

Chinese College Students' Reticence in English Classes: A Narrative Grammar Analysis

Ying Wang

School of English studies, Beijing International Studies University

ysa_wang@outlook.com

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/bjmas.2022.04890>

Published April 29, 2025

Citation: Wang Y. (2025) Chinese College Students' Reticence in English Classes: A Narrative Grammar Analysis, *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies*: 6(2), 116-131

Abstract: *This study aims at exploring Chinese college students' reticence in English classes. It is focused on finding the reasons why the students choose to keep silence in the classes and revealing the relationship between their reticence and identity construction. The study has been carried out with narrative inquiry and narrative grammar analysis has been applied to the interview data. It is found that major reasons for the participants' reticence in English classes include the transfer of perception of incompetence, a habit of being silent in classes and personality from the learner's past self to the present self, the learner's lack of investment in study and the insufficient assistance from the teachers. Based on the findings, it is concluded that through the reticence in classes, the students are constructing an identity of an inactive student and it is the students and the teachers that are the 'heroes' in the narrative who can make efforts to retrieve the value of active participation in classes to improve the students' learning achievements.*

Keywords: reticence in foreign language classes, Chinese college students, identity construction, narrative inquiry, narrative grammar

INTRODUCTION

Students' reticence is one of the problems which foreign language teachers are confronted with in class-room teaching. The problem has been attracting research attention in the fields of second language learning and applied linguistics. Causes for students' reticence are considered multifaceted, involving various factors (Bernales, 2016; Hsu, 2015). For example, Edstrom (2015) revealed that reliance on the first language and the role that teachers play in foreign language classrooms were influential on students' reticence. What's more, previous research studies have revealed that even though foreign language learners may be reticent in classrooms, they are not completely passive (Sang & Hiver, 2021); their reticence may have advantages (Miller & Zuengler, 2011; Saylag, 2014). Studies such as Granger (2004) and Sang and Hiver (2021) address the possible connection between foreign language learners' reticence in classrooms and identity, which is quite significant to the current study. This study aims to join the exploration of the connection between students' reticence, in particular Chinese university students' reticence, in foreign language classrooms and their identity construction. It is carried

out through narrative inquiry from a semiotic perspective. In specific, Greimas's narrative grammar was adopted as the framework of analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and Reticence in Second Language Classrooms

Previous research studies reveal a couple of characteristics of students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in second language classrooms and their reticence which is a distinct state concerning WTC. First of all, WTC in second language classrooms receive influences from various factors. Bernales (2016) claimed, learners' participation in classroom teaching and learning is multifaceted based on her investigation of German-as-foreign-language learners' participation in classroom. The study took MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model for second language learners' Willingness to Communicate in L2 as the core framework for reference. In response to her criticism of the model for ignoring the entire context for learners' decisions on whether to speak in L2 as it was restricted to only the "resulting articulation of L2 speech", Bernales revealed "...additional variables, such as processing time needed to produce L2 speech; students' L2 skill level and motivation; the fact that students are at least nascent bilinguals and may wish to draw on their additional language(s); a sense of solidarity towards their peers; and specific classroom or group norms regarding in-class interactions" (p. 10). Her conclusion echoes Hsu's (2015) conclusion which was drawn from a study of concerns that were raised in the transitional experiences from a L2-learner role in secondary education to L2-user role in tertiary education. Hsu's (2015) study was carried out in a university in Taiwan, China. Data were collected through surveys from the participants who were non-English-major freshmen students. Data analysis revealed the students' low participation in class and its correlation with English listening competence and final course grades. The participants attributed their low participation in class to factors such as communicative barriers, participation apprehension, fear of performing inadequately in front of the class, insufficient confidence in their English-speaking ability, personal state, participatory habits, preferences and also the lack of thoughts to express. Based on the findings, Hsu (2015) stressed that students' participation in foreign language classes was a complicated issue that was related to various factors such as linguistic, interpersonal and affective variables. At the same time, Hsu (2015) pointed out that factors such as a positive classroom atmosphere and teachers' support are important but not sufficient to solve the problem of low participation. Concerning teachers' role in second language classrooms, Edstrom (2015) not only shared Hsu's (2015) confirming of its importance but also highlighted it. Edstrom (2015) studied students' participation in Spanish-as-a-foreign-language classes. Learners' participation was defined as "...their involvement in and contribution to class activities" (p.29). Besides affirming the importance of interaction patterns as were suggested in Storch's (2002), the study revealed that the learners used L1 extensively in a foreign language class interaction and stressed the role that the teacher played in the class. Edstrom (2015) believed that teachers could play an important role in fostering collaboration.

Besides the multiplicity of impact that it receives, students' WTC in second language classrooms was found to have dynamic fluctuations. Peng, Zhang and Chen (2017) carried out a multiple-case study to investigate the dynamic fluctuations of willingness to communication (WTC) in English as a foreign language classroom in China. Their study was focused on

gestures with the support of gaze and language. They found that in the high WTC scenario, mental processes which were associated with the time when the student was talking and the teacher listened to him or her attentively were more frequently identified than in the low WTC scenario; also, in the high WTC scenario, adjacent moves which were more evenly distributed between students and the teacher were found. Meanwhile, no significant difference was identified in patterns in interpersonal meanings between the high WTC scenario and the low WTC scenario.

In addition, Sang and Hiver (2021) stressed that L2 reticence could be learners' conscious decision rather than passive compromise through their investigation of Chinese students' L2 reticence from a language socialization perspective. They argued, even if the learners did not make any output in L2, they may be actively involved in the learning process.

Even though students' reticence in second language classrooms is usually considered negative as it reduces the chances of practice in the second language, yet there are studies that address the possible advantages of the reticence. In a study to investigate learners' access to participation in a high school sheltered civic class, Miller and Zuengler (2011) gained an unexpected finding that a learner's lack of English proficiency and resistance to certain classroom practices were two situations in which the learner might gain central participation in classroom practice. At the same time, they observed that the central participation that was gained with the lack of English proficiency was not empowering to the learner. Also, whether the learner's resistance could successfully lead to central participation was affected by the linguistic capital that a learner can claim in a particular practice. Besides, they found that involving marginalized learners into the class participation was constructive in others' negotiation of linguistic capital. Similarly, Saylag (2014) who considered silence a significant social and psychological component in teaching spoken language observed that students felt obliged to speak by teachers' talk and argued that the advantage of silence to allow students some time to think should be considered.

While the above-mentioned achievements in the research on students' reticence in second language classrooms are valuable reference for further research, caution has been made concerning the validity of the research studies. Roberts (2014) conducted a review study of research on the silence stage in children's second language acquisition. With her analysis of the previous study, Roberts (2014) cautioned that the potential positive impact of silence on second language acquisition might have been claimed in some previous studies without convincing experimental evidence; similarly, experimental evidence was limited in studies of the influence of teacher-directed activity which was also a heatedly-discussed topic concerning children's silence.

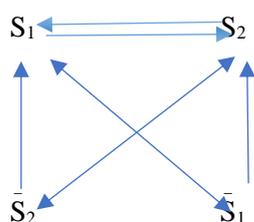
Close reading of previous research literature has led to the understanding that the students' reticence in second language classrooms is a complicated issue and what is the most inspiring to the current study is that the students are not completely passive while they are silent in a second language classroom. The question that I would like to address in this study is whether they are conveying any meaning through their silence. In other words, what identity are they trying to construct through their silence? The core of identity is 'meaning' as according to Burke and Stets' (2009) definition, identity is "the set of meanings that define who one is when one is

an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). This study has been carried out through narrative inquiry which has often been applied to the exploration of identity construction in research on language teaching and learning.

Narrative Inquiry in Language Learning and Greimas’s Narrative Grammar

A commonly adopted definition of ‘narrative’ is the story that research participants tell, such as in Cho (2016), Gao (2007), Garrido and Moore (2016), Junior (2020), Mariou’s (2020) etc. Researchers believe language learners’ and teachers’ “stories” show their identity construction. In other words, the narratives that are generated by the research participants are the site for their identity construction (Lee & Jang, 2023; Menard-Warwick, 2011). Interviews have been often adopted as the data collection method in narrative inquiry (such as in Barkhuizen, 2016, Chan, 2010, Hedman & Magnusson, 2021, and Leigh, 2019). As for the data analysis which is an utterly important procedure in research, five steps of narrative analysis have been proposed: thematic analysis, structural analysis, identifying linguistic resources, exploring dialogic voicing and performance, and analysis of relevance (Menard-Warwick, 2011). In previous studies, thematic analysis was usually employed to analyze the narrative data (e.g. Godley & Loretto, 2013; Lee & Jang, 2023). Coding and categorizing played a central role in data analysis in studies such as Alkhatib et al. (2021) and Li (2022). In addition, positioning analysis and dialogic analysis were adopted in studies such as Mariou (2020) and Menard-Warwick (2019). In this study, A. J. Greimas’s narrative grammar is adopted as the framework for analysis of narratives that were generated by Chinese college students majoring in the English language, literature and culture about their participation and reticence in classes of English-major-curriculum courses. “Identity” as a theme of social scientific studies, as Jenkins (2004) considered, has various definition. As mentioned, -above, it is Burke and Stets’ (2009) that is adopted in this study. Greimas’s narrative grammar well serves the purpose of exploring the “meaning” that the participants construct their identity with because signification is one of its core concerns.

Greimas and Porter (1977, p. 23) proposed that signification was generated by narrative structures rather than the production of utterances. In other words, at the immanent level of narrative representation and analysis lie the narrative structures. The elementary structure of signification is illustrated by a constitutive model which is the basis for the building of the taxonomic model as the core of the fundamental grammar.



(Greimas, 2011)

As is shown in the model above, the constitutive model is made up of binary semic categories that have different logical relationships. S_1 and S_2 are contraries; S_1 and \bar{S}_1 , S_2 and \bar{S}_2 are

contradictories; \bar{S}_1 presupposes S_2 and \bar{S}_2 presupposes S_1 .

If the same relational categories in the constitutional model are applied, a taxonomic model could be built (Greimas & Porter, 1977). "...the taxonomic model is *a structure with four terms* which are mutually interdefined by a network of precise relations describable as *the correlation between two schemas*" (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 27). A 'schema' contains two terms in contradiction such as S_1 and \bar{S}_1 . The taxonomic model is a formal model and *values* are articulated through it. It is the "initial nucleus of an elementary morphology" laying the foundation of *narrative syntax* which is a generative process.

According to Greimas and Porter (1977, p. 27), the narrative syntax consists of the regulation of *operations*. An *operation* is projection of the fundamental relations in the taxonomic model. The syntactic operations are "oriented" in one schema. That is, either from S_1 to \bar{S}_1 or from \bar{S}_1 to S_1 (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 27). The two schemas in the taxonomic model have the issue of priority. Greimas has concluded that the operations are organized in logical series. "...the operation of contradiction which, in negating for example the term S_1 , poses at the same time the term \bar{S}_1 , and must be followed by a new operation of presupposition giving rise to the new term, S_2 , which is conjoined to \bar{S}_1 " (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 28).

The fundamental grammar which has been outlined is conceptual in nature. If it goes through an anthropomorphic but non-figurative form, a surface narrative grammar that can go directly into linguistic utterances is generated. The fundamental grammar and the surface narrative grammar are equivalent. The *syntactic practice* in the surface narrative grammar is the equivalent of the *syntactic operation* in the fundamental grammar. Greimas and Porter (1977) elaborated on the syntactic operation as, "...as activity, it presupposes a subject; as message, it is objectivized and implies the axis of transmission between sender and receiver" (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 29).

The passage from the fundamental grammar to the surface narrative grammar which is *conversion* leads to a simple narrative utterance (NU) that is the basic syntactic forms of narrative grammar. The minimal canonic form of narrative utterance is: NU= F(A); F (function) refers to the practice which is a process of actualization and A (actant) refers to the subject of the practice (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 29). F and A are isotopes: "...any semantic restriction of F will necessarily have repercussion on A, and vice versa" (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 30). A typology of narrative utterances can be generated through introducing semantic restrictions into this canonic form.

Narrative utterances occurring in syntagmatic strings make up of *narrative units* which are entitled *performances*. Greimas confirmed that the *performance* corresponded to the taxonomic schema of the fundamental grammar. A *performance* is "...a formal schema apt to receive the most varied contents" (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 33). In another word, the narrative utterances of a performance interact in the same way as that of the logical operations in the taxonomic schema. For example, as Greimas insisted that the relation of contradiction occur at the surface grammar level. In specific, the negation of an independent narrative utterance whose function is domination is the assertion of a second independent narrative utterance whose function is attribution. Also, the performance receives the projection of *orientation* of the logical operations at the fundamental grammar level. *Performance* falls into two different types

according to modalizations of practice:

...performances modalized by knowledge of how to do[something]...in which the performing subject will act' and '...performances carried out by dint of *ability to do* [something]...in which the performing subject uses only its energy and its force, real or magical (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 34).

On the level of surface grammar, *implication* is the equivalent of *projection*. But *implication* works in a reversed order of *orientation*. *Orientation* works in the order of "NU₁→NU₂→NU₃" while *implication* works in the order of "NU₃] NU₂] NU₁".

NU₃ is an attributive utterance. Attribution means the acquisition of the object by the performing subject. The structure of attribution is the structure of exchange (Greimas & Porter, 1977). The canonical form of an attributive utterance is "TU=F: transfer (A₁→O→A₂)". The utterance contains three actants: the addresser, the addressee and the object of communication (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 34). The translative utterance (TU) in this canonical form is considered a result of the interpretation of the transfer which, according to Greimas and Porter (1977), occurs at the other syntactic level of the schema from the one level where the syntactic operator of assertion is situated. Transfer is considered to represent performance more correctly.

NU₃ leads to a transfer of value rather than a simple acquisition of value. The transfer can be interpreted as "...a deprivation (at the surface level) or as disjunction (at the fundamental level) and as an attribution (at the surface level) or as a conjunction (at the fundamental level)" (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 34). That is, attribution of value happens at the same time with deprivation of value. "...if the object-value is *attributed* to the dominant subject, this is because the dominant subject is at the same time *deprived* of this object value" (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 35).

The circulation of object-values is further organized into a topological syntax whose components, deixes of transfers (d₁, \bar{d}_1 , d₂, \bar{d}_2), have the relationships that are equivalent to the contradictory terms of the taxonomic model at the fundamental level. As illustrated in the model below, conjoining d₁ and \bar{d}_1 , d₂ and \bar{d}_2 , results in a *space*. If \bar{d}_2 and d₁ (\bar{d}_2 →d₁), \bar{d}_1 and d₂ (\bar{d}_1 →d₂) are linked, heterotopic spaces in which the deixes are in the relationship of disjunction are made.



(Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 35)

The heterotopic spaces in the model above show that objects-values circulate through a string of transfers in the courses: "(1) F (d₁→O→ \bar{d}_1)→F(\bar{d}_1 →O→d₂)" and "(2) F (d₂→O→ \bar{d}_2)→F(\bar{d}_2 →O→d₁)" (Greimas & Porter, 1977, p. 35). Greimas has claimed that narration is a value-creating process as is organized by the topological syntax of transfers (Greimas & Porter, 1977). Greimas's theory has been mainly applied to analyzing literary works. Duvall (1982) analyzed Faulkner's "*The Old People*" mainly with the semiotic square as the framework. Duvall considered the semiotic square "...a combination of logic and linguistics, which analyze[d] the

deep structure of any given text” and it “...[had] the greatest potential for direct application in the classroom” (Duvall, 1982, p. 193). Duvall’s three major concerns, “... the oppositions between nature and culture, knowledge and ignorance, and patience and impatience” (Duvall, 1982, p. 194), were represented by Three “squares” (which are presented in p. 200, p. 202, and p. 201 respectively). De Grandsaigne’s (1985) study of Cyprian Ekwensi’s short stories, *Lokotown and Other Stories*, also adopted Greimas’s semiotic square. The stories consisted of nine narratives. “Love” and its implication are taken as the theme. A square (which is presented in p. 542) at the level of deep structure is built on the opposition between “true love” and “false love” and that between “happiness” and “unhappiness”. Jin and Zhang (2011) studied the narrative grammar of Disney animated feature films and they concluded that despite differences in the narrative grammar on the surface level, those films shared something in common on the semantic structure on the deep level, for example, the contraries between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, loyalty and treachery, justice and evil. Liu (2003) introduced Greimas’s narrative grammar and applied it to the analysis of Cinderella. According to Liu, the core of the story, Cinderella, is a transfer from Cinderella’s miserable life at home with her stepmother and vicious step sisters to a happy life with the prince in the palace. The happy life is the object of value, Cinderella plays the roles of both the sender and the receiver; at the same time, the step mother and the step sisters who play the roles of the anti-sender and the anti-receiver, make the miserable situation for Cinderella and the miserable situation motivates her to have the desire for a change; to achieve the goal, Cinderella needs to have the ability and it is the fairy that assists her so the fairy plays the role of the assistant.

The Current Study

Research Questions

This study aimed at exploring the possible reasons for the prevalent silence of Chinese college students majoring in English when they are in classes. The major concern is whether their silence or hesitance to express themselves in English is related to their identity construction. Specifically, this study is targeted at answering the following two research questions:

- 1) In the participants’ opinion, why are they silent in classes?
- 2) What are the meanings that the participants use to define themselves when they choose to be silent in classes?

The Participants

The study was carried out in a university in Beijing, China, in summer 2019. Five Chinese college students were invited to participate in the study. They were all in their second year of study, majoring in English Language, Literature and Culture. Two of them are male students and the other three are female students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two focused-group interviews were conducted to collect data; one was participated by the two male students (Participants A and B) and the other was participated by the three female students (Participants C, D and E). The interviews were hosted by a student assistant who is a male student of the same year of study and of the same major. His role was to raise the questions according to the interview protocols and helped to make sure the conversations between the participants would not deviate from the research focus.

The interviewer raised 3 main questions: 1) Do you usually participate in in-class discussions of English major program classes actively? 2) In what classes do you often actively participate in discussions and what are the possible reasons? 3) In what classes do you often keep silent in discussions and what are the possible reasons?

The interviews were given in Putonghua of Chinese. Both interviews lasted about half an hour. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded and transcribed in Chinese. The transcripts were read closely by the author and analyzed with the narrative grammar of Greimas, especially the semiotic square, as the framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Students' Willingness to Speak in Classes of the English Major Program

The interviewer initiated the interview with the question whether the participants would like to speak to participate in the in-class discussions in English major program classes. Overall, the participants inclined to be unwilling to speak in class. Only one of the five participants firmly reported that he was willing to participate in discussions in class. At the same time, the teacher's request was recognized as a force to break their unwillingness to speak in class, as Participant D and Participant E claimed.

Participant A: I'm willing to participate in discussions in classes of the English major program.

Participant B: I don't really like to speak in English classes.

Participant C: I somewhat like to speak to participate in discussions.

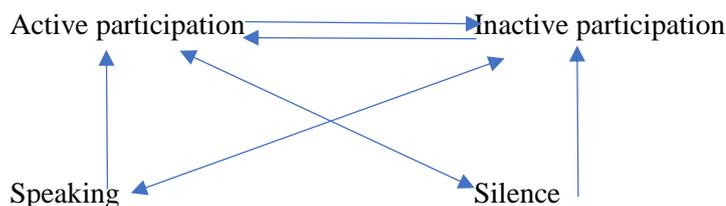
Participant D: I don't like to speak for the discussions. I mean, I don't like to volunteer to speak in class.

Participant E: I don't like to speak in class, either; unless I'm requested to speak for the discussions by the teacher.

These responses were analyzed from the perspective of narrative grammar. The taxonomical model lying under the narrative about the participants' willingness to speak in English major program classes is made up of two schemas:

Silence (S_1) ←→ Active participation (S_1);
Speaking (S_2) ←→ Inactive participation (S_2).

As is shown in the following model, Silence (S_1) contradicts Active participation (S_1) which is expected by teachers from all students but some students fail to present and presupposes Inactive participation (S_2) which is the status quo of many classes. Speaking (S_2) contradicts Inactive participation (S_2) and presupposes Active participation (S_1).



The contradiction and presupposition relationships between Silence (\bar{S}_1), Active participation (S_1) and Inactive participation (S_2) are conversed into a canonical narrative utterance, NU_1 =Prevent (Learners). The “Learner” is the Actant and “Prevent” is the Function. The contradiction and presupposition relationships between Inactive participation (S_2), Speaking (\bar{S}_2) and Active participation (S_1) are conversed into a canonical narrative utterance, NU_2 = Allow (Learner). The “Learner” is the Actant and “Allow” is the Function.

NU_1 and NU_2 contradict each other and they make up a performance in the contradictory relationship. NU_1 and NU_2 play the roles of domination and attribution circularly. That is, if NU_1 's function is domination, which means inactive participation in discussions in class dominates and NU_2 's function is attribution, which means to let learners participate actively in class discussions, there must be some “exchange”/ “transfer” happens. If NU_2 's function is domination, which means the learners actively participate in class discussions, NU_1 's function is attribution, which means there must be some “exchange”/ “transfer” to stop or prevent them from continuing active participation. Answers to what “exchange”/ “transfer” takes place in class discussions are found in participants' responses to the interviewer' second and third questions.

Possible Reasons for the Students' Active Participation in Some Classes of The English Major Program

The participants' responses to the interviewer's second question, “In what classes do you often actively participate in discussions and what are the possible reasons?”, demonstrate attribution which is the role played by NU_2 . The canonical form of an attributive utterance is $TU=F$: transfer ($A_1 \rightarrow O \rightarrow A_2$). The participants' responses invest various contents/values into this canonical form, generating various narrative utterances.

Participant A: I enjoy participating in discussions, usually in courses that I am familiar with or enjoy, such as Comprehensive English. When discussing a certain paragraph, I may have my own opinions and ideas. On those occasions, I am more willing to speak.

Participant B: In fact, there aren't classes in which I am particularly willing to actively join the discussion. If the teacher assigns group discussion tasks in class and divide us into groups, I may be active in discussing some of the teacher's questions with my team members. Then it is also possible that during the Comprehensive English class or other classes, there are some topics that I am interested in, and I will actively answer the teacher's questions.

Participant C: If the task requires only one person to speak at a time, everyone will be particularly reserved; but if it is a group discussion, everyone will be more active and able to naturally express their ideas.

Participant E: First of all, I think personality is a reason. Those students who like to speak in class are simply that kind of people. They just like it. On the contrary, those quiet girls may not take the initiative to speak up, unless she gets Q-ed (questioned). Or maybe the question that the teacher gives is really easy, and everyone can say something about it. Or something that is very interesting and can spark intense discussion. Then everyone may be “brave” enough to speak up.

Translative Utterances (TUs) are extracted from those responses of the participants.

TU₁=F: transfer (the Learner→Ability→the Learner himself/herself). As participant A mentioned that he would be active to join the discussions if he was familiar with the topics. This shows that the learner had a self-evaluation of his or her ability to cope with the task requirements before making the decision to speak in class discussions. Thus, translated into the narrative utterance, the Object of Communication is the ability and the transfer happens between the learner who is the Addresser and himself or herself who is the Addressee.

TU₂=F: transfer (the Learner→Affective Factors→the Learner himself/herself). Similar to TU₁, TU₂ summarizes a transfer between the learner and himself/herself. The only difference is the Object of Communication in TU₂ is the affective factors. As Participant A and Participant B mentioned that they would be active to speak if they were “enjoying” or “interested in” the topics.

TU₃=F: transfer (the Learner’s past self→Characteristics→the Learner’s present self). TU₃ is different from TU₁ and TU₂ in that in TU₃, the Addresser and the Addressee are not the same. The Addresser is the learner’s self in the past and this subject transfers the personal characteristics to the learner’s present self. Even though both the Addresser and the Addressee identify with the learner, yet they exist in different periods of time. As Participant C mentioned that probably a reserved person might not be willing to speak alone to present his or her ideas and Participant E was assertive in attributing a motivating factor to speak in class to personality which is considered an influential factor in learners’ reactions to speaking-tasks in class. Personality is the personal characteristics that were formed in a person’s past experiences. Therefore, in TU₃ the Addresser is the learner’s past self.

TU₄=F: transfer (the Teacher→Request→the Learner). As Participant B reported that he would speak if the teacher gave a task of group discussion and Participant E said that a reserved girl student would not like to speak in class unless she was “questioned” (by the teacher), the driving force comes from the exterior factors rather than the interior factors of the learner. The teacher as the Addresser transfers a Request by giving tasks to the Learner who plays the role of the Addressee.

TU₅= F: transfer (the Teacher→Tasks→the Learner). Similar to TU₄, in TU₅ the Teacher plays the role of the Addresser. The Object that is transferred from the Teacher to the Learner is the tasks that the teachers give in classes. Participant E mentioned that if the task was really easy or interesting, students might be willing to speak. That is, the task triggers the affective factors such as confidence and interest in the learner.

Possible Reasons for the Students’ Reticence in Some Classes of the English Major Program

The participants’ responses to the interviewer’s third question, “In what classes do you often keep silent in discussions and what are the possible reasons?”, demonstrate attribution which is the role played by NU₁.

Participant A: I usually remain silent in courses of humanity because I was a student of science in high school and wasn’t very good at history or geography. I don’t have sufficient knowledge of the subjects in these courses. Also, the teachers

usually teach in English, which may make it more difficult for me to understand and remember the points, so it is important for me to prioritize remembering the knowledge given and imparted by the teacher, rather than expressing my own ideas. Participant A: I have developed the habit of not being willing to stand up and answer questions or participate in discussions since high school. Going to college may also be a change in learning style, and I have not yet got accustomed to it. Therefore, in my freshman year, I still strive to understand the teacher's teaching in English, so I am not very willing to answer some questions raised by the teacher, or I do not have the ability to answer these questions.

Participant B: I feel that I am not particularly active in any particular course and tend to be relatively silent. First of all, I was also a student of science in high school, and most of the courses in English major are humanities, so I'm not very familiar with the framework of knowledge. In addition, I don't put in a lot of efforts to prepare before class, so I only listened to the teacher in class and didn't have any personal ideas because I didn't have enough knowledge. Also, I am a person who tends to listen to others rather than speak. As I'm not sure whether what I'm saying is right or wrong, I prefer to listen to others first and then check whether I'm right or wrong.

Participant B: Actually, I am quite silent in class and unwilling to actively answer questions, which has been going on for some time, mainly from the period before entering university, which is during middle and high school.

Participant C: Comprehensive English mainly focuses on the texts. There are only few questions. You just need to understand the meaning of the text and it seems good enough. I am usually silent in Public Speaking classes. I don't have much to say. I think the main part of the class is that the teacher explains the topics of issues to us. Every one actually has a gap in knowledge about the issues, so we come to learn.

Participant C: I think that the questions raised by the teachers are also a reason. If the question is one that can spark intense discussion, I may say a little more; but if it is only about a certain knowledge point, I don't have much to say. It is related to the attitude of the teacher towards your performance. Sometimes, the teacher may not be listening to what you are saying, and then continuing to lecture and that will completely make us lose the desire to speak.

Participant D: (I don't speak much in) Some courses, for example, A Brief History of British literature.

Participant D: I don't know much about it. I don't really understand history. I didn't learn much before.

Participant D: Comprehensive English classes are also included.

Participant D: It's normal for me to be silent in classes. I started in elementary school. From the beginning, there was me and another girl in the class. I had a strong competitor for the first place in exams at that time. After a period of time of observing her, I felt like: "Hey, if I were like her, my grades would be better than hers." I noticed that she didn't speak in class, and I always spoke. As a little girl, I considered my way was definitely wrong so I began to be silent in classes

too. Since then, I have never been fond of speaking. I have developed this habit.

Participant E: I have nothing to say in those courses.

Participant E: A major teaching purpose seems to be lecturing.

Participant E: It's all because the teaching of our major has a strong emphasis on lecturing. That's why we seldom speak in classes.

Translative Utterances (TUs) are extracted from those responses of the participants.

TU₆=F: transfer (the Learner's past self→Incompetence→the Learner's present self). Participant A, B and D reported that they did not have sufficient knowledge of humanity subjects to cope with the tasks of discussion in classes so they chose to keep silent. Also, Participant A mentioned that his English proficiency was not good enough for him to follow the teacher's lecture in English. The self-perceived lack of knowledge or language proficiency results from learning achievements in the pre-college study. That is to say, the learner's past self transfers the incompetence to his/her present self.

TU₇=F: transfer (the Learner's past self→Habit→the Learner's present self). Both Participant B and Participant D mentioned their habit of reticence which was developed in high school or even in primary school. That is also a 'value' transferred by the learner's past self to his/her present self.

TU₈=F: transfer (the Learner's past self→Characteristics→the Learner's present self). Participant B mentioned it was due to his personality that he was usually silent in classes. As discussed above, personality is the personal characteristics that were transferred by the learner's past self to his/her present self.

TU₉=F: transfer (the Learner→Non-investment→the Learner himself/herself). Different from the previous three TUS, the Addresser in TU₉ is no longer the learner's past self but his or her own present self. Participant B reported that he did not make efforts to prepare before class. That is to say, he did not invest much in following the classes at the current stage. The "non-investment" is transferred to the Addressee who is the learner himself.

TU₁₀=F: transfer (the Teacher →Non-assistance→the Learner). Besides the learner, the teacher plays the role of the Addresser. In Participant C's and Participant E's responses, the teacher was mentioned as the person who was responsible for the students' reticence in classes because of his/her pedagogy. S/he gave questions which were beyond the students' abilities to cope with and did not communicate with the students much, only focusing on his/her own lecturing. The narrative utterance underlying the participants' reports is that the teacher does not provide sufficient assistance to the students in classes. That is, as the Addresser, the teacher transfers "non-assistance" to the learner as the Addressee.

CONCLUSIONS

Students' Reticence in Foreign Language Classrooms and Their Identity Construction

Responses of the participants of this study have outlined an identity of inactive students in dealing with their study. As the participants reported, they were not making efforts to preview or review the lessons; they let their habits and personality characteristics that were formed in

the past prevent their participation in the current classroom study; and they waited for the teachers' requests and directions passively in classes. They were transferring who they had been to the current context of study in university; and they were submitting to the external power (e.g. the teacher's requests) to determine who they were in the current context.

Based on the findings and analysis of this study, it is reasonable to conclude that the students were not actively constructing an identity as they were expected in the context of classroom study in university. A significant question is why the students chose to be inactive. As Peirce (1995) has pointed out, the power relations in a context may prevent second language learners to speak. Checked from this perspective, the teachers who are considered the powerful in classes are not preventing the students to speak. Rather, they are the ones that expect the student to take the initiative to speak and the students actually turn to their requests to get the initiative to speak. Thus, the teacher-student relation in terms of power is not a preventing factor in the context. Then, it is valuable to take peer pressure into consideration. In this study, the participants have not explicitly mentioned peer pressure but attributed their reticence mainly to "personality". However, at the same time, they mentioned that it would be easier to speak if the question given by the teacher was fit for most of the students to join the discussion. This shows the students had the concern about being "outstanding" in the class. In other words, they were stressed to construct an identity of an outstanding student.

Suggestions about Improving Students' Participation in Foreign Language Classrooms

Reticence of students in foreign language classroom is a phenomenon which has long attracted the attention of teachers, researchers and educators. Besides discovering the possible reasons, it is equally important to explore feasible solutions since a vibrant classroom atmosphere filled with meaningful interactions is expected by all that participate in the classes. Therefore, it is significant to make some suggestions on the possible solutions to students' reticence in foreign language classes, based on the findings of this study. As reviewed above, Greimas and Porter (1977) a topological syntax which consists of heterotopic spaces showing that objects-values circulate through a string of transfers. He also mentioned Propp's analysis of Russian tales in his original work. Following the example he gave, analysis of objects-values circulation in the participants' narratives in this study may provide some clues to helpful suggestions on reducing reticence in foreign language classrooms.

Based on the TUS extracted from the participants' narratives of their lack of active participation in classes, the following circulations are identified. 1) The students (d_1) are lacking in active participation in class; his/her past self (\bar{d}_1) stopped him or her from developing proper competence/habit/personal characteristics (O) and kept it "somewhere" (d_2) to be discovered; the "hero" (\bar{d}_2) will find the "somewhere" (d_2) to retrieve the proper competence/habit/personal characteristics (O) and return it to the students (d_1). 2) The students (d_1) are lacking in active participation in class; his/her present self (\bar{d}_1) deprive him or her of investing in study (O) before class and ignore it "somewhere" (d_2) to be adopted; the "hero" (\bar{d}_2) will find the "somewhere" (d_2) to retrieve the investing in study (O) and return it to the students (d_1). 3) The students (d_1) are lacking in active participation in class; the teacher (\bar{d}_1) does not provide proper assistance (O) and ignore it "somewhere" (d_2) to be employed; the "hero" (\bar{d}_2) will find the "somewhere" (d_2) to retrieve the proper assistance (O) and return it to the students (d_1).

In all the three circulations, the "somewhere" (d_2) and the "hero" (\bar{d}_2) are the keys to solving

the reticence in class. In the first two circulations, the best choice for the role of the “hero” is a student’ present self as subjective initiative is a key factor to learning. Then where should the “hero” find the Object, be it the proper competence, a proper habit, personal characteristics that may be helpful to participation in class or the actions to invest in study? Even though the past is what we may consider as the spot for the improper situations to be formed, it is impossible for any of us to travel back to the past to make a change and where it is possible for us to make a change is definitely the present moment. Thus, a possible solution to the reticence in foreign language classroom is that the students should be encouraged and guided to consciously face the fact that they have not developed proper competence, habits, etc. to cope with the current study. Above all, the students should be advised to be aware that identity is constructible. As long as the heritage from who they were is impacting their current study in a negative way, they should be advised not to continue the line but begin to invest in who they are and who they want to be as students. In the third circulation, the best choice for the role of the “hero” is the teacher as the teacher is an important guide in any class. Where should this “hero” go to retrieve the proper assistance as the students expect? In class time, teachers should be aware of the need to facilitate students with encouragement and specific directions, etc. to increase their participation in discussions in a foreign language. However, the class time is not the only arena for the teacher as the “hero” to perform. Investment in learning and developing of pedagogy outside classroom is a more important and valuable arena. On the one hand, teachers’ self-motivating investment in developing pedagogy is essential; on the other hand, it is necessary for policy makers of universities to encourage and assist teachers to increase their investment in developing pedagogy through making evaluating policies that make teachers’ investment rewarding and through providing teachers with training of the latest pedagogies.

Statements and Declarations

Funding

No funds, grants, or other support was received.

Competing interests

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

REFERENCES

- ALKhatib, H., Romanowski, M. H., Du, X. and Cherif, M. (2021) The reconstruction of academic identity through language policy: a narrative approach, *ASIAN ENGLISHES*, 23(3) 313–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2020.1785184>
- Barkhuizen, G. (2016) Narrative approaches to exploring language, identity and power in language teacher education, *RELC Journal*, 47(1) 25–42. DOI: 10.1177/0033688216631222
- Burke, P. J. and Stets, J. E. (2009) *Identity theory*, Oxford University Press.
- Bernales, C. (2016) Towards a comprehensive concept of Willingness to Communicate: Learners predicted and self-reported participation in the foreign language classroom, *System*, 56 1-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2015.11.002>
- Chan, E. (2010) Living in the space between participant and researcher as a narrative inquirer: examining ethnic identity of Chinese Canadian students as conflicting stories

- to live, *The Journal of Educational Research*, 103 1 1 3- 1 22. DOI:10.1080/00220670903323792
- Cho, H. (2016) Under co-construction: An online community of practice for bilingual pre-service teachers, *Computers & Education*, 92-93 76-89.
- De Grandsaigne, J. (1985) A Narrative Grammar of Cyprian Ekwensi's Stories, *Research in African Literatures*, 16(4) Special Issue on West African Fiction 541-555.
- Duvall, J. N. (1982) Using Greimas' narrative semiotics: signification in Faulkner's "The Old People", *College Literature*, 9(3) The Newest Criticisms 192-206.
- Edstrom, A. (2015) Triads in the L2 classroom: Interaction patterns and engagement during a collaborative task, *System*, 52 26-37. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2015.04.014>
- Gao, X. S. (2007) A tale of Blue Rain Café: A study on the online narrative construction about a community of English learners on the Chinese mainland, *System*, 35(2) 259–270.
- Garrido, M. R. and Moore, E. (2016) "We can speak we do it our way": Linguistic ideologies in Catalan adolescents' language biography raps, *Linguistics and Education*, 36 35-44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2016.07.006>
- Godley, A. J. and Loretto, A. (2013) Fostering counter-narratives of race, language, and identity in an urban English classroom, *Linguistics and Education*, 24 316-327. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2013.03.006>
- Granger, C. A. (2004) *Silence in second language learning: a psychoanalytic reading*, Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Greimas, A. J., and Porter, C. (1977) Elements of a narrative grammar, *Diacritics*, 7(1) 23-40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464872>
- Greimas, A. J. (2011) *Du Sens Essais Sémiotiques (Tome 1)*. (Trans, Wu, H. M. and Feng, X. J.). BaiHua Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Hedman, C. and Magnusson, U. (2021) Constructing success and hope among migrant students and families. A mother tongue teacher's didactic narrative, *Language & Communication*, 77 93-105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2021.01.003>
- Hsu, W.-H. (2015) Transitioning to a communication-oriented pedagogy: Taiwanese university freshmen's views on class participation, *System*, 49 61-72. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2014.12.002>
- Jenkins, R. (2004) *Social identity* (2nd ed.), Routledge.
- Jin, H. and Zhang, Y. L. (2011) A tentative discussion of the narrative grammar of Disney animation feature films (In Chinese), *Movie Literature*, 17 54-55.
- Junior, R. C. G. (2020) Instanarratives: Stories of foreign language learning on Instagram, *System*, 94(102330) 1-18.
- Lee, H. and Jang, G. (2023) Native English teachers' construction and negotiation of professional identities in the context of Korea: An analysis of multilayered nature of identities, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 122(103981) 1-10.
- Leigh, L. (2019) "Of course I have changed!": A narrative inquiry of foreign teachers' professional identities in Shenzhen, China, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 86(102905) 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102905>
- Li, W. (2022) Unpacking the complexities of teacher identity: Narratives of two Chinese teachers of English in China, *Language Teaching Research*, 26(4) 579–597. DOI: 10.1177/1362168820910955
- Liu, X.Y. (2003) Introduction and application of Greimas' narrative grammar (In Chinese), *Etudes Francaises*, 1 198-203.

- MacIntyre, P. D., Dörnyei, Z., Clément, R. and Noels, K. (1998) Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: a situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation, *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4) 545-562.
- Mariou, E. (2020) Narratives about 'homeland', heritage, languages and belonging: A case of 'return' migration, *Linguistics and Education*, 56(100793) 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2019.100793>
- Menard-Warwick, J. (2011) A methodological reflection on the process of narrative analysis: alienation and identity in the life histories of English language teachers, *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(3) Narrative Research in TESOL (September 2011) 564-574.
- Menard-Warwick, J. (2019) Bocadillos and the karate club: Translingual identity narratives from study abroad participants, *Linguistics and Education*, 50 84-93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2018.05.001>
- Miller, E. R. and Zuengler, J. (2011) Negotiating access to learning through resistance to classroom practice, *The Modern Language Journal*, 95, Supplement 1: The Supplementary Issue: Research in and Around the Language Classroom: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches 130-147. DOI: 10.1 1 1 /j.1540-4781. 201 1.01273.x0026-7902/11/130-147
- Peirce, B. N. (1995) Social identity, investment, and language learning, *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1) 9-31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587803>
- Peng, J.-E., Zhang, L. and Chen, Y. M. (2017) The mediation of multimodal affordances on willingness to communicate in the English as a foreign language classroom, *TESOL Quarterly*, 51(2) 302-331. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.298>
- Roberts, T. A. (2014) Not so silent after all: Examination and analysis of the silent stage in childhood second language acquisition, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 29 22-40. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2013.09.001>
- Sang, Y. and Hiver, P. (2021) Using a language socialization framework to explore Chinese Students' L2 Reticence in English language learning, *Linguistics and Education*, 61(100904) 1-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2021.100904>
- Saylag, R. (2014) An exploration on the silence in the classroom within a diagnostic perspective: Whose silence is this? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 114 527-532. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.12.741
- Storch, N. (2002) Patterns of interaction in ESL pair work, *Language Learning*, 52(1) 119-158.