Reluctance in EFL-speaking classrooms of adult learners at universities in Vietnam: Causes and Solutions

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Abstract: *Reluctance has drawn significant attention in English language teaching at educational institutions in Vietnam, particularly at universities. Most studies advocate that L2 students are reticent during speaking sessions regardless of their linguistic competency. After reviewing the theory of speaking as well as its characteristics in ESL classrooms, this paper seeks to investigate the challenges students encounter in ESL-speaking classrooms via findings from previous studies in Vietnam. The discussion of this paper includes reasons why Vietnamese learners tend to remain reticent and find it arduous to improve their speaking competence. Lastly, the paper will also propose some viable solutions for overcoming these difficulties and improving the English proficiency of students.*

Keywords: *Reluctance, ESL Classroom, L1, L2, English language teaching, Vietnamese language, non-English major student.*

1. Introduction

In today's modern technology, it is widely acknowledged that English proficiency has played a crucial role in many career prospects of any profession. Companies and organizations have invested significantly in English courses for their employees, serving the purpose of globalisation and automation. In educational settings, English courses have shifted from teacher-centred or grammar-based classrooms to student-oriented and communication-based classrooms. This teaching phenomenon, to a certain extent, especially in non-native English-speaking countries such as Vietnam, has demonstrated positive outcomes on the overall English competence of Vietnamese learners (Vo, Pham, & Ho, 2018). (1) A large number of undergraduates remain, nevertheless, unable to perform satisfactorily in speaking skills regardless of their excel in grammar or vocabulary. According to Littlewood's discovery (as cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2017), the major hindrances leading to the speaking reluctance of ESL students are fear of being wrong, lack of motivation, and teaching pedagogies. Hence, in the first part, this paper aims to explore the definition of speaking and determining factors associated with successful speaking outcomes. Then, the reasons for ESL student reluctance during speaking sessions will be discussed. Finally, suggestions for helping teachers tackle the problem of reluctance to use English (hereafter referred to as L2) in speaking courses will be discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of speaking and its characteristics.

Nunan (as cited in Trinh & Pham, 2021) stated that speaking is believed to be one of the most crucial skills to express personal perspectives and feelings. Indeed, speaking is not only regarded as a passive but also an active process of producing meaningful verbal exchanges among interlocutors (Bygate, as cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). In other words, speaking is a means of expressing opinions, information, and emotions among individuals during a conversation. Even though, coupled with listening skills, speaking skills are innate and developed gradually in different situational throughout childhood and adulthood stages, great speaking skills, especially for non-native languages, still require considerable effort and time due to the cultural diversities embedded in the target language (Riyaz and Mullick, as cited in Trinh & Pham, 2021).

Similar to Riyaz and Mullick's perspective, the characteristics of English speaking skills are determined by two major factors consisting of affective and cognitive factors. Particularly, affective factors are linked to learning motivation and confidence. Likewise, cognitive factors are related to the ability to "decode, pick up contextual clues, and build meaning". In other words, learners tend to be reluctant to speak out or participate in classroom activities when they are unsuccessful in achieving either cognitive or affective factors. Consequently, to help ESL learners overcome speaking reluctance in the classroom, including being apprehensive about making mistakes associated with L2 grammatical and oral accuracy, pronunciation, accent, and fluency, a

more comprehensive understanding regarding the root of reticence tendency in the speaking classroom is needed.

2.2. Reticence and contributing factors to reticence in the speaking classroom

Many researchers have come to an agreement that reticence in L2-speaking classrooms primarily stems from linguistic, educational, cultural, and personal attributes (Tsui, 1996; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Jackson, 2002a, 2002b; Liu, 2006b, as cited in Liu and Jackson, 2011). In the same vein, Liu and Jackson (2011) also believe that the anxiety syndrome from linguistic, cultural, as well as educational differences between L1 and L2 is the main determinant impeding the students' willingness to actively participate in the classroom.

Aside from linguistic incompetency, Li and Lui (as cited in Savaşçı, 2014) also highlighted that cultural differences, particularly, freedom of expression between Western and Eastern cultures, are the major culprit of the non-native students' reticency in L2 speaking classrooms. To be more specific, in Western cultures, students tend to be more proactive in raising their voices than Eastern peers. Indeed, with respect to Liu's research on the classroom involvement of Asian EFL learners (2005), it is apparent that a large number of Asian learners are unwilling to express their ideas in classroom settings primarily in accordance with the deep-root influence of the hierarchical structures in Eastern philosophies, in which teachers are well-respected and is believed to hold the most superior role in the classroom settings. Consequently, any behaviours such as questioning the teacher's knowledge, or pointing out the teacher's mistakes failing to save or protect the teacher's face or the teacher's status in the classroom would be forbidden (2005).

The last factor attributing to student reluctance is classroom practice. According to Mahdikhani, Soheilahamzehloo, and Maryamshayestefard (as cited in Ahmad, 2021), active participation is one of the most crucial elements leading to the success of the learners in a speaking classroom. Accordingly, the researcher divided the classroom practice into five dominant parts, namely preparation, contribution to discussions, group work, communication skills, and attendance. Likewise, in modern teaching philosophy, the most prominent method is believed to be the student-oriented approach, in which group presentations and collaborative discussion are the focal points of effective learning outcomes in classroom settings.

This teaching method would be beneficial to further facilitating as well as strengthening the student's background knowledge, independent thinking, and problem-solving skills of the matter at hand. (Sadeghi et al., as cited in Ahamd, 2021).

3. Discussion

In the majority of previous research studies, most results regarding the causes of speaking reluctance in L2 classrooms are linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical incompetency. These culprits are also listed in the context of Vietnamese-speaking classrooms. Firstly, in terms of linguistic incompetency, Trinh and Pham (2021) noticed that lacking enough vocabulary made some respondents talk less got the highest percentage among other sections. Seventeen students between agree and strongly agree (35.7% - 25.0%), believe that their weakness in having an adequate reservoir of vocabulary represents a barrier for them to speak in a second language. Indeed, Liu (2005) also stated that a lack of vocabulary was one of the reasons behind her student's reticence

Secondly, in relation to cultural incompetency, Xuan (2014) found in their study that less than 50 persons think the teacher does not encourage them to speak and the teacher's comments intimidate them. Meanwhile, teachers' lack of control over speaking activities was positively agreed by 50 agree (35.7%) and 20 strongly agree (14.3%). Nevertheless, some teachers might need to acquire a sense of control over speaking activities. If the teachers let some students speak without defining time boundaries, they will continue elaborately exceeding their time and others' opportunity to speak. Certainly, losing control in that situation will lead some students to feel that their participation is unworthy or feel that they will not have the turn to speak as others had and undoubtedly, they will be reticent. Indeed, in Thanh's research (2011), while linguistic problems were prominent in the responses, the influence of students' issues with turn-taking was also significant in terms of cultural values.

Thirdly, with regard to pedagogical incompetency, the prominent culturally oriented reason cited by learners was a lack of confidence in self-expression (Hien & Loan, 2018). These students lack confidence in their level of English, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and also in their own ideas. Interestingly, their lack of confidence stems from the presence of other students or the classroom atmosphere. They seem to be silent when they are not sure whether their answers are right or if their ideas differ from those of

others (2018). This involves a Vietnamese cultural norm, "tập thể" or 'groupism': the opinion of a group is valued more highly than that of the individual (Thanh, 2011). There are students who think they should provide answers which match the ideas of their peers in order to maintain group harmony. Thus, some students simply may not enjoy being the centre 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 (2011).

4. Conclusion

This paper has discussed some primary challenges of speaking English that Vietnamese adult students at a university encounter including the lack of communicative competence and communicative events, the difficulty of taking advantage of cultural capital and the mismatch between self-ascribing as legitimate and illegitimate speakers of English. Inadequate communicative competence originates from the limitation of linguistic, phonological, discourse and sociocultural knowledge of the participants (Trinh & Pham, 2011). The insufficiency of English communities emanates from both objective and subjective causes. It is objective in the sense that the participants studying English in an EFL context in which everyone around them shares the same linguistic background and hardly uses English for real-life communication. It is subjective because some participants are unable to find the relationship among themselves, resulting in their successful achievement of English communication (2011). Moreover, cultural capital which is not maximally exploited due to their lack of communicative competence contributes to further challenges that the students face. Finally, it is due to the communicative incompetence, unavailability of English communities of practice and incomplete exploitation of cultural capital that brings about the participants' accomplishments as silent and non-native speakers of English (2011).

Another purpose of the study is to offer some recommendations towards promoting programs to enhance students' speaking fluency. As noted above, many adult students are fearful of others' evaluations of their abilities—especially in the classroom. They consider 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, as cited in Steven & Lynn, 2015). 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 (Soo & Goh, 2013, as cited in Steven & Lynn, 2015). The second recommendation might fall upon the role of the teacher. The teacher role would play a pivotal role in facilitating opportunities for fearful students to participate by carefully orchestrating those opportunities with "safety nets" in place.

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