



# AN INSIGHT INTO SOURCES OF RETICENCE IN EFL CLASSROOMS

## CÁI NHÌN THẤU ĐÁO VỀ NGUYÊN NHÂN CỦA SỰ IM LẶNG TRONG CÁC LỚP HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper presents an insight into students' reticence considered a problematic agent faced by most EFL/ESL teachers in Asian educational settings based on empirical evidence. With the hope of getting reliable data, a mixed methodology is employed to investigate the origin of this phenomenon and the application of teachers' practices. Non-English majors coming from four General English classes and twelve experienced lecturers at a provincial university are willing to participate in answering a questionnaire and a ten-question interview. The results show that sources of reticence relate to cultural and educational matters and mainly arise from student and lecturer factors. Consequently, the research provides feedback to the current context of Vietnamese universities where students' lack of interaction is complained and de-evaluated. This paper hopes to contribute practical teaching approaches to help teachers of the same interests overcome this obstacle and reach the communicative purposes in teaching and learning English.

**KEYWORDS.** *reticence, student factor, teacher factor, interaction*

**TÓM TẮT.** Nghiên cứu này trình bày một cái nhìn sâu sắc về sự im lặng của sinh viên, được coi là một tác nhân rắc rối mà hầu hết các giáo viên dạy tiếng Anh là ngôn ngữ thứ hai hoặc tiếng nước ngoài phải đối mặt trong môi trường giáo dục châu Á dựa trên bằng chứng thực nghiệm. Với hy vọng có được dữ liệu đáng tin cậy, phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp được sử dụng để điều tra nguồn gốc của hiện tượng này và đưa ra các phương pháp thực hành giảng dạy của giáo viên. Để thực hiện nghiên cứu, các sinh viên không chuyên Anh tại một trường đại học ở tỉnh sẵn sàng tham gia trả lời một bảng câu hỏi cùng với mười giảng viên tiếng Anh đã tiến hành trả lời một cuộc phỏng vấn với mười câu hỏi. Kết quả cho thấy các nguyên nhân của vấn đề có liên quan đến các văn hóa và giáo dục và chủ yếu phát sinh từ cả hai phía, sinh viên và giảng viên. Do đó, nghiên cứu này cung cấp thông tin phản hồi cho bối cảnh hiện tại của các trường đại học Việt Nam, nơi sinh viên thiếu sự tương tác bị phàn nàn và không được đánh giá cao. Bài viết này cũng hy vọng sẽ đóng góp các phương pháp giảng dạy thực tế để giúp các giáo viên có cùng sở thích vượt qua trở ngại này và đạt được các mục đích giao tiếp của sinh viên trong học tập và giảng dạy tiếng Anh.

**TỪ KHOÁ.** *sự im lặng, yếu tố sinh viên, yếu tố giáo viên, tương tác*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In traditional classes, EFL teaching and learning aim at imparting structural knowledge of the target language to learners in a passive environment. In fact, in today's modern language classes, they are inspired to acquire communicative inputs to perform their productive skills both inside and outside their institutional contexts. Therefore, it requires interpersonal interactions between instructors and learners and among learners themselves who must become active participants in every class session to reach the pedagogical goal in modern time.

Since most of the Vietnamese learners have Asian stereotype, they tend to keep silent in EFL classes. On the one hand, reticence is often used as 'thinking time' for them to choose the right word or phrase before producing an utterance in class; or even reticence is truly a good means to nurture cognitive thinking on reasoning issues. On the other hand, reticence can be frustrating, counterproductive, and problematic as learners remain reticent all the time even when being asked simple questions by their instructors. This affects the quality of learners' participation and performance, but most importantly, the communicative purposes. This paper plays a constructive role in EFL teaching and learning sources since it attempts to discover the significant aspects of reticence affecting the effectiveness in English classes. In this respect, this study selects four EFL classes with all of the subjects coming from technical faculties, and twelve teachers to gather data through a

questionnaire and interviews. In light of the findings, the study enables instructors to flexibly employ scientific teaching methods to encourage learners' willingness to speak regularly and actively. The first part of this study aims to reflect the sources of Vietnamese students' reticence in the classroom. The remainder suggests some implications concerning reticence solutions for educators.

### 2. CONTENT

#### 2.1. Literature Review

##### Definition of terms

Myriad studies have been conducted to interpret the concepts of reticence. It refers to "the rhetorical canons of invention, disposition, style, delivery, and memory" (Phillips, 1991, p. 70). However, reticence is significantly a communication problem with "cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions" (Keaten & Kelly 2000, p. 168). More important, reticence is considered as negative since it represents "the omission of something positive" (Liu, 2001, p. 191).

In certain contexts, the reticent tend to keep silent rather than to take risks when interacting to disguise their

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foolishness. Li and Liu (2011) argue that the reticent tend to avoid interaction in social and public contexts, particularly the novel circumstances in which the potential for negative evaluation exist. Mousapour and Nabavizadeh (2012) define that “reticence refers to the situation in which students do not speak the language (i.e., English) voluntarily, either initiating questions or volunteering to offer answers” (p.82).

From these viewpoints, it can be inferred that reticence is defined under the social and cultural aspects as problematic anxiety that inhibits learners’ activeness and willingness, especially in educational contexts.

### **Causes of reticence**

#### **Learners’ perspectives**

Previous studies using various methods from interviews and observations to journals assert that reticence in Asian classrooms results from different aspects of learners’ attitudes and competence. According to Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996), Flowerdew and Millar (2000), and Liu (2005), many learners are reluctant to voice their ideas due to their passive learning styles, fear of losing face, incomprehensible inputs, low awareness of lesson preparation, incompetence to acquire L2, and lack of interest. In addition, Strahan (2008) emphasizes that many learners fail to readily take risks in language learning, so they keep quiet and wait for finishing time in Chinese classes. All of these influential variables are also known as “anxiety” factors which lead to learners’ passivity in communicative contexts.

In a case study at a top Chinese university, Liu (2011) conducts his study with 93 non-majored freshmen coming from different provinces within 14 weeks of the first semester. He justifies that reticence comes from “cultural beliefs, personality, and the educational system” (p.129). In this country, even elite learners with good L2 competence hesitate to contribute their ideas to avoid being considered “showing-off” and value modesty as a standard cultural measurement. Additionally, introverted Asian learners are too timid to volunteer to speak in public or work in groups; others prefer thinking to speaking out loud. In L2 classrooms, they form a habit of waiting for their teachers to call their names and allow them to speak.

Similarly, a recent study conducted by Bao (2013) examines influential variables in which “students’ need and interest are the first factors that govern participation.” He finds that activities which hinder motivation include rote learning and repetition of information without analysis or comprehension (p. 7). This finding implies that learners are aware of content nature and able to evaluate whether an activity is interactive or not. Consequently, reticence is a complex issue that does not merely derive from the learners; therefore, it poses an urgent question about teachers’ role in affecting this problem.

#### **Instructors’ perspectives**

Research on the influential factors mentions teachers’ number one role in facilitating classroom activities. According to Riasati (2012), sources of reticence derive from task type, teacher’s role, class atmosphere, grading of speech (p. 1294). A list of problematic teaching methodology is mentioned as proved allegations in Bao’s 2013 study. Myriad variables include “teachers’ marks, compliments and recognition, teachers’ undesirable personality and behaviour, teachers’ lecturing mode, teachers’ inability to

raise effective questions, referential questions, convergent questions, divergent questions and so on (p. 8). These issues are involved in instructional strategies and settings. Clearly, teachers are subject to constraints of timed schedules, curricula force, the pressure of imparting knowledge from textbooks, and loads of test requirements; they have to harmonize professional tasks, professional styles, and professional strategies to ensure their learners’ active participation and competence.

In his study, Kiasi & Hemmati (2014) also emphasizes the indispensable influential mode of IRF (p. 96). This pattern restricts the flexible and dynamic feature of classroom interactions. In most Asian institutional contexts, teachers determine discourse hierarchy; and teachers’ authority and dominance over students’ speech and mark evaluation create unnecessary pressure and hinder students’ eagerness to utter their contribution. If teaching methods provide more time for teacher-talk than student-talk, the lessons are not effective.

In two other studies, Syed (2015, p. 223) and Rodríguez & Arellano (2018, p. 12) mention the meaningful interactions between teachers and students. They argue that teachers’ using 100 percent L2 in every classroom inhibit students’ understanding and lead to obstacles to learning the target language. The theorists value the combination of teachers’ meaningful and communicative use of comprehensible L2 with students’ freedom in using L1 to facilitate their developing ideas. When studying listening, reading, writing, students may engage in many activities and easily fulfil teachers’ requirements. However, they become unwilling to speak when teachers use L2, especially in speaking sessions.

### **Effects of reticence**

Reticence naturally causes detrimental effects in EFL classrooms, especially on learners’ confidence, self-esteem, academic outcomes, and social interactions.

According to Fang-yu (2011, p. 2), learners with little confidence when participating in speaking activities tend to separate themselves from other less reticent counterparts. They are less able to correct their own mistakes since they cannot utter their ideas and more able to skip classes, which leads to their poor performance. Learners with anxiety feel reluctant to volunteer, remember learned lessons less fully, and remain passive during class sessions. As a result, reticence hinders their independent learning skills and limits their knowledge application.

Since silent learners have little contribution to classroom activities, they are unable to say things that are nonsense, express some simple concepts, or use language effectively. Even worse, when those learners are exposed themselves to certain social contexts, their incompetence may make them silent, and less likely to obtain communicative purposes. Consequently, when they are perceived as untrustworthy, socially unattractive, and inferior to the less reticent, it is hard for them to succeed at their future work (Li and Liu, 2011, p. 963).

## **2.2 The Research Methodology**

### **2.2.1 Research Methodology**

To carry out the study, the researchers employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to perform the following main tasks. Firstly, the researchers collected information from questionnaires and interviews delivered to

teachers and non-English majors at Lac Hong University. Then, the researchers analyzed, generalized and compared the collected data to find out the outcomes. Finally, the researchers interpreted the findings and gave the conclusion of the study and recommendations to the English Language Faculty as well as for other related studies.

### Research questions

During conducting the research, the two following questions were formulated:

1. What are the causes of reticence in the Asian cultural context?
2. How can reticence be dealt with to create an effective learning and teaching context?

### 2.2.2 Participants

The study was conducted in the campus of Lac Hong University, which is located in Bien Hoa City, Dong Nai province, where the researchers are working as lecturers. Due to the time constraint and in order to obtain thorough results, this research was done with only 124 students from second-year and third-year classes who were studying General English as their compulsory subject in the curricula at the university. In addition, to get the opinions of teachers about their students' reticence, the researchers randomly chose 12 teachers from English Language Faculty to conduct the interviews. All the confidentiality and privacy were maintained when the data were analyzed and tabulated.

### 2.2.3 Data Collection Instruments

For the purpose of getting the participants' opinions with highly exact figures, choosing the tools in the research is very important. Dornyei (2003) stated, "One of the most common methods of data collection in the second language (L2) research is to use questionnaires of various kinds" (p.124). According to Seidman (1991), the aim of using an in-depth interview is to get and to apprehend others' experience (p.9). Seidman also explained the reason for exploiting in-depth interview that talking about teaching experience was a pleasure of teachers, and they were always willing to express their view frankly and honestly (p.130). Hence, the conductors made the decision to choose questionnaires and interviews as the main instruments in this research.

## 2.3 Findings and Discussion

### 2.3.1 Reasons for Student's Reticence from Students' Perspectives

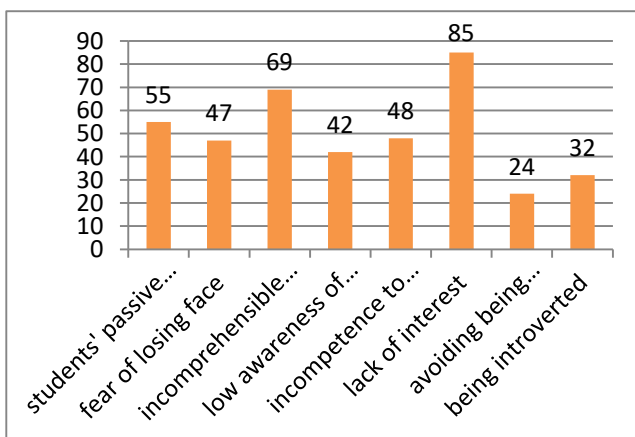


Figure 1. Reasons for Student's Reticence (N = 124)

Students in the survey who were studying General English as their compulsory subject were asked why they kept silent in class. The chart shows clearly the numbers of students giving their own reasons for their reticence. It can be evidently seen in the chart that the proportion of option lack of interest is much higher than the others. As can be seen, the chart shows us that 85 out of 124 students (over 68%) found the lessons and questions given by their teachers uninteresting. Obviously, teachers know how to prepare and hold additional classroom activities in which students are able to find their learning interest effortlessly. What is more, teachers with their experience always try to apply new teaching materials that assist students to learn and understand lessons effectively. However, due to the constraint in the syllabus, sometimes teachers try to finish the lessons on time and students' interest is forgotten.

Another factor should be taken into consideration as 69 students (over 55%) pointed out in the chart. Incomprehensible inputs which can be referred to unclear questions or vague activities are the second popular reason for learners' reticence in class. As any teacher knows, all students learn in different ways. In addition, the class of students at different levels is common in any particular subject especially in General English classes. Teachers need to differ their methods of teaching in order to reach all students efficiently. A diversity of teaching approaches, awareness of student levels, and an application of which approaches are best for specific students can help teachers to know which teaching methods will be appropriate for their class.

Apparently, the objective reasons mentioned above are the two biggest sources of learners' reticence. On the other hand, however, in the survey, students-participants also indicated some other subjective reasons that affected their activeness in English classrooms. Among of them, passive learning styles seemed to be the most chosen with 55 students (over 44%). From the researchers' point of view and experience, the passive learning styles of Vietnamese students are affected mainly by traditional teaching methods of teachers. The old-fashioned teaching style was all about recitation, for example, students would wait in quietness, while the others would take turns to recite the lesson until each one had been called upon. The teacher would listen to each their recitation and they were expected to study and memorize the assignments. At the end of the course, learners would have to take written test or examination. The traditional method has been applying without modification, even in language classes in which communicative and interactive methods should be more appropriate. The old-style of teaching and learning way gradually and adversely affects the learners' language skills improvement. This fact can be the explanation for the incompetence to acquire L2 of students which is also one of the reasons for the classroom reticence. 48 out of 124 students (nearly 39%) in the survey identified their inability to understand what was conveyed by the instructors as the reason for their reluctance to interact. Even when they are assigned, the students still choose to keep silent for fear of losing face when giving the wrong answers. Nearly 38% of participants (47 students) blamed the fear of losing face for their passiveness. The anxiety of being laughed at or made fun of when giving the wrong answers is also a drawback when studying a language. At the researchers' surprise, 42 respondents (over 33%) admitted that they kept silent due to the fact that they lacked

preparation for the lessons. Other 32 respondents disclosed they are introverted people who still keep themselves to themselves even if they know the answers. Most surprisingly, 24 partakers in the survey confessed they preferred to keep silent to be "the middle one". In other words, the fear of being considered as "showoffs", influence these students' behavior and determine their actual participation in classroom activities. Some of them were elite learners and relatively good at spoken English, but in order to show modesty, they chose to be silent, unless singled out by their teachers. Some students knew quite well how to respond to their teachers but remained reticent, waiting for others to volunteer.

### 2.3.2 Instructors' Roles

#### Instructors' Method

Table 1. Statistical figures of instructors' methodology

Methodology	No. of approval	Percentage
Task types/ Topics	10	83.3%
Questioning techniques	8	66.6%
Teachers' feedback/ Evaluation	11	91.6%
Creating classroom atmosphere	9	75%
Recognition/ Compliments	7	58.3%

Being aware of the negative effects of students' reticence, all interviewed teachers asserted that students could not be the sole issue of this phenomenon. This also resulted from teachers' method. Most of the time students spent in their classroom is for tackling with activities designed by their teachers. 83.3% of the teachers agreed that task types mainly determine their cooperation. Simple task-types (gap-filling, mapping, personal information exchange) which did not require analyzing or take time were done quickly, but students did not give much attention to enrich their answers. A teacher said, "If you want your students to do your tasks voluntarily and flexibly, it is important to put them into pairs or groups. Most important, teachers need to check their answers after a limited time to allow them to voice their answers." Nevertheless, three teachers confirmed that when assigning more complex and demanding tasks (reasoning, analyzing, summarizing, imagining, problem-solving) requiring high language proficiency, they received few short answers even from good students; low-level students just kept silent and started using their mother-tongue. Five out of twelve teachers agreed that putting students in pairs and groups, in this case, was also an effective way so that their students could learn from each other. Whether conducting any task types, the core value of class management in terms of pair work and group work together with familiar daily life topics could facilitate students' performance.

Besides, if teachers wanted students to explicit more details from their short answers, they needed to ask more questions to exploit students' thinking and increase students' talking time. 66.6 per cent of the interviewed teachers said that questioning techniques were an influential factor. "Both open-ended and closed-ended questions are essential." 50 percent of the teachers realized that they usually interrupted students' talk, which reduced students' motivation. In such

cases, they found that students just nodded their heads or said "yes" because they did not know anything more to say. 20 per cent concluded that asking multiple simple questions and giving students time to think were essential.

Lastly, 91.6% of the teachers recognized the importance of giving feedback and suitable recognition nurtured students' participation. Six teachers explained, "If students receive negative feedback from teachers, they will lose face and become more passive although their performance is not always as good as expected." Surprisingly, eleven teachers had consent about the way of giving positive feedback. The more students were encouraged to talk, the more they felt confident in public speaking. "I think my way of giving a bonus for their participation is effective because my students like to get high marks", said a colleague. One teacher reminded the others to show their interests in all answers, not just the right ones.

#### Instructors' Dominance – Traditional roles

Teachers' mode of dominance – IRF over classroom activities was another indispensable item in the realm of the findings. Teachers were the main managers to decide which content was taught and which activity was applied for their lessons. Students just followed what their teachers asked to do and just gave ideas when the teachers allowed. 40% of the recorded teachers claimed that the traditional role of teachers affected active learning style. Two teachers stated, "The traditional role of teachers surely makes active students feel bored. Playing traditional roles, a teacher took most of the time to lecture and hindered students' active learning styles." Three teachers shared the same ideas that the traditional role of teachers led the lessons in the right way and kept the class discipline, so it could not affect students' active learning styles. One teacher indicated that due to the pressure of time constraints and curricular, teachers needed to limit the time of exploiting students' ideas to catch up with loads of knowledge in their textbooks.

When being asked for their solutions, 53.3% of them reasoned that the role of teachers was undeniable and significant in every classroom. If teachers restricted dominating their classes, they were afraid that everything went wrong and that they could not impart all the knowledge in the textbook. The students could, therefore, fail in their exams or get low marks. However, three teachers had opposite ideas that they should limit teacher-talking time to enhance students' speaking competence and oral contribution. In this way, the classroom atmosphere would be more energetic and active. This led to other solutions that focused on creating a comfortable teaching and learning atmosphere. All teachers agreed that making students feel relaxed and have fun stimulated students' language acquisition and reinforced their motivation in learning.

#### Instructors' behavior and their requirements for using L2

The third factor listed in this area is the instructors' behavior and their requirements for using L2. 83.3% of the interviewees agreed that teachers' style and behavior influenced their students' reticence. They clarified that professional and knowledgeable teachers aroused students' interest only because they accumulated useful inputs. 50 percent also claimed that university teachers not only lectured their theory but also inspired their students. Only 16.6% of the interviewees affirmed that teachers'

personalities including honesty, modesty, passion, humor, collaboration, etc. affected students' passivity.

A non-native teacher was also invited to participate in this interview. He stated that students listened carefully to his lecture and participated in his activities. He also found that some felt reluctant to express their opinions because they were incapable of using L2 fluently and accurately. 75 percent of other Vietnamese teachers combined both L1 and L2, but they encouraged students' using L2 as much as possible. They hoped that students took advantage of their class time to produce effective L2. As mentioned by one interviewee, "If teachers use L2 all the time, students cannot understand the lessons thoroughly, and they get tired of focusing on L2 and having to translate into L1 to master the lessons".

## **2.4 Recommendation**

From what has been discussed, there should be some strategies to deal with learners' reticence so that they can actively engage in classroom activities.

### **Examining students' reticence causes**

Getting to know the sources of learners' reticence is of great importance. A student may keep silent due to his personality; thus, teachers should find out what that matter is to help that student overcome it. If some learners cooperate well with other learners but feel reluctant to cooperate with the teacher, that teacher had better self-access his method, personality, or even professionalism to see whether there is a conflict between his teaching style and learners' learning styles or between his personality and learners', etc. Analyzing and evaluating the sources of reticence in the classroom is the prerequisite step to minimize unexpected reticence.

### **Applying teacher interaction strategy**

This set of interactions is beneficial for teachers to address problematic reticence and improve communicativeness in educational settings. Lee (2009, p. 304) defines that teacher interaction strategy is an interaction technique a teacher uses to interact with his/ her students during teaching and learning processes. It is divided into three categories: teacher-fronted strategy, facilitator-oriented strategy, learner-oriented strategy.

The teacher-fronted strategy puts the role of teachers in the dominant position in a teacher-centered class. In this mode of interaction, they use non-communicative display questions in a controlled and rigid way developed to maintain activities. It is a traditional but very popular teaching method employed by many teachers. Associated with the IRF pattern, this strategy is still considered a powerful educational device to impart knowledge or to check students' understanding and an effective tool to meet communicative needs.

The second strategy is a set of facilitative interaction tools used to facilitate the interaction between teachers and students in classrooms. "It includes personalizing a topic, use of referential questions, reformulation, elaboration, comment, repetition, and use of backchannels, giving content-focused feedback and longer wait time" (p. 305). Taking advantage of authentic interactions, students are more likely to give meaningful and content focused rather than form-focused feedback. Teachers act as facilitators to support and approve their participation. Therefore, learners

have more chance to initiate dialogues with teachers and peers and have more responsibility in learning.

The last category is a learner-oriented strategy, a non-intervening interaction tool, which widely expands learner's opportunities to speak in classrooms. Teachers create a hands-off atmosphere in which learners have more time to talk freely, share ideas, feel more secure and less anxious in student-student interactions. Learners can decide when to initiate and end a conversation without teacher's interference except when they encounter any difficulties. "Participation rights are open to all learners who have access to the 'discursive resources' of self-selection, topic initiation, topic development, and topic shift" (p.307), which benefits the reticent or passive learners. Nevertheless, when applying this strategy, teachers need to be aware of students' error fossilization because they have no language models; some students even think that teachers neglect their study.

### **Integrating technology in classroom activities**

English learning is beneficial through the use of different technological equipment as well as authentic materials such as films, videos, CDs and E-learning websites. Motivational factors in English learning have a close relation with the technological-based activities designed by teachers. In other words, students expect their teachers to use technology in their classrooms as frequently as they can. Similarly, Jarvis (2005) suggests that learners prefer task-based teaching methods by using different technological devices in the classrooms. The use of computer technology in classrooms, with the internet, can also be powerful for learning, practicing, improving, and assessing English skills. EFL learners should be allowed to use smartphones, tablets and laptop computers skillfully in many ways to interact with their teachers or partners, engage in entertaining and meaningful quizzes, complete assignments, and exchange ideas verbally or non-verbally, which is really helpful and can create a lively and supportive language learning environment. Today, good examples of social networking sites like Facebook, Zalo, Skype and E-learning platforms like Moodle, Schoology, and Blackboard Coursesites have played a very important role in English teaching and learning practices. Consequently, teachers in this very modern society should exploit these sites in the classroom contexts and use them as a tool to motivate their students' engagement. However, if teachers abuse technology, they can cause inevitable side effects. It is advisable for them to combine their interaction strategy and the critical application of technology in pedagogical activities.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

This paper aims to penetrate the sources of reticence from the bilateral perspectives of teachers and learners. Based on the gathered information, the researchers have deeper thought to withdraw applicable methods and strategies to apply in appropriate institutional contexts. With the realm of the study, the application of the mixed method is useful since it can provide the researchers and people with the same interests more insights into this cultural and pedagogical issue. A questionnaire with ten questions is distributed to 124 non-English majors, and twelve interviews with university teachers of English are conducted and audio-recorded to possess diversified and objective answers. After analyzing and synthesizing the collected results, the researchers find thought-provoking perspectives from teachers and learners.

As seen from the findings, both of the two parties assert that the unavoidable existence of reticence cannot merely attribute to students' cultural background, attitude, anxiety, and interests. Sources of reticence are also found to emerge from teachers' methodology, dominance, and the imposition of language use. Under the time constraints, this study was conducted with small scopes of questionnaire and interview methods. With the desire of overcoming this limitation, the researchers are going to conduct action research to test whether the aforementioned recommendations are practical through students' reflection during a semester. Enrolling students in an online discussing forum so that students can exchange ideas about what happens in their classrooms is a feasible way for teachers to re-evaluate their teaching styles and professionalism as well as to develop the best practices being adopted in the future.

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