LEARNING HOW TO SPEAK: RETICENCE IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

SHANE DONALD

ABSTRACT

Student reticence in the English as a second language classroom is a phenomenon that occurs in all contexts, regardless of setting. This paper examines the issue of reticence from the perspective of both teacher and learner, taking into consideration the problematic nature of the condition; there are no unambiguous causes of reticence (Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Chaudron, 1988; Tsui, 1996). Rather, a range of factors such as cultural beliefs regarding learning and the role of the teacher, fear of being misunderstood on the part of the learner and the attendant fear of losing face, as well as comprehensibility of input all play a role in fostering learner reticence in the ESL classroom. A point of difference is the attention given to learners' perspectives on what causes reticence in terms of the practices employed by teachers. Modification to practices such as error correction and extended wait-time are suggested that may allow the practitioner to promote oral communication on the part of learners in the classroom.

Keywords: *reticence, error correction, extended wait-time, changes to practice*

1. Introduction

Tsou (2005, p.46) notes that of the four skills that make up language proficiency, oral participation is the most observable phenomenon in the classroom. Therefore, when students fail to participate in class in the language being taught (hereafter referred to as the target language), it can be generally accepted that the

practitioner is likely to feel that there is a deficiency either in the learners or in their practice. However, the causes of reticence in learners of English as a second or other language cannot be generalized or simplified as being applicable to all learners. A range of variables beyond low levels of English proficiency in learners contributes to this condition and so shape the form interaction takes in the classroom. Reluctance to speak in class has been linked by researchers (Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Chaudron, 1988; Tsui, 1996) to a variety of factors including cultural beliefs regarding communication and the role of the teacher and learner, educational background, fear of being unable to be understood, loss of face, the expectations of the instructor and the comprehensibility of input provided by the instructor. These factors may not operate in isolation and as van Worde (2003, p.5) affirms, are likely to be intertwined.

Establishing an unambiguous relationship between reticence and language acquisition is also problematic due to the emic nature of the condition; learners may internalize the reasons they have for not speaking in class and practitioners are the constructors of the input learners receive, via lesson plans, teaching material and the language used for instruction. Therefore, for practitioners to gain a greater understanding of the conditions that contribute to reticence in the learners in their charge, it is necessary to gain an etic perspective and investigate the problem from the point of view of learners as well as to evaluate their own practice as the constructor of that practice. This paper does not intend to provide any definitive solution to the problem of learner reticence in the ESL classroom; rather this paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of why reticence occurs in the classroom and also seeks to examine the wider implications to practice and pedagogical strategies employed by instructors when encountering learner reticence in the classroom.

As noted by Horwitz et al (1986) and Allwright and Bailey (1991) learning another language is a process that is inherently problematic. Language is the means used to communicate with others and so forms a large part of a person's individual and cultural identity. As Horwitz et al (1986, p.128) put it: "Any performance in L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator".

This issue of competence is important when examining the issue of reticence in the ESL classroom. A native speaker of a language will feel confident that they will be understood and that others will accept their contribution. In the classroom native English-speaking practitioners are likely to have an expectation that the target language will be used for communication and interaction in class. However, this belief often fails to take into account the fact that instructors are expecting learners to communicate in the target language before fluency has been achieved and so feel a sense of risk when offering a verbal contribution.

The teacher may also be perceived as the "expert" in class and as such is expected to transmit knowledge to the learner, rather than have the learner struggle to construct learning on their own. In this context, the instructor is not a figure to be questioned or interacted with. If the instructor is also a native speaker of the target language, there may also be a perception from the learner that any opinion or utterance offered in class is being evaluated for correctness of form. This notion of evaluation is also problematic due to the nature of language learning. If the target language is both "the vehicle and object of instruction" (Seedhouse, 2004), then the perception the learner holds may be that the process of assessment is ongoing; as distinct from other academic subjects, language learners acquire proficiency in the subject being studied as they are exposed to the language while being instructed in it,

and also from using the language. Horwitz et al (1986) also note that there may be a feeling in the learner that in-class performance is constantly being monitored. Learners may feel reluctant to interact with the teacher of the target language, perceiving that they are being judged and evaluated at all stages during the process of learning to communicate in that language.

Johnson (1997) notes that the inability of learners to use the target language in class to interact with either the instructor or classmates may also engender in the instructor false assumptions regarding the ability of the learner, particularly if the instructor is a native speaker of the target language. If a learner does not participate in discussion or verbally share ideas, this may cause the instructor to form inaccurate views regarding the learner's abilities. The instructor may assume the learner has no aptitude for the language or lacks the desire to improve. The instructor may then focus more time and effort on learners who appear better able to use the target language which may cause some reticent learners to believe that it is not worthwhile to contribute in class.

2. Methodology

Three forms of data collection were employed. These were filmed data from a Taiwanese university English conversation class, a focus group consisting of English as a second language learners from differing contexts and stimulated recall interviews with the members of the focus group. The filmed data was used to evaluate strategies practitioners employ in relation to pedagogical goals to promote oral participation in class. The responses elicited within the focus group were filmed and recorded by the researcher to ensure accuracy and then transcribed verbatim by the researcher and the

transcript was analysed according to categories developed from the questions asked during the focus group. From the focus group the aim was to discover learner perspectives on the factors that promote reticence, which would then be examined in greater detail in the stimulated recall interviews. These forms of data were selected to provide a "qualitative narrative" (von Worde, 2003) that would develop from the analysis of the data and so lead to a greater awareness of the factors that lead to reticence in speakers of English as a second or other language and the implications this holds for practitioners.

2.1 Filmed Data of a University Conversation Class in Taiwan

A segment of filmed data from a conversation class in a Taiwanese university classroom was analysed. Attention was paid to the strategies used by the instructor to elicit and develop oral participation in class. The instructor in question also responded to a set of questions sent by email regarding the pedagogical goals that informed classroom instruction and the strategies employed to elicit verbal responses from students.

2.2 Focus Group

Originally, this researcher planned to use Horwitz's (1986) questionnaire on anxiety in language learning as a means of collecting data but this approach was abandoned. This was because, as Nunan (1991, p.62) states:

> The problem with questionnaires is that, having developed our categories and questions before collecting the data, we may predetermine, to a large extent, what we actually find.

In other words, questionnaires are limited in scope and tend to supply "bland" data that does not examine the issue being researched in depth. Therefore, a focus group

was chosen as a means of collecting richer data. The advantage provided by a focus group is that it allows participants to present personal reflections and comments that a survey is not capable of.

2.3 Stimulated Recall Interviews

After the focus group was conducted, stimulated recall interviews were held with the focus group respondents. This method of data collection was chosen because it would allow a more considered and evaluative response from respondents as to the feedback given in the focus group and would allow the researcher to go deeper into the thought processes that informed the responses given in the focus group. This allies with Nunan's belief that interviews allow the researcher to investigate a series of issues in a thorough manner (Nunan, 1991).

2.4 Research Participants

The students who appeared in the filmed excerpt of a university conversation class in southern Taiwan are a group of non-English majors. Permission for the class to be filmed was given by the instructor. The participants in the focus group conducted by this researcher are both Educational and Applied Linguistics students at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. One informant is from Kuwait and gained his Bachelor and Master's degrees from the United States and is now pursuing an IPhD degree and will be referred to hereafter as Informant A. The other is from Macau and is currently engaged in M.A studies and will hereafter be referred to as Informant B. The participants were volunteers and had signed consent forms for their data to be used in this study.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Filmed Excerpt from a Taiwanese University Conversation Class

The first form of data under analysis is a filmed excerpt from an Advanced English Conversation class at a National University in southern Taiwan. It must be emphasized that the conclusions drawn regarding interaction and the efficacy of teacher strategies employed in this excerpt refer to this excerpt only and are not intended to be judgements on the instructor's practice as a language teacher. The instructor of the class estimates that two thirds of the class have passed the elementary level of Taiwan's General English Proficiency Test, giving them an English level roughly equivalent to Taiwanese junior high school students. The lesson in question was taken from *Touchstone 2*. The instructor stated by email that his pedagogical goals in the class are three-fold; to increase students' ability in listening and speaking, to give learners a broader cultural aspect and to make students feel free to speak English in daily life (Hsu, 2009). When evaluating the filmed data the researcher possessed this information and so evaluated the success of the instructor's pedagogical strategies using Walsh's SETT (Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk) framework, a methodology that allows practitioners to examine their own use of language in order to enhance the quality of interaction with learners within the classroom; of particular interest was whether or not what Walsh (2006) calls "mode convergence" was taking place. That is, if pedagogic goals and the language used matched.

The theme of the lesson being taught was "Festivals and Things". The excerpt that was recorded begins with preparation for listening comprehension. The instructor is in managerial mode, meaning that he is in the process of introducing a task; he is

preparing learners for a listening activity and is controlling turn allocation; learners are given no impetus to interact with each other and the instructor's pedagogic goal is clearly to focus learners on answering the questions in the text book. As typified in the managerial mode, the instructor expresses his instructions in an extended turn. Therefore, the pedagogic goal and the language employed are in convergence.

1   T.   OK for you to answer, like for number 1. Is Tina going to the festival this weekend? OK, I wonder, I wonder whether Tina is going to the festival? OK, in the conversation, actually fiesta is kind of festival. OK, it's a kind of festival. So in the conversation you will hear some speaker use the word fiesta to describe the kind of festival. So I want to know is Tina going to the fiesta? I mean to the festival this weekend? And number two, what happened during the festival? OK, I want to know is there...there's going to be a lot of something. Please tell me there's going to be something. And everybody do something. And thirdly what do kids dress like? Right, first of all there are hundreds of little kids....and number four, is the woman into parades? You know what is parades right? OK, so is she into parade, right? If we say someone is into something, what does it mean? I am into bananas. Right, what does it mean? OK, you are into something which means that you like or enjoy something. And what can Tina also get in the fiesta, in this kind of festival, what can Tina also get? Please write it down, please write it down, the answers.

The instructor asks a series of display questions as is typical in this mode. The instructor clarifies that "fiesta" and "festival" possess a similar meaning, which is in keeping with his statement that he wishes to broaden his learners' cultural awareness, another signifier of mode convergence.

In preparing for the listening section, no interaction with learners takes place, as the instructor appears to be in "managerial mode" (Walsh, 2006) and this means that the interaction in the class at this moment is teacher-fronted because the instructor is setting up the learning task.

When it comes time to check the learners' comprehension and understanding of

the questions asked in the text, the instructor tends to use the IRF structure; initiation, response and feedback.

2	T.	Right, OK so let's give it a shot. For example, number one, do you think Tina is going to the fiesta this weekend? Maybe because she used one kind of expression, she used it depends. So she says it depends, OK, means maybe. I don't know, yeah, OK, So number one, yes, it depends, maybe she will go, maybe she will not go. That's right. So hello number two, what happened during the fiesta, what's happened during the festival? It's lots of what, anyone?
3	L1.	Parades.
4	T.	It's a lot of parades. OK, there is going to be a lot of parade. Right. And everybody, what?
5	L2.	They dress up.
6	T.	OK, can you answer in complete sentence? Everybody what happened during the festival? Everybody...?
7	Ls.	Everybody dressed up.
8	T.	Everybody dress up in...dress in costumes right? OK they dress in special costumes in the parade.

However, with regards to the first question in line 1, "Is Tina going to the festival…?" the instructor asks for a contribution from learners and then answers the question himself, providing minimal wait time for learners. The answer to the question is "It depends" and the instructor spends a large amount of time explaining what this expression means. It is possible that he felt learners would not be familiar with this expression and so chose to explain this concept for his learners. He extends the learner's turn in line 4 by remarking that "It's a lot of parades".

He also asks the learners in line 4: "And everybody what...?". A learner supplies the answer in line 5 that "They dress up". The instructor encourages the learner to respond in a complete sentence, which he is unable to do. The answer the instructor is looking for is given by him in line 8 "Everybody dresses up in…costumes". This instructor prompts the learners in line 8, saying (they) "dress in in..." but upon receiving no answer fills in the gap himself.

In this excerpt a large amount of silence occurs when the instructor asks learners for answer to these display questions. If the silence is extended beyond a period of three seconds, the instructor fills in the silence himself, answering his own questions. This is in keeping with Tsui's (1996, p153) belief that instructors will identify swift responses on the part of learners as being an indicator of good teaching. The instructor also spends part of the excerpt attempting to correct pronunciation, an example of "interactive decision making" (Walsh, 2006) to focus on error correction. However, this shift in pedagogical focus (to direct error correction) means that the learner fails to continue to use the target language.

40 T.   Doesn't, doesn't, OK, we don't say doesn't. We say doesn't right,
         OK, doesn't. She doesn't like parade because she say I'm not big
         on parade. She is not very interesting in parade right?

The instructor states that one of his pedagogical goals is to "make students feel free to speak English in daily life". However, it can be argued that the strategies employed by the practitioner in this excerpt are limiting in this regard; the instructor is in managerial mode for almost the entire excerpt and asks a range of display questions almost exclusively. The instructor provides almost no wait time for learners to answer the questions that are asked. While "mode convergence" is generally taking place in this excerpt, the instructor's language does not precisely match his larger teaching goal, that is, getting learners to use the target language in daily life. The learners in this class appear to be largely reticent when called upon to answer questions.

4. Focus Group and Stimulated Recall Interviews

What emerged from this data was a delineation of the attitudes and sensibilities that learners of English as a second or other language bring to the classroom and the

impact the instructor's classroom practice has upon learners' willingness to use the target language in class. Both informants stated that they came from a learning context where English was taught as an academic subject, rather than as a means of communication. In the classroom the pedagogical focus was on reading, writing and listening, with test scores being the criteria by which effective teaching and learning were evaluated. The factors that had the most impact on willingness to speak were fear of making mistakes, error correction and the form that error correction took, extended wait-time, and the effectiveness of group work in overcoming reticence.

4.1 Fear of Making Mistakes

The issue of being afraid to speak in class for fear of making mistakes was of concern for both informants. Informant B stated that when she was in primary school:

> the teacher ask me a question and I raise up my hand and I answer it by mistake because I misunderstand the question and the stu..., the teacher just say oh it's not the correct answer, ask somebody to say that, oh he is correct so why can't you answer in the same way?

This statement accords with Horwitz et al's (1986, p. 127) view that "learners are expected to communicate in the target language before having gained fluency in the language".

This example also illustrates the reluctance learners have to contribute in the target language when they feel their language proficiency is lacking. Informant B encapsulated the problem by saying that even to the present day, "I have to make sure my answer is 100% correct" before she will even consider volunteering a response in class.

4.2 Error Correction

Another issue to emerge from the focus group was error correction, specifically the form of error correction that would lessen distress in the learner. Informant A suggested that:

> if it's (an error) corrected in a manner that's really encouraging, and I feel it's not, you know, um not offensive, I will think it's OK, but if it's really, you know, echoing my mistakes, making everybody listen that, you know, and ah, that's really ah, something that bothers me.

Both respondents felt that error correction has its place in the classroom but that the manner in which the instructor corrects errors is of vital importance in easing the pressure learners feel when being corrected. Here we can see that direct repair, when done in a harsh way militates against students using the target language. Error correction should be focused on reducing defensiveness on the part of the learner (Horwitz et al, 1986).

4.3 Extended Wait Time

When asked if wait time was an effective method of allaying student reticence to use the target language to answer questions in class, informant B expressed belief in extended wait time but did not feel that it was sufficient on its own. She agreed that it gave learners time to rehearse their answers but in the extract below, taken from the focus group she said:

> If I don't know the answer I really want to get the teacher's help and if they just extend the wait-time I will feel more nervous because all the people are looking at me.

This means that she wished to be given examples of the type of response the teacher was expecting. Informant A also stated that wait time may not be the most effective pedagogical strategy for allaying student distress:

> I think it's a useful strategy to a certain extent, um that depends how long is the waiting time, um because if it's too long it will be uncomfortable.

Therefore, it emerges that extended wait time does not always allow for learners to rehearse verbal responses with a feeling of ease due to having time to prepare.

4.4 Small Group Discussion (Exploratory Talk)

Both informants stated that discussion in a small group was of benefit to them when learning English. Informant A said that:

> you can speak, you can can listen to others clearly, you can you know, discuss, you can agree, disagree and so on.

This tallies with the belief that group work will allow learners to offer a contribution in a way that will feel less threatening to self-esteem than having to speak in front of the instructor or the class. Learners can rehearse what they will say in an environment of greater security. Informant B values group work because:

> we can discuss and come up with one answer...because for maybe, maybe I misunderstand the questions so if we work together we can come out ah sensible answer I think

5. Implications for Practitioners/Changes to Practice

Reticence on the part of the learner is largely determined by the pedagogical strategies adopted by the instructor, though this is not the sole factor that leads to reticence. To encourage students to speak in class the instructor must have the intention to let learners speak and also provide the opportunity for learners to do so (Lee and Ng 2009). However, this must also be supported by strategies that will allow the learner to feel that they are able to speak in class.

In this section, the researcher will refer to suggestions made by the focus group

members, as well as literature on the subject. In the focus group, informant B mentioned that extended wait time would make her less likely to offer a contribution in class, believing that she was the focus of her classmates' attention. One strategy that may be employed to overcome this is "delayed response"; asking a different question of another learner while the previous learner attempts to come up with an answer will lead to a shift in focus on the part of the classmates.

Another method that may prove effective is to allow learners to work in small groups when attempting to answer a question. Informant B from the focus group stated that she found this form of interaction more suitable for her learning style. Research has found that small group allow learners to practice critical thinking and questioning skills with classmates in a less stressful environment than when interacting with the instructor; this can lead to an increased feeling of competence on the part of the learner, so facilitating willingness to participate orally in class (Johnson, 1997).

Error correction is another issue that emerged in the focus group and interviews. Both informants stated that the form of error correction was at issue, rather than error correction itself. Research such as that carried out by von Worde (2003) has found that the form of error correction that reduces learners' fear of losing face is modelling of the correct response, rather than declaring that an utterance is incorrect.

Karen Johnson (1995, p155) has stated that making classroom events predictable and accepting all contributions will also facilitate interaction with learners in class. For this researcher, this position is problematic because making events predictable, in terms of the tasks set for students in class or the order in which tasks

are set in class could lead to boredom on the part of the learner. Instead making classroom expectations predictable regarding involvement in class is more practical and achievable. With regard to accepting all contributions, it would be more effective to model the form of the contribution desired and to focus on the content of learner contributions rather than the form of contribution to lessen learner anxiety about contributing in class.

One further factor that may promote interaction in the language classroom is the teacher. The instructor is one of the variables that determines what will happen in class due to the position the instructor holds; the one who determines the content of the class, the topics discussed and who can speak and when (Walsh as cited in Lee and Ng, 2009, p2). The relationship that the instructor builds with the learner will go some way towards influencing the interaction that takes place in the classroom and creating an atmosphere conducive to interacting in the target language. Research has shown that students are more willing to speak in class when the instructor makes the class environment one of interest and engagement, which will then lessen learner anxiety. The informants in van Worde's (2003, p7) study stated that if the instructor "made it fun to like learning", then learners were more willing to speak in class.

Tsui (1996, p161) also argues that referential questions may have a role to play in engaging learners in the class. Referential questions can elicit more complex responses than display questions which have one correct answer, though it must be noted that in Tsui's study as well as in Lee and Ng's paper that referential questions did not elicit significantly longer contributions from learners. This may be related to the issue of input provided by the instructor. If it is too complex, input will need to be

modified in order to make it comprehensible for the learner.

6. Conclusion

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. Rather, a range of factors bring reticence into play. It is vital to offer learners the opportunity to speak in class and to have the intention to allow learners to do so. Other factors such as pedagogical strategies to create greater willingness on the part of the learner to orally participate in class can be utilized, such as modelling language forms rather than directly correcting errors, delayed response as an alternative to extended wait time, allowing for small group discussion rather than asking learners to immediately speak in class and recasting the language used in class in order to make input more comprehensible for learners are methods that may create in learners willingness to speak. However, it must be noted that teaching is an imprecise art and that not all of the above strategies will be effective in consistently engaging learners to communicate in the target language in the ESL classroom in all contexts. As Johnson (1997, p.48) notes, "teachers can vary their classroom practices but they cannot hope to conduct the class in a way that is always comfortable all students all of the time". Therefore, the instruction offered by the teacher cannot rely on these strategies alone; the instructor must be willing to research what goes on in the classroom where they teach, in order to understand the learners in their charge and the factors that may lead those learners to be unwilling to communicate in class. The goal for the instructor must be to make practice more effective and to help learners feel better able to use the target language for communication by investigating their practice

and its effect upon learners.

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About the author

Shane Donald teaches English as a Foreign Language in Taiwan and is currently enrolled as an IPhD student of Educational and Applied Linguistics at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Correspondence: shane.donald@newcastle.ac.uk