

# ***Foreign Language Boredom of Second Language Learners in China***

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**Abstract:** With the development of educational research in the realm of SLA, the number of studies for foreign language boredom (FLB) has witnessed an obvious increase in both China and the rest of the globe during the past decade. However, related research in China is still relatively insufficient. This essay aims to discuss the characteristics and uniqueness of FLB research in Chinese English foreign language (EFL) and second language (L2) education, as well as the characteristics of FLB itself, by summarizing and analyzing information from previous studies conducted in China. With the information provided, it can be concluded that FLB studies in China are characterized by their compatibility with different research instruments and convenience. The measurement scales invented for FLB studies in China can be used worldwide, and those invented for FLB studies in other nations can be used in China as well. The phenomenon of FLB in China varies across students with different backgrounds and identities. It can also be concluded from previous studies that the cause and impact of FLB in China is multidimensional. The present article holds referential value for future scholars who plan to analyze the phenomenon of FLB within their countries and suggests future researchers to conduct studies that include students from different educational backgrounds and nations.

**Keywords:** Second Language Acquisition, Foreign language boredom, China, Urban-rural

## **1. Introduction**

The emotions of second language (L2) have been an essential research subject in educational research. Several emotions have been proven to be infective for the achievements of L2 learners, such as anxiety, enjoyment and boredom [1]. So far, foreign language anxiety has attracted more attention from scholars compared with most other emotions in second language acquisition (SLA) [2]. Other emotions, such as language learning embarrassment, have been found to affect the conviction of the learner; such emotions have been studied and analyzed through classroom performance [3]. In addition to the research on negative emotions, pleasant emotions, such as enjoyment, have also received scholarly attention, and their relationship with negative emotions was explored in various studies [4]. Apart from the surveys using students as the research object, studies focusing on teachers' impact on foreign language learning have also emerged in recent years. Teachers' skills and personalities have been found to affect students' second language learning emotions [5].

Second-language boredom is another emotion shed light on in the past few years, and measurements of students' boredom levels have been developed [6]. Boredom has been found to negatively impact L2 students [7]. With the development of educational research and foreign language teaching, the subject of second language boredom (SLB) has received more academic attention in the past decade [8-10]. Although research on the management of second language learning emotions in China is still in its infancy [11], the number of studies in China that focus on SLB and foreign language boredom (FLB) has increased significantly [12-14]. While the studies of Pawlak et al. have been considered the foundation of the research sphere of FLB [15]. Some studies conducted in China provided new insights and conceptualization by using alternative instruments more suitable for the context. For example, Li et al. concluded in their study that English learning boredom is a relatively more stable and characteristic emotional tendency and a habitual and commonly experienced weariness [12]. Previous studies in China have been conducted in different contexts; participants included students from elementary school, junior high school, senior high school and universities [1,6,13,16,17]. On the other hand, the difference in research contexts also occurs in a geographical sense. Some researchers included participants from both urban areas and rural areas. The difference between the two educational environments affects FLB among FL learners in China [1,16]. Some studies in China exclusively focus on FLB, while others explore the relationship between FLB and other emotions [1,10,14,18]. The present article presents a deeper understanding of boredom in foreign language learning. It is important to note the difference in educational environment between countries, and the referential value of studies might vary across different nations. An article focusing on studies conducted in China may provide a deeper insight for future FLB research. Thus, the present article holds referential value for researchers who plan to summarize or analyze studies of FLB conducted within one nation. This article will focus on the previous studies that are directly or indirectly related to the boredom emotion that occurs in foreign language learners in China, compare related studies and analyze their similarities and differences with the documentary analysis method. Thus, it provides suggestions from a unique perspective for further FLB research in both China and the rest of the world. Based on the findings of previous FLB studies in China, including the causes, levels, effects, and influencing factors of FLB, suggestions will be provided to educators and future researchers.

## 2. Literature Review

The conceptualization of boredom has a long history in academic research within psychology and was defined as a negative mental status or emotional feeling, normally characterized by weariness and a lack of interest [19]. However, there are fewer studies that focus on FLB compared with other emotions. It was not until recent years that there has been a more systematic and more advanced conceptualization of FLB [8,12]. So far, researchers have found that the impact of boredom on education can be diverse [20], and its conceptualization can be categorized into narrow and broad definitions [21]. One of the characteristics of FL education in China is that the school environments in urban and rural areas can be hugely different. Research conducted in rural primary schools in China found that some sub-scales invented and used by Li et al. were not entirely suitable for their research because the scale was designed for students in the kind of classrooms that constantly use multimedia technology or PowerPoint presentations, which is not the case for participants in the rural primary school in that research [16,22]. So far, several methods and instruments have been designed to measure the level of boredom in the past decade, including scales based on the control-value theory. This theory believes that emotions in education might be significantly influenced by students' belief in the importance of their studied content [21]. Some researchers in China have also used the theory to design their scales to test the level of boredom in Chinese students [22]. The BPELC (Boredom in Practical English Language Classes questionnaire), invented by Pawlak et al. is still one of the most

used questionnaires for scholars exploring the subject of FLB [9]. However, several Chinese scholars have used other borrowed or original questionnaires or scales, including a revised version of the Boredom Subscale of the Achievement Emotions Questionnaire (AEQ), which was originally invented by Pekrun et al. [23], was later used in an FLB study in China [12]. Most researchers focusing on FLB in China used the social media app WeChat to reach out to participants, in which case participants normally used the website or software Wenjuanxing to fill out questionnaires [12,22]. The website SPSS was more commonly used to run data analysis [1,10]. Instruments of measurement in China will be further evaluated in the later parts of the article. The scale of the English mark included 100 points, 120 points, and 150 points, which differs from some other countries' educational systems [1,16,17]. Another piece of information to be covered by this article is the background of FLB research in China. The studies taking place in universities are less likely to face urban-rural differences since universities in China are mostly in urban areas [11]. However, junior high schools, senior high schools, and primary schools can be easily found in rural areas [1,16,17]. Although the diversity of Chinese minority ethnic groups is also a characteristic of Chinese education, research exclusively focusing on the FLB among Chinese ethnic minorities is still inadequate [24]. More detailed differences in backgrounds will be included later in the article.

### **3. The Variety and Uniqueness of Instruments Used in Studies of FLB in China**

The educational environment in China has been proven to have a high compatibility for various instruments and measurement scales [1,14]. However, some instruments used to conduct surveys in China might differ from those used in other nations [9,10]. As mentioned earlier, researchers in China sometimes used different instruments and methods to explore the boredom emotions that appeared in Chinese L2 students [1,14]. Several questionnaires have been borrowed, revised or invented [10,12]. In the research conducted by Dewaele and Li to find out how factors like the teachers' passion and Chinese students' engagement during the learning process can be related to emotions that included boredom, the AEQ scale was revised to better fit the context of L2 education of Chinese students since it was originally designed for a more general context of education instead of exclusively focus on L2 or FL education [10]. However, a more systematic and multifaceted questionnaire scale called FLLBS (Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale) was invented by Li et al., which was designed to fit the Chinese ELT context [12]. It has included 32 items that cover 7 factors, allowing scholars around the world to conduct research with revised versions of such instruments to better fit the local context and was frequently used by other studies of FLB in China [12,16,24]. However, it is worth noting that sometimes minor revision was needed for the FLLBS to fit in the research context, including a study mentioned earlier in this article that required a revision of FLLBS due to different classroom facilities used by rural schools in China [16].

Several research instruments are more often used in China than in other nations, and the convenience of these instruments is one of the characteristics of FLB studies in China [12]. WeChat and QQ are more commonly used by Chinese researchers to contact and gather participants and send rewards like WeChat red bags to participants as a gesture of gratitude [12,22]. Later, participants can use Wenjuanxing to fill out the questionnaire [13,14]. SPSS is another tool that was more frequently used by Chinese FLB researchers, which allows them to run reliability tests and validity tests, summarize the numbers and frequency of the participants and their information and analyze the connections of different factors [1,10,24]. The measurements mentioned above have proved that the environment in Chinese ELT classrooms is suitable for different FLB scales used around the world, although occasionally, some revisions are needed [10,16,22]. Meanwhile, the digital instruments used by Chinese researchers are convenient and enable them to carry out more advanced studies [12,13,24].

#### **4. Backgrounds and Contexts of Participants of Studies of FLB of Chinese EFL Learners**

The difference in Chinese students' background is also a factor that has influenced both the results of studies and the conduction of studies themselves [16,24]. Several studies in China indicate that students from different educational stages or areas have different FLB levels [16,24]. Among the studies of FLB conducted in China, several levels of educational background have been covered. So far, most of them focus on the FLB of Chinese undergraduate students. In the research conducted by Li et al., 2002, university undergraduate students from 11 universities reached out to investigate how teacher enthusiasm is related to students' engagement, enjoyment, and boredom [10]. Later, the same subjects and problems were explored in Chinese EFL senior high school students [17]. In another study, Li also reached out to 2002 undergraduate L2 learners to investigate how boredom and control-value appraisal can be related [22]. Most universities and college schools are set in urban areas, so the urban-rural differences are less likely to be a problem in studies focused on university students' FLB in China [11,16]. The FLB of Chinese junior high school L2 learners and Chinese senior high school L2 learners has also been investigated by Chinese researchers [1,17,24]. In another study, Li and Li researched how boredom, along with emotions like anxiety and enjoyment, can influence Chinese middle school students' L2 performance; they found out boredom is negatively related to the EFL achievements of Chinese middle school students [1]. Wu and Zhao studied senior high school students and found that teacher enthusiasm can be negatively related to Chinese high school students' L2 boredom [17]. Some studies also investigate the FLB of primary school L2 learners [6,16]. This study includes a study that aims to explore the reasons for FLB and its impact on primary school EFL students [16]. In his research, Li found that the source of FLB in primary school students may be learning traits, tasks, classrooms and PowerPoint presentations [6]. Among these studies, some also explored the potential difference in the level of FLB between different genders and ages [6,24]. In a study by Li, participants from elementary school were found to have different levels of FLB across different genders and ages [6]. After comparing another study conducted by Li and Dewaele, Li find that EFL learners from primary school are less likely to experience boredom compared with those from universities in China [12]. This may be caused by a lower number of tasks, courses, and exams among Chinese primary school students [6].

The full marks of English exams in China vary from primary school to high school [1,16,17]. The full mark on English exams in most Chinese primary schools is 100 points, the full mark in junior high school is 120 points, and in senior high school is 150 points, which allows researchers to find more accurate results of high school students than those of more junior educational background when exploring relationships between FLB and L2 achievement [1,16,17].

So far, some studies compare differences between urban and rural areas [16], while other studies exclusively focus on rural or urban students [1,6,24]. One of these studies found that rural-urban differences can be a negative predictor of FLB among Chinese primary school students [16]. A study that compares the FLB levels of participants from junior high school that belong to different ethnic minority groups found that boredom level varies between different ethnicities. In contrast, PPT boredom and under-challenging task boredom are most related to ethnicity [24].

All the findings above indicate that differences in the background, such as educational stage, gender, rural-urban and ethnicity, can influence Chinese EFL students' FLB.

#### **5. The Reasons, Levels and Influential Factors of Chinese EFL Learners' FLB**

The phenomenon of FLB on Chinese students can be diverse and multidimensional. The reasons, levels and influential factors may have complex structures and can vary across different backgrounds [11,24]. Several reasons can cause the FLB emotions of L2 learners in China. A study conducted by Zhang indicates that two main reasons are unlikable task design and teachers' low enthusiasm [13].

The level of FLB in Chinese L2 learners differs from background to background. The difference between different levels of boredom has been compared in different contexts in studies conducted in China [16,24]. Li et al. have found in a study that rural primary students' level of FLB is higher than that of urban primary school students in China, although FLB has been found to be a negative predictor for L2 achievement in both rural and urban students [16]. Another study by Mao found that the level of boredom between ethnic minority groups can be hugely different [24]. Such differences mainly lie in boredom caused by homework, tasks that lack challenge and PowerPoint presentation [24]. Chinese L2 learners who belong to the She ethnicity minority group was found to have a higher level of boredom than those in other minority groups while Tujia ethnic group has a higher possibility to be influenced by boredom [24]. The same study also indicate that students from grade 9, which is the third year of junior high school, is more likely to experience boredom because most of their purpose for learning English is to pursue a higher mark in senior high school entrance exam [24].

Most FLB studies in China that explore how boredom will affect L2 learners' education focus on how it will influence their achievement [1,16]. In the study carried out by Li, primary school EFL students from rural areas are found to have both lower exam grades and higher levels of boredom than those in urban areas [16]. Indicating that rural-urban differences can be a factor influencing boredom's effect on achievement [16]. Another study also proves that although boredom negatively affects Chinese junior high school EFL students' achievement, its impact reduces over time as students learn more and get more practice [1].

Hitherto, several factors are negatively or positively related to the boredom emotion of Chinese L2 learners [10,13,14]. Researchers have found that Chinese EFL learners' boredom factors can be divided into internal and external factors, in which case external factors refer to classroom environments, tasks, etc. In contrast, internal factors refer to students and their interaction with teachers [6]. Another study conducted in China indicates that FLB is mainly caused by external factors, such as boredom in FL classrooms, courseware and tasks [12]. In a research by Li et al., teachers' passion has been found to reduce the boredom feeling of Chinese ELT students [10]. On the other hand, Chen et al. have found that classroom boredom, content boredom and teacher/student boredom have formed a three-factor structure in FLB within Chinese students during online L2 classrooms, while Zhang's study points out task-based boredom and teacher-related boredom are the two major components, which further proves that Chinese EFL students' boredom is a complex phenomenon [13,14].

## 6. Conclusion

Several points have been proven by the information collected and analysed above. On the one hand, the Chinese EFL environment is suitable for a multitude of research tools. Measurements and instruments invented for FLB studies conducted in other nations can be used in China and vice versa. However, some revision and redesign are occasionally needed due to differences in urbanization level and mark measurement in exams between China and other nations. Instruments like WeChat, QQ, Wenjuanxing and SPSS allow researchers to conveniently execute their studies. On the other hand, the level of FLB and research results can vary across different backgrounds and identities of EFL learners in China, including their living area, educational stage, ethnicity, and gender. The findings of previous research in China also indicate that the causes and impacts of boredom in SLA can be diverse, as boredom can be caused by different external or internal factors. Several other emotions are also found to be negatively related to FLB. Further proving boredom in Chinese EFL learners can be a complex and diverse emotion.

It can be concluded that research on FLB in China still has its shortcomings. The number of participants varies across different studies and can sometimes be relatively limited. It is also worth noting that most FLB studies in China used the quantitative method or mixed methods, while FLB



case studies in China that entirely use the qualitative methods are seriously limited or unprecedented, and as a result, some uncertain factors failed to be considered. A more systematic case study can provide researchers with deeper insights and allow them to observe FLB [15]. Therefore, researchers should conduct more case studies in China. Still, the findings of FLB research in China have largely contributed to the development of EFL research. It is also suggested in this article that future studies could gather participants of EFL and L2 learners from different educational stages or different nations. A study that recruits students from different educational stages will allow researchers to compare the differences between environments, workloads and curricula in different educational backgrounds. Gathering students from across the globe will allow scholars to compare the levels, causes and impacts of FLB between different nations. As a result, such studies, if ever put out, will be able to take advantage of the present article for information and referential purposes.

### Authors Contributions

Both authors contributed equally, and their names were listed alphabetically.

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