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# **MUTED STANZAS: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF ANXIETY AND RETICENCE ON LEARNING POETRY IN ESP CLASSES IN CHINA**

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**Abstract:** Foreign language anxiety, a phenomenon extensively documented in literature (Horwitz et al., 1986; Kitano, 2001; Liu, 2006a, b; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989; Phillips, 1992), continues to exert significant influence on language learners. This paper explores the multifaceted nature of foreign language anxiety, drawing on insights from various scholars. It delves into the myriad reasons behind language learners' reticence and reluctance to express ideas, particularly when speaking individually in class. Factors such as low language proficiency, fear of ridicule, concerns about losing face, interpersonal competition, personality traits, cultural norms, and generalized anxiety contribute to the prevalence of this phenomenon (Liu, 2006a, b; Jackson, 2002, 2003; Zou, 2004). The paper endeavors to shed light on the complex interplay of these factors and their impact on language learning experiences. By elucidating the underlying causes of foreign language anxiety, this paper aims to inform educators and practitioners about effective strategies to mitigate its effects and create supportive learning environments conducive to language acquisition.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Anxiety, Language Learning, Classroom Communication, Language Proficiency, Learning Environment.

## **INTRODUCTION**

As a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, reticence has been proved to exist in second/foreign language (SL/FL) classrooms and predominantly act as a debilitator (Liu, 2006c; Liu and Littlewood, 1997; Tsui, 1996; Zou, 2004). It is the same with foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Kitano, 2001; Liu, 2006a, b; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989; Phillips, 1992). Due to various reasons such as low proficiency in the target language, fear of being laughed at and losing face, competition, personality, cultural tradition, and anxiety, more than a third of students in language classes remain reticent or unwilling to express ideas, especially when speaking

## **Original Article**

alone to the class, and feel anxious when doing so (Liu, 2006a, b; Jackson, 2002, 2003; Zou, 2004). Anxious students may engage in negative self-talk, ruminating over a poor performance, which affects their ability to process information in foreign language contexts (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991).

Though reticence and anxiety have been researched in various SL/FL classrooms, they have hardly been explored simultaneously in the same situation. In a few of such studies, they are revealed to be closely related to each other (Liu and Jackson, 2008). Even less research has been done in such an area as content-based ESP (English for specific purposes) courses (Flowerdew et al., 2000; Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003). Situated in a content-based ESP poetry course at a top university in Mainland China, the present research investigates the issues in terms of the following: degrees of and changes in reticence and anxiety, and causes for reticence and anxiety.

### **Literature review**

Defined as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977: 78), reticence in native languages is revealed to negatively affect everything from the teachers’ expectations of student performance, actual classroom performance, and perceptions of others while communicating (Burgoon et al., 1987; Evans, 1996; Miller, 1987). Reticent people often speak less and for shorter durations; their language tends to be less comprehensible, less immediate, and less intense (Evans, 1996). They are also found to “display more bodily tension, ... protective behaviors such as body blocking and face covering, leaning away, gaze aversion, and indirect head orientation and less facial pleasantness, nodding, and animation” (Burgoon et al., 1987: 121). A similar finding is revealed in both SL and FL learning situations (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Liu, 2006c; Zou, 2004). Most SL/FL learners, particularly Asian learners, are often observed to be passive and reticent in classrooms due to various cultural, psychological, linguistic and personality factors: fear of making mistakes, incomprehensible input, lack of confidence, lack of experience with oral communication, introversion, cultural tradition, educational experience, and so on.

Foreign language anxiety, a feeling of uneasy suspense, exists in many people in various situations when learning a SL/FL (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989). “The essence of second/foreign language learning is the communication of personally meaningful and conversationally appropriate messages through unfamiliar syntactic, semantic, and phonological systems” (Horwitz, 1995: 573). Thus, many SL/FL learners find the basic requirements of SL/FL learning inherently stressful (Horwitz, 1995). To investigate FL anxiety, Horwitz and his colleagues developed a general theory about FL classroom anxiety and designed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), to identify anxious students and measure their anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). The scale mainly measures three dimensions of SL/FL classroom anxiety—fear of being negatively evaluated, communication apprehension and test anxiety and has gained widespread popularity in subsequent research studies in language classrooms (Kitano, 2001; Liu, 2006b, 2007; Phillips, 1992). These studies show that anxiety is extensively existent in FL/SL learners and primarily negatively affects the learning of the target language.

The researchers also believe that much of the anxiety is associated with understanding and speaking the target language. Speaking publicly in the target language is particularly anxiety-provoking for many students, even those who feel little stress in other aspects of language learning (Horwitz, 1995). Anxious students are less likely to volunteer answers or to participate in oral classroom activities (Ely, 1986). They also perform avoidance behavior like skipping classes and postponing their homework (Jackson, 2002; Phillips, 1992; Tsui, 1996). Moreover, a complex set of linguistic, cultural, psychological and educational reasons has been identified to contribute to

## **Original Article**

language anxiety such as language proficiency, personality, attitude and motivation, risk-taking and competition (Bailey, 1983; Liu, 2006a, b; Phillips, 1992).

Obviously, reticence and anxiety are closely related to each other. Nevertheless, they have rarely been explored in content-based ESP courses where learning may be more challenging and the students may thus feel more anxious and less willing to participate in classroom activities (Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003; Flowerdew et al., 2000), even less simultaneously in the same context (Liu Liu and Jackson, 2008). Jackson's (2001, 2002, 2003) longitudinal investigation of case-based teaching and learning at a major university in Hong Kong revealed that, most students, though bawring the benefits of active participation in case discussions, failed to contribute to classroom discussions. Even if they made some contribution, their speech tended to be short. The interviewees attributed this phenomenon to such reasons as lack of vocabulary, unwillingness to challenge professors, fear of losing face, personality, fear of speaking, lack of familiarity with the cases, habit formed in the past learning, preference for harmony, reluctance to be the center of attention, anxiety and lack of incentive.

Conversely, the more active students thought their active participation was owing to their confidence, aspirations for self-improvement, empathy for the struggling case leaders, and outgoing personality. Clearly, reticence and anxiety can be cause and effect of each other, which is further supported by Liu and Jackson's (2008) study which exposed that unwillingness to communicate and FL anxiety were powerful predictors for each other.

### **Rationale for the study**

As reviewed, both reticence and anxiety are quite pervasive in FL/SL language classrooms and can negatively affect the learning of the target language. Given the number of SL/FL learners in the world, these issues need continuous exploration. It is especially so in ESP courses where the learners have to use the SL/FL to deal with knowledge in a certain area. Nevertheless, reticence and anxiety have scarcely been researched in such situations. Targeting Chinese undergraduate EFL learners, the present research aimed to examine reticence and anxiety in an ESP poetry course. To achieve this, a case study was adopted and three research questions were formulated:

- (1) To what extent do the students remain reticent and feel anxious in the ESP poetry class?
- (2) What is the change in student reticence and anxiety over the term?
- (3) What causes the students to be reticent and anxious in the ESP poetry class?

### **Research design**

#### ***Context of the study***

The present study was situated in an elective ESP poetry course Appreciation of English Poetry (AEP) at a top university in Beijing. Striving to be a worldwide famous university, this university has been promoting the use of English as the teaching medium in content-based courses in recent years. As such a course, AEP was one of a series of courses called Freshman Seminar which was often opened by professors and enrolled first-year students in various disciplines. What was particular about this poetry course was that, it was open only to scorers of more than 85 (representing the highest English level of first-year undergraduate non-English majors) in the Placement Test upon entering the University and English majors.

#### ***Participants***

An intact class of 24 students from various disciplines enrolled in AEP participated in the study. The teaching and learning of the course principally consisted of presentations and discussions. With an average age of 18.3, all the students were first-year undergraduates who were highly proficient in English. To obtain a more

## **Original Article**

comprehensive insider view of reticence and anxiety in the poetry class, the course teacher, as well as eight students (1 high-anxious, 3 average-anxious, and 4 low-anxious, as indicated by their first FLCAS scores) were invited for the pre- and post-term semi-structured interviews. It should be noted that the students in the present study, generally scored (much) lower on the FLCAS than those in existing studies (Liu, 2006a; Sellers, 2000), thus, more average- and low-anxious students were selected for the interview.

Prior to the study, all the participants agreed to sign the consent form which indicated that the study involved their English-learning experiences. To preserve their privacy, pseudonyms were used when presenting the results.

### ***Instrument***

In the study, data were collected via survey, video-recorded observations and interviews, as detailed below. For this study, the students completed the Class Risk-taking Scale and the Class Sociability Scale which indexed the respondents' levels of reticence, the FLCAS which tapped the students' anxiety levels, and a 5-item background questionnaire. All of the items except for the background questionnaire were accompanied by a 5-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" and all were answered by the same sample twice (one at the beginning and the other at the end of the term) during the term.

#### ***Class Risk-taking Scale (CRS) (Cronbach alpha $\alpha$ = 0.69 at the beginning and 0.67 at the end of the term).***

This 6-item measure used in Liu and Jackson's (2008) study, adapted from Ely (1986) tapped the extent to which learners, risk using the medium language in the ESP poetry class. Learners who risk using the language more often are reportedly more willing to communicate with others in class (Ely, 1986; Liu and Jackson, 2008).

Class Sociability Scale (CSS) ( $\alpha$  = 0.66 at the beginning and 0.74 at the end of the term). The 4-item Class Sociability Scale used in Liu and Jackson's (2008) study adapted from Ely (1986), indexed the extent to which learners enjoy interacting with others in the ESP poetry class.

#### ***Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) ( $\alpha$ = 0.92 at the beginning and 0.88 at the end of the term)***

Several modifications were made in the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale used in Liu and Jackson's (2008) study adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986). The words "English language class" appearing in the Liu and Jackson's version was consistently replaced with "the poetry class". Moreover, seven items involving selecting more language courses and test anxiety were deleted to reflect better the present situation. Thus resulted in the present 29-item FLCAS which served as a measure of the degree of anxiety in the Chinese ESP poetry class.

### ***Semi-structured interview***

To obtain more insider views about reticence and anxiety in the ESP poetry class, both pre- and post-term semi-structured interviews were held. The key questions for students covered such aspects as educational experiences, behavior in the class, feeling of anxiety in the class, reasons for reticence and anxiety, and corresponding coping strategies (Appendix I). To complement students' perceptions, interview questions for the teacher were designed to cover the identification of the most reticent/active, confident/anxious students in classroom activities, general reasons for student reticence and anxiety, and so on (Appendix I). All the key questions were developed with reference to those in Liu (2006c) and double checked by the researchers of the present study.

## **Original Article**

### ***Classroom observation***

Observation can provide “deeper insights into the learning context and social interaction in a class” (Chamot, 1995: 6). To compare students’ self-reports with teacher and video-recorded observations, the class was observed and video-recorded by the researchers throughout the 16-week term, primarily focusing on classroom interactions.

### ***Procedure***

The study was conducted during the first 16-week term of the academic year 2007 to 2008. The class met once a week, which lasted 90 min each time. From the very beginning to the end, the class was observed and video-recorded, with notes intermittently taken. The survey was administered both in the 3rd (when the students came to have a general picture of the course and the classroom environment) and the 14th (when the students began to be more concerned with final-term exams) week to explore changes in reticence and anxiety during the term. To better reflect the changes, the first semi-structured interview was held prior to the first survey, and the second was held after the teaching was over. Each student interview lasted for about 20 min and the teacher interview for 12 min. In addition, informal interviews were held during the breaks when necessary. For example, if the observing researcher thought a student behaved particularly anxiously (e.g., blushing, hands shaking, and/or stammering, etc.) or differently from previous lessons, she would interview that student informally during the break. All the interviews were conducted by the first researcher in Mandarin Chinese and were audio-recorded.

### ***Data analysis***

The results of the survey were computed in terms of frequency and percentage to investigate the students’ reticence and anxiety levels in general and changes over the term. The interviews were transcribed and checked twice, which, together with the observations (both the notes and video recordings), were subjected to a thematic content analysis, with themes identified and categorized (Krippendorff, 1980, Neuendorf, 2002). The primary purpose in this study was to identify what activities made the students the most/least anxious and or reticent, whether they felt anxious and/or remained silent in the lesson they had just taken, what changes in anxiety and reticence happened to them during the term and reasons for the changes.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSION Reticence and its change over the term**

### ***Class sociability and its change over the term***

Table 1 summarizes the students’ responses to the items implicative of sociability and risk-taking. All percentages refer to the number of students who (strongly) disagreed or (strongly) agreed with the statements. As shown in Table 1, except that 58.3% of the correspondents at the beginning of the term (strongly) agreed on item 31 (enjoy talking with others), more than 60% of them both at the beginning and the end of the term endorsed the other three CSS statements. Most of them enjoyed interacting with other students in class and preferred to learn in groups. All these implied that the students were (strongly) willing to interact with others in the ESP poetry class. Despite this expressed (strong) willingness to communicate with others, their answers to the CRS items indicate that, many students were not willing to risk using English in class. As Table 1 shows, except that 62.5% of the respondents at the beginning and 41.7% toward the end of the term (strongly) endorsed item 37 (concern about grammar), generally more than 30% both at the beginning and toward the end supported the other five CRS statements. The difference between disagreement and agreement was very small. The analyses of the interview data showed that, all of the student interviewees had a (strong) desire to communicate with others for the purposes



## **Original Article**

of “exchanging ideas”, “improving oneself”, “enhancing mutual understanding”, and “improving English”. Except one average-anxious student who doubted that those who actively asked questions in class, might just want to show off or sometimes disturb the normal teaching and learning, the others held fairly positive attitudes towards active students in class in that they were confident, critical and acquisitive. However, only three average- and two low-anxious students reported that, they not only wanted to but actually participated in interpersonal interactions; one low-anxious student reflected that, he was willing to be engaged in but listened more during speech communications; the rest two confided that they were willing to communicate with others but most often chose to be silent in real interactions. Namely, around a third of the student interviewees self-reported not to contribute to group discussions, in spite of their willingness to communicate with others. Moreover, only four of them confidently selfreported to be active participants in classroom discussions, the other four were either not sure or confided to be silent most of the time in classroom activities.

This finding is further confirmed by the video-recorded observations. In each lesson of the term, all the students listened attentively when the teacher was lecturing; the majority did so as well when their peers were presenting at the front; but only a few actively offered opinions and responded to others during the following discussion, with some saying a little occasionally and Chinese being heard prosodically in a low voice. The rest, though listening carefully, remained reticent until forced to say something by the teacher or a peer student. This observed general picture is also agreed on by the teacher because it is the easiest way to identify the most and the least active students, in that the active students would speak several times in a lesson, offering their opinions and comments, while the reticent would just sit there and listen to others unless singled out by others. But it is also possible to differentiate the average actives from the non-actives since the class is so small. She also observed that silence often fell when a response was expected by a peer student. As to the change in reticence over the term, the students generally became more willing to involve themselves in group discussions. As shown by their responses to the CSS items, more students toward the end of the term reported enjoying talking with others (item 31) and thinking it important to have a strong group spirit (item 33) in the class, while the percentages of agreement with the other items remain almost the same.

In regard to class risk-taking, the students seemed to become more unwilling to risk using English in class, as implied by their answers to the CRS items. Many students toward the end of the term reported that they did not like trying out a difficult sentence (item 35) or to express complicated ideas in English (item 36) in class and that they would follow basic sentence models instead of risking misusing the language (item 39). Meanwhile, around 20% more of them became worried about the small details of grammar when using the language in class (item 37). Inconsistent with this, also around 20% fewer of the students toward the end of the term supported items 34 (worry about an English word) and 38 (worry about a sentence). All these findings suggest that, the students became more ready to contribute to group discussions, but under the condition that they were relatively sure of the language being used.

This tendency implied by the survey data was further supported by the interview and observation data. Only three of the student interviewees reflected that they had become more active (but not very active) in class as the term progressed; the others did not think they had experienced any change in classroom participation either due to their personality (e.g., introversion and/or shyness) or other reasons such as lack of confidence and being active all the time. The teacher, when interviewed, also reflected that the class gradually became more active, as the teaching

## Original Article

moved on but the change was not great, and that the most active students remained unchanged all the time. This was confirmed by the video-recorded observations. Generally, more than half students just acted as attentive listeners, until they were called on by the teacher or a peer to give some comments, similar to those in other teaching and learning contexts (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Liu, 2006c).

In conclusion, the students, though having a desire to and being willing to communicate with others in class, seldom actively participated in interpersonal interactions. This evidently manifests that willingness and desire to participate in speech communication might not lead to actual participation in class, as found in Jackson's (2002) studies.

**Table 1.** Students' responses to statements. Indicative of sociability and risk-taking (N = 24).

I think learning English in a group is more fun than learning on my own.					
Strongly agree (%)	Class (CSS)	1st	2nd	1st	2nd
18/75	disagree	4/16.7	2/8.3	18/75	disagree
18/75	disagree	3/12.5	3/12.5	18/75	disagree
14/58.3	sociability	3/12.5	7/29.2	14/58.3	sociability
18/75	scale	3/12.5	3/12.5	18/75	scale
16/66.7	taking	3/12.5	5/20.8	16/66.7	taking
15/62.5	until I know	6/25	3/12.5	15/62.5	until I know
19/79.2	use an English	4/16.7	1/4.2	19/79.2	use an English
21/87.5	using it.	0	3/12.5	21/87.5	using it.
8/33.3	scale	8/33.3	8/33.3	8/33.3	scale
11/45.8	35. I do not like trying out a difficult sentence in class.	4/16.7	9/37.5	11/45.8	35. I do not like trying out a difficult sentence in class.
7/29.2	1st	3/12.5	14/58.3	7/29.2	1st
14/58.3	2nd	1/4.2	9/37.5	14/58.3	2nd
8/33.3	36. At this point, I do not like trying to express complicated ideas in English in class.	3/12.5	13/54.2	8/33.3	36. At this point, I do not like trying to express complicated ideas in English in class.
7/29.2	1st	2/8.3	15/62.5	7/29.2	1st
3/12.5	2nd	11/45.8	10/41.7	3/12.5	2nd
7/29.2	37. I prefer to say what I want in English without worrying about the small details of grammar.	4/16.7	13/54.2	7/29.2	37. I prefer to say what I want in English without worrying about the small details of grammar.
4/16.7	1st	5/20.8	5/20.8	4/16.7	1st
8/33.3	2nd	8/33.3	5/20.8	8/33.3	2nd
7/29.2	38. In class, I prefer to say a sentence to myself before I speak it.	4/16.7	13/54.2	7/29.2	38. In class, I prefer to say a sentence to myself before I speak it.
11/45.8	1st	4/16.7	13/54.2	11/45.8	1st
8/33.3	2nd	8/33.3	5/20.8	8/33.3	2nd
7/29.2	39. I prefer to follow basic sentence models rather than risk misusing the language.	4/16.7	13/54.2	7/29.2	39. I prefer to follow basic sentence models rather than risk misusing the language.
11/45.8	1st	4/16.7	13/54.2	11/45.8	1st
8/33.3	2nd	8/33.3	5/20.8	8/33.3	2nd

## Original Article

1st	13/54.2	4/16.7	7/29.2
2nd	11/45.8	5/20.8	8/33.3

### Foreign language anxiety and its change over the term

Table 2 summarizes the students' responses to the FLCAS items reflective of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation in the ESP poetry class, as did in Table 1. According to Table 2, the respondents vetoed the FLCAS items indicative of speech anxiety, both at the beginning and the end of the term such as items 8 (about preparation) (62.5 and 70.9% respectively); 18 (feelings of being called on) (58.4 and 50% respectively); 21 (feelings of speaking English in the front) (75 and 75% respectively); and 24 (feelings of speaking English in class) (70.8 and 75% respectively). Nearly a third of them endorsed statements like items 16 (feelings of speaking English in the front) (37.5 and 29.2% respectively) and 25 (feelings on the way to the class) (50 and 20.8% respectively). In general, around a half of these students reported that they were not afraid to speak and felt fairly relaxed when expressing their ideas in English in the presence of other people. These respondents, unlike those in Liu's (2006b) study, did not fear that they would not understand all the input. More than half supported items 13 (feelings about teacher correction) (58.3 and 50% respectively); 4 (feelings about teacher input) (70.8 and 66.7% respectively); and 26 (feelings about input comprehension) (66.7 and 70.8% respectively).

Consistently, these respondents did not fear less competent than other students or being negatively evaluated. They rejected such statements as 7 (feelings about other students' performance) (50 and 54.2% respectively); 20 (feelings about other students' performance) (45.8 and 33.3% respectively); 12 (feelings about volunteer responses) (79.2 and 79.2% respectively); and item 9 (worry about failures) (70.9 and 66.7% respectively). However, these students, like those in Horwitz et al. (1986) study, held mixed feelings about making mistakes and being corrected: around 50% disapproved statement 2 (feelings about mistakes) (41.7 and 58.3% respectively), while about 80% disagreed with item 17 (feelings about teacher correction) (79.2 and 79.2% respectively). These students seemed to worry about making mistakes but expect their mistakes to be pointed out and corrected by their teacher as well. Their disagreement with three FLCAS items—3 (feelings of being called on) (79.2 and 75% respectively), 23 (66.7 respectively), and agreement with items 10 (feelings about seminars) (45.8 and 45.8%) and 19 (feelings about preparation) (37.5 and 58.3% respectively) further supported the view that more than half of these students did not feel anxious in the ESP poetry class.

In summary, foreign language anxiety was not an obstacle to the majority of these students, unlike that reported in other studies (Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu, 2006a, c), which might be attributed to their high proficiency in English. This finding is further confirmed by the interview data. Among the eight student interviewees who unanimously considered presentation to be the most anxiety-provoking activity in the class, one reported to be very anxious when presenting at the front; four reported to be very anxious right before the presentation started and became less and less anxious during the presentation, and thus a "U" pattern emerged, as found in Behnke and Sawyer's (1999) study; the other three did not feel anxious when presenting to the class. Except that two (including the most anxious) confided to be anxious during classroom discussions, the remaining six did not think so. A similar view was held by the teacher who believed that, presentation provoked the most anxiety in the students, that around one third of the students were fairly confident and did not become nervous even when



Original Article

presenting at the front, that about two-thirds became anxious when presenting to the class, and that few were nervous during group discussions.

According to her, it was easy to observe who was anxious and who was not. The anxious students often spoke with a shaking voice at a fast speed, and often read from the scripts; sometimes their hands were shaking or rubbing unconsciously; sometimes they appeared to be at a loss during their speech, not knowing what to say next. By contrast, the confident students seldom referred to their scripts during presentation and spoke more naturally. The general picture described by both the student and teacher interviewees was again supported by the video-recorded observations. It was relatively easy to identify anxious students when presenting at the front or responding to the teacher alone mainly because of the symptoms described by the teacher. The majority of them felt anxious to varying degrees during the presentation at the front, as confirmed by their self-reports during informal interviews held after their presentations during the class session. Only a few behaved confidently during their speech at the front by having frequent eye contact with the audience, smiling, having appropriate gestures and speaking naturally. These people usually had had (enough) such experience before, as reported in informal interviews held during the class.

Meanwhile, as shown in Table 2, the students' answers to most FLCAS statements varied to a certain degree over the term. As indicated by their responses to peer statements 1, 3, 7, 9, 11, 13, 20, 21, 23, and 27 toward the end of the term, more respondents reported worrying about speaking English and performing worse than others in the class, and failing the course. Fewer correspondents agreed that they did not worry about making mistakes (item 2), that it would be OK to take more seminars in English (item 5), that they felt confident when speaking English in class (item 16), and that they felt very sure and relaxed on the way to the poetry class (item 25). Unexpectedly, it seems that these students became more anxious when expressing ideas in English in the poetry class over the term. However, at the same time, none of them reported feeling embarrassed to volunteer answers (item 12) and fearing the teacher was ready to correct his/her mistake (item 17).

When interviewed, three (average-anxious) of the eight student interviewees reflected that they had become less nervous and more confident in class; one (the most anxious student) reported to remain almost the same anxious; one (low-anxious) became more anxious because he found the other students were so excellent; the other three (low-anxious) remained the same in that they did not feel anxious at all in class during the whole term. To conclude, as the term progressed, most of the students also became less anxious during classroom discussions in that more eye contact could be observed and more students contributed to the discussions though sometimes saying only a little.

**Table 2.** Students' responses to statements. Indicative of foreign language anxiety (N = 24).

	Strongly disagree (%)	Neither disagree nor agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in the poetry class.			
1st	17/70.9	3/12.5	4/ 16.7
2nd	18/75	0	6/25
2. I do not worry about making mistakes in the poetry class.			
1st	10/41.7	5/20.8	9/37.5

## Original Article

2nd	14/58.3	3/ 12.5	7/ 29.2
3. I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in the poetry class.			
1st	19/79.2	3/12.5	2/8.3
2nd	18/75	3/12.5	3/12.5
4. It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in English.			
1st	17/70.8	2/ 8.3	5/20.8
2nd	16/66.7	3/ 12.5	5/20.8
5. It would not bother me at all to take more seminars in English.			
1st	8/ 33.3	7/29.2	9/37.5
2nd	7/29.2	12/50	5/20.8 with
6. During my poetry class, I find myself thinking about things that have he course. nothing to do			
1st	17/70.9	2/8.3	5/20.8
2nd	21/87.5	3/12.5	0
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.			
1st	12/50	6/25	6/25
2nd	13/54.2	3/12.5	8/ 33.3
8. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the poetry class.			
1st	15/62.5	5/20.8	4/16.7
2nd	17/70.9	0	7/29.2
9. I worry about the consequences of failing my poetry class.			
1st	17/70.9	3/12.5	4/16.7
2nd	16/66.7	3/12.5	5/20.8
10. I do not understand why some people get so upset over seminars in English.			
1st	6/25	7/29.2	11/45.8
2nd	3/12.5	10/41.7	11/45.8
11. In the poetry class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.			
1st	17/70.8	5/20.8	2/8.3
2nd	16/66.7	5/20.8	3/12.5
12. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my poetry class.			
1st	19/79.2	2/ 8.3	3/12.5
2nd	19/79.2	5/20.8	0

**Original Article**

13. I get upset when I do not understand what the teacher is correcting.			
1st	14/58.3	4/16.7	6/25
2nd	12/50	5/ 20.8	7/29.2
14. Even if I am well prepared for the poetry class, I feel anxious about it.			
1st	18/75	3/12.5	3/12.5
2nd	19/79.2	3/ 12.5	2/8.3
15. I often feel like not going to my poetry class.			
1st	20/83.3	3/12.5	1/4.2
2nd	21/87.5	3/12.5	0
16. I feel confident when I speak English in the poetry class.			
1st	4/16.7	11/45.8	9/37.5
2nd	6/25	11/45.8	7/29.2
17. I am afraid that my teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.			
1st	19/79.2	3/12.5	2/8.3
2nd	19/79.2	5/20.8	0

**Table 2.** Contd.

18. I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in the poetry class.			
1st	14/58.4	2/8.3	8/33.3
2nd	12/50	5/20.8	7/29.2
19. I do not feel pressure to prepare very well for the poetry class.			
1st	10/41.7	5/ 20.8	9/37.5
2nd	5/20.8	5/20.8	14/58.3
20. I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.			
1st	11/45.8	6/25	7/29.2
2nd	8/33.3	8/33.3	8/33.3
21. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.			
1st	18/75	4/ 16.7	2/8.3
2nd	18/75	3/12.5	3/12.5
22. The poetry class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.			
1st	15/62.5	6/25	3/12.5
2nd	19/79.2	5/20.8	0
23. I feel more tense and nervous in my poetry class than in my other classes.			

## Original Article

1st	16/66.7	3/12.5	5/20.8
2nd	14/58.3	3/ 12.5	7/ 29.2
24. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English in the poetry class.			
1st	17/70.8	3/12.5	4/16.7
2nd	18/75	3/12.5	3/ 12.5
25. When I am on my way to the poetry class, I feel very sure and relaxed.			
1st	4/16.7	8/33.3	12/50
2nd	11/45.8	8/33.3	5/20.8
26. I get nervous when I do not understand every English word the teacher says.			
1st	16/66.7	4/16.7	4/16.7
2nd	17/70.8	3/12.5	4/16.7
27. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.			
1st	18/75	4/16.7	2/8.3
2nd	16/66.7	5/20.8	3/12.5
28. I get nervous when the teacher asks questions which I have not prepared in advance.			
1st	13/54.2	3/ 12.5	8/33.3
2nd	11/45.8	8/33.3	5/20.8
29. I get tense and nervous when I have to discuss things unfamiliar to me in English.			
1st	15/62.5	3/12.5	6/25
2nd	14/58.3	3/12.5	7/29.2

## Causes for students' reticence and anxiety

When asked about the causes for the students' reticence and anxiety in the ESP poetry class, all the interviewees, invariably, believed that they could be attributed to a range of factors, as summarized as Table 3 (the causes are listed in the order of the highest to the lowest frequency). Table 3 shows, the most commonly identified cause for reticence was that the students were not familiar with English poems/poets and thus, did not have many ideas for discussion, as an interviewee said, "since we have little knowledge about English poems, even if we want to say something, we cannot. That is, we cannot say what we have not thought of" (Yu, low-anxious). Nevertheless, if they had known more about a poem or poet, they would "volunteer to offer comments, otherwise, I would choose to be silent" (Zhou, average-anxious). That was why some students would be active to comment on "the content but not other aspects of a poem" (Wang, low-anxious).

## **Original Article**

Since these students were highly proficient in English, they normally had no difficulty using the language. Strangely, they still did not feel confident about their spoken English and considered it a great factor for their unwillingness to communicate in the poetry class. However, further analyses of the student interviewees' self-reports revealed that, the underlying reason was pressure, as commented by one interviewee, "those active students generally speak English very fluently. Then those who are not so fluent at spoken English do not want to say anything" (Zong, low-anxious). It was actually competition that drove some students reticent in group discussions. The next important factors, as found in many other studies (Jackson, 2002; Liu, 2006a, 2007; Tsui, 1996), were fear of making mistakes and under preparation. Probably because of competition or fear of leaving a bad impression on the teacher and peers, many students worried about making mistakes and thus, were unwilling to volunteer any comments. Under preparation or lack of preparation was also a great contributor. As an interviewee reported, "if you prepared a lot before the lesson, you are sure to have ideas to share with others and have a better understanding of the topic in the class. But, if you are not (well) prepared, you do not know what to say and therefore have to remain silent" (Zuo, lowanxious). Although, bawaring the importance of preparation, many students failed to do that, due to the "heavy load of so many other courses" (Chen, highanxious).

The other factors were introversion and habit, as found in numerous existing studies (Jackson, 2002; Liu, 2006a; Zou, 2004). As explained by the student interviewees, introverted people might prefer to be silent while the extroverted were more active to offer comments and if a student had developed the habit of volunteering to respond to others in class, "s/he behaved more actively during classroom discussions. ... But those who have not formed this habit cannot do that and often choose to be listeners" (Hao, average-anxious). Another unexpected factor identified by the student interviewees was that some students chose to be reticent because others were too active. Likewise, some students just did not want to say anything and consequently acted only as listeners in the class.

Except for the reason that some students simply wanted to be silent, few of the causes identified by the student interviewees were agreed on by the teacher. When reflecting back, the teacher remarked that the class was generally not that active as she had expected and required. The most important reason was that the presenters usually took up much more time than allowed in each lesson, which resulted in much less time for discussion. Consequently, many students did not have any chance to share their ideas and opinions with the others. The second important reason was "personality" which was "shy and quiet" but not low English proficiency or lack of confidence. In her eyes, these students were fairly proficient in English and should be (quite) confident in that they had been top students and were admitted to almost the best university in the country. As revealed in numerous empirical studies (Jackson, 2002; Liu, 2006a, 2007; Tsui, 1996; Zou, 2004), lack of practice, fear of making mistakes, English proficiency and lack of confidence were also identified to be the biggest contributors to anxiety in the poetry class in the present study. Though increasing importance had been given to English in all phases of education in China, spoken English was not a part of the national college entrance examination and thus had not been paid due attention by high schools which were highly exam-oriented. Therefore, the majority of Chinese high school students, including those from foreign language schools, did not have much practice of oral English. Without enough practice, unavoidably many students would become anxious when expressing ideas in the language. Despite their high proficiency in English, some students still denied that their English was good enough and thus became anxious when using the language in the class. Worse then, this underestimation or pursuit of



## Original Article

perfection partially contributed to their lack of confidence, which in return provoked (more) anxiety in them when using the language in classroom discussions.

Other anxiety-provoking factors were personality, inability to express ideas, failure to understand others, and poor pronunciation, as found in other studies (Jackson, 2002; Liu, 2006a, 2007; Zou, 2004). What is worth noting is that, others were so good at using the language, this drove some students anxious when speaking the language. This finding is rare in studies in contexts outside China but supports Liu's (2006a, 2007) studies of a sample with a similar background. It further confirms Bailey's (1983) claim that competition or peer pressure is a great cause for foreign language anxiety in class.

Surprisingly, none of these reasons was identified by the teacher to be causes for student anxiety in the class. In the teacher's eyes, it was not due to low English proficiency or the lack of confidence because the students must have been good enough in English to register for the course. By contrast, if it existed, the anxiety could be attributed to two reasons. First, it was natural to become anxious when speaking alone to the class, especially when Chinese students were usually not trained to speak to a large audience and thus were not used to making public speeches. The second factor was personality. Some students were so shy and introverted that they became nervous when speaking to a group of people even in the mother tongue, let alone the foreign language; some students just could not help feeling anxious whenever speaking to other people in a foreign language.

In conclusion, a number of factors contributed to the students' reticence and anxiety in the ESP poetry class. However, such commonly identified reasons as cultural beliefs and educational habit (Cortazzi and Jin, 1995; Jackson, 2002; Liu, 2006a; Phillips, 1992) were not mentioned by the participants in the present research. This might be because the interviewees, having a similar cultural and educational background, neglected these two factors and focused on the specific context in which why many students remained reticent and became anxious when using the foreign language.

**Table 3.** Causes for unwillingness to communicate and anxiety.

Causes for unwillingness to communicate		Causes for anxiety	
Students (8)	1. Not knowing much or having no special ideas about what is being discussed (5/8).	1.	Having little practice (4/8).
	2. Being not confident about one's spoken English (4/8).	2.	Fearing making mistakes (4/8).
	3. Fear of making mistakes (3/8).	3.	English being not good (3/8).
	4. Being underprepared (3/8).	4.	Lacking confidence in oneself (2/8).
	5. Fear of using wrong or inappropriate expressions (2/8).	5.	Personality (2/8).
	6. Having no interest (1/8).	6.	Being unable to express oneself (1/8).
	7. Being introverted (1/8).	7.	Failing to catch others (1/8).
	8. Not having formed the habit (1/8).	8.	Poor pronunciation (1/8).
	9. Some students being too active (1/8).		
	10. Simply not wanting to say anything (1/8).		

## Original Article

9. Fear being unable to make oneself understood (1/8).

10. Others being so good (1/8).

Teacher (1) 1. The presentation took up too much time in each lesson.

2. The class being not active by nature.

1. It is natural to become anxious when speaking to others at the front.

2. Personality.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The analyses of the data showed that the students had a desire and were willing to interact with others for various purposes; however, many of them were unwilling to risk using English in the class and chose to be silent during classroom discussions due to various reasons. Although almost all often listened carefully when a person was speaking, usually only a few actively volunteered to share ideas with the others in each lesson, while the rest remained reticent until singled out. Concerning anxiety, though around two-thirds of the students became anxious when presenting at the front, more than half were not afraid to speak and felt fairly relaxed during classroom discussions. It seems that foreign language anxiety was not an obstacle to the majority of these students.

As to the changes in the students' reticence and anxiety in the ESP poetry class, the students generally became more willing and active to involve themselves in group discussions, and less anxious when using English in interpersonal interactions. Nevertheless, the change was only observable. Sometimes, some students would become more worried probably due to the increasing difficulty of the course. Meanwhile, a range of factors such as unfamiliarity with the topic, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, lack of interest, lack of practice, and personality was identified to have contributed to the students' unwillingness to communicate/reticence and anxiety during the ESP poetry class.

Since the poetry course was completely new to the students, it might not be enough to state the course objective and requirements orally to the class only in the first lesson. It might be better to remind the students of the requirements repeatedly during the term so that they could have a better idea of what they needed to do to be successful (Johnson, 1995). Thus, they might become more active and less anxious in class. To help students become less anxious and more willing to use the medium language in ESP poetry classrooms, a relaxing and supportive classroom-learning environment is also preferred (Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991). If students are supportive of each other during every lesson, they will find it easier to break their silent habit that has developed before and gradually become more comfortable and active to share ideas in the language in class (Zou, 2004). If students are mutually helpful, they will not feel embarrassed, if they make some mistakes or give an inappropriate example either.

## **Original Article**

Moreover, it may help enhance students' participation by encouraging them to actively risk using the medium language in class. With a focus on the communication of meaning, students may gradually develop their communicative skills and speak the language more fluently. They may also unconsciously improve their use of the language through continuous feedback from their interlocutors (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). In return, students may gradually build up their self-confidence, which may result in more active participation in interpersonal interactions and reduced anxiety in using the language (publicly). In addition, though the most reticent and/or the most anxious students are only a few, they often need help the most. Therefore, course teachers need to be cautious to observe and identify such students. Once they are identified, it would be helpful for teachers to encourage or even praise them more often to help them build up their confidence in themselves. Teachers can encourage these students, as suggested by Burgoon et al. (1987), to have more eye contact, adjust speaking tempo, and give more positive feedback to other students in the form of more facial pleasantness and nodding.

As to students, first of all, it is helpful for them to be aware that mistakes and errors are a part of learning and that it is natural for EFL learners to make mistakes when using the language (Donley, 1998). More importantly, it may be useful to prepare well for the class, since ESP courses are often content-based, which are much more demanding than language learning. Without adequate preparation, students may not be able to understand the content, the teacher and peers, offer opinions or share ideas with the others in class. Consequently, they will probably listen most of the time during classroom discussions and become anxious when having to express ideas in English. Thus, it is highly recommended that students prepare for each lesson. In the process, they may become more willing and active to use English in ESP class.

Finally, it should be noted that only a small sample of 24 students was involved in the present study and that the participants were generally fairly proficient in English. The findings thus, may not be generalizable to other EFL contexts. Nevertheless, suppose these highly proficient students experienced anxiety and were unwilling to participate to classroom discussions in the content-based poetry class, those less proficient in English might become more anxious and be more unwilling to contribute to interpersonal interactions in content-based ESP courses. Therefore, the issues are worthy to be further explored in similar contexts with students of varying backgrounds.

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### **APPENDIX I: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS**

Dear student,

We have invited you to this interview to better understand your learning experiences in the poetry class. Please express your ideas honestly.

#### **Beginning of the term**

##### ***a) Personal assessment of personality and abilities***

- 1) Please tell me about yourself. How would you describe yourself? Would you describe yourself as an introvert or an extrovert? Please explain. Do you think you have changed in personality so far? Why or why not? How do your friends describe you? Do you think personality plays a role in learning the poetry course well? 2) What English proficiency do you think is necessary to learn the poetry course well?
- 3) What strengths do you bring to the poetry course?
- 4) What areas do you think you need to improve? 5) Are you willing to talk to others? How well do you interact and work with other people?
- 6) Are you a confident person? Please explain with an example. Do you think self-confidence plays a role in learning the poetry course well?

##### ***Educational background/ behavior in English classes in middle school***

- 1) When did you start to study English? And when did you start to learn spoken English?
- 2) Where did you attend middle school? How was English taught there?
- 3) What were the roles and responsibilities of your middle school English teachers? What were the purposes and responsibilities of middle school students to learn English?
- 4) Did you ever have discussions in pairs in English? Please give some examples. What did you like about it? Why? What did you dislike about it? Why? 5) Were you quiet in pair work? Why or why not? Were you anxious in pair work? Why or why not? 6) Did you ever have discussions in small groups in English? Please give some examples. What did you like about it? Why? What did you dislike about it? Why? 7) Were you quiet in group work? Why or why not? Were you anxious in group work? Why or why not?
- 8) Did you ever make presentations in English in class? Please give some examples. What did you like about it? Why? What did you dislike about it? Why? Were you nervous when presenting? Why or why not?
- 9) Did your English teachers encourage students to ask questions or to offer comments in class? How did they react to students who asked questions?
- 10) Did you often volunteer to answer questions or offer your opinions in your classes? Why or why not? 11) What did you think about students who asked many questions or offered their opinions in class? Why? 12) If you

## **Original Article**

disagreed with your teacher on something, would you ever speak out in the class? Why or why not? 13) If you disagreed with some of your classmates on something, would you speak out in the class? Why or why not?

14) Did you consider yourself an active English learner in middle school? Why or why not?

15) Do you think your middle school English teachers encouraged you to be an active and confident learner? Please explain with examples.

16) Why do you think some students keep quiet in English classes? (Follow-up probes: is reticence related to personality, difficulty of the task, respect for the teacher etc.?)

17) Why do you think some students get nervous and anxious when speaking a foreign language, e.g., English?

18) Did you stick to speaking English in English classes? Why or why not?

19) Were you motivated to learn English (spoken English) in middle school? What do you think motivated you to learn? Did you try your best to study English well? How and why?

### ***Expectations of the poetry course***

1) How many ESP courses do you take this term? Why?

2) What do you expect to learn from this poetry course?

Why do you choose to take this course?

### **End of the term**

#### ***Behavior in the poetry class at the University***

1) Have you ever had discussions in pairs in the poetry class? Please give some examples. What do you like about it? Why? What do you dislike about it? Why? 2) Are you quiet during pair work? Why or why not? Are you anxious during pair work? Why or why not? 3) Have you ever had discussions in small groups in the poetry class? Please give some examples. What do you like about it? Why? What do you dislike about it? Why? 4) Are you quiet during group work? Why or why not? Are you anxious during group work? Why or why not?

5) Have you ever made presentations in the poetry class? Please give some examples. What do you like about it? Why? What do you dislike about it? Why? Were you nervous when presenting? Why or why not? 6) In the poetry class, do you prefer to talk to yourself, pair work or group work? Why? 7) Did you volunteer to respond to the teacher's questions? Why or why not? To what questions did you usually volunteer to respond or not to respond?

8) Did other students volunteer to respond to the teacher's questions? Why do you think they volunteered or not?

9) When your opinion was different from the teacher's, did you express your idea in the class? Why or why not?

10) When your opinion was different from your fellow students', did you express your idea in the class? Why or why not?

11) What do you think of students who are active in the poetry class (e.g., ask and answer questions, offer their opinions)? Why?

12) Do you think you are an active and confident learner in the poetry class? Why or why not? What activities make you more active and confident or less active and confident? Why?

13) Why do you think some students are reticent in the poetry class (follow-up probes: do you think such factors as personality, cultural background, difficulty of tasks cause students to be reticent)? What activities make students more reticent or less reticent? Why?

14) Why do you think some students get nervous when speaking English in the poetry class? What activities make them more anxious or less anxious? Why?

## **Original Article**

- 15) Did you stick to speaking English in the poetry class? Why or why not?
- 16) Do you think there was any change in your participation during the term? Why or why not?
- 17) Do you think your reticence/active participation had any effect on your performance in the poetry class? Why or why not? If yes, in what ways and to what extent? Please explain with examples.
- 18) Have you ever tried any means to make yourself more active in classroom discussion? Why or why not? If yes, what did you do?
- 19) Do you think there was any change in your anxiety in the poetry class during the term? Why or why not?
- 20) Do you think anxiety/confidence had any effect on your performance in the poetry class? Why or why not? If yes, in what ways and to what extent? Please explain with examples.
- 21) Have you ever tried any means to make yourself less anxious when expressing ideas in classroom discussions? Why or why not? If yes, what strategies have you used?
- 22) What motivates you to learn English now? Have you tried your best to learn English well now? Why or why not?

### ***Personal assessment of overall English proficiency and proficiency in oral English***

- 1) What do you think of your English proficiency and oral English proficiency in particular (e.g., minimal, poor, fair, good, very good, excellent)? Do you think you have made progress during the term? In what ways? Please be specific. Why or why not?
- 2) What factors do you think have an effect on your performance in the poetry class? Why?

### ***Assessment of the poetry course***

- 1) Do you have any difficulty taking this poetry course? 2) Looking back, do you think this course has satisfied your expectations? Why or why not? Are you satisfied with the teacher? Why or why not? Are you satisfied with yourself? Why or why not?
- 3) Do you have any suggestions for the course? Any suggestions for future students of this course?

## **APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE**

### **TEACHER Beginning of the term**

- 1) Why did you offer this course? What is the purpose of the course?
- 2) What is the plan (e.g., content, teaching and learning activities, assignments, etc.) for the course? 3) What are your expectations of the students?

### **End of the term**

- 1) Looking back at the term, are you satisfied with your teaching (e.g., content, teaching and learning activities, and assignments, etc.)? Why or why not? 2) Did you change or modify your plan (e.g., add or delete certain content, increase or decrease the difficulty, etc.) during the term? Why or why not?
- 3) Looking back at the term, could you comment on the overall participation of the students? Do you think the students were quiet in class? Why do you feel that way? Could you identify the most quiet or active students? (Follow-up probes: Did they tend to keep silent all the time? Did they never take the initiative to talk to others? Did they actively respond to your questions? In what activities were they especially so? Why do you think they were quiet or active?)
- 4) Looking back at the performance of the students, Do you think they were anxious when speaking English in the class? Why do you feel that way? Could you identify the most anxious as well as the most confident

## **Original Article**

students? (Follow-up probes: Did they look confident when speaking out their ideas in English? Did they tremble when speaking out ideas in English? Were there many hesitations in their speech? Did they look down at the desk or ground or did they look up at you or the class when speaking out ideas in English?) In what activities were they especially so? Why do you think they were anxious or confident?

5) During the term, did you take any steps to encourage reticent students to participate more? (Follow-up probes: Did you intentionally call the reticent students more often to state opinions? Did you purposefully assign them more pair work and group work?) Were they effective? Why or why not?

6) During the term, did you try any method to reduce the students' anxiety? (Follow-up probes: Did you provide more opportunities for them to discuss with each other? Did you call them more often? Did you praise them more often?) Were they effective? Why or why not?

7) Do you think student reticence and anxiety negatively affect their performance in the course? To what extent and why? Please explain with examples. In your opinion, what can students do to reduce anxiety and become more active and confident? What can teachers do to help them reduce anxiety and become more active and confident?

8) Are you satisfied with the students? Why or why not?  
Any suggestions do you have for them?