

Coaxing, Begging and Pleading for a Response: Reticence among Iranian EFL StudentsZahra Hashemi ¹ (MA), Maryam Hadavi ² (MSc), Nematullah Shomoossi ³ (PhD), Mohsen Rezaeian ⁴ (PhD)¹. Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences, Rafsanjan, IranE-mail: zhashemi2005@yahoo.com². Department of Anesthseiology, Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences, Rafsanjan, Iran³. Sabzevar University of Medical Sciences, Sabzevar, IranE-mail: nshomoossi@yahoo.com⁴. Professor of Social Medicine, Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences, Rafsanjan, Iran

Abstract: Reticence is a complex multidimensional phenomenon which exists in foreign language classrooms causing a sense of passivity for the students and frustration for the teachers. This paper reports the causes of reticence among EFL students at Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences, Iran. 190 students were randomly selected (2010) and were studied for their reticence reasons. To measure student's general tendency to avoid spoken communication, the 20-item Unwillingness to Communicate Scale (UCS) was used, which measures two dimensions of reticence: Approach Avoidance (AA) and Reward (R). Using a Likert scale, the obtained data were analyzed in SPSS and the results were reported using descriptive statistics. Based on the statistical analyses, we concluded that the participants were aware of the value of oral communication in the classrooms, and those who regarded themselves as more proficient in English were more cooperative and willing to talk and get into discussions in the classrooms. The participants were very reluctant to talk and apprehensive about speaking English in front of other students or teachers.

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Introduction

Language learning as a means of communication forms a large part of a person's identity. As Horwitz and colleagues (1986, p.128) state: any performance in second language (L2) is likely to challenge an individual's self concept as a competent communicator. Competence is also closely related to the issue of reticence in EFL English classrooms. It has been noted that of the four skills that make up language proficiency, *oral participation* is the most observable phenomenon (Tsou, 2005). But reticence or other forms of communication *apprehension* is a problem that almost all language teachers have faced.

Observations in English language classrooms have also indicated that Asian students are particularly more passive and reticent in the English language classrooms (Liu & Jackson, 2009; Liu, Zhang & Lu, 2011). Morita (2004) firmly states that Asians in general, Asian women in particular, tend to be quiet, passive, timid, or indirect. No doubt, English instructors in Iran can attest too that this happens in the EFL environment of Iranian English learners. In these classes, no matter how much effort, coaxing, begging, and pleading is put forward, a considerable number of medical students are reluctant to either communicate or participate in the class discussions. When singled out, usually in an

inaudible voice they are very reluctant, and might say something like: "please ask someone else, I am not prepared today". When asked why they prefer to be silent, they point out to many factors including shyness, low English proficiency, task difficulty and fear of making mistakes (Eslamirasekh, Shomoossi & Soleimani, 2009). Researchers have cited these and many similar factors for the reluctance and apprehension of the ESL/EFL learners to speak, which range from low levels of English proficiency (Cheng, 2000; Kim, 2006) to cultural beliefs (Jones, 1999; Morita 2000 & 2004), educational background, lack of confidence, expectations of the instructors and not understanding the input (Li, 1998; Jackson, 2002; Donald, 2010). To the knowledge of the authors, there has been no considerable and solid research done on the issue of reticence among the Iranian EFL students; this article, therefore, reports a study on the causes of reticence and passivity of the EFL students at a major medical university in Iran (i.e. Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences or RUMS in short), in the English language classes and its pedagogical implications in the long run.

Review of literature

Although oral communication skills are associated with creativity in developing a foreign language (see Shomoossi & Majidifard, 2013), it has been reported that more than a third of students in

language classes remain reticent and are unwilling to express their ideas in front of other students (Liu et al, 2011). This apprehension and anxiety in the long run causes avoidance, and the students fail to experience the practice necessary for the development of true competence, as a consequence. This is especially more true for the medical students who need verbal skills in order to pursue their academic inspirations; that is why researchers have pointed out, reticence is a multidimensional phenomenon which acts as a debilitator (Liu, et al., 2011).

Reticence has been defined as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1977). Reticent students are said to use incomprehensible language and display bodily tension, avert their gaze and show less facial pleasantness, nodding, and animation (Burgoon et al., 1987: 121).

In the past decades, a large number of studies have been conducted to explore the reasons for the reticence of the EFL students in the language learning classrooms (Chen, 2003; Flowerdew, Miller & Li, 2000; Liu & Jackson, 2009). The reasons for this lack of participation in the classrooms and reticence have been varied, and second language researchers have cited the following reasons: educational and cultural backgrounds, embarrassment, low confidence, low English proficiency, previous experiences with speaking in class, personality traits, fear of losing face and task difficulty (Liu & Jackson, 2009). Tsui (1996) also found that most of the teachers attributed students' reticence to low English proficiency; as one teacher explained, "I think the students' failure to respond to teachers' question was a result less from lack of knowledge but more of the insufficient English proficiency" (p. 148). The second reason commonly mentioned was students' lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes and being laughed at. Consequently, the students were reluctant to answer in front of the whole class, and when called on by their teacher spoke in a barely audible voice. The teachers' intolerance of silence was also considered a factor. Many teachers reported that they themselves disliked or were afraid of silence; they felt uneasy or impatient when failing to gain a response from students. Thus when no response was forthcoming, teachers would repeat or modify the question, quickly ask another student, or provide the answer themselves.

Jones (1999), on the other hand, has argued that East Asian students appeared to be "slow" in providing an answer because they needed a moment's reflection and this "slowness" in participation was a cultural characteristic of them, not a sign of fear or

passivity. In addition, uneven allocation of turns and incomprehensible input appeared to promote reticence. In such a setting, the students who were singled out for questions seemed to feel being under pressure and remained silent. But as Donald (2010) points out, establishing an unambiguous relationship between reticence and language acquisition is problematic because of the nature of this condition, as learners might internalize the reasons they have for not speaking in class. Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996) has found that reticent students fear public failure, are afraid of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and are incompetent in the rules and norms of English conversation. Japanese students are nervous about asking questions in class because they were unsure if a question was appropriate and they would choose to ask questions after class, only with teachers (Chen, 2003: 267). McDaniel (1993) states that Japan is a culture which emphasizes social harmony; and this in turn would lead to the use of non-verbal communication, where junior members become passive as a result. Of course, these factors by themselves could cause a language learner to prefer to remain silent. Language researchers also believe that these factors are intertwined (Van Worde, 2003: 5) and need to be explored in order to find out the underlying causes of reticence and reluctance to speak in class. McCroskey and colleagues (1985) found that even the best educated ESL learners are apprehensive when speaking in English and hope that "we don't talk to them in English."

Jackson's longitudinal investigation at a major university in Hong Kong revealed the following reasons for the student's unwillingness to participate in classroom discussions: lack of vocabulary, unwillingness to challenge professors, fear of losing face, personality, fear of speaking, lack of familiarity with the cases, habit formed in the past learning, preference for harmony, reluctance to be the center of attention, anxiety and lack of incentive.

Liu and Littlewood (1997), on the other hand, studied the student's attitudes toward English lessons in Hong Kong, and concluded that students adopted a positive attitude towards participation in classroom discourse. With the advent of globalization (Ketabi & Shomoossi, 2007), there is a pressing need for EFL teachers to help reticent students develop the skills and confidence needed to take an active role in oral English lessons. As participation in the classroom is a very important aspect in language learning, it is important that students produce the language that they are studying.

Of course, we must make a distinction between reticence and reluctance to speak. The word *reticent* means quiet, restrained, unwilling to

communicate. McCroskey (1977) defines reticence as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons." Despite the unwillingness component, reticent imparts less of a negative feeling, but reluctance means resisting and unwilling; there is a strong negative connotation attached to reluctance.

Today, all the Iranian students study English as a foreign language but the long process of learning English has not been very successful and neither the students nor teachers are satisfied with English proficiency of Iranian students. Research has shown that if a student is apprehensive about communicating in his second language, it is likely that he will avoid doing so; as a result, s/he fails to experience the practice necessary to the development of true competence in the language (McCroskey et al., 1985).

Materials and methods

In this cross sectional study, a convenient random sample of 190 medical students who were studying at RUMS, Iran (2010) participated were selected. The background questionnaire was also designed to gather demographic data about the participants: such as their gender, age, university major, and English learning background.

Their reticence in speech communication was measured through the 24-item Unwillingness to Communicate Scale (UCS) (Burgoon & Koper, 1984). The questionnaire measures two dimensions of communication reticence: Approach Avoidance (AA) and Reward (A). However, the present study relying mostly on Liu and Jackson (2008), adopted a short form of the UCS as 20 items (10 items for AA and 10 items for R) in order to measure the participants' general tendency in avoiding the oral communication in the classroom.

Using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree, all the items were translated into Persian. The questionnaire was given to participants to get their impressions and responses; the researcher was present to answer likely questions by the participants. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire was already considered by similar studies (e.g., Liu & Jackson, 2007 & 2008).

The allocated time for answering the survey was 20 minutes. Data were analyzed in SPSS and results were reported using descriptive statistics such tables and numerical indices. Parametric tests such as t-test and non-parametric tests such Chi Square tests were used to compare groups.

Results

Forty five participants (23.6%) were medical students, 49 dentistry students (25.7%) and 95

paramedical students (49.7%). The mean age of the medical students was 18.56 ± 0.89 years; the dentistry students 19.04 ± 0.76 and paramedical students 19.09 ± 0.84 years. There was no statistical difference as for the age of the participants. The distribution of female participants was 42.2% (medical), 26.5% (dentistry) and 26.3% (paramedical); the rest were male.

The participants' responses to the UCS items are presented below (see Table 1). Evaluation of the responses to the UCS which measures the extent to which the students remained unwilling to communicate in oral English classrooms indicated that 46.3% of the students were afraid to speak up in conversations (item 1). The paramedical students (45.3%) and the medical students (49%) indicated lowest and highest scores respectively for this item (*I'm afraid to speak up in conversations*).

Fifty three point seven percent of the students responded positively to item number 4 (*I like to get involved in group discussions*) while 21.6% of the students responded positively to item 9 (*During a conversation, I prefer to talk rather than listen*) and 48.9% disagreed with item 9, and seemed to like to talk more than to listen. The viewpoints on item 7 (*I am afraid to express myself in a group*) and item 8 (*I avoid group discussions*) also indicated that only 15.3% of the students avoided group discussions and the majority (63.7%) were not afraid to speak up in group discussions.

Fifty two point one percent of the students indicated that they became nervous when talking to others (item 5), and 32.2% indicated that they had no stress while talking to others. Also, in response to item number 6 (*I have no fears about expressing myself in a group*), 36.8% responded negatively, indicating that they had fears while they spoke to others, although 49.5% of the students in response to item 2 (*I talk less because I'm shy*) had not agreed that their reticence is because of shyness; for this item, 31.2% of the students had responded positively and considered themselves shy.

In this regard, 47.4% of the participants had indicated that it was easy for them to talk to strangers (item 10), while 8.4% considered talking to others a waste of time (item 20). Item 14 (*I don't ask for advice from family or friends when I have to make decisions*), and item 18 (*My friends seek my opinions and advice*) generated interesting results. A large number of the participants both got the advice and opinions of others (74.7%) and gave opinions and advice to others (65.3%). In response to items 12 and 17 regarding listening to their ideas and suggestions, almost 80% of the students had positive attitude and indicated that family and friends showed interest in their ideas; only 12.6% believed that their friends and

family members had no interest in their ideas and suggestions.

The frequency and percentage of each item, and their means, standard deviation, mode, median,

and range were also calculated to provide an indication of the students' reticence levels for the group.

Table 1 - UCS Items with Numbers and Percentages of Students Selecting Each Alternative (N = 190)

Items	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
1. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations	33	45	24	69	19	2.98	1.305
2. I talk less because I'm shy.	40	54	37	52	7	2.64	1.194
3. I talk a lot because I am not shy.	37	77	49	22	5	2.39	1.102
4. I like to get involved in group discussions	17	29	42	70	32	3.39	1.254
5. I feel nervous when I have to speak to others.	14	49	28	80	19	3.24	1.222
6. I have no fears about expressing myself in a group.	9	61	36	62	22	3.14	1.134
7. I am afraid to express myself in a group.	31	90	37	29	3	2.38	0.984
8. I avoid group discussions.	37	83	41	25	4	2.35	1.005
9. During a conversation, I prefer to talk rather than listen.	25	68	56	35	6	2.63	1.030
10. I find it easy to make conversation with strangers.	16	48	36	63	27	3.19	1.208
11. I don't think my friends are honest in their communication with me.	17	82	55	29	7	2.62	0.973
12. My friends and family don't listen to my ideas and suggestions.	60	98	19	7	6	1.95	0.922
13. I think my friends are truthful with me.	11	27	51	90	11	3.33	0.987
14. I don't ask for advice from family or friends when I have to make decisions.	23	119	24	18	6	2.29	0.912
15. I believe my friends and family understand my feelings.	9	24	36	97	24	3.54	1.021
16. My family doesn't enjoy discussing my interests and activities with me	56	88	22	18	6	2.11	1.034
17. My friends and family listen to my ideas and suggestions.	5	10	23	122	30	3.87	0.917
18. My friends seek my opinions and advice.	4	10	52	107	17	3.65	0.801
19. Other people are friendly only because they want something out of me.	12	77	45	41	15	2.84	1.082
20. Talking to other people is just a waste of time.	62	84	28	10	6	2.04	1.088

Note. 1: Strongly disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neither disagree nor agree; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly agree.

Discussion

The present study was intended to investigate the causes of reticence and passivity of the EFL students at a major medical university in Iran (i.e. Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences or RUMS in short), in the English language classes and its pedagogical implications in the long run. It was observed that most students were afraid to speak up in conversations, preferred to listen in conversations rather than to talk, felt nervous or feared when expressing oneself in a group, felt shy in cases, and found socially acceptable for their status in getting or giving advice from and to others.

Generally speaking, reticence is a challenge for both EFL teachers and students, because it discourages the English teachers, and makes the students less confident and uneasy in the classrooms. According to Friedman (1980), reticence occurs when the ability and desire to participate in discussions are present, but the process of verbalizing is inhibited; also, as he points out, the degree of shyness or range of situations that it affects, varies greatly among the students.

As found in the present study and similar studies (e.g., Liu & Jackson, 2008; Park & Oxford, 1998), a lot of students prefer to be reticent and passive language learners, which no doubt damages their language learning skills. On the other hand, the teachers might perceive these students as less capable and pay less attention to them, which damages their language learning further more.

In the present study, 46.3% of the students indicated that they were afraid to speak up in conversations; also, 53.7% of them indicated that they liked to get involved in the group discussions; these results show that although a large number of participants are shy and afraid to take part in discussions, and may find the class environment threatening, but a good number of them like and enjoy participation and getting involved in discussions. However, what might keep them from participating is more than shyness and anxiety (see also Shomoossi, Kassaian & Ketabi, 2009; Shomoossi, Kooshan & Ketabi, 2008). Also, they might be afraid of making errors and losing face.

Another interesting finding of the present study was the fact that the paramedical students (45.3%) and the medical students (49%) indicated lowest and highest scores respectively for item 1 (*I'm afraid to speak up in conversations*). This is an interesting trend, as usually the medical students are considered to be brighter, hard working and high achievers. As with the rest of the students, they had to take part in the competitive National University Entrance Examination (NUEE) and then be ranked in comparison with other test takers. The better a student is ranked, the higher the probability of entering the university and the field of their choice. The students with worse rankings are left to choose between the less desired remaining fields, such as nursing, usually without any interest or motivation. The results of the NUEE indicate that the medical students are more proficient in English and have been accepted in the first field of their choice; they are very determined and hardworking and usually talkative by nature. Their course work is of course more challenging and they need advanced communication skills to interact with their instructors and teaching staff. Therefore, it is rather curious that they had indicated to have communication apprehension.

Liu and colleagues (2011) examined reticence and anxiety among Chinese students in an English for specific purposes (ESP) poetry class; they reported that many of their students were unwilling to risk using English in the class despite the fact that they were advanced learners, and had indicated a desire to interact with others for various purposes. Also, even though these students were fluent in English and normally had no difficulty using the language, they did not feel confident and remained passive and reticent in the class.

Holbrook (1987) believes that the consequences of communication apprehension and reticence are emotional, educational and social: shy and reticent students tend to confine their career aspirations to vocations that require little oral communication. They seem to have a higher need to avoid failure, and they have less achievement or success motivation than other students. Therefore, EFL teachers should keep the classroom environment relaxing and non-threatening so that the students feel easy and less anxious about talking and participating in the classrooms. In a previous study (Hashemi, Hadavi & Rezaeian, 2012), it was found that the students were highly motivated to learn English and were willing to work hard to learn it. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for the EFL teachers to promote students' active participation in the classrooms and enhance the students' interest in and motivation to speak the language. Friedman (1980) suggests that

teachers should encourage students to get to know one another at the beginning of the course and to give them choice and power in choosing their partners in the discussions.

One factor that might be worth noting is what Liu and colleagues (2011) found out in the process of their study, which was the intimidation factor; they also reported that some students chose to be reticent because others were too active. This could be considered a very important factor in the EFL Iranian classrooms because the students are admitted from all over the country, ranging from affluent cities to less affluent and underprivileged cities. The affluent students have usually attended private English classes during their high school and feel more confident using the language. Therefore, underprivileged students because of their social status, lack of training and different and probably less acceptable accents are more hesitant to talk. They might feel intimidation and also fear being ridiculed by other students. Bailey (1983) considered peer pressure as a great cause for foreign language anxiety in the class.

Conclusion

Considering the fact that most students feel nervous when talking to others and a large number of them also feel nervous talking about themselves, it is suggested that more attention be paid to this problem. Most participants are aware of the value of speaking in the classrooms but those who regard themselves as more proficient in English prove to be more cooperative, willing to talk, and get involved in the classrooms discussions. However, fear of making errors and mistakes is one factor which might limit students' oral participation in the classrooms. Students then need to realize that making mistakes and errors are a vital part of learning a second language. In the EFL classrooms, students need to take responsibility for their own learning, and as Liu (2006 & 2007) points out EFL students should also be aware of and acknowledge the existence of reticence in oral English language classrooms. Also, they should take the initiative to seek strategies to deal with it. Further studies should also be conducted to better understand the impacts of reticence on language learning and gain better understanding of the causes of the students' reticence and passivity.

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