



University of Sistan and Baluchestan  
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**The Relationship Between Reticence and Iranian EFL  
Learners' Vocabulary Knowledge and Foreign Language  
Classroom Anxiety**

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*In the Name of God*



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## چکیده

با پیدایش آموزش زبان ارتباطی<sup>۱</sup>، مطالعات بسیاری به بررسی مشارکت گفتاری در کلاس زبان پرداخته اند. با وجود اینکه مشارکت گفتاری کلاس موضوعی بسیار مهم است، برخی زبان آموزان کم گو<sup>۲</sup> هستند و تمایلی به شرکت در فعالیتهای گفتاری ندارند. بررسی ادبیات مربوط به کم گویی زبان آموزان، کم گویی را به عنوان یکی از عوامل مانع یادگیری زبان آموزان معرفی می کند. از اینرو، مطالعه حاضر با هدف بررسی کم گویی در دانشجویان ایرانی زبان خارجی، به یافتن رابطه احتمالی بین کم گویی زبان آموزان، دانش واژگانی، و اضطراب کلاس زبان خارجی آنها و همچنین تعیین تفاوت سطح کم گویی بین زبان آموزان پسر و دختر پرداخته است. بدین منظور ۵۶ زبان آموز ایرانی از دانشگاه سیستان و بلوچستان و دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی زاهدان در این مطالعه شرکت کردند. برای بدست آوردن سطح کم گویی و اضطراب زبان آموزان، به ترتیب از پرسشنامه های عدم تمایل به ارتباط<sup>۳</sup> و اضطراب کلاس زبان خارجی<sup>۴</sup> استفاده شد. علاوه بر این، جهت اندازه گیری دانش واژگانی زبان آموزان، آزمون اندازه واژگان توانایی تولیدی کنترل شده<sup>۵</sup> اجرا شد. تحلیل داده ها میزان نسبتاً پایین کم گویی در زبان آموزان را نشان داد. نتایج حاصل از تجزیه و تحلیل داده ها حاکی از وجود رابطه معنادار منفی بین کم گویی زبان آموزان و دانش واژگانی آنها بود. همچنین، کم گویی زبان آموزان رابطه معنادار مثبتی با اضطراب کلاس زبان خارجی آنها داشت. در نهایت، نتایج تجزیه و تحلیل آماری نشان داد که تفاوت معناداری بین سطح کم گویی زبان آموزان دختر و پسر وجود ندارد. بنابراین، دبیران می بایست به زبان آموزان کم گو کمک کنند تا با افزایش دانش واژگانی و تقویت اعتماد به نفس در فعالیت های گفتاری مشارکت فعال داشته باشند.

کلمات کلیدی: کم گویی، دانش واژگانی، اضطراب کلاس زبان خارجی

<sup>1</sup> Communicative Language Teaching

<sup>2</sup> Reticent

<sup>3</sup> Unwillingness to Communication Scale

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

<sup>5</sup> Vocabulary-Size Test of Controlled Productive Ability

*Dedicated to*  
*My parents*  
*and*  
*My husband*  
*for their love, endless support and*  
*encouragement*

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## **ABSTRACT**

With the emergence of communicative language teaching, a large number of studies have concerned with students' oral participation in language classrooms. Although the importance of classroom oral participation is evident, some language learners are reticent and unwilling to engage in oral activities. Reviewing the literature on language learners' reticence reveals that reticence is one of the main hindering factors in learners' language learning. Hence, the present study aimed to explore the level of reticence of Iranian EFL learners, and to discover any possible relationships between the learners' reticence, their vocabulary knowledge, and their foreign language classroom anxiety. Moreover, it tried to investigate the difference between male and female learners' level of reticence. To this end, 56 Iranian EFL students from University of Sistan and Baluchestan and Islamic Azad University of Zahedan participated in this study. The Unwillingness-to-Communicate Scale and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale were administered to obtain the learners' level of reticence and anxiety respectively. Moreover, the Vocabulary-Size Test of Controlled Productive Ability was applied to measure the learners' vocabulary knowledge. The analysis of the data revealed a relatively low level of reticence in the learners. In addition, it was found that the learners' reticence had a significant and negative relationship with their vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, the learners' reticence was significantly and positively related to their feeling of anxiety in foreign language classroom. Finally, the result of the statistical analysis showed no significant difference between the male and female learners regarding their reticence level. Thus, it is necessary for EFL teachers to assist their reticent learners by developing their vocabulary knowledge and promoting their confidence for an active participation in oral activities.

**Key words:** reticence, vocabulary knowledge, foreign language classroom anxiety

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

### Abbreviation

AA	Approach-Avoidance
CA	Communication Apprehension
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
FL	Foreign Language
FLA	Foreign Language Anxiety
FLCA	Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety
FLCAS	Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale
SL	Second Language
UCS	Unwillingness-to-Communicate Scale
VTCPA	Vocabulary-Size Test of Controlled Productive Ability
WTC	Willingness to Communicate

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

One of the main purposes of English language teaching is to enhance communicative language ability, which is the ability that enables the learners to express themselves through interaction and to convey messages in English. Since the introduction of communicative language teaching, many research studies have been concerned with students' oral communication in English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL) classroom. Teachers also expect students to actively take part in interactive and co-operative learning tasks. Swain (1985; cited in Tong, 2010, pp. 239-240) pointed out that:

Language learning is more effective when the target language is used, particularly in regard to understanding the language in general, and enhancing their reading or listening skills in particular. Students' oral participation can help students fill the gap between what they want to say and whether they are able to say it.

Cieniewicz (2009) also added that learning is an active process and should involve talking. Moreover, students learn best and retain more when they have an active participation in classroom discussions. In similar vein, Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos and Linnell (1996) asserted that "participation in verbal interaction offers language learners the opportunity to follow up on new words and structures to which they have been exposed during language lessons and to practice them in

context” (cited in Tsou, 2005, pp. 46–47). In Chau’s (1999, p. 1) words, “as involvement and participation are essential for language acquisition, the more utterances the learners offer, the better their spoken language is and vice versa”.

Therefore, while the need for spoken English has been increased among non-native English speakers in recent decades, oral participation and speech communication get more importance. But recent ESL/EFL literature has frequently reported that students of ESL/EFL (especially Asian) are unwilling to be engaged in oral activities in English lessons (e.g. Cheng, 2000; Liu, 2005a; 2005b; Liu & Jackson, 2009; Lee & Ng, 2010; Tong, 2010). They have often seemed to be too silent in language classrooms, and prefer not to voluntarily respond to teachers’ questions, or actively participate in learning tasks. Tani (2005) claimed that “one of the most visible differences that Asian students bring to classroom is a low level of in-classroom participation. Typically this is interpreted as a barrier to the fostering of good learning practice, as participation is viewed as an activity that develops independent learning skills and the ability to apply knowledge” (p. 5).

The passivity and unwillingness to participate in language classroom activities is known as “reticence”. According to Keaten and Kelly (2000), reticence, as a behavior, occurs “when people avoid communication because they believe it is better to remain silent than to risk appearing foolish” (p. 168). Reticence in language classrooms can negatively affect the students’ actual classroom performance and their language achievement. Reticent students, most of the time, avoid participating in speech communication and prefer to remain silent during classroom discussions. In other words, reticence refers to the situation in which students do not speak the language (i.e. English) voluntarily, either initiating questions or volunteering to offer answers, they are unwilling or less willing than other students to engage in oral communication in classroom. Liu (2006) pointed



out that “reticent people speak less and for shorter durations; their language tends to be less comprehensible, less immediate, and less intense” (p. 20).

A range of studies have been carried out on students’ reticence in an SL/FL classroom and on factors that cause reticence in language classrooms. The findings reveal that there are various reasons for this reluctance to speak in SL/FL classroom situations, such as: fear of public failure (e.g., making mistakes and being laughed at); low English proficiency; anxiety; cultural beliefs about appropriate behavior in classroom contexts (e.g., the importance of showing respect by listening to the teacher instead of speaking up); gender difference; personality (e.g., introversion and shyness); the educational system; and lack of vocabulary (Liu, 2005a, 2005b; Liu & Jackson, 2009). Similarly, Beebe (1983) claims that “language learners are often silent because they consider talking in classroom as a high risk-low gain proposition” (cited in Matsuda & Brown, 2004, p. 145). Due to these reasons, some of the students in language classrooms remain reticent or unwilling to express their ideas, especially when speaking alone to the classroom.

Among the reasons for reticence, the important role of vocabulary knowledge in speaking and communicating in SL/FL classroom is not deniable. Read (2000, cited in Oya, Manalo, & Greenwood, 2009, p. 11) observed that many students tend to “view language learning as essentially a matter of learning words so they spend a great deal of time on vocabulary acquisition and largely depend on their bilingual dictionary in situations where they are required to communicate in the target language”. Accordingly, he stressed the fact that “words are the basic components of language” (ibid). In addition, Nation (1993) saw vocabulary knowledge as one of the language components crucial for fluent language use. Levelt (1989; cited in Oya. et al., 2009, p. 11) also considered vocabulary knowledge as “the mechanism that drives speech production”.

Vocabulary knowledge is divided into receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. While receptive vocabulary knowledge refers to learner's ability to understand a word, which is often used in listening and reading, productive vocabulary knowledge is the knowledge to produce a word when one speaks and writes (Nation, 2005, cited in Koizumi, 2005). According to Schmitt (2000, p. 4) "if we are able to produce a word of our own accord when speaking or writing, then that is considered productive knowledge". It seems that we learn words receptively first and later achieve productive knowledge (ibid).

Another classification of vocabulary knowledge is size and depth. "Size refers to the number of words with a primary meaning that a learner has, whereas depth refers to the degree to which a learner knows a certain word in addition to knowing a primary meaning" (Koizumi, 2005, p. 4). Speaking can also be considered from two perspectives: performance and ability. Accordingly, this study is concerned with performance and examines the relationships between the size of productive vocabulary knowledge and speaking performance. In other words, it examines how the size of productive vocabulary knowledge is related to language learners' reticence in speaking or their unwillingness to communicate in oral activities in language classroom.

Among various variables affecting SL/FL acquisition and performance, anxiety is seen as one of the main factors that has effect on language learners. SL/FL researchers and theorists have long been aware that anxiety is often associated with language learning. Teachers and students generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak another language. It is generally assumed that when learners use target language for communication in an SL/FL classroom, they become more anxious and tense. These feelings of anxiety can make them unwilling to take part in class conversations (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994)

claimed that anxious students may have poor oral performance, and not be able to process information in SL/FL contexts. Horwitz et al. (1986) called second language performance anxiety as communication apprehension (CA). McCroskey (1977) referred to CA as a subset of reticence, and defined it as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (p. 79). According to him, students with high level of CA “withdraw from and seek to avoid communication when possible” (ibid). Therefore, most of anxious language learners are weak in oral participation and speaking spontaneously in classroom poses problems for them.

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon in language learning. FLA is the emotional state in which students feel apprehensive, nervous and worried when articulating spoken language in second language contexts (Chau, 1999). Zhang (2004) claimed that anxious students who typically have difficulty in public speaking are likely to experience even greater difficulty speaking in an SL/FL classroom where they have little control over the communicative situation and where their performance is constantly monitored. Zhang further asserted that “language students who experience this anxiety tend to sit passively in the classroom, withdraw from activities that could increase their language skills, and may even avoid classroom entirely” (ibid, p. 2). The evidence indicated that high-anxious students were more reluctant to speak in SL/FL and prefer not to participate in classroom discussions.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study**

In spite of the general awareness of the importance of spoken English and oral communication, EFL learners have often been observed to be silent and rarely participate in language classroom discussions. The students are found to be passive

learners of the target language who prefer not to use it during classroom communication. As a result, both language teachers and students become disappointed and often complain about the quality of learning outcome. Reviewing literature on language learning reveals that reticence is a widely-observed phenomenon in SL/FL classrooms and also various factors contribute to students' reticence. However, the causes of learners' reticence in SL/FL classroom cannot be generalized or simplified as being applicable to all learners. Moreover, it has been found that the specific causes for learners' reticence vary according to the context. Thus, knowing language learners' reticence in oral participation and finding its relation with linguistic and psychological factors can be valuable for language learning and teaching.

Vocabulary has long been considered as an essential and fundamental component of communicative language ability. Even it is conceived of as a good indicator of SL/FL proficiency (Koizumi, 2005). If these assumptions about the importance of vocabulary knowledge in language learning are true, it raises the question of how this factor might influence language learners' speaking ability. Although there have been some studies examining the relationships between vocabulary and other language skills, few studies have focused specifically and systematically on the associations between vocabulary knowledge and oral communication, and particularly the relationship between the productive vocabulary knowledge and learners' reticence or unwillingness to participate in oral communication.

On the other hand, SL/FL researchers and theorists have discovered that anxiety is often associated with language learning and most of the time is considered as a major problem in learning another language. Many language learners find SL/FL classroom situations inherently stressful. FLA, or more precisely, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), is considered to be a