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EXPLORING EFL LEARNING BOREDOM AMONG NON-ENGLISH-MAJOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract:
Boredom is a common yet underexplored emotion in EFL classrooms, particularly among non-English-major students. This study investigated the level of EFL learning boredom among non-English-major undergraduate students at Nam Can Tho University. Guided by the Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions, the study adopted a quantitative research design. Data were collected from 234 students using a structured questionnaire measuring three dimensions of boredom: Affective and Cognitive, Physiological and Expressive, and Motivational. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data. The findings revealed a moderate level of EFL learning boredom. Among the three dimensions, the Affective and Cognitive dimension recorded the highest mean score, indicating that boredom was primarily manifested through mind-wandering and difficulty maintaining attention during English lessons. Physiological signs of boredom and motivational disengagement were also observed. The study highlights the importance of creating engaging and supportive learning environments to reduce boredom and enhance students' participation and learning experiences in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: EFL learning boredom, non-English-major students, Control-Value Theory, classroom engagement, English learning

1. Introduction

Emotions play a crucial role in shaping students' learning experiences and academic outcomes. Among various achievement emotions, boredom has recently attracted increasing attention in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research due to its negative influence on learners' engagement and performance. Academic boredom is generally defined as a negative achievement emotion characterized by low arousal, lack of interest, and difficulty maintaining attention during learning activities (Pekrun & Goetz, 2024). In

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EFL classrooms, boredom can weaken concentration, reduce participation, and hinder language development (Liu et al., 2022).

According to the Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions, boredom arises when learners perceive classroom activities as lacking value or relevance to their goals (Pekrun, 2006). Previous studies have shown that boredom manifests through affective, cognitive, motivational, physiological, and expressive dimensions, including mind-wandering, disengagement, low motivation, and visible signs of inattentiveness (Li et al., 2023; Pekrun & Goetz, 2024). As a result, boredom has become an important issue in language education.

Despite growing interest in EFL boredom, research focusing on non-English-major students in Vietnamese higher education remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the level of EFL learning boredom among non-English-major students at Nam Can Tho University. The findings are expected to contribute to a better understanding of students' emotional experiences and provide implications for improving engagement in EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualization of Boredom in EFL Learning

2.1.1 Definition of Academic Boredom

Recent studies define boredom in different ways, generally describing it as an emotional state marked by difficulty maintaining attention (Mlynski et al., 2025). It is described as a widespread negative experience in which individuals seek meaningful activity but struggle to find it (Dadzie & Danckert, 2025). In general psychology, boredom is defined as an unpleasant emotional state caused by a gap between the desire for mental engagement and the inability to achieve it in a given environment (Mlynski et al., 2025). It is the frustrating experience of wanting to engage in a meaningful activity but being unable to do so (Khalilnezhad, 2025). Research shows that boredom signals whether attention is effectively engaged and can redirect individuals when it is not (Westgate & Steidle, 2020). Specifically, "leisure boredom" refers to the perception that available free-time activities do not meet the need for sufficient stimulation (Finkielsztein, 2023). When applied to educational settings, this concept becomes academic boredom (Goetz et al., 2024). In this context, academic boredom is defined as a negative, low-activation achievement emotion experienced during lessons, lectures, or independent study (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun et al., 2007; Pekrun & Goetz, 2024; Tze et al., 2016). For example, students often experience academic boredom while engaging in educational tasks, such as completing assignments or participating in classroom activities (Goetz et al., 2024). In the specific context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), especially in EFL classrooms, boredom is further defined as Foreign Language Learning Boredom (FLLB).

2.1.2 Boredom in SLA

Academic boredom in SLA or EFL contexts was once overlooked, but recent research clearly recognizes it as a complex and multifaceted psychological phenomenon

(Derakhshan et al., 2022; Özerk, 2020). Rather than viewing boredom as simple laziness, modern educational psychology defines it as an activity-related emotion closely linked to the learning process (Pekrun & Goetz, 2024). This ongoing emotion is highly detrimental, as it weakens cognitive functioning and creates a major obstacle to SLA (Liu et al., 2022).

CVT provides a strong theoretical basis for understanding these complex emotional processes. According to this theory, achievement emotions arise from a student's personal evaluation of two key factors: control and value. CVT defines boredom as the emotion that occurs when a learning activity is perceived as lacking value, regardless of the level of control a student has (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun & Goetz, 2024). In this model, boredom mainly arises when a task is seen as meaningless, irrelevant to personal or professional goals, or lacking clear incentive (Zhou & Liu, 2025). When learners with higher proficiency are given overly simple and repetitive tasks, the lack of challenge leaves mental capacity unused and leads to under-challenged boredom (Pekrun et al., 2007). In such cases, predictable and repetitive input fails to maintain interest, and students' mental engagement quickly drops as they stop paying attention to the lesson (Liu et al., 2022; Qin, 2022; Xie, 2021). Conversely, when tasks are too difficult, students may fail to see their usefulness, reducing perceived value and leading to over-challenged boredom (Pekrun & Goetz, 2024).

General psychology also distinguishes between two forms of boredom: state boredom and trait boredom (Li et al., 2023; Putwain et al., 2018). State boredom refers to a temporary emotion caused by dull, repetitive, or unstimulating environments (Khalilnezhad, 2025; Putwain et al., 2018). In contrast, trait boredom, or boredom proneness, reflects a stable personality tendency marked by a general tendency to feel bored across different situations (Chan et al., 2018; Putwain et al., 2018). These two constructs are deeply linked; Chan et al. (2018) highlight a strong interaction between the two, where an individual's trait boredom proneness actually predicts their experience of state boredom beyond the actual monotony of the situation. In other words, individuals with high boredom proneness are more likely to feel bored even when the situation is not objectively dull.

2.1.3 Dimensions of Boredom in EFL Contexts

Rather than being a unidimensional state of mere apathy, academic boredom is systematically conceptualized by modern educational psychologists as a highly complex, multi-component emotional process (Goetz et al., 2024). Guided strictly by this foundational theory, these interrelated psychological subsystems encompass *affective* (Feelings), *cognitive* (Thoughts), *motivational* (Urge to Escape), *expressive* (Communication), and *physiological* (Actions) dimensions that collectively define the subjective reality of the language learner (Pekrun & Goetz, 2024).

The affective dimension represents the core experience, marked by unpleasant feelings and a lack of interest during language learning (Alenazi & Bensalem, 2024; Deen, 2023; Goetz et al., 2024; Pekrun & Goetz, 2024). These negative emotions often appear as feelings of emptiness, restlessness, and dissatisfaction with the learning environment

(Zawodniak et al., 2017). A recent study indicates that when EFL instruction lacks stimulation and does not meet students' basic needs, learners become bored and disengaged because the tasks feel meaningless and unchallenging (Liu et al., 2025). These negative feelings weaken learners' emotional connection to the target language and create a sense of communicative purposelessness (Li et al., 2025). The intensity of these feelings shows that boredom is not passive but an active form of discomfort that seriously harms student well-being, especially motivation (Pekrun & Goetz, 2024).

The cognitive dimension suggests that boredom weakens mental functioning, reducing focus and limiting deep information processing (Li et al., 2025). A key cognitive sign of boredom is the altered perception of time, where students feel that class passes very slowly during repetitive tasks (Alenazi & Bensalem, 2024; Pekrun & Goetz, 2024). This distorted sense of time is often accompanied by mind-wandering, as learners seek internal stimulation when the environment lacks engagement (Pekrun & Goetz, 2024). As a result, working memory becomes filled with irrelevant thoughts, leaving little capacity to process new language structures (Li et al., 2025).

According to *the motivational dimension*, boredom strongly reduces motivation and creates a persistent desire to withdraw from the task (Alenazi & Bensalem, 2024). This lack of motivation leads to behavioral disengagement, as learners avoid tasks, they see as meaningless (Li et al., 2023). This low motivation is closely linked to reduced self-regulation, as students are unwilling to invest effort in overcoming language difficulties (Li et al., 2025). When students experience this lack of motivation, their WTC in the target language drops sharply, undermining the main goal of the EFL classroom (Bai, 2023).

The physiological dimension of boredom biologically reinforces behavioral disengagement, given that this specific emotion is fundamentally associated with drastically reduced bodily arousal and a pervasive sense of physical lethargy (Kruk, 2016). Students experiencing this state often feel heavy, tired, and lacking the energy needed for active language use (Alenazi & Bensalem, 2024). Research shows that bored learners are less attentive and that boredom disrupts attention, weakening memory and making language learning more difficult (Lapteva et al., 2025; Xie, 2021). This low energy also limits interaction with the material, turning students into passive participants (Dumančić, 2018).

Following *the expressive dimension*, boredom is shown through clear facial, vocal, and postural cues that signal a lack of interest to the teacher (Kruk, 2016). Common signs include unfocused staring, yawning, slouching, resting the head on hands, and off-task behaviors such as doodling (Alenazi & Bensalem, 2024; Kruk & Zawodniak, 2018). When students lose interest, their disengagement appears in flat responses, low energy, and visible tiredness, showing reduced mental involvement (Liu & Cho, 2025; Wu et al., 2025; Xie, 2021).

2.1.4 Measurement of Boredom

Although historically overlooked in language education research, academic boredom in EFL contexts is now recognized as a common, complex, and multidimensional emotion that significantly impacts learning outcomes (Frenzel et al., 2007; Li et al., 2023; Xie, 2021).

To reflect this complexity, recent years have seen the development and validation of several context-specific measurement tools for EFL learners.

For instance, the Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale (FLLBS) is a comprehensive instrument validated among non-English-major university students. It consists of 32 items across seven dimensions, such as under-challenging tasks, teacher-dislike, and general trait boredom (Li et al., 2021). This scale has demonstrated strong reliability and validity across various EFL learner groups (Li et al., 2024).

Another widely used tool is the Achievement Emotions Questionnaire (AEQ) and its short form (AEQ-S). Based on the CVT, the AEQ measures nine major achievement emotions, including boredom, which were selected because they frequently occur in educational settings (Pekrun et al., 2011; Pekrun & Goetz, 2024). These tools have been successfully adapted for EFL contexts, showing good internal consistency (Bieleke et al., 2021; Wu & Kang, 2023). Additionally, for advanced learners, the Boredom in Practical English Language Classes-Revised (BPELC-R) scale is often used to identify two main factors of classroom boredom: disengagement/monotony and lack of satisfaction/challenge (Pawlak et al., 2020).

These instruments are typically administered via self-report Likert scales, where higher scores indicate greater levels of boredom (Shen & Ying, 2024). Ultimately, selecting an appropriate measurement tool requires considering both the multidimensional nature of EFL boredom and the specific research context (Li et al., 2023).

2.2 Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions

In today's field of educational psychology, investigating the complex emotional experiences of non-English-major students in EFL classrooms requires a clear and multidimensional theoretical framework. The Control-Value Theory of achievement emotions provides this foundation by explaining the complex set of factors that influence both academic development and emotional processes (Putwain et al., 2018). Initially developed to explore the causes and consequences of emotions in learning contexts, CVT offers a broad framework that allows researchers to study the sources, context-specific nature, psychological roles, and general patterns of achievement emotions across different groups of learners (Yu et al., 2022). Although CVT has been widely applied in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and applied linguistics, its relevance goes beyond language learning. It is also a key framework in general educational psychology and has been effectively used to inform teaching practices in areas such as medical and physical education (Dong et al., 2026; Li et al., 2025; Garn et al., 2017).

Research consistently shows that emotions are not produced directly by classroom conditions. Instead, they arise from how students interpret their level of control and the value they assign to a task, with external factors influencing emotions only by shaping these interpretations (Choi et al., 2025; Kögler & Göllner, 2018; Pekrun & Goetz, 2024; Struk et al., 2021; Tempelaar & Niculescu, 2023). In other words, environmental conditions affect emotions indirectly by influencing students' immediate cognitive evaluations, specifically, their sense of control over the task ("can I do this?") and the importance they attach to it ("does this matter to me?"), which will be discussed later in

the study (Pekrun & Goetz, 2024). By identifying these evaluations as the direct sources of emotion, CVT outlines a clear sequence: environmental factors influence cognitive appraisals, these appraisals generate achievement emotions, and these emotions ultimately affect academic performance and learning achievement (Pekrun & Perry, 2014; Yu et al., 2022). Within the framework of Control-Value Theory, boredom is considered a negative deactivating achievement emotion that emerges when learners perceive low value in learning activities and/or feel a lack of control over task demands (Pekrun & Perry, 2014). In EFL classrooms, boredom may occur when students view learning tasks as repetitive, irrelevant, excessively easy, or overly difficult. Likewise, learners who feel unable to meet classroom expectations may gradually lose interest and become disengaged from learning activities.

2.6 Related Studies

Rezaee and Seyri (2022) investigated the effects of an autonomy-oriented intervention on boredom among EAP students in online classes. Using data collected from 84 students before and after the intervention, the study found that boredom decreased noticeably when students participated in more autonomy-supportive and interactive learning activities. The qualitative findings further showed that students became more engaged when classroom tasks promoted participation, variety, and meaningful involvement. These findings suggest that task design and classroom activities play an important role in shaping students' emotional engagement in language learning. From the perspective of Flow Theory, interactive and appropriately challenging activities may help maintain a balance between learners' skill levels and task difficulty, thereby reducing boredom caused by tasks that are either overly simple or excessively difficult.

A recent study also explored how classroom environment and teacher-student relationships influence boredom. Derakhshan and Noughabi (2024) examined the relationships among classroom social climate, growth language mindset, boredom, and student engagement in EFL classrooms. Using data collected from 287 English-major students at several Iranian universities, the study found that classroom social climate and boredom both had direct effects on student engagement. More importantly, the findings highlighted the important role of supportive and positive classroom environments in reducing boredom and promoting active participation. These results suggest that teacher behaviors and classroom atmosphere can strongly influence students' emotional experiences and engagement in EFL learning.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the level of EFL learning boredom among non-English-major university students. A survey approach was adopted because it allows researchers to collect data from a relatively large sample and quantitatively examine learners' emotional experiences in educational settings. Quantitative research was considered appropriate for the present study as it enables the

systematic measurement of boredom and facilitates statistical analysis of students' responses. Guided by the Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions, the study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of boredom in EFL classrooms.

3.2 Participants

The participants consisted of 234 non-English-major undergraduate students enrolled at Nam Can Tho University. The students were selected through convenience sampling based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in the study. They represented various academic disciplines and had all completed at least one compulsory English course at the university. As non-English-major students often learn English as a required subject rather than their primary field of study, they constituted an appropriate population for investigating EFL learning boredom.

3.3 Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from Li et al. (2023) and Bieleke et al. (2021). The instrument measured students' EFL learning boredom across three dimensions.

The first dimension, Affective and Cognitive Dimension (AFFCOG), consisted of seven items examining students' emotional and cognitive experiences of boredom during English lessons. The second dimension, Physiological and Expressive Dimension (PHYEX), contained four items assessing observable physical and behavioral manifestations of boredom, such as yawning, fatigue, and inattentiveness during classroom activities. The third dimension, Motivational Dimension (MOT), comprised two items measuring students' motivational disengagement from English learning. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating higher levels of EFL learning boredom.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted during the academic semester at Nam Can Tho University. After obtaining permission from relevant instructors, the questionnaire was distributed to non-English-major students through both printed and online formats. Prior to participation, students were informed of the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw at any stage without penalty. The questionnaire required approximately 30 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the data collection process, all responses were compiled and prepared for statistical analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were employed to determine the overall level of EFL learning boredom and the levels of each boredom dimension. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire. The results were then

interpreted according to the mean scores of the questionnaire items and dimensions to identify students' boredom levels in EFL classrooms.

4. Results and Discussion

As shown in Table 1, descriptive statistics were computed to evaluate the overall level of EFL learning boredom among the participants. The results indicate that the non-English-major students experienced a moderate level of boredom (M = 2.81, SD = 0.75). Based on the predetermined interpretation criteria established in Chapter 3, this mean score falls within the moderate range (2.61 – 3.40). This finding suggests that while boredom is notably present in these EFL classrooms, it does not reach a severe or alarming level.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for overall EFL boredom

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Boredom_mean	234	2.8060	.75285
Valid N (listwise)	234		

While the overall composite score provides a useful overview of students' EFL boredom, treating boredom as a single construct may overlook its multidimensional nature. Previous research has shown that language learning boredom consists of several affective, cognitive, physiological, and motivational dimensions (Li et al., 2021). Therefore, to gain a more nuanced understanding of students' experiences, the overall EFL boredom scale was broken down into its three theoretical dimensions: Affective & Cognitive (AFFCOG), Physiological & Expressive (PHYEX), and Motivational (MOT).

Table 4.2: Mean and standard deviation for individual EFL boredom items

Boredom Dimensions and Items	**M**	**SD**
A. Affective & Cognitive Dimension	**2.84**	**.76**
1. I often feel bored during English lessons.	2.74	.92
2. Time passes slowly during English lessons.	2.89	1.03
3. I find my mind wandering during English lessons.	2.98	.99
4. Although I am physically in class, my mind is elsewhere.	2.91	1.05
5. During English lessons, I often think about other activities I would rather be doing to pass the time.	2.83	1.00
6. I often have to do tasks that seem meaningless in English classes (i.e Being asked to copy a list of 30 new words from the textbook into a notebook five times each).	2.71	1.05
7. It would be very hard for me to find an exciting task in English classes.	2.80	1.01
B. Physiological & Expressive Dimension	**2.80**	**.83**
8. I show physical signs of boredom (e.g., yawning) during my English lessons.	2.88	.99
9. I find myself doodling or fidgeting during English lessons.	2.76	1.08
10. I struggle to keep my head up or stay alert during lectures.	2.95	.95
11. Much of the time, I just sit around doing nothing in English classes.	2.60	1.05
C. Motivational Dimension	**2.72**	**.98**
12. I feel like I am just "going through the motions" without any real interest.	2.67	1.04
13. I cannot wait for English lessons to end.	2.76	1.12

Note: N = 234. Scores are based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Bold values represent the composite means for each dimension.

Table 4.2 above summarizes the descriptive statistics for each individual item within these dimensions.

Among the three dimensions, the Affective & Cognitive dimension elicited the highest level of agreement (M = 2.84, SD = 0.84). Within this subscale, students reported the highest scores on Item 3 regarding mind-wandering (M = 2.98, SD = 0.99) and Item 4 regarding having their mind elsewhere (M = 2.91, SD = 1.05). This indicates that the primary manifestation of boredom among non-English majors is cognitive disengagement, characterized by difficulty maintaining mental presence in class. Interestingly, Item 6 regarding performing "meaningless tasks" received the lowest score in this dimension (M = 2.71, SD = 1.02), suggesting that while students are mentally distracted, they do not necessarily perceive the assigned classroom tasks as entirely pointless or repetitive.

The Physiological & Expressive dimension followed closely (M = 2.80, SD = 0.83). The prominent issue within this dimension was captured by Item 10 (M = 2.95, SD = 0.95), which revealed that students actively struggled to remain alert or keep their heads up during lectures. This physical lethargy is further supported by high responses to Item 8 regarding visible behavioral signs of boredom, such as yawning (M = 2.88, SD = 0.99).

Conversely, the Motivational dimension registered the lowest composite mean score (M = 2.72, SD = 0.98). Nevertheless, within this dimension, students expressed a stronger urge for the immediate conclusion of the class (Item 13: M = 2.76, SD = 1.12) rather than merely feeling that they were participating mechanically without real interest (Item 12: M = 2.67, SD = 1.04).

The findings indicate that EFL learning boredom among non-English-major students was most evident in the affective and cognitive dimension, particularly through mind-wandering and difficulty maintaining attention during English lessons. These results can be explained by the Control-Value Theory (Pekrun & Perry, 2014), which posits that boredom emerges when learners perceive limited value in classroom activities or experience insufficient control over learning tasks. The tendency for students to become mentally disengaged suggests that they may struggle to connect classroom activities with their personal learning goals, leading to reduced cognitive involvement.

The findings are consistent with Rezaee and Seyri (2022), who reported that boredom decreased when students participated in more engaging and autonomy-supportive activities. Similarly, the prominence of physiological signs of boredom and motivational disengagement in the present study aligns with Derakhshan et al. (2024), who found that classroom environment and teacher support significantly influenced students' emotional experiences and engagement. Together, these findings suggest that boredom is manifested not only cognitively but also behaviorally and motivationally, highlighting the importance of creating supportive and engaging EFL learning environments.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to reduce EFL learning boredom among non-English-major students. Firstly, English instructors should incorporate a wider variety of interactive activities, such as group discussions, role-plays, games, and problem-solving tasks, to maintain students' attention and increase classroom engagement. Since cognitive disengagement emerged as the most prominent aspect of boredom, lessons should be designed to encourage active participation rather than passive learning. Secondly, teachers should create a supportive and positive classroom environment where students feel comfortable expressing their ideas and participating in learning activities. Providing encouragement, constructive feedback, and opportunities for collaboration may help reduce boredom and increase students' interest in English learning. Finally, instructional materials and classroom tasks should be made more relevant to students' academic needs and real-life experiences. Meaningful and practical activities can enhance learners' perceived value of English learning and sustain their motivation throughout the lesson.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the level of EFL learning boredom among non-English-major students at Nam Can Tho University. The findings revealed a moderate level of boredom, with the affective and cognitive dimension emerging as the most prominent aspect. Students frequently reported mind-wandering and difficulty maintaining attention during English lessons, while physiological signs of boredom and motivational disengagement were also evident. These results suggest that boredom in EFL classrooms is a multidimensional phenomenon that affects students cognitively, behaviorally, and motivationally.

The study highlights the importance of creating engaging and supportive learning environments to reduce boredom and promote active participation. By understanding how boredom manifests in EFL classrooms, teachers can design more meaningful learning activities that enhance students' attention, motivation, and overall learning experiences. Future research may further examine the factors contributing to boredom and explore its relationship with English learning achievement in different educational contexts.

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Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Cao Minh Phong is currently a final-year undergraduate student majoring in English Language and Linguistics at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Nam Can Tho University, Vietnam. His primary research interests lie in educational psychology, SLA, and applied linguistics, with a specific focus on cognitive-affective factors in student learning, academic emotions, and communicative engagement in EFL contexts. This research work on FLLB represents his baseline academic investigation into emotional barriers among non-English-major learners. He aspires to continue expanding his scholarly contributions to the fields of language education and learner psychology in his future career.

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