

The Effects of Discipline and Proficiency on English Learning Boredom of Chinese L2 Learners

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Abstract—Emotions are intimately involved in every aspect of the learning process. In the field of SLA, the current researchers have given much attention to emotions such as anxiety, enjoyment, or interest while studying foreign language learning boredom is still in its infancy. This study aims to investigate the effects of discipline and proficiency on English Learning Boredom (ELB) among Chinese L2 learners. The results revealed that the total average score of ELB was 2.81, showing a medium level of boredom. English major students and non-English major students have similar levels of boredom. Among English major students, students with a higher proficiency in English may experience more boredom compared to those with a middle or low proficiency level. For non-English major students, there is an inverse relationship between proficiency level and boredom. Reasons for the result and pedagogical implications are also discussed.

Keywords—discipline, proficiency, English learning boredom, Chinese L2 learners

I. INTRODUCTION

Language learning is a complex process that requires motivation, effort, and perseverance. However, many L2 learners experience boredom during their language learning journey, hindering their progress and overall language acquisition. Therefore, understanding the factors that contribute to language learning boredom can help educators and policymakers develop effective strategies to engage and motivate learners. Among studies on language learning boredom, most of them mainly discuss the factors of boredom and the impact of boredom on the process and effectiveness of foreign language learning [1–3], and few have investigated whether learner variables such as disciplinary and proficiency differences influence their boredom level. This study aims to investigate the effects of discipline and proficiency on English Learning Boredom (ELB) among Chinese L2 learners. By examining the relationship between these variables, this research seeks to provide insights into the causes and consequences of boredom in English language learning.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Boredom can be conceptualized as a negative feeling that arises when there is little physical or mental activity, accompanied by a sense of time dragging on and a desire to escape from the current dull situation through mental or behavioral disengagement [4, 5]. In their study, Li *et al.* [5] conducted mixed-method research on non-English major college students in China. They found that 92.6% (610 out of 659) of participants who provided open-ended responses described their experiences of boredom in foreign language

classrooms. Additionally, 22 interviewed college students recalled 49 instances of boredom in foreign language classrooms. Therefore, it can be observed that boredom is a common emotion experienced in foreign language learning.

Although boredom is among the most commonly experienced emotions in foreign and second language (L2) learning, it has so far been given less empirical attention compared to other learner variables, such as anxiety, joy, or interest. Boredom in L2 learning has been investigated in the following six aspects: factors that trigger boredom [6]; the internal structure of boredom [5]; the relationship between boredom and other emotions [7]; the dynamic changes and individual differences [8]; the relationship between boredom levels and foreign language performance [9]; coping strategies for boredom [10].

The majority of the studies were conducted in Polish and Chinese educational contexts, and L2 learners of all levels from primary students to university students are involved. For instance, Zawodniak *et al.* [11] conducted an in-depth analysis of the diaries kept by 30 Polish university English majors, revealing a pervasive sense of boredom in their English classes. This tedium was not merely a transient emotion but a complex interplay of factors such as the monotony of repetitive coursework, the lack of dynamic teaching methodologies, and minimal opportunities for interactive learning. The findings from subsequent case studies [12, 13] corroborate these insights, suggesting a pressing need for teachers to innovate their pedagogical practices to address the specific features of boredom in English language learning. Besides, a survey of 208 Iranian EFL learners by Derakhshan *et al.* [6] found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, students were prone to fatigue during prolonged online learning or lengthy and non-interactive reporting tasks. The perceived relevance of the lecture content also influenced their engagement. In addition, Li and Dewaele [14] explored the predictive effects of trait emotional intelligence and sense of online learning gain on boredom in foreign language classes among 348 first-year non-English major students. They found that the two negatively predicted boredom, but the sense of learning gain has more predictive effects on boredom.

Several factors contribute to boredom in language learning, including repetitive activities, lack of challenge, inadequate instructional methods, and low motivation. However, among the learner variables, such as gender, age, region, etc., majors and proficiency are less paid attention in studies of ELB.

Disciplinary differences have been investigated in educational research for more than 20 years [15].

Disciplines are commonly classified along the “hard-soft” and the “pure-applied” dimensions, depending on their epistemological characteristics [16]. Individuals from various academic fields possess diverse knowledge structures, themes, approaches, and perspectives, and what they think of foreign language learning might be different. Besides, Mori and Tanabe [17] investigated whether the relations between instructional and personality ratings and the general course evaluation varied by major by comparing 160 non-English major students and 193 English major students. The results showed that the teacher’s personality mattered to the non-English major group but did not influence the English major group. Therefore, it is interesting to see whether there are also differences between these two groups when it comes to ELB.

In addition, a study conducted by Li & Han [9] of 348 non-English major freshmen found that the sense of enjoyment in learning foreign languages is significantly positively correlated with English exam scores, while feelings of boredom and anxiety are negatively correlated with exam scores. It has shown that there are negative effects of ELB on English proficiency, but whether there are effects of proficiency on ELB still remains to be seen.

In conclusion, the existing literature suggests that discipline and proficiency may be sources of variation in learning and L2 learners of different disciplines and proficiency might have different language learning experiences which can play an important role in their learning outcomes. Regrettably, empirical studies in this respect fail to investigate their influence on English learning boredom. To address this gap, the present study is to examine the effects of students’ background of disciplines and their proficiency level on overall ELB and each of its subcomponents in a Chinese context.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

- (1) What is the effect of students’ proficiency level on English learning boredom of L2 learners?
- (2) What is the effect of students’ background of disciplines on English learning boredom of L2 learners?

B. Instruments

This study employs the Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale (FLLBS) [5]. The questionnaire started with a section about participants’ demographic information followed by 32 items of the questionnaire. The FLLBS consists of seven factors, namely Foreign Language Classroom Boredom (F1), Under-Challenging Task Boredom (F2), PowerPoint Presentation Boredom (F3), Homework Boredom (F4), Teacher-Dislike Boredom (F5), General Learning Trait Boredom (F6), Over-Challenging or Meaningless Task Boredom (F7). The FLLBS is a standard 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1 (Strongly disagree)” to “5 (Strongly agree).” The FLLBS was confirmed as having excellent psychometric properties for its high reliability and validity (Li *et al.*, 2021).

C. Participants

The online questionnaire (www.wjx.cn) was distributed to university students with different disciplines and

proficiency levels in China. A total of 80 students participated in the research. The sample consists of 30 male participants and 50 female participants. Participants ranged from 20 to 25 years old. Students from different disciplines are divided into English majors (n=39) and non-English Majors (n=41). Students with different proficiency levels are divided into three groups, high, middle, and low levels. All the English major students have attended the Test for English Majors-Band 8 (TEM-8). Students with a TEM-8 score higher than 80 are considered to be at a high proficiency level (n=12); a TEM-8 score from 60-80 is divided into the middle level (n=17); those who didn’t pass TEM-8 are regarded as low proficiency level (n=10). As for the non-English major students, all of them attended College English Test-6 (CET-6). Students with a CET-6 score higher than 600 belong to a high level (n=8); those who did not pass the test are considered as a low level (n=10); the remaining are divided into a middle level (n=24).

D. Procedures

After collecting the data from the questionnaire, we first divided them into 2 groups by majors, and then in each group, they were further divided into 3 sub-groups by proficiency. To examine the effects of disciplines and proficiency levels, descriptive analyses are conducted on the total score of the global ELB scale and each of its seven sub-scales to see whether there are differences. Reasons for the results and their implications are also discussed.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Disciplinary Differences in English Learning Boredom

The total average score of ELB was 2.81, showing a medium level of boredom. Table 1 and Fig. 1 present disciplinary differences in English learning boredom. It can be seen that there is almost no difference between English major students (2.81) and non-English major students (2.80) on the total score of the global ELB scale. English major students and non-English major students have similar levels of boredom when it comes to learning English. That is to say, the choice of major does not significantly impact the total score of the global English learning boredom scale. Both English major students and non-English major students may face similar challenges or find similar aspects of English learning boring.

Among its seven sub-scales, English major students experience more boredom in Factor 2 (Under-Challenging Task Boredom) and Factor 7 (Over-Challenging or Meaningless Task Boredom). This suggests that the level of task difficulty (too simple or too difficult) and relevance in English major courses may contribute to higher levels of boredom among these students. Non-English major students may experience slightly higher levels of boredom in categories such as homework boredom (F4), teacher-dislike boredom (F5), and general learning trait boredom (F6) compared to English major students. However, it is important to note that the difference in boredom levels is small. It indicates that factors such as homework assignments, teacher-student relationships, and general learning traits may contribute to higher levels of boredom among non-English major students.

What's more, both English major students and non-English major students show a consistent pattern in their boredom levels across different categories. The highest level of boredom is reported in F3 (PowerPoint Presentation Boredom), followed by F7 (Over-Challenging or Meaningless Task Boredom), and the lowest level of boredom is reported in F5 (Teacher-Dislike Boredom). This consistent pattern suggests that PowerPoint presentations tend to evoke higher levels of boredom among both English major and non-English major students. Additionally, over-challenging or meaningless tasks are also reported to contribute to boredom, albeit to a slightly lesser extent. On the other hand, boredom levels related to teacher dislike appear to be relatively lower.

Table 1. Disciplinary differences in English learning boredom

	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	Overall ELB
English major	2.58	2.95	3.76	2.91	2.44	2.46	3.12	2.81
Non-English major	2.58	2.89	3.76	2.92	2.49	2.48	3.05	2.80

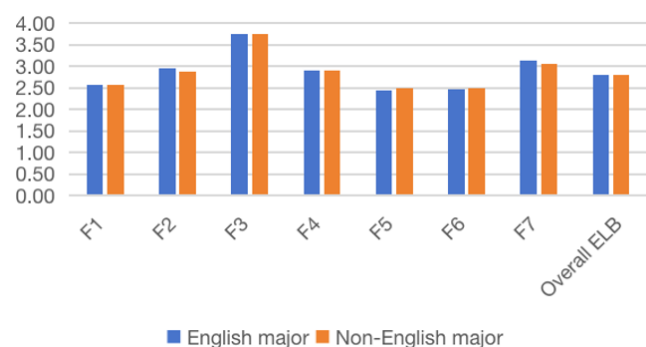


Fig. 1. Disciplinary differences in English learning boredom.

B. Proficiency Differences in English Learning Boredom among English Major Students

Table 2 and Fig. 2 show the proficiency differences in English learning boredom among English major students. It can be observed that among English major students, those with a high proficiency level in English tend to report higher levels of overall English learning boredom compared to those with a middle proficiency level, and those with a low proficiency level report the lowest levels of boredom. However, it is worth mentioning that the difference in boredom levels between the proficiency levels is slight. It suggests that students with a higher proficiency in English may experience more boredom in their English learning compared to those with a middle or low proficiency level. These students may find the material less challenging or engaging, leading to increased feelings of boredom.

Among the subcomponents of English learning boredom, specifically F2 (Under-Challenging Task Boredom) and F6 (General Learning Trait Boredom), students with higher proficiency levels in English tend to report feeling more bored in these circumstances. This indicates that students with higher English proficiency may find under-challenging tasks to be less stimulating or engaging or their general learning traits are not motivating, leading to increased feelings of boredom. It is possible that these students may crave more intellectually stimulating or challenging tasks to

maintain their interest and engagement in the learning process.

The middle group of English major students tends to experience different levels of boredom compared to the other two groups in various subcomponents of English learning boredom. In F1 (Foreign Language Classroom Boredom) and F5 (Teacher-Dislike Boredom), the middle group reports feeling less bored than both the high and low proficiency groups. This suggests that in the foreign language classroom setting and in situations where they may not particularly like the teacher, the middle group experiences relatively lower levels of boredom. However, in F3 (PowerPoint Presentation Boredom), F4 (Homework Boredom), and F7 (Over-Challenging or Meaningless Task Boredom), the middle group reports feeling more bored compared to both the high and low proficiency groups. This indicates that when it comes to PowerPoint presentations, homework assignments, and tasks that are perceived as over-challenging or meaningless, the middle group experiences higher levels of boredom. These findings suggest that the middle group of English major students may have a more nuanced experience of boredom, with varying levels depending on the specific subcomponent of English learning.

Table 2. Proficiency differences in English learning boredom among English major students

Proficiency level	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	Overall ELB
H	2.62	3.01	3.74	2.89	2.43	2.51	3.14	2.83
M	2.54	2.96	3.81	2.94	2.39	2.44	3.18	2.81
L	2.59	2.87	3.74	2.89	2.50	2.43	3.05	2.79

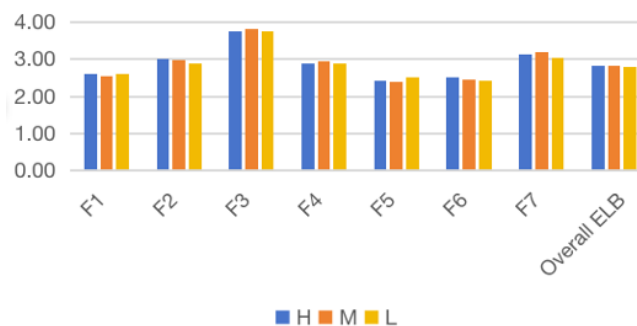


Fig. 2. Proficiency differences in English learning boredom among English major students.

C. Proficiency Differences in English Learning Boredom Among Non-English Major Students

Table 3 and Fig. 3 show the proficiency differences in English learning boredom among non-English major students. For non-English major students, there is an inverse relationship between proficiency level and boredom. Specifically, students with higher proficiency levels in English tend to report feeling less boredom compared to those with lower proficiency levels. This may suggest that students who have a higher level of proficiency in English may find the learning tasks and materials more engaging, challenging, and meaningful, resulting in lower levels of boredom. They may have a greater ability to comprehend and engage with the content, which can contribute to a more positive learning experience. On the other hand, students with lower proficiency levels may struggle more with

understanding and engaging with the material, leading to higher levels of boredom. They may find the tasks more challenging or less relevant to their current language abilities.

Regarding the subcomponents of English learning boredom, there are different patterns observed for students with middle proficiency levels compared to the high and low proficiency groups. In F4 (Homework Boredom), non-English major students with middle proficiency levels report higher scores, indicating that they experience more boredom with homework assignments compared to both the high and low-proficiency groups. This suggests that students with middle proficiency levels do not like homework and find the tasks less engaging. However, in the remaining six factors, students with higher proficiency levels tend to report lower levels of boredom compared to both the middle and low proficiency groups. This indicates that as non-English major students' proficiency levels increase, they are less likely to experience boredom in circumstances such as foreign language classrooms, PowerPoint presentations, teacher dislikes, under-challenging tasks, over-challenging or meaningless tasks, and general learning traits. These findings suggest that for non-English major students, higher proficiency levels in English may contribute to a more positive and engaging learning experience, reducing the likelihood of experiencing boredom in various aspects of English learning.

Table 3. Proficiency differences in English learning boredom among non-English major students

Proficiency level	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	Overall ELB
H	2.57	2.85	3.72	2.85	2.47	2.43	3.04	2.77
M	2.57	2.90	3.78	2.96	2.50	2.48	3.05	2.81
L	2.61	2.93	3.78	2.93	2.50	2.54	3.07	2.83

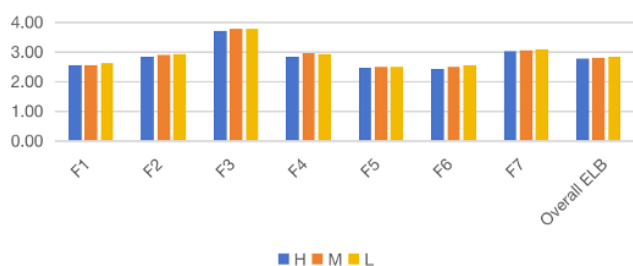


Fig. 3. Proficiency differences in English learning boredom among non-English major students.

In addition, it's interesting that we found the opposite result between English major students and non-English major students regarding the relationship between proficiency level and ELB. It could be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the task difficulty could be one of the reasons. English major students, who have a high proficiency level in English, may find the tasks and materials in their courses to be less challenging or stimulating. As a result, they may experience higher levels of boredom due to a lack of engagement or intellectual stimulation. On the other hand, non-English major students, who are not as proficient in English, may find the tasks more challenging and engaging, leading to lower levels of boredom. Secondly, English major students, with a higher

proficiency level, may have higher expectations for the content and tasks in their courses. If they perceive the material to be less relevant or interesting, it may lead to higher levels of boredom. Non-English major students, with lower proficiency levels, may have lower expectations and may find the material more novel and engaging, resulting in lower levels of boredom. Thirdly, English major courses' learning environment and teaching methods may differ from non-English major courses. It is possible that the teaching approaches used in English major courses may not effectively cater to the needs and interests of students with higher proficiency levels, leading to increased boredom. Conversely, the teaching methods in non-English major courses may be better suited to engage students with higher proficiency levels, resulting in lower levels of boredom. Lastly, it is important to consider that individual differences in learning preferences, interests, and motivation can influence the experience of boredom. Some students may be more prone to experiencing boredom regardless of their proficiency level, while others may be more resilient or find alternative ways to stay engaged in their learning.

V. CONCLUSION

This study based on 80 Chinese L2 students has revealed that the total average score of ELB was 2.81, showing a medium level of boredom. English major students and non-English major students have similar levels of boredom when it comes to learning English. Among English major students, those with a high proficiency level in English tend to report higher levels of overall English learning boredom compared to those with a middle proficiency level, and those with a low proficiency level report the lowest levels of boredom. For non-English major students, there is an inverse relationship between proficiency level and boredom. The opposite result could be attributed to several factors: task difficulty, relevance and interest, learning environment, and individual differences.

The study's findings underscore several key pedagogical implications. Firstly, English language educators must recognize the diverse proficiency levels within their classrooms and design differentiated tasks that cater to these varied needs. By carefully calibrating the difficulty of assignments to match students' abilities, teachers can provide challenges that are engaging without being overwhelming, thus sustaining interest and motivation. Secondly, teachers should strive to make the learning content and tasks relevant and authentic to the students' real-world experiences and interests. This can help increase engagement and reduce boredom levels among both English major and non-English major students. Building on these strategies, the third point emphasizes that the integration of technology, through language learning apps and online platforms, can significantly enhance the appeal of the learning process for students. By embracing digital tools, educators can offer a more interactive and personalized learning experience. Finally, cultivating a growth mindset and encouraging autonomy in learning can empower students to take responsibility for their own learning journey, enabling them to set goals, monitor their progress, and reflect on their learning strategies. Students can develop a deeper comprehension of the material, enhance knowledge

retention, and forge a stronger bond with the learning process. This self-directed approach not only addresses the issue of boredom but also aligns with the overarching aim of creating a stimulating and effective educational environment where every student can thrive.

We are aware of three main limitations in the present study. First of all, the study is based on a relatively small sample size of 80 Chinese L2 students. This limited sample size may affect the generalizability of the findings to a larger population. It is important to consider that different cultural contexts, educational systems, and language learning backgrounds may influence the experience of boredom differently. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying the findings to a broader population. Besides, the study relies on self-reported data from the participants, which may be subject to bias and subjectivity. Boredom is a subjective experience, and individual perceptions of boredom can vary. The accuracy and reliability of self-reported measures may be influenced by social desirability bias or individual interpretations of boredom. Future studies could consider incorporating objective measures or triangulating data from multiple sources to enhance the validity of the findings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Wan Liu conducted the research, analyzed the data, and wrote the paper; Yi Zhang reviewed the paper; both authors had approved the final version.

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