

STRATEGIES USED TO COPE WITH BOREDOM AMONG ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS AT NONG LAM UNIVERSITY, HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM

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Abstract. The present study examined the strategies used by English major students to cope with boredom at Nong Lam University in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. A total of 427 students from 7 batches (2016-2022) participated in the study. The data from a questionnaire was collected and analyzed through SPSS version 22.0. The Multidimensional State Boredom Scale (MSBS) was used to assess levels of academic boredom, while the Coping with Boredom Scale (CBS) measured students' boredom coping strategies. It was found that the participants experienced moderate levels of boredom, with Inattention and Disengagement as the main contributing factors. The most frequently used coping strategies were the cognitive approach and behavioral approach. There was no significant distinction between male and female students in terms of using coping boredom strategies. Correlations between boredom aspects and coping strategies were also examined using correlational analysis. Pedagogical recommendations for ESP lecturers were also discussed in the paper.

Keywords: cognitive approach, behavioral approach, boredom, coping strategies, EFL students.

1. Introduction

What shapes an effective learning environment? This question resonates across educational institutions aiming to create engaging and transformative programs. Studies show that active student participation leads to mental and emotional absorption in learning materials, fostering interest, motivation, and the ability to connect knowledge to real-world applications [1]. Significantly, established motivation fosters resilience in students, helping them persist through rigorous courses. Motivated students develop a growth mindset, seeing problems as opportunities rather than challenges. These individuals better overcome academic challenges, maintain clear goals, and stay committed to their learning [2].

Unfortunately, nowadays, not all institutions possess an engaging academic model that raises students' interest. In contrast to the idea of academic engagement, academic boredom can significantly impact students' academic performance, educational outcomes, and overall well-being. Academic boredom, identified as a serious threat to the educational system, is a negative emotion linked to academic achievement. It leads to high cognitive failures, impairing the ability to process information, acquire knowledge, and perform tasks effectively [3]. Therefore, these cognitive failures can hinder students' learning achievement and overall academic performance, thus, elevating dropout rates. In addition, according to Mann and Robinson (2009), academic

boredom is one of the causes of low levels of academic achievement, motivation, classroom engagement, and attention [4]. When students feel bored and disengaged in an academic setting, their motivation diminishes, leading to a lack of attention and participation during class time [5]. As a result, this will eventually limit their ability to comprehend and remember taught materials, hindering their academic progress. Furthermore, the negative implications of academic boredom extend beyond the immediate impact of academic achievements. Academic boredom can lead to frustration, dissatisfaction, and decreased self-esteem. These negative feelings cause students to doubt their abilities, creating a cycle of self-doubt that hinders their potential [6].

Nong Lam University in Ho Chi Minh City (NLU) is well-known for its mix of students from various backgrounds and interests. Therefore, in order to improve education and student satisfaction, educators, administrators, and policymakers must comprehend the specifics of academic boredom in this context. Additionally, throughout the previous four years, there has been a tendency for the dropout rate among English majors to increase. Thus, this report aims to explore the factors contributing to academic boredom and develop effective strategies to mitigate its impact on students' learning experiences and overall well-being.

2. Content

2.1. Academic boredom among English majors

Academic boredom refers to negative emotions such as demotivated and inattentive feelings, a sense of emptiness, and a lack of purpose, which surely influence students' academic performance and achievements [7]. Many relevant studies about students' boredom have been documented in higher-education settings. However, little attention has been given to the issue of boredom within foreign language (L2) classrooms, including English although English has become a global language [4]. Recent educational journals have documented the prevalence of boredom in learning English as a foreign language. Research shows that university students often experience boredom in their English studies. To illustrate, 92,6% of university students in China experience boredom [9], while a similar state of boredom takes place in English learning classrooms for both English majors in Poland and Iran [8], [9] and non-English majors in China and Thailand [14], [15]. Relevant research also indicated that the success of learning a second language is influenced by elements such as cognitive, affective, and social factors [14]. One of the affective and social factors that negatively impact learners' progress in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is boredom [18]. English learners who experience academic boredom such as low motivation to learn, or inattentive emotions will face the consequences of poor academic achievements [7]. Similarly, research demonstrated clear correlations between students' boredom and the quality of EFL [20]. Obviously, students who run into trouble with learning EFL caused by boredom often tend to turn to coping strategies such as chatting with friends, playing games, or using social networks instead of completing planned academic activities or completing task performance [21]. As a result, these outcomes have negative influences on students' retention, their academic performance and even academic dropouts [22].

In Vietnam, the government has implemented policies to enhance English learning at all educational levels. Recognizing its importance, many university students choose to major in English for academic and career advancement. Given the negative effects of boredom on EFL and the lack of attention to this issue in Vietnam, this research investigates academic boredom among English majors at NLU.

2.2. Strategies for coping with academic boredom

Exploring academic boredom and its triggers, as well as developing strategies to address it, is crucial for educators to improve educational quality. Research has identified common student

coping strategies, such as napping, messaging, playing games, and leaving during breaks [23]. These strategies significantly impact academic performance and achievement, indicating that boredom and learning outcomes frequently influence each other.

A comprehensive framework concerning student's boredom coping strategies has recently been developed by Nett et al [24]. The coping strategies were categorized under four components: cognitive - approach, behavioral - approach, cognitive - avoidance, and behavioral - avoidance. Cognitive-approach strategies mean students must change their perception of the lesson to see the importance of it to involve in, while behavioral-approach strategies require students as an important subject to change the boring situation such as asking the teacher for more interesting tasks or questions during lessons [24]. Conversely, cognitive-avoidance strategies are mental activities students use to cope with boredom (e.g., studying something irrelevant during lessons); whereas behavioral-avoidance strategies are behavioral activities students use to dispel boredom (e.g., chatting with friends or playing games). Nett et al. [24] developed a scale of a four-factor structure to assess student's boredom in math class and it was confirmed in the sample. The result revealed that those who used cognitive-approach strategies in the class significantly experienced less boredom than those who used behavioral-approach, cognitive and behavioral-avoidance strategies. Their framework was also used in other research to assess boredom coping strategies of university students from Canada, China and Turkey [21], [25], [26]. Results collected from the above research share a coherent correlation between four-factor coping strategies and students' academic boredom developed by Nett et al. [24]. This indicates that the four-factor model of boredom coping strategies can be used to investigate how universal students with different cultures and educational settings cope with academic boredom. Thus, these four components of boredom coping strategies were adopted in the present research.

2.3. Research methods

2.3.1. Research design

This study employs a quantitative research design using a survey method to investigate academic boredom and coping strategies among English major students at NLU. The survey method is selected for its effectiveness in collecting data from a large number of participants, enabling the identification of patterns and relationships between variables.

2.3.2. Participants

A total of 427 English major students from 7 batches (from 2016-2022) volunteered to participate in the study. Of the sample of student participants, 26.2 % (n= 112) were male and 73.8 % (n= 315) were female. Nearly half of the surveyed students belonged to batch 2022, which was followed by batch 2020, accounting for 24.1% (n= 103). The students from batch 2021 constituted 17.1% (n= 71), batch 2019 6.6% (n= 28), batch 2018 1.6 percent (n= 7), batch 2017 0.5% (n=2) and batch 2016 0.2% (n= 1) of the whole sample of participants.

2.3.3. Survey instruments

Academic Boredom Scale. Twenty-nine items on academic boredom from the Multidimensional State Boredom Scale (MSBS) developed by Fahlman et al. [27] were used to evaluate academic boredom. The MSBS is a psychological tool designed to assess various facets of boredom (such as Agitated Affect-AAF, Disengagement-DIS, Dysphoric Affect-DAF, Inattention-INA, Time Perception-TPE). Each item uses a Likert-scale response format, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), which enables students to indicate the extent to which they agree with the statement. Higher scores on the MSBS, therefore, reflect greater boredom in the individual.

Coping with Boredom Scale (CBS). Twenty items on students' boredom coping strategies from the Coping with Boredom Scale (CBS) developed by Nett et al. (2010) were used to assess students' boredom coping strategies. The scale consists of 20 items with 5 items, divided into four

subcategories: cognitive approach, behavioral approach, cognitive avoidance, and behavioral avoidance, with 5 items in each subcategory. It employs a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores on the CBS therefore reflect greater coping with boredom employed by the respondents.

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed through internal consistency using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The results of the reliability assessment for the instrument used in the study all yielded Cronbach's Alpha values greater than 0.8, indicating that the questionnaire effectively measures the concepts examined in the research.

2.3.4. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 22.0. Descriptive statistics, such as mean, standard deviation, and percentages, provided an overview of participants' demographic characteristics, their levels of academic boredom, and the coping strategies they employed. Additionally, correlation analysis was used to examine the strength and direction of associations between different variables. Specifically, Pearson correlation coefficients assessed the linear relationships between five facets of academic boredom and four coping strategies.

2.4. Results and Discussion

2.4.1. Descriptive analysis

2.4.1.1 Students' level of boredom

Section 1 of the MSBS consists of 29 items that are categorized into five dimensions which indicate students' experience of boredom: Disengagement, Agitated Affect, Inattention, Dysphoric Affect, and Time Perception. These dimensions provide insights into different aspects of boredom experienced by respondents.

As seen in Table 1, students at NLU reported moderate to high levels of boredom, with means ranging from 3.87 to 4.45. Disengagement and Inattention had the highest scores among the five subscales, with means of 4.45 and 4.22, respectively. These factors indicate that students were mainly bored due to a lack of attention and involvement in tasks. They were often "easily distracted" and found it "difficult to focus on lessons," feeling detached or disconnected from their activities, contributing to their overall boredom.

Table 2 shows that the other three aspects of boredom (dysphoric affect, agitated affect, and time perception) had similar means (3.88 and 3.87). This indicates that participants felt unease or agitation, and sometimes sadness, discontent, and dissatisfaction when bored. Consequently, they experienced boredom through these emotions and perceived time as passing more slowly.

The five boredom subscales indicated various ways in which the respondents may experience and express boredom, stating that boredom is a complex emotional state with different facets.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of boredom subscales

Subscales	Mean	Std. Deviation
Agitated Affect	3.87	1.367
Disengagement	4.2	1.22
Dysphoric Affect	3.80	1.40
Inattention	4.44	1.343
Time Perception	3.87	1.36

2.4.1.2. Boredom Coping Strategies

Cognitive approach:

The cognitive approach to coping with boredom involves changing one's perceptions or mental processes about a boring situation. Strategies include reminding oneself of the lesson's

importance, maintaining focus, and re-concentrating on specific parts of the lesson. Table 2 evaluated how surveyed students used the cognitive approach to deal with their academic boredom. The data shows that students frequently use these cognitive strategies, with a mean score of around 5.0. Over 80% reported reminding themselves of the lesson's importance and actively trying to improve their concentration whenever they felt bored. These efforts aim to overcome the negative feeling of boredom and stay engaged in their studies.

Table 2. Students' use of cognitive approach strategies

	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		M	Std.D
	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%	n	%	n	%		
When I am bored in the classroom I try to pay attention to the lesson more	13	3.0	11	2.6	25	5.9	126	29.5	124	29.0	80	18.7	48	11.2	4.8	1.4
When I am bored in the classroom I tell myself to concentrate again	7	1.6	14	3.3	20	4.7	118	27.6	107	25.1	94	22.0	67	15.7	5.0	1.4
When I am bored in the classroom I make myself aware of the importance of the issue	6	1.4	18	4.2	18	4.2	126	29.5	114	26.7	86	20.1	59	13.8	4.9	1.3
When I am bored in the classroom I try to make myself aware that this class is important	6	1.4	17	4.0	16	3.7	118	27.6	112	26.2	96	22.5	62	14.5	5.0	1,3
When I am bored in the classroom I make myself focus again because the issue is important	12	2.8	19	4.4	16	3.7	121	28.3	117	27.4	86	20.1	56	13.1	4.9	1.4

Behavioral approach

Table 3 describes the frequency of the behavioral approach employed by the students in this study. Behavioral approach strategies require students to change the boring situation itself by, for instance, *asking teachers for more interesting tasks or questions during lessons, suggesting variety in lessons, and redirecting the discussion*. The behavioral approach was moderately used with the mean ranging from 3.8 to 4.2. The most common strategy in the behavioral approach was *requesting more interesting tasks from teachers* with the agreement reaching over 30%, followed by *asking the instructor if the class could do something else* (29%). Another frequently used strategy

is bringing up an issue they believe the whole class would find more interesting (27.4%). 24.7% of participants tried to get the instructor off-topic to discuss an issue that interests them.

Table 3. Students' uses of behavioral approach strategies

	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		M	Std.D
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
When I am bored in the classroom I ask my instructor if we can do something else	34	8.0	36	8.4	50	11.7	183	42.9	67	15.7	33	7.7	24	5.6	4.0	1.5
When I am bored in the classroom I ask my instructor for more interesting tasks	29	6.8	40	9.4	34	8.0	190	44.5	71	16.6	32	7.5	31	7.3	4.1	1.5
When I am bored in the classroom I suggest that the instructor add variety to the lessons	28	6.6	29	6.8	33	7.7	186	43.6	79	18.5	45	10.5	27	6.3	4.2	1.4
I try to get the instructor off topic so that we discuss an issue that interests me	42	9.8	41	9.6	48	11.2	191	44.7	63	14.8	22	5.2	20	4.7	3.8	1.5
When I am bored in the classroom I bring up an issue that I think the class is more interested in	41	9.6	43	10.1	40	9.4	186	43.6	65	15.2	30	7.0	22	5.2	3.9	1.5

Cognitive avoidance

Cognitive avoidance involves mentally distancing oneself from stressors rather than addressing them directly such as by *thinking about or doing homework, preparing for the next class, or studying another subject*. Table 4 shows that cognitive avoidance was used by the respondents with high frequency with means ranging from 4.1 to 4.5. The most common strategy was thinking about homework or study material, reported by over 47% (m=4.5) of participants.

Additionally, 44.7% did homework, nearly 40% (m=4.2) prepared for their next class, and some used the time to study a different subject or copy homework (m=4.1).

Table 4. Students' use of cognitive avoidance strategies

	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		M	Std.D
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
When I am bored in the classroom I prepare for my next class	25	5.9	27	6.3	31	7.3	174	40.7	101	23.7	51	11.9	18	4.2	4.2	1.4
When I am bored in the classroom I do my homework	21	4.9	33	7.7	38	8.9	144	33.7	96	22.5	68	15.9	27	6.3	4.3	1.5
When I am bored in the classroom I study for another subject	30	7.0	34	8.0	40	9.4	177	41.5	68	15.9	52	12.2	26	6.1	4.1	1.5
When I am bored in the classroom I think about my homework or something I have to study	11	2.6	28	6.6	29	6.8	158	37.0	98	23.0	70	16.4	33	7.7	4.5	1.4
When I am bored in the classroom I copy the homework for my next class	28	6.6	35	8.2	35	8.2	176	41.2	83	19.4	45	10.5	25	5.9	4.1	1.5

Behavioral avoidance

Table 5 shows five specific behavioral avoidance strategies utilized by the participants to cope with boredom in the classroom, all involving social interaction with their classmates, including (1) *talking to the person sitting next to them*, (2) *starting a conversation with a nearby classmate*, (3) *distracting themselves by interacting with classmates*, (4) *contacting other bored classmates*, (5) *occupying themselves with a neighbor or someone sitting close*. All strategies had a standard deviation of 1.4 or 1.5, suggesting similar variability in responses across all items. Based on the mean scores, students chose to *talk to the person sitting next to them the most frequently* (m= 4.5) when boredom struck during class. It was the simplest way to pass the time and avoid this negative feeling. The second most frequently used strategy was *starting a*

conversation with a nearby classmate (m= 4.4) to alleviate boredom and make the classroom experience more enjoyable. *Occupying themselves with a neighbor* is the least popularly used by the respondents with a mean of 3.8, indicating that students tended to prefer less effortful and more immediate social interactions as behavioral avoidance strategies when coping with boredom.

Table 5. Students' use of behavioral avoidance strategies

	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		M	Std.D
	n	%	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
When I am bored in the classroom I talk to the person sitting next to me	20	4.7	26	6.1	23	5.4	153	35.8	104	24.4	66	15.5	35	8.2	4.5	1.4
When I am bored in the classroom I start talking to my classmate sitting next to me	24	5.6	20	4.7	37	8.7	158	37.0	99	23.2	59	13.8	30	7.0	4.4	1.4
When I am bored in the classroom I distract myself by interacting with my classmates	28	6.6	32	7.5	38	8.9	172	40.3	83	19.4	48	11.2	26	6.1	4.2	1.5
When I am bored in the classroom I try to contact other classmates who are feeling also bored	31	7.3	39	9.1	40	9.4	180	42.2	71	16.6	44	10.3	22	5.2	4.0	1.5
I occupy myself with my classroom neighbor or someone who is sitting close to me	41	9.6	53	12.4	36	8.4	183	42.9	60	14.1	32	7.5	22	5.2	3.8	1.5

Table 6 compares the usage frequency of four strategies, showing similar standard deviations (1.21 to 1.311) across all strategies, indicating consistent variability. The cognitive approach had the highest mean score (4.9), making it the most frequently used strategy, followed by cognitive avoidance (m= 4.2) and behavioral avoidance (m= 4.1). The least used strategy was the behavioral approach. The highest mean score for the cognitive approach (4.9) indicates that students often try to engage mentally by finding interest, setting challenges, or reframing their perception when bored. Cognitive strategies (approach and avoidance) had higher mean scores than behavioral strategies, showing a preference for mental tactics over social actions. Also, avoidance strategies were used more frequently than approach strategies in both domains, suggesting a tendency to escape or distract from boredom rather than directly addressing it.

Table 6. Mean of four strategies

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Behavioral approach	3.97	1.31
Behavioral avoidance	4.18	1.29
Cognitive approach	4.91	1.24
Cognitive avoidance	4.27	1.21

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study explored aspects of academic boredom and coping strategies used by English major students at NLU. The findings of the study revealed that (1) the participants experienced a moderate to highly moderate level of boredom, particularly in the areas of *Inattention* and *Disengagement*, which means that students in the study had difficulties in maintaining focus and feeling connected to their studies. (2) Although *Cognitive-approach* and *behavioral-approach* strategies were two commonly used to cope with boredom, the more favored one was cognitive methods, particularly *cognitive approach strategies*. There was also a general preference for avoidance over approach tactics by the students. (3) There existed no significant difference between male and female students in using the four coping boredom strategies namely *behavioral approach, behavioral avoidance, cognitive approach, and cognitive avoidance*. (4) To cope with boredom, students in the study tended to use multiple strategies. The positive correlations between coping strategies and boredom aspects might indicate that students experiencing more boredom symptoms employ more coping strategies.

The results lead to several pedagogical implications. Firstly, as for teachers, designing more authentic and interactive teaching methods is crucial to combat *Inattention* and *Disengagement*, as recommended by Zawodniak et al [28] incorporating interactive learning, meaningful hands-on activities, and self-regulated strategies (e.g., goal setting, self-assessment) can increase student satisfaction in English classes. Secondly, understanding students' preference for cognitive approaches to cope with academic boredom can help educators create more engaging learning experiences and effective coping strategies. Regular assessments of student engagement and boredom levels can guide instructors in adjusting their teaching methods. As for curriculum, varied activities and materials should be incorporated to maintain student interest and reduce boredom. Furthermore, the role of the university cannot be neglected. Universities should provide support systems and resources to help students develop skills in self-regulation and motivation.

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