Probing into the boredom of online instruction among Chinese English language teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Although researching emotions in language education has dramatically increased during the past decades, little is written about the effects of aversive feelings like teacher boredom in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context, especially in the context of online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this shortcoming, this study examined the causes of and solutions to teacher boredom experienced by 216 Chinese EFL teachers, including both genders with their ages ranging from 19 to 58. In so doing, the researcher used maximum variation sampling to gather the data via an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The gleaned data were then thematically analyzed by MAXQDA (Version 2020) whose results indicated that most participants consider the online mode of delivery more boring than the face-to-face mode. Additionally, the findings demonstrated that both the antecedents of and the solutions to teacher boredom come under the macro-categories of *student-related, task-related, IT-related*, and *teacher-related* factors and solutions. Out of these, IT-related factors and teacher-related solutions were the most frequently raised themes extracted from the data. The study presents some practical implications and directions for future research.

Keywords Teacher boredom · Chinese EFL Teachers · Online instruction · COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

Emotions play an indispensable role in language learning and teaching, which are two demanding and complicated processes (Derakhshan, 2022a, b; Kruk et al., 2021). They have a trace in almost all aspects of L2 learning and teaching (Dewaele & Li, 2020). Over the past decades, investigations on language learning emotions have led to a shift from negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, tension, distress, anger, shame, guilt, sadness, etc.) to positive emotions under the influence of a new trend in psychology known as *positive psychology* (PP). PP takes a holistic view of emotions and focuses on positive emotions (e.g., joy, optimism, love, passion, engagement, hope, interest, enjoyment, etc.) and flourishing rather than fixating on negative attributes (Seligman, 2011). Research revealed that educators and researchers

need to strike a balance between negative and positive emotions as both are critically significant in L2 education (Derakhshan, Dewaele, & et al., 2022; MacIntyre & Vincze 2017). While positive emotions deserve more attention as they make language learning a pleasant experience (Wang et al., 2021; Zhang & Tsung, 2021; Wang et al., 2022), negative emotions should not be completely discarded as they can obstruct students' learning efforts and hamper teachers' instructional effectiveness (Kruk et al., 2021).

One such negative emotion receiving insufficient attention among scholars and practitioners in EFL/ESL contexts is boredom (Derakhshan et al., 2021a; Li & Dewaele, 2020; Pawlak et al., 2020a). It is a silent and multi-dimensional construct characterized by slower perceptions of time and exhibited mostly through non-engagement or departure from classroom activities (Derakhshan et al., 2021a; Li & Dewaele, 2020; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Attention to boredom in L2 education has been supplanted by focusing on other factors (e.g., anxiety, depression, motivation) due to this misconception that it is a trivial factor attributable to learners' apathy and laziness (Macklem, 2015). As one of the most frequently occurring emotional conditions in the educational arena, it can negatively influence both teachers'

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and students' academic performance, effectiveness, and achievement (Kruk, 2016a; Pawlak et al., 2020; Stephanou et al., 2013). L2 educators sometimes make wrong assumptions, misjudge this aversive emotion, and treat it as an unworthy, trivial issue in the classroom, but unraveling its dynamics is of paramount significance in language teaching process (Pawlak et al., 2020c).

An influential factor that can cause teacher boredom is the mode of instruction- whether face-to-face or online (Russell, 2020; Xie, 2021). However, this issue has not been sufficiently explored in EFL contexts. Hence, it can be argued that online or remote education, as the most dominant mode of instruction throughout the world during the COVID-19 pandemic (Derakhshan, 2021; Gao et al., 2022), is a niche for examining the concept of boredom. Nevertheless, most of the current studies on boredom in online platforms are limited to student boredom, while the causes of and solutions to teacher boredom have been overlooked, especially in EFL contexts that are highly dependent on teachers (Cui, 2022). Consequently, unraveling and diminishing the sense of boredom in EFL teachers is essential as it can influence teachers' practices, enthusiasm, autonomy, commitment, and classroom rapport with students (Cui et al., 2017). Seeking to fill this lacuna, the present study that was conducted in an Asian context scrutinized the antecedents of and solutions to Chinese EFL teachers' boredom. It is a momentous study as it can assist in capturing teachers' behaviors, perceptions, expectations, and intentions regarding the causes of and solutions to boredom and enhance their pedagogical effectiveness and academic performance. The study is also significant given its effort to unravel the role of emotions in L2 education, shed light on online delivery during the pandemic, and unveil the causes of teacher emotions as expressed in their narratives. It is meritorious since it uses the maximum variation sampling technique and takes a triangulated approach to collect and analyze the data.

Literature review

Teachers' emotions and education

Teachers' emotions play a significant role in their instructional effectiveness and professional lives (Burić et al., 2020; Wu & Chen, 2018). They experience a wide range of emotions that may emerge from the school, community, society, and educational policies, but those originating from teaching and classroom interactions are more common and intense (Burić et al., 2020; Chen, 2020; Frenzel et al., 2016). Teachers' emotions may also arouse by different classroom events/behaviors such as students' classroom practices, assignments, and endeavors (Burić & Frenzel, 2019;

Burić et al., 2018; Greenier et al., 2021). In other words, classroom behaviors and performances are the birthplaces of teachers' emotions being positive or negative (Burić et al., 2020). Consequently, understanding the causes of and solutions to teachers' emotions and their academic consequences is very important for better classroom performance. This reciprocal conceptualization of causes and effects of teachers' emotions is effective in exploring their antecedents and consequences (Frenzel, 2014). Hence, it can be claimed that teachers may experience various emotions after observing positive or negative actions/reactions from students (Frenzel, 2014).

Regardless of their sources, teachers' emotions have long been identified to strongly influence their professional well-being, job satisfaction, work engagement, self-efficacy, academic decisions, burnout level, and many more (Burić et al., 2018; Burić & Macuka, 2018; Chang, 2013; Frenzel et al., 2009; Meyer & Turner, 2007; Schutz et al., 2007; Other & Wang, 2021). Nevertheless, the causes and consequences of teachers' negative emotions like boredom have captured insufficient attention to date.

The concept of boredom: a complex emotion

Boredom, a multi-layered emotion, is difficult to define through a single attribute. It is a mixture of disengagement, dissatisfaction, lack of attention, motivation, vitality, and misleading time perception (Pawlak et al., 2020a). Causes of this difficulty involve the use of self-referential and synonymous terms like *tedium, indifference, sluggis*hness, or *inactivity* in defining boredom (Weinerman & Kenner, 2016), the invisibility of boredom that allows students to conceal it (Pekrun et al., 2010), and its diversity and complexity due to its many psychological, sociological, and educational dimensions, which prevent giving unidimensional explanations for the term (Daniels et al., 2015; Finkielsztein, 2020). Nevertheless, most scholars acknowledge that boredom is an aversive, silent, debilitating, transient, deactivating, and dissatisfying emotion which influences students' learning and achievement (Li et al., 2021). It stops learners and teachers from deriving pleasure from their practice and setting and instead causes restlessness, weariness, and disengagement, which generate poor academic performance and more tendency to drop out of school (Bench & Lench, 2013; Pawlak et al., 2020).

Typologies of boredom

Like anxiety, the concept of boredom is divided into two types; *trait* boredom and *state* boredom. Trait boredom is a somewhat steady disposition or regular and frequent boredom experienced when doing a learning activity or taking a

class/subject. In contrast, state boredom is momentary and prompted in response to a specific situation (Putwain et al., 2018). As boredom is both person- and context-specific, its classifications are based on situational and individual perspectives. In this regard, scholars have drawn a distinction between **classroom boredom** and **homework boredom** as two sub-contexts of boredom. Both are associated with achievement results, and they must be separately assessed (Li et al., 2021).

Moreover, based on the degrees of un/pleasantness, boredom is classified into different types (Goetz et al., 2014), including **indifferent boredom** (a pleasant state of fatigue, calmness, and withdrawal which typically happens in free time), **calibrating boredom** (a state which is moderately unpleasant with sporadic thoughts irrelevant to the topic, content, and classroom materials), **searching boredom** (an unpleasant feeling of restlessness in students who want to change the existing situation and seek chances for doing something interesting), **reactant boredom** (a robust aversive emotion in students who desperately seek to find a way to escape the situation, and thus, act aggressively), and finally **apathetic boredom** (an extremely unpleasant state with a high level of dissatisfaction and helplessness common in students with low levels of positive and negative emotions).

Antecedents and dimensions of boredom

The causes of boredom can be traced back to different theories and models which explain why some students and teachers find classroom activities boring and useless, while their peers regard the same tasks as interesting and engaging. The underlying theories include (1) **the understimulation model**, which posits that boredom is the consequence of a paucity of stimulating and challenging activities for students to learn (Larson & Richards, 1991), (2) **the control-value theory**, which contends that boredom occurs when students have no control over the classroom tasks and find them worthless (Pekrun, 2006), (3) **the menton theory**, which maintains that boredom emerges due to over/under challenging tasks in which students have either a deficit or extra mental energy units or mentons (Davies & Fortney, 2012), (4) **the forced-effort model**, which conceptualizes boredom as the offshoot of imposing boring and unattractive tasks on students who have to make superfluous cognitive efforts to accomplish them (Hill & Perkins, 1985), (5) **the attentional theory**, which argues that the main cause of boredom is one's inability to self-regulate his/her attention (Eastwood et al., 2012), (6) **the emotion theory** (Eastwood et al., 2012), which considers boredom to be a consequence of difficulty in identifying, accessing, and expressing one's own feelings (also known as alexithymia), and (7) **the dimensional model** (Pekrun et al., 2010), which regards boredom as a deactivating and activating emotion at the same time. In other words, sometimes the negative state of boredom causes an arousal behavior to seek change. Based on this interpretation, boredom operates as a functional negative emotion that may drive students into specifying new goals or reformulating their previous ones (Komorowska, 2016; Kruk et al., 2021). As each of these theories revolves around a specific source of boredom, the theoretical choice in the present study was an amalgamation of all theories to unpack the sources of teacher boredom from a larger view.

Regarding the dimensions of boredom, Pekrun (2006) proposed a three-dimensional taxonomy including **valence, activation/arousal**, and **objective focus**. Valence concerns the degree of pleasantness/unpleasantness of the emotion; activation pertains to the physical/cognitive activation/deactivation of the emotion; and objective focus concerns whether the emotion is activity-oriented or outcome-oriented. That is to say, the emotion emerges from an ongoing activity or is aroused by its past/future outcomes.

Solutions to boredom

Due to its recency, boredom and its solutions have been minimally examined in L2 education, and the knowledge of the concept has originated from educational psychology (Eren & Coskun, 2016). However, Daniels et al. (2015) posit that one can tackle boredom by using avoidance strategies (e.g., focusing on something unrelated to the task or activity), behavioral strategies (e.g., casting the blame on someone else), and cognitive strategies (e.g., integrating the boring task/activity into one's value system and attaching meaning to it).

It has also been maintained that using appropriate emotion regulation strategies might help to prevent negative emotions in L2 teaching (Gross, 2014; Keller et al., 2014). Teaching concerns both instructing the subject matter to the students and handling the emotional aspects of education (Richards, 2022). Therefore, the more teachers regulate their emotions, the more effective their teaching is (Alipour et al., 2021). One way to cope with negative emotions is utilizing emotional labor strategies, which adjust emotions to organizational expectations (Hochschild, 1983). Another strategy common in emotion-management is coping. It can be *problem-focused* or *emotion-focused*. Problem-focused coping strategies intend to modify the source of the emotion, while emotion-focused coping strategies try to change one's emotional responses to that emotion (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

Moreover, teachers can use the strategies, such as viewing issues from a different perspective, using new resources, or using classroom physical activities like standing up and walking, and engaging students with music to reduce

boredom (Kruk & Zawodniak, 2018). Given the dearth of investigation on EFL teachers' boredom and their coping mechanisms, further studies are urgently required in this line of research to provide fresh insights into boredom as a debilitative emotional experience in English classes.

Boredom in second/foreign language education

The concept of boredom as a damaging experience has long been the focus of research in educational psychology, psychotherapy, and general education (Daniels et al., 2015; Daschmann, 2013; Malkovsky et al., 2012). It has been found that boredom hurts both students' and teachers' academic success, performance, and well-being (Tam et al., 2020). However, most existing studies on boredom have either focused on the causes of and solutions to student boredom or the role of teachers as a cause of students' boredom (Tam et al., 2020). The same trend is observable in the context of L2 education research highlighting the nature and dynamics of student boredom, though using different research designs and instruments (e.g., Chapman 2013; Derakhshan et al., 2021b; Kruk, 2016b; Kruk & Zawodniak, 2018, 2020; Li & Dewaele, 2020; Pawlak et al., 2021; Yazdanmehr et al., 2021; Zawodniak et al., 2017, among others). The negligence of teacher boredom, which can itself be a cause and a consequence of student boredom runs contrary to the fact that teaching is inseparable from teacher emotions as vital dimensions of their identity and practice (Kelchtermans & Deketelaere, 2016; Teng, 2017).

This knowledge gap has recently been started to be bridged by some pioneering studies. For example, in the context of Croatia, Dumančić (2018) took advantage of an open-ended questionnaire to unpack 38 English teachers' boredom. Their study revealed that grammar tasks and uninteresting subject matter are the key causes of teacher boredom. The participants also argued that they use different emotion regulation strategies like introducing new content and getting involved in physical activity to cope with their boredom. In Asia, Khajavy et al. (2018) qualitatively studied the antecedents of pleasant and unpleasant emotions experienced by 11 Iranian EFL teachers. The results of interviews indicated that boredom, as a negative emotion, is only caused by "demotivated or uncollaborative students". In a recent case study, Farrell (2022) explored three novice L2 teachers' frustration, anger, and boredom and argued that boredom is the result from teachers' frustration. He also suggested that by expressing and reflecting on their emotions, teachers can better understand and regulate them. In Hong Tam et al. (2020) conducted a study to examine the association between teacher boredom, student boredom, and student learning motivation and found that

teacher boredom led to students' boredom and reduced their learning motivation.

Despite these studies that shed light on the issue of boredom in language education, the dominant perspective has been that of students, while knowing the causes, consequences, and solutions to teacher boredom can provide a springboard for a high-quality teaching in the L2 classroom.

Boredom in online L2 education

Online education has been employed in different educational contexts since the arrival of the Internet and digital technologies. Likewise, online language teaching has witnessed an unprecedented boom with the COVID-19 pandemic requiring tech-savvy teachers. L2 classes rapidly changed, and the teachers faced a seismic shift to redesign their pedagogy for online delivery. This increased learning opportunities for a wide range of audiences by integrating more multimedia content into lesson that were less used in face-to-face classes.

Nevertheless, this mode of instruction has some pitfalls and may generate negative stressors (e.g., boredom). For instance, the emotional states of students and teachers have been found to influence the success or failure of this mode of delivery just like other instructional modes. In this regard, different scholars (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2022; Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020; Wang & Other, 2021) have argued that negative emotions boredom can limit or foster learning/teaching efforts and prevent users from enjoying the full profits of digital platforms. Despite the significance of EFL teachers' emotional states in online education, very little is known about how they experience boredom (Derakhshan et al., 2021a). Similar to offline L2 education, the available literature on boredom is limited to the antecedents and solutions of students' boredom (Derakhshan et al., 2021b; Li & Dewaele, 2020), and few studies (if any) in EFL contexts have empirically investigated teachers' boredom in online language education spread after the COVID-19 outbreak. Another overlooked area is identifying EFL teachers' pedagogical solutions to stopping or minimizing their boredom. In sum, it can be purported that boredom in language classrooms is incomplete without perceiving teachers' side of the story. Inspired by these shortcomings, the present study scrutinized the antecedents of and solutions to boredom experienced by Chinese EFL teachers during their online instruction. More particularly, this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. Do Chinese EFL teachers experience boredom when they teach online and offline? If so, what are their perceptions of boredom in two settings?

Table 1 *Participants' Demographic Information*

Background Information	No.	% (rounded)
Age		
19–28	13	6
29–38	75	35
39–48	92	43
49–58	36	16
Gender		
Male	46	21
Female	170	79
Academic Qualification		
BA	27	13
MA	163	75
PhD	18	8
Other	8	4
Teaching Experience Years		
1–4	19	9
5–10	46	21
11–20	85	40
21–30	66	30
Major		
English Language Teaching	81	38
English Language Literature	48	22
Applied Linguistics	36	17
Linguistics	38	17
TESOL	5	2
Other	8	4
Total: 216		

2. What are the causes of Chinese EFL teachers' boredom in their online classes?
3. What are the solutions to Chinese EFL teachers' boredom in their online classes?

Method

Participants and research setting

This study was conducted in the EFL context of China, focusing on the causes of and solutions to teachers' boredom during their online instructions. To meet the objectives of the study, the researcher collected quantitative data from 216 Chinese EFL teachers of both genders and with various teaching experiences and educational backgrounds (see Table 1). Their age ranged from 19 to 58, and they were chosen based on the maximum variation sampling technique from 29 different cities (16 provinces) in China via "WeChat", a popular instant messaging, social media used among Chinese people. The logic behind using this sampling technique was to obtain rich data and to offer a vivid image of the EFL education in the country during the pandemic. Moreover, it is beneficial in qualitative research as it offers triangulated data by integrating the voices of different

groups of purposefully chosen individuals, which adds credibility to the results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Instruments

Two instruments were employed to gather the data: including a written open-ended questionnaire and a series of semi-structured interviews in English. The questionnaire was comprised of three sections (see Appendix A). The first one collected the participants' demographic information (e.g., age, gender, major, experience, and academic degrees). The second or main part included open-ended questions about different aspects of EFL teachers' classroom boredom in tune with the formulated research questions. The final section asked the respondents if they were willing to take part in a follow-up interview. The questionnaire was in English, since the teachers had a good command of the English language to express their responses and explanations.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using three pre-specified and approved questions. Nevertheless, the interviewees were free to elaborate on their responses and raise other pertinent points if necessary (see Appendix B). A total of 50 respondents agreed to participate in the interviews out of whom 18 teachers were randomly selected by the researcher based on their locations and institutes to include their voices from different contexts.

Data collection procedure

An open-ended questionnaire was distributed online via WeChat among 216 Chinese EFL teachers (Female N = 170; Male N = 46) of different education stages (from primary schools to higher learning institutions) from 29 cities in 16 provinces (including Anhui, Zhejiang, Henan, Sichuan, Hainan, Chongqing, Shandong, Hebei, Guangdong, Xinjiang, Hubei, Shanxi, Jiangxi, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Jiangsu), two municipalities directly under the Central Government (Beijing and Shanghai), and one Special Administrative District (Macau) across China. They had an average teaching experience of 14.7 years. The data collection, in this phase, took over two months lasting from 5th, March 2021 to 13th, May during which the researcher asked his colleagues and friends to disseminate the online questionnaire's URL. As for the researcher's positionality, the author took an outsider stance but was reflective throughout the whole study.

Subsequently, the results of the questionnaire were complemented by the responses gathered through a semi-structured interview (lasting about 30 min) held in both a little Chinese when they sometimes had a little difficulty in perceiving my English interview questions or expressing their ideas in English and English with 18 Chinese EFL teachers (Female N = 11; Male N = 7) from eight schools (three

middle schools and five universities) who were willing to participate in this phase and had taught English online. Their age ranged from 25 to 53, with an average age of 38. Out of the sample, 11 participants were from the Central part of China, the authors' local area (For anonymity, the specific area/city will be released later); thus, the author conducted the recorded semi-structured interviews. Seven other participants were from different cities; thus, the author used the Tencent Meeting Platform and the VooV Meeting Platform to conduct the semi-structured interviews. Before running the interviews, the author developed six interview questions that two experts later examined for their content relevance and language appropriacy.

After conducting and collecting all the interview protocols, the author, his two colleagues, and three MA students transcribed the interview data. After all the data were transcribed verbatim, the author listened to the recording data repeatedly to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions for the subsequent thematic analysis. Likewise, member checking was conducted by requesting respondents' opinions about the codes and themes extracted from the open-ended questionnaire; the respondents ultimately approved the generated themes. Moreover, in this phase, 30% of the data were also cross-checked by an applied linguist who has recently published papers on boredom to determine the inter-coder agreement on the extracted themes. The results of Cohen's Kappa coefficient indicated that the inter-coder agreement was 0.95. Finally, to add confirmability to the findings, the whole data analysis phase was audit trialed by another scholar who was given the data, codes, and generated themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This brought about agreements and disagreements on the interpretations and themes, which were later resolved via discussions and meetings. The qualitative data collection and transcription lasted for four months.

Data analysis

The data analysis was done thematically and inductively via MAXQDA software (v. 2020) with the author consulting with experts in the field regarding the data analysis process in online meetings. First, all the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were entered into the software to be prepared for coding. Second, the data were checked for consistency and relevance, and the existing errors were removed. Then, the codification process for each research question began using the "open coding," "axial coding," and "selective coding" model of qualitative data analysis proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). For the first research question which focused on Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of boredom experienced in their online classes, thematic analysis of the transcribed data was used iteratively

and recursively (Miles et al., 2013). In so doing, the six steps introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006) for conducting thematic analysis as an iterative and reflective process were followed. The steps included; data familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme defining and naming, and final report providing.

The researcher constantly moved back and forth between responses and codes/themes, and the most common phrases representing the teachers' perceptions of boredom were tallied along with illustrative comments. Moreover, to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the thematic analysis, Nowell et al.'s (2017) strategies were consulted (see Nowell et al., 2017, p. 4 for more detail).

As per the second and the third research questions, the researcher perused the data again and generated open codes for each question. The next step was producing themes or conducting axial coding in which the previously extracted open codes are compared and connected to form larger codes (Creswell, 2008). In this step, four themes (13 sub-themes) for the second research question, and four themes (21 sub-themes) for the third research question were generated. Next, the extracted themes were classified and put under larger categories in the "selective coding" stage (Creswell, 2008). The last step was preparing a detailed report of the analyzed data with extract samples, and making connections to the pertinent literature (Gao & Zhang, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, after the data analysis, credibility, confirmability, member checking, auditing, and researcher positionality were done by the author using the experts' views in the whole process. Despite some minor disagreements on the codification and categorization of special themes, there was a high agreement between the author and the experts.

Results

Boredom in different modes of instruction

The first research question sought to explore if Chinese EFL teachers have experienced boredom when teaching online and offline and their perceptions of boredom in each of these modes of delivery. The results indicated that "*online*" classes were considered the more boredom-inducing mode in instruction by a great majority of Chinese EFL teachers (82.87%). More specifically, they referred to "lack of convenient interaction", "lack of eye contact and facial expressions", "students' limited participation", and "difficulty in providing feedback and reaction" as the most common reasons for considering online delivery as more boring (Table 2). On the other hand, a number of respondents regarded the "*face-to-face*" mode of instruction as boring (11.11%). They defended their responses by arguing that

Mode of Instruction	Frequency	Percentage
Online	179	82.87
Face-to-Face	24	11.11
No Difference	13	6.01
Total	216	

in face-to-face classes, "the students are reluctant to speak out and answer the teacher's questions", "there is a lack of facilities", and "the traditional ways of instruction" generate more boredom in the students. Neutrally, some participants found "no difference" between the two named modes in causing boredom in teachers (6.01%).

The following section presents some representative sample responses posed by the participants in the interviews:

I think that <u>online classes are more boring</u>. Because it's hard to control the whole class, such as students' <u>participation</u> (Teacher 2, Interview).

Briefly speaking, <u>online classes seem to be more boring</u> because in online classes, <u>interaction</u> is <u>not as convenient</u> as in face-to-face classes (Teacher 3, Interview).

<u>Online classes may bring about more boredom</u> since students <u>are unable to see</u> their teachers face to face and are <u>inconvenient to interact</u> and ask questions in time; meanwhile, teachers are unable to get timely responses or <u>feedback</u> from the students (Teacher 6, Interview).

To me, <u>face-to-face classes are more boring</u> because in the real classroom, most (of the) students don't answer the questions even (if) they know how to answer, maybe they are <u>shy to speak</u> in front of the public (Teacher 9, Interview).

<u>Face-to-face classes may be more boring</u>, partly due to the fact that students usually feel timid and are <u>reluctant to speak out</u> in class. Another reason (for boredom) lies in <u>the lack of facilities</u> and resources in the face-to-face class, where there's only one computer for the teachers' use, and sometimes the Internet is inaccessible (Teacher 8, Interview).

In sum, the results of this research question demonstrated that Chinese EFL teachers mostly considered the online mode of instruction to be more boring, while a small group

disagreed and regarded face-to-face classes as more tedious. The rest found no difference between the modes of delivery in inducing boredom.

Causes of boredom

In response to the research question that explored the causes/antecedents of boredom among Chinese EFL teachers, the thematic analysis of the relevant data produced four general themes along with their sub-themes. The broad themes were "*student-related factors, task-related factors, IT-related factors*, and *teacher-related factors*" (Fig. 1). Among these themes, IT-related factors were the most frequently raised causes of boredom in the participants (89 references). This factor was comprised of four sub-themes, namely *the paucity of face-to-face communication* (51 references), *reduced interaction (T-ss/S-ss)* (32 references), *poor internet connection* (4 references), and *teacher-centered classes* (2 references). From these IT-related factors, *the paucity of face-to-face communication* was the most frequent cause of boredom in the participants who pointed to the "*lack of eye contact, lack of direct interaction*, and *inability to catch students' small signals*" as the reasons behind considering this source the main antecedent of Chinese EFL teachers' boredom in online education. Next, the participants referred to *reduced interaction* as the second most frequent sub-theme in this part. In this respect, they complained about "*the ineffective and untimely interaction between the teacher and students as well as among the students themselves*" (T54, T93). Additionally, there were two less frequent sub-themes under IT-related factors, including *poor Internet connection*, which was objected to and criticized by the teachers as it made them extremely frustrated with repetitive disconnections. Concerning this sub-theme, T29 maintained that "*the network infrastructure in our country is very poor*", and this caused "*online teaching platforms not to work well*" (T 35). The last sub-theme was *teacher-centered classes*, which was posed only by two participants, arguing that in online education, "*the classes are mostly controlled and managed*

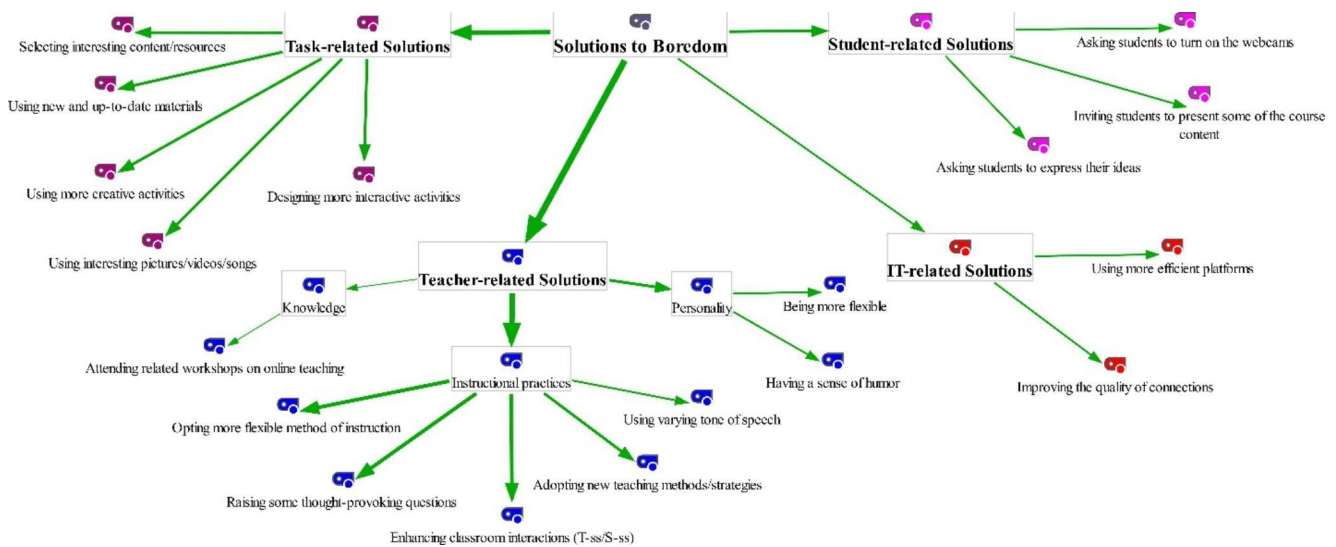**Fig. 1** Antecedents of Teachers' Boredom in Online Classes
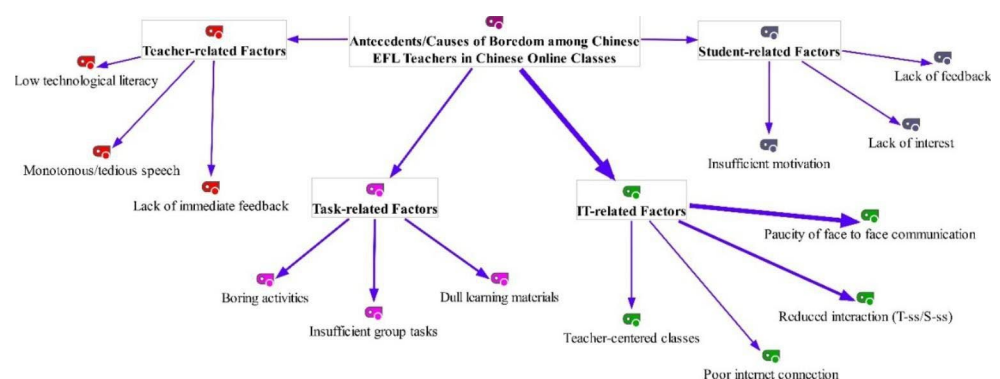
Fig. 2 Solutions to Teachers' Boredom in Online Classes

by the teacher with limited students' involvement in the process" (T 21, T 102).

The second most frequently raised factor leading to teacher boredom was *task-related factors* (16 references). They included the following sub-themes: *dull learning materials* (9 references), *boring activities* (5 references), and *insufficient group tasks* (2 references). The participants strongly complained about the existing materials and their tasks and activities, which were regarded to be mostly "unattractive, boring, and uninteresting". The third most common cause of boredom in teachers concerned *student-related factors* (15 references), under which the three sub-themes of *lack of Interest* (10 references), *insufficient motivation* (4 references), and *lack of feedback* (1 reference) emerged from the data. Specifically, the participants contended that online classes generate boredom in teachers as a result of students' lack of interest and motivation and their limited feedback and involvement during the class.

The last category of themes, with the lowest number of mentions by the participants, was *teacher-related factors* (8 references). This category was comprised of three sub-themes, namely, *technological illiteracy* (4 references), *monotonous/tedious speech* (3 references), and *lack of immediate feedback* (1 reference). According to some participants, *"unfamiliarity and limited proficiency in using modern technologies for teaching online"* (T 210, T 43) can lead to teacher boredom, as well. Another sub-theme of this factor was related to teachers' monotonous and lasting talks and presentations in the class. In this regard, the participants complained that in online classes, teachers speak tediously without involving the students or asking for their reactions and feedback. Finally, *lack of immediate feedback* was referred to only once by one of the participants (T 53), who

stated that "he cannot give students immediate feedback in online delivery" and this causes boredom.

Solutions to boredom

The third research question is aimed at examining Chinese EFL teachers' proposed solutions to minimize or eliminate their boredom in online education. As illustrated in Fig. 2, four categories of solutions were extracted from the data, including *teacher-related solutions*, *task-related solutions*, *student-related solutions*, and *IT-related solutions*. The most frequent category of solutions was the teacher-related category (73 references) which comprised solutions associated with teachers' *knowledge* (attending related workshops on online teaching), *instructional practices* (opting for more a flexible method of instruction, using a varying tone of speech, adopting new teaching methods/strategies, raising some thought-provoking questions, and enhancing classroom interactions (T-ss/S-ss)), and *personality* (being more flexible, having a sense of humor). More specifically, the most frequent solutions were related to teachers' instructional practices (81 references) and personality (29 references), and the least frequent sub-category concerned teachers' knowledge (3 references).

The second group of solutions was *task-related solutions* (40 references) which were divided into five themes, namely *using more creative activities, selecting interesting content/resources, using new and up-to-date materials, using interesting pictures/videos/songs*, and *designing more interactive activities*. Out of these propositions, *designing more interactive activities* (20 references) and *using interesting pictures/videos/songs* (9 references) were more emphasized by the participants. The next category of solutions to boredom was *student-related solutions* (8 references), which

encompassed the three themes of *expressing ideas, turning on the webcams*, and *presenting some of the course content*. These were related to involving the students in the class, and hearing their voices in the course as they commented:

> *It is a good idea to let students answer questions, present the content, express their opinions as much as possible, and get their voice throughout the course* (T211, T72, T51, T24).

The last category of suggestions was *IT-related solutions* (3 references), which involved two themes: *using more efficient platforms* and *improving the quality of connections*. The participants complained about the existing platforms for online teaching and the poor quality of internet connections in China. They also contended that solving these problems would decrease or remove teachers' sense of boredom. Two of the participants best exemplified this by commenting that:

> *I think one of the ways to prevent boredom is that we can improve the quality of the Internet connection and build reliable Internet facilities* (Teacher 159, Interview).
> *Employing more efficient and advanced platforms would be of high importance for mitigating the sense of boredom* (Teacher 110, Interview).

Discussion

The current study was an empirical attempt to unpack the causes of and solutions to Chinese EFL teachers' boredom during their online instruction due to the COVID-19 outbreak. It tried to bridge the existing gap in exploring Chinese EFL teachers' emotional concerns using a questionnaire and a series of interviews. The qualitative analysis of the participants' responses revealed that the Chinese EFL teachers mostly (82.87%) perceived that the "*online*" mode of teaching induced more boredom in comparison to the face-to-face mode of instruction (11.11%). The reasons behind teacher boredom in the online mode of instruction were the lack of interaction, body language, feedback, and students' limited participation. This can be ascribed to the newness of online education for the participants and limited dynamism (if any) in communications featuring this mode of instruction. This is consistent with the results obtained by Gao and Zhang (2020) who were doubtful about the effectiveness of online mode of instruction and maintained that the overall emotional tone of online settings varies from that of the traditional instructional contexts.

In sharp contrast, 11% of the participants saw face-to-face classes as more boring, and 6% perceived no difference

between the modes of instruction in generating teacher boredom. Some respondents referred to "shyness and reluctance" to speak out in face-to-face classes and "insufficient facilities" as less frequent causes of boredom in the Chinese EFL context. This can be attributed to the social context of Chinese EFL classes, where the students are hardly aware of the role of their emotions in L2 education. Therefore, it is possible to claim that when teachers witness students' unwillingness to participate in the lessons, different negative psycho-emotional consequences may take root in teachers such as boredom, anxiety, anger, demotivation, and many more. This is substantiated by Frenzel (2014) and Stephanou et al. (2013), who maintained that teachers may experience different negative emotions including boredom in response to students' classroom actions/behaviors like laziness, inadequate progress, and unwillingness together with the classroom context. Furthermore, the role of "insufficient facilities" in inducing boredom in EFL teachers can be ascribed to the limited logistical requirements of Asian educational contexts, where the classes usually include many students but little instructional equipment to teach and learn.

In unraveling the antecedents/causes of teacher boredom, in the second research question, the findings indicated that Chinese EFL teachers' boredom is generated by *student-related factors, task-related factors, IT-related factors*, and *teacher-related factors*. More particularly, most of the teachers regarded "IT-related" factors as the major cause of boredom. They further pointed to some dire shortcomings in online education such as ineffective classroom interactions, lack of feedback, absence of paralinguistic features, and insufficient Internet infrastructures in China, all leading to dull instruction. This finding partly echoes those of Derakhshan et al. (2021a) who ran a similar study in the EFL context of Iran, and regarded online issues as influential factors leading to teacher boredom. Possible justifications for this factor to be the most important cause of teacher boredom in China can be the abrupt shift of education from the traditional face-to-face mode of instruction to a new mode with which EFL teachers are still unfamiliar. Additionally, teachers' lack of TPACK and insufficient online teaching training or blended pedagogy can be possible reasons for this finding. Boredom might have also been aroused because of teachers' preference for and ease with face-to-face instruction and their inability to develop quick strategies to deal with technical hiccups in online teaching.

In this study, task-related factors were found as the second most frequent cause of teacher boredom with "dull, unattractive, and unengaging materials and activities" being the reasons for this feeling of boredom. Theoretically, this finding reflects the different models of boredom (the understimulation model, the menton theory, and the forced-effort model), which perceive boredom as the consequence of uninteresting and unchallenging classroom tasks. Likewise,

the results are in line with several empirical studies in which task-related factors had a considerable role in generating teacher boredom (e.g., Kruk & Zawodniak, 2020; Nakamura et al., 2021; Pawlak et al., 2020b; Zawodniak et al., 2021). Furthermore, this finding is echoed by Dumančić (2018), who ran a study on the causes of teacher boredom in Croatia and found unengaging tasks and subject matters as the main causes of teacher boredom. However, the results are inconsistent with that of Derakhshan et al. (2021b), who identified task-related factors as a less frequent cause of boredom in Iran. The results can be attributed to Chinese teachers' concern to try to converge and assimilate online classes with the traditional face-to-face classes where teachers would give many tasks to make sure the learners have understood the subject (Wang, 2021). In online classes, teachers might have attempted to reduce the knowledge gaps by offering numerous tasks and materials regardless of their quality, attraction, and students' level (Nakamura et al., 2021). Therefore, such an abundance of unengaging materials and activities proposed by the syllabus/materials designers to be used or the teachers themselves can be a major cause of boredom in academia.

Moreover, student-related factors were found as a source of teacher boredom in China, though infrequently posed by the participants in this study. More particularly, Chinese EFL teachers ascribed their boredom to their students' lack of interest, motivation, and feedback during the online mode of instruction. Theoretically, this finding is compatible with Frenzel's (2014) reciprocal model of teachers' emotions, which attributed the causes and outcomes of teachers' emotions to students' classroom behaviors. Likewise, the results are partially consistent with those of Nakamura et al. (2021) who found student-related factors, such as insufficient L2 skills, physical fatigue, and negative appraisal, as sources of boredom. In a similar manner, the findings reflect those obtained by Khajavy et al. (2018) who ran a qualitative study in Iran and found that teacher boredom is only triggered by students' demotivation and lack of collaboration. A possible logic for this finding can be the rush, during the first period of the pandemic, for integrating technologies into language teaching, which was previously less common in EFL contexts. To put it simply, with the outbreak of COVID-19 many educational centers had to resort to online education in which classroom interaction and students' involvement were limited. Hence, the students would demonstrate less interest and enthusiasm in such a remote mode of delivery producing a sense of boredom among both students and the teacher as two sides of the same coin. Additionally, teachers and materials can be the reasons behind students' lack of motivation and interest in online classes. In other words, teacher boredom can be shaped by materials and student-related factors.

Concerning the solutions to boredom, findings revealed four categories of suggestions to diminish Chinese EFL teachers' sense of boredom including *teacher-related solutions*, *task-related solutions*, *student-related solutions*, and *IT-related solutions*. Most frequently, the participants argued that teachers' knowledge considering online education can be a solution to their boredom.

More technically, they highlighted technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK), which is a framework for an effective integration of technology in teaching (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). This reflects problem-focused coping strategies that find the solution to a problem residing in the source itself (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). They also contended that instructional practices play a crucial role in reducing and eliminating teacher boredom, especially by using effective and flexible teaching methods/strategies, a varying tone of speech, engaging materials and tasks, and finally, increasing classroom interactions. This finding is in tune with the under-stimulation theory, which calls for engaging learning materials and practices to confront boredom (Larson & Richards, 1991). Likewise, the results lend support to those of Derakhshan et al. (2021a), who capitalized on the importance of stimulus-rich online contexts for instruction during the pandemic in Iran. Furthermore, teachers' sense of humor was found to reduce boredom in the current research, which is previously evidenced by Kruk (2019) and Victoria (2019), who maintained that a logical and timely use of humor by the teacher is a great source for improving motivation, passion, and attention among the learners. When students' motivation, passion, and attention enhance, it can be contended that, their classroom engagement increases, as well and this, in turn, can presumably minimize teachers' negative emotions (e.g., boredom). This shift toward using humor and resorting to a positive emotional response to the problem is echoed in emotion-focused coping strategies in managing negative emotions like boredom (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). A possible reason for this finding can be the participants' familiarity and cognizance of emotion-regulation strategies (Gross, 2014) and their own role as the first agents of mitigating boredom in online classes. Hence, they considered their own instructional practices, emotional responses, sense of humor, and playfulness the cures to teacher boredom.

In addition, task-related solutions were the second most frequently raised recommendations for fighting boredom in online classes. This can be explained by the fact that EFL teachers were abruptly forced to teach online without having time and expertise to prepare relevant and interesting tasks for each activity or subject. Consequently, the participants admitted this shortcoming and suggested useful ways to tackle boredom via embellishing classroom tasks. This is substantiated by Zawodniak et al. (2021) who considered language tasks one of the major sources of boredom against which effective techniques by the teachers can change

the situation. Moreover, it was demonstrated that student-related and IT-solutions are also effective in reducing and preventing boredom among EFL teachers. Although not frequently being expressed by the participants, they play a crucial role in the story in the sense that involving students in the class, considering their voices, and providing necessary Internet-related infrastructures definitely reduce the burden placed upon teachers' shoulders in the pandemic era. Consequently, the monotony of teaching and talking in a one-way process would be eradicated. This finding is well-buttressed by a groundbreaking study conducted by Derakhshan et al. (2021a), who pinpointed that students' engagement and participation in the class, having efficient teaching platforms, and a speedy and high-quality Internet connection is significant solutions for eliminating boredom in EFL contexts. Overall, it can be concluded that Chinese EFL teachers mostly consider teacher-and-task-related issues the main venues for solving the aversive sense of boredom.

Conclusion and implications

The concept of boredom as one of the most aversive emotions in education has grasped the attention of psychologists and educators. The growing body of knowledge in this domain reveals that the construct is still flourishing and requires more studies, especially in EFL/ESL contexts to provide a vivid image of this multi-faceted variable. To this end, this study explored the causes of and solutions to boredom experienced by Chinese EFL teachers during their online instruction, a mode of instructional delivery imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of thorough analyses indicated that Chinese teachers considered the online mode of instruction more boredom-inducing in comparison to the traditional face-to-face mode of instruction. It was also identified that boredom can be attributed to four sources, namely, student-related factors, task-related factors, IT-related factors, and teacher-related factors. Out of these, IT-related factors were found to cause the most experiences of boredom in teachers due to the abrupt shift of the teaching mode. Moreover, the study revealed that to solve this aversive feeling in teachers, teachers and practitioners should follow some suggestions which were, similarly, classified into teacher-related solutions, task-related solutions, student-related solutions, and IT-related solutions. More specifically, using engaging tasks/materials, effective methodology, and humor by the teacher together with having classroom interactions, student participation, and a suitable Internet connection were the most important solutions for teacher boredom.

Despite these insightful findings, this study suffers from some limitations like any piece of research. The first limitation pertains to the sample size. Although it seems sufficient for qualitative research, the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts. The second limitation is related to

the research instrument, which was an open-ended questionnaire permitting the participants to express their perspectives freely. However, it did not glean spontaneous responses from the teachers through spontaneous questions as is the case in semi-structured interviews. To overcome these limitations, different future studies are recommended. First, researchers can use other data collection tools such as diaries, portfolios, and audio journals to capture the dynamism and developmental paths of this negative feeling. Second, cross-cultural investigations are recommended to see if teachers from various cultures pinpoint different antecedents and solutions to the same problem or not. Third, experimental studies can be done to see if training courses affect/reduce teacher boredom. Next, future studies can be done on teacher boredom across majors, subjects, and activity types. Furthermore, similar studies can be conducted focusing on other stakeholders' perspectives, including those of students, school principals, and curriculum designers. Finally, boredom can be examined in association with many other PP variables like interpersonal communication factors to see if communication skills mitigate boredom or not (see Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). Moreover, the role of academic engagement, work engagement, teaching enthusiasm, and commitment in dampening EFL teachers' boredom can also shed more light on this negative emotion in language education.

Overall, this study can be beneficial for Chinese EFL teachers, materials designers, teacher trainers, and researchers. Teachers can use the findings to identify and confront the causes of boredom through appropriate solutions mentioned earlier. When they know the dynamism of classroom boredom and the coping strategies, they can minimize the damaging effects of this emotion on their pedagogical behaviors and practices. Additionally, EFL teachers can raise their knowledge of emotions in L2 education, especially in online mode of delivery. Moreover, materials developers can revise and improve their textbooks to prevent boredom and instead, add enjoyment to the included tasks. Interesting and engaging tasks and materials play a significant role in increasing teaching enthusiasm and engagement as two preventers of teacher boredom. The current textbooks have ignored the emotional side of L2 education while it is the core of learning (Derakhshan, 2022b). The results would also be helpful for teacher trainers who can offer workshops and training courses for pre-service and in-service teachers about the emotional aspects of language education and how to establish a lively and engaging online environment to remove or reduce the causes of teacher boredom. They can consider teacher-related factors and solutions to boredom in their training programs after asking teachers' perceptions and views. In a collaborative course, frequent coping strategies and solutions can be substantiated by groups of teachers. Finally, L2 scholars can benefit from this study in that their knowledge of boredom as a damaging emotion in L2 education enhances.

They can build on this study and run similar studies in the future focusing on cultural factors and developmental paths of boredom by using more qualitative and mixed-methods designs. Moreover, future studies can be carried out on specific times of instruction to see how teachers perceive and experience boredom in different circumstances.

Appendix (A). Open-ended questionnaire

Antecedents of and solutions to boredom among Chinese english language teachers

Dear English Language Teachers,

You are highly appreciated if you kindly and patiently fill out this questionnaire. Your valuable information will be used for research purposes, and it will be kept confidential. I believe that your valuable perceptions will add to the rigor and quality of this study.

The present study aims to find out the antecedents of and solutions to boredom in online classes.

For more information, you can keep in touch with the researcher, Dr. Yongliang Wang, and Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China, email: Godfreyeducation@163.com

I do appreciate your time.

Best,

The researcher.

1. Giving Consent.

I hereby declare that I voluntarily participated in this study. I let the researchers use my responses as data as far as my identity remains anonymous. In addition, the researchers guarantee that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

Yes.

No.

2. Demographic Information.

Male.

Female.

Age.

How old are you?

Major

Applied Linguistics

Linguistics

Philology

English Language Teaching

English Language Literature

TESL

TESOL

Other

Last academic degree obtained

PhD

MA

BA

Other

Teaching Experience.

How many years have you been teaching English?

3. Please answer the questions as completely as you can.

1. Have you ever felt bored when teaching offline and online classes? If so, what coping strategies do you use to mitigate this feeling? Please explain.
2. Which classes do you find more boring: face-to-face classes or online classes? Why? Please explain. Please explain.
3. Have you ever noticed any signs of boredom among your students? What do you do to mitigate this feeling among them? Please explain.
4. What strategies do you employ to help your students get over feeling of boredom during specific activities you mentioned in the previous question? Please explain.
5. What are the causes of boredom in your online classes? Please explain.
6. What solutions can you suggest to overcome the signs of boredom in your online classes? Please explain.

Appendix (B). Interview questions

1. Which type of classes do you find more boring, face-to-face classes or online classes?
2. What are the causes of boredom while you are having online classes?
3. What solutions can you suggest to overcome the signs of boredom of online classes.

Declarations

A competing interests statement The author declares that he has no competing interests.

Consent to participate Informed consent to participate was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication Informed consent for publication was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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