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# **Reticence in Oral English Language Classrooms: A Case Study in China**

**Meihua Liu**

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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With a growing need for spoken English among non-native English speakers, reticence research in second/foreign language learning situations has captured the attention of language theorists and educators in recent decades (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre et al., 2001; Tsui, 1996). It is assumed that when people speak in a second or foreign language, they become more apprehensive and tense and thus more unwilling to participate in conversation (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). It has been found that many SL/FL students, especially Asian learners, are passive in language classrooms and choose not to use the target language most of the time, especially when responding to teachers (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 1999, 2001, 2002; Li, 1998; Sato, 1990; Tsui, 1996; Zou, 2004). Meanwhile, multiple variables such as low English proficiency, personality, and cultural beliefs were found to contribute to student reticence in SL/FL classrooms.

Adopting a quantitative method, MacIntyre and his associates conducted a number of empirical studies and found that communicating in a second language was related to a willingness to engage in L2 communication, motivation for language learning, the opportunity for contact, and the perception of competence, language anxiety, personality, intellect, the social context, and other variables (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre et al. 2001). They also claimed that willingness to communicate was a good predictor for students' actual use of the target language in communication. All these findings were confirmed by a range of studies carried out both in second and foreign language learning situations using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Hashimoto, 2002; Jackson, 1999, 2001, 2002; Li, 1998; Tsui, 1996; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004).

Based on six interviews of Japanese students at the University of Edinburgh, Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996) concluded that the students were reticent in EFL/ESL classrooms due to fear of public failure, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, low English proficiency, and inability to keep up with native speakers, incompetence in the rules and norms of English conversation, disorientation, etc. This conclusion was supported by Jones' (1999) review of research on NNS students' oral behavior in English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. On

the basis of the analysis of interviews with fifteen lecturers in a university in Hong Kong. Flowerdew et al. (2000) also found that the students were rated as passive and reticent learners in the classroom by their lecturers who attributed student reticence to such factors as low English proficiency, fear of being embarrassed in front of their peers, their inability to understand concepts, incomprehensible input, lack of preparation, and the passive learning styles acquired during their secondary schooling. The findings were in conformity with a number of other studies (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Li, 1998; Sato, 1990; Tsui, 1996; Zou, 2004), some of which also identified cultural beliefs as an important reticence-inducer in SL/FL classrooms.

All these findings reveal that reticence is a widely-observed phenomenon in SL/FL language classrooms and that various factors contribute to student reticence. However, since wide differences exist in SL/FL language learning situations, to better understand the issue of reticence and enhance the oral proficiency of the target language by promoting students' actual participation in classroom activities, more research is needed with different groups of learners in various SL/FL learning situations.

### **Rationale for the Study**

In the past decade or so, as Chinese have come into more contact with people from other cultures, especially since China entered the WTO and won the right to host the Olympic Games in 2008, there is a growing awareness of the importance of and need for spoken English. Unfortunately, the outcome of oral English learning is not very satisfactory. Students, especially non-English majors, often complain that they are unable to speak English well. Thus, the investigation of oral English learning is of special importance to these students. Classroom participation should merit special attention because non-English majors in China often depend on formal teaching to learn spoken English as well as other aspects of English in that they usually have little contact with and few chances to use the target language in their daily life. As a result, the amount of oral practice of English in class is a key to success for many non-English majors. A better understanding of this would certainly help to promote the quality of oral English instruction.

Focusing on one case with a target on Chinese undergraduate non-English majors, this research aims to examine student reticence in oral English language classrooms by way of survey, observation, and reflective journals. To achieve this, three research questions were proposed:

- (1) To what extent do the students remain reticent in oral English language classrooms, and what activity makes them the most reticent?
- (2) What factors contribute to student reticence during oral English language lessons?

- (3) What strategies do the students use to cope with reticence in oral English language classrooms?

## Research Methodology

### Participants

One intact band-3<sup>1</sup> class of 27 first-year non-English majors enrolled in an English listening & speaking course in a Chinese university in Beijing were invited for the study. Twenty-four (21 male and 3 female) of them, with an average age of 18.5, actually participated in the study (the other three did not fill in the questionnaire due to absence). Of these participants, 16.7% (4) of them started to learn spoken English in primary school, 41.7% (10) started in junior high school, 29.2% (7) in senior high school and 12.4% (3) in the university. Coming from different departments such as Computer Science and Civil Engineering, these students met once a week for the lesson, which lasted 90 minutes per week.

### Instrument

#### *Language Class Sociability*

The original 5-item Language Class Sociability (LCS) scale, developed by Ely (1986), purports to measure to what extent learners enjoy interacting with others in the target language in class. To fit the present research, some modifications were made to the original LCS. The words “Spanish” in the original LCS items were replaced by “English” class in the present research. Designed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”, all the items were translated into Chinese before being implemented.

#### *Background information*

The background questionnaire was designed to obtain demographic data about the participants: name, gender, age, department, and length of English study.

#### *Teacher observation*

The teacher of the class was asked to keep a weekly record of students’ behavior in the classroom during the whole term. In particular, she was asked to note down whether the students were reticent, active, anxious, or confident in different classroom activities: presentation, pair work, group work, and teacher-student activity.

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<sup>1</sup> The students are placed into different band groups ranging from 1 to 3 (band 1 is the lowest and band 3 the highest) according to their scores in the placement test upon entering the University. After a term’s learning, they are often automatically promoted to a higher band group.

### *Classroom Observation*

In addition to teacher observation, the researcher also went to the classroom to observe and video tape students' participation in different activities.

### *Reflective Journals*

According to Oller (1979, p. 17, cited in Bailey, 1983), questionnaires are often problematic because the respondents "tend to give answers that are associated with their perceptions of the predispositions of the researcher." Thus, reflective journals were used in the present study to provide additional data about personal and affective variables in language learning. The participants were asked to write journals (1 entry per week) for eight successive weeks to reflect and comment on their English learning experiences with a focus on their participation in classroom activities and strategies to become more active. In addition to the topics suggested, they could also write about other aspects related to their language learning experiences. In case the students might have difficulty understanding the guide in English, it was translated into Chinese before being implemented.

### **Procedure**

The study was conducted during the second term of the academic year of 2002-2003. In the first lesson, the teacher briefly described the need to keep writing journals on English learning experiences. She also told the students that each journal entry would be commented on and returned by the end of the term. The focus for each week's writing in both Chinese and English was given to the students beforehand. The students started to write journals in the second week and 25 sets of journals were collected by the end of the eleventh week (two students didn't finish all the journals and thus theirs were not considered for later analysis). In the middle of the term, the participants completed the questionnaire in Chinese (2-3 minutes) during the normal teaching period.

Starting from the second term, the teacher kept a record of the students' behavior in different classroom activities, which lasted for a whole term except when tests were held in class. By the end of the term, 14 records of teacher observation were collected. In addition, the researcher also went to the classroom three times to observe and video tape the students' participation in different activities during the last month of the term.

### **Data Analysis**

Because of the small number of respondents, the survey and observation were analyzed mainly in terms of frequency. The reflective journals, on the other hand, were subjected to content analysis.

## Results and Discussion

### Reticence Levels

#### *Item analysis of the Language Class Sociability scale*

Table 1 summarizes the students' responses to the LCS items, which are reflective of classroom sociability in the oral English language classroom. All numbers refer to the percentage of students who chose each response category.

**Table 1**  
**LCS Items with Percentages of  
Students Selecting Each Alternative (N = 24)**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I'd like more class activities where the students use English to get to know each other better.	0	4.2	20.8	54.2	20.8
2. I think learning English in a group is more fun than learning on my own.	0	12.5	16.7	50.0	20.8
3. I enjoy talking with the teacher and other students in English.	0	16.7	54.2	20.8	8.3
4. I enjoy interacting with the other students in the English class.	0	8.3	29.2	50.0	12.5
5. I think its important to have a strong group spirit in the English classroom.	0	0	29.2	54.2	16.7

As illustrated in Table 1, except for a modest agreement (29.1%) on item 3 (I enjoy talking with the teacher and other students in English), more than 60% of the students endorsed the other four statements. Most of them enjoyed interacting with other students in class and preferred to learn English in groups. All these implied that the students were quite willing to interact with other students in oral English language classrooms.

This tendency indicated on the survey was further supported by the students' self-reported willingness to communicate with others in oral English class in their reflective journals, as discussed below.

### **Students' Self-Reported Willingness to Communicate in English**

When asked whether they were willing to speak English to others in class, the majority (76%) of the students, as in Zou's (2004) study, expressed a willingness to talk to others in English in class (for various reasons), as reported in Table 2. Moreover, all of them stated that they desired to speak English well because English was useful and/or because English was important for their future education and career.

**Table 2**

**Willingness to Communicate (N = 25)**

Willingness to speak English	Unwillingness to speak English	Not mentioned N(%)
19 (76%)	4 (16%)	2 (8%)

This willingness can be evidenced by their writing things such as "I'm willing to talk to others in English because it can improve our linguistic sense of English" (Mao, male), and "I am willing to talk to others in English, because I think it is the only way to improve my speaking English level" (Li, male). It is clear that improving English proficiency was a common motivation for the students to be willing to communicate with others in oral English language classrooms. This was further explained by another student, "I want to have some chances as much as possible to talk to others in English. Talking to others is a convenient way for us students to improve our oral English ability" (Zhang, male).

What the students wrote in their journals strongly showed that they were willing to talk to others mainly for the purpose of enhancing their proficiency in oral English. In addition, talking to other students in class could help them find out their own weakness and learn from others, as reported by one student:

I become active if the teacher says “any volunteers?” It’s the best chance to exchange my ideas between the teacher and the other students. At least, the teacher can correct my errors. And sometimes, the teacher can teach me some usages of the words. If I only refer to the dictionary, I wouldn’t know how to use the words. So I think we should respond to the questions actively (Lin, male).

Moreover, some students were willing to communicate in oral English language class because they wanted to interact with foreigners in the future. As a student reported, “English is the most widely used language in the world. So I want to speak English well in order to communicate with the world well in the future” (Mao, female).

Furthermore, according to the self-reports in reflective journals, the students also thought highly of those who actively responded to the teacher and were actively involved in classroom activities. These active students were thought to be outgoing, smart, confident, knowledgeable, and at a high English proficiency level. “I envy them for their fluent oral English.” “The students who actively respond to the teacher’s questions, in my opinion, are not only knowledgeable, but also very brave and confident. Some students were not active because they are afraid of answering questions” “Their English is perfect. I admire them very much. They had enough courage and they were not afraid of losing face.” All these vividly evidenced their positive attitudes towards the students who performed actively in language classrooms.

### **Students Participation in Oral English Language Classrooms**

Although the majority of the students self-reported to be willing to speak English in class and desired to have a good command of the spoken language, their actual participation in the classroom was not so active as implied by their expressed willingness and desire to speak English. Because all the students were required to comment on their participation in class in each of their reflective journals, it can be roughly judged how active they were in different classroom activities during the first eight weeks of the term. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

**Students' Self-reported Participation  
in Classroom Activities (N = 25)**

	Active during pair work N (%)	Active to respond to the teacher N (%)	Active during group work N (%)
Week 1	12(48%)	0	N/A
Week 2	14(56%)	3(12%)	0
Week 3	15(60%)	5(20%)	4(16%)
Week 4	20(80%)	3(12%)	N/A
Week 5	21(84%)	3(12%)	N/A
Week 6	23(92%)	6(24%)	N/A
Week 7	21(84%)	7(28%)	N/A
Week 8	21(84%)	5(20%)	N/A

As can be seen from Table 3, in each lesson, about 3 to 7 reported to actively respond to the teacher, and about two-thirds claimed to be active during pair work. A similar trend was also observed by the teacher throughout the term, although the students who claimed to be active might not be the same as those identified by the teacher. According to her, only about 5 students actively volunteered to respond to her, but more than two-thirds of them were actively engaged in pair work. In particular, she could barely identify any silent students during pair work towards the end of the term.

The student's self-reported participating and the trend observed by the teacher were further supported by video taped observations. In all of the observed 90-minute class meetings, about 30 minutes was spent in listening and checking comprehension, about 5 minutes in giving instruction, about 45 minutes for pair work (some students formed a group of more than 2), and 10 minutes for presentations (students went to the front to report discussion results of pair/group work). Generally speaking, the students were observed to be active in answering easy questions in chorus. As for difficult or challenging questions, only a few students voluntarily stood up to volunteer to state



opinions and the others just listened and waited to be called on, similar to previous studies (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 1999, 2002; Tsui, 1996).

As for presentations, even fewer students volunteered to report their discussion results in front of the class. According to the video taped observations, only 2 students volunteered to do that and all the others remained quiet until singled out by the teacher. When it was time for pair work or group discussion, the students formed pairs or groups on their own and about two-thirds of them appeared to be active, similar to that observed by the teacher. Nevertheless, there were about 3 or 5 pairs who spent a lot of time looking up words in electronic dictionaries and thinking about what to say and how to say it.

In conclusion, the students, though having a desire to learn spoken English well and being willing to communicate with others in class, seldom actively responded to the teacher, especially when presentations at the front were expected. This evidently demonstrates that willingness and desire to participate in speech communication might not lead to actual use of the target language in class, as found in Jackson's (1999, 2002) studies as well. Certain stimuli were needed to push the students to put their desire and willingness into actual use of the target language in class.

### **Causes for Student Reticence in Oral English Language Classrooms**

As discussed before, a considerable number of students were reluctant to respond to the teacher and remained silent until singled out. When asked to comment on what caused them to be reticent in oral English language classrooms, the students identified a multitude of variables such as low English proficiency, traditional cultural beliefs, habits, difficulty of tasks, personality, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes, similar to previous studies (Jackson, 2002; Li, 1998; Sato, 1990; Tsui, 1996).

#### *Chinese Culture*

An important source of student reticence, according to the self-reports reflected in the reflective journals, was concerned with Chinese culture, which emphasizes modesty and respect for the old and superior. As a student said:

Because Chinese culture tells us to be modest, we often keep quiet and give the chances to others. And Chinese people always seem to be too gentle and too reserved, namely, we like and are good at hiding our emotions. As a result, we often keep quiet if we are going to be put in a different position from others' like standing up in front of many people sitting there. In Chinese opinion, the wisest thing for a person is that he shouldn't show his outstanding abilities even if he has the ability. Chinese people don't like to show their views in public. Culture is deep in everyone's mind. It is passed from generation to

generation. So in our mind, it is all right to be reticent. It needs a lot of courage to change to be open (He, male).

This idea was agreed with by many other students. Because of the influence of Confucian ideology, “Chinese people like to be silent and listen to others” (Han, male). Chinese people, consistent with Confucian ideology, generally showed respect to elders and people in authority. This was especially so in classrooms where teachers were considered as figures of authority (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). “Because we think that the classroom is where we learn languages, and we’re students, so we should sit silently and listen to teachers who are very knowledgeable” (Wang, male). One student even claimed that “there seems to have potential virtue in reticence because Chinese people believe “action speaks better than words” (Chen, male).

#### *Personality*

As claimed by Ellis (1999), that extroverted people were more willing to interact with others while the introverted and shy preferred to be quiet and listen to others, personality was also identified as a main cause for reticence in oral language class by the students in the present study. “Personality contributes more to students’ reticence. Some people with an active personality are less reticent than those who are shy” (Fu, male). Some students thought that reticence was so strongly related to personality that they believed that “some people were born to be so” (Gao, female). This was further illustrated by a vivid description, “my partner kept silent unless it was a must to open his mouth. And he would be delighted if he was not chosen to answer a question during the class” (Hou, male).

#### *Low English Proficiency*

As found in other studies (e.g., Tsui, 1996), low English proficiency is also identified in the present research as a major factor that hindered the students from talking to others in English in class. “I hardly speak English in classes. I’m afraid of speaking for my oral English is very weak and it makes my oral English weaker and weaker” (Zhou, male). Because they perceived their English to be poor, many students chose to be quiet “because I feel that others are better than me in listening and speaking I want to withdraw” (Gong, male).

#### *Past Educational Experiences*

In addition to Chinese culture, personality and low English proficiency, past educational experiences were also considered one of the main causes for student reticence in oral English language class. “We are reticent maybe because we were taught to be so since primary school. We were hardly encouraged to speak out loud in front of others” (Huang, male).

Similar to many parts of Asia (Li, 1998; Sato, 1990; Tsui, 1996), secondary education was strongly didactic and exam-oriented in China. As a result, both teachers and learners focused on marks and written tests while neglecting oral English. Students had also formed the habit of sitting in class and listening quietly to teachers. They remained quiet until requested by teachers to speak in class. As a student described, “the teacher always chose one, so it was not necessary to be volunteers. The concept “not to put up my hand” has a long history and was deeply rooted in our mind” (Ye, male). “Some teachers used questions as a punishment, which greatly reduced our enthusiasm. Generally speaking, we were discouraged. So the students who are active are very precious” (Zhou, male).

#### *Lack of Practice*

Apart from all the factors explained above, “. . . Practice is a possible factor. If a student often speaks to foreigners, he will be active in language classrooms” (Zhou, male). Since the main task was to pass the College Entrance Examination in high school, most of the students were not given much practice in oral English, nor could they offer much time to practice it on their own before at that time. To their disappointment, only two 45-minute English lessons were offered per week at the University, which again failed to provide many chances for the students to practice speaking English in class due to the limited class time and class size. What one student wrote, “I remain reticent because I am not used to speaking English” (Lin, male), was a common thought among the peers.

#### *Lack of Courage and/or Confidence*

According to the participants, although some students might have good pronunciation and be at a high proficiency level, they still preferred to be reticent because of the lack of courage. “I’m often quiet in those activities. Maybe I’m not ready for it. Even if I made some preparation I would also give up the chance because of lack of courage” (Gao, male). “I was not active because I didn’t have much confidence or enough courage though I want to answer the questions very much. But I am afraid that I can’t do it well and my answer can’t satisfy others” (Lum, male).

#### *Fear of Losing Face*

Like those in Cortazzi and Jin’s (1996) study, the students in the present study also worried about losing face in oral English language classrooms. Thus, they kept quiet and waited until they were required to speak English. “I am not so active because I don’t want to “lose face” when I make mistakes” (Li, male). “I have self respect and don’t want to lose face before others. Chinese people are afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at” (Shi, male). Moreover, they were also afraid of being embarrassed, which was

virtually the fear of losing face. “I were not active this week because of my fears of embarrassing. I’m unwilling to be asked by teacher as I don’t know what to say” (Shao, male).

#### *Lack of Interest in/Familiarity with Topics*

Interest mattered a lot in students’ active participation in classroom activities. According to the students, “when something isn’t interesting, most people are not willing to talk about it, while one can talk as much as he can on his interests” (Luo, male). Similarly, whether a student was active also depended on his/her familiarity with a topic. “It depends on how much I know about the topics. If I know more I am active, but if I know little about it, I keep quiet” (Qin, female).

#### *Poor Pronunciation*

Because the students were from different parts of the country, they spoke English with different accents. As a result, pronunciation became one of the obstacles to understanding each other in communication. Some students withdrew from talking to others due to their pronunciation, as a student reported, “I am not willing to talk to others, because of my poor pronunciation” (Sha, male).

#### *Lack of Vocabulary*

As one student said, “my poor vocabulary caused a lot [of] trouble in talking [to] each other in English. So we seldom speak in English” (Tian, male). Lack of vocabulary was another source of student reticence in oral English language classrooms. “I always found my vocabulary is so small that I didn’t know how to tell others my ideas. I was very anxious and feel bad. So I have to keep quiet. And this is very common to students in the University” (Luo, male).

#### *Pursuit of Perfection*

As in Price’s (1991) study, the students in the present study also wanted to speak perfect English to others in class. This pursuit of perfection, in return, forced many students to be reluctant to respond to the teacher and remain quiet in class. This is best explained by a student’s self-report, “I seldom speak to others in English, because it is a shame to speak English not as well as Chinese” (Rao, male).

#### *Difference Between Chinese and English*

Moreover, the fact that Chinese is far different from English prevented some students from being active to speak English in class. According to one student:

Chinese is quite different from other languages. It is composed of characters and each character can work independently and be combined with others. It is easy to make sentences in Chinese. But other languages like English are composed of something smaller than

words, which makes it difficult for us to make sentences in English. I think Chinese are not fit to learn foreign languages (He, male).

In addition to the variables described above, other factors such as lack of familiarity with other students, anxiety, fear of being considered as “show-offs”, and difficulty of tasks were also identified as reticence-inducers by the students in the present research. Generally speaking, it was quite difficult for the students to talk to others if they didn’t know one another, “I was not very active because I knew nobody in the classroom and felt lonely” (Wang, male). As they knew more people in class, they became more active. Sometimes, other students’ participation in the classroom also functioned as a deciding stimulus. For example, one student reported that he didn’t want to speak English because “the class is in such a silence” (Huang, male).

#### *Reticence Coping Strategies*

Generally speaking, the students came to be more conscious of the reticence they experienced in oral English language classrooms by writing reflective journals. When asked to reflect on what strategies they had used to become more active in class, most of them, however, seemed to be helpless about being reticent. Mainly depending on gradual change, they believed that they would become more active as they had more exposure to spoken English and became more familiar with the classroom environment. This seemed to be true for some students according to their self-reports in reflective journals and teacher observations.

Many of the students, on the other hand, offered some suggestions for fellow students such as having more practice and overcoming the fear of speaking. As a student said, “there is only one effective way to overcome reticence. That is to speak, to think, to write, to listen with more curiosity. Only the person himself is the key to the success in learning English” (He, male). Some students also thought that it took time to reduce reticence. For example, “to reduce reticence, the students must overcome the fear of speaking. If reading more, we can speak naturally. To reduce reticence needs long-time training” (Wang, male).

Meanwhile, they also suggested that English teachers should try to create a friendly, supportive and non-threatening learning environment and prepare more interesting topics in order to make students willing and active to speak the language in class.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Based on the analyses and discussions in the previous section, it can be concluded that most of the students desire to learn spoken English well and were willing to interact with others in oral English language classrooms. However, due to various reasons such

as a lack of practice, low English proficiency, lack of confidence, anxiety, cultural beliefs, personality, and fear of losing face, more than two-thirds of the students remained reluctant to respond to the teacher and kept quiet until singled out to answer questions. Moreover, many of them seemed to be helpless about being reticent when the teacher asked a question and expected a response. Consequently, some measures need to be taken to help the students become more willing and active to converse with others in the target language in class.

In order to help reduce student reticence, first and foremost, English teachers themselves should be aware of the existence of reticence among EFL learners and try to give more chances and encouragement to the more quiet ones by asking them more questions. In addition, as suggested by the participants, English teachers can prepare more topics which are not only interesting but related to student life so that students have the interest in and ability to talk about them in English. In addition, English teachers should try to establish a friendly, supportive, and non-threatening classroom learning environment, as suggested by Zou (2004), as well as the participants in the present research. It is important for teachers to be friendly rather than strict and critical in class, in order to make students feel at ease to speak English, especially when responding to teachers. It is also important for English teachers to teach and train students to be supportive of one another in class. According to Zou (2004), competition often caused students to become less willing to speak the target language, while a supportive relationship among students usually made them feel free to do so in class.

EFL students should also be aware of and acknowledge the existence of reticence in oral English language classrooms. After that, they should take the initiative to seek strategies to deal with it. As pointed out by some participants, it is of extreme importance to be independent and active learners both in and outside the classrooms. Only thus will they actively seek and make use of every chance to practice speaking English to others. As a result, they may not be so reticent in class. It is also useful for them to improve their English proficiency, expand vocabulary, and be supportive of one another during oral English lessons.

In conclusion, both EFL teachers and learners should be aware that reticence is a serious obstacle for achieving fluency in spoken English and that multiple variables contribute to it in language classrooms. More importantly, they should realize the urgent need to search for strategies to help students become more active to speak the target language in oral English classes. However, because both reticence levels and reticence-inducing variables may vary from context to context, more research is called for with different groups of learners in various situations to better understand the issue and promote the learning of oral English.

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### About the Author

*Meihua Liu is a Ph.D student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research area is English Applied Linguistics and her research interests mainly include classroom research, second language writing, and foreign language teaching and learning.*