



**Shahid Rajaee Teacher Training University**  
**Faculty of Humanities**

**Proficiency Level and Factors Fostering Reticence in  
EFL Learners**

**By: Maryam Badkoubeh**

**Under Supervision of Dr. Maryam Meshkat  
&  
Co-Supervision of Dr. Farhad Dordinejad**

**A thesis submitted to the Graduate Studies Office in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in**

**Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)**

**March, 2013**

In The Name of God



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## **Dedication**

To my Beloved Daddy for his Unconditional Love and Support,

and

To my Lovely Mom for her Patience and Support.

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## **Abstract**

According to Cheng (1999), in recent ESL/EFL literature, Asian (especially East Asian) learners of English as a foreign/second language have been arguably reported as reticent and passive learners. The most common allegations are that these students are reluctant to participate in classroom discourse; they are unwilling to give responses; they do not ask questions; and they are passive and over-dependent on the teacher (Jones et al., 1993; Braddock et al., 1995; Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Tsui, 1996). The present study examined “reticence” in English language classes which has long been a challenge for both professors and students. With the advent of new language teaching methodologies, there is a pressing need for EFL instructors to help reticent students put their problems aside to be able to have an active role in oral activities of the class. This study was an attempt to: first, find the relationship between the level of language proficiency and reticence; second, find other important factors fostering reticence. The data were collected during one whole semester from university students and they were analyzed based on statistics by the help of SPSS software. The results have shown that proficiency level of the learners’ influence their reticence level and the higher the language proficiency level, the better oral performance in the classroom. Also, another influencing factor called teacher interactional/instructional strategies was found to be effective. This is a combination of different teaching strategies a teacher applies in her/his teaching setting which proved to be influential in this study.

**Key words:** EFL, reticence, language proficiency, teacher interactional/instructional strategies.

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# **Chapter I:**

## Introduction

## 1.1. Overview

According to Jennifer Jenkins (2006), despite far-reaching changes in the English-speaking world along with serious critiques of the traditional premises of second language acquisition (SLA) research, little has changed in the way English is taught to its second language learners. At the same year, Werner stated that during the 20th century, the teaching and learning of foreign languages has gained an unprecedented importance. This pertains mainly to English in its world-wide use, but also to other national languages meaning that teaching and learning of English as an international language gained more attention than other languages but other national languages' learning also gained importance. The question is discussed of whether new vernaculars are to be taught merely as the instrument of communication, i.e. in a practical sense, or whether further-reaching pedagogical goals should be envisaged. During the 19th and 20th centuries, educators discussed this issue heatedly with reference to the Niedderer&Schecker's (1982) contrastive teaching. Using these thought-provoking discussions, the idea is floated that foreign language teaching should always include reflecting on the respective culture in which the language is embedded and on the general rules and conventions which guide its use. So in case researchers want to examine the issue of "reticence" it is better to have a good understanding of the setting and culture within which they want to do our research (Meihua Liu, 2005).

Recent research on second language pedagogy advocates the use of tasks which require learners to produce output actively. This needs learners to use all their abilities to interact with their classmates and teachers, but there are lots of Iranian students who have problems in expressing themselves orally in the second language in classroom settings. They try to find other ways of conveying what they mean, writing for instance, in order not to talk in the classroom (Andrew S. Rancer,1998).

Nowadays the interest in language teaching methodology (Skehan 1998; Crookes &Gass 1993a, b) finds support in SLA studies, so, it can be seen that the importance of speaking up in the classroom is getting more and more attention in second language acquisition settings. SLA studies provide the theoretical rationale within the perspective that language is best learned and taught through interaction (Haley L. Wiggins, 2004). Based on this rationale, those students who have problems in oral interaction will face problems in second language learning in one or another way. SLA research has shown that when interaction is modified through the triggers, signals and responses of negotiation, the learners' needs to access L2 input and produce output are enhanced considerably (Lynne Kelly, 1997). The point is that after triggers students should show interest to continue the negotiation and produce output. Thus, negotiation is claimed to play an important role in setting up conditions for L2 learning (Kun-huei Wu, 2010).

On the one hand, language teachers, the putative beneficiaries of applied linguistic insights, tend to think that the name reticence is simply a cover for some idle or somehow lazy students and has no real relevance for the practicalities of the classroom. On the other hand, students, themselves, do not realize that this is a kind of problem that needs to be solved.

While looking for the origin of reticence the researcher came across an article by James A. Keaten, Lynne Kelly and Cynthia Finch (1997) which had a part named 'History of the Reticence Construct'. It was the first document which researcher could find about the origin of the word reticence:

In 1965, Phillips coined the term "reticent" and introduced to the field of communication the notion that there are people who have difficulty communicating across a range of situations. Until that time, the field had focused almost exclusively on fear of public speaking. Phillips' original conceptualization defined reticence as a personality-based, anxiety disorder. By 1973 he had shifted somewhat away from the emphasis on the reticent personality toward a description of the reticent person's behavior (Phillips & Metzger, 1973). The refinement of the conceptualization was completed by 1977 (Phillips, 1977); in that and subsequent publications, Phillips defined reticence as a problem of inadequate communication skills (Phillips, 1984, 1986, 1991). The reticent person avoids and is inept at social interaction and public performance. One central statement of the reticent perspective is included in most of Phillips' discussions of the concept: "When people avoid communication because they believe they will lose more by talking than by remaining silent, we refer to it as reticence" (Phillips, 1984, p. 52). It is the realization of their own ineptitude that leads reticent communicators to this conclusion.

In his latest treatise on reticence, Phillips (1991) provides more detail about the kinds of difficulties reticent or incompetent people may have (He uses the term "incompetent" to include reticent individuals). Phillips proposes that the classical canons of rhetoric "specify the components of the communication act: inventing and arranging ideas, choosing and delivering clusters of words, and maintaining in memory a storehouse of ideas and repertoire of behaviors" (1991, p.70). Furthermore, he states that "the canons provide categories to deal with each of the components of the speaking process. We need the categories for diagnostic purposes, that is, if

we are to modify social performance, we must be able to identify specific patterns of performance that must be changed" (Phillips, 1991, p. 70). Phillips goes on to discuss specifically the types of problems individuals can have within each of the five processes of invention, disposition, style, delivery, and memory.

Thus, although the reticence construct has undergone an evolution, the key notion that the reticent person has communication skill deficiencies has been present for twenty years. The latest work by Phillips (1991; Kelly et al., 1995) further delineates the nature of those skill deficiencies. Specifically, the reticence construct assumes that skill deficiencies defining the problem correspond to the rhetorical canons of invention, disposition, style, delivery, and memory. It is this most recent conceptualization of reticence which serves as the foundation for the Reticence Scale. No existing instrument is isomorphic with this conceptualization and communication competence or skill measures do not assess these particular skills.

When the researcher began studying reticence in SLA two years ago, she came to know that there is a long way out there to solve this problem in Iran. Understanding of language acquisition having just reached completion, it was simply a matter of finding the best way to translate it into teaching practice, then retraining all language teachers in the method, making sure to marginalize and ridicule any who might resist (Pica, 1986). From our teaching experience we know that Iranian students of English have certain difficulties in the use of their oral skills. It is witnessed that there is even a tendency to use their mother tongue in situations which they feel they may make mistakes although they have good knowledge in English as far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned. The researcher was looking for more evidence than her teaching experience, so this research was an attempt to find real factors fostering reticence.



In line with mainstream SLA's view of English learners from the expanding circle as learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English is still taught as though the primary need of learners is to be able to communicate with its native speakers, and with the assumption that correct English is either Standard British or Standard American English(Savignon, 2006). This assumption causes Iranian students to have the fear of being wrong when speaking.

Savignon (2006) work explores processes of classroom improvement, in particular ways in which learners using English as an additional language engage in teaching-learning processes within a junior university-level setting. Transcript evidence of teacher and learner interactions during activities, most of the times, viewed by teachers as enough interaction opportunities so they do not try to have more interactions. According to what is described above this thesis aims to find the factors that foster learners' reticence and how these factors impact students' verbal interactions. And last but not least, the aim was to find out whether proficiency level and teacher interactional/instructional strategies affect reticence or not.

## **1.2. Statement of the problem**

Following an increasing focus in recent years on speaking, numerous academic classes have been established in many different countries. Unfortunately, the teaching practices of such courses often seem to be based on traditional normative principles rather than on solid empirical evidence. It is important that the content of such classes be based on empirical results from analyses of actual language use rather than on traditional normative principles that in many cases need to be reconsidered.

It is commonly held that classroom-based language instruction should be teacher-centered and evaluation be based on what the teacher thinks is best; teachers are also concerned with establishing what learners can do at a given point in time – focusing on attainment – and with monitoring learner progress and informing teaching as a means to supporting learning. The value of providing feedback to learners is largely uncontested in this respect so learners do not feel their responsibilities and do not try to use all their capabilities in order to have their best performances. Moreover, learning another language is a process that is inherently problematic (Horwitz et al, 1986; Allwright & Bailey, 1991). Students' reticence in English language classes is a phenomenon occurring regularly in all EFL contexts including Iranian settings. So reticence is a problem which many EFL teachers all over the world encounter in their classrooms. With a growing need for spoken English among non-native English speakers, a research on the reasons of the reticence of learners in second/foreign language learning situations seems necessary. The research will approach the issue from the communicative learning approach since the willingness to communicate is directly related to this school of thought. This is a more humanistic approach to learning; one in which the interactive processes of communication receive priority. This methodology emphasizes the use of language rather than learning the rules or language usage. Role-play is an important tool. In a class in which it is wanted to have communication as much as possible, whenever possible, authentic language should be introduced. Being able to figure out the speaker's or writer's intentions is part of becoming communicatively competent, the students need knowledge of the linguistic forms, meanings and functions. This knowledge help them not to be silent when should not. The target language is a vehicle for classroom communication, not just the object of study. So this approach suits the aim of this thesis to be gained, since we need a

setting in which everything is ready to make the learners talk and this approach has the best environment for this purpose.

Krashen's (1988) theory is applied in this work: "Acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding." This theory helped the researcher in her first steps of the work to choose the best teaching strategies for her study. Using this theory as the underlying framework, she tried to find the reticence's reason for students in SLA settings.

### **1.3. Significance of the Study**

It is almost sixteen years since Firth and Wagner (1997) published their detailed critique of mainstream SLA research, and even longer since Bley-Vroman (1983), Kachru (1994), Sridhar (1994), Rampton (1987) and others made similar observations. Kachru argued, for example, that known facts about bilinguals' use of language had "not been taken into account in SLA research" and that "[t]he explanation for this phenomenon lies in a pronounced monolingual bias" among SLA researchers (1994: p.798). So speaking is an important medium in learning and teaching in SLA issue and accordingly, reticence is a problem which needs attention in order to find its reasons and then systematic solutions.

According to Liu and Jackson (2009) reticence in foreign language classes has long been a challenge for both teachers and students. With the advent of globalization, there is a pressing

need for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers to help reticent students develop the skills and confidence needed to take an active role in oral English lessons.

This thesis emerges from the need to have classrooms in SLA environments which are active in all aspects. This needs students who feel relaxed enough to express themselves in all possible ways including speaking. Tsou (2005) notes that of the four skills that make up language proficiency, oral participation is the most observable phenomenon in the classroom. There has been a lack of reasons identified in prior studies as having influences in fostering students' reticence. There is a need to connect linguistic theory and language teaching to find concrete solutions to problems Iranian students confront when learning English as their second language.

This work argues that mainstream SLA research can no longer afford to ignore the massive growth in the use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), highlights the irrelevance for ELF of concepts such as reticence and reticent students, and explores the extent to which a number of alternative perspectives offer greater promise for ELF.

This study tries to fill the gaps in those aspects of reticence which are either ignored in previous research studies or not fully covered in others works. Thus, there is a lack in the literature that searched for evidence in EFL classrooms. Finding influential factors fostering reticence this study helps to find some ways of reducing it and improving willingness to communicate (WTC) of the learners. The most important role of this study is that it reveals important differences in the use of language as regards its frequency, structural complexity, medium and pragmatic value. Moreover, no large-scale investigations of reticence in any language have been conducted up to now with particular reference to language teaching so it is