

A Review of Studies on Foreign Language Learning Boredom

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Abstract: Based on the papers on foreign language learning boredom, this article attempts to summarize the main aspects of relevant studies, and analyzes the achievements and shortcomings. It concludes with suggestions for the future study on foreign language learning boredom.

Keywords: Foreign language learning; Boredom; Review

Before the 1980s, emotion was always considered as an “irrational factor” opposite to cognition, which causes its neglect by researchers in SLA (Li, 2020). Although the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) emphasizes the role of emotions on SLA, there were still few relevant studies. Since the 21st century, with the rise and development of positive psychology, scholars in SLA began to pay attention to emotion studies. In addition to the widely-studied anxiety emotion, positive emotions such as pleasure, excitement and other traditionally neglected negative emotions such as guilt and shame have also received great attention. However, fewer scholars have paid attention to the widespread emotional experience of boredom in L2 learning (Li, 2021).

Boredom is an unpleasant emotional or psychological state, often accompanied by low physiological arousal and cognitive stimulation, false perception of time (slow is slow or static), and specific behavioral tendencies (withdrawal from boring events) (Putwain et al., 2018). Numerous studies in psychology and educational psychology have found that boredom is the most intense and frequent students’ emotional experience in the learning process (Goetz et al., 2006), and can have negative effects on their thoughts, emotion, motivation, cognition and behaviors (Putwain et al., 2018).

It was Chapman (2013) who did the first boredom study in second language learning. With the methods of both qualitative and quantitative studies, he investigated 57 students to understand their boredom in learning German as the L2. Since then, great attention has been paid to this emotion by SLA researchers, especially those in Poland.

At present, relevant research mainly explores the causes and influences of academic boredom among English majors. Kruk (2016) and Kruk (2019) investigated 16 Polish English majors and 2 Polish English majors respectively and found that topics, students’ understanding and communication abilities are all important factors for their learning boredom. After analyzing diaries of 30 Polish English majors, Zawodniak, Kruk & Chumas (2017) found that boredom was pervasive in English class, and reasons are analyzed from the aspects of teachers, teaching materials and teaching activities. In another study, using the semi-structured interview, Kruk & Zawodniak (2018) found that all of the participants experienced boredom in English classes, and this emotion increased as time passes. Reasons were analyzed from the aspects of teachers, teaching tasks, as well as teaching methods. In addition to the analysis of reasons for boredom in English classes, Pawlak, Kruk, Zawodniak & Pasikowski (2020) also explored the relationship between boredom proneness and students’ achievement. Statistics indicated that students with high grades felt significantly less bored than those with low grades.

In general, although the above studies have made a comprehensive analysis of the causes and effects of boredom in second language learning, most of the results come from qualitative studies with a small number of subjects such as interviews or diaries, and also lack relevant theoretical basis (Li, 2021).

In view of this, Li, Dewaele & Hu (2020) introduced control-value theory (CVT) into the study of second language learning and proposed foreign language boredom (FLB), which refers to the negative and low arousal emotions generated during foreign language learning. What’s more, Li et al. (2020) also distinguishes state boredom and trait boredom. While state boredom refers to the temporary boring experience caused by a specific situation, with situational and transient characteristics, trait boredom, on the other hand, is a habitual or recurring boredom experience with relative stability.

In order to study the boredom of English learning in China, based on CVT, Li et al. (2020) developed a Foreign Language Boredom Scale (FLBS). This scale includes 7 factors and distinguishes state boredom and trait boredom in different learning situations. With the help of this scale, Li & Dewaele (2020) examined the relationships between boredom and trait emotional intelligence. Results indicated that trait emotional intelligence and perceived gain of online courses negatively predicted boredom jointly. In another survey, Li (2021) explored the relationship among subjective control assessment, subjective value assessment and boredom in English learning. It was worth mentioning that although the quantitative research results showed a linear negative correlation between control evaluation and English learning boredom, the qualitative research results demonstrated an inverted U-shaped correlation between them, that is, students’ English learning boredom is high when the subjective control evaluation is too high or too low. Li (2021) believed that this difference may be caused by the fact that qualitative and quantitative studies focus on different kinds of boredom. Generally speaking, quantitative studies tend to investigate the general tendency in English classes, which belongs to trait boredom. In qualitative research, however, participants recall the specific situations that cause boredom, which belongs to state boredom. This further illustrates the importance to distinguish state and trait boredom.

Based on the above domestic and foreign studies, it is not difficult to find that the current research on boredom in second language learning is still in its infancy. In addition, most of the existing studies do not distinguish between trait emotion and state emotion, resulting in incomplete and even different results. Given the prevalence and impact of boredom in English learning, more research is urgently needed to better understand and deal with this emotional experience.

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