

Mixed Study of College English Classroom Reticence

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ABSTRACT

A large amount of effective classroom interaction is a necessary condition for students to master a foreign language well. But in China, classroom reticence is a ubiquitous phenomenon which prohibits students' effective communication, especially in universities specialized in science and engineering. Through questionnaires and interviews, it is found that low self-efficacy, low self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation are the main reasons for the reticence of non-English majors. Meanwhile, according to the results, this research puts forward specific improvement strategies for students and teachers respectively.

Keywords: College English, classroom reticence, negative reticence

I. INTRODUCTION

Reticence is a way of intercultural communication (Kim, Ates, Grigsby, Kraker and Michel, 2016). However, when there is reticence in English class, the situation is totally different. Since language is the main tool of communication, the ultimate goal of language teaching is to cultivate and improve students' communicative competence (Zhang, 2011). Therefore, although reticence is an important means of nonverbal communication, it is not always welcomed, especially in English classes, which is generally considered to be a lack of communicative competence (Peng, 2016).

In recent decades, the reticence phenomenon in English classroom by Asian English learners has been a popular topic for linguists and pedagogical researchers, and also an urgent problem that many English teachers try to solve (Bao, 2015). College English teaching reform in China nowadays focuses on cultivation of high-quality international talents via improving students' listening and speaking ability. This requires teachers to revolutionize teaching methods and pay attention to interaction with students. For example, teachers could create different kinds of activities to encourage students to speak and express themselves.

II. PREVIOUS STUDIES ABOUT CLASSROOM RETICENCE

A. Definitions of classroom reticence

In communicative linguistics, reticence refers to the

non-linguistic behavior which is silent and has no fixed meaning. In class, the subjects of communication are teachers and students. The communication chain includes two forms: teachers-students and students-students. Therefore, the corresponding definition of classroom reticence is the non-linguistic behavior presented by teachers and students in teaching (Liu, 2009).

In a broad sense, classroom reticence includes all silent phenomena in classroom teaching. In this case, reticence is "the absence of vocalization" that learners do not make any voice in the classroom (Levinson, 1983). In a narrow sense, classroom reticence refers to the reticence of students in question or discussion parts. Scollon (1985) defined it as a continuous silence between non-verbal communication and silence without any communication, because there are learners who listen passively or rarely respond to the communication, while there are those who actively participate in the communication, provide feedback and convey their opinions.

Liu (2009) holds that there are two kinds of reticence: positive reticence and negative reticence. Positive reticence happens when students actively think about teachers' questions, or listen to the speech of others carefully. It means that students are unable to express themselves verbally because of the delay of thinking. Negative reticence is often manifested by students' passive behavior. When students are accustomed to passive acceptance of teachers' knowledge, the classroom would present a quiet atmosphere. Or the discussion in the classroom is kept by several students and the teacher, but most students do not participate. On the other hand, Chen (2017) believes that students' negative reticence is caused by students' negative state of cognition, emotion and spirit. Yin (2010) defined the classroom reticence

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particularly as students' silent response to teachers' questions.

Guo (2014), focuses on the negative reticence in College English teaching, and expounds its negative effect. The lack of communication between teachers and students seriously hinders the development of cooperative teaching, and then affects the learning effect and the quality of teaching. Wang and Zhang (2008) emphasized that many foreign language teachers neglect the equal communication with students, and many classroom teaching activities are carried out causally without careful design.

Luo and Zhang (2009) pointed out that the reticence in English classroom is more prominent in science and engineering colleges because of students' poor English foundation, thus teachers' teaching process cannot be completed as expected, which is not conducive to the overall improvement of College Students' English competence, and aggravates the negative teaching effect brought by the negative reticence in the classroom. Yin (2010) further points out that classroom reticence leads to long teaching time and little learning effect.

This research studies negative classroom reticence from a narrow sense, that is, students do not actively think about problems and participate in classroom activities.

B. Reasons for classroom reticence

Factors like learning motivation, lack of self-confidence, personality characteristics, lack of language ability, emotional barriers especially anxiety and so on have been highlighted in previous studies as the main reasons for classroom reticence (Ellis, 1994; Chen, 2017; Zhu, 2012; Zhang & Li, 2014; Wu, 2014).

Many scholars believe that students' silence in class is related to their learning motivation. According to Gardner, Day and Macintyre (1992), there are two kinds of motivation for ESL learners: instrumental motivation, which occurs when students pay attention to functional goals such as passing examinations, meeting educational requirements and finding jobs; comprehensive motivation, which occurs when students are attracted by the target language, culture and its people, eager to integrate and identify with it (Wu, 2011). However, the common phenomenon in China is that most Chinese college students' English learning is driven by CET-4 and CET-6, or rather instrumental motivation (Li, 2014). In addition, many students are not satisfied with their university (Zhang, 2018). Therefore, they often feel depressed in the classroom without learning motivation and are unwilling to speak or answer the teacher's questions.

Lack of self-confidence is another common problem. Abraham and Vann (1987) pointed out that the more confident learners are, the more successful they will be. Many scholars believe that most Chinese college students lack self-confidence (Chen, 2017; Luo, 2018). One main

reason is that students worry that their imperfect or incorrect answers to teachers' questions will cause laughter from their classmates (Chen, 2017).

Students' silence is also related to their personality. In English class, students who are extrovert with good eloquence and high IQ are more inclined to participate in the class actively and express their opinions, while the introverts negative and less willing to speak in the class.

Students' ways of thinking also have an impact on students' classroom behavior. For example, some students think that it is immature to be active and eager to answer questions, or it is the excellent students who should answer teacher's questions, because it is their privilege and their obligation (Zhang & Li, 2014). Some even think answering questions is just a way to show off (Li, 2014). All these negative attitudes pervade in foreign classrooms and prevent students from speaking in class.

Another major reason is their lack of language ability (Zhang & Li, 2014) in that it is difficult for them to understand teachers' questions and express themselves in English (Wang, 2015).

Zhu (2012) attributed classroom silence to students' emotional barriers. According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, affective filter is a learning or acquisition obstacle caused by learners' negative affective response to the environment. Some emotions, such as anxiety, self-doubt and boredom, can interfere with the process of learning a second language. These emotions would act as a filter reducing the amount of language input.

As for classroom reticence in science and engineering colleges, Luo (2009) explains it from two aspects: students and teachers. The first aspect includes students' uneven English level, personality difference and lack of self-confidence; while the second aspect includes the influence of teachers' evaluation, or they overestimate students' English level and ask difficult questions.

Wu (2014) put forward Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Self-Schema (FLSAS) which is a multi-dimensional structure, including three first-level dimensions: assessment of self-recognition, experience of self-emotion, and tendency of self-behavior. The second level contains six factors (low self-efficacy, low self-esteem, fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, less active tendency and avoidance tendency) as shown in "Table I". It can be seen that these six factors are highly coincident with the influential factors of classroom reticence found in the existing literature. Rui and Ji (2017) found that these six factors can well explain the phenomenon of classroom reticence.

Considering all these factors, this research decided to adopt Wu's FLSAS scale with certain adaptation to try to explain the reticence phenomenon in college English classroom.

TABLE I. DIMENSIONS OF FLSAS

First level	Second level	Contents
Assessment of self-recognition	Low self-efficacy	Low sense of confidence to learners' own oral competence
	Low self-esteem	Low assessment to learners' own oral competence
Experience of self-emotion	Fear of negative evaluation	Expectation of others negative evaluation
	Communication apprehension	The anxiety to communicate by oral foreign language
Tendency of self-behavior	Less active tendency	Lack of positive oral language learning behavior
	Avoidance tendency	Negative attitude to oral language learning

C. Measures to deal with classroom reticence

As to the measures, researchers on the one hand put forward feasible suggestions to reduce students' classroom reticence. However, most scholars tend to reduce negative reticence from the perspective of teachers.

First, teachers should correctly treat relationships between teachers and students, strengthen communication between teachers and students, encourage students to express, and create a harmonious and democratic classroom atmosphere (Zhang, 2019). Liu (2013) advocated that teachers should first change their roles from the classroom leaders into the teaching organizers, tutors and promoters, and stimulate students' creativity. They should enrich teaching methods, carry out group cooperation and inquiry teaching, and give students more opportunities to express themselves. According to Flowerdew (1998), the use of group activities will help to break the silence of students who are afraid of failure or ridicule. He thinks students feel more comfortable while expressing themselves in groups.

Second, teachers should optimize the way of asking questions. They should ask various questions to different students according to the factors such as the difficulty of questions, students' English proficiency and students' personalities, and try to equalize the frequency of students' answers to avoid neglecting some students (Dörnyei, 2001).

Third, actively organize "student-centered" cooperative learning, pay attention to the gender, personality and ability of students in each group (Sun, 2010). Meng (2009) stated that task-based teaching would help students actively construct English knowledge while

participating in classroom activities. Through the activities, students can apply what they have learned.

Fourth, teachers should make positive evaluation and feedback on students' answers and encourage students who are not confident. Zhang (2009) suggested that teachers should guide students to set up correct learning objectives, activate the classroom atmosphere and encourage them to express themselves.

The fifth is to build a new classroom model. For example, Lu's "listening + expression Chinese participatory class" highlights the expression of students and strengthens the communication between teachers and students (2018).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Subjects

The research subjects are 36 freshmen in a natural class from Automation major in an engineering university located in Shan Dong. The whole class is divided into 9 groups with 4 people in each group.

B. Research tools

Two questionnaires were used in this study: FLSAS for Undergraduate Students which includes six factors: low self-efficacy, low self-esteem, fear of communication, fear of negative evaluation, lack of active behavior and avoidance behavior (Wu, 2009); another questionnaire is Classroom Reticence Scale which includes five situations: learners talking with their peers, learners talking with teachers, learners talking in groups, learners speaking in class, and learners' personal efforts to

achieve qualified communication (Ren, 2013). Both questionnaires were tested three times for total 16 weeks.

Moreover, two semi-structured interviews were conducted. The first one was to understand the students' attitude towards their English ability and its impact on their oral performance. The second interview asked the interviewees' opinions from whether they like English, personal English level, the impact on classroom reticence, and students' efforts and suggestions to reduce classroom reticence.

For better understanding and time efficiency, the interview process was also conducted in Chinese and then recorded. After that, the recordings were transcribed into words and then translated into English. Due to the limited time, 10 respondents were selected. SPSS17.0, were used to do statistical analysis. All the processes were intended to contribute to the results in the following chapter.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Major factors affecting classroom reticence

In order to explore whether the six factors of oral anxiety can effectively explain the phenomenon of classroom reticence, this study conducted a forced regression analysis, and obtained a standardized regression equation. The results are as follows.

"Table II" shows the mean values, standard deviations and correlation coefficients. From the contents of the table, it can be concluded that there is a significant correlation between the six independent variables.

According to "Table III", we can see "low self-efficacy", "low self-esteem" and "fear of negative evaluation" could predict classroom reticence well with the R square value being 0.924, which means the combination of "low self-efficacy", "low self-esteem", and "fear of negative evaluation" can explain 92.4% of the variation of classroom reticence.

It should be noted that the regression coefficients of the three variables of "communication apprehensive", "less active tendency" and "avoidance tendency" are not significant, therefore, they are not effective predictors. However, they are still retained in the regression equation due to the use of forced regression analysis. The standardized regression equation is established:

Classroom reticence = low self-efficacy \times 1.019 + low self-esteem \times 0.626 + fear of negative evaluation \times 1.207 + communication apprehension \times 0.392 + less active tendency \times 0.374 + avoidance tendency \times 0.029

The result indicates that the lower the self-efficacy and the self-esteem, and the more worried students will be about negative evaluation, and the more silent they will be in class. It also can be seen that in College English class, teachers should provide positive and encouraging evaluation feedback to maintain students' self-esteem, pay attention to improving students' learning confidence, design different kinds of oral activities in class, cultivate interest in oral learning, and help students develop good oral learning skills to enhance their self-confidence.

TABLE II. DESCRIPTIVES AND CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS OF VARIABLES (N=36)

Variables		Descriptives		Correlation Coefficients					
		M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
DV	Reticence	42.69	13.47	.913*	.766*	.850*	.671*	.789*	.731*
IV	1 Low self-efficacy	17.06	5.47		.793*	.718*	.606*	.782*	.739*
	2 Low self-esteem	11.94	3.74			.539*	.370*	.572*	.454*
	3 Fear of negative evaluation	10.17	3.90				.689*	.703*	.681*
	4 Communication apprehensive	7.36	2.45					.495*	.531*
	5 Less active tendency	9.22	2.85						.792*
	6 Avoidance tendency	9.28	3.61						

TABLE III. MULTIPLE LINEAR REGRESSION (N=36)

Variables		Descriptives		Correlation Coefficients					
		M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
DV	Reticence	42.69	13.47	.913*	.766*	.850*	.671*	.789*	.731*
IV	1 Low self-efficacy	17.06	5.47		.793*	.718*	.606*	.782*	.739*
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	4 Communication apprehensive	7.36	2.45					.495*	.531*
	5 Less active tendency	9.22	2.85						.792*
	6 Avoidance tendency	9.28	3.61						

B. Comparison of classroom reticence pre- and post-test

We have also conducted pre-and-post test to check whether students' have become more active. It can be seen from the "Table IV" that the problem of classroom reticence is relatively serious in college English classroom at the very beginning. However, after 16 weeks, the post-test value of reticence phenomenon is significantly lower than the pre-test value ($MD = -7.22$, $t = -2.96^*$), that is, students' classroom reticence phenomenon has been improved.

At the same time, the improvement is also reflected in five individual dimensions. There are significant differences in all five categories ($p < 0.05$). The changes of pre-test and post-test are ranked as follows: "students talking to classmates" (-1.92), "students giving speeches in front of the class" (-1.75), "students talking to the

teacher" (-1.44), "students talking within the groups" (-1.06), "students' individual efforts for qualified communication" (-1.06).

It shows that through teaching, students' initiative in peer dialogue, presentation and teacher-student dialogue has increased significantly, and they can actively participate in the classroom oral presentation and preparation, answer teachers' questions more actively, and have made significant progress in English communication with both teachers and students. In group discussion, due to the strong autonomy, the poor immediate response ability of English expression and the convenience of mother tongue communication, the students still prefer to mix Chinese and English for discussion; And although the students have made progress in their personal efforts, their spare time spent on practicing English speaking skills is still insufficient.

TABLE IV. COMPARISON OF CLASSROOM RETICENCE IN PRE- AND POST-TEST

	Post-test		Pre-test		MD	t
	M	SD	M	SD		
Reticence	42.69	13.47	49.92	12.72	-7.22	-2.96*
TC	9.53	3.26	11.44	2.88	-1.92	-3.18*
TT	7.42	2.18	8.86	2.46	-1.44	-3.00*
TG	7.36	2.62	8.42	2.33	-1.06	-2.15*
SP	11.08	3.99	12.83	4.14	-1.75	-2.41*
IE	7.31	2.51	8.36	2.31	-1.06	-2.15*

TC= students talking to classmates; TT= students talking to the teacher; TG= students talking

within the groups; SP= students giving speeches in front of the class; IE= students' individual

efforts for qualified communication; * $p < 0.05$

C. Results of semi-structured interview

The first semi-structured interview was conducted with students to understand their attitudes towards their English abilities and how these attitudes affect their oral performance in class.

Most students do not want to speak English actively in class because they think they cannot speak English well, in that, they think they have poor pronunciation, small vocabulary range, have trouble in sentence organization, and are unable to express ideas fluently, etc. Therefore, they are worried about being laughed at by teachers or their classmates in class, which would make them feel embarrassed and directly lead to speaking anxiety and reticence in classroom.

However, some other students believe that none of the above factors will be an obstacle to speaking English in class. They are not afraid of embarrassment because they think it is a good opportunity for self-improvement.

Of course, these two types of students care about teachers' evaluation. They believe that owing to the positive and encouraging evaluation of teachers, they will be more willing to speak English actively in class, which is helpful to improve their oral English expression and break the classroom reticence.

The second interview tried to find out what kinds of teaching methods and classroom activities could effectively improve students' classroom performance and reduce classroom reticence.

First of all, there are two different attitudes towards spending time practicing oral English themselves during their spare time: some are willing to spend a certain amount of time practicing oral English, while some think that oral English is not important, and do not even try to improve oral English. But on the whole, they all found that their practice effect was not very satisfied, and they could not reach their expected level.

Secondly, the class activities combined of multimedia tools such as pictures, videos helped to stimulate learning interest and create the atmosphere of speaking English. However, the materials used must cater to the English proficiency of students, otherwise it will be counterproductive.

Thirdly, in the process of teaching, teaching methods like preview, presentation, various classroom activities are all believed to be effective to some degree. But, summary & evaluation part of the teaching procedure is the most highly evaluated and students believed that helped them most.

In short, students are generally not confident in their English competence, and they could not find effective ways to improve their oral English. At the same time, all students think that teachers' summary & evaluation play a crucial role in foreign language teaching.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A. Conclusions

Here are some conclusions made in this paper.

First of all, questionnaire survey and interview results show that there is an omnipresent and even severe phenomenon of reticence in College English class. The classroom atmosphere is dull, and a large number of students tend to keep silent in the classroom. They are not interested in answering the teacher's questions, less active in class activities, and rarely ask questions on their own initiative.

Secondly, according to the regression analysis results, this research found "fear of negative evaluation", "low self-efficacy", "low self-esteem", "communication apprehension" "less active tendency" and "avoidance tendency" can account for most classroom reticence in college English class. Among them, "fear of negative evaluation", "low self-efficacy" and "low self-esteem" are most important factors.

Third, as for how to improve college English classroom reticence, this study found out that it can be effectively improved by arranging pre-class preview tasks, encouraging group discussion, organizing attention-grabbing class activities, encouraging students to demonstrate and express themselves in class as well as making summary and evaluation.

B. Implications

Based on the above research results, some suggestions can be provided for teachers and students to help students reduce classroom reticence in English class.

1) Suggestions for students

a) Building confidence and staying self-motivated:

The main reason for classroom reticence is that most students lack self-confidence. They are not confident in their language ability or expressing themselves correctly and clearly. Therefore, the key to solve classroom reticence lies in how to overcome shyness and build up enough self-confidence.

In addition to the teacher's encouragement, students must also maintain self-motivation. When they answer the teacher's questions, they are advised to give themselves some positive hints. Even if they answer the questions incorrectly, they do not have to feel depressed. Actually, they should be told that every failure is a valuable experience.

b) Keeping a relaxed mood: Students should participate in the class with a relatively relaxed mood, without being too nervous or too concerned about the eyes of others and negative evaluation. Even if students make some mistakes, it will not make a big impact in that teachers and students put forward negative evaluation in

order to promote the progress of the respondents, rather than ridicule. Students can summarize and reflect to see how they can improve next time and turn stress into motivation.

c) Establishing a positive learning attitude: Before entering the University, students' goals are very clear. However, most of them may be confused when they start campus life. Students may lose their goals, or take exam as a temporary motivation. However, students should realize that the purpose of learning is not testing. On the contrary, they should make full use of various courses in the university to improve their comprehensive ability, which will certainly make them more capable when they enter the society. Strong motivation will lead to students' active interaction in the classroom. Students should realize that examinations are not the purpose of their learning, but only an evaluative tool. Therefore, they should seize every opportunity to speak in class and regard it as a good way to communicate with teachers directly, so as to improve their English level.

d) Improving English ability comprehensively: Besides reading and writing, they should also pay attention to the improvement of listening and speaking level. Moreover, they had better master the content of English textbooks well to effectively participate in classroom activities. In addition, students could also try to increase their vocabulary which is the basis of learning English well. Forming the habit of using English is also important, students should integrate English into life, and consolidate English knowledge by using it. Thirdly, students should read more English materials to enrich their knowledge. Especially before taking courses, previewing, reading or watching some related materials will help students improve the efficiency of English class.

2) Suggestions for teachers

a) Paying attention to the way of evaluation: Teachers should know that students' errors in the process of language learning are inevitable. Therefore, when students answer questions, teachers should not just pay attention to students' mistakes since frequent correction will make students lose confidence and increase their anxiety. When listening to students' answers or opinions, teachers can encourage students to continue to speak with smile and nod or applaud when hearing good answers. When evaluating students' performance, teachers should use positive words such as "good", "very good", "good job" etc.. While facing students' mistakes, instead of correcting or negating their answers, teachers can repeat students' answers, speak in a questioning tone, or add hints, so as to make students realize their mistakes. Teachers should remember to give students positive evaluation to encourage students to speak again. More importantly, students' ideas and opinions are more important than their expression. As long as

communication is understood, it is not necessary to interrupt students' answer. One thing can not be neglected is that teachers should not rush to express their own suggestions, but first listen to students' opinions; do not force students to accept teachers' views, but encourage students to put forward their own opinions; do not reject or over appreciate the students' distinctive personality, but guide them to develop in the right direction.

Teachers' positive evaluation is the greatest emotional support for students which has a great inspiring effect on students. It can help to improve students' self-efficacy and their desire for classroom communication. There is no doubt that they will be more confident in class, more willing to speak and express themselves. This kind of repeated training will eventually improve students' oral English level and promote their enthusiasm to participate in classroom questioning and discussion.

b) Encouraging group cooperation: Group cooperation has been widely used in English classroom teaching. Group cooperation not only gathers ideas, but also enables group members to help others and get help from others. Those who are afraid of failure or embarrassment can be relieved when they have discussions with other members of the group. Because of the increase of students' thinking time, the chance to practice in groups and to receive feedback from other students, the probability of answering questions correctly is improved, students' self-confidence is gradually enhanced, so the phenomenon of classroom reticence gradually reduces.

c) Applying task-based language teaching: Teachers can assign tasks before class, letting students accumulate background language knowledge independently, so they can have something to say in class. The interview found that most of the students did not have the habit of independent preview before class, and thought that "there is nothing to preview in listening and speaking class"; the students who did the preview also "look up the unknown words at most", and few of the students who did the subject-related language knowledge expansion before class. This requires teachers to assign reading, audio and video materials related to the next unit before class. In order to ensure the quality of preview, teachers could also design several activities at the beginning of the class to check accomplishment of preview.

Some classroom activities, such as role playing, dubbing, reading pictures and guessing words, can promote classroom interaction in English teaching. Task-based teaching can transform teacher-centered classroom into student-centered classroom. In addition, it enables students to focus on the whole process of communication. If organized properly, these activities can increase the possibility of students' participation, reduce students'

anxiety, and create a relaxed and supportive learning environment for students.

d) Designing topics suitable for students: When preparing lessons, teachers should not only prepare teaching materials, but also focus on students: individual students' English proficiency, students' character etc.. While designing question-asking part, we should take into account students' practical problems, reduce the requirements for students to take care of all students. Teachers should not only be inspiring, but also let students have words to say. Actually, the desire of students to express is stronger than their desire to keep reticence. When asking questions, we should pay attention to provide equal chance and give students adequate waiting time. In addition, the after-class homework questions should be assigned clearly, so students can carry out self-study without doubt. It is also advisable to let students acknowledge the overall teaching plan and arrangement of teachers in advance, so that they can allocate their time more efficiently.

e) Stimulating students' interest in learning: Interest is the best teacher. It can stimulate students' learning motivation, arouse students' desire for knowledge, and let them participate in the teaching process with interest. We'd better create certain situations to arouse students' emotional resonance, so as to arouse students' enthusiasm in learning English. Furthermore, teachers can combine the content of English texts with real situations in daily life. To be a good teacher, we should constantly challenge ourselves, innovate teaching methods and reflect on the teaching effect.

Actually, no student wants to keep silent in class, it is teachers' responsibility to "allure" them to open their mouths.

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