PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' RETICENT BELIEFS TOWARDS ORAL PARTICIPATION IN EAP CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate pre-service English teachers' reticent beliefs towards oral participation in English for Academic Purpose (EAP) classrooms. To this end, a survey was carried out using a self-report scale - the Reticent Belief Index (RBI). The participants were 144 pre-service English teachers enrolled in a teacher-training programme in Malaysia. They were all diagnosed with high level of reticence prior to the study. In addition, 24 pre-service teachers, selected randomly from among the survey participants, took part in a focus-group discussion. The results of the study revealed that the majority of the pre-service English teachers subscribed to eight beliefs presumed to be associated with reticent behaviour. Among these, the belief, "I can speak whenever I want to but I would rather listen" was considerably rated the most influential one. Additionally, a newly identified belief, 'Kiasuim' was also found to cause the pre-service teachers being reticent in the class. The findings suggest that, to alleviate pre-service teachers' reticence, a remedial course which incorporates cognitive aspect of reticence such as modifying irrational beliefs about oral participation, could be included in the current teacher training programme.

Keywords: *Reticent beliefs, pre-service English teachers, EAP classroom, kiasuism.*

INTRODUCTION

Student oral participation occupies an indisputable position in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom that operate within the communicative approach. In these classrooms, students are always encouraged to participate verbally in various communicative activities in order to enhance their aural-oral competencies and to develop more holistically in terms of their soft skills (Fauziah, *et al.,* 2012). Besides pair-work and small group discussion, students' ability to participate in open class discussions is also given great importance. Apart from providing students the opportunity to practise their speaking skills, it is a platform for teachers to evaluate their students' learning outcomes in class. Thus, in realisation of the fact that language learning is an active process and should involve talking (Cieniewicz, 2007) students are always expected to contribute orally during open class discussion. However, engaging in open class discussion can be a difficult and daunting task for many students (Karas, 2016). This is shown in their reticent behaviour when confronted with the task.

The phenomenon of student reticence has continuously been reported and become the focus of classroom-based research. Many of these have examined this issue from the perspectives of culture, speaking anxiety, teacher factor, and language proficiency. Most of the researchers predominantly

found that linguistic, teacher and cultural factors contribute greatly to ESL/EFL students' reticent behaviour in class (Xia, 2009). Along this line, the suggestions recommended for student improvement are also based on those factors. However, the existing literature in the field of English language teaching has not extensively examined the cognitive factor of student reticence and remediation. Furthermore, only one study (Keaten, Kelly & Finch, 2000) had empirically investigated students' reticent beliefs and belief change in a western educational context. Thus, given the influential role of belief system in learners' learning behaviour formation and behavioural change (Bandura, 1986), the present study was executed to explore reticent students' beliefs towards open class discussion in EAP classrooms.

METHODS

This mixed-methods study was undertaken to examine the beliefs of reticent pre-service teachers towards oral participation in EAP classrooms. The central research questions that frames this paper is: What beliefs do the pre-service English teachers hold that caused them to be reticent or to refrain from engaging in oral participation in EAP classrooms? The answers to this question were derived from the data collected via a survey and focus-group discussions.

The survey participants were 144 pre-service English teachers of a 3-year Bachelor of Education (TESL) (Teaching of English as a Second Language) programme at a state university in Malaysia. To meet the study requirement, the participants, at the time of data collection, had completed at least one of the EAP courses. This step was taken to ensure that the participants had experienced open-class discussion. Furthermore, as the programme requirement, all of them obtained band 4 to band 6 (between the range of satisfactory user and highly proficient user) in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Prior to the survey and focus- group discussions, the 144 participants (out of 346 TESL students) took a diagnostic test using the Reticence Scale (RS) and were identified as highly reticent in classroom oral participation. After the survey was administered, 24 participants were randomly selected to participate in focus group discussions. They were divided into 4 groups.

To research into the beliefs subscribed by reticent pre-service English teachers, the Reticent Belief Index (RBI) (Keaten, *et al.,* 2000) was first administered among the 144 participants. The RBI consists of 16 beliefs associated with reticence. These beliefs were identified from Phillips's (1984, 1991) previous work on reticence. The sixteen beliefs were built on a four-point Likert scale (range from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') to seek the participants' degree of agreement with each of the statements.

Focus group discussion was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the pre-service teachers' reticent beliefs. Besides complementing the RBI results, the qualitative data of the discussions would be able to inform the formation of reticent beliefs. During discussions, the participants were invited to share their experiences of being reticent during open class discussions. They were prompted to focus on the cognitive aspect of reticent experience in EAP classes that they were currently undergoing or had taken in the previous semesters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
RBI Findings: Pre-service English Teachers' Reticent Beliefs

Table 1 presents the distribution of responses on the degree of agreement towards the sixteen beliefs by the pre-service English teachers. Overall, the majority of them (more than 50%) expressed agreement with eight faulty beliefs presumed to be associated with reticent behaviour. On the top of this list is the belief of "I can speak whenever I want to but I would rather listen" (RB-1, 88.2%) and this is closely followed by the belief which indicated that they were good listeners in class (RB-2, 87.5%). Still centring on the value of listening in class, a high number of the students (80.6%) believed that "being a good listener is more important than being a good speaker" (RB-3). These are the top three beliefs held by the students. The fourth highly-agreed belief was that "good communicators speak spontaneously" (RB-4, 79.9%).

Table 1. Reticent pre-service teachers agreement with reticent beliefs (N=144).

Reticent Belief (RB)	Percentage (%)			
	Strongly disagree	*Disagree*	*Agree*	*Strongly agree*
1. I can speak whenever I want to but I would rather listen.	1.4	10.4	66.7	21.5
2. I am a good listener.	-	12.5	54.9	32.6
3. Being a good listener is more important than being a good speaker.	2.7	16.7	49.3	31.3
4. Good communicators speak spontaneously.	1.4	18.7	42.4	37.5
5. It is better to remain silent than to look foolish in front of others.	8.3	18.7	29.9	43.1
6. Excellent speakers are born.	7.6	32.6	39.0	20.8
7. In general, people talk too much in class.	10.4	29.8	54.2	5.6
8. I have more to gain by remaining silent than by talking in class.	8.3	41.0	43.8	6.9
9. Being a good communicator has little to do with achieving your goals in learning.	9.7	39.6	36.1	14.6
10. Communication skills cannot be taught; you either have them or you don't.	18.1	40.3	29.8	11.8
11. Nervousness about speaking in class is normal	-	8.3	43.1	48.6
12. Communication is the process by which we form our identity.	2.1	4.8	67.4	25.7
13. The most effective communicators are people who can adapt to their audience and the situation.	2.7	1.4	56.3	39.6
14. It is through communication that we are able to build close relationships with others.	-	4.2	40.2	55.6
15. Skillful speaking is a form of manipulation.	18.1	72.9	9.0	-
16. Speaking in class is not that important to me.	49.3	35.4	9.0	6.3

Focus Group Discussions Results

Three relevant themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of the focus group discussions. A newly identified reticent belief, 'Kiasuism' was discovered in one of the themes. Furthermore, the other two themes corroborated the reticent beliefs reported in the RBI results above, namely 'losing face if making mistakes' and 'just wait and listen because others will speak'.

Kiasuism

'Kiasuism' was identified as a new reticent belief subscribed by the pre-service English teachers. This belief influenced the pre-service teachers exhibited *kiasu* attitude towards oral participation in class. With respect to this, Hwang et al (2002) categorised 'kiasuism' as 'positive kiasu' and 'negative kiasu'. 'Positive kiasu' is characterised by individuals' beliefs and behaviours that being diligent and hardworking would optimise one's performance and outshine other counterparts. On the contrary, 'negative kiasu' reflects "the use of guile, deceit and selfishness to gain competitive advantage" (Kirby & Ross, 2007, p. 111) and involves "keeping knowledge and advantage to oneself" (Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014, p. 435).

In this study, a number of the pre-service English teachers were found holding negative kiasu-based belief towards oral participation in EAP classes. Their negative kiasu mindset was reflected in their elaborated responses as follows:

> *"Sometimes I actually got the answers and had some ideas in mind...but why should I say it out, right... because I read up and get the answers by searching everywhere so why must I give others easily?" (Pre-service teacher, PST-6)*

These statements also accord with Kirby and Ross's (2007) view that being *kiasu* is a tactic. Most of them admitted that they were reticent because of their kiasu mindset towards their classmates and their desire to excel over the others.

Losing face if making mistakes

The strong value of *face* among the pre-service English teachers held back their desire to participate in open class discussions. In other words, they hold the belief that whenever they make mistakes, others will impose negative evaluation on them. Some of these comments are presented below:

"I was not scared to speak up actually or answer any question but I was thinking that I should not speak a single word because even a small mistake, I think everyone will laugh at me...If I have no choice then I have to answer when the lecturer suddenly asked me something. Normally I will keep it short." (PST-8)

Just wait and listen because others will speak

This is related to the belief, "I can speak whenever I want to but I would rather listen" in RBI. Some of them perceived that oral participation in class is a choice, and thus they opted not to take part:

"Sometimes I am not sure about the answer, but even if I know I choose not to respond because I don't feel the need to talk a lot...is not that I cannot speak, just that, you know, there are so many people in class, so no need for me to talk" (PST-3)

Some of the pre-service English teachers also believed that it is not necessary to orally participate in class because other students would contribute their part or the lecturers would give the necessary answers:

"I feel that I would rather listen to the lecturer than interfering by asking questions or giving my ideas on a specific topic because even we don't answer or give any ideas, at the end the lecturer will tell us everything." (PST-20)

These responses revealed that the reticent pre-service teachers hold a passive mindset in which they opted to wait for information. It can be concluded that reticence, although being portrayed as a passive learning behaviour, is largely rooted in learners' passive mindset.

CONCLUSION

It was found from this study that the majority of the pre-service English teachers subscribed to eight beliefs described by Phillips (1984, 1991) in RBI. Some of these beliefs, such as "It is better to remain silent than to look foolish in front of others", "I have more to gain by remaining silent than by talking in class" and "I can speak whenever I want to but I would rather listen" were then confirmed in the focus group discussions to have associated with their reticent behaviour in EAP class. This finding indicates that apart from the widely reported linguistic, socio-cultural, personality and pedagogical factors, cognitive factor such as learners' beliefs towards oral participation would also influence their reticent behaviour in class to a great extent.

In addition to the above, the pre-service English teachers held a 'negative kiasu' mindset or belief towards oral contribution in class. This negative belief is not in favoured by any classroom members who always strive for knowledge-sharing because being negative kiasu can be damaging to task performance especially when group-based tasks are required (Kirby & Ross, 2007). In this study, being negatively kiasu-motivated signifies that the pre-service teachers' reticence is a conscious behaviour. As reported in the interview results, due to *kiasu* mindset, they deliberately adopted reticent behaviour as 'competitive learning strategies' (Johnson, *et al.,* 1981, cited in Hodkinson & Porapat, 2014) in an attempt to gain competitive advantage over other students in class. In the view of Okereke and Ugwuegbula (2014), 'competitive learning strategy' occurs when one student strives to be the best in a group, in which only his/her goal is achieved and all others fail to reach that goal. This behaviour reflects a phenomenon of *selfishness* and *afraid to lose to others* among the pre-service teachers due to the belief that they would not be able to compete with other students if they share all their knowledge. Besides that, this is also an indirect strategy for the pre-service teachers to gain good image of 'academic intelligence' or the "ability to solve problems in academic (classroom-like) settings" (Grigorenko, *et al.,* 2004, p. 184) from their lecturers, especially when they demonstrate or apply those perceived 'new' knowledge or ideas in course assessments. Due to these reasons, they intentionally kept their ideas and suggestions by remaining reticent during open class discussion. To date, the construct of 'Kiasuism' has not been discussed or examined in the present literature on student reticence; therefore, it could possibly be added to the existing list of reticent beliefs for further examination in the future.

The discovery of these beliefs lends support to the cognitive dimension of reticence (Keaten, Kelly & Phillips, 2009; Phillips, 1984, 1997). Therefore, it is important for language teachers to identify various beliefs affecting learners' oral participation, and work out suitable plans for remediation. Overall, although the results of this study may not be generalizable to other classroom situations, it has raised a consideration to the need of including a remedial component in the existing teacher training programme to help modify the reticent pre-service English teachers' faulty beliefs towards oral participation.

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