



ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 7 No 4 December 2022

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.7, No.4, December, 2022

Probing Reticence in ESL/EFL Classrooms Through a Theoretical Lens

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Abstract: In the context of classroom teaching, one important factor is student participation. When it comes to teaching English as a second or foreign language, the participation factor can make or break the pedagogical practices of instructors. Even curricula design pivots on classroom participation. Across several teaching methods, the issue of “reticence” emerges as a roadblock. Teachers and instructors find it to be a formidable challenge. Interestingly, in the literature, “reticence” has been dealt with as a challenge that needs to be overcome. However, in an attempt to overcome this challenge, theoretical insights often demand the classroom teaching to be motivating students to participate more through activities or exercises. Is this an appropriate solution to the problem, or is it becoming a constraint to overcome reticence? The current paper strategically unpacks select scholarly pieces of literature to find out if the suggested cure is actually a solution. In this paper, the objective is to understand the existing literature and provide a holistic understanding of theoretically overcoming the issue of “reticence” in the ESL/EFL classroom practices.

Keywords: reticence, ESL/EFL, Asia, anxiety, identity, passive learner, India.

Introduction

Teaching of English to non-native speakers often demand active classroom participation. However, many students, especially from Asia, show a restraint toward participating with peers in classroom activities. This problem is much more than just reluctance to participate in group tasks. It signals a much deep-rooted problem. This is known as “reticence” in the literature of language pedagogy. According to Keaten and Kelly (2000), reticence has cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions that result in this overt communication problem. It occurs because students believe that some participants choose to remain silent that appearing to be foolish or incompetent in front of peers. It operates on the notion of projected identity. It is a self-initiated mental process that is triggered by other-initiated public fear. The aim of this paper is to critically unpack



pieces of research work on this issue and suggest an alternative viewpoint to understand reticence. This paper will first discuss the literature and then will provide a better understanding of how one needs to view reticence in the domain of English language teaching to speakers of other languages in Asia.

Theoretical Background

Anderson (1993) focuses on how the communicative teaching method is used in China to teach English. He examines the pros and cons of this approach. He scrutinizes “the reasons for teaching and learning English in China, delineates the obstacles a communicative approach must overcome, and explains the advantages of using a communicative approach before citing the experiences of foreign teachers in the classroom and reviewing the attitudes of Chinese educators with respect to this approach.” Anderson further attempts to explore the same issue in a 6-week summer training program for young Chinese middle school English teachers, to what extent should communicative methodology be encouraged? How can this communicative approach benefit the teacher and his or her students? The article gives a precise description of what the basic tenets are of CLT. He explains (based on Maley 1984) that--

...the communicative approach is characterized by the following: (1) concentration on use and appropriateness rather than simply on language form, (2) a tendency to favor fluency-focused rather than simply accurately-focused activities, (3) communicative tasks are achieved through the language rather than simply exercises on the language, (4) an emphasis is placed on student initiative and interaction, rather than simply on teacher-centered direction, (5) there will be a sensitivity to learners' differences rather than a "lockstep" approach, and (6) there is an awareness of variations in language use rather than simply attention to the language.

(Anderson 471)

Tsui (1996), discusses the problem of reticence as a major issue in the context of Asia. As a basis of the study ESL teachers working in secondary schools Hong Kong were asked to reflect on their own teaching and identify the basic problem of getting students to respond. Their perception of this problem forms the main basis of possible action research. The study, as Tsui (147) suggests, is a study “...based on the classroom action research project of thirty-eight ESL teachers who were practicing teachers enrolled in the Postgraduate



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.7, No.4, December, 2022

Certificate in Education program at the University of Hong Kong...The teachers were predominantly Chinese, with teaching experience ranging from two to thirty years.” This work also foregrounds that teachers’ perceptions of student response is a crucial factor in ESL context. Students’ low proficiency, students’ fear of mistakes and derision, teachers’ intolerance of silence, uneven allocation of turns, and incomprehensible input are said to be the major factors in augmenting reticence. Tsui (1996) suggests that students are reluctant to participate because if they participate it will be considered as a “show-off” in the class by other students. Thus, verbal success in demonstrating good English in front of peers is derogatory in nature. This is an extremely unfamiliar issue to the Western culture of ESL teaching-learning. Hence, in spite of potential competence students might answer hesitantly and in short phrases to the teacher.

Another important piece of work in the discourse of reticence has been done by Liu and Littlewood (1997). In this paper, authors have drawn on studies which indicate East Asian students' seeming reluctance to speak, and then on their own surveys which contradict such observations. The study looks into the myth of passive Asian student and explores that the commonly believed negative identity associated with a language of colonization does not exist for Chinese learners. Most studies would explore the cause behind that and they would propound some effective strategies for ESL/EFL pedagogical purposes. While the notion of passive learner has become the potential topic for investigation, both supporting and debunking it have also been the motives of researchers. The paper talks about the different labels of the stereotyping associated with the Chinese ESL/EFL learners. It is sometimes suggested that students' apparent reluctance to speak English is caused by identity problems, i.e. the "banana complex" (in Asia, it is sometimes said that the use of English is frowned upon because that makes you a banana, yellow on the outside, white inside. See, for example, Branegan, 1991.). This kind of examples of specific labelling is eye-catching and elaborates a possible cause. The negative identity issue attached to speaking English, in terms of considering English as a language of Colonization, has also been discussed in this work. Although 57% of the responses suggest that they think English as a colonial language, there is no stigma attached to this. Moreover, 97% of the responses clearly indicate that the students want to learn English for brighter prospects in career.



Spratt (1999) compares learners' preferred activities with teachers' perceptions of what those preferences were. In this study, Spratt investigated some specific language learning activities were liked by the learners in the classroom. He then compared the preferences of the learners with what the teachers thought learners would prefer. The study used a questionnaire survey method for 997 tertiary level participant learners and 50 corresponding teachers at a university in Hong Kong. The data collection was done through 48 classroom activities. The results show that “teachers were able to gauge their learners' preferences with accuracy for 54% of activities, and that there was no clear pattern indicating in what activity areas (e.g. speaking, writing, listening) or with what activity types (communicative or non-communicative) predictions might be more or less accurate.” These results strongly influence how the curricula is designed and classroom teaching is conducted through active decision making by the teachers. An interesting finding of this study is that the learners rated communicative activities higher than other activities. This can entail a possible distinctive learning profile for Hong Kong tertiary learners.

Littlewood (2000) examines some common preconceptions about Asian students and their learning attitudes, in particular the belief that they see the teacher as an authority figure, and as a “fount of [all the] knowledge” (Liu, 1998: 8) which they will need to acquire. This study analyzes responses given by 2307 students at senior-secondary and tertiary levels in eight East Asian countries—Brunei, Mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Further responses from 349 students in Finland, Germany, and Spain were also collected. The students in eight Asian countries and three European countries responded to three statements which reflect these attitudes—“1. In the classroom I see the teacher as somebody whose authority should not be questioned, 2. I see knowledge as something that the teacher should pass on to me rather than something that I should discover myself, & 3. I expect the teacher (rather than me) to be responsible for evaluating how much I have learned”(Littlewood 32). The data in the responses show that common preconceptions do not align with what they want and there is less difference in the collective attitude between the learners from Asian and European countries. However, this difference is slightly higher in the cases on difference between individuals within the any country in the dataset.



Although the paper is relatively brief, it serves as an eye-opener on the existing void between perceived identity and aspired identity. Whereas most of the other studies would focus on the passivity stereotype of Asian students either as an identity and obstacle for ESL teaching-learning context or would totally debunk the notion of that stereotype, this article unfolds the reality where Asian students want to break free off that common preconception. The article also suggests that Asian students in fact do want to gain knowledge on their own instead of receiving from a “fount of knowledge”. Moreover, the study suggests that there is hardly any difference in answers among the average groups of students from Asia and Europe. This article inspires one in thinking or considering the notion of heterogeneous nature of individual beings rather than the culture-associated homogeneous nature of a huge body of diverse ESL learners in Asian context.

The ethnographic study by Jackson (2002) investigates the reticence of Chinese students in an English-medium, undergraduate, four-section business course in Hong Kong. The study’s primary base of research is the case-discussions in four sections. By the of way surveys and interviews as well observing and analyzing the video tapes of these events the researcher seeks to investigate the reasons of perceived reticence of the Chinese students. A complex mix of affective, sociocultural, and educational factors are found to play a significant role in determining the level of interaction. The findings suggest specific strategies that case leaders and business communications teachers might adopt to increase the participation of reticent students. Taking reticence as one of the most perplexing issues in this bilingual (Chinese and English), context. The findings of the study suggest that while the lecturers and American exchange students share similar perspectives on the reticence of Chinese students, Chinese students seem to differ a lot. American students and lectures think the cause of reticence to be their reserve education culture, low English proficiency levels, anxiety of losing face, and several others, Chinese students seem to have different reasons. Chinese reticent students of course mention the reasons of low English proficiency levels and anxiety of speaking in front the class, but there is something more than just these. American students’ and lectures’ perception of Chinese students of not liking case-based discussions and open-ended questions seem to be hugely different from the Chinese students’ opinion. Chinese students in fact seem to like case-based discussions but they do not like it when it is not locally related. Chinese students in spite of having high level of proficiency, seem to adhere to brevity and less talking to maintain harmony in discussions, and to not



express conflicting or challenging opinions in the classroom. While the American students in group works blame Chinese students of not talking much, the Chinese students accuse American fellows of talking more and leaving no scope for them to jump in. The entire article is extremely exhaustive and unfolds many layers of reticence-related research contexts.

In a qualitative study, Chen (2003), by using in-class task and after-class discussion groups, examines English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) undergraduate students' experiences with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) at a major mid-western university in the United States. In this work, Chen presents what students perceive and feel about their experience with CLT approach. The students also use certain frames of reference to gauge how they did in the ESL class. This study attempts to capture which communication-related events are most significant to the students by providing an insider perspective from the students. A holistic understanding of aspects such as cultural and personal was needed to better comprehend the classroom communication situation for the students. Hence in-depth interviews were used as a part of data collection. The findings shed light on the communication styles of the students, their coping mechanism for second language acquisition. As observed, this study investigates the formation of an inner world that participants often put themselves in. This study uses a backdrop of culture, human behavior, and understanding of methodology to figure out what students understand in terms of where they live, have lived, or will live. Moreover, this article talks about the overwhelming negative influence of the teaching method in promoting reticence, may be indirectly. The author discusses how the language teaching method implemented in the ESL class "greatly influences students'" anxiety levels. Surprisingly, CLT presupposes more engagement from students in the classroom but is highly likely to trigger more anxious student response than that of the traditional grammar-translation methods.

Yang and Lau (2003) discuss the attitudes students foster towards the English language pre and post their tertiary studies. Adding to the existing body of research in the similar vein, this study examines the language situation of 35 students in Hong Kong who are undergoing their university studies. The findings suggest the following things—1. Students were comfortable with the language environment offered in the academic setting, 2. They strongly agreed that learning the English language was important in the post-1997



era. These participants who received their first academic degree suggested a fixed curriculum at the secondary school level and a more flexible curricula for English course at the university level were conducive of their professional growth. They realized how important it is to possess a positive attitude towards the use of English. This study is based on a 3-year-long investigation which involved 42 (later on 35) participants. The findings of this study indicate that students more or less suggested that their English lessons in the university levels were difficult but they in fact learned something new. Some of the students said they had familiar lesson elements from their secondary schools but it was worth repeating those in university. Students of Business and Engineering majors specifically remarked that English courses at the university level aimed to enhance their research, reporting, and speaking skills and these will in turn help them prepare for job application materials and interview-handling strategies. The language environment in the university thus strengthens the foundations and prepares for the workplace in the future.

Savignon (2007) takes a rather critical perspective to gauge the future of the language teaching domain. He evaluates professional consequences of the challenges that language teachers and instructors might face. This study is a not necessarily tied to reticence but the methodological implications of communicative language teaching. Savignon (2007) uses probing questions such as “How will the needs and goals of the next generation of learners be met? Will applied linguists continue to assert an expert or authority status in the determination of practice? Or will a post-method era lead to the recognition of teachers as the professional decision-makers and theory builders that they in fact could be?” to tell the scholars in the field of language and linguistics as to how the current situation should prepare for the future. Said study particularly takes a look at the classroom teaching ESL or EFL for the upcoming CLT practices. The author also attempts to address questions around the nature of CLT, its position as a method, its characteristics that can be universally validated and used, its relevance to actual language teaching, etc. The author suggests in the paper (209), “the essence of CLT is the engagement of learners in communication in order to allow them to develop their communicative competence.” This work points the reader in the direction that CLT can grow into a multidisciplinary perspective that can draw from disciplines like, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and educational research. The argumentation has been to accommodate methodologies that promote the development of functional language ability through active participation of the learner in



communicative events. CLT may or may not use small group task. Thus, clarifying misconceptions about CLT the article voices a concern for a more “...a holistic, interactive, and learner-oriented CLT conception of language use and language learning (218).”

Tomlinson and Dat (2004) use a survey of 300 intermediate-level EFL adult learners on the participants' perception of the instruction they receive as well as 15 respective teachers at the National University of Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City. The primary objective of this study has been to understand how language learners can meaningfully inform English language teaching methodologies. The article does an impressive review of the literature to understand the perceptions and cultures of language learners as well as how the learners have previously informed classroom ELT methodologies. The study discusses the survey to further unpack the implications in terms of potential pedagogical interventions in the L2 classrooms in Vietnam and elsewhere. There is a strong inclination toward incorporating the “learner” needs and contributions. The survey study indicates that the language instructors were unaware of how effective the students perceived the methodology of the courses to a large extent. The teachers could not predict that the learners could positively welcome some modifications to the language-learning culture of the classrooms. The motivation of this study was commonly found reluctance or reticence of adult Vietnamese learners to participate in the classroom discourse. The study aims to inform that teachers feel differently about the classroom routine. Some find it self-satisfactory, where some find it boring and ineffective for oral communication. This study strongly recommends a culturally sensitive pedagogy as a vehicle to transfer culturally appropriate subject matter. However, this recommendation should not entail that each distinctive culture should dictate a fixed language teaching methodology, but some fixed methodological practices that have been effective so far in a specific culture do need to go through modification if they are supposed to be applied to another culture.

Molwaie and Rahimi (2010) attempts to investigate the supposed gaps of discrepancies between the perceived CLT tenets by language teachers and their actual classroom practices while they follow these tenets as principles. 100 teachers across different domains of a reputed school in Tehran responded to a research questionnaire about their attitudes on different CLT principles and how often they thought they



practiced those principles. The research questions in this study are: 1. What is EFL teachers' belief about different CLT principles? & 2. How do EFL teachers practice CLT principles in the context in which they teach? However, discrepancies were found in the observations. Some of the classrooms portrayed a rather deviant picture as far as the practicing the principles was concerned. The authors also conducted a post-observation interviews. In such interviews, teachers accepted the potential existence of discrepancies, but they warranted such arguments with practical reasons in the classroom scenario.

Banerjee (2010) investigates the issue of reticence or passivity of Asian learners in Western classrooms. The paper looks into the notion of "alleged passivity" of Asian learners. In so doing, Banerjee revisits the notion of reticence. According to him, it could majorly be the stereotype which is based on "superficial observations" (p. 151) causes the perceived passivity or reticence of Asian students. The paper draws upon several previous studies to elaborate on the literature and the understanding of reticence. The paper reiterates the possible factors causing reticence as unsuitable methodologies, intolerance for silence, fear or anxiety of the students, and cultural difference etc. Although the paper talks about the possible existence of reticence, it also tries to debunk the same existence by labeling it as alleged. He also says, it is most of the times the stereotype than the real existence of passivity that helps overstate the reticence. This paper also suggest some possible strategies to alleviate reticence, if there is any. The paper points out the loopholes in methodologies and also in students' behavior as a causes of reticence. While most of the studies explore the causes of reticence and the alleviating strategies, Banerjee challenges the very notion of reticence. He emphasizes the theoretical assumption of reticence is flawed many times because it is based on the stereotype of Asian students being reticence and passive. In so doing he does not ignore the possibility of Asian culture playing a role in alleged passivity, but he states that the alleged existence of reticence of Asian students has been blown out of proportion. According to him it needs attention before rushing for remedial measures. He also emphasizes the Western teachers' perception of reticence to be wrong enough to seeing reticence as on a binary scale, where either a student is reticent or not. He says it is a continuum where students could be reticent yet participating, depending on the context. There is no black and white segregation.



Discussion and Analysis

The twelve studies have been discussed in a nutshell view to portray the vivid picture of reticence and corresponding methodological issues. However, it is still beyond the scope of these twelve articles to elaborately unfold the complexities of the issue of reticence. In this discussion, the aim is to first talk about the ideas that have been gathered from these twelve pieces while connecting those ideas to the larger objective of the current research as necessary.

Tsui (1996) talks about the reticence-causing factors and also suggests plausible strategies to minimize the problem of reticence. In so doing, the author foregrounds a new perspective on the issue of “show-off” as a functional factor for reticence. Thus, verbal success in demonstrating good English in front of peers is derogatory in nature, at least in the said Asian context. In Banerjee (2010), he digs into the notion of reticence and possible factors behind it. He focuses more on the perception of reticence by different individuals. The study is grounded in the context of ESL/EFL students in Western schools or universities. Banerjee indicates that culture might play a role in promoting reticence but it is the prior assumption of reticence that gives birth to the problem. He says the number of passive Asian students is as frequent as any reticent student in any discipline. Therefore, the passivity is alleged in case of the Asian students, and according to him evidence supports this claim. Since the research interest of the current study aims to look into the issue of reticence, it is not feasible to not stand in support of Banerjee’s claim of reticence to be non-existing in the real world.

Jackson (2002) sheds light on the different perspectives of reticence causing factors. It shows that Chinese students, although having low level of English proficiency, mentions other reasons for their perceived reticence. The paper explains in spite of having competence Chinese (ESL/EFL) students prefer choosing brevity and harmony in discussion to challenging others’ ideas. They also complain about the lack of scope of talking when their American fellows are devouring on most of the scopes. Liu and Littlewood (1997) too seem to support this claim of Asian students’ reserve nature and sense of brevity as the cause of reticence. However, Liu & Littlewood (1997) add that higher expectation for perfect English is also a cause of students’ reluctance to speak up. Although many associate stigma with speaking a language of



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(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

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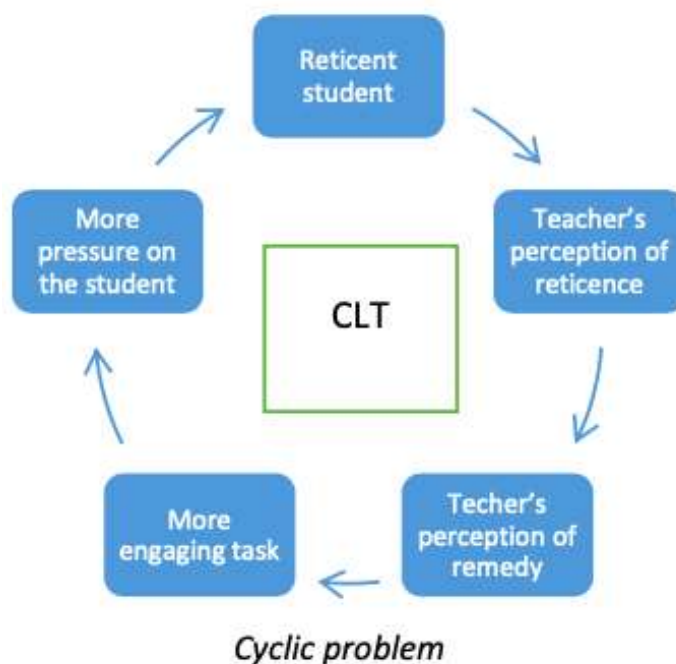
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colonization, Liu and Littlewood debunk that preconception. Littlewood (2000) aims to debunk the factor of Confucian tradition of Chinese pedagogy to be a reason for any reticence. Moreover, he motivates readers in thinking or considering the notion of heterogeneous nature of individual beings rather than the culture-associated homogeneous nature of a huge body of diverse ESL learners in Asian context.

Spratt (1999) talks about an almost 50% of gap between teachers' preferences and learners' preference sin ESI/EFL context. On the other hand, Yang and Lau (2003) show how satisfied and positive students are with their university-level English courses. Mowlaie and Rahimi (2010) talk about the gap between the teachers' belief and their actual practice of CLT in classroom situations, and argues for bridging that gap for the benefit of teaching as a whole. All these studies and their findings somewhat indirectly relate to my very own query or interest in regards to the topic of reticence. The next section will briefly elaborate on the research question and would try to establish that as a potential area of research for this current study and the ones in the future through informed recommendation.

Recommendations

The current study investigates the issue of reticence of ESL/EFL learners in classroom environment as a fallout of over-engaging teaching activities and how this kind of approach plays a boomerang in alleviating the issue of non-participation of the students. Although there is scarcity of available literature on this particular topic, this research presupposes the issue of motivating/employing too much of engaging classroom activities can be a potential factor in augmenting reticence rather than minimizing it. One only piece, Chen (2003), among this set of twelve to touches upon this issue. The critical analysis suggest that reticence is not just one problem. Rather, it is a cyclic problem where methodologies calling for over participation exacerbates the alleged issue of reticence. It creates a vicious cycle in the pedagogical practices.



Therefore, the current study calls for an approach that takes into consideration the culture, the heterogeneous nature of human beings, and is learner-centered. Tomlinson and Dat (2004) show how the needs and problems of learners are the paramount for any methodological inquiry and successful implementation. In the Indian context, which is not very different from other Asian contexts, teachers need an approach that tackle reticence with patience and should consider this problem which needs a long-term remedy. Like Banerjee (2010), ignoring the existence of reticence is not a cure. The paper argues that CLT is an a useful approach if handled with caution. The language learners in India have experienced grammar-translation and audiolingual methods of teaching for a long time. Thus, implementing communicative language teaching approach with a narrow perspective on oral communication is heavily flawed.

As suggested by Tomlinson and Dat (2004), educators and policy should aim for a flexible pedagogy that is more culturally sensitive and can serve as a better medium to transfer culturally appropriate content. This does not mean that one needs to think that each distinctive culture needs its own distinctive methodology. On the contrary, it necessitates the need for pedagogical practices that have proved effective in one culture need sensitive modification if they are to be accepted with effect by both teachers and students



in another culture. Therefore, Western pedagogical discoveries (like CLT) can be implemented in the countries like India, China, and Vietnam, where teacher-talk is said to be have been prevailing for ages. Here, it is crucial to draw an analogy between two games to explicate the rudimentary sense of the situation and a possible solution. The existing method(s) or the practice sees the students' engagement as a Soccer game, where the ball is yours if you can grab it. There is less scope for patience and equality. On the contrary, the approach should be of a game of Chess, where everyone gets a chance to play and there is lot of scope to strategize and act accordingly.

Conclusion:

To conclude, teachers should take into consideration the issue of reticence as a problem of an individual student and also as a problem for a particular group. The focus should be on the existence and also on the cause of the problem. Promoting a stress-free environment would minimize the problem. However, it does not guarantee a complete cure of the problem. However, it promises alleviation to a great extent. Any methodology should ground itself in the culture the students are coming from and should allow modification in the pedagogical practices. If the culture needs a beginning of Confucian way of teaching, let it be like that, and then gradually move towards a more advanced and fruitful Western approach. If the reticent student comes from a different culture that the rest of the class is not familiar with, give student the time and exposure to imbibe the cultural competence over time. Forcing too much of engaging classroom activities can be a potential factor to augmenting reticence rather than minimizing it. In implementing all these, teachers' education should also be regarded as a crucial factor. Teachers' acumen and flexibility play a major role in any ESL/EFL context. As Kumaravadivelu (1991: 98) states that "...the narrower the gap between teacher intention and learner interpretation, the greater are the chances of achieving desired learning outcomes."

It is a must to mention that more research in this area is needed. ESL/EFL candidates in India should serve as a potential research terrain. In the future research, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology can be the best approach. A large sample of data collected through both survey and interview questions should be the primary data set. Upon collection of data and primary analysis, in-depth qualitative



analysis can provide critical insights towards choosing the most appropriate strategy for research that aims at alleviating reticence in Indian ESL/EFL classrooms.

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(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.7, No.4, December, 2022

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