

CAUSES OF RETICENCE IN EFL CLASSROOMS: A STUDY OF CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study of students' reticence in Chinese EFL context. The participants were three teachers and 100 university freshmen from three proficiency levels enrolled in an English Listening & Speaking course. Using journals, observations and interviews as a technique of collecting data, the study revealed that (1) the majority of the participants were active during pair work but only a few volunteered to respond to their teachers or actively engaged in group discussions, (2) advanced-level students tended to be more active than their lower-level counterparts, and (3) multiple variables worked together to result in student reticence in EFL classrooms. The results indicate that more research needs to be done to help students become more active and proficient EFL learners.

Keywords: reticence, university students, Chinese EFL context

INTRODUCTION

Whether in second language learning situations such as native-speaking countries or in foreign language learning situations, second/foreign language learners, especially Asian learners, have often been observed to be quiet in language classrooms, rarely responding to teachers' questions, or actively taking part in classroom discussions (Chen, 2003; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 2001a, 2002b, 2003; Tsui, 1996; Zou, 2004). The students were found to be passive learners of the target language who chose not to use it most of the time. With the help of interviews and journals written by second/foreign language learners, researchers have found that students' reticence arises due to various reasons: fear of making mistakes, low target language proficiency, incomprehensible input, habits, lack of confidence, lack of experience with oral communication, personality variables and so on (Flowerdew *et al.*, 2000; Jackson, 2001a, 2003; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Tsui, 1996).

Based on six interviews of Japanese students at the University of Edinburgh, Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996) concluded that the students were reticent in EFL/ESL classrooms due to fear of public failure, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, low English proficiency, and inability to keep up with native speakers, incompetence in the rules and norms of English conversation, disorientation, and so on. This conclusion was supported by Jones' (1999) review of research on Non-Native Students' (NNS) oral behavior in English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

Similar findings were revealed in a number of studies in EFL situations, most of which were situated in Hong Kong (Flowerdew *et al.*, 2000; Jackson, 2001b, 2002b, 2003; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Tsui, 1996). On the basis of the analysis of interviews with 15 lecturers in a university in Hong Kong, Flowerdew *et al.* (2000) found that the students were rated as passive and reticent learners in the classroom by their lecturers who also considered their English poor. According to the interviewees, the students were unwilling to participate due to their fear of being embarrassed in front of their peers, their inability to understand concepts, and the passive learning styles acquired during their secondary schooling. It was also found that incomprehensible input and lack of preparation before coming to the class contributed to the students' reticence in the classroom. In addition, their perceptions of their own questions as unnecessary interruptions to the lecturer made them seldom talk in the classroom. These findings are, in general, in line with those of Tsui's (1996) and Jackson's (2001a, 2002a, 2002b, 2003).

Cortazzi and Jin (1996) asked 15 highly experienced Western teachers of English working in universities in Mainland China about Chinese students' learning styles. The study revealed that Chinese students were not active in class, unwilling to work in groups, shy and passive. In comparison with Western students' learning style, the researchers claimed that the students' reticence and passivity were closely related to the Chinese cultural tradition which stresses social hierarchy and face value. Although the findings were challenged by Stephens' (1997) study of 12 Chinese visiting scholars working in UK, several other researchers shared the same idea and maintained that the hierarchy of human relations in the Chinese culture may drive some Chinese students to respect authority and regard teachers as authority figures (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jackson, 2001b, 2002a; Ho & Crookall, 1995; Miller & Aldred, 2000). As a result, the students are reluctant to express their own ideas in the classroom.

It can be drawn from these studies that reticence, a common phenomenon in ESL/EFL classroom, is caused by a multitude of variables which may vary from context to context. And although there seemed to be

many studies on reticence in EFL contexts, the majority focused on Hong Kong learners of English, with very few in other EFL learning situations. Given the international status of English, this scarcity calls for more explorations on reticence in various situations to ultimately help students become more active and proficient learners. This study, therefore, aims to investigate students' reticence in a Chinese EFL context by answering the following two research questions:

- (1) Do Chinese students experience reticence in EFL classrooms?
- (2) What factors contribute to Chinese students' reticence in EFL classrooms?

METHOD

Participants

Three intact classes, with one class from each band group¹ enrolled in an English Listening & Speaking course at a university in Beijing, participated in the study. Among 100 freshman participants, 34 were band 1 students (five females and 29 males) with an average age of 18.3 studying in the Department of Fundamental Science, Engineering Physics, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, or Nuclear Engineering, 32 band 2 students (six females and 26 males) with an average age of 18.2 from the Department of Mechanical Engineering, Manufacturing, Automobile, Engineering Physics, Mechanics, Material Engineering, or Mathematics, and 34 were band 3 students (five females and 29 males) with an average age of 18.3 from the Department of Mechanical Engineering, Manufacturing, Automobile, Mechanics, Material Engineering, Energy Engineering, or Mathematics. Before entering the University, 63.3% of the band 1 students had never had any access to spoken English, whereas fewer bands 2 & 3 students (38.7% and 34.4% respectively) had never practiced oral English before.

Instruments

Reflective journals. According to Allwright (1983), and Bailey (1983), diaries and journals can provide additional data about personal and affective variables in language learning. To get an insider view of student

¹ The students were placed into different band groups ranging from 1 to 3 (band 1 is the lowest and band 3 the highest) according to their scores in the placement test upon entering the University. After a term's learning, they were often automatically promoted to a higher band group.

reticence in EFL classrooms, the participants were asked to write reflective journals on a weekly basis according to the topics provided beforehand in both Chinese and English. In addition to the topics suggested, the students could write about whatever related to their language learning.

Classroom observation. To compare students' self-reported participation and observed behavior in different classroom activities, each of the three classes was observed and video-taped.

Semi-structured interviews. Because interviews can "provide us with valuable information about language classes ..." (Block, 1997, p. 348), two high-reticent, three average-reticent and two low-reticent students from each class as well as their teachers were invited for a semi-structured interview to get a better understanding of student reticence in EFL classrooms. The interview questions for students covered such aspects as educational experience, family background, personal experience, behavior in English classes at the University, and reasons for students' reticence or active participation. To complement students' perceptions, interview questions for teachers' were designed to cover their identification of the most reticent/active, general reasons for the students' behavior, and strategies they had taken to help the students become more active. To avoid misunderstanding, all the interview questions were translated into Chinese before being implemented.

Procedure

The study was conducted during the first term of the academic year of 2003-2004. In their first lessons, the three teachers orally stated the course objectives and described the requirements of journal writing. The students started journal writing in the second week and kept on writing for six successive weeks. Finally, 30 band 1, 31 band 2 and 32 band 3 sets of journals were collected for analysis. During the last two months of the term, each class was observed and video-taped twice with a focus on oral activities. Each class meeting lasted 90 minutes. Toward the end of the term, the semi-structured interview was conducted in Mandarin Chinese and was audio-taped. Because one band 1 low-reticent student did not show up, 20 students and three teachers participated in the interview. Each student interview lasted around 50 minutes and each teacher interview lasted about 25 minutes.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and checked twice, which, along with the journals and observations, were subjected to a thematic content analysis. Since both journals and interviews in the present study were

conducted according to a set of key questions (themes), they could be best analyzed according to thematic units, which were identified “by their correspondence to a particular structural definition of the content of narratives, explanations, or interpretations” (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 62). The primary purpose was to identify the possible factors contributing to the students’ reticence or active involvement in oral activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students’ Reticence in EFL Classrooms

Students’ self-reported (un)willingness to communicate in class

As stated in the reflective journals, the students at three proficiency levels generally desired to learn and speak English well for various reasons such as “English is important and useful”, “I want to communicate with foreigners”, “speaking English well makes me more self-confident”, “I am interested in English”, and “it is a necessary ability for a university graduate”, and so on. This desire to learn spoken English well predisposed many students to be willing to communicate with others in English in the classroom, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Student’s expressed (un)willingness to communicate

Level	No. of participants	Willingness to speak English N(%)	Unwillingness to speak English N(%)	Not mentioned N(%)
Band 1	30	17 (56.7%)	7 (23.3%)	6 (20%)
Band 2	31	22 (71%)	4 (12.9%)	5 (16.1%)
Band 3	32	23 (71.9%)	1 (3.1%)	8 (25%)

As can be seen from Table 1, more than half of the students in each band group (56.7%, 71%, and 71.9% respectively) explicitly expressed their willingness to talk to others in English in class for a similar reason—in order to “improve spoken English” and/or “communicate with others”. Some students either thought it useless to talk with others or felt strange to speak English with people whose native language is also Chinese. Thus, they remained unwilling to communicate with others in English in class.

Students' participation in different classroom activities

Based on the students' self-reports in their reflective journals, in each lesson, three to five band 1, four to six band 2, and about one third of the band 3 students actively responded to the teacher; about two-thirds in each group claimed to be active during pair work. Very few people reported that they were active during group discussions because maybe group work was seldom formally required by the teachers. More than 60% of them in each group reported to be the most active during pair work while least to respond to their teachers. This was confirmed by both student and teacher interviewees who confided that few students actively volunteered to respond to the teacher in class though they were often encouraged to ask and answer questions. Nor would they argue against teachers or peer students in class, as they used to in the middle school. On the other hand, most of them felt relaxed during pair work and group work. During pair work, they, especially bands 2 and 3 students, usually stuck to speaking English until they really could not express their ideas in the language, as reflected by the student interviewees. By then, they had to switch to Chinese or fall into silence for a while.

This self-reported participation in EFL classrooms was further supported by video-taped observations. Generally speaking, in all the three classes, about one-third of the students responded actively to the teacher in chorus if the questions were easy to answer. Occasionally, one or two students would stand up to answer questions or state ideas in the public of the whole class. Few volunteered if the questions were difficult or challenging, with the rest either looking down at their desks or books or pretending to think about the questions. Nevertheless, except for a few who appeared to be uninterested in the questions, about two thirds of the students listened attentively. For pair work, most of the students were active, with a few spending much time looking up words in electronic dictionaries or thinking about what to say and how to say it.

On the whole, not many students were active to respond to their teachers, especially when the questions were fairly challenging. Previous studies (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 2001a; 2002a, Miller & Aldred, 2000; Tsui, 1996) found that the majority seemed to be active when speaking English to each other in pairs. The band 1 students were the least active in class, especially in responding to the teacher. Though not many students actively volunteered to answer questions, the band 2 students actively participated in pair work and sometimes group discussions. Most of the band 3 students were active in various classroom activities and supportive of each other in class.

Causes of Reticence in Oral English Lessons

In addition to the comments on students' participation in university EFL classrooms, both the students and the teachers were required to comment on what contributed to students' reticence in class. According to their self-reports in the journals and interviews, a range of factors contributed to the reticence such as low English proficiency, lack of familiarity with tasks, teaching style, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and incomprehensible input. The results are summed up in Table 2.

Table 2: Causes of Chinese university students' reticence in oral English language classrooms

	Band 1 (Total N = 30) N (%)	Band 2 (Total N = 31) N (%)	Band 3 (Total N = 32) N (%)	Teachers (Total N = 3) N (%)
Low English proficiency	19(63.3%)	13(41.9%)	12(37.5%)	2(66.7%)
Chinese cultural beliefs	14(46.7%)	12(38.7%)	15(46.9%)	1(33.3%)
Personality	14(46.7%)	13(41.9%)	10(31.3%)	2(66.7%)
Chinese educational system	5(16.7%)	13(41.9%)	11(34.4%)	2(66.7%)
Anxiety/fear of speaking/nervousness	7(23.3%)	10(32.3%)	7(21.9%)	0
Difficulty of the task	7(23.3%)	7(22.6%)	1(3.1%)	0
Fear of making mistakes	5(16.7%)	4(12.9%)	8(25%)	0
Lack of familiarity with others/ the new environment	2(6.7%)	2(6.5%)	3(9.4%)	0
No interest in the task	2(6.7%)	3(9.7%)	2(6.3%)	1(33.3%)
Teaching style (Don't offer much time to speak)	2(6.7%)	2(6.5%)	1(3.1%)	0
Fear of being laughed at	1(3.3%)	3(9.7%)	4(12.5%)	0
Lack of environment	0	2(6.5%)	1(3.1%)	0
Treat English as a subject	1(3.3%)	1(3.2%)	1(3.1%)	0
Don't know how to express ideas	2(6.7%)	2(6.5%)	1(3.1%)	1(33.3%)
Lack of familiarity with the task	1(3.3%)	3(9.7%)	2(6.3%)	0
Incomprehensible input	0	2(6.5%)	1(3.1%)	0

Lack of vocabulary	1(3.3%)	4(12.9%)	2(6.3%)	0
Lack of confidence	5(16.7%)	3(9.7%)	7(21.9%)	0
Poor pronunciation	1(3.3%)	0	2(6.3%)	0
Difference between Chinese and English	0	0	1(3.1%)	0
Expectation of something new/different from that in the middle school	0	0	1(3.1%)	0
Fear of being the focus of attention	0	0	1(3.1%)	0
Family communication pattern	0	0	1(3.1%)	0
Gender difference	1(3.3%)	0	0	0
No interest in English	1(3.3%)	0	0	0
Keeping quiet can make some students more serious and thus learn more knowledge	1(3.3%)	0	0	0
Don't know what to say about a topic because the students lack knowledge and experiences in many areas	0	0	0	3(75%)
Don't know that they should make use of what they've learned from texts	0	0	0	1(25%)
Don't feel well	0	0	0	1(25%)
Be lazy	0	0	0	2(50%)
Lack of preparation	0	0	0	1(25%)
Have no desire or need to learn English because they won't go abroad or work with English in the future	0	0	0	1(25%)
Haven't realized the importance of oral English	0	0	0	1(25%)

Among the factors, the most widely accepted ones were low English proficiency (63.3%, 41.9%, 37.5%, and 66.7% for bands 1, 2, 3 students and teachers respectively), Chinese cultural beliefs (46.7%, 38.7%, 46.9%, and

33.3% respectively), personality (mainly introversion and shyness based on their own description) (46.7%, 41.9%, 31.3%, and 66.7% respectively), the Chinese educational system (16.7%, 41.9%, 34.4%, and 66.7% respectively), and anxiety (23.3%, 32.3%, and 21.9% respectively). Low English proficiency was the greatest contributor to Chinese university students' reticence in oral English lessons, as a band 2 student said:

“I think what keeps me reticent is my poor English proficiency. I always cannot express my opinions in English. I lose many chances to show myself to the class. All is owing to my poor English proficiency.” (Wei, female, journal). This view was shared by the teachers as well, as the band 3 teacher described, most Chinese university students remain silent in class, especially the students with low English proficiency. I had taught such a class last year. They were band 1 students. Whatever I did, they just remained passive and silent. They would say something during pair work. But they often spoke Chinese. I think English proficiency was the main reason (female, interview)

Chinese cultural beliefs also played a major role in determining students' reticence in the language class, as found in a couple of previous studies (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 2001a, 2003; Sato, 1990). In the students' opinions, Chinese culture values modesty and doing things rather than showing off and talking about things. As the Chinese saying goes, “silence is gold”, “when we don't know much about something, we'd better not do it” (Huan, male, journal, band 2). Chinese culture also emphasizes respect for the elderly and the superior. Thus, in Chinese classrooms, teachers are often considered figures of authority and should be respected and obeyed, like that in other ELT classrooms (Chen, 2003; Phillips, 1997). Consequently, Chinese people prefer to be reserved and modest, and most of the students do not like to show themselves to others and thus keep quiet in class.

Otherwise, they might leave a bad impression on others, as a band 3 student stated:

“If you are too active, you will be thought of as one who likes to show off. People will not like you. So many people will not say anything although they are very knowledgeable and have their own opinions in the mind.” (Xia, female, journal)

Meanwhile, the Confucian ideology also makes students unwilling to volunteer to speak in class because:

“Chinese culture teaches us not to be the first nor last, so that the majority prefer to wait for someone to speak first rather than make themselves the first one to try.” (Mao, male, journal, band 2)

This finding seems to be in conformity with Bond’s (1996) proposal that Confucian ideology inhibits Chinese people from being active in class due to their awe of teachers. Nevertheless, it needs further research in that many interviewees recalled that many middle school students were in friendly relationships with their teachers.

As shown in Table 2, personality was another important factor for student’ reticence in oral English lessons at the tertiary level. Some university students kept quiet in class because they were too shy or introverted to speak to others, even in Chinese classes. Some just did not like to speak to others, as one band 2 student said:

“If one student doesn’t like speaking in front of others, no matter how easy the task is, he would not say a word about it.” (Xing, male, journal)

Some students preferred thinking to speaking though they could speak English quite well.

“In the classroom, though I didn’t answer any question, I think I could answer very well if the teacher asked me to. And to the teacher’s every question, I made a very good preparation.” (Ping, female, journal, band 2)

Chinese university students’ reticence in class was also attributed to the Chinese educational system by both student and teacher participants. The silence in the classroom is a historic question in Chinese universities.

“When we were in primary school, the teacher told us to be quiet in the classroom, listen to the teacher and speak only if the teacher asked you to do. The people who made noise were to be punished by the teacher. This means that the teacher was a powerful figure. These didn’t change when we grew up. When we were in the middle school, the teacher become even more powerful. ... Though everything changed in universities, time is needed to change this.” (Xiao, female, journal, band 2)

As a result, the students had formed the habit of waiting to be singled out, like those in Jackson's (2001a, 2002a) and Miller and Aldred's (2000) studies. Coupled with the testing system, Chinese students had to:

“Pay great attention to reading and writing, not to listening and speaking.” (Shuo, male, journal, band 2)

“It was true that students from the middle schools where a more communicative approach had been adopted could speak better English, as noted by the teachers, students from big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Dalian were more active because they had lessons taught by foreign teachers even in the middle school. But students from smaller cities and the countryside were quieter because the teaching was very traditional in the middle school. And they've become used to sitting there quietly and listening to their teachers.” (female, interview, band 3)

Unexpectedly, similar to Jackson's (2002a) study, anxiety was also regarded as one of the main reasons for students' reticence by the participants in all the band groups. Many students kept quiet because:

“They are too nervous to speak out.” (Zhao, male, journal, band 3)

Anxiety made many students unwilling and afraid to speak English to others in class.

In addition to these main reasons, the difficulty of the task, fear of making mistakes and being laughed at, and lack of familiarity with partners and the environment, etc. also functioned as factors for Chinese university students' reticence in oral English lessons. Nevertheless, students at different proficiency levels put varying weight on these different factors. For example, the difficulty of the task was considered as an important factor by bands 1 and 2 students but as a minor one by the band 3 participants. A reversed view was held for the other three factors—fear of making mistakes, fear of being laughed at and lack of confidence.

In addition, two interviewees, like those in Jackson's (2003) and Miller and Aldred's (2000) studies, also pointed out that some students remained silent because they were afraid that their peers thought that they liked to show off. Generally speaking, both teachers and students held positive attitudes towards active students in class. By contrast, some thought that they were too talkative and liked to show off and thus tried to separate them, as a band 1 student reflected:

“The teacher and other students would get impatient and thought why you had so much to ask.” (Dai, male, interview)

Furthermore, low motivation, though not explicitly identified by the student and teacher participants, was actually another cause for reticence. According to the students' self-reports in their journals and interviews, the majority of Chinese middle school students were motivated to learn English to get high marks in written tests and very few were motivated to learn spoken English. Not much change happened in the University. Since few lessons were offered every week, the students were either still motivated to learn English to get high marks in written tests such as College English Test (CET) bands 4 & 6² or lost motivation to learn it, let alone speaking English. Though some students planned to go abroad for further education or work with English in the future, the need was not so urgent in the first two university years. Coupled with the heavy load of their major courses and other reasons, many students were poorly/not motivated to learn English, especially spoken English, and thus unwilling to speak the language in the classroom.

In conclusion, like the findings of previous studies (Dwyer & Heller-Murphy, 1996; Flowerdew *et al.*, 2000; Jackson, 2001a, 2002a, 2003, Miller & Aldred, 2000; Tsui, 1996), a host of variables were found to contribute to students' reticence in oral English lessons at the tertiary level. Similar to their Hong Kong counterparts (Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Tsui, 1996), some of these students remained silent because they treated English as a subject rather than a language. In their mind, it was enough and necessary to have a good mastery of English words and grammar so that they could read and write. Interestingly, just as Keaten and Kelly (2000) claimed that reticent people tended to underestimate potential rewards and overestimate potential punishments. One band 1 student also held the belief that keeping quiet could make him more attentive in class and thus acquire more knowledge. In the teachers' eyes, on the other hand, laziness and lack of adequate knowledge also forced some students to be quiet in the language class.

When asked how to help students become more active in EFL classrooms, however, most of the teacher and student participants felt helpless. Except for routine expressions such as “be more active” and “take the chance”, the teachers felt that they could do nothing due to limited time and big class size. Likewise, the students mainly depended on a gradual change as their exposure to spoken English increased.

² College English Test bands 4 & 6 are the most important English tests for undergraduate and graduate non-English majors respectively in Mainland China.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In light of the results, the following can be concluded about Chinese university students' participation in EFL classrooms.

Concerning whether Chinese university students remained silent in EFL classrooms, it can be claimed that most of them were willing to communicate in English, which, however, not necessarily led to the actual use of the target language. The majority of the students at varying proficiency levels were actively involved in pair work, but only a few volunteered to respond to their teachers or to be active participants in group discussions. When it comes to English proficiency, students at a higher level behaved more actively than those at a lower level in various classroom activities.

With regard to what contributed to students' reticence in EFL classrooms, a multitude of variables was identified such as cultural beliefs, past educational experiences, low English proficiency, lack of practice and task difficulty. Among these variables, the most prominent ones were low English proficiency, Chinese cultural beliefs, personality, Chinese educational system, and anxiety. As Jackson claimed (2002b, 2003), a complex set of socio-cultural, psychological, educational, affective, contextual and other variables contributes to students' reticence and makes it a serious problem in second/foreign language learning.

Worse still, most of the teacher and student participants felt helpless about being reticent in EFL classrooms. Thus, while becoming aware of the existence of reticence in EFL classrooms, EFL teachers should intentionally encourage the reticents to become more active by giving them more speaking chances and creating a friendly and supportive classroom-learning environment. In order to help passive and reticent students become more active, it is also better for EFL teachers to state course objectives and explain the communicative language teaching method (CLT) clearly to their students in the first lesson(s). With a clear idea of course objectives, students should be able to adjust their own expectations and goals and have a better idea of what they need to do to be successful (Johnson, 1995). An explanation of CLT in the first lesson(s) may facilitate students' understanding of the new teaching and learning style: its mode and purpose, teacher and student roles in CLT classrooms, and so on. This knowledge may help students understand their new roles as well as those of their teachers, which differ from traditional classrooms. It may also facilitate students' understanding of their own responsibilities in learning spoken English and predispose them not to expect teachers to lecture a lot in class. Moreover, it can help to reduce students' reticence and anxiety resulting

from novelty. To promote students' active participation in EFL classrooms, it is also advisable for EFL teachers to enhance their interest in speaking/using the language by providing interesting and various topics and organizing a variety of activities. This may not only help them become more interested in English but also more motivated to learn the target language in class. In addition, scaffolding topics may help students' communication more active and successful (Prégent, 1994). This can be done by giving students topics in advance along with a package of reading materials or a list of recommended books, films and/or websites, etc., or giving students a list of vocabulary and sentence structures that are essential for the discussion of a topic, and/or making use of media to facilitate students' understanding and discussion of a topic, and so on.

EFL learners, on the other hand, can work hard to have large vocabulary and to be supportive of each other when speaking English in class. Thus, they may not become so afraid of making mistakes but confident and more willing to speak the target language. This, however, needs further exploration to ultimately improve the students' learning of oral English in foreign language contexts.

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