

CAUSES OF THE FIRST –YEAR STUDENTS’ RETICENCE IN ENGLISH SPEAKING LESSONS AT NAMDINH UNIVERSITY OF NURSING

Pham Thi Hoang Ngan

Namdinh University of Nursing

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 09/3/2022	Students are required to be active in English language learning, especially speaking skills. It is always considered to be challenging to most students at all levels, including university students since there are many factors which may prevent them from English speaking in the class. This problem is known as “Reticence” which is a complex phenomenon existing in foreign language classrooms causing a sense of passivity for the students and frustration for the teachers. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate whether the students are willing to speak English or not as well as the factors that cause the reticence in English speaking lessons. The participants were five teachers and 80 nursing students in the first year at Namdinh University of Nursing with two levels enrolled in English course. Questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews, and class observations were used for collecting data. The results show that the main reasons of students’ reticence were low English proficiency, Vietnamese cultural beliefs, personality, as well as their motivation and some others such as difficult tasks, students’ lack of vocabulary, preparation and their laziness.
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KEYWORDS

Reticence
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Passive
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Speaking classes

NGUYÊN NHÂN CỦA SỰ DÈ DẶT, ÍT NÓI CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT ĐẠI HỌC ĐIỀU DƯỠNG NAM ĐỊNH TRONG GIỜ HỌC NÓI TIẾNG ANH

Phạm Thị Hoàng Ngân

Trường Đại học Điều dưỡng Nam Định

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 09/3/2022	Học sinh được yêu cầu phải tích cực trong khi học tiếng Anh, đặc biệt là kĩ năng nói. Tuy nhiên, kĩ năng nói luôn được xem như là kĩ năng khó khăn nhất của hầu hết người học ở tất cả các cấp học, bao gồm cả sinh viên đại học bởi vì có rất nhiều yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên trong lớp. Vấn đề này được biết đến là dè dặt, ít nói. Đó là một hiện tượng phức tạp tồn tại trong các lớp học ngoại ngữ gây ra cảm giác thụ động cho học sinh và làm cho giáo viên thất vọng, chán nản. Vì thế, bài viết này nhằm mục đích xác định xem sinh viên có sẵn sàng nói tiếng Anh trong giờ học nói hay không và tìm ra nguyên nhân dẫn đến việc dè dặt, ít nói của sinh viên. Tham gia nghiên cứu gồm năm giảng viên và 80 sinh viên điều dưỡng năm thứ nhất thuộc hai nhóm trình độ đang theo học môn tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Điều dưỡng Nam Định. Tác giả đã sử dụng bảng hỏi, phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc và quan sát để thu thập số liệu. Kết quả cho thấy các nguyên nhân chính dẫn đến sự dè dặt, ít nói của sinh viên là do trình độ tiếng Anh thấp, tín ngưỡng văn hóa Việt Nam, tính cách cũng như động cơ học tập và những yếu tố khác như bài khó, học sinh thiếu từ vựng, thiếu sự chuẩn bị bài và lười biếng.
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Động lực
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Email: phamhoangnganndun@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Nursing students at Namdinh University of Nursing are getting more and more opportunities to work overseas or at international hospitals in Vietnam. Thus, equipping good knowledge of English for them, especially speaking skills is really necessary. However, being able to speak English fluently is not easy because of students' reticence during speaking lessons. Reticence is a common problem in English speaking classrooms, especially in those with mainly Asian students including Vietnamese students. "Reticence in foreign language classes has been a challenge for both teachers and students" [1]. Reticence was identified by Keaten and Kelly [2] as a communicative problem with affective, cognitive and behavioral dimensions and due to the belief that it is better off remaining silent than risking of being foolish. In the context of this study, reticence is discussed in a specific situation that is English classroom. Reticence here belongs to the category of feelings of uneasiness, worry, nervousness and apprehension experienced by non-native speakers when speaking in a second or foreign language class. Besides, Chen [3] stated that students' reticence means that they are silent students or passive students who are uncommunicative and reserved; not revealing their thoughts or feelings readily in ESL classes; not volunteering anything more than necessary in oral participation. Students have often been observed to be quiet in language classrooms and not be willing to respond to teachers' questions or actively participate in classroom discussions.

Whatever problem it is, there must be causes and it is important to find the causes of the students' reticence so as to solve them. In the brief study of reticence by Li and Liu [4], possible causes of reticence in class were presented as the result from students' low esteem, cultural differences, avoiding conflict, communication apprehension, fear of being ridiculous when they inaccurately respond. Although these factors are found in all language skills, they are regularly cited in speaking classes most. With the help of self-reports in journals and interviews, Liu [5] found a range of factors contributing to the students' reticence such as low English proficiency, lack of familiarity with tasks, teaching style, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, incomprehensive input, Chinese cultural beliefs, personality, and Chinese educational system and anxiety. Among these factors, low English proficiency was the greatest contributor and cultural beliefs also played a major role. In the later research, these factors were also found in a case study by Liu, Zhang and Lu [6]. Since their study was carried out in a different context that was ESP poetry classroom, the findings revealed some more factors. The students' unfamiliarity with English poems, pressure and competition were the reasons that drove them reticent in class. Lack of preparation or under preparation, students' introversion and habit were also great contributors.

Having the same concern about students' reticence, Donald [7] pointed "It is important to note that reticence and the factors that cause it are complex issues. There is no definitive cause of reticence in the classroom, which makes the issue problematic for the practitioner when attempting to elicit more oral response from learners." By using filmed data, focus groups and stimulated recall interviews, the findings revealed that learners in the class appeared to be largely reticent when called upon to answer questions. Besides, the informants claimed that they came from a learning context where English was taught as an academic subject, rather than as a means of communication. Like Liu's findings, fear of making mistakes and lack of target language proficiency were found. However, the other factors that had the most impact on willingness to speak were error correction and the form that error correction took, extended waiting times as in the focus group and interviews.

In another research, Liu and Jackson [1] also investigated students' reticence in English language classrooms but at varied proficiency levels. The findings showed that proficiency in English affected students' willingness to communicate. In reflective journals, students also commented about their participation in various classroom activities. Moreover, from observation by teachers and researchers, teachers' challenging questions were the causes of students' reticence. Not many students actively responded to their teachers when their questions were too

difficult. Also relating to a teacher factor, Lee and Ng [8] stated that teacher interaction strategy was found to be determining students' reticence in classrooms. The video data showed that no students volunteered to answer questions and a possible reason for this was that instead of waiting long for the students' answers, teachers kept throwing the questions out. Donald [7] also said that the instructor was one of the variables that determined what would happen in class due to the position the instructor holds.

Although a growing number of studies on reticence have been conducted by many Asian researchers [1], [3], [5], [6], [8], there have been few extensive researches conducted in Vietnam. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the causes of reticence in English speaking lessons of the first year nursing students at Namdinh University of Nursing.

2. Methodology

The subjects of the study were five teachers of English with over 5-year experience and 80 freshmen majoring in nursing at Namdinh University of Nursing. 33 students in group 1 passed the test level A2 and 37 students in group 2 did not. In this study, qualitative action research with observation, semi-structured interview and the questionnaire survey in Vietnamese were used to get data for this study. However, not all students were interviewed. All 5 teachers and 15 students (8 in group 1 and 7 in group 2) were chosen randomly for the interviews.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Students' willingness to communication

In the questionnaire, students were asked whether they were willing to communicate in English or not, the students at the higher level generally desired to speak English in the classroom whereas most of the students in the lower group answered that they were not willing to communicate with others in the English speaking lessons.

Table 1. *Students' willingness to communicate*

Level	No. of participants	Willing to speak	Unwilling to speak	Not mention
Group 1	33	24 (73%)	9 (27%)	0 (0%)
Group 2	37	10 (37%)	22 (59 %)	5 (4%)

As can be seen from Table 1, the number of students in group 1 who were willing to speak English to others in the classrooms is higher than those who were not (respectively 73% and 27%). However, the results of group 1 were different from group 2. More students in group 2 were unwilling to speak than those who were willing to do so (59% and 37% respectively). This result is similar to the results we got from the interviews. Among 15 students (8 in group 1 and 7 in group 2) were asked about the same questions as in the questionnaire, more than half of them were willing to speak in English speaking lessons and mostly from group 1. It is the same in the interview with the teachers. The teachers said that most of the students in group 2 were unwilling to speak to others as well as participate in the other activities.

In general speaking, most of the students were not willing to speak in English class, especially the students who were not good at English. Previous study conducted by Liu [4] found that advanced-level students tended to be more active than their lower-level counterparts and in the study by Le Van Tuyen et al. [9], the finding showed that most of the students seemed to be reticent to speak English to the teacher as well as their classmates in class.

3.2. Causes of reticence in English Speaking lessons

In addition to find out what contributes to students' reticence in English speaking classes, both teachers and students were asked to answer the questionnaire about the causes of reticence in Speaking English lessons. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Causes of students' reticence in English speaking class

Causes	Group 1 33	Group 2 37	Teachers 5
Low English proficiency	16 (53.3%)	30 (81%)	4 (80%)
Vietnamese cultural beliefs	15 (49.5%)	20 (54.1%)	3 (60%)
Personality	16 (53.3%)	19 (51.4%)	2 (40%)
No interest in English	5 (16.7%)	10 (27%)	3 (60%)
Difficult task	7 (23.3%)	18 (48.6%)	0 (0%)
Lack of vocabulary	5 (16.7%)	20 (54.1%)	4 (80%)
Laziness, lack of preparation	8 (26.7%)	5 (15.5%)	2 (40%)

Among many factors, low English proficiency was most widely accepted ones (49.5%, 81% and 80% for group 1, group 2 students and teachers respectively). They also believed that lack of vocabulary in English was another reason which prevented them from speaking in the class (49.5%, 67.6% and 80% respectively). Vietnamese cultural beliefs played a major role in determining students' reticence in English Speaking class (53.3%, 54.1% and 60% for respectively) as well as personality (36.4%, 51.4% and 40% respectively). Laziness and lack of preparation (26.7%, 15.5% and 40% respectively) seemed to have fewer influences on students' reticence. While students in both groups thought difficult tasks were one of the factors causing their reticence (23.3% and 48.6% respectively), no teacher believed that.

The results got from questionnaires were quite the same ones from the interviews and observations. In the interviews, with the question of what caused your reticence most in English speaking class, most of the students in both group 1 and 2 answered that their poor English proficiency including their lack of vocabulary is the major factor. 13 of the students interviewed stated that they were worried about their English proficiency when they spoke English. They also tended to be silent because they felt unconfident about their grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Student 1 said: "I think my poor English made me feel afraid of speaking in front of the class." Students 7 stated that she really wanted to speak English but she thought her vocabulary was not enough to express her ideas in English. Many expressions like that were given by others. This view was also shared by the teachers as well. All of the teachers interviewed said that most of the students kept silent in class, especially the students with low English proficiency. They would say nothing when being asked to speak in pairs or groups. It was the same what the teachers wrote in their observation that students who were good at English seemed to be willing to speaking in the lessons while those who were not good seemed to be keep silent all the time. This finding is in line with those of some studies by Li and Liu [5] and Iyoung, Y. G., Clarry, S., and Eusabinus, B [10], in which the findings stated that low proficiency was one of the main reasons, which lead to reticence in English classrooms.

Besides, they also stated that Vietnamese cultural beliefs with the saying "silence is gold" made them afraid of speaking in front of the crowd. Modesty is considered one of the most important characteristics in Vietnamese culture. Students have been taught to be modest and do things rather than show off and talk about things since they were little children. Moreover, they are emphasized to respect the elderly as well as the superior. Therefore, teachers are often considered to be the figures of authority and others have to obey them. As a result, many Vietnamese students are reserved and modest, they do not like to express themselves and thus tend to keep quiet in class. Student 12 shared their opinions as follows: "In my opinion, it is because of my habit of many other classes. I have asked to keep silent in the classroom for many years, we rarely worked in pairs when we were at lower schools. Gradually, I am afraid of talking in class." Student 9 added: "If you are too active and volunteer to speak, you will be thought to be boasting and like to show off. Then people may not like you. Consequently, many of us will not say anything although we have knowledge about the topic." This finding seems to be like that in other ELT classes by Liu [5] and Chen [3].

Moreover, students' personality was one of the greatest factors contributing to their reticence. Like the data from the questionnaire, more than half of the students interviewed believed that their personality influenced their communication in the class. Student 1 said: "I feel shy when I am asked to express my opinions in front of the crowd." Others revealed: "I am not confident enough about my English speaking ability. I usually feel rather stressed every time I speak English in front of my teacher and my classmate." (student 5), whereas student 11 expressed as follows: "In my view, Vietnamese students tend to be reluctant to speak English in the classes due to their personality. They seem to be silent in the situations in which they are not forced to speak. Perhaps, they are unsociable, feel shy and fear of making mistakes and being laughed if they do it wrongly." Many of the students in the interview agreed that they kept quiet because they felt nervous when speaking. Obviously, anxiety made the students unwilling and afraid of speaking English in class. Fear of being laughed when making mistakes was another cause of their reticence as well as passivity in English speaking lessons. Student 3 said: "I am not good at pronunciation so I have a fear of making mistakes when speaking." Student 6 also added: "I do, too. I am afraid of being laughed when I speak something wrong." This finding is consistent with that of Liu [5] and Le et.al [9] as well as Iyong [10] revealing that a large number of students feel more anxious when answering questions or making presentation in front of the class.

In addition, low motivation was thought to be another cause for reticence. Some students said that they were motivated to get high marks in written tests so they were not motivated to speak English. In the interview, when the students were asked why they were not interested in speaking English, student 8 stated that "At lower schools, we never had English speaking tests so we were lazy to speak English in class. We paid much attention to written tests. Now we have an oral test but it is not so important. If we get high marks with the written tests, we can pass the subject." Student 14 added "I do not have enough motivation in learning English, especially speaking English because I am not going to work overseas, I will apply for a job in the local hospital. It means that I will never speak to foreigners." Gradually, they did not have interest as well as habit of speaking English. In verse, some students said that planning to go abroad for further study or working overseas in the future was the motivation which made them have more interest in English, especially speaking English in the class. Student 2 revealed "I want to work in international hospitals after graduating so I am trying to learn English. I always volunteer in English speaking lessons." This find is supported by the study conducted by Liu [5] showed that low motivation, though not explicitly identified by the students and teachers, was actually another cause for reticence.

Furthermore, nearly half of students in group 2 and over one fourth of students in group 1 believed that difficult task was one of the factors that made them hesitate to speak whereas no teacher agreed with that idea. Student 4 said about this problem as follows: "In my opinion, many topics in the course book are too difficult for us to understand. Therefore, they are hard for us to explain them in English." According to the teacher's observation, many students kept reticence in their English speaking lessons because they did not know what to say about the topic they were given due to their lack of knowledge and experience in many areas. In the interview, teacher 3 stated: "I think the speaking tasks in the course book are not too difficult for students. I often give clues and explain to them if the tasks are difficult." Then, teacher 1 added: "Sometimes, we let them prepare at home. However, they still keep silent in the next lesson. I think they are too lazy and lack preparation. Their knowledge of the topics is limited even in their native language." This finding seems to be in conformity with Le and Nguyen's study [9], they stated that the students were rarely willing to speak English in class because they found the contents in the textbook were difficult, not updated, and irrelevant to the Vietnamese context so they found it difficult to speak in English if they did not have preparation before attending the class.

4. Conclusion

Through the data collected from the questionnaires, it can be concluded that more than half of the students in the first year at Namdinh University of Nursing were reticent about speaking English. With other data from questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews as well as class observations, it can be claimed that the most prominent reasons for their silence in English classroom were due to their low proficiency, Vietnamese cultural beliefs, personality such as shyness, anxiety and motivation as well as difficult tasks related to their laziness and lack of preparation.

Students' reticence is the most frustrating one in ESL classes and it is considered to be a strong indicator of academic performance. It is said that reticence has a detrimental effect on students' confidence, self-esteem and level of participation. They suffer from mental blocks during free speaking activities, lack confidence and they are less able to self-edit and identify language errors, even more likely to skip class [4]. Therefore, while being aware of these negative effects of reticence in English speaking classrooms, teachers should intentionally encourage the reticent students to take different viewpoints or role play. On the other hand, students can work hard to improve their vocabulary and to be supportive of one another in English speaking classes. In the future the writer will conduct further study on this topic at Nam Dinh University of Nursing to investigate how to deal with the nursing students' reticence in English speaking classes.

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