

The Effect of Foreign Language Boredom on Willingness to Communicate in Classroom

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Abstract—To explore the general situation of Foreign Language Boredom (FLB) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in classroom as well as the relationship between the two factors, this research was conducted with 45 non-English major students at the intact university varying from different grades. Based on the analysis of the questionnaire and semi-structured interview results, this study found that despite the lack of obvious differences, activity-induced boredom, followed by teacher-induced and student-induced boredom, may have a major effect on how they learn. In terms of WTC in English, it appeared that the average level of students' WTC is not particularly high. As grades rise, WTC in class will fall for various reasons, including repetitious task modes, more distinct self-perceived aims, and individual characteristics. According to qualitative analysis of interview data, lower-grade students may manipulate environmental factors to reduce the sense of boredom, and enhance their engagement in class. In contrast, higher-grade students have a self-sufficient learning style that has developed over time and see less of an impact from FLB on their WTC.

Keywords—Foreign Language Boredom (FLB), Non-English major students, silence in class, willingness to communicate

I. INTRODUCTION

Well-known Second Language Acquisition theories, such as the Interaction Hypothesis [1] and the Output Hypothesis [2], suggest that communication and interaction as well as language output in target language are of great significance in language learning. The more they output their acquired knowledge in their second language, the better they perform in the target language [3]. The primary goal of second language teaching is to cultivate learners' second language communicative competence [4], and one of the prerequisites for achieving this goal is that learners must have willingness to communicate [5]. However, despite high language proficiency, individual learners are not always willing, or even sometimes reluctant to take part in communication in English [6–7]. Therefore, cultivating learners' willingness to communicate and exploring the factors that cause students' silence in class have become a key aspect in SLA study.

There has been a steady increase in the attention to academic emotions over the past decade [8], among which Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and anxiety (FLCA) have been explored with studies focusing on their factor structure, correlation, correlates, antecedents and consequences [9–11]. One of the emotions that deserves more attention in SLA is boredom which has been well-researched in educational psychology given its multifarious repercussions in learning [12]. Boredom is an unpleasant psychological state characterized by a sense of emptiness, physical inactivity, lack of achievement goal, purpose and motivation [13]. In language acquisition,

Foreign Language Boredom (FLB) is further divided into 3 categories—Teacher-induced boredom, Student-induced boredom and Activity-induced boredom [14].

Previous studies have examined the role of language learners' emotions in shaping WTC, and especially the role of FLCA as well as FLE have been thoroughly investigated [7, 10, 15, 16]. However, only several studies examined the correlating role of boredom and other factors in WTC [17, 18]. There are relatively few studies conducting the role of different types of boredom to WTC and giving further implications for cultivating learners' WTC from this specific perspective. To fill this gap, the current research aims to explore the correlation between FLB and WTC and give implications to the current phenomenon of “silence in classroom.”

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the previous research and theoretical constructions, this study attempts to explore the influence of college students' Foreign Language Boredom (FLB) on their Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English in the classroom. The results of this study will contribute to our comprehension of the relationship between different types of FLB and WTC in English in the classroom settings along with pedagogical implications for ELT for Chinese college students who are taking compulsory English courses. To achieve the above mentioned purpose, research participants, questions, instruments as well as research procedures are illustrated in detail.

A. Research Participants

Due to the particularity of English majors and the limitation of the number of undergraduates, it is not enough to select only English majors as samples to show the overall characteristics, so this study takes non-English major students in NPU (Northwestern Polytechnical University) as research objects. For the purpose of investigating the general situation of non-English major students, by the means of randomly selecting one English class each grade, and asking students for their willingness and approval for participating in this research, 45 students from freshmen to master students were selected as the participants of the current research. Among them, 24 participants are freshmen and sophomores, and 13 participants are juniors and seniors, also with 8 master students, accounting for 53.33%, 28.89% and 17.78% respectively. Here the researcher divided all the participants into 3 groups—the junior group (freshmen and sophomores), the senior group (juniors and seniors), and the master group (master students) so as to control the proportion and to

explore the different situation varying in different grades.

B. Research Questions

This research intends to investigate the correlation between FLB and WTC among non-English major students. The following research questions are addressed:

Q1: What is the general situation of non-English major students' FLB?

Q2: What is the general situation of non-English major students' WTC in classroom?

Q3: Does non-English major students' FLB affect their WTC in classroom as a predictor? If so, which factor is the dominant one?

C. Research Instruments

The current study combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In quantitative study, the variables under investigation are measured using a composite questionnaire, which consists of 3 parts, starting with a short section aiming to collect some basic demographic information of participants (age, grade etc.). The following two parts are comprised of two verified questionnaires measuring FLB and WTC in English.

Kruk *et al.*'s (2022) modified 26-item Foreign Language Boredom Questionnaire (FLBQ) under 3 factors (Teacher-induced; Student-induced; Activity-induced) is used to measure FLB. Peng and Woodrow's scale measuring WTC in English is adopted in the present study [7]. It consists of 10 items adapted from the scale of Weaver's [19]. All the items are in Chinese to allow for full understanding and are responded to on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "1(completely disagree)" to "6(completely agree)". The questionnaire included scales tapping into the constructs investigated in the present study, that is FLB and WTC. Since in previous research, the validity and the internal reliability of the two questionnaires have been respectively verified by Kruk *et al.* [14] through a Q methodology and by Li through a pilot study conducted in the practicum school with the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) ($CR > 0.7$; $AVE > 0.5$) [3], these two questionnaire can be put into use in the present study. Here, in the present study, the researcher reduced the FLBQ to a simplified 18-item one in order to remove ambiguous expressions in it.

Semi-structured interviews from one freshmen and one senior (regardless of their gender) will be conducted to analyze the potential factors that cause boredom in class from learners' perspective and also to provide emic materials for supporting the quantitative data. Then qualitative study, that is, the discussion part, will take both the results of the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews into account.

D. Research Procedures

First, 2-phase data collection was conducted, which was divided into a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews, covering a period of one and a half weeks. In order to reduce students' nervousness to least, all interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded by the interviewer with key words to make sure that the interview would not be too long and they could feel free to talk about their true feelings without consideration.

Secondly, the quantitative data was processed through

SPSS 26.0. With the aim of getting the overall situation of non-English major college students' FLB and their WTC in classroom, descriptive analysis was firstly adopted. Then, one-way ANOVA was used to see whether there is a grade difference of the two variables. Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis were used to investigate the correlation between FLB and WTC in classroom and to see whether these three dimensions (Teacher-induced, Student-induced, Activity-induced boredom) can work as predictors of WTC, and also to explore the most dominant factor.

Then, through manual transcribing, coding and labeling, the qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews was used to support the results and give explanations from students' perspective, which will be shown in the Discussion part along with the qualitative analysis.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, the results of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews will be presented to analyze the detailed situation of non-English major students' WTC and FLB in NPU. The following parts are illustrated orderly according to three research questions. Also, a deep discussion will be unfolded to provide emic materials from students' viewpoints.

A. The General Situation of Non-English Major Students' FLB

In section A, the first research question will be answered accordingly, firstly from an overall perspective, then followed by the differences across grades.

1) Overall description of FLB

Table 1 shows the descriptive data of the overall results and mean values of non-English major students' FLB.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
FLB	45	1.33	6.00	4.36	0.110
Student-induced	45	1.42	6.00	4.18	0.094
Teacher-induced	45	1.38	6.00	4.31	0.106
Activity-induced	45	1.18	6.00	4.60	0.130

18 items contained in the FLBQ are averagely under the 3 dimensions, with 6 items in each dimension, which adopted a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (definitely not agree) to 6 (definitely agree). As shown in Table 1, the FLB of non-English major students ($M = 4.36$) is above average, suggesting that students are mostly agree with the fact that certain situations may cause their FLB in learning English in class. As for the different dimensions of FLB, the mean value of activity-induced FLB (4.60) was at the highest level, then followed by teacher-induced FLB, and the lowest was from students themselves. From the respective results, it can be indicated that activities in class may have much more influence on their perception towards boredom in English class.

2) Grade differences of FLB

As presented in Table 2, the mean of junior (freshmen and sophomores) students' FLB ($M = 4.53$) ranks the highest among these three groups, followed by the mean of the senior

(juniors and seniors) group ($M = 4.19$) and the master group ($M = 4.16$). It can be seen clearly from Table 3 that there was no significant difference among three groups on FLB. Post-test LSD (Table 4) was conducted to make multiple comparisons between each two groups, results showing that the differences between each two groups were not obvious ($p > 0.05$).

Table 2. Descriptive data of FLB in three grades

	Grade	N	Mean	SD
FLB	Junior	24	4.53	0.474
	Senior	13	4.19	0.438
	Master	8	4.16	0.587

Table 3. Results of ANOVA

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	Sig.
FLB	Between groups	1.365	2	0.682	0.407
	Within groups	31.217	42	0.743	

Table 4. Multiple comparisons

Dependent Variable	(I) Grade	(J)Grade	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
FLB	Junior	Senior	0.338558	0.261
		Master	0.365	0.306
	Senior	Junior	-0.338558	0.261
		Master	0.026442	0.946
	Master	Junior	-0.365	0.306
		Senior	-0.026442	0.946

The results can be explained from multiple aspects. Firstly, learning English systematically and in fixed patterns (teaching methods, activities, emotions etc.) for more than 10 years for every college student can be a tough and boring period, regardless of their grade difference in college. Secondly, non-English major students tend to learn English from a task-motivated or compulsory requirement, for which they have no other specific interest in learning English in class and that causes their boredom in class.

B. The General Situation of Non-English Major Students' WTC in Class

Section B aims to investigate the general situation of their WTC in classroom as well as the difference among grades.

The WTC questionnaire contains 10 items, adopting six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely not willing) to 6 (definitely willing). As can be seen from Table 5, the mean value of students' WTC in English ($M = 3.342$) is at a medium level, from "neutral" to "sometimes willing", suggesting that non-English major students' WTC in English is not very high but still promising. As for the maximum scale of WTC, the junior group's WTC ($Max = 6.00$) in English is the highest, then is the senior's WTC ($Max = 4.80$) followed by the master group's ($Max = 4.00$), corresponding to the order of the mean value. In order to see whether there is any difference among three grades, ANOVA and multiple comparisons were conducted. See Tables 6 and 7.

Table 5. Descriptive data of overall WTC in class

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
WTC	45	1.00	6.00	3.342	1.326
Junior	24	1.00	6.00	3.550	1.445
Senior	13	1.00	4.80	3.231	1.275
Master	8	1.30	4.00	2.900	1.326

Tables 6 and 7 reveal that the differences between different groups were not significant, which can be explained by the sample size of the present research is relatively small. However, from the descriptive statistics, it is clear that as the grade increases, WTC in English decreases gradually. Possible reasons may be that firstly, for freshmen and sophomores, they will have some curiosity and enthusiasm towards anything new in college life, including English class. Secondly, faced with the choice of taking the postgraduate entrance examination and studying abroad, senior and master students have their own learning orientation, and their willingness to communicate in English will decline. More influential factors will be discussed in the following part.

Table 6. Results of ANOVA

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	Sig.
WTC	Between groups	2.762	2	1.381	0.466
	Within groups	74.568	42	1.775	

Table 7. Multiple comparisons

Dependent variable	(I) Grade	(J)Grade	Mean difference (I-J)	Sig.
WTC	Junior	Senior	0.31923	0.786
		Master	0.650	0.496
	Senior	Junior	-0.31923	0.786
		Master	0.33077	0.859
	Master	Junior	-0.650	0.496
		Senior	-0.33077	0.859

C. The Influence of Non-English Major Students' FLB on WTC in Class

In this part, the author intends to answer the third question, that is, the correlation between students' FLB and WTC. Pearson correlation analysis will be firstly adopted to find out whether there exists certain correlation between FLB and WTC in English. Materials from semi-structured interviews will also be analyzed to explore the relationship between the two variables.

As presented in Table 8, there does not exist a statistically significant positive or negative correlation between non-English major students' FLB and their WTC in English, only a low correlation existing between the two variables ($r = 0.327 \leq 0.39$), which indicates that students who feel bored in English class may partially influence their willingness to communicate in class.

Table 8. Correlation between FLB and WTC in class

Table 3: Correlation between FLB and WTC in class		
	WTC in English	
FLB	Pearson Correlation	0.327
	Sig.(2-tailed)	0.538
	N	45

Although the significance was not obvious, we can still get some implications from the qualitative data, that is, the semi-structured interviews from 1 freshman and 1 master student so as to see their difference in perception of FLB and WTC in English.

Teacher-induced boredom, referring to concepts such as excessive teaching control (item 18), lack of teacher's attention to learners' progress (item 4), being unfriendly (item 6) and not providing opportunities for sharing opinions (item 10) [14]. When this kind of boredom appears, students tend to not be cooperative and involved in class and fail to

construct a friendly relationship with teachers. It can be illustrated that students in lower grades may need teachers' appropriate guidance in class to avoid boredom and activate willingness [20].

"In my opinion, the guiding role of a teacher is very important in class. A teacher's attitude towards students, teaching skills and care for students in the interaction process are all important factors that affect whether we will feel bored in class, which in turn indirectly affects whether we are willing to communicate in class." (S1-Freshman)

"At this stage of graduate study, our interaction with teachers may not be so important, because we all have our own goals and plans for learning English, and we will rarely be bored by teachers in class. As for the willingness to communicate, it may mostly depend on how interesting the topic is and how much we know about the topic. It is also a matter of personal characteristics." (S2-master student)

Apart from that, student-induced boredom seems not so influential among these three factors, which ranked the lowest score (mean = 4.18). Most of the boredom-inducing situations under this factor are related to their disengagement from what transpires in class [14]. For example, being passive (16), seeing no progress (1) and comprehension difficulty (8). Compared with those two, activity-induced boredom is proved to be the most influential one, which contains memorizing activities (3), useless tasks and materials (11), repetitive or monotonous tasks (19) and mismatch of an activity and proficiency level (25). When asked about to what extent do these types of boredom influence their WTC in English, two interviewees gave different opinions.

"For me, the type of task and the relaxed atmosphere of the class can more affect whether I feel bored or not. Maybe it is because I just entered the university and have not experienced any English tests, so I don't care much about the grades and therefore do not have a clear self-perception. The most important thing is to experience the fun of learning. As long as I can be motivated and interested in learning in class, I will not feel bored and want to participate in the communication." (S1-freshmen)

"To be honest, at the stage of master's degree, it may be because we have taken many English classes and gradually know what we can gain and want to achieve in English classes, rather than just perceiving whether we are bored from teachers or activities. Perhaps due to so many years of immobilized mode of learning, we have become numb to English class and gradually lost the willingness to communicate in English class. Personally, I don't think boredom can influence my willingness to communicate, which is just a habit acquired over time." (S2-master student)

In summary, through the qualitative analysis conducted on two students who are experiencing different stages of learning, it can be suggested that students in lower grades may owe their WTC in English partly to FLB, with teacher-induced and activity-induced accounting for a larger proportion, whereas higher grade students do not relate the two factors together. They focus more on self-motivated targets and tasks which can help them achieve their practical goal, such as hunting for a job or continuing to further study.

IV. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the current situation of non-English major students' FLB and WTC in English and

also explored whether there existed certain correlation between two variables. Findings suggest that although there are no significant differences, activity-induced boredom may be the most influential factor in their learning process, followed by teacher-induced and student-induced boredom. As for WTC in English, it turns out that the average level of students' WTC is not that optimistic and that as grade increases, WTC in class will decrease for certain reasons, including repetitive task modes, clearer self-perceived goals and personal traits. From qualitative analysis from interviews, the results show that lower grade students may dependent on environmental factors to help them reduce boredom and activate their WTC, whereas for higher grade students, their independent way of learning has been shaped over years and they see less influence of FLB on WTC.

This research has some limitations. Firstly, the sample size is too small due to the researcher's few contacts in NPU, which may be the primary reason for the insignificant difference in quantitative analysis and statistical processing. If possible, future research can enlarge the sample size to further explore the correlation between the two variables. Secondly, this study did not take gender difference into account. In the future, the gender variation can also be explored. Thirdly, the validity and internal reliability should be verified further through a pilot study. Despite all these limitations, it also has some pedagogical implications. First, different methods should be implemented for students in various grades to reduce their boredom in class and stimulate their WTC. Secondly, for non-English major students, learning English is to acquire a tool or a skill. Their primary goal is different from that of English major students. Therefore, in the future study, comparative study can be conducted to investigate their difference.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Hu conducted the research, analyzed the data and wrote the paper; Zhang supervised the paper; both authors had approved the final version.

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