

Reticence in the Libyan University EFL Classroom: Causes and Strategies

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Abstract:

This study aims to examine students' reticence and highlight its possible causes in the foreign language university classroom. Fifteen Libyan students from the English department; at the faculty of education, University of Misrata, participated in this study. Interviews and focus group discussions were used for collecting data. The findings revealed some leading causes to reticence in the classroom; i.e., fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, shyness, low English proficiency, and so on. The participants also demonstrated some needs which can be used as strategies by teachers to help reduce reticence; such as, teacher encouragement, appropriate teaching methodology, use of group work, and extending wait-time.

Key words: reticence, EFL classroom, university students

1. Introduction:

Students' reticence is a problem that usually occurs in the foreign language classroom. According to Cheek and Watson (1), reticence can indicate shyness characteristic. It includes attitudes and feeling; such as the lack of confidence, particularly in new or unfamiliar settings. A Reticent learner may be described as the one who is reluctant to participate in classroom activities. In addition, the causes of reticence in the foreign language classroom cannot be generalized and noticed in all learners. There are some ambiguous causes

of reticence (Allwright and Bailey, 2). However, different researchers have employed different ways to identifying students' reasons of reticence.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Many students in the EFL classroom struggle with high level of reticence. This feeling affects their oral performance in different aspects. Reticence occurs especially when students are asked a question or when they are invited to speak.

1.2 Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the reasons that cause reticence in the Libyan university language classroom?
- 2- Are there any effective strategies that students or teachers can follow in order to reduce reticence?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to highlight the causes of reticence and determine the classroom strategies that students and teachers may use to deal with this problem. There are two major objectives of this paper. First, it intends to explore the causes that may lead to students' reticence and affect their oral performance in the EFL classroom. Second, it aims to highlight some effective ways which teachers and learners may follow to reduce reticence.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study may help English foreign language teachers and students be aware of the factors that lead to reticence in the classroom. Furthermore, the findings could enable teachers to develop interesting and useful approaches and strategies for dealing with reluctant students.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study surveys some students from the English department, Faculty of Education, University of Misrata, in the academic year 2016-2017. The study deals with a classroom problem called students' reticence in the EFL classroom. The other problems which students may encounter in English classroom will not be a part of this study.

2. Review of Related Literature

According to Tsou (3), among the four skills that make up language proficiency, oral participation is the most observable phenomenon in the classroom. Because of the growing need for spoken English as a foreign language, reticence research has captured the attention of language theorists and educators in recent decades (MacIntyre et al, 4).

2.1 Definitions of Reticence

Reticence is a communication problem with cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions and is due to the belief better of remaining silent than risking appearing foolish (Keaten & Kelly, 5). As Philips (6: p52) points out, "when people avoid communication because they believe they will lose more by talking than by remaining silent, we refer to it as reticence". Besides, Philips (7) describes a reticent person as someone who does not expect success in the communication step which involves speech. He may be defined as a person who feels reluctant to participate in oral communication.

2.2 Reticence in the Classroom

Research reveals that foreign language learners often seem reticent in the classroom. Promoting students to speak in the classroom is a problem that most language teachers face (Tusi, 8). It has been found that many foreign language learners are passive and choose not to use the target language most

of the time in the language classroom (Li, 9). Foreign language teachers need to help reticent students develop their speaking skills and take an active role in oral communication (Liu & Jaskson, 10).

2.3 Possible Causes of Reticence in the Classroom

Different researchers have tried to identify why some language learners choose to remain silent in the foreign language classroom. However, the causes of reticence cannot be generalized as being applicable to all learners. For example, Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (11) found that students were reticent due to several reasons including fear of making mistakes, low English proficiency, lack of self-confidence, and lack of familiarity with the classroom environment. According to Flowerdew & Millar (12), students being passive and reticent in the language classroom are likely to be as a consequence of such reasons as fear of losing face, their inability to understand concepts, the passive learning style they use, and lack of preparation before coming to class. Moreover, Malton & Ortiz (13), claim that the major causes of reticence in the classroom are low self esteem, fear of being ridiculed, culture differences, communication apprehension, and anxiety. It is important to note that reticence and its causes are a complex issue; there are no definitive causes of reticence in the classroom.

2.4 Reticence Coping Strategies

In order to reduce students' reticence, the teacher and students should be aware of the causes of reticence, and try to follow different useful techniques and strategies suggested by previous researches. Some of these strategies are presented below.

2.4.1 Students need sufficient time to think before they speak

Teachers should give students more time to respond to their questions. According to Brinton (14), learners need more time to formulate their responses. Besides, Mohr, & Mohr, (15) emphasize that in order to increase classroom talk and language use, teachers should allow their students sufficient time, including pauses that might be needed for code switching; i.e., thinking or speaking in one language and switching to another. They suggest that repeating the question can also be used by teachers to allow their students more time for processing while other students are engaged.

2.4.2 Peer support and group work can enhance speaking

Another strategy for eliminating reticence is argued by Tsui (8), that using peer support and group work can help learners cope with their reticence. In fact, teachers should run activities that are less stressful to learners (e.g. pair work and group work). Working in small groups may allow students use the language and support each other in the class (Jackson, 16). Also, trust between teacher and students must be enhanced. As Zou (17) and Tsui (8) indicate, the teacher should try to build trusty, relaxing, friendly, supportive, welcoming, and non-threatening classroom environment.

2.4.3 Teachers should explain the hypotheses behind their teaching strategies and course objectives

Teachers should clarify the aims of their teaching strategies and the objectives of the course (Liu & Jackson, 10). It is important to let students know about the elements of the course, and help them experience the class environment, so that students can understand their roles in the classroom. In addition, a teacher who tends to dominate the classroom, imposing their

opinions on the learners and not giving them any chance to express their views, is more likely to promote students' failure (Javad, 18).

2.4.4 Motivation can make learners less reticent

Furthermore; as suggested by Liu & Jackson (10), it is important for teachers to enhance their students' interest and motivation to speak (e.g., using role-plays); which may help students be less reluctant and more willing to speak. Liu (19) shares the same view as Liu and Jackson in that a teacher could endorse the students' inspiration and help them become less worried and more confident by using expressions such as; "*Don't be nervous*", "*Don't be afraid of making mistakes*", and "*Take the chance and you will speak better*".

2.4.5 It is OK if learners make mistakes

Overall, according to Price (cited in Liu & Jackson, 10), it would be helpful for teachers to tell their students that it is inescapable for foreign language learners to make mistakes, because it is really difficult to speak English as a native speaker. A teacher has an effective role, and their behavior in the classroom has a direct impact on students' motivation and participation. If the teacher, for example, pinpoints the students' mistakes and draws their classmates' attention to them, this will have a negative impact on the students' involvement in class activities and may lead to reticence. Therefore, teachers are responsible for making students willing or unwilling to participate, and their roles toward their students' participation are considered to be the key factor that influence students' behavior in the classroom.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Setting

The participants in this study were Libyan University students of English. The total number of participants was fourteen students. They were mixed

gender, males and females. Their level ranges from freshmen to graduate students. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Education, Misrata University, during the academic year 2016-2017.

3.2 Research Design

Since qualitative approach design underlines collecting data in naturally occurring phenomena, as McMillan and Schumacher (20) state, the current study follows an empirical qualitative research to identify the causes of reticence among Libyan university students, and the strategies that students and teachers might use to deal with this problem. McMillan and Schumacher indicate that the form of this kind of data is interpreted in words rather than numbers. That's why the researchers conducted interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) instead of questionnaire.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The methods employed for collecting data in this study were interviews and focus group discussions, as believed they are appropriate research tools to examine the issue being researched in depth. In fact, the use of interviews and focus group discussion allows the participants comment about the issue in more details and share their personal points of view regarding their classroom interaction. As Rubin & Rubin (21) point out, researchers can explore more complex questions by talking with and listening carefully to the people being researched.

The interviews and focus group discussion were audio recorded to ensure accuracy, and transcribed verbatim by the researchers according to a thematic content analysis. The form of data provides qualitative narrative that helps raise awareness of the causes that lead to reticence and the strategies which can be followed to reduce reticence.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The participants have been informed about their anonymity, confidentiality and their right to withdraw from participation. Moreover, permission was taken from the supervisor to apply the interview with different students from the English department.

4. Findings and Discussion

The results of the study are next discussed according the two research questions. Based on the data of this study, the Libyan university students of English sometimes appear reticent and silent, but they are able and willing to speak when the conditions allow them to do so. The data obtained from the interviews show that some of the students tend to be passive and silent in the classroom. The goal of this study was to understand and shed light on the causes that make these learners reticent.

4.1 Possible Causes of Reticence

Whatever phenomenon it is, there must be a cause. According to the first research question; *what are the reasons that cause reticence in the Libyan university language classroom?*, the causes of reticence emerged from the interviews and FGDs are presented and analyzed as follows:

4.1.1 Error/mistake correction

Greater reticence was also attributed to fear of making mistakes. Participants 9 stated that "I remain silent in the class because I am afraid of making mistakes in front of the teacher and classmates". Some of the participants said that they accept correction from the teacher; as stated by participants 2, "It does not matter if the teacher corrects my mistakes because he is a teacher and I am a learner". Whereas, some other students feel uncomfortable when their mistake is corrected or pointed out by the teacher, as participant 3

stated, "it will make me think twice before speaking in the class again if the teacher points to my mistake in front of my classmates". Participant 8 added, "If the teacher corrects my mistakes in front of my classmates, I will not respond to any question given by the teacher, even if I know the right answer".

The manner which the teacher uses to correct the error is very important. The teacher should look for good techniques to correct their students' mistakes/errors in a way that would lessen their distress and anxiousness. Participant 5 from the focus group discussion said that "it depends on the way the teacher follows to correct my mistakes". The matter is with the form of correction, rather than the correction itself (Donald, 22).

The findings illustrate that some students prefer to remain silent to avoid making mistake. As Donald (21) identifies, fear of making mistakes, and the form that error/mistake correction takes, have a greater impact on learners' willingness to speak. In fact, students do not feel secure to risk making mistakes (Tsui, 8).

4.1.2 Low self esteem

Some students think that they are unworthy and unable to speak successfully in the class, so they remain silent. This would indicate low self-esteem which may hinder any opportunity for speaking. As extracted from the interviews; Participant 3 stated that "sometimes I don't feel confident, so I don't speak". Participant 7 suggested that "we need support, encouragement and motivation from the teacher so that we feel more secure, and then, we can speak". It could be inferred from the findings that the more the students feel confident, the better they perform in the class. This can also be supported by what Li & Liu (23) and Malntyre (4) indicate that students' willingness or unwillingness

to speak is affected by students' confidence and self-esteem. However, students need to communicate in order to improve their communicative skills and gain confidence (Yashima, 24).

4.1.3 Shyness

One possible reason for students' silence in the class is students' shyness.

Participant 10 stated that "most of the time I remain silent in the class because I am shy". A majority of the participants said that they feel shy when they speak a foreign language, although they are advanced level students. As participant 7 suggested, "sitting in groups when there's a task to do or a topic to discuss would make us more willing to speak and interact with our mates".

4.1.4 Lack of practice

The findings also revealed that the lack of practice is another possible cause for students' reticence in the class. For example, participant 6 said that "one effective way to promote our oral performance is by practicing English more in the class". The findings, in general, also showed that practice increases students' willingness to speak. As students do more practice in English, they are expected to feel safer to participate and interact in the classroom. All students emphasized that practicing English more can increase their ability and willingness to speak. As Tsui (3) points out, lack of practice can make students feel worry when speaking English in the classroom, and it is another cause for students' unwillingness to speak.

4.1.5 Lack of preparation

Almost the majority of the interviewees stated that they feel reluctant to speak when they are not well prepared. Instead, some stated that when they are prepared for the class, they have high self-esteem and low reluctance level and they can speak more freely. As extracted from the interviews,

participant 1 mentioned that "my preparation encourages and pushes me to speak up in the class". The importance of preparation is, also, underlined by participant 2 in that, "preparation is so important for both teacher and students to carry out meaningful interaction in the classroom". In most cases, Preparation is considered to be effective in participants' willingness or unwillingness to speak. As it was also found by Tsui (3), more students attributed their unwillingness to speak to the lack of preparation.

4.1.6 Low proficiency level

Another vital cause for reticence was low English proficiency. It can directly affect students' performance in the class and make them unable and reluctant to speak. As Participant 13 said, "I do not speak in the class because, sometimes, I do not know how to say what I know". Low English proficiency is identified as a major effective factor that would obstruct the students from any interaction in the classroom. (for more support, see Liu 19, ; and Tsue, 3).

4.1.7 Unfamiliarity with the classroom environment

When students feel strange and unfamiliar with the classroom environment, they are, consequently, unwilling to speak. Participants 1 and 2 stated that "I will withdraw the subject if I feel unfamiliar with the class environment". Participant (11) indicated, "I will remain silent until I become familiar with the classroom environment". The data showed similar results as Park & Oxford (cited in Liu & Jackson, 10) that most of the participants remain silent in the class during the first few weeks, and then, they become more active and willing to speak as they become more familiar with the classroom environment.

4.2 Possible Strategies to Reduce Reticence

Based on the second research question; *Are there any effective strategies that students can follow in order to reduce reticence?* The findings of this study addressed some students' needs; which can be worked out as strategies that teachers can use to reduce reticence. Some of these needs/suggested strategies are presented below.

4.2.1 Teacher encouragement/motivation

Almost all the participants strongly agreed that the teacher has an important role in reducing reticence in the classroom. Teachers should encourage students to interact in the classroom. As Participant 3 said, "I never talk in the classes where the teachers are not encouraging". Participant 14 also said, "When the teacher makes the class environment fun and ease, we are more willing to speak up". The data showed that teacher's attitude and the relationship between learners and their teacher can definitely affect classroom interaction. The friendly and relaxing environment created by the teacher can increase students' willingness to speak. This is quite related to what has been addressed in the literature that teachers can use different techniques and activities to promote students' inspiration and interest, i.e., use of role plays. Besides, teachers can help their students be less reticent and worried by the use of some expressions such as, "*Come on, you can do it*", "*Don't worry if you make mistakes*" (see Liu & Jackson, 10; and Liu, 19).

4.2.2 Teaching style

Teaching style is also an important factor that can influence students' willingness to speak. Participant 10 stated that "using Communicative Language Teaching may encourage us to speak and communicate better with our partners". Thus, teachers need to modernize their teaching styles and be

more creative to make their classes more inspiring and inviting for students' involvement and interaction in the class. Participant (11) said, "I prefer remaining silent, unless the class is motivating and interesting". The teacher's responsibility is not only correcting students' mistakes and making students produce a lot of error free sentences; they should facilitate language learning in the classroom using different styles (Richards, 25).

4.2.3 Use of group work

Another strategy that may facilitate classroom interaction is to allow learners to work in small groups when discussing a topic or working on a particular task. For instance, Participant 7 from the focus group discussion said, "when I work with my classmates, I feel more comfortable and willing to speak". As Jackson (16) indicates, there is more opportunity to use the language when students work in small groups, where they can get support from their classmates working in the same group. It could be illustrated from the findings that students feel less reticent and more confident when working in small groups than when speaking in front of their teacher.

4.2.4 Extending wait-time

A useful strategy suggested by participant (6) is to extend wait-time. Participant (13) commented that, "I would feel more comfortable if I have more time to set my answer or response to the teacher's question". As Brinton (14) underlined, extending wait-time is a useful strategy to allow students think about their responses.

5. Conclusion: This study which investigated the causes of reticence and the strategies that EFL students and teachers may use to reduce reticence in the

classroom, has provided some evidence that Libyan learners experience high level of unwillingness to speak in the classroom. In general, the participants of the study outlined the following causes of reticence in the class: 1) The form of error and mistake correction; 2) lack of confidence; 3) shyness; 4) fear of making mistake; 5) lack of practice; 6) lack of preparation; 7) the low proficiency level of the learners; 8) and unfamiliarity with the classroom environment. The level of reticence and causes may vary from a learner to another.

This research shows that in order to reduce students' reticence, teachers need to be aware of the existence of reticence among EFL learners. After that, they should seek strategies to deal with this problem. Some of these strategies have been discussed in this paper under these headings; 1) teacher encouragement, 2) appropriate teaching methodology, 3) use of group work, and 4) extending wait-time.

5.1 Study Limitation and Recommendations for Further Studies

One major drawback of this study is the absence role of teachers among its participants. It would be more useful if another study, in future, examines teachers' opinions and experiences about students' reticence in the classroom.

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