
Reticence among English department students in an online speaking class: Contributing factors and remedies

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to investigate second/foreign language (L2) reticence among students taking an online public speaking class at an English Language Education Department in Java, Indonesia. These participants were selected because based on a preceding observational study, L2 reticence was present among these target participants in the observed public speaking class. More specifically, the present study intends to discover the possible causes of L2 reticence and the possible strategies to alleviate it. To achieve this goal, four reticent students, identified based on the observation data from the preceding study, as well as two teachers who taught the class, were individually interviewed. The interview data were analysed using Thematic Analysis. The results suggested the student participants' beliefs that low confidence levels and fear of possible embarrassment were major causes of L2 reticence. The teacher participants, furthermore, believed that constantly monitored group discussions and teacher psychological support could lessen students' L2 reticence. Implications include setting clear expectations and assigning roles to each student to keep students accountable. Teachers should also maintain a democratic classroom environment where students can feel more at ease in expressing their thoughts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Second/foreign language (L2) reticence is generally seen as an unfavourable phenomenon in L2 classes. Two prominent authors tried to conceptualise L2 reticence. (McCroskey, 1977) defined it as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (p. 78). Different from the definition from McCroskey, (Tsui, 1996) defined reticence as “learners’ inadequate ability in self-expression, a problem in verbal response to the learning situation” (p. 145). Despite the differences, both definitions suggest L2 reticence as a silent phenomenon or behaviour in L2 classes. This silent behaviour is attributed to a psychological factor, that is, anxiety (McCroskey, 1977), and low linguistic competence (Tsui, 1996). It can be said that L2 reticence is relatively stable. It is a pertinent tendency to be silent. This phenomenon forms as a result of recurring episodes of perception of low competence, and language anxiety, defined as anxious feelings arising from the language learning process with all its characteristics (Subekti, 2018). Similarly, Tripudiyana et al. (2022) stated students frequently have difficulty expressing their thoughts due to a variety of factors, including a lack of confidence, a lack of listeners’ ability, a lack of listeners’ responsiveness, a lack of grammar understanding, a lack of motivation, and a fear of making mistakes.

Studies in different contexts have tried to investigate the possible causes of reticence behaviours in L2 classes. Studies suggested that the causes of L2 reticence can come from students themselves. A study in Vietnam, for example, identified by (Van & Phuong, 2021) found that students' motivation affected their reticence behaviours. Some were not very motivated and interested in learning L2. Some came to class unprepared, further hampering participation. Some others had low proficiency. Each student factor or the combination of these factors made students reticent in class. In China, Wu (2019) reported that anxiety, along with insufficient language proficiency, and introversion, contributed to silence behaviours in class. A study involving 36 Chinese non-English major students by Ma et al. (2020) also revealed low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, and fear of negative evaluation as the main reasons for reticence among students. Furthermore, a quantitative study involving 122 Malaysian undergraduate students by Fen et al. (2020) found that anxiety significantly and strongly correlated with L2 reticence. A recent study in Vietnam by Ng  n (2022) also reported several factors increasing L2 reticence, including low proficiency, and personality such as shyness, anxiety, and motivation. These studies suggested that students themselves have a big role to play in explaining why they are silent in language class.

Furthermore, external factors, outside of students, can also be identified from several studies. Cultural beliefs have been reported to make students in some Asian contexts silent in language classrooms (Ng  n, 2022; Tuyen, 2017; Zhou & Chen, 2020). Ng  n (2022), for example, found that Vietnamese students tend to be silent to pay attention and show respect to their teachers. Similar finding has also been reported in an earlier study by Tuyen (2017). The study found that when there was a large power distance between teachers and students, students tended to be silent in class. In line with this previous study, a study in China also found that the cultural value of passively receiving knowledge without speaking out was a pattern prevailing in the Chinese school environment that contributed to reticence behaviours among Chinese students in English classes (Zhou & Chen, 2020). Secondly, students' classroom environments such as classmates, teachers, and classroom activities also play a role in contributing to reticence behaviours. Similarly Irham and Jayanti (2020) revealed, most of them cannot speak English very well because the classroom situation appears as the source of difficulties, not the source of knowledge. Van & Phuong (2021) revealed that reticence was mostly related to students' fear of making mistakes and being publicly embarrassed. Furthermore, several teacher attributes were linked to heightened reticence, for example, not giving sufficient time to answer questions, not accepting students' ideas, giving negative gestures, and constantly interrupting when students made mistakes. Next, the L2 classroom atmosphere seen as unfavourable by students also could make them reticent. For example, when students consider activities or materials boring, too complicated, or irrelevant, they tend to keep silent. A study by Junco et al. (2022) reported that even English department students experienced reticence. Several possible causes were identified. Among them were pronunciation difficulty, shyness, fears, and poor speaking habits.

Several studies, though not very extensive, reported the negative impacts of L2 reticence. Recently, a study involving Indonesian English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students by Dewi and Subekti (2024) found that L2 reticence significantly influenced L2 confidence negatively. It means reticence makes students unconfident. Reticent students remain silent during class and rarely participate in L2 classes. In L2 learning, students must continue practising and using the target language. When they choose to remain silent, they are likely to have limited language

production (Wu, 2019), which is crucial for L2 learning progress. For this reason, L2 reticence is seen as an obstacle to successful learning in the long run.

Due to the negative effects of silence behaviours on L2 learning in the long run, researchers also tried to investigate possible ways to increase students' participation in class. A perspective study by Pei (2025) mentioned several possible strategies to alleviate reticence among students. The suggested strategies include giving students timely verbal feedback, giving them sufficient time to prepare before language production, and establishing good teacher-student relationship. Whilst empirical studies specifically investigating L2 reticence may not have been extensive, studies on closely related constructs such as anxiety and willingness to communicate have been widely available. For example, in a study contemplating speaking anxiety, teacher participants commented on the importance of perceived teacher support to make students more at ease and relaxed in L2 classes (Subekti, 2018). Teachers' supportive facial expressions were associated with lowered anxiety, whilst strict and too-detailed teachers were associated with increased anxiety. (Zarei et al., 2019) reported that Iranian teachers' uses of socio-affective strategies such as building positive relationships, showing empathy, and creating a supportive environment made students more willing to communicate. These strategies were noted to be crucial in the Iranian culture attributed to the prevalence of students' fear of making mistakes and facing embarrassment. Furthermore, a study in China by Kraus et al. (2020) reported that gamification in large L2 classes was found to significantly enhance students' confidence, and eventually increase their participation. Gamified activities created a less intimidating environment and fostered collaboration among students. These findings highlight the crucial role of classroom atmosphere in influencing whether students remain silent or can be stimulated to speak up and engage in class activities. Earlier, a study specifically investigating L2 reticence of Indonesian Junior High School students by Aripin and Umam (2019) also suggested creating a supportive environment in class, using interactive and engaging activities, focusing on fluency over accuracy, and giving students more preparation time before speaking activities to help reduce reticence.

1.1 Rationales for conducting the present study

Despite the possible contributions of the studies on L2 reticence or the closely related constructs in language learning settings, several aspects still need to be addressed. A preceding preliminary observational study revealed the prevalence of the reticence phenomenon among students in online speaking classes at a university in Indonesia. The finding of this observational study also conformed with the finding of a study in online L2 learning context in Indonesia (Nurrohman, 2021). The study also suggested the widespread silence among students in online setting. Hence, investigating L2 reticence in an online environment can be essential. It has been understood that studies on L2 reticence have been available in various learning contexts (Baktash & Chalak, 2016; Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Chang, 2011; Gushendra & Aprianti, 2019; Li & Liu, 2011). Several of these studies also reported the prevalence of L2 reticence among students (Chang, 2011; Gushendra & Aprianti, 2019; Li & Liu, 2011). For this reason, conducting a study on L2 reticence is deemed essential, especially in online settings where students have physical distance from their teachers and peers, probably discouraging more flexible language production. Moreover, in the case of the Indonesian context, there are only three available studies on L2 reticence, one in a junior high school context (Aripin & Umam, 2019), another in a senior high school context (Gushendra & Aprianti, 2019), and the other in an ESP context (Dewi & Subekti, 2024). For this reason, more empirical studies on L2 reticence involving students from different characteristics may be worthwhile.

For this reason, the present study aims to conduct a study on reticence involving university students and their teachers in the previously observed online speaking class setting where most students exhibited reticence behaviours to investigate the contributing factors for their reticence and the strategies to alleviate this reticence. For these aims, this study intends to answer the following research questions. First, what are students' views on factors contributing to their reticence to participate in an online speaking class? Second, what are teachers' strategies to reduce L2 reticence in online speaking classes?

2. METHOD

2.1 Design

This study employed a qualitative design. Qualitative research design allows researchers to obtain in-depth and rich data on a phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2022). In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain students' subjective experiences regarding the contributing factors of reticence and the possible strategies to alleviate it. The interpretivism paradigm was used in this study. The paradigm seeks to understand a phenomenon in a particular context from the interpretations of participants (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

This study was preceded by a preliminary observational study of an online public speaking class via the *Zoom* platform at a private university in Java, Indonesia, to see whether the phenomenon of L2 reticence existed among students. From the preliminary study, it was found that some students seemed to be reticent. They did not volunteer to answer the teachers' questions and tended to be silent during the class unless called upon.

2.1 Participants and Ethical Consideration

The participants of this study were four English language department students taking the observed online public speaking class in the preliminary study and two teachers teaching the class. The four student participants were recruited based on the results of three class observations before the study. These four students were observed to be passive during the class sessions and thus were considered to have a high level of reticence. Of the four students, three were females and one was male. Both the teacher participants were females. Student participants were interviewed to find the contributing factors of L2 reticence, whilst teacher participants were interviewed to find possible remedies.

This study implemented the principles of autonomy and confidentiality. Participation in this study was voluntary without any coercion, suggesting autonomy (Israel & Hay, 2006). Next, the report does not disclose the participants' real names to protect their confidentiality (Gray, 2022). Pseudonyms protecting the participants' identities are used throughout this research report.

2.2 Instruments

The instruments used in this study were an interview checklist on factors contributing to L2 reticence and an interview checklist on possible strategies to alleviate the reticence. Examples of questions in the first checklist include "Do you feel comfortable in the speaking class? Why?" "Do you participate enough in class? Or are you just keeping silent in class? Why is that the case?" and "What are things that may influence your participation in the online speaking class?" Examples of questions in the second checklist include "If you have reticent students in your class, what strategies do you usually implement to tackle the issue?" and "What are the possible challenges in implementing the strategies?"

These checklists were generally prepared and finalised based on a structured procedure. It was to ensure the alignment of these checklists with the research objectives. The drafts in English were assessed by two university teachers of English to double-check the alignment with the research objective. Upon the revisions of the checklists, these checklists were translated into Indonesian before the interviews were conducted. The same university teachers reviewed the translations to ensure the clarity and accuracy of the translation.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection started from 5 April 2023 to 26 April 2023. The interviews were conducted in the Indonesian language and recorded. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. After that, the English transcripts were analysed using Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis was used as it allows for identifying patterns in experiences and beliefs of the participants regarding their reticence. As Braun and Clarke (2012) suggested, the steps for conducting thematic analysis are as follows: We familiarised ourselves with the data. Then, we generated initial codes, searched for themes, and defined the themes. These processes were conducted through reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to get familiar with the dataset and annotating the interview transcripts whilst writing separate notes, when necessary, on potential themes. The last step was writing up the report, in which the most representative excerpts answering the research questions of this study are presented and further discussed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using Thematic Analysis, the present study found two recurring themes on contributing factors to L2 reticence and two other themes regarding strategies to reduce L2 reticence. These themes can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis Results

Objective 1. Students' views on factors contributing to their reticence in L2 speaking class	
Theme 1	Lack of confidence made students reticent to participate in class.
Theme 2	Fear of embarrassment made students reticent to participate in class.
Objective 2. Strategies to reduce students' L2 reticence	
Theme 1	Discussion groups can be utilised to lessen reticence behaviours and increase student participation in class.
Theme 2	Teacher support can lessen reticent behaviours and promote students' risk-taking behaviours in class.

In the following parts, each of the themes will be presented and discussed further.

3.1. Students' views on factors contributing to their reticence in L2 speaking class

We interviewed four seemingly reticent students from our preliminary observational study to find students' views on factors contributing to L2 reticence. The pseudonyms of the four student participants are Audi (Female/F), Desta (Male/M), Tika (F), and Ellen (F). From the interviews, the study found two themes: 1) "Lack of confidence made students reticent to participate in class," and 2) "Fear of embarrassment made students reticent to participate in class." In the following paragraphs, each theme is presented.

3.1.1. *Lack of confidence made students reticent to participate in class*

Two students, Audi and Thea, said that their lack of confidence made them reticent. Regarding this, they stated:

Maybe, (lack of confidence comes) from us ... lack of confidence or fear to be active in class. So maybe, what is the most common factor, from oneself mostly a lack of confidence. (Audi)

Hmmm, the first factor might be, they... what is that...? Lack of self-confidence ... We, maybe at first, were confident like that. However, we are like seeing other friends who are already speaking fluently, so we are like, (feeling) down. So... (we are) like, lacking confidence, like me too. (Thea)

From the excerpts, both Audi and Thea acknowledged that their low self-confidence made them silent in class. As seen from Thea's account, she also felt intimidated when she saw her peers speak fluently. Seeing more able peers perform well made her even more reticent in class. Related to the finding that lack of confidence made students reticent in class, a similar finding was also reported in a study by (Waloyo & Nurrohmah, 2021) which also reported a lack of self-confidence as a reason why students kept silent with little or no contribution in class. A study by Gushendra and Aprianti (2019) also reported that a lack of self-confidence made students feel that their language skills were lower than those of their peers. This low confidence level was exactly what happened to Thea, as seen in the excerpt. What can be more alarming is that low self-confidence may make students perceive their competence as lower than their actual competence. This low self-perception of competence could make students avoid any communication prospects, such as asking teachers questions, volunteering to answer questions, and giving opinions in class. In the long run, this could hamper L2 learning.

Several things can be done to help improve students' confidence and, in turn, lower their L2 reticence. First, teachers could assign a task requiring students to practice speaking outside the classroom context. For example, they are tasked to make a video project requiring them to continuously speak for quite some time. Second, in the case of online speaking classes, small group activities where students are required to speak in front of a limited audience may boost their courage to speak up.

3.1.2. *Fear of embarrassment made students reticent to participate in class.*

Two students, Desta and Vina, stated in the interviews that fear of possible embarrassment prevented students from actively participating in L2 class. Desta mentioned his fear of making a mistake, saying:

"I am embarrassed; I am embarrassed to talk, especially since this class is a public speaking class; if we talk, we have to use English, so maybe I am afraid of saying wrong things." (Desta)

In line with that, Vina commented that feeling insecure and afraid of talking to more able peers made students choose to be silent instead of active in class. She stated:

Shy... afraid of being wrong in what we say. Using English, I am afraid of being wrong or not, like I am still thinking first (before talking) ... If I, for example, want to say this, what do you think?... The English is still like, ... (I need to) think first... like that. For the others, they speak without thinking, as if the words just come out of their heads... So, it may be

(my) lack of confidence or hesitation. Then, um... maybe sometimes it is like (feeling) insecure, how come the others can do it, why am I... still... still like this, still, speaking... still like... speaking... not good. (Vina)

This finding resonated with the findings of several previous studies (Van & Phuong, 2021; Wu, 2019). In China, a study by Wu (2019) also reported that in large classes, students avoided answering teachers' questions voluntarily because of fear of embarrassment in front of a large audience. A finding from a study on willingness to communicate by Subekti (2019) may be related to this finding. The study revealed that the fewer the number of interlocutors, the more willing to speak students were. In the present study's context, fear of possible embarrassment may come from having to speak in front of the whole class, albeit online. It may also relate to anxiety as in Asian culture, many students were afraid of losing face when making mistakes or looking stupid in front of others. However, this finding was in contrast to the finding of a recent study involving Indonesian ESP students (Dewi & Subekti, 2024). This previous study found that the participants' L2 reticence was low-moderate, and most participants did not seem to be afraid of speaking in front of their friends and making mistakes in the process.

In the case of the present study, the participants' level of proficiency may play a role. These participants could have a low level of proficiency. It becomes interesting that the participants studying at an English language department in the present study seemed to be more reticent than student participants from non-English departments in the previous study. It possibly calls for evaluation of parts of the English language department curriculum likely linked to the instructional practices of developing students' communication skills. On a more micro level, in classroom practice, fear of possible embarrassment can be lessened by dividing the class into small groups to allow students to practice the language in front of fewer interlocutors. Activities in small groups could lessen their anxiety and improve their confidence.

3.2. Strategies to reduce students' L2 reticence

To find out possible strategies to reduce students' L2 reticence, we interviewed two teachers teaching the online speaking class observed in the preliminary study. The pseudonyms of the two teacher participants are Ms. Erina and Ms. Gina. From the interviews, two themes emerged. These are 1) "Discussion groups can be utilised to lessen reticence behaviours and increase student participation in class" and 2) "Teacher support can lessen reticent behaviours and promote students' risk-taking behaviours in class."

3.2.1. Discussion groups can be utilised to lessen reticence behaviours and increase student participation in class.

From the interviews with the teachers teaching the online speaking class, both teachers commented that forming discussion groups can be used as a strategy to increase participation even from reticent students. Regarding this, Ms. Erina stated:

"For them to practice speaking, I put them in the room (to discuss in small groups) so that they can take turns and chat with their groupmates to get input... In the breakout rooms, they also take turns to speak, for example, to convey the outline and then get feedback. There inevitably all have to speak." (Ms. Erina)

Ms. Erina's account seemed to be echoed by Ms. Gina's statement in another interview. However, she also noted that making students work in small groups would not automatically make

them speak. She mentioned the importance of teachers' supervision in these small groups to ensure all students speak in English in these small groups. Regarding this, she stated:

When I visit each breakout room, there are always silent students, or they switch the language to Indonesian. When they see me, they immediately say, 'There is Ms. Gina,' and then they switch back to English. Now, my strategy to ensure everyone speaks is to appoint students who rarely speak to be the spokesperson. After they have discussed in small groups in the breakout rooms, they will report back to the larger group. These spokespersons are usually chosen from the reticent students. (Ms. Gina)

The teacher participants believed that discussion groups could be utilised to lessen reticence behaviours and increase student participation in class. The accounts of these teacher participants highlight their views that, generally, group discussions could be used to lessen L2 reticence. More specifically, the excerpts suggest giving students more talking time and guidance in small groups, requiring even the most reticent students to speak up. Informed by the high level of reticence among student participants in his/her study, Wu (2019) mentioned that teachers provide more opportunities for students to practice English orally by organising various speaking activities, especially pair work and group discussions. Besides, group work is not only an avenue for a collection of ideas, but it also allows students to help others and get help from others (Ma et al., 2020). In the case of the present study, supervised small group discussions could allow reticent students to go beyond their comfort zone either voluntarily due to a less threatening environment or involuntarily through the teachers' commands for passive students to be the spokesperson for their respective groups. Setting clear expectations, assigning roles to each group member, and monitoring the groups seem to be the keys to successful small-group discussions. Especially in the case of an online environment, teachers' monitoring seems to be crucial to help keep students accountable.

3.2.2. Teacher support can lessen reticent behaviours and promote students' risk-taking behaviours in class.

The interviews with the teacher participants further revealed that perceived support from teachers could students feel braver to speak because they would feel their teachers are there to support their learning. Regarding this, Ms. Erina commented:

"For example, the answer is wrong. I will not immediately say oh, that is wrong, but I will first ask the others, what do you think? Then, the friends can correct each other or add to the answer given... It can encourage students' participation in class... (Students are) given information that this (expressing their opinions) is an opportunity for input to be given. Well, usually, they are happy, me, me, me. I want to try." (Ms. Erina)

As seen from the excerpts, Ms. Erina believed that error correction should be delivered in a way that did not embarrass students. On the contrary, teachers could orchestrate the class in such a way that students feel encouraged not only by their teachers but also by their peers. Similarly, Ms. Gina, the other teacher, commented that it is very important that students do not feel too wide a gap between a teacher and their students to make them more relaxed and comfortable in class. Regarding this, Ms. Gina said:

"I tend to be someone who likes building and maintaining good relationships with students. I strive to minimise the gap between us; it's not 'Hey, you are a student, and I am a teacher.' Instead, I aim to make students feel comfortable in class. By reducing distance and tension,

(teachers can encourage) students to freely express their thoughts, making the class environment less tense.” (Ms. Gina)

Furthermore, the teachers also believed that teacher support could lessen reticent behaviours and promote students' risk-taking behaviours in class. From both the excerpts in the finding section, the teachers believed that providing support could reduce students' reticence in class. The teachers' statements were similar to several authors' reiteration that teacher support can be achieved through attention to students' needs, helpful feedback, and encouragement (Cesnaviciene et al., 2022; Zarei et al., 2019). Teacher participants in an anxiety study in Indonesia by Subekti (2018) also noted the importance of teachers' supportive facial expressions to sustain students' speaking and lower their anxiety. Students are more likely to fully engage in their studies and put effort into them when they feel their teacher supports them emotionally. This support can manifest in many practices, such as: calling students by their names, giving students more opportunities to talk, minimising the teacher-student gap, and providing democratic classroom environments where students could feel safe expressing their opinions. As students see their teachers as democratic rather than authoritative, they would likely feel braver in expressing their thoughts and less afraid of making mistakes, thus lessening their L2 reticence.

4. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study investigates the possible contributing factors of L2 reticence in an online speaking class and the possible strategies to alleviate it. This study found that the student participants believed that their L2 reticence stemmed from their low confidence and fear of possible embarrassment. Low perceived competence is speculated to have been attributed to these negative feelings. Furthermore, the teacher participants viewed constantly monitored group discussions could be utilised to lessen reticence behaviours and increase student participation. They also viewed that making students believe their teachers were always there to help them learn could make them feel more at ease and active in class.

Based on the findings of this study, pedagogical implications can be suggested. Generally, the findings of this study can also inform English departments, including curriculum developers and teacher trainers. Although English department students may have greater exposure to English and engage in language production more extensively than typical L2 learners, reticence persists among them. Departments should go beyond language input/output and pay attention to affective factors among students. Even those who seem proficient may experience a certain degree of apprehensiveness in communication. In this case, teachers should help reduce students' fear of embarrassment by providing opportunities in a lower-stake environment. For example, students can gradually move from small-group to whole-class discussions. During the small group discussions, teachers provide clear guidelines and expectations to keep students on track in terms of content and language. Teachers should also continually monitor each group discussion to ensure they use the opportunities optimally to practice the L2 and to ensure that reticent students have and use the opportunities to participate in the discussions. Finally, error corrections shall be delivered in a way that is not embarrassing for students either at the end of the class session or simultaneously during the group discussion. Creating a democratic classroom environment seems to be a key to creating such a conducive environment.

This study contributes to understanding the L2 reticence phenomenon in an online speaking context, what may have caused it, and the possible ways to alleviate it. Despite the contribution, this study has several limitations. It only employed interviews to follow up an

observational preliminary study on reticence. It only involved a limited number of participants within an institution. Hence, this study lacks generalisability and is unique in its context.

Future studies can be suggested as follows. It could be strategic to conduct a longitudinal study on confidence-building, which investigates the long-term effects of various strategies to improve confidence and lessen L2 reticence. Based on the findings on the possible role of the teacher-student relationship in influencing L2 reticence, a study dedicated to examining the impact of the teacher-student relationship on L2 reticence is worthwhile to conduct. Likewise, based on the findings that perception of peers' level of proficiency affected L2 reticence, researchers can investigate the possible role of peer support systems on L2 reticence. Such support systems include peer mentoring, collaborative learning projects, and buddy systems. Furthermore, diversifying the methods of collecting data, for example employing mixed-methods or classroom action research, could help increase the comprehensiveness of L2 reticence studies.

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