Reducing student reticence through teacher interaction strategy

Winnie Lee and Sarah Ng

Reticence is a common problem faced by ESL/EFL teachers in classrooms, especially in those with mainly Asian students. The willingness to communicate model of MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998. 'Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: a situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation'. The Modern Language Journal 82/4: 545–62.) postulates that willingness to speak is determined not only by learners themselves but also by the situation they are in, suggesting that situational variables such as topic and participants should be included in the investigation. This paper aims to examine whether teacher interaction strategy could be one of the factors triggering student reticence in classrooms. A group of Form 1 (Grade 7) Hong Kong Chinese students were given two lessons characterized by different interaction patterns. The two lessons were videotaped for analysis. The results show that teacher strategy is a major determinant of student reticence in classrooms, but it is not the sole factor. Pedagogical factors such as lesson objectives and task type were also found to influence a teacher's classroom-based interaction strategy decision making.

Introduction

How to reduce reticence in ESL/EFL classrooms to increase students' target language use is a pedagogical issue that interests not only language researchers but also teachers. In the past decades, a growing number of studies in ESL/EFL have been conducted to explore the reasons for student reticence in classrooms. The findings have shown that the reasons are very complex and involve multiple learner variables such as motivation, confidence, anxiety, etc. (MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels 1998; Hashimoto 2002; Yashima 2002; Liu 2005). However, a satisfactory explanation of how these variables interact to produce effects on students' classroom participation behaviour has not yet been achieved. MacIntyre *et al.* (op.cit.: 545) integrated these variables into a conceptual willingness to communicate (WTC) model, which provides 'a useful interface between these disparate lines of enquiry'.

WTC was originally introduced with reference to L1 communication and was considered to be a fixed personality trait that was stable across situations (McCroskey and Barer 1985 quoted in MacIntyre *et al.* op.cit.). MacIntyre *et al.* (ibid.: 546) adapted this model for investigating learners' WTC in a L2, arguing that WTC is a 'situation-based variable' rather than a 'trait-like variable', and students' communicative behaviour in L2 situations is

influenced by 'both immediate situational factors as well as more enduring influences'. WTC is then conceptualized as a 'pyramid' model in which 'social and individual context, affective cognitive context, motivational propensities, situated antecedents, and behavioural intention are interrelated in influencing WTC in L2 use' (Hashimoto 2002: 38).

The suggestions of MacIntyre *et al.* (op.cit.) are insightful and shed light on the importance of situational variables such as participants, physical setting, and the formality of the situation in student reticence investigation. These variables are believed to produce immediate effects on WTC (MacIntyre *et al.* ibid.) and are able to account for why some learners are more willing to participate in one particular classroom situation than another. Since the teacher is always the one who determines what and when students are going to speak in classrooms (Garton 2002; Walsh 2002), we believe that the teacher is one of these situational variables and should be included in reticence studies.

Role of teachers in student reticence in classrooms

According to Cullen (1998: 181):

> The classroom, typically a large, formal gathering, which comes together for pedagogic rather than social reasons, will have its own rules and conventions of communication . . . these established patterns are likely to be very different from the norms of turn-taking and communicative interaction which operate in small, informal social gatherings outside.

In such an institutional setting, a teacher is the person institutionally invested with not only the most talking rights but also the power to control both the content and procedure, discussion topic, and who may participate (Gil 2002; Walsh op.cit.). In other words, a teacher is the director of the lesson determining learners' participation opportunities in classrooms. This factor of 'opportunity' is very important because 'intention must combine with opportunity to produce behaviour' (MacIntyre *et al.* op.cit.: 548). Without such an opportunity, reticence will be encouraged as the learners' wish to communicate is not stimulated.

Tsui (1996) conducted a study to examine the factors that contribute to student reticence. The video/audiotaped classroom data show that teachers' ways of interacting with students, i.e. intolerance of silence, uneven allocation of turns, incomprehensible input, and short wait time, are factors contributing to reticence in classrooms.

This view is further supported by Clifton's (2006) classroom interaction study. He audiotaped his classes and analysed how his own classroom talk shaped student interaction and participation in classrooms. It was found that his lesson was teacher fronted; however, because of the adoption of facilitator talk, he was successful in establishing more symmetrical social relationships with his students, resulting in more participation opportunities, which then helped reduce reticence in the classroom.

To summarize, how teachers conduct their lessons and how they interact with their students can influence learners' communicative behaviour in

classrooms. Teacher variables, like learner variables, are complex and multiple, and each of these variables deserves a place in student reticence research. This study aims to examine whether teacher interaction strategy, one of the teacher variables, triggers student reticence in classrooms. The discussion will first start with a definition and identification of types of teacher interaction strategy, which will then be followed by the findings of a survey.

Definition of teacher interaction strategy

Teacher interaction strategy is defined in this paper as an interaction device a teacher adopts to interact with his/her students in classrooms. This includes the use of referential/display questions, wait time, turn allocation, as well as ways of engaging learners in communication. It is believed that the interaction strategy(ies) adopted by a teacher can promote/reduce reticence in classrooms because they are believed to be able to determine the communicativeness of the classroom, which is characterized by:

1 Participation rights: how much a teacher and students talk in classrooms.
2 Role of teacher and students: whether a teacher plays an instructional or facilitator role, and whether students can take charge of their own learning.
3 Organization of classroom interaction: whether the interaction pattern is teacher fronted or learner initiated (Walsh op.cit.).

Types of teacher interaction strategy

Generally, three types of teacher interaction strategy can be identified in an ESL/EFL classroom: teacher fronted, facilitator oriented, and learner oriented.

Teacher-fronted strategy

Teacher-fronted strategy is a controlled interaction device used to facilitate a smooth flowing classroom discourse to ensure efficiency and smooth lesson progress. Teachers adopting this strategy usually use a controlled and structural manner to interact with learners. They talk most of the time and initiate most of the teacher–student exchanges by non-communicative display questions, resulting in a teacher-dominated, rigid, and restricted interaction pattern. The IRF pattern (teacher initiation → student response → teacher follow-up) is associated with a teacher-centred classroom methodology, pedagogically oriented lessons, and teacher-fronted activities (Clifton op.cit.; Garton op.cit.). In spite of this, this strategy appears to be popular among teachers. It is found that 'teachers instinctively adopt an IRF mode of instruction because it is perceived, perhaps unconsciously, to be a powerful pedagogical device for transmitting and constructing knowledge' (Cullen 2002: 118). The following is an example of the teacher-dominated IRF interaction pattern induced by this strategy.

Example 1
Purpose: checking understanding of vocabulary.

Teacher What's this? (teacher initiation—a display question)
Student A tower. (learner response—a short reply)
Teacher Good, yes, a tower. (teacher follow-up—comment)
(Author's data)[1]

The reasons for the popularity of this strategy could include factors such as teachers' beliefs about their roles, cultural backgrounds, teaching styles, pedagogical goal(s) of the lesson, and the learners' proficiency, motivation, and attitude (Scott 1996; Cullen 1998). It seems that it is unrealistic to expect this strategy to disappear completely from classrooms. None the less, an element of communication could be incorporated into this strategy, so that both pedagogical and communicative needs could be taken care of.

Facilitator-oriented strategy

Facilitator-oriented strategy is a set of facilitative interaction devices used by a teacher to facilitate interaction with his/her students in classrooms, and 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. This set of strategies enables teachers to create 'authentic' dialogues with learners throughout the interaction process. When interacting with learners, the teacher adopts a more 'let-go' and 'meaning-focused' approach that breaks from the IRF interaction pattern, resulting in learners' greater participation rights. For example, referential questions are used, and the wait time is longer. The right of turn allocation is returned to learners, and non-verbal expressions such as backchannels are used to show teacher support/approval. In addition, the feedback given is content focused rather than form focused (Garton op.cit.; Gil op.cit.). As a result, learners are empowered to take more initiative and responsibility for learning.

One special feature about these strategies is that they are also practicable in pedagogically oriented classrooms. As pointed out by Gil (op.cit.), communicative talk can be integrated into a focus-on-form talk if a teacher is willing to open space for learners to make personal comments, indicating that with the use of an effective strategy such as personalizing the topic, focus-on-form talk and focus-on-meaning talk are not mutually exclusive. A similar argument is made by Cullen (2002), who argues that the teacher-directed IRF interaction exchanges commonly found in teacher-fronted classrooms could be made more learner directed and communicative if the Follow-up Move (F-move), the third part of a chain of IRF (initiate–respond–follow-up), carries discoursal (content-focused) rather than evaluative (form-focused) functions. This implies that pedagogically teacher-fronted classrooms are not necessarily form focused and non-communicative. The example below illustrates this argument.

Example 2
Purpose: teaching past tense.

- **T**   How did you spend your Xmas holiday? (Initiating move—use of a referential question)
- **S1** mm . . . . (pause for more than two seconds) . . . Bored . . . I sleep every day. (Response move—expressing opinions)
- **T**   Oh, what a shame. Your holiday was boring. You slept the whole day. (Follow-up move—reformulation to show correct expression + showing sympathy)

Why didn't you go out? (Initiating move—asking another referential question to create a rapport with the student)

S1 No, no money. (The whole class laughs.) (Response move—expressing opinions)

T Yeah. (Follow-up move—backchannel showing understanding)

S2 No, he had money. (Student 2 self-selects and joins in)

S1 How you know I <u>had</u> money? (Expressing opinion and using the correct past tense verb form)

(Author's data)[2]

Learner-oriented strategy

A learner-oriented strategy is a non-intervening interaction device that offers learners full opportunities to speak in classrooms. The teacher uses a complete hands-off approach to let learners interact among themselves to work on a task, resulting in a very learner-directed classroom interaction pattern known as student–student interaction. The whole interaction is basically learner initiated, and the teacher will not intervene except at the time when learners come across difficulties. Thus, participation rights are open to all learners who have access to the 'discursive resources' of self-selection, topic initiation, topic development, and topic shift (Clifton op.cit.). This strategy is believed to be able to benefit passive or reticent learners as their motivation to participate may increase because of the peer support and negotiation of meaning they are engaged in (Kennedy 1996 quoted in Garrett and Shortall 2002).

None the less, Johnson (1992) points out that we have to be careful when engaging learners in student–student interactions, as without a language model, fossilization of errors may result. O'Neill (1991) also cautions that some students view learning on their own as a form of teacher neglect. Thus, in order to ensure that learners can engage comfortably and confidently in a student–student interaction, a facilitator-oriented strategy can be used to scaffold learners throughout their interaction process. The following example illustrates how a facilitator-oriented strategy complements the learner-oriented strategy to help Student 3, a low-proficiency learner, to participate in the discussion.

Example 3
Purpose: practising discussion skills.

T Get yourselves into groups of three, and discuss who's your favourite singer and give reasons for your choice. (Task setting by a teacher)

S1 My favourite singer is Lesley Cheung . . . he die. I feel very . . . very sad. (Expressing opinions)

S2 Did you cry when . . . mmm . . . he was died? (Asking for information)

S1 I was not believe it first but . . . um . . . it was true . . . I cried. (Giving information)

S2 Now who you like? (Asking for more information)

S1 Mum . . . No, no . . . only like Lesley Cheung.

[Student 3 keeps quiet and does not participate, and so the teacher intervenes]

T	(Uses body language to signal she is going to intervene—facilitator-oriented strategy) . . . right, John, how about you? Do you like Lesley Cheung?
S3	(Looks very shy) . . . mum . . . (shakes his head)
T	Ok . . . Do you mean you don't like him? (Says this very slowly and clearly—confirming)
S3	(Shakes his head) . . . don't like him. (Imitates the teacher's speaking)
S2	Why?
S3	. . . (thinking) . . . I like Leon. (Expresses opinion)
T	Ah . . . You like Leon more than Lesley. Is that right? (Confirming and reformulating the expression)
S3	Yeah . . . yeah . . . (looks very happy)

(Author's data)[3]

Which type of interaction strategy should be adopted?

The example above shows that the facilitator-oriented strategy can make the pedagogically teacher-controlled IRF interaction more learner initiated and meaning oriented and can make the free flow student–student interaction less daunting to beginning/weak learners. It seems that this strategy has a number of advantages in the teaching and learning process.

The use of this strategy in a teacher-fronted classroom enables both teachers and learners to collectively construct a pedagogically goal-oriented event, allowing the teacher to strike a balance between the formal feedback/form-focused instruction and content-based follow-up/meaning-focused communication, resulting in students' stronger motivation and greater participation opportunities.

This strategy also has a key role to play in learner-centred classrooms where learners are expected to engage in negotiation of meaning to complete a task by themselves. When learners have interaction difficulties, strategies such as reformulation and elaboration can be used to develop learners' confidence in using English to communicate among themselves.

To summarize, the use of a facilitator-oriented strategy can help reduce reticence in both learner-centred and teacher-fronted classrooms. Nevertheless, whether this can be attained depends not only on teachers' willingness to give up their 'power of control' but also on their professional skills and having sufficient time to allow a 'facilitator–learner interaction' (Clifton op.cit.) to take place.

Research questions

Based on the discussion above, the following research questions were formulated:

1 Is teacher interaction strategy a factor determining student reticence in classrooms?
2 Can the use of a facilitator-oriented strategy make the traditional IRF interaction meaningful, which then breaks student reticence?

The study
Background

This is a two-year project sponsored by Oxford University Press (China). The purpose is to identify factors causing reticence in English classrooms, for example task design and cultural factors. This study specifically focuses on teacher interaction strategy.

Subjects

Two local Hong Kong secondary school teachers of English, one male and one female, and 20 Form 1 students took part in this study.

The two teachers are trained E S L teachers with two years' English teaching experience in Hong Kong. They were not the students' English teachers but were invited to participate in the study because of their support for interactive teaching approaches. The students were of average proficiency with quite high motivation for learning. But according to their English teacher, they were usually quiet during lessons and reluctant to volunteer to answer questions.

Neither the teachers nor the students were given any information about the research design. They were simply told that the lessons would be videotaped and observed by a visitor. The teachers, none the less, were told in advance that they should try to make the lessons interactive.

Instruments

Two one-and-a-half-hour lessons, attended by the same group of 20 students, were co-planned by the two teachers but mainly conducted by the female teacher with assistance from the male teacher.

Lesson 1 aimed to provide story input (see Table 1) about the adventures of a cockroach, Siu Keung, while Lesson 2 was to enhance student participation through a number of speaking activities related to the story. The reasons for using a story about a cockroach as a springboard for the speaking activities are (a) a story can create a meaningful context to motivate students to speak and (b) the cockroach, Siu Keung, was familiar to students as this character had appeared in a TV drama series popular among Hong Kong teenagers. It was hoped that students' reticence could be broken through the use of familiar materials and contextualized activities. Table 1 shows the structure of the lessons.

Results and discussion
Role of teacher interaction strategy in student reticence

The interaction strategies used in Lessons 1 and 2 were found to be different. In Lesson 1, the strategies employed were mainly teacher-fronted and facilitator-oriented strategies, while in Lesson 2, learner-oriented and facilitator-oriented strategies were used. A brief summary of the teacher strategies, interaction patterns, and activities used in these two lessons is presented in Table 1.

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Objectives	Activities	Teacher interaction strategies	Interaction patterns	Student participation opportunities
Lesson 1: story input				
■ Activate schema ■ Introduce story background ■ Elicit target vocabulary	Teacher-led class discussion: personalizing story topic by asking referential questions	Facilitator-oriented strategy	Facilitator–learner interaction	Participation chances open to all students but not many volunteered to participate
Pre-teach vocabulary	Pronunciation teaching	Teacher-fronted strategy	Teacher-dominated interaction/IRF	Limited to students being called upon
Develop confidence in reading	■ Supported reading ■ Teacher-led class activities: form filling and picture labelling	As above	As above	As above
Lesson 2: task				
Develop oral presentation skills	■ Preparation ■ Oral presentation	■ Learner-oriented strategy ■ Facilitator-oriented strategy	■ Student–student interaction ■ Facilitator-oriented interaction	Participation chances open to all students
Develop confidence in speaking	■ Group script writing ■ Role-play	As above	As above	As above

TABLE 1
Structure of the lesson

The students' participation chances in Lesson 1 were very limited as most of the teacher–student interactions were teacher directed. On the contrary, participation chances were open to students in Lesson 2, which was learner centred. These results confirm that teacher interaction strategy does affect students' participation behaviour.

None the less, the differences in these lessons were found to lie not only in the teacher interaction strategies but also lesson objectives and activities being used, suggesting that there may be an interrelationship between these three factors.

Lesson 1 was found to be mainly pedagogically oriented, aiming to provide the story input (see Table 1). Teacher-directed activities such as teacher-led class discussion, supported reading, and pronunciation teaching were used at different stages of the lesson. In contrast, learner-centred speaking activities such as oral presentation and role-play were used in Lesson 2 with the objective of creating contexts related to the story for students to practise speaking skills. These results show that pedagogical goals and task/activity types are closely related to the interaction strategies teachers employ,

suggesting these two factors may affect teachers' decision making on the use of interaction strategies.

This assumption was confirmed by Teacher 1 who was asked for the reasons for her decisions about her interaction strategy. She said that her decision was mainly pedagogically related, but she emphasized that she considered not only lesson objectives, activity types, but also students' proficiency levels. For example, in Lesson 2, more facilitator-oriented strategies were used with the low-proficiency students who needed scaffolding for participation in the group work. As for Lesson 1, the reason why the teacher-fronted strategy was used, regardless of the students' proficiency, was because her main goal was to attain the objective of providing story input by directing the whole class to complete the activities/tasks step-by-step.

Use of facilitator-oriented strategy: video analyses

Lesson 1
In spite of the use of a teacher-fronted strategy in Lesson 1, the two teachers were found to have tried hard to make the IRF pattern-filled lesson interactive by employing the facilitator-oriented strategy whenever possible. During the story introduction part, they tried to create meaningful dialogues with students. Referential questions were used to tap students' feelings towards cockroaches and help them relate themselves to the story (see Extract 1 below).

Extract 1

T1 . . . So are you Siu Keung's best friend? Do you like Siu Keung? Or when you see Siu Keung, you . . . (stamps on the floor) . . . Ok. What do you think? (Less than two seconds' wait time)

T1 Who killed Siu Keung before? Have you ever killed any Siu Keung? (Less than two seconds)

Class (Remain silent)

T1 Are you afraid? (To Student 2) So who are afraid of Siu Keung? Put up your hand if . . . if you are afraid of Siu Keung. (To whole class)

S2 (Raises his hand)

T1 So who killed Siu Keung before? Killed (pretends to shoot cockroaches) . . . who killed Siu Keung before?

Class (Remain silent and some start to chat)

T1 No? I killed Siu Keung before.

However, the video data showed that no students volunteered to answer questions. The hypothesis that facilitator-oriented strategy can make the traditional IRF interaction meaningful appears not to be confirmed. A possible reason for this was that the teacher did not wait long for the answers from the students, and instead she kept throwing out questions. If the teacher had slowed down—asking one question at a time and providing a longer wait time—the result might have been different. This suggestion was raised with Teacher 1. She agreed with our view but explained she had to speed up due to insufficient time.

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When asked about facilitator-oriented strategy, the teacher agreed that it can be used in both teacher-centred and learner-centred classrooms and can help build a rapport between teachers and students. But the time factor was her major concern, especially in classrooms with strong pedagogical objectives. In order to attain both the pedagogical and communicative objectives, both skilful questioning techniques and time are required for a targeted language form-focused communicative dialogue to take place. She suggested that in order to give teachers space to create such kinds of authentic dialogue, a flexible schedule should be allowed.

Lesson 2
As pointed out before, Lesson 2 mainly combined the learner-oriented and facilitator-oriented strategies. Students worked in pairs and groups, and the role of the teachers was as facilitators who would intervene only when students had difficulties. Extract 2 shows how facilitator-oriented strategy helps promote participation and avoid group conflicts in a group discussion.

It was found that, unlike S1 and S2, who participated actively in the discussion, S3 remained silent. Teacher 1 intervened by using a facilitator-oriented strategy and succeeded in eliciting opinions from him. However, his opinion appeared to annoy S1 because what he had chosen was what S1 disagreed with earlier. In order to avoid conflicts, the teacher used backchannel 'yeah' and 'nodding' to calm S1 down. This shows that the facilitator-oriented strategy, if conducted properly, is a necessary complement to the learner-oriented strategy in learner-centred classrooms as it can facilitate participation and smooth the flow of student–student interactions.

Extract 2

S1 Which part we do?

S2 . . . this (points to p.10)

S1 mm . . . Part 1 . . . mm, not good. Not enough people.

S2 . . . Why?

S1 (Looks around and counts the student numbers) We three. But only two here.

S2 Yeah . . . yeah. (Nods his head)

T (Intervenes and turns to S3) . . . Peter, how about you? What's your view? (Invites participation)

S3 (Looks a bit shy) . . . mm . . . this . . . (points to p.10) . . . Siu Keung brave . . . brave . . .

T Good . . . you like this part because Siu Keung was brave, right?

S1 . . . but not enough people . . . (looks annoyed)

T Yeah . . . (nods her head) (backchannels to calm down S1)

S1 . . . (looks somewhat relieved) . . . OK . . . let's vote . . .

Conclusion

In this study, teacher interaction strategy was found to be not the only factor determining student reticence in classrooms. The pedagogical goals of the

lesson, the task/activities used, and the proficiency level of the students came into play. These factors were found to influence a teacher's decision on the use of interaction strategy(ies), suggesting that teachers' interactional choices are pedagogically related. Walsh (2006) argues teachers' 'interactive decision making' plays a role in student reticence and suggests teachers develop this skill through the use of reflective practice and professional dialogue. His suggestion is insightful and deserves further investigation.

The pedagogical value of facilitator-oriented strategy in a learner-centred classroom is confirmed, indicating that facilitator-oriented strategy could serve as a type of scaffolding support to ensure participation in and the smooth running of learner-centred activities. As for whether the facilitator-oriented strategy can make IRF pattern-filled classrooms interactive, no definite conclusion could be drawn due to the teacher's short wait time. In spite of this limitation, the results of this study show that teachers have to face problems when using the facilitator-oriented strategy in pedagogically oriented classrooms—professional skills, flexible teaching schedule, and time availability—all of which have implications for professional development and curriculum planning.

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Notes
1 Data taken from the classroom observations of a postgraduate diploma in education programme.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.

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