



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

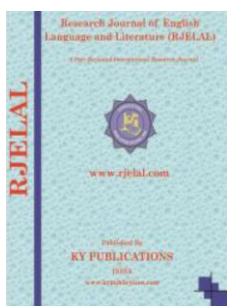
IDENTIFYING THE EFFECT OF SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS ON PRE-INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS' RETICENCE IN SPEAKING ENGLISH

To Thi Le¹, Lại Hoài Châu²

^{1,2}Lecturer in Ho Chi Minh University of Natural Resources and Environment, Vietnam

Email: tothilend@gmail.com¹ ; hoaichau.206@gmail.com²

doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.211>



ABSTRACT

Although reticence in speaking second / foreign language classes has long been a challenge for both teachers and students (Liu & Jackson, 2009), few studies have been conducted in Vietnamese contexts about this phenomenon. This primarily quantitative analysis paper was to investigate the socio-cultural 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 questionnaires to students and interviews to teachers. The results of the study clearly pointed out a range of factors contributed to the reticence such as passive learning styles, the fear of giving public speaking or the difference between English and Vietnamese. 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 can prevent EFL students from good speaking performance and their learning achievement.

Key words: socio-cultural factors, reticence, speaking performance

Introduction

The reticence in second / foreign language classes that 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), they were found to be reticent and passive learners of the target language who choose not to use it most of the time. This reticence 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 unwilling to speak in class have fewer opportunities to practice the language and therefore, make slower progress. As a result, the more slowly the progress they make, the less likely they are to perform well when called upon to speak.

At Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment, English is one of the compulsory subjects that students have to study for two semesters of about 90 periods. Although most

of the teachers always tried to use variety of activities in teaching to encourage their students to speak in class, the students showed little concentration on this. These teachers assessed students' speaking skills through variety of activities like group presentations, personal performance and assignments. In spite of the teachers' efforts to motivate students' participation, the students were extremely 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 socio-cultural factors.

This study, thus, serves as a reference for the teachers to be aware of the influence that reticence can have on EFL students' speaking performance as well as the effect of cultural factors on that reticence. Once students recognize the factors that lead to their reticence, they can cope with the problem and achieve speaking skills to get effective communication. Besides, it is expected that 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

Socio-cultural factors

Socio-cultural factors were also considered one of the main causes for students' reticence in oral English language class. Previous studies identified a large numbers of factors such as cultural beliefs, passive learning styles acquired during secondary schooling, incompetence in the rules and

norms of English conversations, etc. which were strongly related to students' participation in speaking activities (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Dwyer and Heller Murphy, 1996; Turner & Hiraga, 1996; Zhang & Head, 2010). Cortazzi and Jin (1996) investigated the strong and weak points of Chinese students' learning styles. The results showed that, apart from the positive side, Chinese students were weak at communicating orally; they were not active in class; they were unwilling to work in groups and preferred whole-class work or individual work (to group-work or pair-work); and they were shy and passive. Moreover, 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. Zhang and Head (2010) investigated factors contributed to students' reticence in speaking class. The results showed that passive behavior has been instilled into Chinese students by growing up in a cultural and educational environment which discourages students to participate in speaking activities. In other words, reticence is considered to be a particular characteristic of Chinese learner behavior. In addition to the main reason, the students' low English proficiency, fear of making mistakes and losing face, and teacher's low tolerance of students' silence were closely related to students' active participation in classroom discussions. Besides, it is necessary to mention about "kiasu" term, which means "fear of being blamed". This term has been mentioned by Chris and Arthur (2014) like a factor that actively impedes the interaction of international Chinese students with their teachers and restricts collaboration with peers, thereby limiting educational achievement.

In order to investigate the possible causes of and solutions to the reticence of Japanese students, Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996) carried out the study "*Japanese learners in speaking classes*". It was suspected that students' reticence affected their rate of learning and personal improvement as well as the general dynamics of the multi-national classes they attended. Results revealed that certain socio-cultural factors were

significant causes of reticence. Besides, students' 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, and disorientation were also probably influences on L2/FL learning. Besides, it was found that Japanese students in Britain appeared passive and unwilling to engage in dialectic and analytic discourse in tutorials (Turner and Hiraga (1996)). The results also identified that Japanese academic culture, which values the demonstration rather than transformation of knowledge, could be the cause of students' passive behavior.

In conclusion, with regard to what contributed to students' reticence in EFL classrooms, a multitude of variables were identified such as cultural beliefs, students' low English proficiency, fear of making mistakes and losing face, lack of confidence, inability to keep up with native speakers, and incompetence in the rules and norms of English conversation (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Dwyer and Heller Murphy, 1996; Turner & Hiraga, 1996; Zhang & Head, 2010). Among these variables, the most prominent one was cultural beliefs. This illustrated that socio-cultural factors also play a major role in determining students' reticence in the language class.

Data analysis

Instrument and target population

The instrument used in this survey research was questionnaires to students and interviews to teacher. The questionnaires referred to the aspects like cultural beliefs, saving face, learning preference, willingness to speak, habit of speaking. 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

In speaking, using English was not an easy matter by students, they usually faced some problems that made them hard to speak up. It was evident from chart 1 that *passive learning styles*, *pressure of public speaking* and *difference between Vietnamese and English* were the main contributors to students' reticence in terms of socio-cultural factors. It was not surprised that the passive learning styles stood at the top as this reason rooted from the early age, the misleading in language education in secondary and high school. The fossilization of the mindset "*waiting to be called*" has long been a challenging for lecturers in universities in Vietnam, not only mentioning about English, but also other subjects to involve learners in the learning process.

Fear of public speaking was the second biggest hindrance to learner's speaking

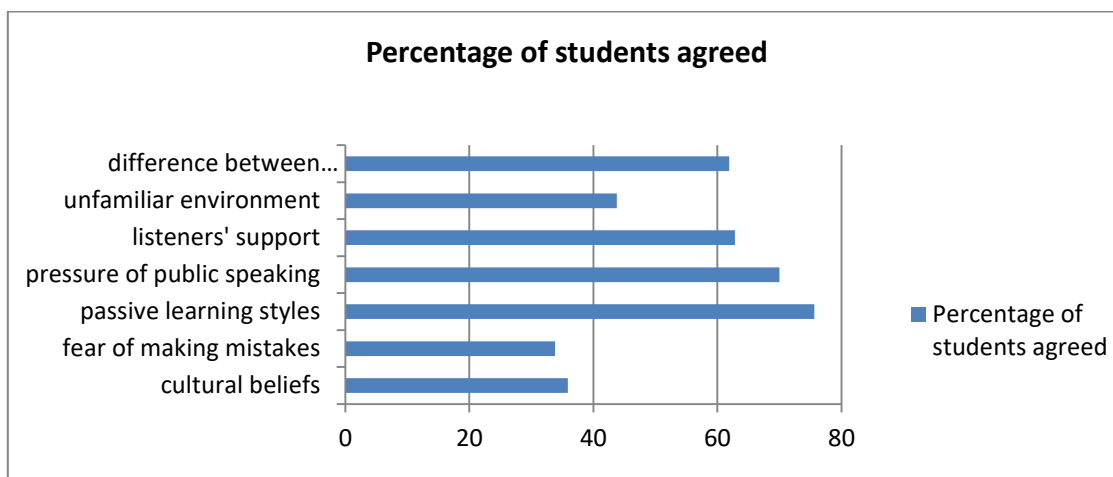


Chart 1. Students' opinion about the effect of socio-cultural factors on speaking performance

performance. It is easy to understand as public speaking was not common in Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese people prefer to be reserved and modest, and some of the students do not like to show themselves to others and thus kept quiet in class because they were afraid that their peers thought that they liked to *show off*. General speaking, both teachers and most of the 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. This finding seems to be in conformity with Liu's (2005b) and Bond's (1996) findings. In brief, Confucian ideology also made students unwilling to volunteer to speak in class.

Also, *difference between Vietnamese and English language* made students confused. For instance, when the students arrange the words to speak, they doubt with their tense, words or grammatical structures that they will use in speaking. Teaching English therefore involves not only helping the students to use the form of English most suitable for their purposes, but also exposure to cultural styles so that the students will be able to communicate well both inside the class, outside the class as well as with native speakers.

A noticeable reason for reticence that surprised author most is the need for *listeners' support*. According to the interviews with teachers, some of them admitted that they were afraid of silence waiting students to give speaking answer. This intolerance made them put a series of questions to fulfil the silence, accidentally put students under another pressure of time and thinking, discouraging them from speaking. Moreover, the other students themselves even did not want to listen to their friend hammed and hawed.

Vietnamese cultural beliefs also played a considerable role in determining students' reticence in the language class. However, discussing about this, teachers and students did not share the same point of view. It could not be denied that Confucianism had influenced Vietnamese students for a long time with traditional methods. Some students passively studied, following one-way style

from teachers to students. In that sense, there was no argument due to the conception of respecting their teacher. Moreover, in many people's opinions, Vietnamese culture values modesty and doing things rather than showing off and talking about things. As the Vietnamese saying goes, "silence is gold", "when we don't know much about something, we'd better not do it". Consequently, the aim to enhance all students to be fluent communicators could not be reached.

Beside the unfavorable performance conditions in the class, there were other factors that might affect the students' speaking performance such as *lack of familiarity with other students and new environment*. Actually, environment could give bad or good effect to the students' speaking skill. Sometimes the students doubted to speak up because they were not familiar with new environment; they could feel shy to speak in front of new friends.

Pedagogical implications

In light of the results obtained from questionnaires to students, the study drew a conclusion about NREU first year students' reticence in terms of socio-cultural factors. Concerning what contributed to students' reticence in Speaking class, a multitude of variables was identified such as *cultural beliefs, past educational experiences, the difference between English and Vietnamese, listeners' support* etc. Among these variables, the most prominent ones were *passive learning style acquired during secondary schooling, and pressure to speak in front of the class*. These factors made serious problem in foreign language learning. In general, it was evident from the results that the students encountered many problems in the speaking class which contributed to their reticence. On the whole, the current teaching and learning of speaking skills at NREU needed to be improved. Basing on the results, the researcher made some recommendations to the teachers, the students as well as the school managers to help reticent students become more active. Besides, some recommendations for further studies were also added.

Recommendations to the teachers**(1) Creating a friendly and supportive classroom learning environment**

Teachers play a significant role in creating conditions for the students to develop a positive attitude towards language learning. These conditions can be achieved through choice of materials and tasks, constructive feedback, and assessment. Moreover, a positive learning environment further motivates learners and lowers their anxiety level (Hashimoto, 2002; Zou, 2004; Liu, 2005b).

Besides, the teachers should encourage the students to use English in the classroom to make it a habit. Gradually, the students will be used to speaking English in the classroom. The teachers also should use English in the classroom frequently so that the students have more exposure to the language (Tanveer, 2007). However, the English used should be easy for students to understand otherwise they will not be interested in the lesson (Chaudron, 1988).

(2) Helping students overcome shyness and passiveness

The findings of the study showed that the students at NREU were often shy and passive in speaking class. They were worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face. Besides, they were shy because they thought that their speech would attract attention. 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 also remind students not to worry about making mistakes. Baker & Westrup (2003) suggest that teachers should explain that making mistakes is a part of the learning process and other people still understand them when they make small mistakes. Therefore, the teachers should encourage students not to worry when they have to speak in front of the class. Moreover, the shy students need more encouragement. The teachers can help students be more confident taking part in speaking activities by giving them clear instructions and

sufficient guidance.

(3) Enhance students' interest in speaking

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).

(4) Personalizing and simplifying the topics and tasks in the textbook

People tend to be interested in doing things that are interesting and relevant to their lives while in fact, some topics and tasks in the textbook were too difficult for students to talk about. Therefore, the teachers should personalize the topics and make them easier so that they are relevant to the students' life experience, Vietnamese culture 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.

(5) Giving students more speaking chances

The teachers should create an environment where the students feel the need to communicate (Tanveer, 2007). Firstly, the teachers can use some speaking activities that require students to speak. For example, the teachers could use information gap activity, interviewing, picture describing, finding the differences, etc. Secondly, the teachers can give students opportunities to speak by asking them questions. For example, after giving instructions for

every activity, the teachers can ask some students what they are going to do to check whether they understand what the teachers just tell them. Before starting every lesson, the teachers can also ask students about what they did last weekend or last holiday. After the students performing a speaking task in front of the class, the teachers can also ask other students to give comments or to ask their friends questions related to what they just said.

(6) Giving students constructive feedbacks

In relation to giving feedback, the results of the study show that one half of the students complained about the way their teacher corrected their mistakes. Baker and Westrup (2003) suggest that 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. 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. Using *sandwich feedback* is also a good solution to criticize students without hurting their feeling.

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).

(7) Testing speaking skills

Baker and Westrup (2003) say that many

teachers worldwide have to teach mainly grammar and vocabulary and neglect language skills because in examinations, grammar and vocabulary are tested. Besides, the students tend to learn what are tested. As a result, they can pass exams but it is difficult for them to speak English outside the classroom. Therefore, it is necessary to include speaking tests in the syllabus (Liu, 2005b). It is very difficult for the teachers to design speaking tests for all the students at the same time because they do not have enough time. However, before starting the new lessons, it is possible for the teachers to ask some students to speak to give marks instead of asking them to do grammar exercises as usual. After every speaking lesson, the teachers could give the students a speaking topic. In the next lesson, they will perform this speaking task. Every lesson, at least three students are called to speak and one term, all the students in the class could have chance to speak. The students will be more motivated to learn speaking skills because they are tested.

Also, teachers might ask the students to use 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.

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.

REFERENCES

- Baker, J., & Westrup, H. (2003). *Essential Speaking Skills: A Handbook for English Language Teachers*. London: Continuum.
- Bond, M.H. (1996). *The Handbook of Chinese Psychology*. Hongkong: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, H.D. (1987). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Prentice-Hall Regent.
- Chaudron, C. (1988). *Second Language Classrooms: Research on Teaching and Learning*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cheng, X. (2000). Asian Students' Reticence Revisited. *System* 28(2000): 435-446.
- Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1996). *Cultures of Learning: Language Classroom in China*. In Coleman, H. (Ed.) *Society and the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 169-206.
- Crookes, G. & Schmidt, R (1991). Motivation: Reopening the Research Agenda. *Language Learning*, 41(4): 469-512.
- Doyon, P. (2000). Shyness in the Japanese EFL Class. *The Language Teacher*, 24(1): 10-11.
- Dwyer, E., & Heller-Murphy, A. (1996). Japanese Learners in Speaking Classes. *Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics*, 7: 46-55.
- Hamouda, A. (2013). An Exploration of Causes of Saudi Students' Reluctance to Participate in the English Language Classroom. *International Journal of English Language Education*. ISSN 2325-0887. Vol.1, No.1.
- Hashimoto, Y. (2002). Motivation and Willingness to Communicate as Predictors of Reported L2 use: the Japanese ESL Context. *Second Language Studies*, 20(2): 20-79.
- Horwitz, E.K., Horwitz, M.B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol.70 (2): 125-132
- Kato, K. (2001). Exploring "Cultures of Learning": A Case of Japanese and Australian Classrooms. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 22(1): 51-67.
- Lebra, T. (1987). The Cultural Significance of Silence in Japanese Communication. *Multilingual*, 6(4): 343-357.
- Liu, M. (2005b). Causes of Reticence in EFL Classrooms: A Study of Chinese University Students. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching*, Vol.1, No. 2, October 2005.
- Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2009). Reticence in Chinese EFL Students at Varied Proficiency Levels. *TESL Canada Journal*. Vol.26, No.2, Spring 2009.
- Lucas, R.I., Miraflores, E., & Go, D. (2011). English Language Learning Anxiety among Foreign Language Learners in the Philippines. *Philippine ESL Journal*, Vol.7, July 2011.
- MacIntyre, P.D., and Charos, C. (1996). Personality, Attitudes, and Affect as Predictors of Second Language Communication. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 15: 3-26.
- Marchand, T. (2010). *Steps towards Improved Participation. An Analysis of Classroom Talk to the "Ladder of Interactions" in the Japanese context*. MSc Thesis. Aston University.
- Nakane, L. (2006). Silence and Politeness in Intercultural Communication in University Seminars. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38: 1811-1835.
- Prégent, R. (1994). *Charting Your Course: How to Prepare to Teach More Effectively*. Magna Publications, Inc.
- Sioson, I.C. (2011). Language Learning Strategies, Beliefs, and Anxiety in Academic Speaking Task. *Philippine ESL Journal*, Vol. 7, July 2011.
- Tanveer, M. (2007). *Investigation of the Factors that Cause Language Anxiety for ESL/EFL*

Learners in Learning Speaking Skills and the Influence it Casts on Communication in the Target Language. Dissertation, University of Glasgow.

Tsui, A. (1996). *Reticence and Anxiety in Second Language Learning* in Bailey, K.M., & Nunan, D. (Eds). *Voices from the Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press.

Turner, J.M., & Hiraga, M.K. (1996). *Elaborating Elaboration in Academic Tutorials: Changing Cultural Assumptions.* In: Coleman, H., Cameron, L. (Eds.) *Change and*

Language Clevedon: BAAL and Multilingual Matters.

Yashima, T. (2002). *Willingness to Communicate in a Second Language: The Japanese EFL context.* *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(1): 54-66.

Zhang, X., & Head, K. (2010). *Dealing with Learner Reticence in the Speaking Class.* *ELT Journal*. Volume 64/1, January 2010. Oxford University Press.

APPENDIX

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

Socio-cultural factors	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1. cultural beliefs (Vietnamese culture values modesty and doing things rather than showing off and talking about things).					

2. if you are too active, you will be thought of as one who likes to show off.					
3. passive learning styles acquired during secondary schooling.					
4. pressure to speak in front of the class (time allowed to perform a speaking task, time for preparation, pressure to perform well).					
5. listeners' support (listeners' patience, understanding, sympathy and support).					
6. lack of familiarity with other students and new environment.					
7. limited time and big class size.					
8. difference between Vietnamese and English.					

Other reasons.....

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