

# The Relationship between Reticence and Personality Types in Iranian University EFL Classrooms

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**Abstract**—Reticence is regarded as a problematic phenomenon among students in EFL classrooms. The present study was an attempt to explore the issue of reticence in Iranian foreign language classrooms. The study examined the relationship between students' reticence and their personality types among university EFL learners. For this purpose, the Reticence Scale-12 (RS-12) questionnaire and the 60-item NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) questionnaire were used. Moreover, interviews with the participants about reticence were employed to find the students' ideas about reticence in the classroom. The results revealed that the five personality types affected Iranian EFL students' reticence. In addition, educational, situational, and emotional factors contributed to the students' reticence in EFL classrooms. It can be concluded that teachers' awareness of learners' reticence can help them match their teaching styles with their students' personality types, and choose more appropriate activities that can enhance EFL learners' participation. The study can have implications and applications for both teachers and students.

**Index Terms**— reticence, personality type, NEO five-factor inventory, classroom oral participation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Students often avoid oral participation in EFL classrooms. Among all kinds of classroom phenomena, the most frustrating one is that students will not actively participate in classroom discussions (Li & Liu, 2011). "When people avoid communication because they believe it is better to remain silent than to risk appearing foolish", this behavior is called as *reticence* (Keaten & Kelly, 2000). Despite the students' awareness of the importance of spoken English, still many students are reticent and quiet in EFL classrooms (Tani, 2005).

Reticence and non-participation in language classrooms is problematic because learners should be orally active in the target language in order to progress their foreign language (Jackson, 2002). On the other hand, students with varying personality types may respond to the same situation differently. Thus, personality traits make a difference in how students learn and what they learn (Myres & Myres, 1980). Hence, awareness of the of reticence of the EFL students in language classrooms and the relationship between learners' personality and their reticence in EFL classroom can play an important role in identifying the potential causes of verbal nonparticipation and encouraging the students to speak and express their ideas in oral language classrooms. Meanwhile, it can help the teachers to come to a better understanding of the students' behavior in the learning situations.

Despite the importance of students' reticence in the EFL classroom, and students' personality, few investigations have been done in Iran in these areas particularly in university context. It is important to explore these issues in more depth and help students become more active in foreign language learning classroom. The present study investigated on classroom reticence and explores the relation between university EFL learners' reticence and personality type in English as foreign language classrooms in Iran. Moreover, factors contributing to students' reticence are discussed.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reticence has been a problem among EFL students in language classrooms. Li and Liu (2011) argued that reticent individuals avoid communication in social and public contexts, particularly situations that have the potential for negative evaluation.

In an investigation of case-based teaching and learning, Jackson (2002) revealed that most students failed contributing to classroom discussions. Even if they made some contribution, their speech was short. The findings showed that lack of vocabulary, unwillingness to challenge professors, fear of losing face, personality, lack of familiarity with the cases, anxiety and lack of incentive influenced students' non-participation and reticence.

Students' reticence in oral English lessons at the tertiary level was explored by Liu and Jackson (2009), concluded that students with a higher proficiency level were more willing to be active in class. Moreover, the students' least

favorite activity was giving a lecture, while pair work was a popular activity. Students' willingness to take part in class activities was found to increase as a result of their exposure to spoken language and familiarity with the environment. In an ethnographic study, Baktash and Chalak (2015) observed that learners behaved passively in Iranian EFL classrooms. It was found that classroom atmosphere and learners' proficiency level can influence students' nonparticipation in the classrooms discussions.

On the other hand, personality factors significantly influence the degree of success that individuals achieve in learning a second language (Gass & Selinker, 1994). Some features of the learner's personality might encourage or impede second language learning (Cook, 1996). Thus certain aspects of language learning are required to be enhanced while others need to be inhibited (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

An individual's personality trait determines one's behavior relatively and underlines a stable style of thinking, feeling and acting (Hogan, 1991; Mc Crae & Costa 1997). The NEO five-factor model of personality comprises of validation, recognition, and practical consideration across a broad domain of fields, including clinical psychology, industrial-organizational psychology, and health psychology (Widiger & Trull 1997).

Liu (2012) explored the predicting effects of personality traits, self-esteem, language class risk-taking and sociability in Chinese EFL learners' performance in English at the tertiary level. The results revealed that these factors were correlated with one another and with the students' performance in English and self-esteem, language class risk-taking, language class sociability proved to be powerful predictors for the students' performance in English.

Tahriri, Divsar, and Ashouri (2015) explored the relationship between male and female EFL learners' learning styles and their personality types. The study indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between males and females' learning styles and their personality types.

The fact is that there is hardly any study in the world that targeted the relationship between students' reticence and their personality type particularly when it happened in language classroom. The present study intended to answer the following question:

1. What is the relationship between EFL students' reticence and their personality types in Iranian university classrooms?
2. What factors contribute to the EFL students' reticence in Iranian university classrooms?

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Participants

This study was a mixed method in design. The study was conducted at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch and University of Isfahan, Iran. Data were gathered during the first semester of the 2014-2015 (Iranian academic year). The participants of this study were 102 Iranian undergraduate EFL students, majoring in English Language and Literature. Their age ranged from 18 to 28. They were all first year students enrolled in listening and speaking courses. Their privacy was observed when the data were analyzed and tabulated.

#### B. Instruments

The present study employed the Persian version of the 60-item NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), the Reticence Scale-12 or RS-12 questionnaire (Kelly, Keaten, Hazel, & Williams, 2007), and a set of questions (as the interview) as the data collection instruments. The RS-12 measures the level of reticence along six dimensions (two items per dimension) of social situation reticent individuals experience in (a) feelings of anxiety, (b) knowledge about topics, (c) timing skills, (d) organization of thoughts, (e) delivery skills and (f) memory. The 12 items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. The students were asked to specify their age and their proficiency level.

The focus of NEO-FFI lied the five broad domains: Extroversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness. The Persian version of the NEO-FFI was utilized in this study. Each of these five domains is represented by 12 items that must be scored on 5-point Likert scales. Consequently, scores are ranged from 12 to 60. In order to reveal the participants' beliefs about reticence and their experiences in EFL classrooms, a set of semi-structured questions was employed as the interview.

#### C. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The NEO-FFI and the RS-12 questionnaires were distributed among the participants in six listening and speaking course. Both questionnaires were given to the participants at the same time. They responded to the questionnaires in 30 minutes. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and justified that their responses would be anonymous.

RS-12 is a reliable instrument used to measure the students' reticence in EFL classrooms. The overall Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the reticence questionnaire was 0.88 which is high. The total score of RS-12 for each student was calculated. It revealed a student's tendency to be reticent in the class.

Alph Cronbach reliability coefficient for the NEO-FFI five personality factors were C= .89, A=.85, O=.83, E=.81, N=.81. Mean and median score were calculated. Moreover, Pearson correlation between students' reticence and five personality factors was calculated in order to determine the relation between them. Moreover, Pearson correlation between students' reticence and five personality factors was calculated, to see the relation between these factors.

A semi-structured interview was conducted. This qualitative component was essential to the study because it led to a precise analysis of reticence. Twenty eight students were participated in the interview voluntarily. The anonymity of participants was emphasized. For better perception and justification, the interviews were conducted in Persian. The interviewees' responds were recorded, transcribed and translated.

#### IV. RESULTS

##### A. Results of the Reticence Scale (RS-12) Questionnaire

Based on the six dimensions, the 12 items in RS-12 express the students' passivity in classroom participation. A value of 5 was given to 'Strongly Agree'. A value of 1 was given to 'Strongly Disagree' and so forth. Therefore, the total score of RS-12 expressed a student's tendency to be reticent in foreign language classroom based on the six dimensions.

The results of the RS-12 questionnaire illustrated the mean score (see Table 1) of 34.94, a median of (36.00) and a mode of (36), which all were above the scale midpoint 31 at IAUKB. This further confirms that majority of the students were experiencing reticence in the EFL classrooms. In addition, at UI, the mean score of 29.33, with a median of (30.67) which are close to midpoint 29, and the mode of 18 which is below 29 indicates that more than half of the students were reticent in the EFL classrooms at University of Isfahan.

TABLE 1.  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF RS-12 AT IAUKB AND UI

	Midpoint	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Range
<b>IAUKB</b>	31	34.94	36	36	8.19	37
<b>UI</b>	29	29.33	30.67	18	9.81	35

IAUKB=Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch

UI=University of Isfahan

As the results of IAUKB are shown in Table 2, more than half of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were nervous and about two third felt tense when talking. Moreover, about half of the students stumble over their words and around one third of them muddle their words in speaking. In addition, the findings of the present study revealed that more than half of the students agreed that they forgot what they wanted to say and about one sixth of them agreed that they lost sight of what to say. Based on the findings, one third of the students agreed that their thoughts were jumbled or disorganized. Less than one fourth of the students needed to wait or hesitate too long to say something. Furthermore, less than one fourth of the students were unaware of what to say and more than one third of them agreed that they were unfamiliar with subject.

Based on the results, about one third of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were nervous and felt tense when talking. Furthermore, the findings of the present study revealed that about one third of the students stumble over their words and one fifth of them muddle their words during speaking. Moreover, one sixth of the participants agreed that they forgot what they wanted to say and one fifteenth of them agreed that they lost sight of what to say. The results also showed that less than one sixth of the students agreed that their thoughts were jumbled and less than one third of them agreed or strongly agreed that their thoughts were disorganized. In addition, Table 2 reveals that about one sixth of the students needed to wait or hesitate too long to say something. Furthermore, less than one sixth of the students were unaware of what to say and more than one third of them agreed that they were unfamiliar with subject.

The results of the RS-12 questionnaire showed that most of the participants were found to be reticent. As illustrated in Table 2, anxiety and then delivery skills were the major problems of the students at both universities. Memory, organization of thoughts, knowledge about topics, and timing and were respectively the next EFL students' problems at IAUKB. Moreover, the next dimensions in which the students of UI had problems were organization of thoughts, knowledge about topics, timing skills, and memory respectively.

TABLE 2.  
STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO RS-12 STATEMENTS AT IUAKB AND UI

Dimensions & Items		SD		D		N		A		SA	
		f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p
1. I am nervous when talking.	IAUKB	5	6.9	20	27.8	12	16.7	27	37.5	8	11.1
	UI	6	20	9	30	4	13.3	9	30.0	2	6.7
2. I feel tense when talking.	IAUKB	0	0	8	11.1	10	13.9	43	59.7	11	15.3
	UI	5	16.7	5	16.7	9	30.0	11	36.7	0	0
3. I stumble over my words.	IAUKB	5	6.9	17	23.6	13	18.1	32	44.4	5	6.9
	UI	8	26.7	8	26.7	3	10	11	36.7	0	0
4. I muddle my words.	IAUKB	6	8.3	22	30.6	22	30.6	19	26.4	3	4.2
	UI	6	20.0	14	46.7	4	13.3	5	16.7	1	3.3
5. I forget what I want to say when talking.	IAUKB	4	5.6	14	19.4	16	22.2	35	48.6	3	4.2
	UI	8	26.7	8	26.7	9	30.0	4	13.3	1	3.3
6. I lose sight of what I want to say when talking.	IAUKB	10	13.9	26	36.1	22	30.6	14	19.4	0	0
	UI	9	30.0	14	46.7	5	16.7	2	6.7	0	0
7. My thoughts are disorganized.	IAUKB	7	9.7	26	36.1	15	20.8	19	26.4	5	6.9
	UI	8	26.7	7	23.3	10	33.3	5	16.7	0	0
8. My thoughts are jumbled.	IAUKB	6	8.3	24	33.3	19	26.4	20	27.8	3	4.2
	UI	9	30.0	8	26.7	5	16.7	8	26.7	0	0
9. I wait too long to say what I want to say.	IAUKB	14	19.4	24	33.3	17	23.6	13	18.1	4	5.6
	UI	5	16.7	12	40.0	9	30.0	4	13.3	0	0
10. I hesitate too long to say what I want to say.	IAUKB	7	9.7	27	37.5	21	29.2	16	22.2	1	1.4
	UI	6	20.0	13	43.3	6	20.0	5	16.7	0	0
11. I am unaware of what to say.	IAUKB	7	9.7	34	47.2	15	20.8	16	22.2	0	0
	UI	7	23.3	16	53.3	3	10.0	4	13.3	0	0
12. I am unfamiliar with what to say.	IAUKB	7	9.7	16	22.2	22	30.6	24	33.3	3	4.2
	UI	6	20.0	7	23.3	10	33.3	5	16.7	2	6.7

SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; UD = undecided; A = agree; SA = strongly

### B. Results of Neo-FFI Questionnaire

Results of the NEO-FFI questionnaire for IAUKB and UI are presented separately in Table 3. In the NEO-FFI for each factor those who receive scores (12-24) are low; scores (24-48) are average and (48-60) are high. As it is shown in table 4, in both universities majority of the participants fell in the range of average (24-48) and few were in the high category (48-60) while very few learners received low scores (12-24) and for some factors there were no participants for low score. Students were in the average range, had the following features in common. They tended to be:

1. generally calm and able to deal with stress, but sometimes experience feelings of guilt, anger, and sadness.
2. moderate in activity and enthusiasm. Enjoy the company of others but also value privacy.
3. practical but willing to consider new ways of doing things; seek a balance between the old and the new.
4. generally warm, trusting, and agreeable, but you can sometimes be competitive.
5. dependable, moderately well-organized; generally have clear goals but are able to set you work aside.

TABLE 3.  
PERSONALITY TYPES AT IUAKB AND UI

	12-24		24-48		48-60		N
	f	p	f	p	f	p	
<b>IAUKB</b>							
Neuroticism	8	11.11	58	80.56	6	8.33	72
Extroversion	1	1.39	62	86.11	9	12.5	72
Openness	0	0	68	94.44	4	5.55	72
Agreeableness	1	1.39	68	94.44	3	4.17	72
Conscientiousness	0	0	51	70.83	21	29.17	72
<b>UI</b>							
Neuroticism	3	10	22	73.33	5	16.67	30
Extroversion	0	0	26	86.67	4	13.33	30
Openness	1	3.33	26	86.67	3	10	30
Agreeableness	0	0	26	86.67	4	13.33	30
Conscientiousness	0	0	20	66.67	10	33.33	30

### C. Results of the Relationship between Reticence and Personality Types

To uncover the existence/inexistence of a relationship between reticence and personality types at both universities, Pearson correlation formula could have been used.

The results of table 4 illustrates that the relationship between reticence and neuroticism was a significant positive one ( $r = .460$ ) at IAUKB. In addition, the relationships between reticence and the other personality types (i.e. extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) are  $-.066$ ,  $-.185$ ,  $-.227$ , and  $-.347$  respectively which are negative relationship.

Moreover, Table 4 also shows the results of the regression analysis conducted for the purpose of this research question at University of Isfahan. The correlation between reticence and Neuroticism was a significant positive one

(.561) at University of Isfahan. A significant negative correlation (-.583) exists between reticence and Extroversion. There are negative relationships between reticence and other personality types (i.e. Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) which are -.017, -.099, and -.263, respectively.

TABLE 4.  
RESULTS OF PEARSON CORRELATION FOR THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN PERSONALITY TYPES AND RETICENCE AT IAUKB AND UI

		Reticence	Neuroticism	Extroversion	Openness	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	
<b>IAUKB</b>	Reticence	1.00	.460	-.066	-.185	-.227	-.347	
	Neuroticism	.460	1.00	-.490	-.159	-.404	-.522	
	Pearson Correlation	Extroversion	-.066	.490	1.00	-.220	.371	.229
	Openness	-.185	.159	-.220	1.00	-.078	-.040	
	Agreeableness	-.227	-.464	.371	-.078	1.00	.410	
	Conscientiousness	-.347	-.522	.299	-.040	.410	1.00	
<b>UI</b>	Reticence	1.00	.561	-.583	-.017	-.099	-.263	
	Neuroticism	.561	1.00	-.484	-.203	-.320	-.161	
	Pearson Correlation	Extroversion	-.583	-.484	1.00	.504	.432	.115
	Openness	-.017	-.203	.504	1.00	.419	-.139	
	Agreeableness	-.099	-.320	.432	.419	1.00	-.009	
	Conscientiousness	-.263	-.161	.115	-.139	-.009	1.00	

#### D. Results of the Interview

A series of semi-structured interview questions were conducted in order to revealed the participants' ideas and experiences about reticence in foreign language classrooms. Twenty of the students at IAUKB and ten of the students at UI were participated in the interview voluntarily.

The results of the interview at IAUKB showed that more than half of the interviewees had trouble with the grammatical points, constructing sentences, and listening. Therefore, they were reticent because they did not express their ideas as they expected. They pointed out that they need enough time to think about or even write what they intended to say. They claimed that most of the time, they were not able to understand most parts of the listening context, and did not have any idea to state.

About half of the interviewees mentioned that they were not confident enough and about half of the participants felt afraid of their classmates' reaction. More than half of the students stated that they wouldn't participate in class if they were not interested in topic. Most of the students said that the instructor traits and method had a strong impact on their reticence and tense. About two third of the participants mentioned that the instructor's behavior and practice help them be less nervous and more confident to participate in class.

Based on the results of interview at UI, less than one third of interviewees mentioned that lack of English proficiency made them be reticent. About half of them pointed out that lack of self confidence made them not speak in class or answer to the teacher's question voluntarily. Two of them believed that the level of proficiency of their classmates was so high that they preferred to be reticent than making mistakes or hesitating too much in front of their classmates and the instructor. They kept thinking that other students were better at English than them.

One fourth of the interviewees reported that they did not like to speak even in their mother tongue. One of them claimed that although he was not a talkative person at all, he attempted to participate in EFL classrooms to benefit from, but he was still one of the most reticent students among his classmates. The instructor trait and the method that s/he used influenced on the students participation and their reticence. One fourth of the participants stated that other students had already given the ideas before they intended to start speaking. Therefore, they did not have any other thing to share with their classmates. More than half of the interviewees mentioned that they would not discuss about a subject that they found uninteresting.

Generally, at both universities, the majority of the interviewees mentioned that their fear of others reaction and the teachers' evaluation was gradually decreasing, because they got acquainted with the students and the teacher. They claimed that they had improved in comparison with the beginning of the semester.

#### V. CONCLUSION

This study revealed that reticence exists among students at all levels of proficiency in EFL classrooms. As reticence has been found to be a problematic behavior by many EFL instructors, this issue should be studied seriously. It has been explored that psychological factors contribute to students' reticence and makes it a serious problem in foreign language learning.

The results showed that personality types influence on the EFL students' reticence. The influence is more prominent among the students with higher proficiency level. Moreover, educational, situational, and emotional factors impact on the EFL learners' reticence. For instance, level of proficiency, anxiety, teacher's trait, to be interested in the subject, teaching method, fear of making mistakes, and self-confidence had a large effect on reticence. In order to avoid reticence and its consequences in EFL classrooms, both teachers and students are expected to transform the classrooms into a more active one.

Teachers' awareness of learners' reticence can help them match their teaching styles with their students' personality types and choose more appropriate activities that can enhance EFL learners' participation. Furthermore, students should practice a lot to improve their proficiency level. The results of the study can help language learners and teachers consider the psycholinguistic aspects in learning and teaching. Special curriculum can be developed to provide treatment for individuals with communication difficulties in the classrooms.

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