



European Journal of English Language Studies

Volume 5, Issue 3, 167 - 177.

ISSN: 2770-9752

<https://www.ejels.com/>

Exploring English Learning Boredom: Evidence from Chinese Senior High School Students

Yutong Shen 

Wujiang Suzhouwan Experimental Junior Middle School, CHINA

Zizheng Shen 

Soochow University, CHINA

Received: May 13, 2025 • Revised: July 6, 2025 • Accepted: August 20, 2025

Abstract: With increasing scholarly attention to the role of emotions in language learning, boredom, a prevalent yet often overlooked negative emotion in educational settings, has emerged as a significant research focus. Understanding boredom in language learning is crucial because it directly impacts students' motivation, engagement, and long-term achievement. Given that, this study investigates the level of English learning boredom (ELB) among Chinese high school students, examining potential differences across genders and grades. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research collected quantitative data through a questionnaire survey of 748 high school students in Northeast China, supplemented by qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with 5 students. The findings revealed that students generally exhibited a low level of English learning boredom, meaning they rarely felt disinterested or bored in class. No statistically significant differences were observed between genders or across grade levels. Our interview results added further nuance to the quantitative findings. Future research could expand the sample scope to include diverse geographical and socio-economic backgrounds and employ longitudinal approaches to track boredom dynamics over time. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on emotions in language learning and offers practical implications for educators seeking to reduce boredom and enhance student engagement in English classrooms.

Keywords: Boredom, high school students, English learning.

To cite this article: Shen, Y., & Shen, Z. (2025). Exploring English learning boredom: Evidence from Chinese senior high school students. *European Journal of English Language Studies*, 5(3), 167-177. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ejels.5.3.167>

Introduction

The affective dimension of second language acquisition has gained increasing research attention, with most studies focusing on anxiety and motivation (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Liu, Yan, et al., 2022). However, boredom, a deactivating emotion stemming from monotonous or unchallenging learning experiences (Shao, Kutuk, et al., 2023), remains understudied despite its significant impact on language learning engagement and outcomes (Pekrun et al., 2002). This gap is particularly evident in non-Western educational contexts where cultural and institutional factors may uniquely shape emotional experiences.

While existing research has explored foreign language learning boredom (FLB) primarily in Western university contexts (e.g., Kruk, 2016; Pawlak, Kruk, et al., 2020), few studies have investigated how it manifests among secondary school students in Asian educational systems. Although recent Chinese studies have reported moderate ELB levels among high school learners (Liu, Wang, et al., 2025; Zhao & Yang, 2022), none have systematically examined how these experiences vary across gender and grade levels, a crucial gap given the developmental and social differences that may influence emotional responses to language learning.

This study addresses this specific research gap by quantifying ELB levels and examining their variations across gender and grade levels among Chinese senior high school students. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, the research provides both statistical evidence of ELB prevalence and a nuanced understanding of students' boring experiences in English learning. The findings will expand our knowledge of boredom in language learning, while offering practical insights for educators working in exam-oriented contexts.

* **Corresponding author:**

Zizheng Shen, Soochow University, Suzhou, China. ✉ zzshen123@stu.suda.edu.cn

© 2025 The author(s); licensee EJELS by RAHPSODE LTD, UK. **Open Access** - This article is distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). 

Literature Review

Conceptualizing English Learning Boredom

The conceptualization of boredom in second language acquisition has evolved significantly since the introduction of positive psychology to the field (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Liu, Shen, et al., 2025). While early research focused predominantly on anxiety and motivation, recent scholarship has established boredom as a distinct and consequential affective factor in language learning (Chen et al., 2024; Dewaele & Li, 2020; Liu, Elahi Shirvan, et al., 2025).

Current theoretical understanding differentiates between two primary conceptualizations: (1) trait boredom as a stable personality characteristic ("boredom proneness") reflecting cross-situational propensity (Tam et al., 2021), and (2) state boredom as a context-dependent emotional response that varies across learning environments (Pekrun et al., 2002). The latter perspective, which dominates current foreign language psychology, characterizes boredom as a negative, deactivating state marked by cognitive disengagement (Macklem, 2015), aversive reactions to repetitive tasks (Dewaele & Li, 2020), and reduced involvement (Shao, Kutuk, et al., 2023). Within this state framework, foreign language learning boredom (ELB) emerges as a specific manifestation of learning-related academic boredom (Kruk, 2016). Following Pawlak, Kruk, et al. (2020), this study conceptualizes ELB as a dynamic emotional state shaped by both personal characteristics and environmental factors in instructional settings.

Empirical Research on English Learning Boredom

Recent research has significantly advanced our understanding of English Learning Boredom (ELB), though existing studies predominantly focus on Western university contexts. Groundbreaking work in Western settings by Kruk (2016) established foundational evidence through a longitudinal study of Polish university students, documenting a progressive intensification of moderate boredom levels primarily attributed to pedagogical factors, including repetitive tasks and insufficient learner interaction. This quantitative perspective was subsequently expanded by Pawlak, Kruk, et al. (2020), who, through factor analysis, identified ELB's dual-component structure: behavioral disengagement characterized by passive withdrawal from learning activities, and cognitive dissatisfaction stemming from inadequate intellectual stimulation. Supporting these findings, Kruk and Zawodniak's (2018) phenomenological study revealed how teacher-centered methodologies systematically exacerbate these dimensions through reduced learner agency.

Despite this, the limited Asian educational landscape presents more nuanced ELB manifestations that challenge Western-derived models. Dewaele and Li's (2020) comparative study in a sample of Chinese high school students demonstrated significantly elevated boredom in online environments relative to traditional classrooms during Covid-19. However, Liu, Li, et al.'s (2022) large-scale survey of Chinese high school students reported unexpectedly low to medium boredom levels given the region's intensive exam culture. Recently, Chen et al. (2024) reported a moderate level of boredom among Chinese high school students. This pattern suggests that boredom levels among Chinese high school students have shown fluctuations over time. This divergence indicates a complex interaction between instructional delivery modes and cultural learning expectations that current frameworks inadequately explain. Crucially, the predominant focus on tertiary education across these studies leaves unaddressed the unique ELB dynamics in secondary education, particularly within high-stakes testing systems like China's National Higher Education Entrance Examination (Gaokao), where curricular rigidity and performance pressures (Xu & Lu, 2022) may fundamentally reshape boredom antecedents.

Three critical limitations constrain current ELB research: First, the overwhelming Western university bias severely limits applicability to Asian secondary contexts. Second, despite established gender and developmental differences in affective experiences (Pekrun, 2006), demographic variations in ELB remain virtually unexplored, particularly concerning the pivotal transition from 10th to 12th grade in Chinese high schools. While Chen et al. (2024) conducted similar research on Chinese high school students, our study advances this line of inquiry by adopting a state perspective and employing a measurement tool (ELBS) based on Control-value theory (CVT), which enables more precise measurement of boredom and better alignment with our theoretical framework. Third, methodological monism prevails, with only a few studies employing mixed methods, thereby neglecting the crucial interplay between measurable patterns and lived experiences.

To address these gaps, the present study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate:

- (1) What are the levels of students' boredom in English learning?
- (2) Does English Learning Boredom (ELB) significantly differ across genders and grade levels among Chinese high school students?

Methodology

Participants

Participants of the current study were 748 senior high school students from Northeast China (302 males and 446 females). Among them, 389 students attended key schools and 359 attended non-key schools. A total of 610 students were from urban areas and 138 from rural areas, reflecting both regional diversity and variation in socio-economic and educational backgrounds within the sample. Besides, 345 students were from senior one, 207 were from senior two, and

196 were from senior three (see details in Table 1). All of them reported having Mandarin Chinese as a first language (L1) and learning English as their foreign language.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Grade 1	155	44.9	190	55.1	345	46.10%
Grade 2	71	34.3	136	65.7	207	27.70%
Grade 3	76	38.8	120	61.2	196	26.20%

N=748

The sampling strategy for the interviewees was the maximum variation in terms of the interviewees' grade and gender to gain commonality across diversity. Five students were chosen as participants in the interviews (see details in Table 2), and the average length of the interviews was 15 minutes.

Table 2. Basic Information of Interviewees

Student	Gender	Grade	ELB
S1	Male	3	1.80
S2	Female	2	2.36
S3	Male	2	1.48
S4	Female	1	2.05
S5	Female	3	2.29

Research Instruments

English Learning Boredom Scale

English learning boredom was evaluated via the English Learning Boredom Scale (ELBS). It was part of the Achievement Emotion Questionnaire--Second Language Learning (AEQ-L2L) scales (Shao, Stockinger, et al., 2023), which was adopted from the learning-related emotion scales of the AEQ (Pekrun et al., 2011) based on CVT. This unidimensional scale consists of 8 items and has demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.97$).

Interview Protocol

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews to corroborate and complement the quantitative data. The interview protocol was developed according to previous literature and the quantitative results of the present study, centering on participants' English learning experience, boredom, perceived teacher support and empathy in English learning (see the interview protocol in Appendix 2). The interviews were conducted with open-ended questions in Chinese to ensure complete understanding and expression. The interviewee's responses generated changes in the order and number of questions.

Data Collection

The data collection process had two stages: the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview phases. In the first phase, a questionnaire was distributed online from January to March 2023 through Wenjuanxing, an online app. Following their online assent, students were asked to voluntarily complete the questionnaire. The participants were made aware, before completing the questionnaire, that the data would solely be utilized for research and that the goal of the study was to understand the way they learned English. In addition, participants received assurances that their grades and academic experience would remain unaffected and that no personally identifiable information would be disclosed. Five students took part in phone interviews during the second phase from June to July 2023. Every participant was interviewed one-on-one and recordings were made with their consent. The interviews lasted fifteen minutes on average. Their first language, Chinese, was used for all of the interviews. The excerpts appearing in this thesis were transcribed and translated into English by the author.

Data Analysis

The data analysis proceeded in three distinct phases to comprehensively address the research questions. In the first phase, the full dataset ($N = 748$) was screened for normality and subjected to item analysis. To rigorously evaluate the factor structure, the sample was then randomly split into two independent subsamples: one for exploratory factor analysis (EFA; $N = 370$) to derive the initial factor model, and the other for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA; $N = 378$) to test its validity. This approach mitigates overfitting, ensures cross-validation of the model, and strengthens confidence

in the stability of the results (Boateng et al., 2018; Hair et al., 2019). Model fit was evaluated using Kline's (2016) recommended benchmarks, including $\chi^2/df \leq 8$, GFI ≥ 0.90 , AGFI ≥ 0.90 , CFI ≥ 0.90 , RMSEA ≤ 0.08 , and RMR ≤ 0.10 , ensuring the psychometric robustness of the measurement instruments.

The second phase employed descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA using SPSS 26.0 to examine the overall level of English learning boredom among participants and investigate potential differences across gender and grade levels.

The final phase involved thematic analysis of interview data from five participants following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, adopting a deductive approach guided by the research questions and quantitative findings. This iterative analytical process, which involved constant comparison between transcripts, codes, themes, and reports, provided complementary qualitative insights that helped contextualize and enrich the quantitative results, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. However, given the small interview sample size ($N = 5$), these qualitative findings should be interpreted with caution, as they may not be generalizable to broader populations.

Results

Normality and Item Analysis Results

A series of tests was conducted to confirm the utility of the English Learning Boredom Scale with a sample of Chinese senior high school students. In detail, a univariate normality test was conducted on the total sample ($N = 748$), which found that the skewness and kurtosis indices were below the cut-off values of $|3.0|$ and $|10.0|$ (see Table 3), respectively, indicating a normal distribution of the collected data (Kline, 2016).

Table 3. The Normality Test Results

	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Q01	2.38	1.584	.872	-.392
Q02	2.39	1.585	.848	-.458
Q03	2.35	1.514	.883	-.220
Q04	2.26	1.510	.995	-.047
Q05	2.39	1.556	.837	-.404
Q06	2.29	1.499	.940	-.180
Q07	2.07	1.371	1.207	.645
Q08	2.15	1.443	1.173	.515

$N=748$

Item analysis was then used to identify the discriminant validity of each item (Field, 2013). The 27% highest and 27% lowest scoring Chinese senior high school students who filled in the scale were selected and compared using an independent samples t-test. The results displayed a significant difference between the two groups on each item ($p < .01$) (see Table 4), indicating that all items in the scale were appropriate for further analysis.

Table 4. The Independent Samples Test T-Test of the 27% Highest Scoring and 27% Lowest Scoring Participants

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t (288)	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% CI	
Q01	31.085	0.000	11.541	412.415	0.000	1.513	.131	1.255	1.770
Q02	47.336	0.000	12.407	392.029	0.000	1.620	.131	1.363	1.876
Q03	32.503	0.000	12.181	401.068	0.000	1.535	.126	1.287	1.783
Q04	26.316	0.000	10.950	403.888	0.000	1.399	.128	1.148	1.650
Q05	17.898	0.000	10.974	424.761	0.000	1.446	.132	1.187	1.706
Q06	40.131	0.000	11.668	393.533	0.000	1.465	.126	1.218	1.712
Q07	48.283	0.000	11.105	382.317	0.000	1.307	.118	1.076	1.539
Q08	25.553	0.000	10.567	407.099	0.000	1.281	.121	1.043	1.519

$N=748$

Then, item-total correlation analysis was conducted to examine the correlation between each item and the global scale (see Table 5). The results were satisfying, as indicated by a correlation coefficient $r > .30$ and $p < .01$ (Field, 2013).

Table 5. The Item-Total Correlation Analysis of The Correlation between Each Item and The Global Scale in The Boredom Scale

	Q01	Q02	Q03	Q04	Q05	Q06	Q07	Q08
Q01	1							
Q02	.77**	1						
Q03	.78**	.84**	1					
Q04	.76**	.83**	.89**	1				
Q05	.72**	.78**	.84**	.86**	1			
Q06	.72**	.81**	.80**	.82**	.83**	1		
Q07	.74**	.79**	.81**	.82**	.78**	.83**	1	
Q08	.69**	.77**	.79**	.80**	.78**	.84**	.85**	1

N=748, ***p*<.01 (2-tailed)

Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis

The EFA results showed that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.947, and Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded $\chi^2=3821.259$, *df*=28, and *p* =0.000, indicating that the data were well-suited for factor analysis. Principal axis factoring via SPSS 26.0 was conducted. The threshold for factor loading was set at |0.4| (Hair et al., 2019). Only one factor was extracted (see details in Table 3). As shown in Table 1, the cumulative percentage of total variance explained was 81.31%, which exceeds the 55% threshold recommended for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) by Plonsky and Gonulal (2015). This confirms the acceptability of the final result.

Table 6. Results of EFA of English Learning Boredom (Pattern Matrix)

Items	Factor 1	Communalities
Q01 Because I'm bored, I have no desire to learn.	.855	.731
Q02 I would rather put off this boring work till tomorrow.	.892	.795
Q03 The material bores me so much that I feel depleted.	.924	.854
Q04 The material bores me to death.	.934	.873
Q05 While studying this boring material, I spend my time thinking of how time stands still.	.893	.797
Q06 While studying, I seem to drift off because it's so boring.	.910	.829
Q07 Studying for my courses bores me.	.908	.824
Q08 The material is so boring that I find myself daydreaming.	.895	.801
Total Variance Explained Cumulative %	81.31	—
Cronbach α	.97	—

Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

After confirmatory factor analysis, two items in the English learning boredom model (Q6 and Q8) were deleted due to poor model fit and the presence of large residual correlations, as indicated by the highest modification indices (MIs) with multiple other items. Removing these items improved the overall fit of the scale (see Figure 41), ensuring a more parsimonious and valid measurement model. Specifically, the χ^2/df , RMSEA, and RMR were 2.927, 0.071, and 0.028, respectively, and the GFI, AGFI, and CFI were all greater than 0.90. The values reached the cut-off scores mentioned above. Regarding convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) values were 0.7945, and the composite reliability (CR) values were 0.9586, demonstrating good convergent validity of the model.

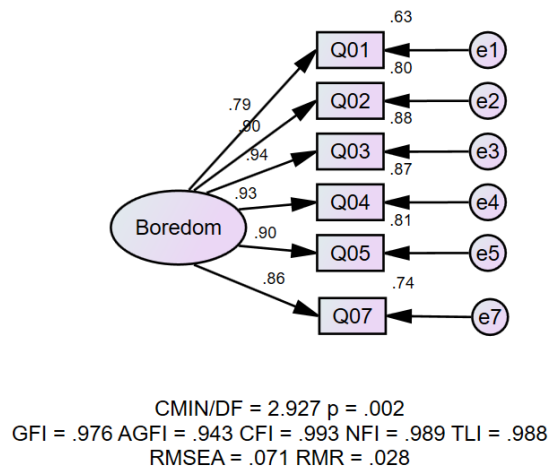


Figure 1. Model of English Learning Boredom

Levels of Students' English Learning Boredom

The first research question considered the levels of students' English learning boredom. The descriptive statistics of ELB are presented in Table 7, including extreme values, mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis. Considering the scoring of boredom levels by Pawlak, Zawodniak, et al. (2020), we regarded a score between 2.5 and 4 as a low-to-medium level and between 4 and 5.5 as a medium-to-high level on the six-point scale of this study. In the current study, the average level of students' ELB was 2.29 ($SD=1.37$), showing a low to medium reported level of English learning boredom among senior high school students.

Table 7. Results of Descriptive Analysis of ELB

Variable	Min	Max	M	SD	Skew	Kurt
English learning boredom	1.00	6.00	2.29	1.37	0.88	-0.11

N=748

The research results showed that generally, students' level of boredom was not high, which was similar to previous research. Kruk (2016) found that Polish college students showed a low level of boredom when learning English, and they showed some interest in English learning. Liu, Li, et al. (2022) uncovered that high school students in mainland China had a medium to low level of boredom in English learning ($M=2.87$; $SD=1.00$).

Gender and Grade differences of Students' English Learning Boredom

According to Table 8, there was no significant difference between genders on the level of English learning boredom ($p>0.05$).

Table 8. Gender Differences for ELB Levels

	Male (n=302)		Female (n=446)		MD	t	df	p	r
	M	SD	M	SD					
English learning boredom	2.24	1.39	2.32	1.35	-0.082	-0.808	746	.420	0.03

N=748

In terms of students' ELB levels of different grades, as shown in Table 9, there was no significant difference ($p>.05$), which contrasted with previous studies. In Pawlak, Zawodniak, and Kruk's (2020) study, 111 English majors filled out the Boredom in Practical English Language Classes Scale, and the results revealed that the second-year students experienced more boredom during practical English classes than the third-year students. The difference may be attributed to the intense pressure and workload Chinese senior high school students face in preparing for the "Gaokao." This exam is considered a crucial crossroad in determining one's future success and opportunities in China, so they have to spend long hours studying and preparing for it. Therefore, there is no significant difference among students in different grades.

Table 9. Grade Difference for ELB Levels

Grades	N	Mean	SD	F	p	η^2
1	345	2.29	1.35	0.607	0.545	0.002
2	207	2.21	1.36			
3	196	2.36	1.41			

N=748

Qualitative Insights into Students' Boredom

The interview data, consistent with the quantitative finding of low-to-medium ELB levels, show that boredom occurred only occasionally and was often mitigated by coping strategies. Two main themes emerged: the influence of classroom activity design and the role of repetitive tasks without learning strategies.

Theme 1: Classroom activity design affects boredom

S1 explained that engaging, varied classroom activities helped sustain her interest and avoid the occurrence of boredom, whereas rigid, teacher-dominated tasks reduced motivation and triggered his boredom.

Extract 1

Student 1: I seldom feel bored because my English teacher arranges various activities in class from time to time. When I participate in these activities, time seems to go faster. However, when the activity is designed in a rigid way, I will feel boredom and even a bit of hatred. I have no desire to learn and do not want to participate in the activities, because I think these activities do not involve our own thinking process, with the teacher dominating the whole activity. At that time, I usually do not sit idly in my seat. Instead, I use this time to check the gaps according to my own study situation, so I scarcely feel bored.

(Student 1, 2023/8/21)

This case showed that when teachers used diverse and interactive activities, students' boredom levels remained low. Even in less engaging situations, S1 mitigated boredom by redirecting her focus to self-study, demonstrating metacognitive self-regulation and resilience (Artuch-Garde et al., 2017; Solhi et al., 2023). This supports Zhang's (2022) finding that high-quality teaching design can sustain students' emotional engagement, helping to explain the overall low boredom levels found in the quantitative data.

Theme 2: Repetitive tasks and lack of strategies intensify boredom

S2 noted that boredom tended to occur when memorizing vocabulary without effective learning strategies.

Extract 2:

Student 2: When I am learning English, I sometimes feel bored. Usually, it is when I memorize English words, maybe because I don't have any suitable memorization methods, and I just memorize them by rote. Therefore, the process of memorizing these words is as dry as a chip, and I am exhausted from memorizing them. I want to put it off until tomorrow, but this thought is fleeting because I clearly know that in order to get satisfactory results in the college entrance examination, I must master the knowledge and complete the daily learning tasks.

(Student 2, 2023/8/21)

S2's account highlights that monotonous, strategy-free learning tasks can trigger boredom, yet her strong awareness of exam-related goals counteracted procrastination. This self-regulatory adjustment aligns with S1's approach, reinforcing the quantitative finding that boredom remained low overall and suggesting that coping strategies and academic motivation play a significant role in managing boredom.

Discussion

The current study's examination of English learning boredom (ELB) among Chinese senior high school students yields several significant findings that both corroborate and challenge existing literature in second language acquisition research. The low-to-medium overall boredom levels observed in this high-pressure academic environment present an interesting picture, which aligns with Control-Value Theory (Pekrun, 2006). According to this theory, the high value placed on English proficiency for college admission serves as a powerful motivator that mitigates boredom despite the potentially controlling nature of exam-focused instruction (Pekrun, 2006). Pekrun and Perry (2014) documented that when students perceive high value in academic tasks, even in controlled environments, this may not necessarily result in increased negative emotions. This helps explain why our participants reported lower boredom levels than some prior

studies, as the terminal importance of English for Gaokao success creates an automatic motivation to pay attention, even when the lessons feel repetitive.

However, the finding of low-to-medium boredom does not mean boredom is absent. Interview data indicated that boredom still emerged in specific situations, such as during rigid, teacher-dominated activities or repetitive vocabulary memorization without effective strategies. This is consistent with previous studies, which reported that pedagogical factors can significantly contribute to the emergence of boredom (Kruk, 2016; Kruk & Zawodniak, 2018). Besides, the qualitative findings also demonstrated that strong extrinsic motivation from Gaokao pressures may reduce the overall frequency and intensity of boredom, but cannot fully eliminate it. Even when the perceived value is high, students may experience “micro-moments” of disengagement caused by mental fatigue, content saturation from prolonged exam preparation, or a mismatch between preferred learning styles and instructional format (Liu, Li, et al., 2022). Such situational factors mean that the “low-to-medium” boredom level reflects a dynamic balance between sustained extrinsic drive and periodic lapses in engagement rather than the complete absence of negative emotion.

The absence of significant gender differences in ELB levels presents a notable contrast to previous findings in Western educational contexts, which suggested that female language learners tend to report higher emotional intensity overall (e.g., Dewaele, 2013). Our results indicate that in China's highly standardized secondary education system, the potential gender differences in ELB were not significant, possibly because systemic pressures create more homogeneous emotional experiences across demographic groups (Pawlak, Kruk, et al., 2020). Cultural norms around emotional restraint in classroom settings may also reduce self-reported emotional variability (Huggins et al., 2023), with students—regardless of gender—being less likely to overtly acknowledge boredom in formal academic contexts. Our interview data also support the quantitative non-significant difference of ELB across genders.

Similarly, the lack of significant grade-level variation challenges developmental perspectives that predict increasing boredom as students progress through educational stages (Kruk, 2016). Our findings instead suggest that the consistent pressure of Gaokao preparation across all three years of senior high school creates what might be termed an “emotional plateau”—a state in which students’ emotional engagement and disengagement stabilize at a relatively constant level because the academic demands and motivational pressures remain consistently high throughout the entire senior high school period. This plateau effect may suppress typical grade-based fluctuations in boredom, leaving less room for developmental changes to manifest.

The contrast between our findings and higher boredom levels reported in online learning studies (Dewaele & Li, 2020) highlights several crucial advantages of physical learning environments. Traditional classrooms appear to provide what Marsh (2016) calls “engagement scaffolds,” including immediate teacher feedback, peer modeling, and established routines, that help sustain attention even during less intrinsically interesting activities. Evidence from the current study reinforces this: for instance, S1’s account of feeling compelled to stay engaged because “everyone else is” in the classroom environment illustrates the social modeling and peer accountability that in-person settings uniquely offer. This observation highlights the significance of social context in sustaining engagement, aligning with Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory of learning. Further, it suggests that engagement scaffolds may work in tandem with extrinsic motivators like the Gaokao to create a layered buffer against boredom—a claim warranting further empirical testing.

These findings have important implications for language teaching pedagogy in exam-oriented systems. They suggest that while the Gaokao context provides powerful extrinsic motivation that reduces overall boredom, educators should still strive to incorporate elements of autonomy-supportive instruction (Reeve, 2006) to foster more intrinsic forms of engagement. Sansone and Harackiewicz (2011) emphasize that even in high-stakes learning environments, fostering students’ basic psychological needs, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness, can significantly improve both their motivation and academic outcomes. In the Chinese context, this might also involve culturally sensitive strategies that acknowledge the value of persistence and collective effort while creating space for more open emotional expression in the classroom.

Conclusion

The study found that Chinese senior high school students reported a generally low level of boredom in English learning, with no significant differences between male and female students or among students in different grades. By providing empirical evidence from Chinese secondary school students in a high-stakes Gaokao context, this research expands the limited ELB literature beyond Western and tertiary settings, examines demographic variables that have rarely been explored, and employs a mixed-methods approach to integrate quantitative patterns with qualitative insights.

This work offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it further demonstrated Pekrun’s Control-Value Theory by showing how high-stakes testing environments can reshape the relationship between control/value appraisals and boredom, refining our understanding of the emotional impacts of exam pressure. From a practical standpoint, the research underscores the importance of thoughtful activity design in EFL instruction. Teachers should adopt varied, student-centered approaches that offer appropriate challenge and foster autonomy. The findings also highlight the value of professional development focused on recognizing early signs of boredom and training teachers to

explicitly teach metacognitive strategies, including self-reflection and time management, to help students better regulate their emotional experiences.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The regional focus on Northeast China may affect generalizability to other regions with different educational approaches. The cross-sectional design prevents examination of how ELB develops over time, and reliance on self-report measures could be complemented in future studies with physiological or observational data. Moreover, the qualitative data size was relatively small, and potential interview translation bias may affect the nuance of participant meaning, especially regarding subtle cultural and emotional expressions. These limitations suggest valuable directions for future research, including longitudinal studies to track ELB trajectories (emphasized as a priority), investigations across diverse educational contexts and regions (with particular emphasis on cross-regional comparisons), and examination of the relationship between ELB and other emotional constructs like enjoyment and anxiety.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations are offered to enhance English language learning engagement in exam-oriented settings. Educators should implement differentiated instruction that addresses diverse student needs and balances task difficulty to reduce boredom. Promoting learner autonomy through scaffolds such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, and reflection can empower students to regulate their own learning and emotional experiences more effectively. Classroom activities should be varied and interactive, moving away from teacher-centered, repetitive tasks toward collaborative and project-based approaches that increase cognitive involvement. Additionally, professional development programs for teachers are essential to help them recognize early signs of boredom and to equip them with strategies to foster metacognitive regulation among students. Finally, longitudinal monitoring of students' boredom and motivation levels can provide valuable insights for adapting instructional practices and informing educational policy.

Ethics Statements

The participants provided their informed consent to participate in this study.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest for the authors

Generative AI Statement

This manuscript was prepared with the assistance of generative AI tools, which were utilized solely for language editing and formatting. All intellectual content, including the research design, data analysis, and interpretations, are the original work of the authors. Any changes made by AI tools have been carefully reviewed and approved by the authors to maintain the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Shen Yutong: Conceptualization, design, analysis, writing. Shen Zizheng: Editing/reviewing, supervision.

References

- Artuch-Garde, R., González-Torres, M. D. C., de la Fuente, J., Vera, M. M., Fernández-Cabezas, M., & López-García, M. (2017). Relationship between resilience and self-regulation: A study of Spanish youth at risk of social exclusion. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, Article 612. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00612>
- Boateng, G. O., Neilands, T. B., Frongillo, E. A., Melgar-Quinonez, H. R., & Young, S. L. (2018). Best practices for developing and validating scales for health, social, and behavioral research. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 6, Article 149. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2018.00149>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Chen, B., Li, Y., & Liu, H. (2024). Investigating boredom among Chinese senior high school students in English as a foreign language classroom. *European Journal of English Language Studies*, 4(2), 89-101. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ejels.4.2.89>
- Dewaele, J.-M. (2013). *Emotions in multiple languages* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230289505>

- Dewaele, J.-M., & Li, C. (2020). Emotions in second language acquisition: A critical review and research agenda. *Foreign Language World*, 196(1), 34-49.
- Dewaele, J.-M., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2014). The two faces of Janus? Anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 4(2), 237-274. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2014.4.2.5>
- Dewaele, J.-M., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2016). Foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety: The right and left feet of the language learner. In P. D. MacIntyre, T. Gregersen, & S. Mercer (Eds.), *Positive psychology in SLA* (pp. 215-236). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783095360-010>
- Field, A. (2013). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E. (2019). *Multivariate data analysis* (8th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Huggins, C. F., Williams, J. H. G., & Sato, W. (2023). Cross-cultural differences in self-reported and behavioural emotional self-awareness between Japan and the UK. *BMC Research Notes*, 16, Article 380. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13104-023-06660-0>
- Kline, R. B. (2016). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling* (4th ed.). Guilford Press.
- Kruk, M. (2016). Variations in motivation, anxiety and boredom in learning English in Second Life. *The EuroCALL Review*, 24(1), 25-39. <https://doi.org/10.4995/eurocall.2016.5693>
- Kruk, M., & Zawodniak, J. (2018). Boredom in practical English language classes: Insights from interview data. In L. Szymański, J. Zawodniak, A. Łobodziec, & M. Smoluk (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary views on the English language, literature and culture* (pp. 177-191). Uniwersytet Zielonogórski.
- Liu, H., Elahi Shirvan, M., & Taherian, T. (2025). Revisiting the relationship between global and specific levels of foreign language boredom and language engagement: A moderated mediation model of academic buoyancy and emotional engagement. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 15(1), 13-39. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.40195>
- Liu, H., Li, J., & Fang, F. (2022). Examining the complexity between boredom and engagement in English learning: Evidence from Chinese high school students. *Sustainability*, 14(24), Article 16920. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142416920>
- Liu, H., Shen, Z., Shen, Y., & Xia, M. (2025). Exploring the predictive role of students' perceived teacher support on empathy in English-as-a-foreign-language learning. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2025(1), Article 2577602. <https://doi.org/10.1155/cad/2577602>
- Liu, H., Wang, Y., & Wang, H. (2025). Exploring the mediating roles of motivation and boredom in basic psychological needs and behavioural engagement in English learning: A self-determination theory perspective. *BMC Psychology*, 13, Article 179. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02524-3>
- Liu, H., Yan, C., & Fu, J. (2022). Exploring livestream English teaching anxiety in the Chinese context: An ecological perspective. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 111, Article 103620. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103620>
- Macklem, G. L. (2015). *Boredom in the classroom: Addressing student motivation, self-regulation, and engagement in learning*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-13120-7>
- Marsh, H. W. (2016). Cross-cultural generalizability of year in school effects: Negative effects of acceleration and positive effects of retention on academic self-concept. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(2), 256-273. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000059>
- Pawlak, M., Kruk, M., Zawodniak, J., & Pasikowski, S. (2020). Investigating factors responsible for boredom in English classes: The case of advanced learners. *System*, 91, Article 102259. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102259>
- Pawlak, M., Zawodniak, J., & Kruk, M. (2020). The neglected emotion of boredom in teaching English to advanced learners. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 30(3), 497-509. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12302>
- Pekrun, R. (2006). The control-value theory of achievement emotions: Assumptions, corollaries, and implications for educational research and practice. *Educational Psychology Review*, 18, 315-341. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-006-9029-9>
- Pekrun, R., Goetz, T., Frenzel, A. C., Barchfeld, P., & Perry, R. P. (2011). Measuring emotions in students' learning and performance: The Achievement Emotions Questionnaire (AEQ). *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 36(1), 36-48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2010.10.002>
- Pekrun, R., Goetz, T., Titz, W., & Perry, R. P. (2002). Academic emotions in students' self-regulated learning and achievement: A program of qualitative and quantitative research. *Educational Psychologist*, 37(2), 91-105. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3702_4

- Pekrun, R., & Perry, R. P. (2014). Control-value theory of achievement emotions. In R. Pekrun, & L. Linnenbrink-Garcia (Eds.), *International handbook of emotions in education* (pp. 120-141). Routledge.
- Plonsky, L., & Gonulal, T. (2015). Methodological synthesis in quantitative L2 research: A review of reviews and a case study of exploratory factor analysis. *Language Learning*, 65(S1), 9-36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12111>
- Reeve, J. (2006). Teachers as facilitators: What autonomy-supportive teachers do and why their students benefit. *Elementary School Journal*, 106(3), 225-236. <https://doi.org/10.1086/501484>
- Sansone, C., & Harackiewicz, J. (2011). *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: The search for optimal motivation and performance*. Academic Press
- Shao, K., Kutuk, G., Fryer, L. K., Nicholson, L. J., & Guo, J. (2023). Factors influencing Chinese undergraduate students' emotions in an online EFL learning context during the COVID pandemic. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 39(5), 1465-1478. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12791>
- Shao, K., Stockinger, K., Marsh, H. W., & Pekrun, R. (2023). Applying control-value theory for examining multiple emotions in L2 classrooms: Validating the Achievement Emotions Questionnaire - Second Language Learning. *Language Teaching Research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221144497>
- Solhi, M., Derakhshan, A., & Ünsal, B. (2023). Associations between EFL students' L2 grit, boredom coping strategies, and emotion regulation strategies: A structural equation modeling approach. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 46(2), 224-243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2175834>
- Tam, K. Y. Y., van Tilburg, W. A. P., & Chan, C. S. (2021). What is boredom proneness? A comparison of three characterizations. *Journal of Personality*, 89(4), 831-846. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12618>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4>
- Xu, S., & Lu, C. (2022). Hybridization of curriculum integration and high-stakes testing: Chinese teachers' experiences and struggles in handling competing institutional logics. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 119, Article 103845. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103845>
- Zhang, T. (2022). Unpacking boredom factors of Chinese foreign language major students in translation classes: A sequential mixed methods study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 895223. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.895223>
- Zhao, Y., & Yang, L. (2022). Examining the relationship between perceived teacher support and students' academic engagement in foreign language learning: Enjoyment and boredom as mediators. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 987554. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.987554>