# An Investigation on Students' Reticence in Iranian University EFL Classrooms

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*Abstract*—Reticence is a prominent and complex phenomenon which occurs in foreign language classrooms and influences students' oral passivity. The present study investigated the extent in which students experience reticence in the EFL classrooms and explored the underlying factors triggering reticence. The participants were 104 Iranian freshmen undergraduate male and female EFL students, who enrolled in listening and speaking courses, all majoring in English studying at Islamic Azad University Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch and University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran. To collect the data, the Reticence Scale-12 (RS-12) questionnaire which measures the level of reticence consisting of six dimensions (anxiety, knowledge, timing, organization, skills, and memory) was administered to the participants. The statistical analyses showed that the reticent level was high among the Iranian EFL undergraduate students, and their major problems were feelings of anxiety and delivery skills. Moreover, the results revealed that factors such as low English proficiency, the teaching method, and lack of confidence contributed to the students' reticence in Iranian EFL classrooms. It can be implied that language teachers' awareness of learners' reticence can help them choose more appropriate activities and provide a friendly environment enhancing hopefully more effective participation of EFL learners. The findings can have implications for EFL teachers, learners and policy makers.

*Keywords*—Reticence, reticence scale, anxiety, Iranian EFL learners.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IN the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning, students' participation in the classrooms is very important. Though many foreign language learners tended to be active and independent and to be involved in interpersonal interactions [1], [2], in many foreign learning situations, learners have been observed to be quiet in language classrooms, rarely responding to teachers' questions, or actively taking part in classroom interactions [3]-[5].

It is believed that "reticence, as behavior, occurs "when people avoid communication because they believe it is better to remain silent than to risk appearing foolish" [6]. Reticence impedes students expressing and sharing what they know. Therefore, student reticence impacts on teaching and learning process and there is a necessity for an individual, teacher and learner to reduce or eliminate such phenomena [7].

Thus, this is fundamental to find out students tendency of having reticence and discover the roots of reticence of the EFL

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students in classrooms. However, there are not enough studies investigating reticence of university EFL students in Iran. This study met the need for more investigation in this area and explored the extent of Iranian EFL students' reticence in the classroom. Moreover, the potential causes of students' reticence in the classroom discussion are presented.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the EFL classroom, the students usually express willingness to participate in classroom discussions in the target language, but remain reticent and passive in classes. They even perceive themselves as active in class just by listening to the teacher or others. In an investigation indicated that personal-affective factors such as anxiety and lack of experience with class discussion, and socio-cultural factors such as the prevailing belief of teacher as a sage on the stage, as the primary causes of the issue in question [8].

It claimed that being reticent not only impedes the learners' own pace of learning, but also impedes the teacher's help. The teachers do not know whether the learners have any problems or not, especially pronunciation problems if the students remain reticent [9].

Contribution in EFL classrooms is determined both by learners themselves and the situation they are in, proposing that situational variables such as topic and participants should be included in the study [10]. The results demonstrated that teacher strategy is a major cause of student reticence in classrooms. In addition, pedagogical factors such as lesson objectives and task type were found to influence a teacher's classroom-based interaction strategy decision making.

The issue of reticence from the perspective of teachers and students were examined by [11]. The results of the study demonstrated that fear of making mistakes, and error correction and how it was done played significant roles in determining students' reticence. Group work was found to have an important role in reducing reticence among the participants.

Reference [12] investigated the extent in which tertiary students majoring in English experience reticence in the classrooms, and examined the underlying factors of reticence. The findings revealed that reticent level is high among the students, and their major problems laid in affective-control and delivery.

In a study, [13] examined the degree of reticence among Iranian EFL learners and the roles of productive vocabulary knowledge and gender in their reticence in the classroom. Results of the study showed that learners mostly avoid communication rather than have a negative attitude toward

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class participation. Moreover, it was found that the learners' vocabulary knowledge had a significant relationship with their reticence.

In an investigation, [14] examined factors contributing to learners' reluctance to participate in EFL classrooms. The results revealed that different factors such as lack of practice, low English proficiency, incomprehensible input, lack of confidence, instructor's evaluation, and fear of making mistakes and being laughed at influence Iranian EFL learners reluctance to participate in class discussion.

Although students' reticence is a prominent issue in foreign language classes, there are few investigations in the Iranian university EFL classrooms in this area. The present study was an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do Iranian EFL university students majoring in English experience reticence in classrooms?
2. What are the possible factors influencing the Iranian EFL students' reticence in the university classroom?

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Design and Setting

This study was both qualitative and quantitative in design. The study was conducted at one private university; namely, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, and at one State public university; that is, University of Isfahan both located in Isfahan, Iran. The data were gathered during the second semester of the 2014-2015 (Iranian academic year). The study was conducted in five listening and speaking classes.

### B. Participants

The participants of this study were 104 Iranian undergraduate EFL students, majoring in English Language Teaching and English Language and Literature. Their age ranged from 18 to 30. They were all first year students enrolled in listening and speaking courses. Their anonymity was kept at all times, their confidentiality and privacy was observed when the data were analyzed and tabulated.

### C. Instruments

Reticence Scale-12 or RS-12 questionnaire [15] was employed as the data collection instrument. The RS-12 measures the level of reticence along six dimensions (two items per dimension) of social situation reticent individuals experience in (a) feelings of anxiety, (b) knowledge about topics, (c) timing skills, (d) organization of thoughts, (e) delivery skills and (f) memory. The 12 items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

A set of semi-structured questions were used as the interview, to find out the students' personal experiences and their opinions about behaving reticent in language classrooms.

### D. Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

The RS-12 questionnaires were distributed among the participants in five listening and speaking course. They responded to the questionnaire in 10 minutes during the class hour. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would be anonymous

RS-12 is a reliable instrument used to measure students' tendency of being reticent in classrooms. The overall Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the reticence questionnaire was 0.89. In determining the extent to which students who are majoring in English experience reticence in classrooms, the total scores obtained in RS-12 scales were calculated. The total score of RS-12 revealed a participant's tendency to be reticent in the class. The higher score indicated the less tendency of contribution in classroom. In order to identify high and low reticent groups, median and mean score was calculated. To analyze the students' responses towards twelve problems under the six dimensions, the data were converted into frequency and percentage for each question.

A semi-structured interview was conducted. This qualitative component was essential to the study because it allowed a deeper analysis of reticence. Twenty five students were participated in the interview voluntarily. The anonymity of the participants was emphasized. The interviews were conducted in Persian, to avoid the influence of the foreign language proficiency and for better justification. The interviewer (one of the researchers) asked questions, the respondent answered the questions freely. Interviewees' answers were recorded and some reflective notes were written.

## IV. RESULTS

### A. Results of the Questionnaire

As presented in Table I, the midpoint is 31. It indicates that the individuals who obtained a score of above 31 were regarded as highly reticent students; whereas the individuals who scored below 31 were considered low reticent ones. Accordingly, there were 68 high reticent students (65.4%) and 36 low reticent ones (34.6%) present in the study. This scoring demonstrated that about two third of the students in the classes regarded themselves as being reticent.

TABLE I
FREQUENCY/PERCENTAGE OF HIGH AND LOW RETICENT STUDENTS

| Reticent score | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Above 31 | 68 | 65.4 |
| Below 31 | 36 | 34.6 |

Furthermore, Table II summarizes the descriptive statistics based on the Reticence Scale-12 including the mean of (33.6), a median of (34.5) and a mode of (42.0) all of which were above the scale midpoint 31. Therefore, it was safely established that majority of the students experienced reticence in the Iranian EFL classrooms.

TABLE II
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF RS-12

| | Mean | Median | Mode | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| RS-12 | 33.6 | 34.5 | 42 | 8.61 |

As shown in Table III, about half of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were nervous and about two third felt tense when talking. Moreover, about half of the students stumble over their words and around one third of them muddle their words in speaking. In addition, the results of the present

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study revealed that more than half of the students agreed that they forgot what they wanted to say and about one sixth of them agreed that they lost sight of what to say. According to the results, one third of the students agreed that their thoughts were jumbled or disorganized. Table III illustrates that less than one fourth of the students needed to wait or hesitate too long to say something. Furthermore, less than one fourth of the students were unaware of what to say and more than one third agreed that they were unfamiliar with the subject of the class discussions.

TABLE III
STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO RS-12 STATEMENTS

| Dimensions & Items | SD | | D | | N | | A | | SA | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *f* | *%* | *f* | *%* | *f* | *%* | *f* | *%* | *f* | *%* |
| 1. I am nervous when talking. | 11 | 10.6 | 29 | 27.9 | 16 | 15.4 | 37 | 35.6 | 11 | 10.6 |
| 2. I feel tense when talking. | 5 | 4.8 | 13 | 12.5 | 19 | 18.3 | 56 | 53.8 | 11 | 10.6 |
| 3. I stumble over my words. | 13 | 12.5 | 27 | 26.0 | 16 | 15.4 | 43 | 41.3 | 5 | 3.8 |
| 4. I muddle my words. | 12 | 11.5 | 37 | 35.6 | 26 | 25.0 | 25 | 24.0 | 4 | 4.2 |
| 5. I forget what I want to say when talking. | 12 | 11.3 | 24 | 23.1 | 25 | 24.0 | 39 | 37.5 | 4 | 3.8 |
| 6. I lose sight of what I want to say when talking. | 19 | 18.3 | 42 | 40.3 | 27 | 26.0 | 16 | 15.4 | 0 | 0 |
| 7. My thoughts are disorganized. | 15 | 14.4 | 34 | 32.7 | 26 | 25.0 | 24 | 23.1 | 5 | 4.8 |
| 8. My thoughts are jumbled. | 15 | 14.4 | 33 | 31.7 | 24 | 23.1 | 29 | 27.9 | 3 | 2.9 |
| 9. I wait too long to say what I want to say. | 19 | 18.3 | 37 | 35.6 | 26 | 25.0 | 18 | 17.3 | 4 | 3.8 |
| 10. I hesitate too long to say what I want to say. | 13 | 12.5 | 42 | 40.4 | 27 | 26.0 | 21 | 20.2 | 1 | 1.0 |
| 11. I am unaware of what to say. | 14 | 13.5 | 50 | 48.1 | 18 | 17.3 | 22 | 21.2 | 0 | 0 |
| 12. I am unfamiliar with what to say. | 13 | 12.5 | 25 | 24.0 | 32 | 30.8 | 29 | 27.9 | 5 | 4.8 |

*B. Results of the Interview*

The results of the interview confirmed and completed the findings obtained from the questionnaire. Twenty five students participated in the interview voluntarily. In the interviews, questions were asked to explore students' definition of reasons, purposes behind, and attitudes towards reticence.

Fourteen of the interviewees stated that they were reticent because of the lack of English proficiency. They concerned about Lack of vocabulary, grammar, and listening. They stumbled over their words and needed some time to think and answer to the question. More than half of the participants mentioned that they were not confident enough to speak in class. Less than half of the interviewees were shy and reserved and stated that they were not talkative persons. Two third of the participants mentioned that the subject of the discussion was a crucial determining factor for them to talk about.

They preferred not to answer the instructor's question voluntarily in order to avoid making mistakes. Most of them pointed out that they spoke English to participate in class only when they were called by the instructor. More than half of them acknowledged that they were not confident enough to speak in the class. They preferred not to answer the instructor's question voluntarily in order to avoid making mistakes. Two third of the participants, especially females claimed that their instructors traits which encouraged them to speak proved effective on their activity in the class. Moreover, more than half of them believed that the teachers' method made them participate properly in the class.

## V. CONCLUSION

Obviously, reticence is a common phenomenon in classrooms across all levels of students in Iranian EFL university classrooms. The findings of this study revealed that the majority of the students were behaving reticent in the EFL classrooms. Their major problems were feelings of anxiety

and delivery skills. In addition, the students with higher level of proficiency were less reticent than the students with low level of proficiency.

The results showed that some factors such as lack of confidence, personality types, teaching method, and teacher's traits influenced on their reticence. Moreover, the extent of reticence high at the beginning of the semester and it was decreasing at middle to end of the semester generally, but it was different depending on such factors as the students themselves, the teachers' traits, and the teaching method.

The results of the study are consistent with [16] in which they investigated the extent of students majoring in English reticence in the classrooms, and examined the underlying factors of reticence. Moreover the results are in line with other studies including [17], [18], [3] and [6] which attributed student's reticence to different factors such as low English proficiency, lack of confidence, shyness, personality, lack of practice, and classroom atmosphere.

The findings can make the students aware to improve their skills in order to decrease their difficulty in speaking and listening. The results of this study can motivate EFL teachers to provide a stress-free atmosphere in the class and prepare practices for active participation of Iranian EFL students to obtain much more effective outputs.

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