



Reticent Students in the ESL Classrooms

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Abstract

Reticence has always been regarded as a problematic phenomenon among students in the ESL classrooms. Many instructors have expressed their frustrations to decode the reticent behaviour and work out suitable strategies to help students with such behaviour. Whenever such students do not engage in the classroom discourse, they are usually regarded as not having the desire to learn or lacking in cooperation. These explanations seem simplistic, bias and stereotypical. Based on a larger project on students' reticent behaviour, this study investigated the extent in which tertiary students majoring in English experience reticence in the classrooms, and examined the underlying factors of reticence. Data were obtained from 78 students utilizing the Reticence Scale-12 (RS-12) which measures the level of reticence along six dimensions: anxiety, knowledge, timing, organization, skills and memory. The findings reveal that reticent level is high among the students, and their major problems lie in affective-control and delivery.

Keywords: reticence, ESL classroom

1. Introduction

In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching and learning, students' verbal participation or engagement is essentially important in the classrooms. This claim complies with the conceptualization of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach of teaching English, which sees language being taught as a system for expressing meaning (Nunan, 1999). It is believed that when students engage in the classrooms with their teachers or among peers, they are compelled to be involved in the 'negotiation of meaning', that is to express and clarify their intentions, thoughts and opinions (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). In turn, the students 'communicative competence' or what they need to know to communicate, can be developed in the classrooms (Hymes, 1972; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Chang & Goswami, 2011). Therefore, student oral contribution is of great importance for class participation.

Operating from the belief that verbal participation is associated with learning, students are always encouraged by their teachers to contribute to the classroom discourse, and their participation is often evaluated according to the amount and quality of their talk (Warayet, 2011). This practice has also become an evaluative benchmark for ESL teachers to reflect if they have conducted a good lesson or elicited sufficient responses from their students. Although participation may be graded in different forms, and vary substantially from one instructor to another according to the types of interactional activities and measured quality, the ultimate goal is somewhat to increase student involvement (Bean & Peterson, 1998). Generally speaking, with teachers' encouragement and efforts, students are always expected to be able to fully contribute in the classroom discourse. Nonetheless, the ESL classroom may be a frustrating place when most students remain silent in class, and only a small proportion of them actually participate (Fritschner, 2000).

Despite the students being aware of the importance of spoken English, and knowing the fact that participation is encouraged, many teachers still experience a great deal of quietness in the ESL classroom. The students are said to remain non-participatory, quiet or behave passively. In the field of second language acquisition, this is a situation typically termed as 'reticence'. For ESL instructors, this is a kind of uncomfortable feeling as it reflects negatively on their instructional practice. Many of them, in spite of having many years of teaching, still fail to decode the reticent behaviour, and work out suitable strategies to encourage their students to contribute more to classroom discourse. This experience also prompts us to find out more about reticence since it has always been denoted a problematic attribute that would hinder the development of oral proficiency in the English language.