

An Investigation into Reticence and Vocabulary Knowledge of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

A growing body of research has indicated that students of ESL/EFL are reticent and unwilling to be engaged in oral activities in English lessons. Communicative language ability includes speaking ability, so vocabulary knowledge plays an integral role in speaking a language. However, there have been few studies examining the degree to which vocabulary knowledge affects speaking ability. The present study aimed to explore the degree of reticence in Iranian EFL learners and to find out the roles that productive vocabulary knowledge and gender may play in their reticence. To accomplish this, 56 male and female English language learners participated in the study. Unwillingness-to-Communicate Scale and Vocabulary-Size Test of Controlled Productive Ability were used. To analyze the data, descriptive statistics, Pearson Product-moment Correlation and an independent t-test were used. Results of the study revealed a relatively low level of reticence among Iranian EFL learners. However, it seems that learners mostly avoid communication rather than have a negative attitude toward class participation. In addition, it was found that the learners' vocabulary knowledge had a significant relationship with their reticence; while, no significant difference was found between Iranian male and female learners in terms of reticence.

Keywords: Reticence, Productive Vocabulary Knowledge, EFL Learners, Gender

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1. Introduction

With the emergence of communicative language teaching, many research studies have been concerned with students' oral communication in language classroom. Language teachers also expect students to actively take part in interactive and co-operative learning productive tasks. However, language learners have often seemed to be too silent in language classrooms, and prefer not to voluntarily respond to teachers' questions, or actively participate in learning tasks. Tani (2005, p. 5) claims that "one of the most visible differences that Asian students bring to classroom is a low level of in-classroom participation". He further asserts that class participation is an activity that develops independent learning skills and the ability to apply knowledge. Passivity in the classroom is known as reticence. Reticence refers to the situation in which students do not speak the language (i.e., English) voluntarily, either initiating questions or volunteering to offer answers. To put it simply, they are unwilling or less willing than other students to engage in oral communication. Keaten and Kelly (2000, p. 168), believe that reticence, as a behavior, occurs "when people avoid communication because they believe it is better to remain silent than to risk appearing foolish". Additionally, Li and Liu (2011) argue that reticent individuals tend to avoid communication in social and public contexts, particularly the novel situations that have the potential for negative evaluation.

A range of studies have been carried out on students' reticence and on the factors that cause reticence in language classrooms. The findings reveal that there are various reasons for the reluctance to speak in SL/FL classroom situations, such as: fear of public failure (e.g., making mistakes and being laughed at), low English proficiency, anxiety, cultural beliefs about appropriate behavior in classroom contexts (e.g., the importance of showing respect by

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listening to the teacher instead of speaking up), gender difference, personality (e.g., introversion and shyness), the educational system, and lack of vocabulary (Liu, 2005a; Liu & Jackson, 2009). Among the reasons for reticence, the important role of vocabulary knowledge in speaking and communicating in SL/FL classroom is not deniable. Read (2000, cited in Oya, Manalo, & Greenwood, 2009, p. 11) states that many students tend to “view language learning as essentially a matter of learning words so they spend a great deal of time on vocabulary acquisition in situations where they are required to communicate in the target language”. Vocabulary knowledge, according to Levelt (1989; cited in Oya. et al., 2009, p. 11), is considered as “the mechanism that drives speech production”. This is in line with Nation’s (1993) view that vocabulary knowledge is one of the language components crucial for fluent language use. Therefore, it sounds reasonable to assume that the amount of a learner’s vocabulary knowledge may foster or hinder his classroom participation.

If these assumptions about the importance of vocabulary knowledge in communication are true, it raises the question of how this factor might influence language learners’ willingness or unwillingness to speak the target language in classroom. The scarcity of research in this area, coupled with the large number of EFL learners in Iran and the increasingly important status of spoken English in today’s world communication, calls for more exploration of reticence in the Iran context. Hence, this paper mainly aims to investigate the level of reticence among Iranian EFL learners and to explore the possible impacts gender and productive vocabulary knowledge may have on learners’ tendency toward classroom oral participation. To achieve these objectives, the following research questions are addressed:

1. To what extent do Iranian EFL learners experience reticence in oral English classrooms?
2. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' reticence and their vocabulary knowledge?
3. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL male and female learners' level of reticence?

2. Literature Review

The notion of 'reticence' was first coined by Gerald M. Philips in 1965, and later it was introduced to the field of speech communication. In fact, the publication of Phillips's first article on reticence in 1965 raised interest in individuals' communication problems and provided a new topic for scholars' research. The construct of reticence was first considered as the status of some people who have difficulty in communicating across a range of situations (Keaten & Kelly, 2000). However, the frustrating effects of reticence are more evident in language classroom situations. According to Li and Liu (2011, p. 961), "students' reticence, withdrawal, or fear of interacting not only deprives of them sharing what they know, but also deprives the teacher and classmates of benefiting from it". In a similar vein, Chau (1999) claims that the problem of being reticent is twofold. On one hand, reticence impedes the learner's own pace of learning, and on the other hand, it impedes the teacher's help. The teachers do not know whether the learners have any problems or not, especially pronunciation problems if they remain silent.

The perception towards reticence can be classified into two dimensions cognitive and behavioral. The cognitive dimension is regarded as the firm devotion of reticent communicators to a set of faulty beliefs (myths), which makes rational excuses for the reticent individuals to avoid communication

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(Kelly, Keaten & Finch, 1996). Based on the cognitive dimension, the reticence learners assume that good communicators are capable of speaking spontaneously and that they are born with these skills that lead to successful communication in society. Moreover, they believe that they must speak faultlessly; consequently, they feel that it is a false hope to become a good speaker. They would also anxiously fear negative evaluation of others and also fear to appear foolish when talking. So, they withdraw and avoid participating in social communication (Keaten & Kelly, 2000). Based on Phillips' published works about reticence, Kelly, et al., (1996) examined and identified the following beliefs which reticent communicators possess:

1. Since reticent speakers consider themselves as more important to others than others think about them, they have an excessive sense of self-importance.
2. Reticent speakers falsely think that effective speakers are born in this way, not made and that they have a gift which reticents lack.
3. Skillful speaking is manipulative. The reticent communicators hold the opinion that non-reticent individuals receive benefit because of having a formula of proper phrases and expressions that cause the desired behavior in other people.
4. Because of their belief that talking too much is a waste of time, reticent speakers believe that speaking may not be that important. Based on Phillips (1991), social foreplay is done via small talks.
5. Reticent individuals believe that they are efficient listeners. They say they can speak whenever they want, but they usually prefer not to.
6. Reticent communicators believe that it is better to remain silent and let others think they are foolish, rather than starting to talk and proving they are truly so.

7. Reticents think that this deficiency is a kind of disease. Therefore, they are searching for applied treatments.

Thus, such kinds of beliefs hinder social interaction. Reticents regard effective speaking as a gift but simultaneously consider it as being manipulative. Therefore, reticent communicators think they have logical excuses for their silence, because they think such behavior is a reasonable response, i.e. by remaining silent, reticent people prevent themselves from appearing foolish and manipulative (Kelly, et al., 1996). By the way, although reticents are aware of their disability, they do not attempt to promote their speaking skills and it leads them to avoid social interactions.

The behavioral dimension toward reticence is regarded as reticents' silence and their keeping away from communication and also their being unskilled and deficient in rhetorical processes. Reticent speakers may have a wide range of communication skill difficulties. Phillips (1991) provides detailed analysis concerning the probable kinds of skill difficulties which reticent or incompetent people may have. He suggests that the classical Canons of rhetoric "specify the components of the communication act: inventing and arranging ideas, choosing and delivering clusters of words, and maintaining in memory a storehouse of ideas and repertoire of behaviors" (Phillips, 1991, p. 70). The reticence concept assumes that the skill deficiencies which define the problem refer to "the rhetorical canons of invention, disposition, style, delivery, and memory" (Phillips, 1991, p. 70).

The importance of words in SL/FL communication is beyond question. Vocabulary knowledge has been defined differently by different researchers. In fact, researchers have conceptualized vocabulary in many but similar frameworks. Vocabulary knowledge, according to Laufer and Goldstein (2004, p. 400), is "the knowledge of the spoken and written form, morphological

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knowledge, knowledge of word meaning, collocational and grammatical knowledge, connotative knowledge, and the knowledge of social or other constraints to be observed in the use of a word". Vocabulary knowledge is divided into receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. While receptive vocabulary knowledge refers to learner's ability to understand a word, which is often used in listening and reading, productive vocabulary knowledge is the knowledge to produce a word when one speaks and writes (Nation, 2005, cited in Koizumi, 2005). It seems that the ability to produce vocabulary and to apply the productive vocabulary knowledge in language communication can help language learners to actively take part in classroom discussions. In fact, vocabulary knowledge and specifically vocabulary production ability has long been regarded as a crucial component of communicative language ability (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 68; Carroll, 1968, pp. 54-55).

Additionally, there is a theoretical background to the relationship between vocabulary and speaking performance. In the theoretical model of L1 and L2 speaking, which was proposed by Levelt in 1993, "vocabulary has a central position in forming an utterance with appropriate meanings and with syntactic, morphological, and phonological structures" (Koizumi, 2005, p. 53).

Tsou (2005) conducted a study to find out the effects of instruction about classroom participation on students' oral participation in class and speaking proficiency. Both qualitative and quantitative findings supported the propositions that instruction about classroom participation can "increase students' oral participation in class, and lead to the improvement of students' speaking proficiency" (p. 46). Cheng (2000) indicated that in recent years, ESL/EFL Asian students have been relatively reticent and passive. He added that the main causes of such behavior of reticence and passivity were the cultural attributes of Asian societies. Kelly, Keaten, Finch, Duarte, Hoffman,

and Michels (2002) studied the relationship between family communication patterns and reticence. The findings showed that reticent communicators had a lower level of conversation orientation within their families contrary to the students in their comparison group. Lee and Ng (2010) also suggested that willingness to speak is determined not only by learners but also by the situation they are in. So, situational variables (like topic and participants) should be taken into account. They explored the strategy of teacher interaction as one of the factors which activate students' reticence in classes.

Students' participation in class activities enhances their autonomy. Zhang and Head (2010) claimed that involving students in making decisions about the content and organization of their oral language classes can improve their confidence and ability to speak English.

There are some studies concerning the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and oral performance of language learners. For example, Vermeer (2000) carried out a study on Dutch native (L1) and ethnic minority (L2) children at kindergarten. Analyzing data collected via survey and interview demonstrated almost zero to moderate relationships of lexical aspects of speaking performance.

Contrary to some earlier findings, Koizumi and Kurizaki (2002) found strong associations between speaking test scores and the number of words uttered on the speaking test. In a similar vein, Ukrainetz and Blomquist (2002) conducted a study on American children to investigate the effects of vocabulary knowledge on children's speaking performance. Analyzing data via survey and interview showed some relationships of the number of lemmas and tokens and the mean length of children's utterance. The findings of Ishizuka's (2000) study also demonstrated a moderate correlation between receptive vocabulary depth

test scores and interview test scores among Japanese senior high school students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants of the study were 56 Iranian EFL students (26 males and 30 females) who studied English in the University of Sistan & Baluchestan and Islamic Azad University of Zahedan. Their age range was 20 to 26 years old. All of the participants spoke Persian as their first language and were learning English as a foreign language in the university. The selection of the participants for the study was based upon the accessibility of the participants.

3.2. Instruments

The instruments employed in this study to collect the data included: (1) The Unwillingness-to-Communicate Scale (Burgoon, 1976) and (2) Vocabulary-Size Test of Controlled Productive Ability (Laufer & Nation, 1999).

3.2.1. The Unwillingness-to-Communicate Scale

To measure the reticence in speech communication, Burgoon (1976) developed the Unwillingness-to-Communicate Scale (UCS), which measures two dimensions of communication reticence: Approach-Avoidance (AA) and Reward (R). Burgoon and Koper (1984) describe these dimensions as follows:

The AA dimension represents an individual's tendency to avoid or participate in interpersonal and small group interactions. The R dimension, by contrast, reflects attitudes toward communication, whether one considers it a

valuable, honest, and personally rewarding enterprise or feels socially isolated and regards communication as a deceptive, manipulative, or unprofitable activity (pp. 608-609).

UCS is a self-reporting questionnaire consisting of 20 items that measures students' general tendency to avoid speech communication. The participants responded to the items on the basis of five-point Likert scales, ranging from *1=Strongly Disagree* to *5=Strongly Agree*. The items that expressed willingness to participate and confidence in conversations were scored in reverse. Thus, the total score of the UCS revealed a respondent's general tendency not to communicate in conversations; the total score of AA represented a respondent's unwillingness to participate in interpersonal communication; and the total score of R reflected a respondent's negative attitudes toward speech communication.

For all three constructs, UCS, AA, and R, a higher the score represented the student's willingness to participate in conversations or to value speech communication highly. Because the UCS comprises 20 items with 10 items for each of its two subcomponents, a total score of more than 80 on the UCS implies that a respondent is strongly unwilling to participate in speech communication; a total score of 60-80 represents moderate unwillingness; and a score of less than 60 signifies moderate or even strong willingness to participate in speech communication. Similarly, a total score of more than 40 on R suggests a strong unwillingness to participate in or a strongly negative attitude toward speech communication; a total score of 30-40 reflects moderate unwillingness or a moderately negative attitude; and a total score of less than 30 signifies strong or moderate willingness to participate in or a strongly or moderately positive attitude toward speech communication. The reliability index for the instrument (UCS) in this study was found to be .83.

3.2.2. Vocabulary-Size Test of Controlled Productive Ability

The second instrument used in this study was Vocabulary-Size Test of Controlled Productive Ability (VTCPA) developed by Laufer and Nation (1999). The test was designed to assess the productive vocabulary knowledge of students. The term ‘controlled productive ability’ refers to the ability to use a word when compelled to do so by a teacher or researcher, whether in an unconstrained context such as a sentence-writing task, or in a constrained context such as a fill-in task where a sentence context is provided and the missing target word has to be supplied.

This study focused on a controlled production measure of vocabulary consisting of items from five frequency levels, and using a completion item type. A sample is given below:

The lawyer gave some wise coun to his client.

For each item, a meaningful sentence context is presented and the first letters of the target item are provided. The first letters prevent the test-takers from filling in another word which would be semantically appropriate in the given context. The number of letters for each word was decided on by the elimination of possible alternatives to the tested word. Because our test was a test of productive vocabulary ability, it was thought better to provide the minimal number of letters that would disambiguate the cue. If two letters could start two possible words in the given sentence, an additional letter was added to eliminate this possibility. The size of the underlined space at the end of the incomplete word is no indication of the number of letters needed to complete it. The test samples 18 items at each of the 2000, 3000, 5000, University Word List (UWL), and 10000 word levels (Laufer & Nation, 1999). Each participant took the entire test consisting of five frequency levels, with 18 items at each

level. The test is easy to mark as there is only one correct word for each item and each answer is marked as correct or incorrect. It is also easy to interpret:

Each level represents 1000 words, except the UWL level which represents a list of 836 words. A learner's percentage score on a level is a very rough indication of the number of words known at that level (for example, 9 out of 18 equals 50%; and this would roughly equal 500 out of 1000 words). Deciding whether a learner has satisfactory mastery of a level is a matter of judgment and depends what level is being considered, but is probably around 15 or 16 out of 18 (85% or 90%) for the 2000-word level, indicating that less than 150 words at that level are not readily available for productive use. (ibid, p. 41)

3.3. Procedure

The UCS questionnaire and VTCPA test were distributed among the participants in their classrooms. UCS questionnaire was administered in one class session, but in order to avoid pressuring the students too much, the participants completed VTCPA in the following session. The questionnaires were collected and coded. Later, the data were entered into SPSS. Then, based on the research questions, appropriate statistical procedures were chosen. In the first place, descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage) was used to analyze the question which dealt with the extent to which Iranian EFL learners experience reticence in oral English classrooms. The frequency and percentage for each item, and the mean, standard deviation, mode, median, and range for the scale were obtained to provide an indication of the students' reticence level. Then, an independent sample t-test and a Pearson Product-moment Correlation were run to investigate the impacts of gender and vocabulary knowledge on the learners' reticence.

4. Results and Discussion

In line with the purposes of the study, the learners' scores on the reticence questionnaire were entered into SPSS to compute descriptive statistics. Table 1 presents the students' responses to the UCS items, which reflect unwillingness to participate in speech communication. The first figures in the first column present the actual scores and the second ones in the same column represent the percentage of students selecting the item.

Table 1. UCS Items with Frequencies and Percentages of Students Selecting Each Alternative

	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.					
	9*	27	4	13	3
	16.1**	48.2	7.1	23.2	5.4
2. I talk less because I'm shy.					
	17	14	9	11	5
	30.4	25.0	16.1	19.6	8.9
3. I talk a lot because I am not shy.					
	6	18	12	14	6
	10.7	32.1	21.4	25.0	10.7
4. I like to get involved in group discussions.					
	1	5	5	28	17
	1.8	8.9	8.9	50.0	30.4
5. I feel nervous when I have to speak to others.					
	10	23	4	15	4
	17.9	41.1	7.1	26.8	7.1
6. I have no fears about expressing myself in a group.					
	2	10	11	26	7
	3.6	17.9	19.6	46.4	12.5
7. I am afraid to express myself in a group.					
	9	27	12	6	2
	16.1	48.2	21.4	10.7	3.6
8. I avoid group discussions.					
	13	27	9	7	0
	23.2	48.2	16.1	12.5	0
9. During a conversation, I prefer to talk rather than listen.					
	2	19	11	20	4
	3.6	33.9	19.6	35.7	7.1
10. I find it easy to make conversation with strangers.					
	0	9	17	23	7
	0	16.1	30.4	41.1	12.5

11. I don't think my friends are honest in their communication with me.					
	7	20	19	6	4
	12.5	35.7	33.9	10.7	7.1
12. My friends and family don't listen to my ideas and suggestions.					
	11	33	8	4	0
	19.6	58.9	14.3	7.1	0
13. I think my friends are truthful with me.					
	1	4	17	27	7
	1.8	7.4	30.4	48.2	12.5
14. I don't ask for advice from family or friends when I have to make decisions.					
	7	31	8	7	3
	12.5	55.4	14.3	12.5	5.4
15. I believe my friends and family understand my feelings.					
	3	8	16	23	6
	5.4	14.3	28.6	41.1	10.7
16. My family doesn't enjoy discussing my interests and activities with me.					
	8	26	13	8	1
	14.3	46.4	23.2	14.3	1.8
17. My friends and family listen to my ideas and suggestions.					
	1	5	7	37	6
	1.8	8.9	12.5	66.1	10.7
18. My friends seek my opinions and advice.					
	0	3	22	25	6
	0	5.4	39.3	44.6	10.7
19. Other people are friendly only because they want something out of me.					
	3	12	26	12	3
	5.4	21.4	46.4	21.4	5.4
20. Talking to other people is just a waste of time.					
	18	22	12	3	1
	32.1	39.3	21.4	5.4	1.8
Notes. SD: Strongly disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neither disagree nor agree; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree * Frequencies ** Percentages					

As shown in Table 1, many learners expressed positive attitudes toward speech communication (e.g., group discussions and interaction). They agreed with statements like *"I like to get involved in group discussions"* (item 4, 80.4%), and rejected statements like *"I avoid group discussions"* (item 8, 71.4%). The students seemed to be aware of the benefits of talking to others, and more than 70% rejected the statement *"Talking to other people is just a waste of time"* (item 20). As Table 1 illustrates, more than half of the students believed in the

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honesty and sincerity of their friends and sought their friends' and family members' opinions when making decisions. For example, 60.7% endorsed the statement *"I think my friends are truthful with me"* (item 13), and 76.8% agreed with the statement *"My friends and family listen to my ideas and suggestions"* (item 17), whereas 67.9% objected to the statement *"I don't ask for advice from family or friends when I have to make decisions"* (item 14). Similarly, their responses to statements 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 showed that more than half of the learners were not afraid of and did not feel nervous in conversations in English class. They endorsed statements like *"I have no fears about expressing myself in a group"* (item 6, 58.9%), while rejecting the statement *"I'm afraid to speak up in conversations"* (item 1, 64.3%). Nevertheless, only 35.7% of the students agreed with the statement *"I talk a lot because I am not shy"* (item 3). This might reflect the students' mixed feelings about conversations. On one hand, they were willing to participate in conversations and were aware of the benefits of communication; however, they did not do so in practice for a variety of reasons. This willingness to participate is further evident in their responses to items 9 and 10. 42.8% endorsed the statement *"During a conversation, I prefer to talk rather than listen"* (item 9), and 53.6% reported that they find it easy to engage in conversations with strangers (item 10). Consequently, the analysis of the learners' responses to UCS items revealed that the learners were willing to take part in classroom discussions and oral activities. To determine the students' general unwillingness to communicate, the total scores, means, and standard deviations of the UCS and its two subscales, approach-avoidance (AA) and reward (R), were computed. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of UCS and its two subscales.

Table 2. Statistical Analysis of the UCS

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Mode	Minimum	Maximum	Range
UCS	49.54	10.069	49.00	48	23	68	45
AA	23.89	6.222	23.00	19	10	36	26
R	25.68	4.702	26.00	22	13	36	23

Table 2 indicates that some students (those with a score near 68) tended very much to avoid speech communication. However, the mean score of 49.54 on the UCS, with a median of 49 and a mode of 48, were all far below the scale midpoint 60. This indicates that more than half of the students were willing to participate in interpersonal interactions. This notion is further supported by the AA mean (23.89), median (23), and mode (19), which hardly exceeded the scale midpoint 30. Meanwhile, a mean of 25.68 on R, together with a median of 26 and a mode of 22, all below the scale midpoint 30, suggests that most of the participants were positive about speech communication and considered it worthwhile. According to the data analysis outlined above, the learners had a relatively low level of reticence in their speaking. As it was stated before, most research studies reported that learners' reticence level are high especially in the case of Asian EFL learners who are passive in language classrooms and prefer not to use target language most of the time (Jackson, 2002, 2003; Zou, 2004). Yet, the results of the present study contradict with the results of previous studies and suggested that Iranian EFL learners actively participate in classes and articulate their intentions. According to Barjesteh, Vaseghi and Neissi (2012), "Iranian EFL learners are willing to initiate communication in situations experienced before, like group discussion or communicating with their friends" (p. 47). Moreover, these findings confirm Liu's (2005a) study who reported that learners highly intended to interact in their oral EFL classes.

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Similarly, Cheng (2000) argued that “Asian students have fewer problems with language, both in perception and production, they are more likely to take active roles in class” (p. 444). Generally speaking, the findings showed that although the learners were aware of the benefits of oral communication in language classroom, they did not do so in practice for a variety of reasons. Further research is needed to explore the reasons.

To test the relationship between the learners’ reticence and their vocabulary knowledge, learners’ productive vocabulary knowledge was assessed. The results of reticence questionnaire and the vocabulary knowledge test are shown in Table 3. The mean score of 49.54 (SD=10.07) on the reticence questionnaire, with a median of 49 and a mode of 48, are all far below the scale midpoint 60. This indicates that more than half of the learners are willing to participate in interpersonal interactions.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Reticence and Vocabulary Knowledge

N=56	Mean	Std. Deviation	Median	Mode	Range
Reticence	49.54	10.069	49	48	45
Vocabulary knowledge	24.23	11.543	25	25	43

As shown in Table 3, the mean score of the learners’ vocabulary knowledge is 24.23 with a standard deviation of 11.54. Regarding the mean score of the learners’ vocabulary knowledge, more than half of the learners (53.58%) had vocabulary scores more than the mean. A Pearson product-moment correlation and a test of significance for Pearson r were employed to verify the relationship between the learners’ reticence in speaking and their vocabulary knowledge. Table 4 presents the Pearson product-moment correlation between these two variables.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation between Reticence and Vocabulary Knowledge

		Reticence	Vocabulary knowledge
Reticence	Pearson Correlation	1	-.511**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	56	56

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results revealed that the learners' reticence correlated with vocabulary knowledge, $r(54) = -.511, p < .01$. Based on Table 4, the learners' reticence in speaking has significant relationship with their vocabulary knowledge. However, the correlation is negative. Figure 1 clearly depicts the correlation between the learners' reticence and their vocabulary knowledge.

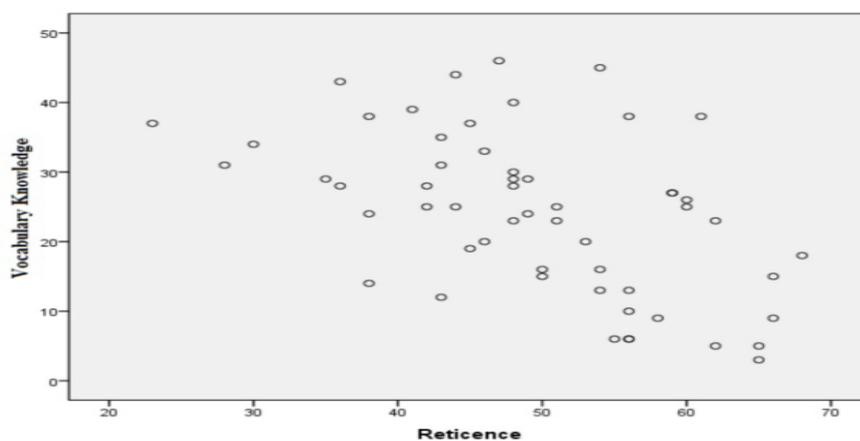


Figure 1. Correlation between Reticence and Vocabulary Knowledge

Consequently, as Table 4 and Figure 1 indicate, there is a reverse relationship between learners' vocabulary knowledge and their level of unwillingness to participate in oral performance, that is, the higher the vocabulary score of the students, the lower their reticence in oral performance score. Thus, it can be concluded that the learners' unwillingness to

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communicate has a significant and negative relationship with their vocabulary knowledge.

The results of the learners' speaking reticence questionnaire indicated that the students preferred to communicate and take the risk of interaction. The results of the vocabulary knowledge test also revealed that the learners' vocabulary knowledge is at an appropriate level for interaction. The findings proved that there is a significant though negative correlation between the learners' reticence in classroom discussion and their vocabulary knowledge (Figure 1). In other words, learners tend not to speak since their lexicon is not much developed. These findings confirmed the results of Koizumi's (2005) study which demonstrated that learners who have larger and deeper productive vocabulary knowledge produce a greater number of tokens and types and better speaking performance.

Liu (2005b) also argued that one of the factors that can be contributed to the learners' reticence is lack of vocabulary. Insufficient vocabulary knowledge causes learners constantly to think that they forget and don't know the needed vocabulary if they engage in discussion; hence, they can't express themselves and just make a dupe of themselves. Liu (2005a) claimed that EFL learners who practice hard can possess large vocabulary and can "be supportive of each other when speaking English in class. Thus, they may not become so afraid of making mistakes, but confident and more willing to speak the target language" (p. 233).

Figure 1 also indicated that large vocabulary knowledge causes learners to feel safe in responding to a question or involving in a classroom discussion. In so doing, a rich lexicon helps learners take the risk and engage themselves in interaction. The undeniable significant role of vocabulary in learners' level of reticence can also be explained by oral ability. As Meara (1996) stated, one of

the indispensable parts of a good communication is vocabulary. According to Meara (1996, p. 35), “lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence”. Hence, vocabulary knowledge is one of the predictors of learners’ L2 proficiency. Oya et al. (2009) explicitly asserted that “better vocabulary knowledge produces better oral performance in terms of all the aspects– fluency, accuracy, complexity, and global impression” (p. 17). In their study, Oya et al. (2009) emphasized that in order to improve speaking performance, vocabulary development and actual speaking practices are vital. Similarly, Levelt (1993; cited in Koizumi, 2003) argued that to build a mutual understanding, interlocutors should know vocabulary to the extent that they could express their propositional meaning. In view of that, it can be speculated that insufficient knowledge of vocabulary may cause learners to remain silent in classroom discussions. Students who lack sufficient vocabulary believe that they fail to express themselves even in cases where they know the answers to their teachers’ questions. Unfortunately, little has been done concerning the relationship between reticence and vocabulary knowledge. However, it is generally concluded that learners’ knowledge of vocabulary significantly correlates with their level of reticence.

To explore whether the difference between the male and female learners is significant with regard to their reticence level, an independent samples t-test was run. Table 5 shows the results of this test.

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Table 5. Independent-Samples *t*-test for the Means of Male and Female Learners

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Reticence Equal variances assumed	1.926	.171	-.633	54	.529	-1.718	2.713	-7.157	3.721
Equal variances not assumed			-.625	48.778	.535	-1.718	2.749	-7.243	3.808

As shown in Table 5, there is no significant difference between the male learners (M=48.62, SD=11.09) and the female learners (M= 50.33, SD= 9.21) concerning their reticence level, $t(54) = .63, p = .53$.

Apparently, the female learners (M=50.33) are more reluctant to speak in their EFL classrooms than their male counterparts (M=48.62). Figure 2 shows the comparison between males' and females' level of reticence.

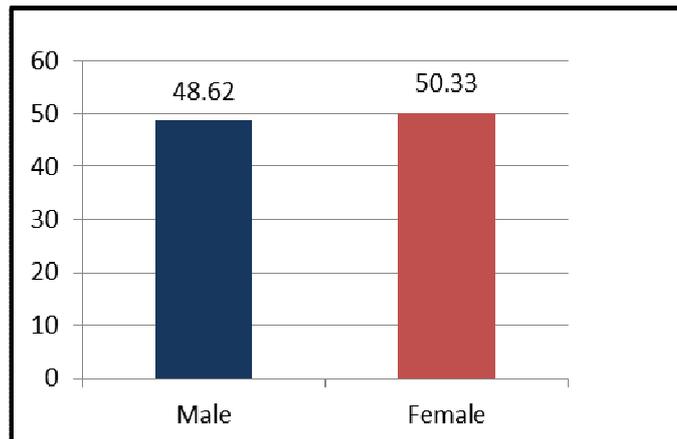


Figure 2. Comparison between Male and Female Levels of Reticence

Accordingly, it can be, thus, concluded that the male and female learners show no significant differences in their attitude towards participation in classroom discussions and interpersonal interactions. These findings confirmed the results of Donovan and MacIntyre's (2004) study. They pointed out that regarding the learners' willingness to communicate "specifically, males appear to increase in WTC as they grow toward adulthood, and females may show a parallel decrease in WTC" (p. 421). Their findings reported that although female and male learners showed different attitudes toward communication, the main effect of gender was not significant at higher level. They concluded that "females are more willing to communicate than males in the junior high group, but there are no significant differences in WTC between men and women in either the high school or university group" (ibid, p. 424).

5. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to investigate the roles of gender and vocabulary knowledge in Iranian EFL learners' reticence. The findings of the study revealed a low level of reticence among Iranian language learners. Therefore, it can be concluded that the efforts made by both teachers and learners had provided the learners with opportunities to foster classroom participation. Alternatively, it may be due to some other reasons. It is evident that reticence is a multidimensional phenomenon and drawing any conclusion without further research will lead to oversimplification.

It could be concluded that there is a significant but negative association between Iranian language learners' vocabulary knowledge and their reticence. It implies that the more the vocabulary knowledge of the learners, the less reticent they are in the classroom. So, one reason for learners' unwillingness to take part in classroom discussions can be lack of sufficient knowledge of

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vocabulary. Given that other variables such as psychological, cognitive and personal variables were not probed in the present study, further exploration is needed to identify the likely effects of other unexplored variables.

Additionally, the results of the study proved that there is no statistically significant difference between Iranian male and female learners in terms of reticence, though it is generally assumed that Iranian female learners are more reluctant than male learners. Hence, further studies are needed to confirm or reject such assumptions.

To sum up, the present study has deepened our understanding of the level of reticence or unwillingness to communicate of Iranian EFL learners and provided implications for classroom practice. The findings have some implications in pedagogy. Since reticence exerts vital influence on foreign language learning and teaching, a number of solutions have been studied by foreign language scholars in the attempt to resolve the problem, among which communicative language teaching is the most widely accepted one. Moreover, speaking should be an integral part of their language instructional program so that the students would get used to talking and the oral practices would not come as unexpected for them. Furthermore, studying the general causes of students' reticence and then working towards appropriate resolution can motivate and help students to overcome the associated obstacles, thus changing the embarrassing classroom situation as well as improving students' learning ability. Moreover, they should be aware of the important role of vocabulary knowledge in learners' oral performances which in turn would, ideally, lead to better educational outcomes for learners.

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