flow Scale. The procedure lasted approximately one hour and the respondents were in one room. The participants responded to the ESM questionnaire in December 2006. The procedure conducted in one room lasted approximately one hour.

3 Results and Discussion

As far as the first open question is concerned, namely: *Do you ever do something where your concentration is so intense, your attention so undivided and wrapped up in what you are doing that you sometimes become unaware of things you normally notice (for instance, other people talking, loud noises, the passage of time, being hungry or tired, having an appointment, having some physical discomfort)?*, the research results show that the autotelics enumerated writing, reading and communicating with native speakers as the activities that stimulate their concentration most. It is worth noting that the tasks which are authentic or interesting to the students make them more concentrated. Moreover, watching movies and listening to the music make their attention undivided. The responses of the non-autotelics seemed to be quite similar to those of the autotelics. An interesting issue is that literature, perceived as a very demanding subject which arouses high concentration and attention, was mentioned only by the non-autotelics.

In response to the next open question, *Do you ever do something where your skills have become so 'second nature' that sometimes everything seems to come to you 'naturally' or 'effortlessly', and where you feel confident that you will be ready to meet any new challenges?*, the autotelics could detect and enumerate the EFL activities more easily. But the non-autotelics' choices roughly coincide with those of the autotelics. The tasks mentioned by both the autotelics and non-autotelics are communicating with others, watching movies and British channels on TV, and reading authentic materials.

As far as the third open question is concerned, namely: *Do you ever do something where you feel that the activity is worth doing in itself? In other words, even if there were no other benefits associated with it (for instance, financial reward, improved skills, recognition from others, and so on), you would still do it*, the responses show that the activities that arouse the examined feeling for the autotelics are, generally speaking, inventive and creative, mainly the activities which the autotelics find important for their future goals. Apart from that, they also mentioned cooperation and team work, communicating with other people, native speakers as well, which they recognise as significant. Moreover, they felt so when reading, not only obligatory material, but also plays and poems as well. Furthermore, they mentioned writing essays, poems and e-mails, and watching TV or listening to the music. Some of them listed grammar tasks. The autotelics also noted that they feel that the activity is worth doing in itself when they feel competent and successful. Furthermore, they underlined the role of the EFL tasks which they find challenging but at the same time pleasant and satisfying. What is more, autotelics mentioned activities which can enlarge their EFL knowledge, which is browsing through dictionaries or learning new, very often very sophisticated and unique vocabulary, which is not part of their curriculum. They just do it for the pleasure of doing and for satisfaction. It directly corresponds to the premises of flow theory which postulates that autotelics find enjoyment in the activities irrespective of the external

benefits. Furthermore, when autotelics are interested in an activity and feel competent, they become also more satisfied and successful.

As far as the non-autotelics are concerned, we can speculate that their choices roughly correspond to those of the autotelics. They mentioned listening, and writing activities, such as letters and e-mails and translating texts into Polish; moreover, learning English vocabulary and pronunciation, reading English literature, comics, fairy tales, and idioms or authentic materials from newspapers, and also learning grammar. It is worth noting, however, that the non-autotelics underline that if they find the task interesting, they perceive the activity as worth doing, even if it is quite difficult.

Responding to the following question: *Do you ever do something that has provided some unique and very memorable moments—for which you feel extremely lucky and grateful—that has changed your perspectives on life (or yourself) in some way?*, the autotelics stressed, similarly to the previous items, the importance of communicating in English with people all around the world, also with native speakers; moreover, they mentioned reading literature and watching movies and TV programs. Some of them, quite surprisingly, valued the participation in the formal lectures, which can be interpreted as a compliment for the teacher. They enumerated methodology, psychology and teaching others as the activities that make them successful and satisfied. Some of them also stated that they find the opportunity to enlarge their knowledge valuable. Quite a few had doubts, but still they declared that the feelings examined are not unfamiliar to them. A number of the autotelics marked that they experienced the aforementioned feelings quite rarely.

Similarly to autotelics, the non-autotelics distinguished the opportunity to communicate with other people as the most significant factor when feeling fortunate, grateful and unique. Moreover, they mentioned reading books and magazines and getting to know British and American culture. What is more, they recognised the value of meeting interesting people all over the world, including native speakers, watching movies and other programs on British Channels, enlarging vocabulary and translating. Additionally, they reported to feel benefits and satisfaction when the task is completed successfully, which corresponds to their previous responses. Another interesting response is that they found the aforementioned feelings when teaching English, under one condition, however, that their students should be highly motivated. It can be assumed that they appreciate the fundamental role of motivation in learning. Some of the non-autotelics admitted that they had rarely or never experienced the examined feelings.

In the next step, the Experience Sampling Method was employed to collect the data for the next item which focused on the participants' choice as far as learning English was concerned. The informants were supposed to provide a response to the question: *Would you have learned English if you had had a choice?*

It is worth noting that 100 % of the autotelic participants unanimously admitted that they would have chosen studying English, whereas only 86 % of the non-autotelic students would have made a similar decision. Among the 14 % of the non-autotelics' responses opting for other subjects, the following reasons were given: "If I had a choice I would choose to learn Russian, which I like more. English,

however, guarantees a better job opportunity”, as one of the participants frankly admitted, or another one, who would rather study photography than English, which he is a little bit bored with. Finally, one of the participants admitted that she had wanted to become a doctor of medicine, but she eventually decided to study English philology, since it seemed to be ‘easier’. Another participant wrote that she wanted to be an actress but her parents discouraged her. Some students could not justify their opinions.

The Experience Sampling Method was also employed in order to define the attitude to learning English. Thus, it was worth shedding more light on particular responses of the autotelic and non-autotelic participants to the following question: *Has anything happened, or have you done anything which could have affected how you feel about learning English?*

Both autotelics and non-autotelics provided responses which could be gathered in several thematic issues, such as the informants’ experience with visiting English speaking countries, meeting English culture and native speakers, finding English essential for future goals, English as a means of communication with people all around the world, listening to English music, watching movies and reading English stories, positive learning experiences with English from primary or secondary schools, English as the informants’ favourite subject, or the subject they were particularly successful at, and the role of the English teachers who influenced the participants.

Some of the examples the non-autotelics provided sounded quite surprising and bizarre. One of the participants said that he would have chosen studying ‘music’ but he was afraid it was too difficult, or the one who openly admitted that his motivation to learn English declined, mostly because he would prefer studying something else. Another one frankly admitted that studying medicine had always been her dream, but she did not pass the entrance exam and she thought that English would also give her the possibility of having a prosperous career. And finally the one who liked English because it was the only subject he could ‘show off’ in at secondary school. Two of the interviewees could not decide, whereas three of them did not respond at all.

4 School Records Results

In the final step of analysing the autotelic and non-autotelic respondents the grades obtained in their practical English exam were taken into account. It was worth checking whether apart from the differences in autotelics’ and non-autotelics’ general opinions and attitudes towards learning English, the informants vary as far as their objective achievements in English are concerned. In order to do it, the grades of the final practical exam were compared and analysed. As far as the grades of the autotelics were concerned, the mean was 2.87 (SD = .23), while the non-autotelics’ mean response was 2.75 (SD = .22). The *t*-test for independent samples did not reveal any significant differences between the groups ($t = 1.58, p = .12$). It means that both autotelics and non-autotelics did not differ significantly in their objective achievements in English.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of the present study was to assess the differences between autotelic and non-autotelic students of English philology, their subjective attitudes and objective achievements in English as a foreign language learning process. In response to the data collected (see Appendix) several remarks can be formulated.

First of all, it can be inferred that both autotelics and non-autotelics designated the following English activities when their concentration, interest and attention were the highest: communicating in English, also with native speakers, watching English films and programmes, reading authentic materials, sight-seeing, listening to music and translating lyrics. Therefore, it seems that these tasks can induce focused concentration and undivided attention in the foreign language classroom context. It can be speculated that interest is more important for autotelics who concentrate more on subjects which they find more interesting, whereas non-autotelics concentrate more if the tasks demand high attentiveness and involvement, and because they are difficult and also because they seem to be necessary to be completed. Another interesting issue is that only for some non-autotelics there are no EFL tasks that make their concentration intensive and their attention undivided. It accords with the hypothesis of flow theory which assumes that autotelics experience a higher level of intrinsic motivation, whereas non-autotelics are more prone to external awards. Non-autotelics' intrinsic motivation tends to increase if they devote time and give concentration, attention and energy to EFL tasks; some non-autotelic students become more autotelic if they perceive the activities interesting and important for their future goals; if some of the non-autotelics devote some time and focus their attention on an activity, the activity becomes more autotelic. Only some non-autotelics have rarely or never experienced high concentration, focused attention and interest. It directly corresponds to the premises of flow theory which postulates that autotelics find enjoyment in the activities irrespective of the external benefits. Furthermore, when autotelics are interested in an activity and feel competent, they become also more satisfied and successful. The non-autotelics underline that if they find the task interesting, they perceive the activity as worth doing, even if it is quite difficult. It can be speculated that the more interesting the activity appears to be to the students, the more autotelic it becomes. It accords with the assumption of flow theory which stresses that both focused attention and enough time devoted to the activity can make it more interesting and worth doing and, in other words, more autotelic. It also corresponds to the finding demonstrated in the present research, namely that non-autotelics' intrinsic motivation tends to increase if they devote time and give concentration, attention and energy to EFL tasks. This finding seems to be the most valuable among the pedagogical implications.

Only non-autotelics admitted that if they had had a choice they would have chosen something else to study. Some non-autotelic students decided to study English when they had failed the entry exams to other faculties, some treated English as an 'easier' alternative, for instance to studying medicine, which seemed to be more challenging.

Finally, the levels of autotelics' and non-autotelics' EFL competence are comparable in this study. As the results show, the grades obtained in the practical English

exam did not differ significantly. It can be speculated that as far as the present level of English is concerned there are no differences between autotelics and non-autotelics and, as the research shows, both objective (grades) and subjective (feeling of perceived success) render similar results for autotelics and non-autotelics. On the other hand, the autotelics declared that the tasks were more important and interesting for them. Besides the level of autotelics' intrinsic motivation was higher. Therefore, we can speculate that autotelics, being equally successful to non-autotelics, can easier detect tasks which excite their interest, induce flow, and support flow experiences. Moreover, the non-autotelics appreciated the role of intrinsic motivation, which directly corresponds to the *flow* principle. Namely, the more attention people pay to an activity, the more involved they become, and the activity gives them more enjoyment and satisfaction. Thus, flow is said to function like a 'magnet' to learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

It can be concluded that flow-producing activities, as Csikszentmihalyi (1997) claims, require a mental investment of focus and attention before they can become enjoyable, and whenever people feel tired, anxious, or not disciplined, they tend to choose something less demanding. The reason why autotelics invest more in work to develop their intellectual potential may stem from their experience of flow, whereas non-autotelics invest less in work in order to avoid negative subjective states. Of course, the importance of a balanced challenge and skill for clustering positive subjective states is only one parameter of the flow experience. Moreover, as Pintrich and Schunk (2002) imply "the fundamental issue when considering the flow theory is that the *flow experience* requires skill, expertise, concentration, and perseverance, not just hanging out and feeling good" (p. 284).

Appendix

Results of the qualitative research on subjective attitudes and objective achievements of autotelic and non-autotelic students of EFL

| Open questions | Autotelics' answers | Non-autotelics' answers |
|--|--|--|
| Do you ever do something where your concentration is so intense, your attention so undivided and wrapped up in what you are doing that you sometimes become unaware of things you normally notice (for instance, other people talking, loud noises, the passage of time, being hungry or tired, having an appointment, having some physical discomfort)? | Writing, reading and communicating with native speakers as the activities that stimulate the concentration most; watching movies and listening to the music make the attention undivided | Similar to those of the autotelics; literature, perceived as a very demanding subject-mentioned only by the non-autotelics |

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| Open questions | Autotelics' answers | Non-autotelics' answers |
|--|--|--|
| Do you ever do something where your skills have become so 'second nature' that sometimes everything seems to come to you 'naturally' or 'effortlessly', and where you feel confident that you will be ready to meet any new challenges? | Communicating with others, watching movies and British channels on TV, and reading authentic materials | Similar to those of the autotelics |
| Do you ever do something where you feel that the activity is worth doing in itself? In other words, even if there were no other benefits associated with it (for instance, financial reward, improved skills, recognition from others, and so on), you would still do it | Speaking, inventive and creative activities, important for their future goals; cooperation and team work, communicating with other people, native speakers as well, reading, not only obligatory material, but also dramas and poems; writing essays, poems and e-mails, watching TV or listening to the music. Some mentioned grammar tasks; the activity is worth doing in itself when they feel competent and successful; the role of the EFL tasks- they find challenging but pleasant and satisfying; activities which can enlarge their EFL knowledge, that is browsing through dictionaries or learning new, very often very sophisticated and unique, vocabulary, which is not the part of their curriculum, done for pleasure of doing and for satisfaction | Listening, and writing activities, such as letters and e-mails and translating texts into Polish; moreover, learning English vocabulary and pronunciation, reading English literature, comics, fairy tales, and idioms or authentic materials from newspapers, and also learning grammar |

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| Open questions | Autotelics' answers | Non-autotelics' answers |
|---|---|---|
| Do you ever do something that has provided some unique and very memorable moments—for which you feel extremely lucky and grateful—that has changed your perspectives on life (or yourself) in some way? | Communicating in English with people all around the world, also with native speakers, reading literature and watching movies and TV programs. Some mentioned methodology, psychology and teaching others as the activities. Some find the opportunity to enlarge their knowledge valuable. Some had doubts, but still declared that the feelings examined are not unfamiliar to them. Some experienced the aforementioned feelings quite rarely | Communicating with people, reading books and magazines and getting to know British and American culture; meeting, including native speakers, watching movies and other programs on British Channels, enlarging vocabulary and translating; They feel advantageous and satisfied when the task is completed successfully and when teaching English but their students must be highly motivated |
| Would you have learned English if you had had a choice? | 100 %—Yes | 86 %—Yes |
| Has anything happened, or have you done anything which could have affected how you feel about learning English | Visiting English speaking countries, meeting English culture and native speakers, finding English essential in the future goals, English as a means of communication with people all around the world, listening to English music, watching movies and reading English stories, positive learning experiences with English from primary or secondary schools, English as the informants' favourite subject, or the subject they were particularly successful at, and the role of the English teachers who influenced the informants | Similar to those given by autotelics |

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| Open questions | Autotelics' answers | Non-autotelics' answers |
|---|--|------------------------------------|
| Do you ever do something where your skills have become so 'second nature' that sometimes everything seems to come to you 'naturally' or 'effortlessly', and where you feel confident that you will be ready to meet any new challenges? | Communicating with others, watching movies and British channels on TV, and authentic materials | Similar to those of the autotelics |

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