



International Conference on Current Trends in ELT

Student Reticence in Iran's Academia: Exploring Students' Perceptions of Causes and Consequences

Solmaz Aghazadeh^{a, *}, Hojjat Abedi^b

^{a, b} *Shahid Beheshti University, Evin, Tehran, Iran*

Abstract

The nature of silence in classroom is complex with different students possessing distinct beliefs, social norms, and cultural backgrounds. There are several factors that contribute to students' reluctance to speak up and participate in classroom activities, such as linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural (Harumi, 2010) issues. Awareness of sources of silence on the part of EFL instructors may decrease misinterpretations regarding students' level of engagement in language classrooms. Despite the available literature on Asian students' silence (e.g., Littlewood, 2000), studies in the context of Iran are scarce and have mainly focused on exploring teachers' perspectives in this regard. To help bridge this gap, we interviewed 28 university EFL students exploring their perceptions of the nature of reticence in classroom, its causes, and its consequences. Thematic analysis of the data yielded mixed results. Regarding its causes, silence might be because of students' personality type and even a legitimate form of classroom participation. In some other cases, it seems to be the result of teachers' emotionally negative feedback to questions and mistakes or, at a more general level, their authoritarian approach to students. In terms of its outcomes, student reticence was found to sometimes contribute to and sometimes hinder deeper mental engagement in classroom process. Based on the findings, some guidelines were proposed for instructors on how to deal with reticent learners.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Urmia University, Iran.

Keywords: Reticence; Voice; Class Participation; Speaking

1. Introduction

To date, a host of research studies have focused on the characteristics of language learners who have been perceived as having pivotal roles for their learning and their capabilities as well as their limitations. Among the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: aghazadeh.solmaz@yahoo.com

factors that have been explored by researchers, students' reticence in language classrooms has attracted many attentions in recent decades (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Flowerdew, 1998; Chen 2003; Jackson, 2002, for example). Current ESL/EFL literature has frequently reported that Asian (especially East Asian) students of English as a second or foreign language are reticent and passive learners in language classrooms and choose not to use the target language most of the times, especially when responding to teachers.

Getting students to respond in the classroom is a problem that most EFL teachers face, particularly when they are dealing with Asian learners. Asian learners are typically perceived as passive and reluctant to participate in classroom discussions; they are unwilling to give responses, they don't ask questions, and they are highly dependent on their teachers (Jones et al., 1993; Braddock et al., 1995; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Tsui, 1996). However, some EFL teachers may misinterpret the learners' reticence as lack of initiatives or refusal to participate in classroom discussions.

With a growing need for spoken English among non-native English speakers, research in the field of reticence in foreign and second language situations has captured the attention of language theorists and educators in recent decades (Cheng 2000; Endo 2008, for example). It is assumed that when people are asked to speak in a second or foreign language, they become more apprehensive and tense and thus more unwilling to participate in conversations (Horwitz et al., 1986). A host of research projects have focused on exploring the roots and ramifications of learner's reticence in the classroom (Liu, 2005; Harumi 2010, for example). This silent behavior has been referred to as 'stony silence' or 'dead air' that follows a question addressed to a class of Asian learners (Flowerdew, 1998).

Up to now, as mentioned above, a plenty of research has been carried out in regard to Asian EFL students examining their being silent in the classroom, such as Liu & Littlewood (1997), Cheng (2000), Jackson (2002), Chen (2003), Endo (2008), and Harumi (2010), only to name a few. The hitherto results from the research are varied. In general, we can divide these results into two strata: one pinpointing the potential causes for Asian students' reticence and then scrutinizing these causes, the other rebutting this allegation at all, i.e., Asian students' reticence, and labeling it as a "myth".

With regard to the former, the roots of the reticence have been investigated by many researchers (Harumi, 2010; Cheng, 2000; Liu & Littlewood, 1997, to name a few). In her ethnographic study, Harumi (2010) discovered that roots of silence inside the Japanese classroom were linguistic (limited vocabulary, expressions, grammar, and so on), psychological (shyness, boredom, lack of confidence, and so on), and socio-cultural (Confucian ethics, classroom culture, and so forth) factors. Chen (2003) discerned personal-affective factors such as anxiety and lack of experience with class discussion, and sociocultural factors such as the prevailing belief of "teacher as a sage on the stage" as the primary causes of the issue in question. In a similar vein, Jackson (2002) identified several explanations for the students' reticence. In this way, the students' lack of proficiency and opportunities to practice English, lacking confidence thereby fear of losing face by making a mistake, anxiety, and habit of waiting to be singled out were noted as the main sources of the students' reticence.

Conversely, Cheng (2000) demonstrated that "...Asian students are not culturally predisposed to be reticent and passive in language learning." Rather, if some Asian students are perceived as being "quieter than expected in certain circumstances, the causes are *situation specific [sic]*..." (p.435). He attributed these situation-specific causes to the "differences between teaching methodologies" and the "lack of required foreign language proficiency" (p.442). With almost similar results, in their 1997 study, Liu and Littlewood stated that in spite of some allegations against Asian students as being passive in EFL classes, students wanted to take an active speech role in the class.

As mentioned above, in the previous studies, multiple variables such as low English proficiency, personality, and cultural beliefs are found to contribute to the students' reluctance to participate fully in classroom discussions. However, such interpretations are often based on teachers' interpretations of students' silence behavior which may be in contrast with the reasons that students themselves may deem as being important. In fact, the sources of potential mismatch regarding the students' level of engagement in whole-class discussions may lead to some misinterpretations on the part of the teachers. Thus, awareness of the roots and ramifications of reticence in language classrooms can play an important role in identifying the potential sources of mismatch and encouraging the students to speak and express their ideas in oral language classrooms. Meanwhile, it can help the teachers to come to a better

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