

An Investigation into the Effect of Foreign Language Learning Boredom on the English Proficiency of Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract: *This study aimed to investigate the boredom experience, gender differences related to boredom, and the correlation between boredom and English proficiency among junior high school English learners in China. The findings revealed several key outcomes: Firstly, the overall foreign language learning boredom (FLLB) among the subjects was at a moderate level. Secondly, a strong negative correlation was identified between the students' level of boredom and their English proficiency, with all seven factors exhibiting a negative correlation with English scores. This study has expanded the scope of boredom research to include junior high school English learners, further contributing to the existing body of knowledge on boredom in foreign language learning, and offering valuable insights for English teaching in junior high schools.*

Keywords: *Foreign Language Learning Boredom; English Proficiency; EFL Learners*

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the “affective turn” in applied linguistics has prompted scholars to delve deeper into the link between emotions and second language acquisition (SLA)^[1]. In this regard, Xia and Xu^[2] highlighted a growing emphasis on the exploration of various emotions, such as dissatisfaction, enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom, in the domain of SLA. Notably, anxiety has been the most frequently discussed emotion, while boredom has received comparatively less attention in the context of foreign language learning. However, Pekrun et al. uncovered that, aside from anxiety, boredom is the most commonly experienced emotion among German secondary school students in learning situations^[3]. Additionally, the level of foreign language learning is influenced not only by cognitive factors such as achievement attribution and learning strategies^[4], but also by emotional factors like learning motivation and self-efficacy^[5]. It is evident from recent research that boredom has an adverse impact on students' ability to learn a foreign language^[6], highlighting its current practical significance in educational settings.

With regards to English learning in China's middle schools, boredom emerges as a significant barrier hindering students' progress, profoundly impacting the enhancement of their English proficiency^[7]. However, there remains a dearth of understanding about the effects of boredom in the context of English learning within the middle school environment. Accordingly, the objective of the present study was to investigate the extent of boredom experienced by junior high school students during the process of English learning, comprehend the influence of negative emotions on their English competence, and endeavor to clarify the relationship between boredom and English proficiency. Thus, this study holds the potential to provide valuable insights into English teaching, in light of the aforementioned reasons.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Page Definition of Boredom

Boredom has been the focus of educational psychologists due to its widespread prevalence as an emotion. When the environmental stimuli fail to meet individuals' needs, the subsequent dissatisfaction often leads to the emergence of boredom, an adverse emotion^[8]. The lack of stimuli discourages individuals from engaging in stimulating activities, suggesting that it may be the primary cause of this dissatisfaction^[9]. Additionally, boredom is commonly characterized as a low emotional state resulting

from monotony in external information and stimuli. According to Fahlman et al.^[10], boredom entails feelings of aversion and dissatisfaction when one engages in activities that do not meet their intrinsic demands. Farmer and Sandberg^[11] further posit that boredom is associated with a disconnection from one's surroundings, indicating a correlation between boredom and disengagement. Consistent with Fenichel^[9] and Eastwood et al.^[12], boredom is defined as a lack of stimulation and an active pursuit of stimulation. This stimulation may stem from changes in the external environment or internal thoughts and emotions^[13]. Despite nuanced differences, scholars concur that boredom is a negative mental state or emotional response directly linked to self-satisfaction and stimulation.

According to research findings, arousal significantly affects boredom, which in turn has a pernicious effect on students' learning. Boredom is described by researchers as an unpleasant state of relatively low arousal and a difficulty concentrating on things due to environmental circumstances induced by insufficient stimulation^[14]. Perkrun^[15], in the investigation of the achievement emotions, also classifies boredom as a negative emotion related to achievement activities with low arousal. In contrast, Barbalet^[16] characterizes boredom as a high arousal condition that results in restlessness and irritability. This diversity of viewpoints highlights the complexity of boredom as a psychological and emotional state and underlines the importance of understanding the impact of arousal on learning and student engagement.

2.2. Boredom in Foreign Language Learning

Foreign language learning boredom or FLLB represents a complex emotional experience commonly encountered by learners in second language classrooms. This emotional state shares similar characteristics with general learning boredom, such as a lack of interest and difficulty in concentration. However, FLLB is more tightly linked to the ecological environment of foreign language learning, exhibiting a high degree of situationality. The specific stability and differences associated with FLLB are determined by factors such as foreign language learning tasks, the classroom environment, and the interaction mode between teachers and students^[17]. As a result, FLLB represents a multi-dimensional amalgamation of negative emotions that emerge from learners' interaction with the surrounding ecological environment within the dynamic system of foreign language learning.

In recent years, concerns about boredom have become a focal point in SLA research. Most studies have centered on English learners in Poland. For example, Zawodniak et al.^[18] conducted a study with 30 Polish university students learning English and found that boredom in the second language classroom is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon influenced by various factors, such as frustration, irritation, and dissatisfaction, as well as learning tasks, teacher behavior, and organizational factors. Additionally, FLLB is influenced by a range of personal and environmental factors at different stages of language acquisition, encompassing individual differences, such as boredom, anxiety, and motivation, as well as situational characteristics, including learning content, mode, and form of activity^[19]. Furthermore, Li et al.^[20] emphasized that boredom is widespread in the Chinese EFL context. Their work introduced the concept of FLLB, employing the theoretical framework of the control-value theory to expound on boredom from three dimensions. First, they described boredom as a process-type negative achievement emotion characterized by low physiological arousal and low cognitive activation. Second, they identified high or low challenge as a attributing factor to boredom in SLA. Lastly, they highlighted uninteresting or worthless learning tasks or activities in the learning context as additional sources of boredom.

From the above-mentioned research, it is evident that the current focus in FLLB research is on the abstract definition of boredom, the learning circumstances leading to boredom, and the correlation between boredom and other factors. However, there is a gap in the exploration of the relationship between classroom boredom and English proficiency. In the context of foreign language learning in China, there is a noticeable absence of discourse on this detrimental emotion. Notably, the existing literature largely centers on college students, with limited attention to middle school students. Therefore, this study addresses the deficiency by providing empirical research on the link between boredom in foreign language learning and the English proficiency of junior high school students in China.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following four questions:

- (1) Do junior high school students feel bored in English class? If so, is their boredom at a low,

moderate, or high level?

(2) What is the relationship between students' boredom level and their overall English proficiency?

3.2. Research Subjects

This research comprised 163 first-year junior high school students from three classes in a middle school in China. These students primarily used Mandarin as their first language and had English as a foreign language. Most participants had commenced learning English in Grade 3, thus already having a foundation in English proficiency. Throughout the research process, a total of 163 questionnaires were distributed, leading to the acquisition of 156 valid questionnaires, after excluding 7 invalid ones. Out of the valid questionnaires, 77 (49.4%) were completed by male students and 79 (50.6%) by female students.

3.3. Research Instruments and Procedures

The major measurement tool utilized in this study was the *Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale* (FLLBS), developed by Li et al.^[20], comprising 32 items organized into 7 factors. These factors consist of foreign language classroom boredom (Factor 1), under-challenging task boredom (Factor 2), PowerPoint presentation boredom (Factor 3), homework boredom (Factor 4), teacher-dislike boredom (Factor 5), general learning trait boredom (Factor 6), and over-challenging or meaningless task boredom (Factor 7). The FLLBS operates on a Likert 5-point scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). A lower score indicates a higher level of boredom. The internal consistency reliability coefficient for the entire scale was 0.886, while the coefficients for the 7 sub-scales were 0.960, 0.942, 0.869, 0.938, 0.849, 0.864, and 0.759, respectively. These coefficients demonstrate that the FLLBS exhibited high reliability. The example statements for each factor are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Example statements for each factor

Subscales	Example statements
Factor 1	The English class bores me.
Factor 2	It is really boring to repeat the (English) text after the modeling audio.
Factor 3	Reading from script in the PPT slides bores me.
Factor 4	Just thinking of my English homework makes me feel bored.
Factor 5	The English teacher is uninteresting, so the English class is dull.
Factor 6	I'm always bored when I study.
Factor 7	If I cannot understand classmates' presentations, I become really bored.

In the first semester of the 2022-2023 academic year, participants completed the English final exam, a comprehensive assessment consisting of five sections: listening comprehension, vocabulary and grammar, reading comprehension, cloze, and writing. The former four sections were in multiple-choice format, while the writing section was assessed by two senior English teachers, who demonstrated a strong inter-rater correlation ($r=0.843$). In instances of disagreement, the two raters engaged in negotiation to reach a consensus. Conversely, the remaining four sections underwent automatic grading.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Participants' Level of Boredom

This section is dedicated to addressing the initial research question. Using the SPSS software (version 23.0), the normality of the collected statistics was tested to determine if the data followed a normal distribution. The results indicated that the Skewness and Kurtosis statistics fell within the range of -2 to +2, signifying normal distribution for all the data. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for all variables, encompassing the minimum and maximum values, mean scores, and standard deviation (*SD*).

The mean scores of the FLLBS ($Mean=105.583$, $SD=23.9146$) were slightly higher than 96, indicating that participants' level of boredom was at a moderate level. For a more direct comparison, the mean scores were taken as the indices. Considering that the FLLBS was responded to on a Likert 5-point scale, the theoretical neutral value of one item is 3 and that of the whole scale should be 96 (i.e., 3×32). Therefore, the mean score of each item was 3.299 ($105.583/32$). These results suggest that the participants' responses were skewed towards higher boredom levels compared to the theoretical middle point of the scale.

Specifically, the highest level of boredom experienced by students was associated with PowerPoint presentations ($Mean=7.962$, $SD=2.6661$), demonstrating a moderate to high degree of boredom. Following this, under-challenging task boredom registered a mean score of 15.526 ($SD=4.7362$), while homework boredom scored an average of 12.667 ($SD=3.8877$). The mean score for over-challenging or meaningless task boredom was 9.712 ($SD=2.7168$). Foreign language classroom boredom, teacher-dislike boredom, and general learning trait boredom scored averages of 26.410 ($SD=7.7592$), 15.032 ($SD=3.2270$), and 18.276 ($SD=3.8781$) respectively. Notably, the PowerPoint presentation boredom score was the highest among the seven factors, falling within the moderate to high level, whereas the other six factors scored relatively low or moderate levels, since their mean scores were above the theoretical neutral value of 3.

Table 2: Descriptive results of participants' boredom levels ($N=156$)

Variable	Min.	Max.	Mean (Factor)	Mean (Item)	SD
Factor 1	8	40	26.410	3.301	7.7592
Factor 2	5	25	15.526	3.105	4.7362
Factor 3	3	15	7.962	2.654	2.6661
Factor 4	4	20	12.667	3.166	3.8877
Factor 5	7	20	15.032	3.758	3.2270
Factor 6	5	25	18.276	3.655	3.8781
Factor 7	3	15	9.712	3.237	2.7168
Total	41	158	105.583	3.299	23.9146

SD, standard deviation.

The results obtained in this study are consistent with those of Li's investigation into boredom in English classes among university students in China^[21], as well as with Li's research on the relationship between high school students' English classroom boredom and English learning strategies^[22]. According to these previous studies, the participants exhibited a moderate level of boredom in foreign language learning. It is worth noting, however, that the findings of this study diverged from those of Dewaele and Li's study on boredom in English classes, which observed a low level of boredom among non-English major college students in China^[23]. It is likely that the divergence in results can be attributed to differences in the sample selection. Throughout the process of foreign language learning, individual differences among participants, such as learning strategies, interests, and age, may have influenced the outcomes. Further investigation is needed to determine whether these differences have an impact on the study results. Regardless, these studies collectively demonstrate that participants experience boredom during their foreign language learning, regardless of their diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, these findings suggest the need for additional empirical research on learners' boredom across various educational settings worldwide.

4.2. Relationship between Boredom and English Proficiency

Based on the findings presented in Table 3, the mean score of the test was 109.872 ($SD=11.8614$), indicating a generally high level of English proficiency among the students. The correlation analysis between the scores of FLLBS and English proficiency is further elaborated in Table 3, illustrating a strong positive correlation between the two ($r=0.965$). This correlation implies that higher scores on the FLLBS correspond to lower levels of boredom and higher English proficiency among the students. Thus, it can be inferred that boredom is strongly negatively correlated with English proficiency. When examining the relationship of the 7 factors, it was found that, with the exception of teacher-dislike boredom ($r=0.587$), which demonstrated a moderate negative association with total scores, the remaining six factors exhibited a strong negative correlation with the English score. This indicates that boredom induced by these six factors had a more substantial impact on the total score compared to that caused by teacher-dislike boredom. In summary, the results suggest a prominent negative correlation between boredom and English proficiency.

The findings of this study align with those of Li and Han^[1], who demonstrated that boredom in foreign language learning has a significantly negative impact on English achievement. In particular, the level of boredom associated with PowerPoint presentations was found to be higher than that of the other six factors, consistent with the results of Ou^[24]. Despite the differences in the selected samples, the outcomes are akin, indicating a universal negative correlation between FLLB and students' overall scores, unaffected by sample selection. This cumulative body of research substantiates the pervasive influence of FLLB on students' academic performance.

Table 3: Descriptive results and bivariate correlations

	Descriptive statistics				Correlations	
	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	with factors	with total
Score	80	146	109.872	11.8614	0.587**~0.873**	0.965**

** means that the correlation is significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed).

5. Conclusions

The research findings indicate that foreign language learning boredom is prevalent among junior high school students. Despite the pervasiveness of this issue, the research offers valuable pedagogical implications for English teaching at the junior middle school level to minimize students' boredom with English learning and enhance their learning achievement.

However, several limitations need to be addressed. Firstly, the small number of participants and limited selection of research subjects raise concerns about the representativeness of the sample, calling for consideration in future research. Secondly, the reliance solely on questionnaires limits the depth and comprehensiveness of the findings in demonstrating the relationship between students' FLLB and English proficiency. Incorporating additional research methods such as classroom observation, student diaries, and interviews can significantly bolster the robustness of the research conclusions drawn from diverse data sources.

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