

## CAUSES OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' RETICENCE IN MALAYSIAN ESL CLASSROOMS

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### Abstract

*Student reticence has become one of the main concerns in the English language classroom. It is frequently labeled as a problematic, frustrating, and disturbing classroom phenomenon by many instructors. The purpose of this study was to explore the degree to which undergraduate students experienced reticence and the factors that caused them to refrain from participating in classroom oral participation. To this end, a total of 122 Malaysian undergraduate students from a university participated as respondents in a self-assessment conducted using the Reticence-Scale 12 (RS-12) and a survey. The results of the self-assessment revealed that the majority of the students experienced high reticence in the classrooms. Additionally, the students' reticent behaviour was caused by virtual of their personality traits, lack of self-confidence, anxiety, poor language skills, and teacher factors. This study highlights the need for more research in this area in different learning contexts.*

**Keywords:** reticence, undergraduate students, personality traits, self-confidence, anxiety

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Oral participation is one of the most critical and compulsory productive skills all tertiary students need to learn in ESL (English as a Second Language) or EFL (English as a Foreign language) classroom. This skill's mastery is expected to help university students complete various educational tasks that require an active verbal contribution. Despite much emphasis has been put on teaching this skill in ESL/EFL classrooms, many students are still found to be

reticent in various learning contexts (Tsui, 1996; Liu & Jackson, 2009; Keaten & Kelly, 2000; Soo & Goh, 2017). The widely reported phenomenon of student reticence or reluctance to speak English has undoubtedly become one of the pressing issues that need to be addressed.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Generally, reticence can be conceptualised as an individual, timid, or willing communicative behaviour. It is often associated with disconnected or remote behaviour, body language, reactions, or emotions that prevent people from engaging in social and public contexts, especially in situations that might pose potential for negative criticisms from others. Reticent individuals not only refrain from social activities but also suppress words when they talk. They are likely to remain silent in rowdy communities where everyone talks and holds their own thoughts and opinions. Although this behaviour might be seen as normal in some contexts, it is regarded as unacceptable in education and language learning contexts. It may limit students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of communication, which might then affect their learning performance.

Reticent students' reluctance to share their ideas and thoughts, ask questions and engage in a full-length discussion with others (Karas 2017; Shea 2017) is believed to negatively affect students' learning, motivation, and general attitude towards the courses being pursued (Cieniewicz, 2007). This is because students' reticent behaviour disrupts the planned teaching activities and causes teachers to have difficulties in promoting active learning among students. This would be a major obstacle for students to develop language skills, especially oral skills (Jenkins, 2008).

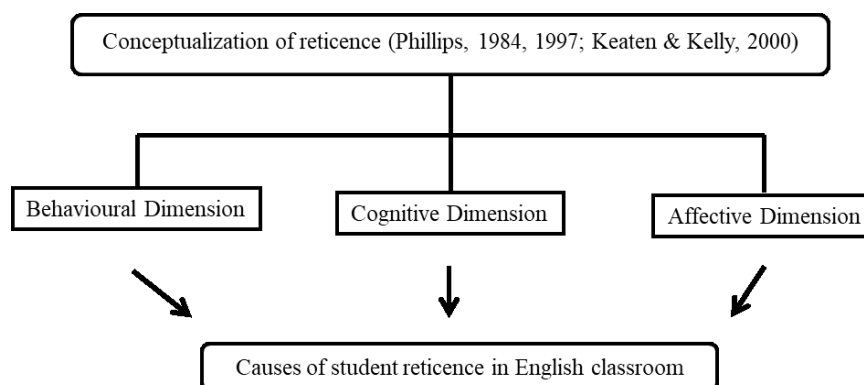
A large number of studies have been conducted in recent decades to explore the reasons behind student reticence in language learning classrooms (Chen, 2003; Flowerdew, Miller & Li, 2000; Liu & Jackson, 2009). These reasons include student personality, lack of self-confidence, poor language skills, anxiety, etc. Student personality traits play a significant role in reticent behaviour. Personality features such as student introversion may lead to students unable to engage in class activities orally. According to Wu (2019), personality traits, particularly introversion, are widely adopted as one of the predictors of reticence in the classroom. Introverts tended to be quiet and less willing to engage in groups, so introverted students seemed less interested in classroom interaction (Olakitan, 2011). Similarly, Harumi

(2011) believes that shyness, which is associated with one's personality, plays an important role in forming this behaviour.

Student reticence can be attributed to a lack of self-confidence. Here, confidence can be described as students' feelings, perceived ability, and qualities in learning. This argument is confirmed in Hamouda's (2013) study, in which 78.62% of his respondents had no confidence in speaking before class. Besides that, lacking English or English language skills is another factor that may cause students to be reluctant to participate orally in class. Wu (2019) reported that there is a strong association between low language skills and students' reticent behaviour.

In addition, anxiety may be one reason why students are reluctant to participate orally in class. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), this relates to uncertainty as to whether others are judged in terms of fear of adverse assessment, avoiding evaluative situations, and predicting that others may be negatively assessed. There is a negative connection between fear and reticence. Students will feel uncomfortable and humiliated when asked to speak English to others, as they fear their peers' negative opinions and the people around them. Besides that, they also fear their instructors' negative opinions if they do not meet their expectations. Due to this reason, Li and Liu (2011) regard reticence as a result of the subscription of faulty communication beliefs.

## 2.1 Conceptualization of Reticence



Phillips's (1984, 1997) "Conceptualization of Reticence," which was then reconceptualized by Keaten and Kelly (2000), was adopted as the theoretical framework for this study. According to Phillips (1984), reticence is why people avoid themselves to contact with others because they think they lose more by talking than remaining silent. Through this

perspective, he proposed two dimensions depicting the phenomenon of reticence for a generalised communicative context: behavioural dimension and cognitive dimension. These two dimensions are useful for theorizing about the underlying factors of reticence. The behavioural dimension is central to the prevention and ineptitude of skills deficiencies in the rhetorical sub-processes. The cognitive dimension is associated with reticent individuals' faulty belief systems.

On the other hand, in the reconceptualised model of reticence, Keaten and Kelly (2000) have introduced the affective dimension while maintaining most of the original features proposed by Phillips. They argue that reticent individuals' feeling of fear or anxiety is another strong predictor of reticence. Reticent individuals, as compared to non-reticent individuals, frequently possess high levels of fear of negative evaluation and sensitivity to the opinions of others. Therefore, reticent individuals have the tendency to avoid the fearful feeling or experience by remaining silent as they are afraid of the threat of negative evaluation by others or foolishness (Soo & Goh, 2013).

### **3.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- (i) To what extent do undergraduate students experience reticence in ESL classroom?
- (ii) What are the causes that affect reticent undergraduate students' reluctance to speak English in the classroom?

### **4.0 METHODS**

This study employed a quantitative research design, which involved essentially the collection of data using a self-assessment and a survey.

#### **4.1 Contexts and Participants**

This research was carried out in a university in Malaysia. A total of 122 tertiary students from different faculties participated in the study. As a sampling requirement, the participating students must have taken at least one of the university's proficiency English courses during the

study. This ensures that the students had experience participating in various classroom activities that require oral engagement, such as teacher-fronted and student-led whole-class discussion.

## **4.2 Instruments**

Before the survey, all the participating students were required to self-assess their level of reticence using the Reticence Scale-12 or RS-12 (Kelly et al., 2007). The students' level of reticence was measured across six dimensions in the RS-12, namely anxiety, subject knowledge, timing skills, thinking organization, delivery skills, and memory. Each dimension consists of two items relating to the social condition that individuals often encounter in communication. The items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale with a range of 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (undecided), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). A survey was administered to identify the underlying factors that cause the students' reticence in oral participation in the classroom. The survey was adapted from Hamouda (2013). It consists of 29 items covering five pre-identified factors: personality traits, lack of self-confidence, anxiety, language proficiency, and teacher factor. The items are measured on a 4-point Likert scale with a range of 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (agree), and 4 (strongly agree).

## **5.0 FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Students' Level of Reticence**

To determine the undergraduate students' degree of reticence in ESL classrooms, their total scores in RS-12 were calculated. A median split technique was used to identify high-reticent and low-reticent groups, in which respondents who obtained the overall score above 29 were considered highly reticent. In contrast, those who obtained below 29 were deemed to be low reticent (O'Connell, 2010). For interpretation, the higher the overall RS-12 score, the lower the student's ability to participate orally in the classroom, and vice versa.

The results show that, among the 122 respondents, 27 students (22.1%) were low-reticent, and as many as 95 students (77.9%) were found highly reticent (Table 1). As shown in the descriptive statistics (Table 2), the mean scale score is 37.12 above the midpoint score of 29.

This data clearly showed that the majority of the students experienced reticence in the classrooms.

Table 1: Frequency of high reticent and low reticent students (n= 122)

<b>Reticent Score</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Below 29	27	22.1
Above 29	95	77.9

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of RS-12 (n=122)

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mode</b>
<b>RS-12</b>	37.12	10.30	38	48

## 5.2 Causes that Affect Undergraduates' Reticence

Students' reticence could be attributed to a number of factors, including both internal and external. Previous studies have identified personality traits, lack of self-confidence, anxiety, language proficiency, teacher influence, classroom atmosphere, unpreparedness, uninterested in English, and lack of practice. These are some of the strong predictors of student reticence in class.

### (i) Personality Traits

Table 3: Reticent students' personality traits

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. To avoid any embarrassing situation, I prefer to remain silent rather than to orally participate in the classroom.	8.2 %	23%	47.5%	21.3%
2. I talk less because I am shy.	12.3%	30.3%	43.4%	14%
3. I feel embarrassed if I mispronounced.	5.7%	25.4%	55.7%	13.1%

The results in Table 3 demonstrate that the majority of the students (68.8%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred to remain silent in the classroom in order to avoid any

awkward circumstances. Also, many of them will feel ashamed if they make any mistakes in pronunciation during class discussions. In other words, they felt uncomfortable towards their peers' negative responses towards their mistakes. Their timidity in classroom oral engagement could be associated with their introverted personality (Liu, 2005; Liu et al., 2011).

**(ii) Self-confidence**

Table 4: Reticent students' self-confidence

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I am not confident when I am speaking English in front of the whole class.	11.5%	35.2%	33.6%	19.7%
2. I am not confident when I make English oral presentations in front of the class.	9.8%	31.1%	43.5%	15.6%
3. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	4.9%	13.1%	50%	32%
4. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in my class.	9%	33.6%	43.4%	14%
5. I shall only talk when I am very sure what I utter is correct.	5.7%	23.8%	46.7%	23.8%

A lack of self-confidence in using English as a spoken communication medium is a strong factor leading to students' unwillingness to participate in the classroom (Hamouda, 2013). This claim is supported by the results shown in Table 4. The majority of the students expressed agreement in the five statements pertaining to their lack of confidence in expressing themselves using English. In addition, more than two-thirds of the students agreed with the assertion that other students speak English better than they do. As they believed their speaking skills were weaker than others in the classroom, they chose to remain silent.

**(iii) Anxiety**

Table 5: Reticent students' anxiety

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. I am too afraid to volunteer answers orally to the teacher's question because my classmates would laugh at me if my answer is wrong.	16.4%	37.7%	35.2%	10.7%
2. It is unpleasant speaking English in class because my mistakes make me feel incompetent.	13.1%	33.6%	41.8%	11.5%
3. I am afraid of being seen as foolish if I make too many mistakes when I speak in class.	9.8%	27.9%	45.9%	16.4%
4. I feel more anxious in the class because my teacher always corrects me in a very bad way.	24.6%	40.2%	23.8%	11.4%
5. I feel anxious because I have no confidence in my spoken English.	13.9%	37.7%	37.7%	10.7%
6. I am afraid that other students will laugh at me when I speak in English in the class.	17.2%	36.1%	41%	5.7%

In general, the results in Table 5 reveal that some of the students experienced a varying degree of anxiety during oral classroom participation. On top of this list was their apprehension of being labeled as foolish if they make mistakes when speaking in class. They viewed oral participation as one of the anxiety-triggering classroom activities. This wholly aligns with Ozturk and Gurbuz's (2013) claim in which speaking can turn out to be the most conspicuous source of anxiety in the language classroom. Students may feel threatened, unsafe, and uncomfortable when asked to speak English to their classroom peers.



*(iv) Language Proficiency*

Table 6: Reticent students' language proficiency

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I am reticent due to my low language proficiency.	14.8%	33.5%	40.2%	11.5%
2. I am reluctant to participate orally because I can't respond quickly and fluently.	12.3%	35.2%	41%	11.5%
3. I can't participate orally because I can't speak in complete sentences (i.e. uttering words or broken English)	20.5%	45.1%	26.2%	8.2%
4. I can't participate orally because I have difficulty to express my idea with exact words and constructing simple sentences.	19.7%	35.2%	33.6%	11.5%
5. When I want to speak "I am not sure which tense to use".	9.8%	32.8%	46.7%	10.7%
6. I am reluctant to participate orally in class because my pronunciation is not good when I speak in the class.	13.1%	38.5%	36.1%	12.3%
7. My English language speaking skill is not good.	10.6%	32%	46.7%	10.7%
8. I can't respond to my teacher's question whenever I have to respond spontaneously.	8.2%	47.5%	31.1%	13.2%

The results in Table 6 reveal that the majority of the students attributed their reticence to low language proficiency. This is further confirmed by their perceived incompetency in English speaking skills (57.4%, statement 7). In a more specific manner, more than half of them had problems in giving instant responses and constructing grammatically correct utterances. These had become their obstacles in classroom oral participation. To conclude, if students perceive themselves as low proficient language users, they will avoid or reduce their oral engagement with others in the classroom (Jackson, 2002; Tsui, 1996).

**(v) Teacher Factors**

Table 7: Teacher's influence on students' reticent behaviour

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. I am reluctant to participate orally in class because of my teacher's harsh comments and negative responses.	20.5%	44.3%	27.9%	7.3%
2. I am reluctant to participate orally because of my teachers don't give me the needed time to process the questions that he/she ask.	12.3%	50%	28.7%	9%
3. I don't like to participate orally because my teacher is impatient and strict.	19.7%	52.5%	21.3%	6.5%
4. I don't like to participate orally using English because my teacher has a bad impression of me.	24.6%	48.4%	20.5%	6.5%
5. I get anxious when speaking if my teacher gives marks for oral participation.	4.1%	29.5%	47.5%	18.9%
6. I am reluctant to participate orally whenever I have to speak without any preparation in the class.	7.4%	25.4%	54.9%	12.3%
7. I will not participate orally in the class discussion whenever the lesson is not interesting.	14.8%	45%	33.6%	6.6%

In finding out if teachers' ways of speaking impact students' reticent behaviour, slightly more than one-third of the students agreed that their teachers' use of harsh and negative comments had caused them to refrain from participating in class. In terms of the impact brought by the teacher's ways of conducting classes, the students (66.4%) stated that they were anxious whenever their teachers evaluated oral participation and if they were required to speak spontaneously without any preparation (67.2%). Furthermore, some of them (37.7%) admitted that they were hesitant to participate orally because their instructor did not allocate sufficient time to respond to any questions.

## **6.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Reticent students who are unable to engage verbally in class can be associated with their shyness. Shyness is simply a trait that can arise from anyone or from a combination of various factors, such as social introversion, unfamiliarity with academic discourse, lack of trust in the subject matter, or fear of communication (McCroskey, 1992). In this study, the students tend to compare themselves with their peers' ability to speak English and feel inferior to them. Such a negative mindset has caused them to feel shy to attempt oral participation tasks such as open-class discussion. Additionally, when students refrain from participating orally in class, it could be interpreted as an act of 'saving face.' Some reticent students might perceive oral participation as a risky activity as it could put themselves in a vulnerable position that may attract open criticism. Therefore, in order to avoid losing their "face" to the public, reticent students may choose to remain silent and not to engage verbally in classroom activities. Wu (2009) believes that "face" could be the main variable that can explain much of the nature of students' resistance to oral participation.

The findings in this study also reveal a strong association between anxiety and student reticence. Two sub-variables of anxiety are identified, which are communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. Primarily, reticent students' fear of making mistakes in speaking English has made them holding back from participating in open classroom discussions (Shumin, 2002). The present study predicts that this scenario is common among students in Asian ESL/EFL classrooms as past researchers (Wu, 2019; Soo & Goh, 2017; Shea, 2017; Li & Liu, 2011; Liu & Jackson, 2009) have widely reported the phenomenon of student reticence in this context.

Students' low English language proficiency and competency, including insufficient knowledge of grammar, lack of vocabulary, and speech disfluency, have become one of the stumbling blocks to classroom oral participation. The present study reveals that the majority of the students attributed their reticent behaviour to their low language proficiency. This mirrors Liu's (2005), and Tsui's (1996) claims that linguistic issues such as lack of vocabulary and grammar would influence students' oral participation in class. In another study, Cortazzi and Jin (1996) reported that one of the reasons why students prefer to be passive listeners rather than active classroom participants is largely due to their restricted vocabulary. Thus, the myriad causes of English deficiencies and the phenomenon of student reticence are indeed interrelated.

Student reticence is undeniably a significant and widespread problem in the second or foreign language setting (Riasati, 2014). We believe that many students would like to learn, develop their language, and participate verbally in classroom activities. However, due to various factors such as personality traits, lack of self-confidence, anxiety, and poor language skills, they are not able to participate actively. The present study only focuses on the causes of student reticence in the Malaysian ESL classroom context. Future researchers may attempt this topic by using diversified methods in different learning contexts. To conclude, this topic is worth addressing in various ways with the goals of improving students' oral participation and helping both teachers and students to enhance classroom teaching or learning.

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