

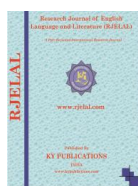


IDENTIFYING THE EFFECT OF LINGUISTIC AND EDUCATIONAL FACTORS ON PRE-INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS' RETICENCE IN SPEAKING ENGLISH

To Thi Le

Lecturer, Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment, Vietnam

Email: lett@hcmunre.edu.vn



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Abstract

Reticence in second / foreign language classes has long been a challenge for both teachers and students (Liu & Jackson, 2009). However, few studies have been conducted in Vietnamese contexts about this phenomenon. This primarily quantitative analysis paper was to investigate the linguistics and educational factors that contributed to students' reticence, helping reticent students develop the skills and confidence needed to take an active role in oral English lessons. Nine teachers of English and 320 first year college students at HCM City University of Natural Resources and Environment participated in the current study. Data collection was from two questionnaires to the instructors and the students. The results of the study clearly pointed out a range of factors contributed to the reticence such as low English proficiency, low listening ability, and poor pronunciation. From discussions, some difficulties in the process of teaching speaking skills were indicated, and possible solutions were suggested for teachers and students. The findings of the study help the teachers and students to be aware of the influential factors that reticence can have on EFL students' speaking performance and their learning achievement.

Keywords: linguistics and educational factors, reticence, speaking performance

Introduction

Being aware of the importance of students' participation in learning speaking, teachers always try to involve students in speaking activities. However, reticence in second / foreign language classes has long been one of the most problematic areas for both teachers and students (Liu & Jackson, 2009). In recent ESL/EFL literature, Asian learners of ESL/EFL have been observed to be quiet in language classrooms, rarely responding to teacher's questions, or actively taking part in classroom discussions (Tsui, 1996; Jackson 2001, 2002, 2004). The students were found to be reticent and passive learners of the target language who choose not to use it most of the time. It cannot be denied that

reticence in language learning has much influence on EFL learners, especially reticence in oral skills. Zhang and Head (2010) in their recent research showed that reticence to participate in speaking activities was preventing learners from making progress and achieving the outcomes intended for the course. Swain (1985) also highlighted that students who are passive and reticent in class have fewer opportunities to practice the language and therefore, make slower progress. As a result, the slower the progress they make, the less likely they are to perform well when called upon to speak.

At HCMC University of Natural Resources and Environment (NREU), English is one of the

compulsory subjects that students have to study for two semesters of about 90 periods. From the classroom observations in academic year 2019 – 2020 (required by the school managers), the researcher found that most of the teachers always tried to use variety of activities in teaching speaking. Some of them even encouraged their students to speak in class by giving plus marks for the midterm test. These teachers assessed students' speaking skills through variety of speaking activities such as group presentations, personal performance and assignments. In spite of the teachers' efforts to motivate students' participation in classroom activities, the students were still very reticent and passive. Similar to the findings of Tsui (1996) and Zhang and Head (2010), some of the students rarely responded to teacher's questions, or actively taking part in classroom discussions. Some chose to be silent or sat at the back of the classroom to avoid being noticed and called upon to participate. Others simply sat there doing nothing but listening. Many of them looked nervous when they were called upon to speak in front of the class. In general, most of students withdrew from voluntary participation in activities which required them to speak, and adopted generally passive role in the classroom. These negative attitudes and behaviors led to frustration and failure for both the teachers and the learners. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to uncover students' and teachers' perceptions towards students' reticence in terms of linguistic and educational factors;

This study serves as a reference for the teachers to be aware of the influence that reticence can have on EFL students' speaking performance. In addition, its findings will help the students to recognize the factors that lead to their reticence; thus, they can cope with these factors and achieve speaking skills to get effective communication. Besides, it is expected that its findings will contribute to the faculty to be aware of the difficulties that teachers and students are facing, and have a close management of curriculum and teaching activities.

Literature review

Linguistic and educational factors

As found in many studies, linguistic and educational factors are identified as major factors that hindered the students from talking to others in English in class (Tsui, 1996; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Cheng, 2000; Flowerdrew et al., 2000; Liu, 2005a, 2005b; Zhang, 2006). According to Walsh (2006), learners often find themselves in a "disadvantaged" position during teacher-student interaction: in order to respond to the teacher, students must first understand the question, interpret it, and formulate a reply before finally uttering a response. This means that gaps in linguistic ability may affect this chain of processes at any point.

Tsui (1996) implemented a qualitative research to examine students' reticence and anxiety in EFL learning. In this study, 38 EFL teachers working in secondary schools in Hong Kong were asked to reflect on their own teaching and identify a specific problem that might form the basis for classroom action research. Over 70% of a group of 38 teachers identified getting more students oral response as one of their major problems. They all viewed reticence as a major problem in their classrooms, and their comments express frustration at the behavior of their students who are "unable to bring themselves to participate actively in class"; "generally shy, passive, and unwilling to speak in English"; and "most of them simply sit there doing nothing but listening or sometimes daydreaming". The study also identified five principal factors accounting for the reluctance of students to speak up in class: students' perceived low proficiency in English; students' fear of mistakes and derision; teachers' intolerance of silence; uneven allocation of turns; and incomprehensible input. Clearly, linguistic and educational factors were identified as major causes for students' reluctance to raise their voice in class.

Among the factors which made ESL students have great difficulty with classroom participation, according to Ferris and Tagg (1996), are students' inability to ask and respond to questions, and low listening ability. Besides, cultural inhibition and shyness about speaking up in class are also counted

as factors contributed to students' reticence. The study also suggested that in order to help students actively participate in listening and speaking activities, ESL instructors should give students opportunities to practice listening to real lectures by a variety of speakers, interact with native speakers, and cope with genre-specific vocabulary, reading materials, and writing tasks.

Flowerdew et al. (2000) investigated to find out the reasons for students' unwillingness to participate in classroom activities. The results revealed that student's low English proficiency, inability to understand concepts, fear of being embarrassed in front of their peers, and the passive learning styles acquired during their secondary schooling were the main factors contributed to students' reticence. It was also found that incomprehensible input and lack of preparation before coming to the class contributed to the students' reticence in the classroom. It can be concluded from these findings that linguistic and educational factors seemed to be greatest contributors to students' reticence.

In order to argue that cultural attributes of Asian societies are often cited as the main causes for students' reticence and passivity, Cheng (2000) conducted an informal survey about teachers' attitudes toward Asian learners' reticence and passivity. Based on the analysis of teachers' ideas on forum for ESL teachers and review of previous research, the study identified that causes of students' reticence and passivity are unsuitable methodology and lack of required language proficiency rather than cultural attributes of Asian societies to blame.

Liu (2005a) investigated Chinese undergraduate non-English major students' reticence in oral English classroom by way of survey, observations and reflective journals. The findings showed that most of the students desire to learn spoken English well and were willing to interact with others in oral English language classrooms. However, due to various reasons such as low proficiency, lack of practice, anxiety, cultural beliefs, personality and fear of losing face, more than two thirds of the students remained reluctant

to respond to the teacher and kept quiet until singled out to answer questions. Moreover, many of them seemed to be helpless about being reticent when the teacher asked a question and expected a response.

Similar to the purpose of Liu's (2005a) study, Liu (2005b) investigated causes of students' reticence in a Chinese EFL context. The participants were three teachers and 100 university freshmen from three proficiency levels enrolled in an English Listening and Speaking course. The results 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 students' reticence in EFL classrooms such as low English proficiency, Chinese cultural beliefs, personality, Chinese educational system, and anxiety. These findings seemed to indicate that linguistic factors played a major role in determining students' participation in group discussions.

In accordance with the results of Liu's (2005a & 2005b) studies, Zhang's (2006) study found that the students were actually suffering from anxiety in the classroom, which generally results from students' less proficient English, fear of mistakes and derision, large class size, unwillingness to take risks, low tolerance of ambiguity and competitiveness. Obviously, these linguistic and educational causes prevented them from actively participating in the classroom activities, thus losing many opportunities to use the language.

It can be concluded that multiple variables such as low English proficiency (Tsui, 1996; Cheng, 2000; Flowerdew et al., 2000; Liu, 2005a, 2005b; Zhang, 2006), incomprehensible input, and inability to understand concepts and utterances from the teacher (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Tsui, 1996; Flowerdew et al. 2000), from a lack of practice, task difficulty (Liu, 2005b) and other variables were found to contribute to students' reticence in L2/FL classroom. Findings from these previous studies indicated that linguistic and educational factors are negatively

correlated with students' speaking performance as well as learning achievement.

Data analysis

Instrument and target population

The instrument used in this survey research was questionnaires to students and interviews to teachers. The questionnaires referred to the aspects like low English proficiency, lack of vocabulary for speaking, low listening ability, poor pronunciation. The results of the study were taken from the responses to the questionnaires delivered to 320 students of pre-intermediate college students. After the results of questionnaire were analyzed, interviews to teachers would be carried out to ask for solutions.

Data analysis

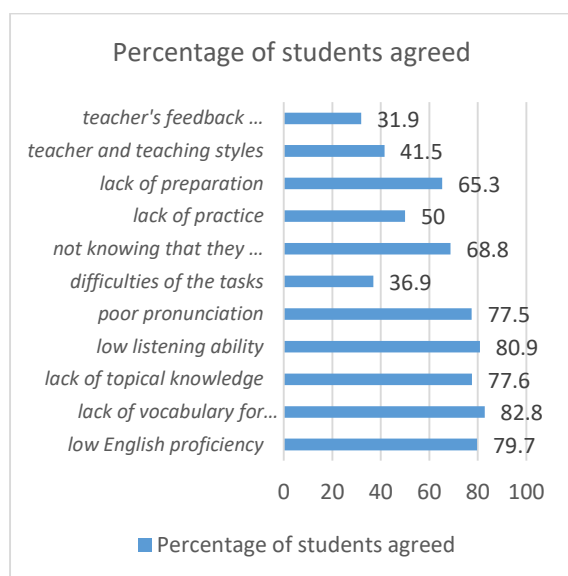


Chart 1. Students' opinion about the effect of linguistics and educational factors on speaking performance

In speaking, using English was not an easy matter by students. In fact, they usually faced some problems that made them hard to speak up. It was evident from chart 1 that *low English proficiency*, *lack of vocabulary*, *lack of topical knowledge*, *low listening ability*, and *poor pronunciation* were the main contributors to students' reticence in terms of linguistics and educational factors.

Firstly, as can be seen from chart 1, *low English proficiency* (item 1) was the greatest

contributor to students' reticence in speaking class. Low English proficiency made students feel shy and unconfident in expressing their ideas. Zhang (2006) explains that low proficiency students have difficulty in understanding what the teacher says in class and thus are unable to response to the teacher's questions. This result was in accordance with Liu's ideas (2005b, p.228) as well. In her research, one of student's reflective journal expressed "I think that keeps me reticent is my poor English proficiency. I cannot always express my opinion in English. I lose my chance to show myself to the class." This view was also shared by the teachers. "Most students remain silent in class, especially the students with low English proficiency. 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 for students' reticence in terms of linguistic factors."

Secondly, vocabulary was a large chunk of reasons for fear. *Lack of vocabulary* (item 2) made the students doubt to say what they wanted to convey. The students usually lacked of vocabulary in speaking, so when they wanted to speak out, they could not speak fluently. Thus, the students should use their dictionary more frequently, read more books or journals to find out some new vocabulary and idioms. If so, they would have variety of vocabulary and ideas when they want to convey something in front of the class and speak actively.

Furthermore, *the poorness of pronunciations* (item 5) made the students fear for speaking as well. English contains a number of sounds and sound distinctions which are not presented in some other languages. Speakers of languages without these sounds may have problems both with hearing and with pronouncing them. In addition, in English curricula, there were lessons that use tapes and CDs to practice listening, speaking skills and pronunciation. However, some teachers did not have the habits of using CDs and tapes in teaching speaking and pronunciation. Thus, students mostly copied the way their teachers pronunciation, but sometimes, teachers mispronounced the words themselves.

The results from item 3 revealed that students' perceptions were quite similar to the teachers', that their speaking performance was affected by *topical knowledge*. As mentioned above, topical knowledge is the speakers' knowledge of relevant topical information (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Teachers should be aware that without topical modification, students would get stuck in speaking. The best advice for students who suffered from lack of informativeness was that they should read more and more. As a result, with the plentiful resource of topical knowledge, the ideas would flow smoothly when they were speaking.

When the teachers were asked to evaluate their students' *listening skills* (item 4), all of them said that their students' listening skills were not good enough. The students themselves also thought that they were not good at listening. We all agreed that speaking and listening share a very close relationship of communication. Listening provides the aural input that serves as the basis for language acquisition and enables learners to interact in spoken communication. Doff (1998) states that speaking skills cannot be developed unless we develop listening skills. Students must understand what is said to them to have a successful conversation. Thus, when students' listening ability was not good enough, they would get difficulty in speaking skill. In other words, one is certainly unable to respond if he / she cannot understand what is said. It means low listening ability contributes to students' reticence.

From the classroom observations (required by the school managers every year), the researcher found that the teachers had many ways to give *feedback during speaking activities* (item 11). When the students were performing their tasks, most of them watched, listened to students and wrote down points to give feedback afterwards. Some of them kept quiet, smile and encourage students to go on their task. If students could not think of what to say, the teachers might prompt them forward. The teachers shared that they rarely stopped them and corrected their mistakes immediately because of its inappropriateness in improving students' speaking skills. Correcting errors immediately might interrupt students' presentation and make them anxious as

well as confused to continue their speaking. It was better for teachers in speaking classes to tolerate more errors during communicative practice. Instead of correcting errors at once, most teachers noted errors during fluency activities and returned to them later with an accuracy- based activity.

Most of the teachers agreed that their students *did not know how to make use of what they had learned from texts and conversation pieces* (item 7). More than two thirds of the students also shared the same idea. As mentioned above, there was a wide variety of reading, listening and speaking tasks in the textbook New English File. Besides, vocabulary file, functional language and conversation pieces were some sections, which presented useful vocabulary and useful expressions for listening and speaking. Students should make the most use of these expressions to enrich their thoughts when speaking. In addition, the students should enrich their ideas by reading more books or journals. As a result, the ideas would flow smoothly if they read more.

For Vietnamese students, English is considered a foreign language. Thus, students in such environments are exposed to the language only in the classroom where they spend less time in contact with the language, covering a smaller discourse type. Krashen (1985) states, for EFL learners the only input is teachers' or classmates' talk - both do not speak L2 well. The limited exposure to the target language and *lack of opportunities to practice speaking* (item 8) in such environments do not let the communicative abilities of FL learners fully develop and result into embarrassment or stress for them when they are required to speak both in and out of the class. In accordance with Tanveer's (2007) study, one student expressed "We could practice English only in the class, out of the class, no practice; we always lack of chances to practice..." It indicates that language teachers should consider practices and the previous language learning experiences of the students as an attempt to reduce their language anxiety.

Discussing about *time for preparation for speaking task* (item 9), students' and teachers'

answers were inconsistent. Only one third of the teachers agreed with this, while the percentage of students' agreement was double. As previously mentioned, Nation & Newton (2009) regard planning as the preparation for a task before the task is performed. Typically, it involves "having time to think about a given topic, having time to prepare what to say and taking brief notes about what to say". Planning allows part of the work to be done before the task so it helps language production as while the task is being performed, there are fewer things to attend to. Thus, it pointed out that teachers should consider the time for students to well prepare their speaking task.

In addition to these main reasons, *the difficulty of the task* (item 6), *teachers and teaching styles* (item 10), etc. also functioned as factors for students' reticence in oral English lessons. Similar findings were revealed in the study of Liu's (2005b). In her research, she pointed out that students at different proficiency levels put varying weight on different factors. For example, the difficulty of the task was considered as an important factor by band 1 and band 2 students but as a minor one by the band 3 participants (band 1 is the lowest and band 3 is the highest according to their scores in the placement test upon entering the University).

Pedagogical implications

It can be concluded from these results that there were almost no differences between teachers' and students' perceptions towards variables which contributed to students' reticence in terms of linguistic and educational factors. This indicated that the teachers seemed to clearly comprehend the strong points and weak points of their students. Bearing in mind that these factors created one of the barriers to the teachers and students in teaching and learning speaking, the teachers can accurately and credibly decode the symptoms of students' reticence and could deal with them accordingly.

Through the data analysis, it can be inferred that there were many factors which prevented the students from actively participating in the classroom activities. Therefore, it is necessary for the teachers to help students overcome these speaking problems and cope with these factors. Because of this, the

following recommendations were made.

Recommendations to the teachers

(1) Increasing students' motivation in speaking English

It is easy to understand that the more proficient in English the students were, the more willing they were to participate in speech communication and the more positive they were about it (Liu, 2006). Therefore, teachers should clearly spell out the aims of the English courses and explain specific course objectives. With a clear idea of course objectives and an understanding of teachers' and students' roles in English classrooms, students will be better positioned to adjust their own expectations and goals. They will also have a better idea of what they need to do to be successful (Johnson, 1995).

To promote students' active participation in EFL classrooms, it is also advisable for EFL teachers to enhance their interest in speaking and 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 (Liu 2005b).

(2) Simplifying the topics and tasks in the textbook

In general, the students at NREU were not good at English. Besides, some topics and tasks in the textbook were too difficult for them to talk about. In reality, people tend to be interested in doing things that are interesting and relevant to their lives. Therefore, the teachers should give them clear instructions, sufficient guidance as well as personalize the topics and make them easier so that they are relevant to the students' life experience and suitable for their level of English. Providing familiar and easy speaking lessons can help students' ideas flow smoothly when they are speaking (Chaudron, 1988).

In addition, scaffolding topics may help students' communication more active and successful (Prégent 1994, cited in Liu 2005b). 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 websites, etc., or giving students a list of vocabulary and sentence structures that are essential for the discussion of a topic, and making use of media to facilitate students' understanding and discussion of a topic, and so on.

(3) Giving students constructive feedback

According to Tanveer (2007) the teachers should have friendly, helpful and cooperative behaviors to make students feel comfortable when speaking in the class and they will participate in the classroom actively.

The teachers should decide carefully when and how to give feedback and correct the students' mistakes so that the students are not fearful of making mistakes and the flow of the students' conversation is not destroyed (Baker and Westrup, 2003).

During accuracy work, the teachers can correct students' mistakes by showing incorrectness and getting it right. For example, the teachers can repeat what the students have said and emphasize the part of the utterance that was wrong. The teachers can simply say "Do you think that's correct?" or "That's not quite right." to indicate that something has not quite work.

During fluency work, if the students do not know how to express ideas, the teachers can prompt them forwards. The teachers can act as observers watching and listening to the students, recording their mistakes to give feedback afterwards. After the students finish performing a speaking task, the teachers should give an assessment of the activity. Then they can write the students mistakes on the board and ask if the students can recognize the mistakes and ask them to correct their mistakes.

Besides, it is the responsibility of the teacher to give immediate praise and encouragement to students so that they are brave enough to speak. In short, in teaching speaking, teachers are advised to give feedback and correct errors on both form and content after the students already finish their task (Harmer, 1991).

Recommendations to the students

Students need to be aware of the increasing demand of communicating in English and their important role in learning speaking skills as active and creative contributors to the lessons. They are also advised to understand their own responsibilities in learning spoken English and not to expect teachers to lecture a lot in class (Liu, 2005b). Besides, students should work hard to have large vocabulary and to be supportive of each other when speaking English in class. In other words, it is necessary for students to do most of the speaking frequently as well as actively complete a speaking task. Thus, they may not become so afraid of making mistakes but confident and more willing to speak the target language.

Also, the students should make use of some information technology application at home to help them to improve their pronunciation; they can record their own speech, listen to the native speakers and imitate them. It is believed that good listening skills, pronunciation improvement as well as variety of vocabulary will help students feel more confident in speaking English.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This research aimed at investigating students' reticence at NREU in learning speaking and only the first year college students were chosen to participate in the study. The study scope is limited so the suggestions and solutions are to be applied to the situation of the first year college students at this school rather than generalized for all the students of similar situations. Moreover, the study only focused on the students' reticence in speaking class, other skills were not generalized. Finally, there are many types of speaking problems and factors affecting students' reticence, but the number of problems and factors taken into account in the study was still limited.

In order to understand reticence better in ESL/EFL classrooms, more research employing both quantitative and qualitative methods need to be carried out with varied groups of learners in a variety of environments. Further studies should explore the multiple causes of reticence and explore potential

coping strategies to help students become more confident, active learners of the target language.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE TO STUDENTS

This survey questionnaire is designed for the research “Identifying the effect of socio-cultural factors on pre-intermediate students’ reticence in speaking English”. Your assistance in completing the following questions is greatly appreciated. Please put a tick (✓) in the box beside the option(s) you choose.

PART I: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Gender

Male

Female

2. Age

17-20

Over 20

3. How long have you been learning English?

Under 1 year

2 - 4 years

5 - 7 years

More than 7 years

4. What is your major at your university?

PART II: FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS’ RETICENCE IN SPEAKING CLASS

Is your reticence in speaking class due to _____?

(1) strongly disagree (2) disagree (3) neutral (4) agree (5) strongly agree

Educational / linguistic factors	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1. low English proficiency.					
2. lack of vocabulary for speaking.					
3. lack of topical knowledge.					
4. low listening ability.					
5. poor pronunciation.					
6. difficulty of the tasks.					
7. not knowing that they should make use of what they’ve learned from texts and conversation pieces.					
8. lack of practice.					
9. lack of preparation.					
10. teacher and teaching styles.					
11. teacher’s feedback during speaking activities.					

Other reasons.....

Thank you very much for taking your valuable time to complete this survey questionnaire. Your opinions are greatly appreciated!