

Article

A Survey of Boredom in English Classrooms among Non-English Major Students and Optimization Strategies: An Analysis Based on the Production-Oriented Approach

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Abstract: The boredom experienced by students in college English classrooms is often subtle and has long remained on the periphery of pedagogical research. This study surveyed 150 non-English major undergraduates at a university in the western regions of China (with 133 valid questionnaires returned), employing the Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale developed by Li, Dewaele, and Hu (2023) to examine the current state of boredom in English classrooms across three dimensions: general foreign language classroom boredom, task-underload boredom, and task-overload or meaning-deficit boredom. Results indicated that the mean total boredom score was 44.42 (SD = 14.35), approaching the theoretical median of 48, yet with significant inter-individual variation. The average scores across the three dimensions were nearly identical (ranging from 2.77 to 2.78), suggesting that the boredom experience presents a complex pattern characterized as "overall manageable yet locally prominent, with notable individual differentiation." A lack of classroom engagement, monotonous task design, and a deficiency in perceived value constitute the threefold triggering mechanism for boredom. Grounded in the teaching process of the Production-Oriented Approach (POA)—"Motivating–Enabling–Assessing"—this paper proposes mitigation strategies from four aspects: optimizing the motivating stage, refining the enabling stage, improving the assessment stage, and constructing a supportive classroom environment. It also acknowledges the study's limitations, including a single-source sample, cross-sectional data, and strategies not yet empirically tested.

Keywords: Non-English major students; Classroom boredom; Production-Oriented Approach; College English teaching; Academic emotions

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The college English course constitutes a vital component of China's higher education curriculum. In terms of its orientation, this course possesses a dual nature: on one hand, it undertakes the fundamental task of imparting language knowledge and training language skills, helping students acquire instrumental linguistic competence; on the other hand, it bears the function of humanistic education, involving learners' cognitive development, cultural understanding, and emotional cultivation [1]. However, for an extended period, the focus of college English teaching reform has primarily rested on technical aspects such as teaching models, methodologies, and assessment methods, with relatively insufficient attention paid to learners' emotional experiences within the classroom [2]. In reality, language learning is not a purely cognitive activity; learners' emotional states profoundly influence the efficiency of language input processing, the willingness to produce language output, and the sustainability and engagement in learning behaviors [3]. Amidst the ongoing deepening of college English curriculum reform, students' emotional experiences should not be viewed merely as a byproduct of teaching activities but rather as a core dimension for measuring teaching quality [4].

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1.2. Literature Review

In the field of academic emotion research, Pekrun's Control-Value Theory provides a systematic theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms of academic emotion generation [5]. This theory posits that academic emotions arise from learners' cognitive appraisals of their perceived control over learning activities and the perceived value of those activities: when learners believe they lack control over learning activities or perceive learning tasks as lacking value, negative emotions such as boredom and anxiety ensue. In college English classrooms, students commonly exhibit symptoms like distraction, mind-wandering, and a lack of motivation, which are closely linked to academic boredom [6]. Existing research has demonstrated the negative impact of boredom on academic achievement [7]. Through a systematic analysis of high-level domestic and international literature from 2013 to 2021, Liu Honggang and Li Jing pointed out that while boredom is a common emotion in foreign language learning, research on it within applied linguistics remains relatively scarce, and exploring effective ways to alleviate student boredom from a practical perspective is a crucial direction for future research [6].

For non-English major students, English, as a public compulsory course, differs from English majors in terms of teaching objectives, curriculum design, and teaching methods. This student population exhibits considerable variation in English proficiency, with learning motivation primarily extrinsic and instrumental. Classroom learning time is limited, and instruction is often delivered in combined classes. Consequently, the mechanisms generating boredom for this group may differ from those for English majors. Zhang Xi and Wang Jianhua investigated 642 non-English major college students to examine the pathway through which teacher support affects learning engagement, establishing a multiple mediation model with academic emotions as mediators. They found an association between boredom and learning engagement, providing empirical reference for understanding the role of boredom among non-English major students [8]. Li Chengchen and Lu Xiaojun, using a scoping review methodology, systematically reviewed domestic and international research on foreign language boredom, identifying a notable gap in research subjects, particularly a relative lack of empirical investigations targeting non-English major college students [9].

At the intervention level, the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) offers an operationalizable pedagogical pathway for alleviating negative academic emotions in foreign language classrooms. This theoretical framework, centered on the core principle of "learning-using integration," structures the teaching process into three closely linked stages: "Motivating–Enabling–Assessing," aiming to solve the long-standing problem of "separation of learning and using" in foreign language teaching [10]. Regarding the specific design of the motivating stage, Wen Qiufang and Sun Shuguang clarified four core elements of the productive scenario—topic, purpose, identity, and setting—providing operational guidance for teachers to design communicatively authentic motivating tasks in the classroom [11]. In the assessment stage, Wen Qiufang proposed the theoretical framework of "Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment" (TSCA), transforming assessment from a unidirectional teacher judgment into a bidirectional interactive process involving both teacher and students, offering an operational scheme for optimizing classroom assessment [12]. These theoretical achievements have received preliminary validation in teaching practice—Zuo, based on POA theory, surveyed the academic emotions of 710 undergraduate students in POA classrooms, finding that the positive academic emotions experienced by students were significantly higher than negative ones overall [13]. However, existing research predominantly focuses on the impact of POA on learning outcomes, while specialized studies applying POA specifically to alleviate boredom among non-English major students remain relatively scarce.

1.3. Research Purpose and Questions

Given the above research background, this study surveys non-English major undergraduates at Xizang University using the Foreign Language Learning Boredom

Scale developed in one study, aiming to achieve two primary objectives: (1) to describe the overall level and main manifestations of English classroom boredom among non-English major students; and (2) to explore feasible strategies for alleviating classroom boredom based on the POA theoretical framework [14]. The specific research questions are as follows: (1) What is the level of English classroom boredom among non-English major college students, and what are its dimensional characteristics? (2) How can the pedagogical concepts and operational procedures of the Production-Oriented Approach specifically alleviate this emotion?

2. Research Design and Current Situation Analysis

2.1. Research Participants

This study selected non-English major undergraduates at Xizang University as participants. Using convenience sampling, a total of 150 students from various majors were recruited to complete the questionnaire, aiming to investigate the current state of their English classroom boredom. All participants had completed college English courses and were aged between 18 and 22. Given the significant variation in English proficiency levels among non-English major students and the evident individual differentiation in learning motivation and willingness to participate in class, this sample can provide representative data for revealing the overall characteristics of English classroom boredom in this population.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed online via the WJX platform during August 2026. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed. After excluding invalid responses (those with excessively short completion times or identical answers across all items), 133 valid questionnaires were obtained, yielding an effective response rate of 88.67%. SPSS 26.0 was used for statistical analysis, which primarily included: (1) descriptive statistics, calculating the mean and standard deviation for each dimension and item; (2) reliability analysis, calculating Cronbach's α coefficients to test internal consistency reliability; and (3) validity testing, calculating the KMO value and performing Bartlett's test of sphericity through exploratory factor analysis.

2.3. Research Instrument

This study employed the Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale developed by Li, Dewaele as the measurement tool [14]. This scale has demonstrated good reliability and validity in previous large-sample studies. Aligned with the needs of this study, three dimensions most relevant to the college English classroom context were selected, comprising a total of 16 items: General Foreign Language Classroom Boredom (8 items), Task-Underload Boredom (5 items), and Task-Overload or Meaning-Deficit Boredom (3 items). The questionnaire utilized a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "completely disagree" and 5 indicated "completely agree." Higher scores indicated more severe boredom, with total scores ranging from 16 to 80. Additionally, the questionnaire collected basic information including students' gender, major category, grade level, and whether they had passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4). Validity testing showed a KMO value of 0.943 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$), indicating good construct validity. Reliability analysis revealed a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.97 for the total scale, with subscale α coefficients ranging from 0.876 to 0.953, all exceeding 0.8, confirming high internal consistency reliability for the scale within this study's sample.

2.4. Research Findings

A total of 133 valid questionnaires were collected, and all data were statistically analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that the mean total score for English classroom boredom was 44.42 ($SD = 14.35$), approaching a medium level (theoretical median = 48), slightly below it, yet with a relatively large standard deviation, indicating a complex pattern of "overall manageable yet locally prominent, with significant individual differentiation." The mean scores for the three dimensions were

very close: General Foreign Language Classroom Boredom ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.93$), Task-Overload or Meaning-Deficit Boredom ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.96$), and Task-Underload Boredom ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.98$). These results are summarized in Table 1. Detailed analysis is as follows.

General foreign language classroom boredom is a relatively common phenomenon in students' classroom experiences. Specifically, 32.33% of students indicated that "In English class, my body is there, but my mind wanders," 29.33% reported that "I tend to zone out in English class," and 27.82% stated that "Time passes so slowly in English class," with corresponding item mean scores of 2.88, 2.86, and 2.84, respectively. The above data indicate that nearly one-third of students are in a low-arousal state during English class, with the phenomenon of being physically present but mentally absent warranting attention. Previous research has shown that when learners lack a sense of control or value over learning activities, they are prone to negative emotions such as boredom [5]. If boredom in foreign language learning is not effectively intervened, it will persistently erode students' learning motivation and classroom engagement [6]. In traditional classrooms, where teacher-centered lecture-style instruction remains the primary teaching format, students lack opportunities for substantive participation and authentic language production and immediate interaction. Being in a prolonged state of passive reception leads to the continuous weakening of their attention maintenance capacity, creating a negative cycle of "Can't understand → Don't want to listen → Understand even less."

Boredom triggered by task underload is also worthy of attention. 28.57% of students considered the analysis of lengthy texts too dull, and 25.56% felt that when the same English exercise or content is sustained for too long, it becomes uninteresting, with corresponding item mean scores of 2.86 for both. This suggests that when learning tasks lack cognitive challenge and involve monotonous, repetitive content, students can also become bored due to a "lack of intellectual substance." A meta-analysis by Wang Xiaoqi et al., based on 33 independent effect sizes from 30 studies involving 17,067 participants, found a moderate negative correlation between boredom and foreign language achievement [7]. The expression of task-underload boredom in this study indicates that students are not necessarily giving up because they "can't learn" but rather disengaging because they "find it uninteresting." In current college English classrooms, some practice exercises tend to emphasize mechanical drills, neglecting cognitive participation and intellectual activation. Students remain in a state of low cognitive investment for extended periods, making substantial improvement in language proficiency unattainable. Slow learning progress further reinforces the negative perception that "English class is boring."

Passive participation caused by a deficiency in perceived value is equally noteworthy. 27.07% of students indicated that "When the English teacher doesn't want to teach, I also don't want to listen," with this item scoring a mean of 2.86. This finding resonates with the core tenet of Control-Value Theory: when learners' perception of task value is insufficient, boredom ensues [5]. When students perceive that the teacher is not fully invested or does not prioritize a particular segment of the class, they tend to lower their own value judgment and willingness to participate in that segment, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of "teacher negativity → student negativity."

Overall, boredom in English classrooms among non-English major students is the result of the interplay between task characteristics, classroom interaction patterns, value perception, and individual factors. Task underload leads to insufficient cognitive participation, value deficiency leads to the dissolution of learning meaning, and inadequate quality of classroom interaction leads to reduced emotional investment. These three factors collectively constitute a multiple-trigger mechanism for boredom. Boredom not only affects classroom learning engagement and knowledge internalization efficiency but also weakens students' English learning motivation and sustained willingness to learn. Zhang Xi and Wang Jianhua, in their study of 642 non-English major college students, found an association between boredom and learning engagement [8]. The scoping review by Li Chengchen and Lu Xiaojun also pointed out that the target population in foreign language boredom research still needs to be expanded [9]. Therefore, it is of practical

urgency to take teaching model reform as a breakthrough point to create a challenging, meaningful, and participatory classroom learning environment.

3. Optimization Strategies

The findings of the survey indicate that boredom in English classrooms among non-English major students manifests primarily in three forms: lack of classroom engagement, monotonous task design, and deficiency in perceived value—each corresponding to potential areas for optimization within the three stages of the POA framework (value deficiency can be addressed in the Motivating stage, task difficulty mismatch can be alleviated in the Enabling stage, and lack of classroom engagement can be restructured in the Assessing stage). The Production-Oriented Approach (POA), with its core concept of “learning-using integration,” structures the teaching process into three stages—“Motivating–Enabling–Assessing”—which can respond to the causes of boredom by stimulating intrinsic motivation, providing learning scaffolds, and enhancing participatory experience. Based on the above theoretical framework and research findings, this study proposes strategic recommendations for alleviating English classroom boredom among non-English major students from the following four aspects.

3.1. Optimize the Motivating Stage: Stimulating Cognitive Gaps through Authentic Communicative Scenarios

The survey found that students commonly experience being “physically present but mentally absent,” with the root cause being the lack of a meaningful connection between learning tasks and students’ real-life experiences. The Motivating stage of POA addresses this by designing communicatively authentic productive scenarios. By allowing students to attempt the productive task, they become aware of their linguistic deficiencies, thereby generating a sense of “gap” or “hunger” at the cognitive level, fundamentally activating intrinsic learning drive. This stage emphasizes “output-driven” learning—the teacher first presents a realistic communicative scenario and asks students to try completing the productive task. Through this attempt, problems are exposed, fostering a desire for “I want to learn” rather than passively receiving the indoctrination of “I must learn” [10].

In specific implementation, teachers can design productive tasks closely related to the professional backgrounds and future career needs of non-English major students. For example, using the task “Introduce your major’s research directions,” the teacher first presents a realistic communicative scenario—simulating an international academic exchange where students need to introduce their major’s basics to a foreign scholar in English—and asks students to attempt this task spontaneously. Most students will discover their own deficiencies in professional vocabulary, logical organization, or oral expression during this attempt. This “productive difficulty” itself serves as intrinsic motivation, making students realize “I do need to learn something.” The meaning of learning is thus no longer externally imposed by the teacher but grows from the students’ own experience. Research indicates that the design of motivating scenarios must meet the conditions of communicative authenticity, clarifying the four elements: topic, purpose, identity, and setting. An effective motivating scenario should make students “feel the relevance of the task to themselves,” rather than just completing a classroom exercise [11]. When students perceive the connection between the productive task and their own professional development and future career scenarios, the intrinsic value of the learning activity is activated, undermining the cognitive basis for the value deficiency stemming from the belief that “learning English is useless.”

3.2. Refine the Enabling Stage: Resolving Task Difficulty Mismatch through Scaffolded Steps

Survey results show that 28.57% of students find the analysis of lengthy texts too dull, and 25.56% feel that sustaining the same exercise or content for too long becomes uninteresting. This indicates that when learning tasks lack cognitive challenge or involve monotonous repetition, students can become bored due to a “lack of intellectual substance.” The Enabling stage of POA offers a dual pathway of “progressiveness” and “selective learning” to address this issue. The design of enabling activities must adhere to

three criteria: precision, progressiveness, and diversity—precision requires that enabling activities closely align with the productive goal; progressiveness requires a gradual increase in task difficulty; and diversity requires a variety of activity formats [10].

In terms of progressive design, teachers should break down the overarching productive goal into several sub-goals across progressive stages. For instance, with the task “Writing an English activity proposal,” the enabling process could be divided into three stages: Stage 1 (Language Enabling)—learning and practicing core sentence patterns and logical connectors for expository writing; Stage 2 (Content Enabling)—gathering and organizing information around three questions: “What are the core activities of our club? Why are they worth attention? How can one participate?”; Stage 3 (Structure Enabling)—organizing the content into a complete essay with an introduction-body-conclusion structure. This progressive design allows students to gain a sense of “accomplishment” at each sub-goal, preventing the overwhelming feeling or learned helplessness that might arise from a final productive task that seems too large.

Regarding selective learning, POA allows students to choose learning content based on their own deficiencies. Teachers can provide enabling materials at three levels: Basic level—offering common sentence templates and high-frequency vocabulary (for students with weaker foundations); Intermediate level—providing excellent sample essays with structural analyses (for intermediate students); Advanced level—introducing stylistic variations across different cultural contexts and more sophisticated phrasing techniques (for advanced students). Students can selectively learn based on their specific productive difficulties, avoiding the helplessness of “being unable to reach” and the dullness of “being too simple,” thus dually responding to the “task-underload boredom” and “task-overload boredom” identified in the survey. Research shows that progressive teaching design can effectively reduce students’ productive anxiety.

3.3. Reform the Assessment Stage: Enhancing Classroom Participation through Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment

The survey indicated that 27.07% of students stated, “When the English teacher doesn’t want to teach, I also don’t want to listen.” While this appears to be an issue of teacher-student interaction on the surface, it essentially reflects a design flaw in the assessment stage: when students are merely “onlookers” in the classroom rather than “participants,” attention drift is an inevitable outcome. The “Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment” (TSCA) proposed by POA offers a systematic solution to this problem.

The TSCA framework proposed by Wen Qiufang comprises three stages: pre-class, in-class, and post-class [12]. Pre-class, teachers select and evaluate typical samples based on the unit’s teaching objectives. In-class, students first engage in individual thinking, followed by pair or group discussions, and then participate in whole-class discussion guided by the teacher, who provides pre-prepared evaluation comments at appropriate times. Post-class, students supplement TSCA through self-assessment or peer assessment, building on the teacher’s in-class professional guidance. This assessment model transforms evaluation from a unidirectional teacher activity into a bidirectional interactive process involving both teacher and students.

Taking the “Peer Oral Presentation” activity as an example, the issue of passive assessment can be fundamentally improved using the TSCA approach. Instead of being the sole evaluator, scoring each student’s presentation individually, the teacher designs a “Presentation Evaluation Observation Sheet” in advance. This sheet lists evaluation criteria (e.g., content organization, language expression, time management, engagement, etc.), and requires each student to fill out the sheet while listening to the presentations, assigning scores and writing brief comments. After the presentations, students first share their observations and evaluations, followed by the teacher’s supplementary comments and summary. The evaluators are thus expanded from just the teacher to the entire class, transforming the act of listening from passive observation to active observation and judgment. Research indicates that Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment, to a certain

extent, enhances students' classroom engagement and the relevance of learning. This participatory assessment design keeps students cognitively active throughout their peers' presentations, naturally alleviating the boredom arising from being a mere spectator.

3.4. Construct a Supportive Classroom Environment: Strengthening Emotional Experience through Formative Feedback

Beyond optimizing the teaching process, the classroom environment itself is a crucial factor influencing students' emotional experiences. The survey found that students are generally in a low-arousal state in English class, partly due to monotonous interaction patterns and insufficient formative feedback. POA encourages teachers to transition from knowledge transmitters to learning guides and developmental supporters, requiring attention to students' emotional experiences throughout the teaching process.

In specific implementation, teachers need to provide comprehensive formative support: pre-class—clarify production requirements and assessment criteria, provide resource lists and expressive frameworks; in-class—circulate and guide, promptly answer student questions, and encourage students to experiment boldly; post-class—provide specific, positive, and constructive feedback, prioritizing affirmation of students' effort and progress before gently suggesting improvements. Research has shown that utilizing online resources to alleviate input and production pressure during the enabling stage, and innovating assessment methods through student participation and teacher post-class evaluation, effectively supports the implementation of POA's three key stages. Concurrently, teachers must reasonably control task difficulty, adopting a scaffolded design that progresses from short sentence expression and paragraph writing to complete project presentations, allowing students ample preparation time to avoid anxiety caused by overly difficult tasks or time pressure.

Furthermore, teachers should refine the course assessment system by incorporating multi-dimensional indicators such as group collaboration performance, classroom participation enthusiasm, task completion quality, and outcome innovativeness into the evaluation framework, de-emphasizing score competition and focusing on student growth and progress. Multiple assessments can free students from singular test-taking pressure, fostering a more relaxed mindset and greater willingness to actively participate in class. When students feel respected, understood, and supported, their psychological safety increases, and their boredom levels effectively decrease. As Liu Honggang and Li Jing pointed out, exploring effective ways to alleviate student boredom from a practical perspective is an important direction for future research [6]; constructing a supportive classroom environment represents the concrete implementation of this direction in teaching practice.

In summary, the three-stage teaching process of POA—"Motivating-Enabling-Assessing"—combined with the construction of a supportive classroom environment, can systematically address the multiple causes of boredom in English classrooms among non-English major students by stimulating intrinsic motivation, providing learning scaffolds, enhancing participatory experience, and creating a safe atmosphere. Previous research indicates that POA effectively stimulates students' learning motivation and reduces learning anxiety [10]. Applying POA to college English classrooms for non-English majors not only helps improve students' language application skills but also systematically alleviates classroom boredom by optimizing the learning experience, improving classroom interaction, and enhancing learning confidence. This holds significant practical implications for promoting the transformation of college English teaching models and improving the quality of curriculum-based education.

4. Conclusion

The core finding of this study is that boredom in English classrooms among non-English major college students does not manifest as a monolithic "high degree of disengagement," but rather presents a complex pattern characterized as "overall manageable yet locally prominent, with significant individual differentiation." The mean

scores across the three boredom dimensions were nearly identical (2.77–2.78), indicating that different types of boredom are all represented in this sample, but none is overwhelmingly dominant; while the notably large standard deviation ($SD = 14.35$) suggests that inter-individual differences are far greater than inter-type differences among dimensions. In other words, the primary challenge facing current college English classrooms may not be “universal boredom among all students,” but rather “how to accurately identify and respond to different types and varying degrees of boredom experiences.” This finding aligns with the conclusion by Zhang Xi and Wang Jianhua regarding the association between boredom and learning engagement—boredom may not necessarily constitute a “universal crisis,” but it is certainly a pedagogical signal warranting precise intervention.

The subtlety of boredom has long kept it on the periphery of pedagogical research. Exploring effective ways to alleviate student boredom from a practical perspective is a crucial direction for future research. The strategic construction undertaken in this study, framed by POA theory, attempts to provide a feasible pathway reference for this direction.

POA’s teaching process of “Motivating–Enabling–Assessing” precisely corresponds to the three sources of boredom revealed in this study: the Motivating stage addresses “deficiency in perceived value” (what’s the use of learning this?); the Enabling stage addresses “task underload or content repetition” (what and how to learn?); and the Assessing stage addresses “lack of classroom participation” (what role do I play in the classroom?). Theoretically, these three elements form a relatively complete intervention loop; however, its operational feasibility and effectiveness in practice remain to be further tested.

The limitations of this study are clear: a single-institution sample, cross-sectional data unable to track changes, and strategies not yet empirically validated. However, as an exploratory study, its value may lie less in providing “answers” and more in posing “questions”—boredom is not a monolithic emotional state; it is multidimensional, individualized, and deeply embedded in specific learning contexts. Future research could advance in the following two directions: first, implementing POA intervention programs in teaching experiments to track changes in students’ boredom levels before and after the intervention, verifying causal effects; second, expanding the sample coverage to examine differences in boredom characteristics among students from different types of institutions, majors, and English proficiency levels, providing a basis for constructing differentiated intervention systems. In teaching practice, teachers can flexibly adjust the themes and difficulty of productive tasks according to students’ professional backgrounds and individual characteristics, integrating emotional support into all aspects of teaching design.

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