

Reticence in the EFL Classroom: Voices from Students in a Chinese University

Huashan Wu*

School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University, Wuhan, China

Corresponding Author: Huashan Wu, E-mail: wu_huashan@126.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: August 04, 2019

Accepted: October 19, 2019

Published: November 30, 2019

Volume: 8 Issue: 6

Advance access: November 2019

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

ABSTRACT

Student reticence in the English classroom is a pervasive phenomenon in the EFL context, yet limited empirical research on reticence among Chinese university students can be found in the previous literature. This study investigated the students' perception regarding the reasons behind their reticence. Student respondents also proposed coping strategies both from students' and teachers' perspectives. 144 first-year undergraduates undertaking various disciplines in a Chinese university participated in the research. Methodological triangulation involving quantitative and qualitative methods was adopted. Findings indicate that low language proficiency, foreign language anxiety, introversion and teachers' influence are strongly related with student reticence. By employing thematic content analysis, it is found that informants may respond with self-encouragement, adequate preparation and oral practice in an attempt to produce more oral output. Meanwhile, they expect teachers to organize more speaking activities, give guidance and be amicable, which can effectively promote classroom interaction. It is hoped that the findings of this research could potentially help to address student reticence in the English classroom at the tertiary level.

Keywords: Student Reticence, Chinese University Students, Reasons, Coping Strategies, Classroom Interaction

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s, a policy came into effect for Chinese university students to learn English as an obligatory course. To date, most of the universities in China require students to learn College English in the first two years. Afterwards, they are supposed to pass the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) before granted with Bachelor's degree (Tian et al., 2019). Put it differently, there are a myriad of Chinese students learning English. In this regard, investigation into the English learning of Chinese university students deserves some attention from researchers. In the domain of L2 learning, scholars have shed some light on the affective dimensions influencing language acquisition, such as motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy and tolerance of ambiguity (Ehrman et al., 2003), while little empirical research papers delve into the speaking reticence within higher education contexts. In comparison with speaking ability, Chinese students seem to be more relatively proficient in the other three counterparts, namely listening, reading and writing (Murad & Jalambo, 2019). However, they still place a high premium on spoken English. Knowing the paramount importance of English speaking, students still choose to remain silent in oral activities, being passive onlookers (Tsui, 1996).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Reticence

McCroskey (1977) defined reticence as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). Tsui (1996) referred to speaking reticence as "learners' inadequate ability in self-expression, a problem in verbal response to the learning situation" (Tsui, 1996, p. 145). These two definitions commonly conceptualize reticence in the form of non-participation. However, McCroskey related reticence with anxiety; that is, students' lack of verbal participation is owing to the language anxiety. On the other hand, Tsui believed linguistic problems were the main impediment for oral communication in class. In this study, these two factors are both taken into accounts.

Reticence: A Cultural Factor?

There is a stereotype that western students are more active in educational settings, while learners from Confucian-heritage countries value reticence in an attempt to save face (King & Aono, 2017); that is, reticence is culturally salient so that students from eastern Asia have the proclivity to remain quiet

in English learning tasks. Bao (2014) carried out a study involving 112 Chinese college students and determined their perception of learner reticence, and it reflected that students view reticence differently. Some regarded reticence as respect for others because participating actively may be seen as showing off their fluent oral English, which embarrassed their classmates. On the other hand, others considered silence as participation avoidance and it is detrimental for their communicative ability.

Reticence: A Vicious Circle

If students stay reticent in the form of non-verbal response, it generally inhibits students' oral competency since students lack language output. Also, when teachers fail to get a response from students, teachers may reason that students use avoidance of talk to indicate their boredom and being uninterested. As a consequence, teachers have no alternatives but to fill the silence by talking, which not only builds up a teacher-centered lesson, but also gives students fewer chances to produce language outputs. This kind of class, in turn, becomes an impediment to the improvement of communication capabilities in target languages.

Reasons Behind Reticence

Through looking into prior studies, there are several identified reasons for reticence, including low language proficiency, foreign language anxiety, introversion, teachers' influence, insufficient preparation, competition with peers and the like.

According to previous research, low English proficiency was the main contributing factor to students' reluctance to speak. Harumi (2011) collected questionnaires from 197 English majors in a Japanese university to investigate reasons for remaining silent in the English classroom. 67% of participants felt that the linguistic issue contributed to the most prominent factor. This stopped them from expressing themselves in English. This finding is echoed with that of Tsui (1996). Similarly, Liu (2005) surveyed 93 students from three bands of English proficiency, coupled with reflective journal, classroom observation and semi-structured interview, uncovering that low English proficiency was the greatest factor giving rise to students' reticence in Chinese tertiary level. The conclusion is in support of Williams and Andrade's (2008) study. Though students have loads of ideas in their mind, they have difficulty in expressing themselves by using English, especially when they are lacking in time to rehearse before being nominated to speak.

The second commonly mentioned reason behind reticence in a large body of research was anxiety. For investigating foreign language anxiety in language learning, Horwitz et al. (1986) identified three components of language anxiety, namely communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Students with communication apprehension feel uneasy to use the target language when being the focus of others, especially in the speaking context. As to the fear of negative evaluation, it refers to 'apprehension about others' evaluation, avoidance of evaluative

situations and expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively' (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.128). Students with test anxiety feel afraid to fail in a test situation, especially in the speaking output stage. In Liu's (2005) study, anxiety was also one of the contributors in learner reticence. This result is continually confirmed by the research of Williams and Andrade (2008), Harumi (2011) and Yalcin and Incecay (2014).

Some research revealed that reticence was partly teacher-induced. Wen and Clement (2003) concluded two main reasons for verbal reticence, namely "face-saving mechanism" and "a submissive way of learning". First, Chinese place a high value on "face". If they have oral production in the classroom, they would be afraid that their performance could not meet their expectation and receive negative judgment from both the teacher and fellow students. Therefore, they would rather stay reticent for face protection at the expense of lacking authentic language stimulation. The other reason is students' submission to authority in the process of learning. In the traditional class, teachers dominate the class by occupying most of the time for lecturing, thus leaving little time for students to practice speaking. Besides, Chinese students regard grammar rules as the "law" of English learning. Thus, accuracy is valued much more than fluency and students shy away from spoken English since they are not adept in it. This finding is consistent with the assertion of Wang and Chen (2013). They surveyed 512 non-English majors and 94 teachers among six universities in China, and the principal factor of reticence stemmed from the previous learning experience. Before students attended college, they were taught by the Grammar-Translation method which attached great importance to reading and writing. Drilling is the frequent teaching methodology used. Therefore, students' time was mainly devoted to memorizing grammar rules and a wide range of lexical spelling, resulting in the tedious learning experience. Meanwhile, students tend to position teachers as a source of knowledge. Consequently, students exhibit considerable reliance on teachers and become passive knowledge receivers without active participation, let alone question their teachers. Though Williams and Andrade (2008) also identified teacher was the reason for students' reticence, the teachers in their study were referred to the English native speakers. In that case, students struggled to comprehend what native speaker teachers were saying. If they failed to understand, they would remain quiet.

Personality traits, especially introversion, are widely adopted as one of the predictors of classroom reticence. According to Olakitan (2011), introverts were inclined to be quiet and less willing to be involved in groups, so introverted students appeared to have less participation in classroom interaction. Similar findings are documented in Williams and Andrade (2008) and Harumi (2011), claiming that shyness played a significant role in learner reticence.

Other reasons are also identified in addition to the factors mentioned above. Liu et al.'s (2011) found that the most commonly rated reason was insufficient preparation. They were not familiar with the teaching content, thereby remaining quiet. Another great and unexpected contributor towards silence was that active students were fluent in spoken English, so they chose to

be listeners instead of losing face by showing their poor English. This finding was scant among the existing studies, although it lends support to Bailey's (1983) claim that peer pressure was the source of L2 anxiety in the English classroom. Classroom atmosphere is another reason why they are reluctant to speak English. Silence is contagious when the majority of classmates rarely respond to their teachers and speaking English may create a sense of isolation (Williams & Andrade, 2008). Other factors, such as fear of making mistakes, being unfamiliar with the teacher and students and difficulty of the learning content, are all attributed to the students' reticence (Liu, 2005).

Solutions to Reticence

A great deal of previous research has shed light on the varied and concrete strategies to address student reticence. The measures can be generally categorized into two perspectives: students' strategies to overcome difficulties in expressing themselves and students' expectation for teachers to elicit students' responses.

Liu et al. (2011) concluded a couple of strategies to cope with students' reticence, one of which is that students ought to be aware that mistakes and errors were not the handicap of the good performance but a natural part of the language learning process. Also, preparing in advance can effectively help to enhance students' participation. In another study, Liu (2005) mentioned that it would help to facilitate oral output if teachers assign the discussion topics to students before class and instruct students to prepare the topics by giving them relevant reading materials or a list of vocabulary and sentence structures with respect to the topics. Meanwhile, the topics discussed in class should be intriguing enough so that students can be stimulated to speak (Liu & Jackson, 2009).

Showing understanding and empathy towards students' reluctance to speak is a feasible impetus for producing high levels of student involvement in classroom activities. Those who have the least desire or willingness to stay engaged in oral practice are the group that needs an appropriate amount of attention from instructors. Once teachers identify extremely reticent students, especially those with great introversion and excessive shyness, they may need to schedule a meeting to talk to those students, comforting them it is a common trait and providing them with some useful tactics to tackle the reticence (Li & Liu, 2011). Other support, such as providing positive reinforcement after they present their viewpoints in English, having more eye contact, showing willingness to understand and nodding, is also helpful to build up their confidence, this stance being congruent with numerous existing studies (Harumi, 2011; Humphries et al., 2015; Jiang & Jiang, 2019). For the purpose of encouragement, teachers should be cautious in error correction (Cutrone, 2009), because inappropriate error correction will exacerbate the problem by adding learners' apprehension. To the best of my knowledge, an excess of error correction largely impedes students from expressing themselves freely and may result in anxiety.

To promote undergraduates' active participation in English class, Liu and Jackson (2009) advised teachers to create a supportive atmosphere, which corresponds to the earlier research concerning learner reticence (Zou, 2004;

Liu, 2005). One of the ways to build a relaxing atmosphere is organizing group discussion or pair work. Edge and Garton (2009) suggested a host of classroom activities for stimulating discussions within small groups. With fewer number of interlocutors in communication, students concern less accuracy than fluency, thereby being more engaged. The intimate relationship between students and the teacher is another way to create a less anxious atmosphere. For instance, amiable teachers could positively influence students' involvement in class (Young, 1990; Humphries et al., 2015).

Scaffolding is regarded as necessary to aid EFL learners in performing oral tasks (Liu & Jackson, 2009). This is especially important for those who have comparatively lower language proficiency. Without input, such as vocabulary and expressions, they scarcely have resources to stimulate oral production. Half of the practitioners surveyed in the research of Harumi (2011) also held that providing linguistic support both verbally and non-verbally would be an effective strategy to elicit students' answers. Also, when students found questions raised by teachers incomprehensible, it is necessary for teachers to use simple words to rephrase questions.

Educators can help combat reticence by explaining the norms of classroom interaction explicitly (King & Aono, 2017). For instance, in the orientation of the English class, teachers can introduce the English only policy. Some teachers believed nominating individual students to answer questions was a useful approach to involve students in communication (Harumi, 2011). However, this is not expected by students in another research project by Liu (2006). Participants deemed that singling out students to answer questions was anxiety-provoking and it seemed to force reluctant students to speak. The discrepancy between these two studies illustrates the different interpretations on how reticence can be tackled.

Drawing on the prior research regarding reticence, a myriad of empirical studies undertaken in EFL contexts are in Japan and Hong Kong, with the scarcity of research focusing on English learners' reticence in Mainland China at the tertiary level. Given a large number of students studying English in China and pervasive reticence in English class, the current research was implemented to investigate the main reasons accounting for students' reluctance in participation. Coupled with the techniques that both students and teachers can adopt, this study aims to help students achieve better English attainments and provide insights for instructors to grapple with student reticence. To achieve this, three research questions are formulated:

- (1) What are the main causes of student reticence in English interactive activities?
- (2) What do students think they themselves can do to encourage more speaking in English class?
- (3) What practices do students think instructors can do to help them speak more English in class?

METHOD

Rationale of the Research

The rationale of student's questionnaire originated from the well-established body of research which identi-

fied a multitude of variables leading to reticence, such as insufficient language proficiency, foreign language anxiety, introversion and teachers' influence. These four main reasons feed into the constructs of the questionnaire in the current research.

Participants

The population of this study was 144 first-year non-English majors enrolling in a compulsory course named College English in a first-tier Chinese university, with an average age of 18. These freshman informants are from various disciplines, ranging from the Department of Electronic Information Technology to Chinese Language and Literature. There are 73 female participants and 77 male participants, with the gender ratio around 1:1.

Instrument

The questionnaire consists of two parts. The beginning of the questionnaire solicits the biographical and background information, such as gender, age and major. The first section includes 24 statements deriving from the four constructs, with each construct having 6 sub-questions. Among these 24 statements, half of the items are positively worded and the others are negatively worded for the crosscheck. 7-point Likert Scale is applied, ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, neither disagree nor agree, slightly agree, agree and strongly agree. In the second part of the questionnaire, students, stakeholders in the English language classroom, write their strategies to break their silent habit and what they expect instructors to do to elicit their answers. For this part, narrative frames proposed by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) are used to gather students' comprehensive insider views. A narrative frame is an open-ended inquiry template comprising sentence starters and transitions as well as gaps in between for participants to complete with their

viewpoints. These frames "provide guidance and support in terms of both the structure and content of what is to be written" (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 376).

Procedure

144 first-year undergraduates answered the 24-item questionnaires at the end of the second semester. The questionnaire is available on <http://www.sojump.com>. When all the participants finished the questionnaires, the data could be downloaded from the website.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the first part of the questionnaire was computed by SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) to gather descriptive and bivariate statistics, such as correlation, mean, standard deviation as well as the frequencies for each item. As for the qualitative data from the self-report in the second part of the questionnaire, thematic content analysis was adopted to identify and analyze patterns and themes. Similar themes were grouped into categories which act as the higher level umbrella terms (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Robson, 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: What Are the Main Causes of Student Reticence in English Interactive Activities?

The first research question is addressed by the first part of the questionnaire, and the self-report qualitative data in the second part of the questionnaire explores deeper into this question. Pearson correlation coefficients in SPSS were used to identify the relevance between the four constructs and student reticence, and the resulting correlation is presented in the following table (Table 1). It is obvious that four constructs, namely low language proficiency, foreign language

Table 1. Correlation between student reticence and the four constructs

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1 LowPro	29.13	6.12	1.000 144				
2 LangAnx	23.71	6.52	.612** .000 144	1.000 144			
3 ShyPer	26.38	7.40	.706** .000 144	.714** .000 144	1.000 144		
4 TeachInf	18.63	4.18	.495** .000 144	.407** .000 144	.532** .000 144	1.000 144	
5 Reticence	97.85	20.35	.855** .000 144	.847** .000 144	.914** .000 144	.678** .000 144	1.000 144

LowPro: low language proficiency
 LangAnx: foreign language anxiety
 ShyPer: shy personality
 TeachInf: teachers' influence

anxiety, shy personality and teachers' influence, are all significantly correlated with students' reticence.

As Table 2 illustrates, the result collected from the second part of the questionnaire implied that around 40% of the respondents in the present study attributed their reticence to their inability to express themselves well in the target language, and about 20% felt that the main reason was their introverted personality. Anxiety and lack of confidence accounted for 11% and 10% respectively, while teachers' role and previous educational mode share the same percentage. Topic, the influence of other students and other reasons were also pertinent to students' silence.

Low language proficiency

The result revealed that there was a significant positive correlation between low language proficiency and learner reticence ($r=.855$, $p<.001$). Specifically, if students perceive themselves as incompetent language learners, they are likely to avoid oral communication in class. This result mirrored the conclusions drawn by Harumi (2011), Tsui (1996), and Liu (2005), which indicated that linguistic issues had powerful effects on students' reticence. In the current study, more insightful details can be obtained from the qualitative data in the self-report inquiry. 18

students regarded their poor English foundation as the main reason why they remained quiet in oral activities, and 16 students wrote that their poor spoken English made them shy away from speaking up. 11 students remarked that their lack of vocabulary was the major hindrance of active participation.

S57: I think the poor foundation of English is another important reason why I remain silent in the English classroom. This is mainly because most of my classmates, including me, don't have a good English environment and habit to practice English. As a result, many students do not have a good foundation of English and do not have the confidence to speak in class.

S94: I think poor language expression skills is another important reason why I remain silent in the English classroom. This is mainly because if I do not know how to express my ideas well in English, though I have a good idea, I may keep silent.

S141: I think vocabulary is another important reason why I remain silent in the English classroom. This is mainly because my vocabulary is not enough to support me to speak in English fluently.

Poor grammar and pronunciation were also recognized by respondents as the stumbling blocks, while it is worthwhile

Table 2. Students' self-report reasons for remaining silent

Rank order	Causes of reticence	No. of students	% of students	
1	Low language proficiency	Poor English foundation	18	58 (40.3%)
		Poor spoken English	16	
		Lack of vocabulary	11	
		Poor grammar	4	
		Poor pronunciation	4	
		Need time to translate	3	
		Incomprehensible input	2	
2	Personality traits	29	29 (20.1%)	
3	Anxiety	Communication apprehension	5	11 (7.6%)
		Fear of negative evaluation	4	
		Fear of making mistakes	2	
4	Lack of self-confidence	10	10 (6.9%)	
5	Teacher's influence	Personality	4	8 (5.6%)
		Teaching method	3	
		Relationship with students	1	
6	Previous educational mode	8	8 (5.6%)	
7	Topics	Unfamiliarity	3	5 (3.5%)
		Uninterested	2	
8	Influence of other students	Other students' reticence	3	4 (2.8%)
		Fluency of other students	1	
9	Other reasons	Learning style	4	11 (7.6%)
		Classroom atmosphere	2	
		Distracted	2	
		Under preparation	1	
		Uninterested in English	1	
		Unsure about answers	1	

noticing that the causes of English deficiency are manifold and interrelated. Students thought their low proficiency was derived from poor spoken English, limited vocabulary, bad grammar and non-standard pronunciation. This finding is reaffirmed in the study by Harumi (2011). As Harumi put it, linguistic aspects, such as lexical resources, grammar accuracy, English fluency as well as the difficulty of comprehension, were the signs of low English levels, which hindered them from articulating in English.

S82: I think the poor spoken English is another important reason why I remain silent in the English classroom. This is mainly because I have not studied English well since I was a child. My vocabulary is too small and my grammar is too weak.

3 students emphasized that they needed enough time to translate their answers from Chinese into English before speaking. The process of formulating their speaking content seemed to be time-consuming, so they need extra wait-time to be well-prepared. 2 students reported that they remained silent due to the incomprehensible input either from teachers or from their classmates.

S124: I think the time gap is another important reason why I remain silent in the English classroom. This is mainly because I always speak Chinese in school. But in the English class, I am supposed to speak English. It requires me to change my way of thinking. And I need time to translate my Chinese words into English words. However, because of my lack of vocabulary, I could not utter any words in proper time even though I would like to.

S85: I think that I can't understand questions is another important reason why I remain silent in the English classroom. This is mainly because I can't understand what others are speaking so that I don't know how to respond to them.

Foreign language anxiety

Language anxiety is another predictive factor of student reticence ($r=.847$, $p<.001$). Communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety are three sub-variables within anxiety. Based on the quantitative and qualitative data in this study, communication apprehension was the main obstacle since students were unlikely to speak in public, and communication apprehension was also interwoven with the other two factors.

S53: I think being afraid to speak English is another important reason why I remain silent in the English classroom. This is mainly because I'm afraid of speaking English in public. My pronunciation and my spoken English are poor. I always need so much time to think about how to express the ideas I have. What's more, I don't have enough courage to make mistakes, so I keep quiet.

S54: I think I'm afraid of false expressions in English is another important reason why I remain silent in the English classroom. This is mainly because I fear of making a fool of myself and may feel nervous and uncomfortable after speaking.

To investigate this finding, the researcher recalled the results of Williams and Andrade (2008). They invited 104 undergraduates to complete online questionnaires, eliciting students' responses on the situations when they remained quiet. There were five themes conducing to the classroom silence: speaking in front of the class, classroom atmosphere, influence of the teacher, language difficulty, and under preparation. Giving presentations and being singled out to answer questions were two most cited anxiety-provoking activities in that students felt they were exposed under spotlight, and peers may judge them negatively if they spoke poor English. In another study by Harumi (2011), 23% of respondents attributed their avoidance of talk to the psychological factors, with anxiety an apparent reason leading to their reluctance in oral practice. However, half of the students in the current study were less concerned that teacher would assess them based on their oral performance.

Shy personality

The quantitative results indicated that shy personality was significantly correlated to students' reticence ($r=.914$, $p<.001$). A majority of respondents (67.4%) in this study saw themselves as shy and inhibited, so they were withdrawn in English class. Also, answering questions voluntarily in class would make them feel embarrassed, especially in a big English class. Most of them chose to use an avoidance strategy. As reported above, students' unwillingness to involve oral activities was associated with their timidity. To investigate this relationship, it is worth recalling Liu et al.'s (2011) research. Set in a Chinese university, a triangulation of methods was adopted to explore the reasons behind students' reticence. Data were collected via questionnaires, observations and interviews to obtain comprehensive perceptions. The study identified several reasons triggering reticence, and introversion was a salient factor, this confirming the findings of Liu (2005) who identified personality traits were an influential factor. It could be inferred that introverted students got used to being unnoticed and keeping quiet without showing themselves to others. This corroborates the qualitative data yielded from the open-ended inquiry in this study. 29 students ascribed their reticence to the introverted trait, since they were afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at by their peers.

S27: I think characters is another important reason why I remain silent in the English classroom. This is mainly because somebody is born silent. They always worry about other's attitude with their oral English. And they often want to do this better.

S70: I think character is another important reason why I remain silent in the English classroom. This is mainly because I am afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at. That is too disgraceful.

Teachers' influence

Although teachers' influence was strongly related with students' reticence ($r=.678$, $p<.001$), it is heartening to discover that teacher-oriented teaching method did not dominate

the English class in this Chinese university, with 86% disagreeing with the statement that “I seldom have the chance to speak because my English teacher speaks all the time”. However, around 45% of students would not speak out if they had different opinions with teachers, which implied teachers’ authoritative role. This is partly because Chinese culture places great emphasis on the respect for teachers, so students in class tend to be reserved and obey teachers (Liu, 2005). It is also imperative to note that another significant factor giving rise to the inadequacies responses lay in teachers’ personality. Around 65% of students in this study maintained that they did not feel like speaking if their English teachers were serious and less amicable. In contrast, if teachers are friendly and patient, students would be more willing to participate in the oral discussion.

S111: I think the good relationship between teachers and students can encourage me to speak more English. Teachers should be more friendly. This is mainly because I am afraid that making mistakes can make the teacher angry.

Research Question 2: What Do Students Think They Themselves Can Do to Encourage More Speaking in English Class?

In the second section of the questionnaire, students were asked what coping tactics they would use to address the class interaction avoidance. As Table 3 illustrates, nearly one-third of infor-

mants reported that they would use the self-talk in an attempt to accomplish the aim of communication. Among these students, 16 students would give themselves psychological hints that they can make it. Other students may think of the intangible benefits of being interactive in class, such as improving their spoken English and language ability, getting an extra score for their usual performance, increasing self-confidence as well as giving teachers a good impression. Self-talk, an affective tactic, is the main focus in the study of Shi et al. (2014). They investigated 209 students who enrolled in the public speaking course and saw how participants coped with speaking anxiety. It was found that reinforcing self-talk can effectively alleviate anxious emotion so as to improve speech performance. Self-encouragement is similar to self-talk, and around 10% of the respondents wrote that encouraging themselves would help to break the silence in class and raise the motivation of talking.

S88: I often take an active part in class. I think speaking in English class will help to improve my oral ability and do better in an English speech contest and other similar activities.

S113: Thinking that speaking English will help me improve my English is helpful.

S107: Speaking in English will help me improve myself and build my confidence. I don’t want to be a shy person all the time and I want me to be more confident.

The second most rated comment is preparation, with around 19.5% of students contending that sufficient prepa-

Table 3. Students’ strategies to overcome difficulties in expressing themselves

Rank order	Students’ coping strategies	No. of students	% of students	
1	Self-talk	Psychological hints	16	48 (33.3%)
		Improve spoken English	12	
		Gain Usual score	9	
		Improve English ability	6	
		Increase self-confidence	3	
		Leave a good impression for teachers	2	
2	Preparation	General preparation	8	28 (19.5%)
		Construct sentences in mind	7	
		Preview	5	
		Write down sentences on paper	4	
		Translate into English	2	
		Search words from dictionary	2	
3	Encourage themselves	15	15 (10.4%)	
4	Practice more oral English after class	14	14 (9.7%)	
5	Speak with familiar students	12	12 (8.3%)	
6	Push themselves to talk without considering others’ opinion	10	10 (6.9%)	
7	Calm down	7	7 (4.9%)	
8	Teacher	More interaction with teachers	4	5 (3.5%)
		Keep up with teachers	1	
9	Do nothing	3	3 (2.1%)	
10	Compare with active students	1	1 (0.7%)	
11	Award himself/herself	1	1 (0.7%)	

ration was necessary for oral production. In addition to the general preparation, some students stated that they may need time to process the speaking content, such as formulating utterances in their heads, writing down the sentences beforehand, translating their ideas from Chinese into English and searching the unknown words before expressing them verbally. 5 students would choose to preview the texts or topics before class. Liu et al. (2011) had a similar conclusion. With adequate preparation, students appeared to have more capacity to speak and share their opinions, since they were more familiar with the course content.

S43: If I want to express something clearly, I may use my mobile phone to find some suitable words to help me. In short, doing some preparation will help a lot.

S138: Mostly I will try to translate what I will say in English so that I can make it correct.

S112: I will preview before English classes and get familiar with the text and new words. When the teacher asks questions, I will think the questions in my mind and write the keywords to answer the questions better.

Approximately 10% of students held that they would put more efforts into oral practice after class. However, notwithstanding students are aware of that continuous practice can tremendously improve their use of the language, few students would take the initiative to speak after class when there is no supervision. If students were required to talk in class, they were likely to speak with familiar students, such as their roommates, desk mates or their good friends. This is because the familiarity between students can make students more comfortable in interaction (Williams, 1994).

S60: Practicing more after class could encourage me during speaking activities in English class.

S29: Communicating with my partners will encourage me to speak English

Pushing themselves to talk without considering others' opinions was another technique used by the participants, with 6.9% of students adopting this method. One of the reasons why students remained silent in discussion tasks was that they were afraid to receive a negative evaluation from their peers. Some Chinese students would value "face", especially when they spoke to the whole class (Mak 2011). As a solution to the inadequate interaction, students proposed that they would push themselves to talk regardless of others' opinions.

S133: I would give myself some pressure to force myself to speak. I would first conceive my answers in Chinese, and then translate them into English and write it on the paper. At the same time, I would remind myself to speak English out. Do not care too much about right or wrong. Do not care too much about the opinions of others. Imagine all my classmates are non-existent in my mind, and I am the only one talking about in class.

Relaxation techniques, such as taking a deep breath, were also the palliative measures used by students. Some reported that they would have more interaction with teachers and be

more attentive towards the lectures so that they could keep up with the questions raised by teachers. However, some students would take a passive attitude and did nothing to become engaged and productive. One student would compare with active students to encourage language output. This encounters a contrast, as Liu et al. (2011) contended that peer pressure was the handicap for less proficient students to actively interact with others.

S136: Take a deep breath and tell myself "I can do it."

S137: Keeping up with my English teacher is a better way to help me to answer questions.

S119: I would encourage myself by comparing with others who are active in class.

S126: I'll do nothing.

Research Question 3: What Practices Do Students Think Instructors Can Do to Help Them Speak More English in Class?

87.5% respondents filling out the questionnaires felt that their teachers did not employ the teacher-centered pedagogical method, but this conclusion can not be generalized to a wider population. This is because all the respondents are from the same university, and convenience sample may not be representative. For the qualitative result (see Table 4), 16.7% of students still thought more opportunities should be given to students to speak English. They expressed an explicitly favorable attitude towards a variety of oral tasks, varying from presentation to drama. In other words, communicative language teaching (CLT) was welcomed by a certain proportion of students. CLT is a teaching methodology that values interaction and oral production in the process of learning a foreign language. It is worth backtracking to the results of Liu (2005) who highlighted the importance of CLT as a role to provoke an increase in reticent students' discussion. It is suggested that CLT should be introduced as the main teaching method in the orientation, aiming to help students reshape their English learning style. In a later study, Li and Liu (2011) proposed that adopting the communicative language teaching method was the key to steering students away from the reticence in English class. Therefore, it could be surmised that teachers using CLT in the classroom could encourage students to produce meaningful output in a wide range of contexts instead of merely centering around grammatical accuracy and rote memory.

S59: Teacher organizes more activities, which could give me a chance to communicate with others.

S51: Teachers should organize more presentation activities.

S55: Our teacher can organize some activities like stage drama.

However, the notion of using merely CLT is at odds with Edge and Garton (2009) who advised that various interaction patterns should be introduced to tailor varying instructions to different learners. The reason is that some learners were keen on classroom activities, such as pair work or group discussion, to yield creative language production, while others favored "old

Table 4. Students' expectation from teachers to elicit their responses

Rank order	Students' expectation from teachers	No. of students	% of students	
1	More opportunities to speak English	Organize more oral practice	17	24 (16.7%)
		Presentation	3	
		Practice English by means of games	3	
		Drama	1	
2	Scaffolding	General guidance	5	18 (12.5%)
		Sentence structures	5	
		Vocabulary and expressions	4	
		Hints	4	
3	Encouragement	18	18 (12.5%)	
4	Classroom atmosphere	English immersion environment	8	15 (10.4%)
		Relaxing atmosphere	7	
5	Group discussion	14	14 (9.7%)	
6	Personality of teachers	Friendly	4	10 (6.9%)
		Humorous	2	
		Patient	2	
		Cute	2	
7	Award students with extra score	9	9 (6.2%)	
8	Interesting topic	8	8 (5.6%)	
9	Single out students to answer	8	8 (5.6%)	
10	Comprehensible input	Speak slowly	3	5 (3.5%)
		Ask simple questions	2	
11	Enough wait-time	5	5 (3.5%)	
12	Teachers have done well, and the key is on students themselves.	5	5 (3.5%)	
13	After-class oral assignments	2	2 (1.4%)	
14	Teach phonetic symbols	1	1 (0.69%)	
15	Tell students the topics in advance	1	1 (0.69%)	
16	Recommend English movies	1	1 (0.69%)	

shoe" teaching strategies, such as grammar-translation teaching method. This led to the students' second most mentioned expectation; that is, scaffolding given by teachers was necessary before oral production. That is to say, guidance, including sentence structures and expressions, ought to be given. In light of Liu and Jackson (2009), scaffolding was helpful to achieve learning goals by providing a list of relevant words and sentence structures. This is in accordance with the study of Harumi (2011) that got insights from students' and teachers' self-report with respect to the means of eliciting students' response. From students' perspective, they put forward several techniques which may stimulate their oral responses. Nearly 58% of students supported that useful collocations and phrases can be provided by teachers in advance so that they had lexical resources to continue the flow of conversation in the target language.

S1: I think teachers can give us some words or sentence structures first.

S10: Teachers could give a template to let us know how to express.

12.5% of participants in the current study acknowledged that encouragement given by teachers was of great help. En-

couraging students can boost students' self-confidence and release their tension to a great extent. Similarly, Jiang and Jiang (2019) believed that positive reinforcement from teachers could facilitate students to learn, while punishment inhibits learning. The positive reinforcement includes awarding those who are active during class, positive feedback, facial pleasantness as well as satisfaction with students' answers.

S80: Teacher can encourage me to speak English and give me more confidence. I think a kind teacher can release my tension when I feel nervous in the class.

S53: Constant interaction and generous praise will help.

Creating an English immersion and relaxing classroom atmosphere is another approach teachers can take to promote students' spoken stimulation. A student suggested that if the rule of speaking English only was implemented in English class, it would be less embarrassed to communicate in English. To achieve this, teachers should also adhere to this rule. Humphries et al. (2015) investigated 104 English majors by means of the "narrative frames" with regard to their capacity to speak, and one of the affective factors of their unwillingness to speak English was that their English

teachers mostly used Japanese as the medium of teaching. On this note, students would also avoid speaking English in class. Also, relaxing atmosphere was favored by a couple of students. Liu and Jackson (2009) claimed that to provide a non-threatening environment where students felt at ease was an antidote to transcend the role of passive learner to active learners. This was echoed with another study conducted by Liu (2005) and Liu et al. (2011). They suggested that for encouraging students to use English as the medium of instruction, teachers were supposed to create a favorable classroom climate in class. The more English students speak, the more fluent they will be. In return, the improvement in fluency will boost their confidence, resulting in more active participation.

S81: Teachers can have a rule that everyone should speak English in class.

S48: Teachers could make the class atmosphere more relaxed and more humorous.

To create a friendly and relaxing atmosphere, organizing pair work or group work was recommended by a couple of students in the current study. In pair work, students were confronted with fewer audience, so they are less worried that their oral performance was assessed, thereby being more engaged. This argument is in line with Cutrone (2009) who reckoned that less anxiety-provoking classroom activities, such as group discussion and pair work, can be employed to facilitate speaking.

S6: Teachers can organize more group discussions and don't pay attention to my mistakes and don't rate it on that basis. Otherwise, I'll be scared.

S21: Teachers should let everyone discuss freely and then let them answer in small groups.

The role of instructors' characteristics can not be neglected in improving the efficacy of student interaction. In this study, friendly, patient and humorous teachers were welcomed by participants. Nevertheless, if teachers are strict and ready to comment negatively regarding students' oral performance, there will be fewer students volunteering answers. This supports Young's (1990) proposal that students preferred teacher-educators who were friendly, patient and humorous.

S123: Being patient and friendly may be a good way to shorten the distance between students and teachers.

S124: Teacher could give us more time to organize our thinking or teach us how to overcome this. Besides, they can be more humorous and kind so that we can be less embarrassed when we are stuck in certain words.

6.2% of students hoped that their usual score could be associated with their oral interaction in class. As S84 remarked, "The English teacher could make students' regular grade attach to the times that the students speak English in class." Some students lose interest in oral participation, because they have inadequate motivation, especially those who are non-English majors. Using a point system would inspire students who seriously concern scores of courses to articulate in discussion tasks (Li & Liu, 2011).

Interesting topic was put forward by 8 students. Scattered empirical findings support this result, one of which is Liu and Jackson (2009). They deemed that introducing intriguing topics in class appeared to arouse students' interest and then motivate them to speak. In an earlier study, Liu (2005) concluded that engaging students to discuss intriguing topics can possibly break students' silence. Hence, some oral activities can be designed to fit in the thought-provoking topics in each lesson. A word of caution is in order however. If students are not familiar with the topic given, background information is needed to be introduced, and relevant expressions can be taught.

S112: Instructors can prepare some interesting questions that most students can answer easily. The instructors can communicate with students randomly after giving a topic.

S56: Communicate with the students more and know more about the topics that students are interested in to arouse the enthusiasm of students.

8 students wrote that singling out students to answer was less awkward than volunteering to answer, which has incongruence with the findings of Liu (2006). A research project was conducted among 547 Chinese undergraduate students at three different proficiency levels through questionnaire, observation, diary and interview. Participants reported that the most anxiety-provoking moment was when teachers called the roll call, because they were worried about their insufficient English proficiency and afraid of making mistakes. In a similar study by Williams and Andrade (2008), their findings appeared to be in conformity with Liu (2006), proposing that most students did not praise this interactive pattern. In evaluation of this contrast, it is imperative to note that not all of the students are in favor of this kind of interaction.

S61: Teacher can encourage me by calling the roll.

S130: When we are in class, teachers can ask students to answer questions by calling names. I do not like to take the initiative to answer questions.

Around one-seventh of students came up with other insightful details for the purpose of enhancing their interest and motivation to speak in speaking tasks, including comprehensible input and enough wait-time. Sometimes, students are incommunicative in class in that they have trouble keeping up with teachers or understanding the questions, thereby being less active. In this regard, teachers ought to take students' individual differences into consideration and adjust speech rate if necessary. Moreover, a sufficient amount of wait-time was supported by some students, since they can take advantage of the wait-time to prepare their utterances. On the contrary, if they are not well-prepared, they may be afraid of losing face, while 'face' has a huge role to play in Chinese culture (Mak, 2011). Similarly, Ingram and Elliott (2014) recorded pupils aged between 12 and 14 in secondary schools in England, and it showed that extended wait-time led to longer answers containing more details, explanation or reasoning. However, there are some studies offering a contradictory conclusion. Tsui (2001) proposed that giving excessive wait-time had debilitating impacts on students'

speaking and then brought about anxiety. In a study investigating Scottish primary students by Kirton et al. (2007), students reported boredom when required to wait. Although these two studies were carried out in contexts outside China, it still has its significance for reference in the EFL interactional classroom in China.

CONCLUSION

Findings in this research suggest that inadequate English proficiency, language anxiety, introversion and teachers' influence are significantly correlated with student reticence. Other variables involving lack of confidence and previous learning mode are also conspicuous reasons causing reticence in the English classroom. Students remarked that they were devoid of required lexical resources and speaking fluency, which are inextricably intertwined with other factors, such as being unconfident and anxious.

A broad set of measures both from students' and teachers' sides were mentioned by the respondents to resolve student resistance. Approximately half of the informants contended that they may apply positive self-talk to encourage themselves to participate in the speaking tasks. Preparation beforehand was another strategy to deal with their silent habit. More output production was viewed reciprocal practice which seemed to improve their spoken English. On reviewing the previous studies in regard to speaking reticence, little research probes into the tactics employed by students, so one of the areas of future research should uncover students' perceptions of their own solutions towards their inactive participation.

From a pedagogical point of view, here are some teaching techniques that students expected their English teachers can use to help them overcome reticence. It was advised that practitioners can give students more opportunities to practice their oral English by organizing a variety of speaking activities, particularly pair work and group discussion. More importantly, guidance in sentence structures and expressions were indispensable to produce fluent output. Besides, giving encouragement, creating a favorable climate and being friendly can be incorporated into teaching practice and these are of help for classroom interaction.

The self-report questionnaire may not be sufficient to examine Chinese students' reticence in English class. Although students reported their own strategies and their expectations for teachers to deal with their reticence, there may be discrepancies between what participants think they would do and what they would actually do. Also, if teachers apply the teaching practice suggested by students, will it make them more active in classroom interaction? In this case, structured observation is recommended as an additional approach to examine students' reticence. Furthermore, whether other variables, such as gender and English proficiency, would exert an influence on Chinese students' reticence has not been addressed in the current study. Further research considering factors which are not examined in the present study may contribute to a fuller understanding of student reticence.

REFERENCES

- Bailey K. M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: looking at and through the diary studies. In H. W. Seliger & M. H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition* (pp. 67-103). Rowley, Mass: Newbury House Publishers.
- Bao, D. (2014). *Understanding silence and reticence: Ways of participating in second language acquisition*. London: A&C Black.
- Barkhuizen, G., & Wette, R. (2008). Narrative frames for investigating the experiences of language teachers. *System*, 36(3), 372-387.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Cutrone, P. (2009). Overcoming Japanese EFL learners' fear of speaking. *Language studies working papers*, 1, 55-63.
- Edge, J., & Garton, S. (2009). *From experience to knowledge in ELT*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ehrman, M. E., Leaver, B. L., & Oxford, R. L. (2003). A brief overview of individual differences in second language learning. *System*, 31(3), 313-330.
- Harumi, S. (2011). Classroom silence: Voices from Japanese EFL learners. *ELT journal*, 65(3), 260-269.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132.
- Humphries, S. C., Burns, A., & Tanaka, T. (2015). "My head became blank and I couldn't speak": Classroom factors that influence English speaking. *The Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 2(3), 164-175.
- Ingram, J., & Elliott, V. (2014). Turn taking and 'wait time' in classroom interactions. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 62(3), 1-12.
- Jiang, H., & Jiang, Q. (2019). Research on the English Silence Classroom in Chinese Universities. *DEStech Transactions on Social Science, Education and Human Science*.
- King, J., & Aono, A. (2017). Talk, silence and anxiety during one-to-one tutorials: A cross-cultural comparative study of Japan and UK undergraduates' tolerance of silence. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 18(4), 489-499.
- Kirton, A., Hallam, S., Peffers, J., Robertson, P., & Stobart, G. (2007). Revolution, evolution or a Trojan horse? Piloting assessment for learning in some Scottish primary schools. *British educational research journal*, 33(4), 605-627.
- Li, H., & Liu, Y. (2011). A Brief Study of Reticence in ESL Class. *Theory & Practice in Language Studies*, 1(8) 961-965.
- Liu, M. (2005). Causes of reticence in EFL classrooms: A study of Chinese university students. *Indonesian JELT*, 1(2), 108-124.
- Liu, M. (2006). Anxiety in Chinese EFL students at different proficiency levels. *System*, 34(3), 301-316.
- Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2009). Reticence in Chinese EFL students at varied proficiency levels. *TESL Canada Journal*, 26(2), 65-81.

- Liu, M., Zhang, W., & Lu, Z. (2011). Reticence and anxiety in Chinese university ESP poetry class: A case study. *Journal of Languages and Culture*, 2(2), 20-33.
- Mak, B. (2011). An exploration of speaking-in-class anxiety with Chinese ESL learners. *System*, 39(2), 202-214.
- McCroskey J. C. (1977). Oral communication apprehension: A summary of recent theory and research. *Human communication research*, 4(1), 78-96.
- Murad, A. I., & Jalambo, M. O. (2019). EFL Students' Reluctance in Participating in English Speaking Activities at University College of Applied Sciences: Challenges and Solutions. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 7(3), 28.
- Olakitan, O. O. (2011). An examination of the impact of selected personality traits on the innovative behaviour of entrepreneurs in Nigeria. *International Business and management*, 3(2), 112-121.
- Robson, C. (2011). *Real World Research*. Hoboken: Wiley.
- Shi, X., Brinthaup, T. M., & McCree, M. (2014). The relationship of self-talk frequency to communication apprehension and public speaking anxiety. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 75(3), 125-129.
- Tian, Z., Wei, Y., & Li, F. (2019). Who are better teachers? The effects of tenure-track and part-time faculty on student achievement. *China Economic Review*, 53(1), 140-151.
- Tsui, A. B. (1996). Reticence and anxiety in second language learning. In K. M. Bailey and D. Nunan (Eds.), *Voices from the language classroom* (pp. 145-167). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tsui, A. B. (2001). Classroom Interaction. In R. Carter & D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages* (pp. 120-125). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wang, X., & Chen, M. (2013). The Questionnaire Analysis Research on the Causes of College Students' Reticence in the English Classroom. In 2013 *International Conference on the Modern Development of Humanities and Social Science* (pp. 129-132). Paris: Atlantis Press.
- Wen, W., & Clement, R. (2003). A Chinese Conceptualisation of Willingness to Communicate in ESL. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 16(1), 18-38.
- Williams, C. (1994). Situational behaviour in the language classroom. *The Language Teacher*, 18(5), 10-11.
- Williams, K. E., & Andrade, M. R. (2008). Foreign language learning anxiety in Japanese EFL university classes: Causes, coping, and locus of control. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 5(2), 181-191.
- Yalcin, O., & Incecay, V. (2014). Foreign language speaking anxiety: the case of spontaneous speaking activities. *Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 116, 2620-2624.
- Young, D. J. (1990). An investigation of students' perspectives on anxiety and speaking. *Foreign Language Annals*, 23(6), 539-553.
- Zou, M. (2004). EFL learners' perceptions of in-class relationships and their voluntary responses. In Y. Gao (Ed.), *The social psychology of English learning by Chinese college students* (pp. 149-167). Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.