



## Addressing Reticence: The Challenge of Engaging Reluctant Adult ESL Students

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Reticence frequently prevents adult ESL learners from learning as much as they otherwise might. The nature of second-language learning requires frequent performance that may challenge students' self-concepts, leading to reticence and self-consciousness. To reduce or prevent this problem, teachers must employ appropriate pedagogical and classroom management strategies to create a safe and supportive learning environment that will reduce students' state anxiety and by extension increase their confidence when using English. Furthermore, attention to establishing a positive group dynamic and careful monitoring and control of situational factors/variables can do much to alleviate language learners' anxiety such that reticence is minimized.

Anyone who teaches ESL to adults will sooner or later note that their students exhibit a variety of responses to interaction within the classroom. Many seem eager to answer questions and participate in discourse, some to the degree that they can even become disruptive. On the other hand, others seem to hang back and rarely speak up. They typically sit and observe, exhibiting to varying degrees a timid, reserved, or withdrawn attitude. They rarely volunteer to answer a question and during group activities they often seem more inhibited and reserved than their fellow learners. In other words, "despite the efforts of...teachers to create the right conditions [for positive communicative interaction], some learners have a strong tendency to withdraw from opportunities for oral exchange" (Baran-Lucarz, 2014, p. 446).

Reticent behavior poses particular problems when it comes to language learning. Many experts emphasize that...

Speech is not only a product of acquisition but also a necessary precondition for it. Consequently, it is vital for [foreign language] classes to be run in a way that encourages student participation in communication activities...[and] it is crucial to discover and understand the reasons for [some students'] unwillingness to speak. (Baran-Lucarz, 2014, p. 446)

Or, stated in fewer words, "[A language-learning] program that fails to produce students who are willing to use the language is simply a failed program" (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clemént, & Noels, 1998, p. 547).

This article focuses on students who seem reluctant to involve themselves in the foreign language

classroom. It explores reticence—what it is (and what it is not), its implications for language learners, and what teachers can do in adult ESL classes to help reticent students participate more. It will first address several false but common assumptions regarding reticence and reticent students. Next, it will define reticence and explore its probable causes. Then, it will discuss the implications for adult ESL learners. Finally, it will suggest steps that teachers of adult ESL can take to assist reticent learners, including building a favorable intergroup climate and adjusting situational factors in the classroom.

### False Assumptions about Reticent Students

First of all, it should be remembered that reticence does not equate to a student's lack of competence, motivation, or even proficiency. Soo and Goh (2013) point out that "the lack of relevant knowledge about reticence has caused many instructors to wrongly perceive their students' ability...[and to assume] that they do not have the desire to learn" (p. 67). This, however, is not necessarily the case. Learners' paradigms about the learning process are important to keep in mind before jumping to conclusions. Some behavior is more indicative of students' perceptions of the appropriate, distinctive roles of learners and teachers, and these perceptions are often culturally driven (Jackson, 2002, p. 77). For instance, "views about the importance of raising comments and questions depend strongly on one's conception of the students' role in the learning process" (Liu & Littlewood, 1997, p. 377).

Besides cultural causes for variations in behavior, students' degree of reticence may vary depending on the language skill being used at the moment. For instance, productive skills are more apparent than receptive skills, and this difference can lead teachers to wrong conclusions. "Sometimes...we assume that the silent student doesn't understand when in fact [his] listening skills may be quite strong. Similarly, confident speech may mask very limited literacy skills" (Bell, 2012, p. 88). Teachers need to be careful not to assume too readily that a student's apparent reticence in using one language skill represents that student's overall language proficiency.

Individual personality variables may also result in varying degrees of apparent reticence. In class, some students simply may not enjoy being the center of attention. Certain activities may be at odds with their perceptions of themselves as English speakers. They may have no desire to become "outspoken" English speakers and they may perceive some activities as designed to endorse that kind of persona. As Savignon (2001) states, In planning for CLT [Communicative Language Teaching], teachers should remember that not everyone is comfortable in the same role. Within classroom communities, as within society at large, there are leaders and there are those who prefer to be followers.... Those who often remain silent in larger groups typically participate more easily in pair work. (p. 21)

In summary, reserved behavior alone is not always indicative of, and should not be immediately diagnosed as, reticence. Phillips (1968) provides further clarity on this point:

Mere quietness is not the problem! There are many people who do not choose to be garrulous or eloquent who are well able to cope with verbal demands made on them. The reticent person, however, cannot participate even when he needs to or when he feels strongly enough to want to (p. 45)

### **Reticence and its Probable Causes**

Phillips (1968) describes a reticent person as someone who "does not anticipate success in communicative transactions involving speech. He may be defined as a *person for whom anxiety about participation in oral communication outweighs his projection of gain from that situation.*" He further explains that reticent individuals are "quite aware" of their incapability, but seek to avoid interactions, opting for activities "that will spare [them] from communicating" (p. 40).

The adult ESL classroom is a context that is likely to induce reticent behavior due to *state* anxiety rather than *trait* anxiety (although instances of trait anxiety certainly

do occur as well). To explain, *state anxiety* refers to "anxiety induced by a particular *temporary* [emphasis added] phenomenon" (i.e., the language classroom) whereas *trait anxiety* refers to "an inherent, long-term personality characteristic" (Hilleson, 1996, p. 250). It is fairly certain that a substantial degree of the reticence exhibited by second-language learners is linked to their anxiety about performing well in the target language rather than clinical personality disorders. The degree of willingness to communicate that students demonstrate in a second language does not necessarily have a one-to-one correlation with their degree of willingness to communicate in their first language. Indeed, "communicating in a second/foreign language is a unique process and experience, governed by its own distinct rules" (Baran-Lucarz, 2014, p. 447).

The legitimacy of this temporary, second-language, context-induced state anxiety (also known as *foreign language anxiety*) and consequent reticence was well documented by Hilleson (1996) in a qualitative study he carried out in Singapore. The adult students who participated in the study expressed frustration at not being able to communicate their true identity [in English, their second language]. One student reported: "I don't tell as many jokes or make fun because I am afraid that people don't understand. Therefore I have become much more serious" (p. 255). Another Chinese student confided, "When I met a new person I'd never met before it's hard to communicate. Actually I'm not too shy, but nervous. But I can speak Japanese well. (In Japan), usually I like to be with friends" (p. 254). From these students' comments it seems obvious that for them reticent behavior was not the norm, but rather a phenomenon related to their second-language use.

### **Implications for Adult ESL Learners**

The detrimental effects occasioned by reticent behavior are problematic. Regardless of whether reticence is due to the unique context of the second-language learning environment or linked to a more deeply embedded character trait, reticence tends to cause students to withdraw from interaction and become "passive spectator[s] when the rules demand active immersion...[Thus, they become losers] in transactions demanding participation" (Phillips, 1968, p. 45). This can lead to a vicious cycle—"high anxiety and low self-perception may lead to reluctance to speak and lower frequency of L2 use" (Baran-Lucarz, 2014, p. 451). Once students have become accustomed to the loser's role, "[they have] both a defense against future winning and an explanation to [themselves] for [their] failures" (Phillips, 1968, p. 45).

Obviously this kind of cycle can have serious consequences for adult ESL students' ability to interact in English over the long-term.

One cannot deny that participation is very important in language learning. When students produce the language that they are studying they are testing out the hypotheses which they have formed about the language. When they respond to the teacher's or other students' questions, raise queries and give comments, they are actively involved in the negotiation of comprehensible input and the formulation of comprehensible output, which are essential to language acquisition. (Tsui, 1996, p. 146)

The initial hurdle lies in the fact that adult learners' can perceive speaking in ESL classes as a "high-risk, low-gain" venture (Tsui, 1996, p. 156). They often are "desperately trying to avoid humiliation, embarrassment, and criticism, and to preserve their self-esteem" (p. 159). Yet, due to the context (and without appropriate intervention and classroom management by the teacher), they face an uphill battle. Language learning by its very nature is a "process in which individual learners are constantly putting themselves in a vulnerable position of having their own self-concept undermined and subjecting themselves to negative evaluations" (Tsui, 1996, p. 155). Being adults and being aware that they are regularly being "sized up" by their peers and teachers, students naturally wish to be viewed in a positive light (Hilleson, 1996, p. 257). Sometimes, however, they do not feel that they are seen as competent. One adult ESL learner said in an interview, "When I came to class I feel like a small kid where all adult are. I feel very unconfident" (Hilleson, 1996, p. 258).

Perhaps the most critical factor in this issue of reticence is students' self-perception or self-created second-language identity. What students truly are in terms of second-language development is not so important as *how they perceive themselves* because, interestingly enough, how students perceive themselves will eventually determine what they are. "Many observations have shown that students' personal and interpersonal anxieties with respect to their self-perception and beliefs about FL [foreign language or second language] learning are the most powerful determinants of [language acquisition]" (Baran-Lucarz, 2014, p. 452). To drive the point home, whether students see the glass as half full or half empty with respect to their second-language identity will have a profound influence on their future abilities in that language.

### Steps Teachers Can Take

All the foregoing discussion leads to the question—what can teachers do to assist reticent learners? How can

they coax them out of their shells? The answer lies primarily in helping learners to develop positive second-language identities. Baran-Lucarz (2014) states that students' "success in learning [a second language] depends on the extent to which [they] are willing to modify and accept a new identity" (p. 453). We could add that their success is contingent upon this new identity being positive. Whether directly or indirectly, everything an adult ESL teacher does ought to reinforce students' view of themselves as participants *moving toward success* in the enterprise of second-language acquisition and mastery. This positive second-language identity is closely related to the idea of second-language confidence: "the overall belief in being able to [eventually] communicate in the [second language] in an adaptive and efficient manner" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 551).

This counsel to help learners develop positive second-language identities, however, is decidedly vague. The question becomes *how* does one positively reinforce learners' second-language self-perception? In other words, what specific steps can teachers take to ensure the development of students' positive second-language identity or to repair learners' negative self-perceptions such that they become more positive?

As we noted above, many adult students are fearful of others' evaluations of their abilities—especially in the classroom. They see the ESL classroom "as a stage on which their performance is constantly being evaluated...[They fear the danger of] making themselves ridiculous and losing face in front of significant others (classmates [and teachers])" (Baran-Lucarz, 2014, p. 450). In other words, they do not feel secure enough to risk making mistakes. The first and most practical solution to the problem, then, is to create a safe and supportive learning environment in which students can feel at ease (Tsui, 1996; Soo & Goh, 2013).

The safety and supportiveness of a specific learning environment are influenced by numerous different factors. Some of these factors vary from day to day while others tend to be more firmly established and stable, being based on habitual practices and behaviors. Nevertheless, even established, stable practices and behaviors are capable of alteration. Three types of practices and behaviors are of particular interest:

1. Teacher pedagogical practices and behaviors (expectations, wait time, etc.).
2. Intergroup climate (determined by intergroup attitudes and previously established group dynamics).
3. Situational factors (the social parameters of the communicative situation, the communicative task at hand, etc.) (Baran-Lucarz, 2014, p. 448).

Each of these three types will now be discussed.

## **Pedagogical Practices and Behaviors**

Obviously, the role of the teacher is pivotal in any learning environment. This role is perhaps the one factor that can potentially have the greatest influence for good or bad. In the adult ESL classroom,

[The] teacher is the director of the lesson determining learners' participation opportunities in classrooms.

This factor of opportunity is very important because intention must combine with opportunity to produce behaviour. Without such an opportunity, reticence will be encouraged as the learners' wish to communicate is not stimulated. (Lee & Ng, 2009, p. 303)

It falls upon the teacher to facilitate opportunities for fearful students to participate by carefully orchestrating those opportunities with "safety nets" in place. In an article titled "Reticence and Anxiety In Second Language Learning," Tsui (1996) discusses six different strategies that can be used by teachers in order to alleviate anxiety and help minimize reticent behavior:

1. Lengthening wait time.
2. Improving questioning technique.
3. Accepting a variety of answers.
4. Utilizing peer support and group work.
5. Focusing on content.
6. Establishing good relationships.

Several of these strategies deserve further explanation.

Longer wait time, or giving students more time to respond to teachers' questions, is frequently mentioned as an important strategy throughout the literature on reticence (Brinton, 2014; Jackson, 2002; Lee & Ng, 2009; Walsh, 2002). Brinton (2014) states, "Given that L2 learners require significantly more processing time to formulate their responses, allowing adequate wait time is essential" (p. 347). This need for processing time is evidenced in Hilleson's (1996) research findings. He documented the frustrated feelings of several students about trying to participate in English discussions, yet lagging behind:

Maki said, "By the time I want to speak and I have the sentences, the conversation is going on and the topic is changed. So I just quiet." In her diary Natsuko wrote, "There were many people so it was a bit difficult for me to speak out because while I was thinking what to say, other people spoke what I wanted to say." (p. 261)

Furthermore, when students are *pushed* to answer questions too quickly it unnerves them, stops their thinking "and suppress[es] their wish to answer questions" (Tsui, 1996, p. 152).

Teachers may also need to adjust their expectations of their students, not placing unrealistic demands on them

that exceed their present capacities. If students feel that their attempts to participate will not be validated in some way or another they "will remain silent rather than risk not measuring up to the teacher's expectation" (Tsui, 1996, p. 151).

Another strategy for overcoming reticence discussed by Tsui (1996) is that of utilizing peer support and group work. Other experts (Lee & Ng, 2009; Jackson, 2002) corroborate the advantages of using small groups to allow students to *rehearse* language while enjoying the support of their classmates. Lee and Ng (2009) suggest that teachers use a facilitator-oriented strategy (the teacher acting as a facilitator) to scaffold or support learners throughout student-to-student interactions, asserting that during these interactions passive or reticent learners' "motivation to participate may increase because of the peer support and negotiation of meaning they are engaged in" (p. 306).

Lastly, for a safe classroom environment to exist, at least some degree of trust and rapport must be built between the teacher and students. It is unlikely that students will take risks in front of a teacher if they do not trust that the teacher has their best interest in mind. When teachers take time to establish good relationships with their students, it will pay dividends in the long run.

Clearly, the teacher's pedagogical practices and behaviors can have a determinative impact on the learning environment and, by extension, the degree of reticence exhibited by students.

## **Intergroup Climate and Situational Factors/Variables**

The second and third of the three key factors that readily effect the degree of security felt by students in the classroom are (a) intergroup climate and (b) various situational factors/variables. The first factor, intergroup climate, has to do with the general attitudes and/or dynamics that exist within a group. Douglas stated that a group is a "resource pool that is greater in any given area than the resources possessed by any single member" (as cited in Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997, p. 67). Furthermore, success in the classroom often "depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (Stevick, 1980, p. 4). "A group has a 'life of its own,' that is, individuals in groups behave differently than they would outside the group" (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997, p. 68). Group mood can vary from day to day, but overall group attitudes tend to be established early on in the course. As Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) assert, "Within a short time, [groups establish] a social structure that will prevail for a long time" (p. 68). If this social structure is positive and supportive, conducive to the development of

L2 confidence, generally speaking if there is group cohesion, this will reinforce a feeling of safety and likely facilitate the participation of more reticent learners. Levine and Moreland point out that “members of a cohesive group are more likely than others to participate actively in conversations, engage in self-disclosure or collaborative narration” (Levine & Moreland, 1990, p. 604).

Disentangling intergroup climate from situational factors/variables may seem difficult, but these two factors are nonetheless quite different. That said, the latter will likely have a significant affect on the former as well as on the students as individuals within the group. The following quotation specifies several situational factors/variables that affect the psychological conditions that determine students’ willingness to communicate (degree of reticence):

The decision to communicate in an L2 at a particular moment is determined by three psychological conditions that result from the combination of a *few situational variables, such as topic, interlocutor, and conversational context* [emphasis added]. The psychological conditions include the feeling of security (shaped by the level of topic and interlocutor familiarity), excitement (related to the genuine interest of the speakers in the topic), and responsibility (referring to the need to obtain information when the topic was initiated by the speaker). (Baran-Lucarz, 2014, p. 449)

MacIntyre et al. (1998) posit that “anything that increases state anxiety will reduce one’s self-confidence, and, therefore one’s [willingness to communicate].” As noted above, *state anxiety* refers to momentary anxiety, which may be transient within a given situation. Its opposite would be *state-self confidence*, a momentary feeling of confidence distinct from trait-like self-confidence (which is more linked to personality). State-self confidence is very similar to state-perceived competence which “refers to the feeling that one has the capacity to communicate effectively at a particular moment” (p. 549). For example teachers ought to take care not to propel their students into unfamiliar situations or states with the expectation that they will communicate without inhibition. Under such circumstances and without adequate preparation, students’ state anxiety would probably increase considerably and the results could be disappointing and demotivating. To put it another way, “novel situations [can] be particularly detrimental to [a student’s willingness to communicate] because the speaker will be uncertain of his or her ability to meet the communicative demands present at that moment” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 549).

To summarize, anything a teacher can do to favorably adjust situational factors or prepare students to confront challenges will likely increase students’ state-self confidence and state-perceived competence. Additionally, teachers’ prompt attention to group-building early on in any given course will contribute to the establishment of a positive intergroup climate. Both of these efforts on the part of the teacher will significantly reinforce the general sense of security and safety within the classroom context and thereby encourage students to overcome reticence and be willing to communicate.

### Conclusion

Certainly, reticence is a significant challenge to be reckoned with—especially within the context of the adult ESL classroom. It is particularly problematic due to the nature of language acquisition, which is substantially encouraged by risk-taking and the frequent use of the target language. Indeed, repeated and sustained use of the new language is a precondition to full acquisition. Use begets mastery. By the same token, the absence of use begets stagnation and in some cases regression. Yet, the particular characteristics of the adult ESL classroom context constitute an environment in which speaking up may often be considered a “high-risk, low-gain” proposition. Of necessity, performing in the language concedes that mistakes will likely accompany that performance. Hence, “any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual’s self-concept as a competent communicator and [could] lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic” (Tsui, 1996, p. 156). Overcoming this naturally unfavorable state of affairs poses a unique problem for teachers of adult ESL.

Language teachers must strive to construct a secure classroom environment that will nurture learners’ second-language confidence and their positive self-perceptions related to their second-language identities. Constructing this secure environment is likely to optimize students’ willingness to communicate and reduce their tendencies toward reticence. Certain factors, over which teachers have varying degrees of control, are of particular concern in this effort. A teacher’s pedagogical practices and behaviors undoubtedly have a decisive influence on the learning environment. Teachers have full control over this category, and accordingly, they should take measures to maximize their positive influence.

Other important factors are intergroup climate and situational variables. Although teachers cannot control all aspects of intergroup climate, they must dedicate time and effort toward fostering a positive group dynamic

within the classroom insofar as is possible. Likewise, situational variables should be monitored and managed such that learners are placed in circumstances of minimal state anxiety. Teachers who manage all of these factors carefully will minimize their students' level of reticence and those learners will enjoy a more optimal context for English language development and acquisition.

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