

## Task-Specific Flow in Older Adult EFL Learners

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### ABSTRACT

Flow has been identified as an optimal state of total immersion, enjoyment, and concentration with the appropriate balance of challenge and skills (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) and an important factor contributing to improved task performance (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). However, despite its relevance, publications related to this aspect in the context of foreign language (FL) geragogy (i.e., FL learning and teaching of older adults), are still very scarce. To bridge this gap, the present research was undertaken with older adult English as a FL learners aimed at investigating task-specific flow and the corresponding range of emotions. The study employed a mixed-methods approach with two types of data collected in two stages. First, students of the University of the Third Age, representing A1 ( $n = 20$ ) and A2+ ( $n = 18$ ) proficiency levels (Council of Europe, 2001), were asked to complete a questionnaire after performing three different tasks during a regular lesson: a listening task, a grammar exercise, and an information gap speaking activity. The data collection instrument tapped into their enjoyment, anxiety, and flow. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with selected participants ( $n = 9$ ). The results show that flow in the FL classroom is dynamic, and dependent on specific task characteristics, especially the arrangement mode and the level of other students' disruptive behaviors.

*Keywords:* foreign language geragogy (FLG), University of the Third Age (U3A), positive psychology, positive language education, flow, anti-flow

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## INTRODUCTION

The claim that, in the domain of second language acquisition (SLA), “emotions are the elephants in the room—poorly studied, poorly understood, seen as inferior to rational thought” (Swain, 2013, p. 11) no longer applies. Following what was called the “affective turn” (Pavlenko, 2013), the study of the impact of emotions on the process of language learning has established itself as a vibrant and promising area of inquiry in SLA, opening new perspectives and introducing a host of functional theories, novel constructs, and research methods to the field. MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012), by introducing and adapting the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2013) to the domain of language education, have brought to the limelight learners’ positive emotions and the fact that they have the power of overruling the impact of negative ones. SLA researchers’ interest in positive psychology (PP) (Dewaele et al. 2019; Dewaele & Li, 2020; MacIntyre et al. 2016, 2019; MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014) has resulted in studies of foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) (see Botes et al., 2022 for a meta-analysis of enjoyment studies), resilience (e.g., Capstick, 2018; Yun et al., 2018), grit (e.g., Sudina & Plonsky, 2021), buoyancy (e.g., Jahedizadeh et al., 2019), boredom (e.g., Pawlak et al., 2020), and foreign language (FL) peace of mind (Zhou et al., 2021).

Another theme PP has explored is flow, an optimal psychological state of total immersion, enjoyment, and concentration in an activity (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). In SLA, flow has been identified as an important factor contributing to improved task performance (Czimmermann & Piniel, 2016; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Dewaele and MacIntyre (2022c, p. 403) define flow as “a particularly intense, powerful conceptualization of an optimal, positive emotional experience featuring the interaction of skill with challenge.” Research in this area concentrates on identifying conditions leading to and hindering the occurrence of flow, at the same time exploring whether it can be enhanced through interventions. The present study falls in this trend by looking into the impact of task design on the experience of flow, as well as FLE and FLCA among older adult (OA) language learners. Despite growing in numbers, to the best of our knowledge, this specific group of learners has not attracted researchers’ attention in this respect. Hence, situating our study in the context of foreign language geragogy (FLG) bridges the research gap and aims

to provide insights into the impact of different types of tasks on OAs’ experience of flow and corresponding emotions. Students at the University of the Third Age (U3A) were asked to fill in questionnaires gauging their enjoyment, anxiety, and flow following the implementation of three different tasks in the course of one lesson. Numerical data were complemented with detailed interviews with volunteer participants that enabled an in-depth interpretation of the survey results and advanced a better understanding of the role of FLCA and FLE in the occurrence of flow with relation to specific tasks.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Older Adult Foreign Language Learners

The past two decades have seen a worldwide shift regarding the policies and practices of ageing. The active ageing framework (WHO, 2002) presents the challenges of the so-called older population (about 60+), but also highlights opportunities related to the process of normal (i.e., non-pathological) ageing. In line with this proposed new framework, OAs should no longer try to maintain the same level of activity throughout their lives, but rather perform any type of activity, be it social, economic, cultural, or civic, only within their abilities. The promotion of such engaged, healthy, and positive ageing has led to a heightened awareness of the needs of OAs and resulted in a change of perspective on the role of FLG.

Cognitive change may be affected by numerous life experiences, health, psychomotor abilities or even one’s lifestyle [including taking part in stimulating activities, such as FL learning]. Yet, with age, inter-individual differences increase, while the aims and outcomes of FL learning become more diverse. The research to date shows that FL learning may mitigate the effects of age-related structural and functional changes (e.g., Antoniou & Wright, 2017; Bubbico et al., 2019), but caution is required as there are also studies which prove that FL instruction might have an insignificant effect on our cognition (Berggren et al., 2020). At present, however, there is an agreement among cognitive researchers that neural plasticity remains unchanged throughout our entire lives (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). Maintaining cognitive function, along with strengthening social connections and improving well-being, are viewed as

primary aims of late-life FL learning by OA course participants (e.g., Bowling & Iliffe, 2011; Klímová & Pikhart, 2020; Słowik-Krogulec, 2023) and have become key factors in the geragogical research (e.g., Bar-Tur, 2021; Kivi et al., 2021; Klímová et al., 2021; Owen et al., 2022; Pikhart & Klímová, 2020). Yet, despite growing awareness of the need for employing the principles of positive language education (Mercer et al., 2018) to FLG, too little is known about the extent to which learning a FL can answer OA learners' needs, improve their quality of life, foster FLE and reduce FLCA, or induce associated positive states, such as flow.

The increasing influence of PP in SLA research (Gkonou et al., 2020; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018; Sampson & Pinner, 2021) has shifted the focus towards the role of learner and teacher emotions in language education. As a result, the latest publications in FLG (e.g. Pikhart & Klímová, 2020; Słowik-Krogulec, 2024) have brought to light the psychosocial motivations of OAs enrolling in language courses, which extend beyond solely developing language skills. Even though studies on the quality of life and well-being of OAs have flourished in recent years (Bar-Tur, 2021; Cwirlej-Sozańska et al., 2018; Kivi et al., 2021; Owen et al., 2022), this area has only recently gained attention in the field of applied linguistics (Brouwer et al., 2024; Klímová et al., 2021; Pikhart & Klímová, 2020). Consequently, there is still limited research on learners' emotions, such as reducing FLCA (Baran-Łuczars & Słowik-Krogulec, 2023), fostering FLE (Geng & Jin, 2022), or inducing positive states, such as flow (Słowik-Krogulec & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, forthcoming).

### **The Concept of Flow**

The concept of flow, introduced by Csíkszentmihályi (1990), is defined as an optimal psycho-social experience that occurs when a situation or task corresponds with the current capacities of an individual. It is an immersive state of “dynamic equilibrium” (Nakamura & Csíkszentmihályi, 2009, p. 90), which creates an awareness of a harmonious coordination between one's thoughts, actions, wishes, and feelings. During flow, people become extremely focused, the perception of time is distorted, and it is impossible to think about anything else besides the task at hand. This complex phenomenon is not something given, but rather

“something that we make happen” (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, p. 4) when we push ourselves to achieve a challenging and meaningful goal. It is based solely on a person's conscious and voluntary endeavor and creativity. The subjective experience of being involved in an activity is said to promote learning (Piniel & Ritecz, 2022), lead to self-development, the sense of thriving, and lasting motivation (Piniel & Albert, 2017, 2019).

However, the balance between action capacities and perceived opportunities may be easily distorted when task demands do not match one's existing skills, which can cause anxiety if the task is too difficult, or apathy and boredom if the activity is not challenging enough (Dewaele et al. 2022). All three emotions are strongly related to anti-flow and may lead to resignation and loss of interest in completing the assignment. Since flow seems to be conducive to an individual's development and may lead to better learning outcomes, it is central to PP research and is of interest to applied linguists investigating its role in FL education. One of the earliest studies on the optimal experience in this context was Egbert (2003), who examined task-flow in a FL. She noted that, similarly to motivation, flow theory demonstrates a complex and dynamic interaction of various variables, including the learner, the task at hand, and other contextual factors.

The results presented by Piniel and Albert (2019) also show that the likelihood of experiencing flow and being immersed in tasks depends on students' motivation, curiosity, and willingness to learn. The time spent in a state of flow while taking part in productive, meaningful, and motivating activities that leads to language improvement is similar in that regard to the concept of motivational second language self (Dörnyei, 2005), in which “experience is one of the main constructs that determines motivating learning behaviour” (Czimmerman & Piniel, 2016, p. 196). Motivational theories, such as Dörnyei's (2009) second language self-system or directed motivational currents, share with flow the experiential element, but just like in the case of emotions, flow can also appear on a group-level and can thus be “contagious” (Muir, 2020, p. 165), which has important implications for FL education.

Though the experience of flow may not be very common, there are certain components which might increase the likelihood of its appearance in the FL classroom context. They include: (1) the balance of

challenge and skills, (2) an interesting task with (3) a clear goal, (4) no time limit, (5) clear feedback, (6) the feeling of control, and (7) a focused attention with a high degree of intensity (Egbert, 2003; Nakamura & Csíkszentmihályi, 2009). In order to remain in this state, task difficulty must be gradually enhanced, and a person needs to develop new skills and embrace new challenges along the way (Csíkszentmihályi, 1988).

Task types which may lead to flow experiences were investigated in a group of university students by Czimmermann and Piniel (2016). The authors discovered that relevant and interesting activities as well as creativity involved in task completion are of utmost importance for getting students in the state of flow. This research was partially replicated by Piniel and Rítecz (2022), who concentrated on oral tasks in three modes: individual, pairwork, and groupwork. The results pointed to a higher level of flow in individual tasks, but the challenge to skills ratio was the highest in tasks requiring pairwork, though students reported experiencing low levels of control in all tasks. In contrast, in Dewaele et al.'s (2022) study, the occurrence of collective flow was more common than the individual experience as the state of heightened focus, enjoyment, timelessness, and bonding with peers increased gradually and became more intense with higher proficiency levels. Czimmermann and Piniel (2016) pointed out that occurrences of flow were associated with an overall lower level of FLCA, higher motivation, and self-efficacy of more advanced learners. The last concept, self-efficacy beliefs (see Bandura, 1997; Mills, 2014), or people's perceived ability to deal with a given task, is also important for task involvement and completion, central to flow theory. Learners with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to ascribe accomplishments to their effort, which may affect future learning (Piniel & Albert, 2019).

The research on emotions has also found its way to flow studies (e.g. Dewaele et al. 2022; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). The first instruments, the 22-item *Classroom Flow Questionnaire* (CFQ; Czimmermann & Piniel, 2016), adapted from the *Flow Perceptions Questionnaire* (FPQ; Egbert, 2003) investigated the correlations between task/classroom flow and the negative emotions of task boredom, apathy, and state anxiety. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2019) developed the 8-item flow measure to examine flow-related learner variables, and Wang and Huang (2022) decided to “identify learners’

levels of flow and develop a holistic view of learners’ emotions in EFL [English as a foreign language] classrooms” (p. 2) within a blended learning setting. This new 14-item *Foreign Language Flow Scale* includes items asking about flow and anti-flow experiences (including FLE, FLCA, and FL boredom). In a series of recent studies, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2022a, 2022b, 2022c) examined the relationship between flow and classroom emotions. The results in the Spanish as a FL context (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022a) indicate that the time spent in flow correlated with a higher degree of multilingualism and, similarly to previously discussed studies, higher proficiency. In addition, flow experience proved to be not random but resulted from long and careful preparation to improve one's fluency, and teachers proved to be vital for the appearance of flow and limiting the time of anti-flow.

Finally, unlike FLCA, FLE predicted the frequency of the state of flow (see also Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022c). Dewaele and MacIntyre (2022b) also investigated whether flow emerges equally with FLE and FLCA in two groups of respondents: learners of EFL and languages other than English. The relationship between the variables was found to be stronger in the former group, which points to their greater emotional involvement. At the same time, the results suggested that learning languages other than English may be even more enjoyable, less anxiety-provoking and lead to flow more often than in the case of English classes. However, as reported by Dewaele and MacIntyre, the effect size was very small. In short, although flow is much desired in the context of FL education, it is also dynamic, complex, and highly dependent on a variety of variables, including positive and negative emotional states (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022a).

### Emotions in Language Learning

Language learning generates both positive and negative emotions. Intricate interrelationships among them are inherent in the process of learning and communication. Generating positive emotions brings along a host of benefits: First, it overrules the destructive impact of negative emotions, while also increasing one's thought-action repertoire by allowing more thoughts and actions to come to mind, and builds all types of personal resources, including physical, intellectual, social and psychological

ones (Fredrickson, 2001). Importantly, personal resources that are generated when positive emotions operate are durable, which means that they can be accessed when negative emotional states take over (Frederickson, 2001, 2013). Positive emotions constitute one of the pillars of Seligman's (2018) PERMA model (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement), according to which its constituents, operating separately or jointly, contribute to one's well-being and happiness.

FLE has been recognized as a manifestation of positivity in language learning and experientially linked to academic achievement and perceived FL proficiency (Botes et al., 2022; Dewaele, 2022). The study of enjoyment in SLA was initiated by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), who defined it as a positive emotion that language learners experienced when their psychological needs were met. In a recent meta-analysis of studies on effects on FLE, Botes et al. (2022) emphasize an impressive range of research involving FLE as a variable and show the existence of moderate positive correlations between FLE and willingness to communicate, academic achievement, and self-perceived achievement. Among positive emotions, enjoyment appears the most common and noticeable in the classroom context (Pavelescu & Petric, 2018; Piniel & Albert, 2018). It stems from a positive classroom environment created by supportive teachers and friendly peers, where activities are engaging and pose adequate challenges (Jinag & Dewaele, 2019).

While positive emotions support language learning, negative ones have a detrimental effect. For instance, FLCA impinges on language acquisition at the input, processing, and output stages of the learning process (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a, 1991b). Harmful effects of FLCA on learning and communication have been documented in a large body of research (for an overview, see Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Although some suggestions were made that FLCA can have a facilitative effect (e.g., Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012), supportive evidence turned out to be insufficient, leading to questioning the existence of such an effect in general (Papi & Khajavy, 2023). Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 128) defined FLCA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." It can be considered at the trait and state level and be driven by learner-internal and external factors.

Learner-related features involve personality traits, for example, low levels of trait emotional intelligence and high levels of perfectionism (Dewaele, 2017); low self-esteem (Young, 1991); low language proficiency (Liu, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008); insufficient motivation (Teimouri, 2017); negative self-evaluation (Cheng, 2002; Liu, 2006; Mak 2011). Context-dependent triggers of FLCA encompass not only the teacher's but also peers' behaviors. In the former case, error correction (Mak, 2011) and classroom management (Liu, 2006; Mak 2011) can generate the emotion, as can peers' reactions to speech errors and their effect on one's social position (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017).

Although the scope of emotions considered in SLA research has grown in recent years (see section above), in the current study, we decided to focus on only two of them: enjoyment and anxiety. The former appears inherently linked to the concept of flow because it is one of its components and also serves the purpose of defining flow. The latter is undoubtedly the best-studied emotion in SLA with a vast literature and instrumentation. The two have long been considered opposite ends of the spectrum, but today they are viewed as separate and independent entities (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). The occurrence of anxiety does not exclude the possibility of enjoyment and the other way round. Moreover, as stressed by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014, p. 261), "the absence of enjoyment does not automatically imply a high level of FLCA, and an absence of FLCA does not mean a presence of FLE." This intricate connection has led researchers to a more holistic approach that, instead of considering either positive or negative emotions, looks at their co-existence and interdependence (e.g., Jiang & Dewaele, 2019; Li, et al., 2019; Resnik & Dewaele, 2020; MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017; for a more detailed discussion of FLCA and FLE see Dewaele et al., 2023).

Along these lines, our study explores both FLE and FLCA; however, it also considers flow in an attempt to better understand how the two emotions coincide with its occurrence. Moreover, we intend to discover conditions conducive to the emergence of the state individually and socially in relation to specific task types. Hence, a decision was made to adopt a mixed-methods approach to strengthen the interpretation of the numerical data with qualitative accounts of the participants. The novelty of the current study lies also in the fact that our inquiry is situated in the specific context of OA learners' classroom.

## Research Questions

The general aims presented above have been translated into the following detailed research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: To what extent does the percentage of time the participants experienced flow and anti-flow differ depending on the task?
- RQ2: To what extent does the level of FLE differ in three different tasks: a listening task, a grammar exercise, and an information gap speaking activity?
- RQ3: To what extent does the level of FLCA differ in three different tasks: a listening task, a grammar exercise, and an information gap speaking activity?
- RQ4: What is the relationship between FLE, FLCA, flow, and anti-flow experienced by OA language learners in three different tasks: a listening task, a grammar exercise, and an information gap speaking activity?
- RQ5: How do physical and social features of the classroom context affect the occurrence of FLE, FLCA, flow, and anti-flow among OA language learners in relation to task characteristics?

## METHOD

### Participants

The sample consisted of 28 students attending an English course at the U3A. Three of them were men, eight (28.57%) had secondary education, and 20 (71.42%) held a university degree. All of them were retired. The majority (82.14%) were between 60 and 70 years of age, and 17.86% between 70 and 80. As many as 20 (71.42%) described themselves as absolute beginners, and eight (28.57%) declared having a basic knowledge of English.

The average time of learning English, as provided in the background questionnaire, amounted to 1.57 years (min. = 6 months; max. = 5 years). As many as 20 (71.42%) learnt Russian at school, 14 (50%) attended lessons of German, seven (25%) lessons of French, and one (3.57%) of Latin and one of Spanish. Apart from taking part in the course of English, two (7.14%) participants attended German classes,

another two French, and one Spanish. Qualitative data were collected from nine volunteers.

### Procedure and Data Collection

This is a mixed-methods study that takes into account numerical data gathered by means of questionnaires and qualitative data provided by nine volunteer participants in semi-structured interviews (for the interview protocol, see the Appendix). The decision to jointly apply qualitative and quantitative paradigms was dictated by the need to complement numerical data with more detailed and nuanced explanations of the interplay of numerous variables whose operation might have evaded the measurement by individual scales. Questionnaires are intended to tap into well-defined factors predicted a priori, while qualitative data provide deeper insight into the processes and phenomena, increasing the possibility of finding unexpected results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Looking at the emergence of flow in mixed ways enables a more comprehensive and complete understanding of its nature and conditions that promote or hinder it.

Questionnaires were administered after each of the three different tasks performed in the course of one lesson. The content of the tasks in the groups was not exactly the same because students' proficiency levels differed; however, the design was identical. Thus, Task 1 (T1) involved listening to recorded conversations and entering words that were missing from the script. Task 2 (T2) focused on grammar and required producing wh- and how questions to fill in gaps in a conversation (Group 1) and providing negative or affirmative sentences in present simple (Group 2). Task 3 (T3) was an information gap activity, during which participants conducted short conversations using coursebook prompts. The administration of the questionnaires was preceded by filling in a short demographic survey, as reported above. The data collection tools were adapted in such a way that they directly referred to each of the tasks performed during the class.

**Table 1.** Interview Participants – Demographics

Participants	Age	Gender	Level	Learning Experience
P1	60	Female	A1	
P2	67	Female	A1	It was the participants' first year learning English at the U3A.
P3	63	Female	A1	
P4	65	Female	A1	
P5	64	Female	A1	
P6	65	Female	A1	
P7	66	Male	A1	
P8	63	Female	A1	
P9	71	Female	A1	

*Note.* U3A = University of the Third Age; A1 = Descriptions of proficiency levels are adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

Participants filled out *the Short-Form Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* ( $T1\alpha = .758$ ;  $T2\alpha = .781$ ;  $T3\alpha = .818$ ), designed by MacIntyre (1992) and consisting of eight items that tap into FLA in the FL classroom with items, such as “I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in FL class.” Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Another tool was the 9-item *Short-Form Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale* ( $T1\alpha = .853$ ;  $T2\alpha = .859$ ;  $T3\alpha = .732$ ), designed by Botes et al. (2021), which is a shortened version of the original 21-item scale (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). The underlying factor structure of the scale contains one higher-order FLE factor and three lower-order factors, namely *personal enjoyment* (3 items, e.g. “I enjoy my FL class.”), *social enjoyment* (3 items, e.g. “There is a good atmosphere in my FL classroom.”), and *teacher appreciation* (3 items, e.g. “My FL teacher is encouraging.”). Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Finally, participants reported on their experience of flow by responding to eight items modelled on Dewaele and MacIntyre (2019). Here, they were required to indicate the percentage of time they felt in flow or in anti-flow while performing each of the tasks. The first four items represented flow ( $T1\alpha = .748$ ;  $T2\alpha = .768$ ;  $T3\alpha = .671$ ), for example “I was totally absorbed...,” while the other four

were meant to reflect anti-flow experiences, for example “I was frustrated...” ( $T1\alpha = .825$ ;  $T2\alpha = .750$ ;  $T3\alpha = .885$ ).

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine volunteers. The questions revolved around the topic of flow and conditions that triggered or coincided with it, as well as positive and negative emotions corresponding to the tasks considered in the present study and evoked by learning English in general. The interviews enabled us to identify a range of factors that enhanced or hindered positive experiences in the language classroom. Moreover, the themes that emerged were used to explain some of the tendencies observed in quantitative data and substantiate the conclusions drawn.

### Data Analysis

The first step of analysis involved calculating descriptive statistics and establishing the data distribution. Because the data did not follow the normal distribution, non-parametric tests were chosen. The Friedman-test was chosen to compare the means for T1, T2, and T3. Correlations between the variables for each test were calculated by means of a Spearman test.

The qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2021) principles of performing reflexive thematic analysis. Both the inductive and deductive analytic

approaches were used. While the former emphasized data-based meanings, the latter was employed to make sure that the developed themes corresponded to the RQs posed in the study.

Themes were developed by using codes in the recursive six-phase process: “familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 39). The transcribed responses were fed into the NVivo software, Version 14 (QSR International, 2023) and coded by semantic segments by one of the researchers. The other researcher reviewed and suggested new codes. Patterns were identified using semantic (explicit) or latent (implicit) coding frameworks. The coding results and the wording of the codes were worked through and reexamined until we reached consensus. The same procedure was applied when the codes were organized into themes that were later reviewed and readjusted so that they corresponded to the RQs underlying the study.

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Data

The highest percentage of time participants reported they experienced flow was during T3 ( $M = 84.92$ ,  $SD = 18.59$ ) and, on the same occasion, their percentage of anti-flow was the lowest ( $M = 9.83$ ,  $SD = 18.77$ ). The ratings for anti-flow were the highest during T2 ( $M = 18.21$ ,  $SD = 22.00$ ). Enjoyment ratings were very similar on all three occasions,  $M_{T1} = 4.45$ ,  $SD_{T1} = 0.52$ ;  $M_{T2} = 4.30$ ,  $SD_{T2} = 0.58$ ;  $M_{T3} = 4.52$ ,  $SD_{T3} = 0.38$ . Reported anxiety turned out highest while performing T1 ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) (see Table 2 for the summary of descriptives).

A Friedman-test was carried out to compare the scores for the tested variables for the three tasks. There was a significant difference in perception of time in flow depending on the task,  $\chi^2(2) = 11.415$ ,  $p = 0.003$ . Post-hoc analysis with Wilcoxon signed-rank tests was conducted

with a Bonferroni correction applied, resulting in a significance level at  $p < 0.017$ . The analysis showed a statistically significant difference in the percentage of flow only between T1 and T3 ( $Z = -2.748$ ,  $p = .006$ ). A Friedman test for the percentage of anti-flow also showed a significant difference,  $\chi^2(2) = 6.024$ ,  $p = 0.049$ . Here, the difference was noted between T1 and T3 ( $Z = -2.541$ ,  $p = .011$ ). The difference between enjoyment scores reported for each of the tasks was not significant ( $\chi^2(2) = 5.447$ ,  $p = 0.066$ ). A Friedman-test targeting anxiety showed statistically significant differences between the tasks,  $\chi^2(2) = 10.424$ ,  $p = 0.005$ . A post-hoc Wilcoxon-test showed that T1 and T3 ( $Z = -2.747$ ,  $p = .006$ ) differed significantly, as well as T2 and T3 ( $Z = -3.472$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

To investigate the relationship between flow, anti-flow, enjoyment, and anxiety, Spearman’s rho was computed in each of the tasks. As shown in Table 3, in T1, three significant correlations were reported. There was a positive correlation between flow and enjoyment ( $r(26) = .527$ ,  $p = .004$ ), anti-flow negatively correlated with enjoyment ( $r(26) = -.407$ ,  $p = .031$ ), and a positive correlation was found between anti-flow and anxiety ( $r(26) = .729$ ,  $p = .000$ ). T2 was the only occasion when flow and anti-flow negatively correlated at  $r(26) = -.410$ ,  $p = .030$ . Positive correlations were established between flow and enjoyment ( $r(26) = .587$ ,  $p = .001$ ), as well as anti-flow and anxiety ( $r(26) = .571$ ,  $p = .002$ ). T3 flow positively correlated with enjoyment ( $r(26) = .559$ ,  $p = .002$ ), and anti-flow correlated with anxiety ( $r(26) = .389$ ,  $p = .041$ ).

### Qualitative Data

Thematic analysis was used to answer RQ5 concerning patterns related to the features of the classroom context that affect the occurrence of FLE, FLCA, task-related flow, and anti-flow. Although the interview questions were intended to gauge participants’ reactions and opinions concerning the investigated aspects only with reference to the three tasks, most of the interviewees provided a more general account

**Table 2.** *Descriptive Statistics*

	Task1		Task 2		Task 3	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Flow	73.60	22.81	77.65	20.85	84.62	18.59
Anti-flow	17.87	24.16	18.21	22.00	9.83	18.77
Enjoyment	4.45	0.52	4.30	0.58	4.52	0.38
Anxiety	2.92	0.80	2.87	0.78	2.43	0.72

**Table 3.** *Correlations Between Variables in T1, T2, and T3*

		1	2	3	4
Task 1	1. Flow	–			
	2. Anti-flow	–.197	–		
	3. Enjoyment	.527**	–.407*	–	
	4. Anxiety	–.168	.729**	–.170	–
Task 2	1. Flow	–			
	2. Anti-flow	–.410*	–		
	3. Enjoyment	.587**	–.314	–	
	4. Anxiety	–.253	.571**	–.222	–
Task 3	1. Flow	–			
	2. Anti-flow	–.356	–		
	3. Enjoyment	.559**	–.220	–	
	4. Anxiety	–.121	.389*	–.012	–

Note. \*correlation is significant at 0.01 (2-tailed); \*\* correlation is significant at 0.05 (2-tailed).

concerning their experience of language learning, and the decision was made to take the data into account. Both learner-internal and -external factors were identified and will be presented in the subsections below referring to each of the constructs separately.

### **Enjoyment**

Three main learner-internal sources of FLE were identified in the interview data: (1) the ability to overcome memory problems, and (2) the sense of achievement and satisfaction. Moreover, FLE was pointed out as (3) an inherent component of the state of flow. Memory, its deficits, and a struggle to overcome them surfaced as one of the leading themes throughout the interviews. For example, while commenting on the ability to recall information from earlier years, Participant 2 (P2) expressed her contentment and delight: “It is such a pleasure and satisfaction. Everything suddenly refreshes, some [memory] drawers open, and I think, ‘oh, I’ve covered this before, I remember this.’” The

impact of achievement and success on generating FLE is best exemplified by P9, who commented:

There are moments of enjoyment, euphoria, even, because sometimes I begin doing something and I actually manage to do it. And then I am able to recall something, and I say ‘wow, I know it, I really know it,’ even though I have never learnt English and it is something completely new for me. (P9)

Such intensity was reported in association with the experience of flow, but also in a more general sense, showing that enjoyment in the language classroom is not limited to experiencing this state. The data suggest that FLE appears to be inherent in flow and separating it from the sensation of flow may not be possible. An overall optimal state of deep concentration and sheer enjoyment co-occur, as evidenced in the comment by P4: “It’s such a great feeling, because it is such an intense focus on something that it gives me so much pleasure. I enjoy it so much.”

Contextual triggers of FLE include: (1) teacher-induced positive classroom atmosphere, (2) classroom procedures,

and (3) the joint experience of learning with peers, as well as (4) the language learning tasks themselves. The first of the themes is exemplified by P4, who commented:

The classes are so nice, and with you it's no stress, only pure pleasure. There is such a great atmosphere, that after the first classes [which were a little stressful] everything passed and now it's really great. So, when it comes to emotions... I am so relaxed here. (P4)

The quote that best summarizes learners' appreciation of the way classes were conducted and showed how it contributes to FLE was provided by P2:

It's a completely different method than it was in school. The way you conduct the classes is somehow very easy (...) without any pressure, obligation. This is so important. (...) Here, it's simply for personal satisfaction, it's very, very casual. Sometimes, as if unintentionally, certain things are mentioned, we find out something, we write it down. It's a completely different form, it's so much easier to learn than before. (P2)

P7, on the other hand, pointed to the role of other students in creating a positive classroom environment. The need to socialize and spend time with peers was thus highlighted when asked about the sources of enjoyment:

The group itself because we all see each other. Smiling faces, everyone is satisfied. That alone creates a pleasant atmosphere, and people come willingly. I come willingly, that's why I've only missed one class, but it was just for reasons beyond my control (...) I really like it here. (P7)

Finally, the third age learners were able to derive enjoyment from performing the tasks, since they recognized the benefits and enjoyed the challenge, as expressed by P4:

I enjoy solving various puzzles, reading challenging books, delving into something. And here, I have the impression that there's something that we can explore in terms of knowledge. Besides, it also improves my memory a bit because that's the reason I came here. I don't think I'll learn English perfectly, especially since I don't have such exposure, but it's fine. (...) I just come here because it's nice, I enjoy learning. (P4)

## *Anxiety*

FLCA, characteristic of the emergence of anti-flow, appeared especially when the task did not match the current abilities of the learner. In addition, similarly to FLE, there were both internal and external factors that may be associated with this emotion. Internal factors included (1) poor preparation, (2) negative beliefs about FL learning, (3) memory problems, and (4) the challenge of learning another language; external factors focused on (1) the teacher, (2) fear of negative evaluation in class, and (3) previous learning experiences.

The first factor contributing to FLCA – being unprepared for classes – was mentioned by nearly all of the respondents. For instance, P4 recalled that she felt anxious when she did not study before the class: “Perhaps a little, when I'm a bit less prepared because, for example, during the week, I have other activities, and I don't always manage to prepare 100%, but it's not really stress.”

Negative beliefs about language learning are yet another reason behind FLCA in OAs. For example, being afraid to use English stopped P7 from enrolling in the course, but once he decided to sign up, these perceptions changed: “Throughout my life, I've always had this issue that I won't be able to manage because of English pronunciation, because it has this specific, as some say... swallow the dumpling and talk approach. [But you made it easy.]”

Another cause of FLCA, common for all the participants, was age-related memory problems. The inability to recall information when needed affected the learners' confidence to speak up during the classes for fear of negative evaluation. However, P2 also showed her understanding of the changes associated with ageing, the experience shared by all her peers:

Sometimes, I know, and I'll say something silly, and I just don't know where it came from. But I think it's like this tension, or maybe some kind of mental paralysis? And those emotions are still dormant somewhere, so a person gets tense, and even says something so silly that when you, for example, continue asking, I think, ‘Oh, I knew that.’ I'm just hopeless, but that's what learning is at this age. We can't do anything about it now. (P2)

The challenge of learning English in later life can also cause acute stress. However, this did not happen very often in the current study, and as highlighted by P4, it could be alleviated by a positive classroom atmosphere.

When I enrolled, it was a huge stress. I felt like I couldn't utter a single word because I really had never had any contact with that language (...) it was completely new. I learned German and Russian, certainly not English. So, when I came to the first class, and you asked me a question to answer, I almost choked from stress. But little by little, everything passed, and I won't overly sugarcoat it here, saying that the classes are enjoyable, and so on, but they really are enjoyable, and with you, these classes are just stress-free, so pleasant. (P4)

Another important issue was raised by P2, who noted that FLCA appeared involuntarily when she was trying to make a good impression. However, she also reflected on her understanding of the challenges faced by FL learners at this age.

When you start asking questions, it [FLCA] immediately appears (...) because there is this desire to do well, not to embarrass myself, but often I end up doing just that. No, of course, I know. I don't take it as... because we are all at the same level and in the same, so to speak... we have the same possibilities of imperfect expression. (P2)

As mentioned before, the occurrence of FLCA depends also on context characteristics; those that were most frequently mentioned by the study participants concerned the teacher, fear of negative evaluation, and former learning experience. The teacher's actions generated not only pleasurable states but also led to anxiety, as evident in the comment provided by P7 below. However, the sense of being overwhelmed and anxious was followed by concrete solutions and a belief that it was possible to deal with the problem:

Only once (...) you went ahead with so many words that I got lost with everything. I thought, if this is how it's always going to be, it will be a problem. But somehow I came home, organized all of it one by one. In the end, I wrote down those words, and I thought maybe it won't be so bad, we'll see. (P7)

Furthermore, FLCA can be attributed to previous learning experiences. For example, P8 talked about her ingrained fear of answering questions in the classroom, but, just as P2 stressed in the excerpt above, P8 was aware of age-related memory problems, which made it even more difficult to perform at the level that would satisfy her:

The stress, above all, occurs when called upon to answer. I think it's something left from school, and it's just a fundamental thing that blocks you. Suddenly, a person feels like they know something, but in reality, they don't. They respond impulsively, and it's often not good. Sometimes it's good if it works out, but often not. (...) However, being called upon is the biggest stress. Another stress is that one doesn't remember as much anymore. (P8)

### *Flow*

Two main themes were identified in participants' responses to questions about flow: flow as an individual and as a collective experience. Additionally, two other categories emerged: teacher-induced flow and task flow. The interview questions revolved round the tasks that were the focus of the present study, the first of which – listening comprehension – induced both individual and group flow when an increased focus was simultaneously experienced by everyone in the group, even though the task was done individually by each student. Moreover, the activity allowed participants to feel intense positive emotions, which appeared in contrast to one of the respondent's prior beliefs associated with listening to a longer stretch of discourse. The determination to understand every word, even if it meant listening to the recording in a loop was described by P8 as follows:

I didn't even expect that this task would give me so much pleasure. I think we only had it once, where you played such a dialogue, and we had to fill in the gaps. Surprisingly, it was great, although I thought it would be very challenging for me, that I wouldn't hear anything, I wouldn't understand, but no, that dialogue was fine. (...) I completely tuned out at that time because I was constantly just checking each word that was there, and listening the second time, and thinking 'oh, I'll pay attention to this because I missed something.' So, I completely

tuned out and I was really focused on what that person was saying. (P8)

The second task, fill-in the gaps, required participants to first do the task individually by choosing the correct form of the word and only then to compare it in pairs, which allowed for a focused preparation. This aspect of task completion was stressed by P7 who highlighted his need to concentrate properly on the activity to find the right answer:

Fill-in the gaps is a good method because it requires thinking about what should be in each gap. If it's a sentence missing one word, it's easy to guess what that word might be, but sometimes there are various possibilities. At that moment, you have to think about what it could be, right? So, you have to focus. (P7)

Along similar lines, a moment of individual preparation that preceded the activity and the information-gap task itself were mentioned in excerpts from the following two respondents. P7 described a moment of focused attention that preceded the discussion and his experience of speaking in a FL, while P2 paid more attention to the act of communication and the associated joint emotions that once again lead to group flow:

Yes, to avoid things coming out wrong, well, then I have to think each time about what I'm saying and whether I'm saying it well or correctly and if I'll say everything, right? (P7)

Such emotions build up during these classes. Perhaps it's because there are many of us, and everyone speaks at once, so a person enters this kind of trance of assimilating and simultaneously reinforcing the concepts. (P2)

Two of the participants (P6 and P7), however, also pointed to the teacher's central role in getting their students into the state of flow by devoting conscious effort to engage the learners, which led to a shared experience of flow.

Everyone should have such an approach to [older] people, and that way of fostering engagement because the teacher fosters it (...) knows when to say stop, knows when to rev up, even though some [students] might seem like it can't be done with them. Yet, it can. And that's beautiful. (P6)

It's always like this. I don't know if you noticed, but we're always surprised at how quickly the classes end, right? It's supposed to be just learning a foreign language, and there are various things, but time really flies, and the teacher's involvement certainly matters here. In my opinion, a teacher should always guide and kind of steer in that direction, then I know what I am doing, and we have to adapt to it, we have to do it, right? (P7)

### *Anti-Flow*

The respondents did not report anti-flow during the tasks involved in the present study; hence, their responses considered here concern anti-flow during language classes in general. The data show that it can be rooted in both individual and collective experiences. The individual dimension manifests in anxiety, apathy, or boredom that lead to abandoning the task. Anti-flow can be further explained by a combination of internal and external factors: inability to concentrate caused by distractions from other students. Therefore, when asked if task-flow is possible, P8 commented as follows:

There's movement, there are many of us, you need to answer something here, you need to think about something there. So, not really, I can't completely disconnect and just think about the task and do it. It would probably have to be some activities where the focus is strong, and you have to completely disconnect and work independently. (P8)

Anti-flow can also be linked to other students. Too many people, problems with collecting and expressing one's thoughts during speaking tasks lead to disengagement and disaffection, as exemplified by this participant's description of her problems in a large group:

With too many people it seems to me that the engagement also drops (and I speak from my own experience) because there are slight... how to say it..., there are the so-called pauses, you know what you want to say, you know it's on the tip of your tongue, but the environment and the commotion around makes it impossible. (P6)

The causes of anti-flow were further explored and discussed in relation to written tasks and pairwork. P8

described the urge to compare herself to other, in her opinion, more advanced students, which made it difficult to concentrate on the activity. She also expounded potential problems with communication and her perceived difficulty of peer-teaching or sharing knowledge with others. The excerpt also suggests a degree of FLCA experienced during these task-types.

I think when we don't know something, we observe how others do it, and it's like, 'How they have done this or that? Why like that?' Besides, our skills are not always the same, and it also seems to me that if at some point I know something better, then I have a sense that I can solve it. And if the other person knows something better, I also have a sense that they solve it better, and I feel that... it's not entirely that we focus, but maybe... I don't know, maybe I can't, or we can't connect that well. Or somehow that we could share our skills and don't think, 'I can do it better' or 'I can do it worse,' I just can't quite do that. (P8)

Finally, it needs to be mentioned at this junction that although the interviews did not require the respondents to do so, they discussed at length their motivation to learn a language in later life, their beliefs associated with the process, including their general task preferences, perceived benefits of FL learning, and self-efficacy, vital for successful task completion.

## DISCUSSION

The present study was launched to establish to what extent the type of task (a listening task, a grammar exercise, and an information gap speaking activity) determine the perceived time in flow, anti-flow, as well as the level of FLE and FLCA experienced by OA learners of English. A large body of research has shown the impact of contextual variables on academic emotions and experiencing flow in the language classroom (cf. Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). While the investigations have taken into account a whole host of variables, none explored specific task designs in the group of OA learners. To bridge this gap, we formulated a set of research questions that we tried to address here.

The first RQ concerned the extent to which the percentage of time in flow and anti-flow differ depending on the task. Our participants reported experiencing flow for more than two thirds of the time spent on performing the activities. The data show that T3, an information gap activity, generated flow for the largest proportion of time, while T1, listening comprehension, produced flow in the smallest amount and the difference was statistically significant. It appears that communication with a partner increased the likelihood of absorption in an activity. To achieve such a state, the students needed to feel capable of accomplishing the task, which was achieved thanks to a clear structure and helpful prompts in the handbook, which, in turn, provided learners with a sense of control.

It turned out that one of the conditions for flow to occur, namely, balance between skill and challenge (Nakamura & Csíkszentmihályi, 2009), was achieved to a considerable degree, minimizing the likelihood of experiencing anxiety and apathy. Although, as pointed out by Csíkszentmihályi and LeFèvre (1989), being in flow does not mean that people are "more cheerful or sociable" (p. 816), the social dimension evidently added to the sense of flow and enhanced enjoyment. The smallest percentage in flow in Task 1 can be attributed to the challenge listening comprehension poses to OAs. Here, challenge outweighed the skill. Natural problems also related to hearing deficits coupled with poor acoustics and high speed of delivery. Having low expectations about their ability to cope with the task and experiencing difficulties while performing it, the learners did not report long durations of flow.

A predominance of flow does not exclude experiencing anti-flow states (e.g., frustration, worry, anxiety, disengagement). The task that resulted in the largest proportion of anti-flow was T2, a grammar exercise involving filling gaps. It appears that the participants experienced frustration, distraction, or disengagement for a considerable percentage of time not only while performing the listening comprehension activity but also while doing the task focused on formal accuracy. Hence, T1 and T2 anti-flow ratings were not significantly different, but T1 and T3 anti-flow scores differed significantly.

The second RQ looked at the effect of task design on experiencing FLE. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2019) assert that positive emotions prevail over negative ones in language classrooms, which holds true in the group of

learners who took part in our study. When it comes to RQ2, there were no significant differences between FLE reported with reference to the three tasks. The ratings were above point 4 on a 5-point scale, indicating a stable and relatively high degree of enjoyment, which is not surprising, given the fact that the participants perceive English classes mostly as an opportunity to socialize and enhance their cognitive capacity. The lowest FLE score was noted for T2, a grammar task that was repetitive and did not involve communicative language use. The result mirrors earlier study results, for example, Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014, 2019, 2022c), which stress the predominance of positive affectivity in language learning contexts.

The answer to the third RQ revealed the existence of significant differences in FLCA ratings across the three tasks. Overall, anxiety scores placed below 3 on a 5-point Likert scale, showing a relatively low level of the emotion. FLCA ratings differed significantly between T1 and T3, as well as between T2 and T3. T3 turned out to be the least stress-provoking, most likely because it was performed in cooperation with another student and generated the most enjoyment. All in all, our results stay in line with Dewaele and MacIntyre (2019), who asserted that older learners tend to be less anxious and enjoy classes more, as well as spend more time in flow due to higher concentration skills.

RQ4 tackled the relationship between FLE, FLCA, flow, and anti-flow in the three tasks. As expected, flow and anti-flow turned out to be negatively correlated; however, the correlation was statistically significant only in the case of T2. Still, the magnitude of the correlation was moderate (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). Unsurprisingly, flow correlated positively with FLE in all tasks, showing a good predictive power, and negatively with FLCA. Anti-flow, in turn, correlated positively with FLCA and negatively with FLE. While the correlation magnitudes were moderate in most of the cases, in T1, FLCA and anti-flow correlated very strongly. T1, a listening comprehension task, turned out to be highly stressful and devastating to the sense of flow.

Qualitative data provided evidence that enabled answering RQ5, concerning features of the classroom context related to specific tasks that affected the occurrence of FLE, FLCA, and the two flow dimensions. However, as mentioned before, the respondents did not delimit their communication to the three tasks but commented on the constructs investigated in the present study in a more

general sense. Since we assumed that these comments contribute to our understanding of the explored phenomena, we included the data in the analysis. Apart from FLE and FLCA, the respondents mentioned excitement, fulfilment, and satisfaction associated with learning English, the emotions which, as the OAs declared, differed from those experienced while learning other languages at the U3A. In fact, as suggested by interviewees, EFL classes were more likely to foster positive experience than other language courses attended, or other classes offered by the U3A in general, which reflects earlier research on well-being of OA FL learners and late-life positive language education (cf. Klímová et al., 2021; Pikhart & Klímová, 2020).

Among negative emotions described during the course of the interviews were anger, boredom, embarrassment, shame, insecurity, and sadness, caused by in- and out-of-the-class factors. In fact, anxiety and boredom are the two emotions that disrupt classroom flow, appearing when task difficulty does not match the current abilities of an individual (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). Although boredom emerged rarely during the lessons, FLCA proved to be much more common. As previously shown (cf. Baran-Łucarz & Słowik-Krogulec, 2023), this emotion in the OA FL classroom can be both internally and externally driven. The first category comprises negative beliefs about FL learning and excessive self-expectations, negative self-perceptions, or the novelty of learning another language.

The second category involves anxiety triggered by fear of negative evaluation in class, and previous learning experiences, included in the latter, as also shown by, for example, Cheng (2002). However, as evident in interview excerpts, it seems that the learner-internal sources of FLCA can be alleviated by contextual factors, including the teacher and peers (cf., Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; Liu, 2006; Mak 2011). Hence, for instance, the fear of negative evaluation, determined by classroom atmosphere, is reliant on other learners, the teacher, and their rapport in the classroom. Thus, sources of FLCA are to be viewed as forming an interdependent and dynamic network, which again corroborates earlier findings (e.g., Baran-Łucarz & Słowik-Krogulec, 2023).

Importantly, the participants often referred to experiencing "mixed emotions," which was explained by an overall enjoyment of the classes that alternated mainly with anxiety and frustration caused by age-related memory

problems and an inability to recall information when needed. Enjoyment, a significant positive predictor of flow (cf. Dewaele et al. 2022) and anxiety, conducive to the emergence of anti-flow, once more proved to co-exist and depend on one another (cf. Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). They were also experienced by the learners simultaneously, alongside other emotions (cf. Dewaele et al. 2022), which is vital for the occurrence of flow, defined by “a harmonious balance between the positive and negative emotions” (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2022c, p. 404). This complex and dynamic phenomenon is much desired in the FL classroom. Yet, certain conditions need to be met for learners to enter the state of deep focus and overall joy (cf. Egbert, 2003).

Thus, this experience may be rare and difficult to obtain or to describe by respondents, which may explain why, at first, the learners claimed that they were rarely in this state in the classroom. However, the discussion of flow in particular task-types (including the activities chosen for the study) proved that it was rather common, but it appeared mainly during individual work (cf. Piniel & Ritecz, 2022), such as reading or translating short passages, writing dialogues, open-class drills, and individual oral performance. The analysis of interviews thus leads to an observation that when occurring, flow in the OA FL classroom turned out to be more often externally induced. In fact, the majority of the respondents mentioned the feeling of time passing quickly or not knowing when the classes ended and ascribed it to an overall pleasant and informal atmosphere, and to their teacher, who was frequently associated with positive emotions, fostering deep engagement, and inspiring flow.

Other students, on the other hand, seemed to more often contribute to anti-flow (the themes comprise distraction caused by others, mixed-ability groups, overall negative relationships with some peers), although instances of peers' actions fostering flow were also mentioned (the supportive role of peers, the need to socialize, and an overall enjoyment of classes). Finally, the respondents also discussed at length their motivation to learn a language in later life, their beliefs associated with the process – including their general task preferences, perceived benefits of FL learning, and self-efficacy, vital for successful task completion.

## CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The aim of this study was to determine context characteristics, including types of tasks, that affect time in flow, anti-flow, and the level of OA English learners' FLE and FLCA. As shown in the present research, contextual variables to a various degree affect academic emotions and the experience of classroom flow. The results of the quantitative analysis as well as the overarching patterns discerned from the themes support the predominantly positive impact of language learning on OAs' emotions. Although a whole range of emotions accompany learners in the classroom, enjoyment turns out to be the dominant one.

We also managed to establish that OAs derive most pleasure from tasks requiring interaction and that such activities are likely to lead to flow. However, as our data suggest, the presence of others may both promote and hinder flow in the classroom. Another important contribution of our study is linking the emergence of negative emotions and the state of anti-flow to age related deficits. Furthermore, it should be highlighted that the experience of late-life FL learning differs from acquiring knowledge during formal education, or even in adulthood, as it allows people to pursue earlier aspirations and make new social connections in place of many that are lost at this age.

Motivation is nearly always intrinsic resulting from a passion to learn and a need to meet new people. As with all lifelong learning in later years, it is thus a voluntary pursuit of knowledge, vital for the emergence of flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). As such, it also brings a multitude of emotions, otherwise often absent from many OAs' lives. All these aspects are conducive to the occurrence of optimal experience, which, in turn, positively affects the overall well-being of the third age students. Recognizing the study's contributions, it is equally important to delineate its limitations, offering suggestions for future research. The main disadvantage is the sample size, which can be partially explained by a relatively high partial non-response, as some participants failed to answer all of the statements, leading to a lower-than-expected number of questionnaires collected. It appears that the flow scale used in the questionnaire turned out to be too complex, as indicating the percentage of time students felt in flow or in anti-flow on a scale from 0–100 was confusing for some of the respondents. The Likert scale used to measure FLE

and FLCA, on the other hand, did not seem to cause such problems. We attribute this to age-related cognitive changes inherent to the process of normal ageing (cf. Pfenninger et al., 2023), which might have affected the participants' ability to deal with the type of scale. This leads us to believe that special care should be taken while administering the instrument, including, for example, prior training using a similar scale, or adapting the scale especially for this

respondent group. We are aware of the fact that results of statistical analyses concerning such a small group of participants cannot be perceived as generalizable. That is why we believe further exploration involving the aspects discussed here with a larger sample could enhance our understanding of conditions leading to the occurrence of the state of flow induced by language learning.

### Authors' Contributions

ASK and AMW participated in the design of the study and ASK completed the data collection. AMW worked on quantitative data collection and data analysis, ASK worked on qualitative data collection and analysis. Both authors were involved in the writing of the manuscript. ASK and AMW drafted the manuscript and participated in the interpretation of the results. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

### Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrollment and data collection in the study.

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## **APPENDIX. Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

1. What feelings accompany you while learning English (during classes, at home, with a friend, etc.)?
2. Do you ever find yourself so absorbed, focused, and engaged in learning English that you lose track of time?
  - Can you recall such situations?
  - When did it happen, what were you doing at that time? (Was it during the classes, at home, with a friend, etc./ what task were you working on then)?
  - Please, describe what you felt in those moments.
3. Do you experience such a state of focus and absorption when working independently or in pairs? Why/why not?
  - Do you think your classmates feel the same way?
  - How about the teacher? Is s/he ever in such a state? If yes, please, describe it.
  - Does the teacher influence the sense of focus on a task?
  - Has there been a situation where this state applied to the entire group? What happened then?
4. Why do you think that in those moments/during those tasks, you felt such engagement, absorption, and a sense of losing time?
  - What might have influenced this?
5. How often do you feel this way while learning English?
6. What tasks do you like the most and why?
7. When do you experience enjoyment in learning English, and what influences it?
  - What happens then? What situations, experiences, tasks?
  - How often does this happen?
8. When do you feel anxiety related to learning English, and what influences it?
  - What happens then? What situations, experiences, tasks?
  - How often does this happen?
9. What other emotions accompany you while learning English?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything else you would like to share?