Review Article

Factors Leading to Reticence in Speaking in English amongst English as a Second Language Learners in Sri Lanka at Tertiary Level

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Abstract: The most disheartening and challenging experience faced by language teachers when teaching a second or foreign language is the reticence of language learners to speak or take part in class discussions actively in the target language. This study was undertaken with the intention of investigating factors that cause reticence in speaking in English by Sri Lankan learners of English as a second language. The participants were forty students who were following an engineering technology diploma course in the English medium at a higher educational institute in Sri Lanka. The students took part in a questionnaire survey which was administered to them using a google form. The results of the study show that reticence of students was due to many reasons including linguistic, psychological, and socio-cultural factors. The study recommends that teachers should take into consideration findings of research to better understand their students' socio-cultural background, their previous learning experiences and environments, and their psychological and linguistic needs in order to create a suitable learning environment to motivate them to develop their speaking skills and get over their inhibition.

Keywords: reticence in speaking, English as a second language, linguistic, socio-cultural and psychological factors

INTRODUCTION

"The purpose of learning a language is to use it rather than just to learn about it. If students are reluctant to work orally in class, the real purpose of language teaching and learning cannot be fulfilled." (Tuyen ,2017)

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method that is being presently adopted by teachers in teaching a second language in Sri Lanka emphasizes the development of speaking skills of language learners, but developing speaking skills has become the most challenging aspect of teaching for language teachers because most language learners are reluctant to speak in the target language and shy away from expressing themselves orally in the ESL classroom. This has hindered the development of English speaking skills of students.

Research has found low proficiency in the target language and psychological and socio-cultural factors to be major causes of ESL learners' reticence in speaking a second or foreign language.

Many linguists and language teachers are of the view that developing speaking skills through listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation etc. would reduce learners' reticence in speaking a second or foreign language. It has been found that in order to become a fluent speaker and communicate effectively, a language speaker needs a vocabulary of around 10,000 words in addition to speaking practice, grammar practice and knowledge of word usage.

Nation (2014) therefore stresses the need for language learners "to keep motivated and work hard, do what needs to be done and spend equal amounts of time on each of the four strands":

- Learning from meaning-focused input (listening and reading)
- Learning from meaning-focused output (speaking and writing)
- Language-focused learning (studying pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar etc.)
- Fluency development (getting good at using what you already know).

Lack of opportunity to practice their speaking skills outside the classroom as well as reticence in speaking because they are afraid of making mistakes while speaking, and using the language incorrectly outside the classroom are some of the factors that hinder the development of speaking skills of learners. In addition, there are many other factors that influence reticence of language learners to speak in the target language. Even learners with higher levels of proficiency are sometimes reluctant to speak in the target language due to many reasons.

This study will investigate linguistic, socio-cultural and psychological factors that cause L2 reticence in speaking among adult English as a Second Language learners following an engineering technology diploma course in Sri Lanka and discuss measures that can be taken to dispel learners' reticence in speaking in English.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a brief summary of psychological and socio-cultural factors that contribute to reticence in speaking in English and an account of socio-linguistic factors that lead to reticence in speaking in English, as identified by Sri Lankan researchers.

Psychological Factors

A study by Gunawan, Sada & Bunau (2019) found that grade eight students of an EFL class in Indonesia chose to remain silent without actively taking part in class discussions. The participants were chosen by the characteristics of reticence such as tending to be reluctant in responding to teachers' or other students' questions, sitting at the middle or back rows in the classroom, and rarely asking questions. The study found that the main reasons for students' reticence were anxiety, shyness, unfamiliarity with the topics/materials, low English proficiency, fear of making mistakes, lacking confidence in oneself, and being underprepared. The findings showed that affective, individual, and psychological factors had a dominant influence on students' reticence.

Many studies on language anxiety attest to the fact that learners experience distinct types of language anxiety, which lead them to be quiet in the ESL classroom. In analyzing anxiety in terms of social contexts and educational environment, Horwitz *et al.* (1986) established three related performance anxieties named: 1) communication apprehension, 2) test anxiety, and 3) fear of negative evaluation. Horwitz defines communication apprehension as the anxiety to communicate with people, to talk in front of others and to talk in groups, test anxiety as the fear of failing to perform due to the high demands that students put on themselves to be perfect speakers of the foreign language, and fear of negative evaluation by others in situations such as oral exams or in-class presentations.

Horwitz *et al.* (1986) claim that "people who typically have trouble speaking in groups are likely to experience even greater difficulty speaking in a foreign language class where they have little control over the communicative situation and when their performance is constantly monitored".

According to Juhana (2012), the personality of the learners plays a vital role in determining how quickly they achieve fluency. This is because the students who are good at taking risks become more talkative and develop their speaking skills quickly; in contrast, it takes more time for the shy learners to speak confidently. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) emphasize the role of students' beliefs, for example, remaining silent and

reluctant to speak until fluency in the foreign language is established, can increase anxiety levels. The reason for this silence is mostly because students fear to make errors and as a result get corrected by the teacher in front of their classmates.

Hamouda (2013) is of the opinion that some learners may feel shy to speak in front of the class because of fear, while some may worry because they lack the topical knowledge and vocabulary to express their ideas; consequently, when being asked to talk in front of their classmates, they become nervous and tend to neglect the opportunity given to them.

A study by Hyland (2004) found that many students use English outside the classroom mainly for listening and reading but not for speaking. The most likely reason why EFL learners do not use English for speaking is that they are afraid of making mistakes while speaking and using the language incorrectly. This silent behavior of the learners has become a real concern for L2 teachers and it is believed to be a serious problem, as it would definitely hinder the development of oral skills of the learners.

Researchers such as Allwright and Bailey (1991), Chaudron (1988) and Tsui (1996) found the relationship between reluctance to speak in class and a variety of factors including cultural beliefs regarding communication and the role of the teacher and the learner, educational background, fear of not being understood, shyness & expectations and the comprehensibility of input provided by the instructor. These factors may not operate in isolation and as van Worde (2003) affirms are likely to be intertwined.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Studies on factors that affect students' reticence in speaking has identified socio-cultural factors affecting students' reticence in speaking. Eilisha (2007) mentions that learning styles are often culture-based and students from different cultures have different learning styles, thinking patterns and behaviour and states that an understanding of culture is necessary as it affects learning styles of learners. This view is also endorsed by many other researchers such as Ramburuth and McCormick (2001), Kim and Bonk (2002) and Teng (2007).

Many studies undertaken on socio-cultural factors that affect reticence in speaking of L2 learners have found Asian students to be passive learners who are reluctant to speak in the ESL classroom, ask questions or actively take part in class discussions (Murphy, 1987; Chan, 1999; and Wursten and Jacobs 2013). According to Ballad and Clanchy (1991), Chinese students depend

more on teachers for information and mostly respond to teachers' questions using rote learning and memorization.

Furthermore, Ward (2006) identified a variety of factors that influence learning styles including values and religion, prior learning experiences and assessment methods amongst others.

Seo and Koro Ljungberg (2005) also point out that without efforts to understand students' cultural background, 'the main goal of higher education, that is quality education cannot be fully realized'.

Power distance in the classroom can also be a cause of students' reticence in speaking in the ESL classroom. A study by Wursten and Jacobs (2013) on reticence in speaking a second language in a number of selected Asian countries including China, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam found that Asian societies tend to exhibit 'collectivism and high-power distance' which is notably different from western societies such as the UK, Australia and the United States where they exhibit individualism and low power distance. According to Wursten and Jacobs (2013), Asian classrooms are 'teacher-centered with much respect given to hierarchy position and status. Students expect the teacher to outline paths of learning, lessons could be detailed in content and coverage. Students are expected to respect teachers, and there is harmony in the classroom with minimal questions asked by students. Also, teachers are expected to 'initiate communication and students only speak when they are asked to do so, whereas in the UK, Australia and the United States, 'teaching is student-centered and students play an active role in their learning. Teachers provide a brief outline, encourage students to be independent learners, students speak out in class with questions often asked and diversity of opinions are encouraged within the classroom.

Wong (2004) and Maesin *et.al.* (2009) studied the influence of past learning experiences on students' learning styles and found that when the learners had been exposed to teacher-centered learning for a considerable period of time, their previous learning experience would carry forward to the next level of education, sometimes resulting in students facing challenging situations especially at the beginning of the next course of study.

Rathod (2012) studied the relationship between social contexts and the acquisition of an L2 and stated that social contexts influence the development of language acquisition indirectly and the learners' attitudes towards the L2 and the learning opportunities that the learner can obtain are determined by their social-economic classes. According to Rathod (2012), there are three types of social structures which can affect the acquisition of second languages: sociolinguistic setting, specific social factors, and situational factors. Sociolinguistic setting refers to the role of the second language in society. Specific social factors that can affect second language acquisition include age, gender, social class, and ethnic identity and situational factors are those which vary between each social interaction.

Tuyen (2017) studied factors that affect students' reticence in class and found that reticence in class was due to many reasons such as students' lack of confidence, knowledge, personal beliefs, the differences in the culture of learning in environments where there is large power distance between the teacher and the students, the teachers' teaching method and classroom management. The study found that oriental cultural identity, power distance, and collectivists' culture of teaching and learning to be the leading factors that affect learners' reticence in Asian classes.

Sri Lankan Context

The socio-linguistics factors that affect English language learning in Sri Lanka have been studied by many linguists over the years.

Nagahawatte (2016) mentions the existence of second language learners who have had no opportunity to learn and use English socially. Gunasekera (2005) explains that non-English speakers in Sri lanka refer to English as "Kaduwa" (sword) a term that is used to show their frustration due to English which deprives them of securing jobs and upward mobility in society. Kandiah (1984) points out that 'Kaduwa' has actually indicated that the non-English speakers are aware of the need for English for upward social mobility. These studies depict the language inequality in the Sri Lankan society as Sinhala – English bilinguals enjoy high status in society and English is seen as the language of the privileged.

Gunasekera (2005) further claims that there is a class distinction between those who speak English and those who do not, in Sri Lankan state universities. Nagahawatte (2016) and Wijesinghe (2020) see this difference within the 'state university sub-culture' as a crucial aspect inhibiting speaking in English among students within state universities. Rathnasiri (2020) states that due to this reason even proficient speakers of English try to conceal their English-speaking ability within the university. Rathnasiri (2020) further identifies Sri Lankan university students to be 'reticent and ambivalent' when speaking in English 'irrespective of their proficiency in the target language' even though they follow their undergraduate courses in the English medium.

METHODOLOGY

A google form was administered to 40 students who were following English classes in the first year of their study program at a higher educational institute in Sri Lanka. The students were randomly selected to participate in the survey. The questions were carefully prepared to obtain an understanding of students' language proficiency, their speaking fluency, psychological factors that affect their active participation in English class, their previous and present speaking experiences, socio-cultural factors that cause reticence in speaking, and students' attitude towards learning English etc. The data obtained were categorized under the following headings: linguistic competence, psychological factors, power distance in the classroom, active participation in English class, previous learning environments, speaking in English outside the classroom, and attitude towards English.

To obtain teachers' view of students' reticence in speaking in English, 06 teachers who were teaching English in the first-year study program were interviewed and their observations were also recorded.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Students' responses for the questionnaire were summarized under 07 categories as given below:

1. Linguistic Competence	Percentage
Fluent speakers of English	15.4%
School education in English medium	5.2%
Regular participation in English class	82.1%
Lack of vocabulary to participate in class discussions	66.7%
Unable to express their thoughts and ideas in English due to low level of proficiency	30.8%
Lack proficiency to ask questions in English	28.2%

Table 1

2. Psychological factors	Percentage
Afraid to make mistakes, lack confidence to speak in front of a group and participate in class discussions, shyness	56.4%
Afraid the teacher might correct mistakes in front of other students, worried about negative evaluation	28.2%

Table 2

3. Power distance in the classroom	Percentage
I don't ask questions and express my opinion in class due to respect for the teacher.	23.1%
Where do you sit in English class?	84.2.% (middle & back rows)

Table 3

4. Active Participation in English class	Percentage
During my school days I never asked questions from the teacher, in English class.	20.5%
Previous learning experience in English class at school has caused my passive behavior in English class at the Institute.	48.7%
At school I did not take part actively in English class discussions, speech activities, role play, etc.	89.7%
I speak in English with the English teacher if I have to ask something relevant to English class, after the class.	23.7%
I am a passive learner in English class (I do not ask/ answer questions or take part in class discussions actively).	68.4%

Table 4

5. Learning Environment	Percentage
I don't speak in English with other students in campus, outside English class. I use my mother tongue.	51.3%
The sub-culture within campus prevents me from speaking in English inside campus.	25.6%
I am afraid to speak in English at the campus because the other students may think that I am trying to be different.	20.5%
I am afraid to speak in English at campus because I might be isolated by the other students.	10.3%

Table 5

6. Speaking in English outside the classroom	Percentage
I spoke in English with my friends during my school time.	7.7%
I don't speak in English with other lecturers and instructors at the institute.	68.4%

Table 6

7. Attitude towards English	Percentage
Improving English speaking skills is important for facing an interview and securing a job.	97.4%
I can improve my standing in life if I can speak fluently in English.	94.7%
Developing English speaking skills will be helpful in going abroad for employment / higher studies.	97.4%
My English language skills have improved after joining this study program conducted in the English medium.	97.4%
I did not attend English classes at school when I was in my A' Level class.	77.7%

Table 7

To obtain teachers' view of students' reticence in speaking in English in class, 06 ESL teachers were interviewed and their observations are recorded herewith:

Question 1

Do students speak in English class and take part in class discussions actively?

1	About 5-10 % actively participate and initiate discussion. Others give short answers to questions, some use the mother tongue to ask and answer questions.
2	Very few students speak in English class. They listen to the teacher and give short answers to questions but rarely ask questions. When group work is given, they mostly discuss in their mother tongue. Even those who are fluent speakers prefer to remain silent in class.
3	Few take part in class discussions. They do group work guided by their friends.
4	Most students are silent most of the time. There is very little interaction in class.
5	Around 20%-30% actively participate in the lesson. Others are silent most of the time.
6	Not many speak and actively participate in discussions. Those who answer questions give very short answers. Even the proficient speakers prefer to remain silent, may be because of the university sub culture.

Table 8

Question 2

Do you correct students' mistakes, ignore them or rephrase them to benefit the whole class?

1	I don't correct them, but discuss common errors at the end.

2	I don't correct them but supply the needed vocabulary to help the student to communicate. Sometimes I tactfully rephrase what they say to benefit the whole class.
3	I tell them to speak even with mistakes. Sometimes, I rephrase what was uttered by the students.
4	I don't correct their mistakes, but sometimes rephrase what they say in my own words.
5	Not directly, but sometimes I discuss common mistakes with the class.
6	I don't correct their mistakes, but give feedback sometimes. If a student utters something incomprehensible, I rephrase.

Table 9

Question 3

What do you think are the factors that contribute to students' reticence in speaking in English?

1	They are afraid to speak because they don't have the necessary vocabulary, they lack confidence in their ability to speak. Their silent behavior in the classroom may be due to their past learning experiences learning English and their attitude towards English which they neglected during A' Level time.
2	Lack of vocabulary, level of proficiency, afraid to make mistakes, anxiety, socio cultural factors, not used to the teaching method (interactive) etc.
3	Not used to speaking in English, especially in front of a group, afraid to make mistakes, lack of vocabulary.
4	Lack of vocabulary, pronunciation, level of proficiency
5	The sub-culture which is preventing them from speaking, when doing group work they survive on other students. They are afraid that others will laugh at their mistakes. Maybe they are not used to speaking in English.
6	Lack of exposure, lack of confidence to speak, lack of proficiency in the language, being afraid to make mistakes, being afraid that the teacher will correct their mistakes, power distance in the classroom.

Table 10

According to the results obtained, out of the 40 students who responded to the questionnaire only 15.4 students were fluent speakers of the language and 5.2% students had followed their school education in the English medium. 7.7% students mentioned that they were used to speaking in English with their family and friends.

At school, only around 10% of students had taken part actively in English class discussions, speech activities, role play, etc. and 12.8% students had not got the opportunity to speak to the teacher in English. Over 76% of students had not attended English class when they were in their A 'Level class.

At the Institute, 82% students attend English class regularly and over 96% of students responded saying that they were aware that improved English-speaking skills would help them in facing an interview and securing a job, or going abroad for employment or higher education. Students' responses also showed that they were aware that they would have a better standing in life if they could speak in English fluently. Despite this, most students are reluctant to speak in English class and actively participate in class discussions at the institute. Most students are of the view that this is because of the more traditional teacher-centered method of teaching that they had been used to at school where there is a high-power distance between the students and the teacher in which students accept the authority of the teacher and rarely ask questions in class. As such the study found that 68.4% of students were passive learners of English who preferred to sit in the middle or back rows in the classroom.

Students' responses also showed that the students were aware that the English language enjoyed the status of a language of privilege in Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is evident that the Institutes' 'subculture' plays a part in students' reluctance to speak in English inside campus as well as in English class resulting in even the more proficient speakers of English opting to remain silent in English class in order to avoid creating a class distinction within campus.

The study aligns with the perspectives of several scholars, including Horwitz (1986), Hyland (2004), Juhana (2012), Hamouda (2013), and Gunawan, Sada, and Bunau (2019), supporting the idea that various linguistic and psychological factors play a role in students' reluctance to speak in English within the ESL classroom. These factors encompass low proficiency in the English language, a limited vocabulary, as well as psychological barriers such as shyness, lack of confidence when speaking in a group, fear of making mistakes, and apprehension about receiving negative evaluations from their teachers. During interviews teachers too shared similar views and expressed agreement with the researchers' observations.

CONCLUSION

According to the results of the study, it can be concluded that although students had previously neglected attending English classes during the two years they were in the Advanced Level classes, most of the students who took part in the study have understood the importance of English for their personal development and attend English classes regularly at the Institute. The results also show that students' previous learning experiences had influenced the way they participate in English class at the Institute. It is evident that power distance between the teacher and students as a result of following traditional teacher-centered methods of teaching at school had led to students' reticence in speaking in English in the classroom to a certain extent. Other factors that had contributed to reticence in speaking in English include lack of proficiency in the English language and psychological factors such as anxiety about making mistakes, and the fear of being corrected by the teacher, fear of speaking in front of a group etc.

Another contributory factor to students' reticence in speaking in English within the campus is the 'sub-culture' which frowns on students moving away from collectivists' practices and ideologies of the dominant group of students which would create a class distinction within campus. The findings of the study agree with the findings of researches reviewed to collect information for conducting this study.

The study recommends that teachers should take into consideration findings of research to better understand their students' socio-cultural background, their previous learning environment, and their psychological and linguistic needs, to create a suitable learning environment within the classroom so that learners will be motivated to develop their speaking skills and get over their inhibition, however challenging the task may be.

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