

REMEDIATING RETICENCE IN ORAL  
PARTICIPATION AMONG TESL  
STUDENTS IN EAP  
CLASSROOMS

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UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

2019

REMIATING RETICENCE IN ORAL PARTICIPATION AMONG TESL  
STUDENTS IN EAP CLASSROOMS

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

FAKULTI BAHASA DAN KOMUNIKASI  
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

2019

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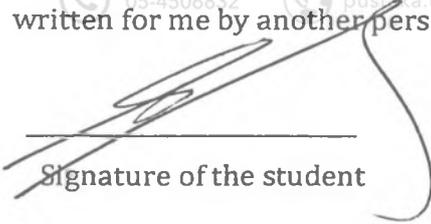
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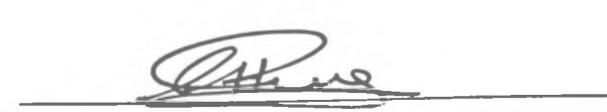
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis would not have been possible without the support, help and encouragement of many people.

First and foremost, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my main supervisor, Associate Professor Dr. Goh Hock Seng for his enthusiasm, constructive feedback, invaluable advice and great efforts to assist me throughout my study and completion of my study. I have been very fortunate to work with Dr. Goh.

I also wish to thank my second supervisor, Associate Professor Dr. Raja Nor Safinas Binti Raja Harun who was so keen to share her experience, knowledge and support.

My special thanks also go to all the TESL students and EAP instructors who took part in this study, which would not have been completed without their efforts and great helps. Lastly, I am sincerely grateful to my colleagues who helped me a lot during my data collection and data analysis.





## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine a remedial course to alleviate reticence in oral participation among TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language) students in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classrooms. Adopting a multiphase mixed-method research design, this study was implemented in four phases: (I) identification of reticent students, (II) needs assessment, (III) remedial course development, and (IV) course implementation and evaluation. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and classroom observations. 9 EAP instructors and 144 TESL students from a university involved in Phase I and Phase II of the study. For the remediation, an intact group of 31 TESL students participated in the remedial course. The needs assessment results in Phase II showed that the remedial course should cover the teaching of oral participation skills, modifying reticent beliefs and alleviating fear towards oral participation. The analysis of the remediation results using Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed significant effects ( $Z = -2.906, p = 0.004$ ) in reducing the level of reticence and modifying four reticent beliefs, particularly beliefs that are related to the roles of listening in open class discussion. The findings also showed that the students could take more speaking turns and utilise more words in their utterances to sustain interaction. Moreover, the students considered practice-based components in the remedial course as more helpful than instruction-based components. In conclusion, the TESL students' oral participation productivity has improved after undergoing the remediation. The findings of this study have implications for the understanding of reticent behaviour among TESL students, and for developing remediation programme to alleviate student reticence in classroom oral participation.





## PEMULIHAN KEENGGANAN BERTUTUR DALAM PENYERTAAN SECARA LISAN DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR TESL DI DALAM KELAS EAP

### ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menguji satu kursus pemulihan untuk mengurangkan tingkah laku keengganan bertutur dalam penyertaan secara lisan dalam kalangan pelajar jurusan Pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris Sebagai Bahasa Kedua (TESL) di dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris Untuk Tujuan Akademik (EAP). Berdasarkan reka bentuk kajian gabungan pelbagai fasa, kajian ini dilaksanakan dalam empat fasa, iaitu (I) mengenal pasti pelajar yang enggan bertutur, (II) penilaian keperluan, (III) pembangunan kursus pemulihan dan (IV) pelaksanaan serta penilaian kursus. Data kajian dipungut melalui soal selidik, temu bual separa berstruktur, perbincangan kumpulan berfokus dan pemerhatian di dalam kelas. Kajian untuk Fasa I dan II melibatkan 9 orang pengajar EAP dan 144 orang pelajar TESL daripada satu universiti. Bagi tujuan pemulihan, 31 orang pelajar daripada satu kumpulan telah mengambil bahagian. Keputusan penilaian keperluan di Fasa II menunjukkan bahawa kursus pemulihan tersebut perlu meliputi pengajaran kemahiran penyertaan secara lisan, modifikasi kepercayaan yang menyebabkan keengganan bertutur dan pengurangan kerisauan penyertaan secara lisan. Keputusan pemulihan yang dianalisis dengan menggunakan *Wilcoxon signed-rank test* menunjukkan kesan signifikan ( $Z = -2.906$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) dalam pengurangan tahap keengganan bertutur dan memodifikasi empat kepercayaan yang menyebabkan keengganan bertutur khususnya kepercayaan yang berkaitan dengan peranan mendengar dalam perbincangan kelas terbuka. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa pelajar dapat meningkatkan giliran bertutur dan menggunakan lebih banyak perkataan dalam ujaran mereka untuk mengekalkan interaksi. Selain itu, pelajar beranggapan bahawa komponen berasaskan latihan dalam kursus pemulihan lebih berguna daripada komponen berasaskan arahan. Kesimpulannya, produktiviti penyertaan secara lisan pelajar TESL telah bertambah baik selepas menjalani pemulihan. Dapatan kajian ini mempunyai implikasi terhadap kefahaman berkaitan tingkah laku keengganan bertutur dalam kalangan pelajar TESL serta pembangunan program pemulihan untuk mengurangkan keengganan bertutur pelajar dalam penyertaan secara lisan di dalam kelas.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CpBI	Competency-based Instruction
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
LSA	Learning Situation Analysis
NAFOP	Needs Assessment for Oral Participation
ORAPAC	Oral Participation Course
PSA	Present Situation Analysis
PSRP	The Penn State Reticence Programme
RBI	Reticent Beliefs Index
RS	Reticence Scale
SCT	Social Cognitive Theory
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SRL	Self-regulated Learning
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
TSA	Target Situation Analysis

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION



Participation as a key dimension of student engagement is becoming increasingly important across all levels of education, especially at tertiary level (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler, 2005). This is in support of the shift from traditional lecture-based classroom to a more student-centred instruction (Knight, 2007) which takes place in many higher learning institutions, both local and abroad. This move has also witnessed the replacement of traditional methods of teaching with more interactive instructions which utilise whole-class discussion, group discussion, dyadic-work, peer review, forum, among others, to minimise lecturing (Rocca, 2010). In order to carry out these tasks successfully, all students have to actively engage themselves by giving the necessary desired oral responses in the classroom.





In this regard, a reciprocal interaction among classroom members is a crucial element, especially in its contribution towards students' learning experience. In the instance of English language education, be it in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, students' active oral participation are also highly essential in the classrooms (Green, 2008). When students orally engage with their teachers or peers in the classroom, they are compelled to carry out 'negotiation of meaning', that is to express and clarify their intentions, thoughts and opinions (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 150). This will, in turn, develop the students' communicative competence (Chang & Goswami, 2011; Hymes, 1972; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards, 2006). Based on this assumption, the ability to participate orally using English would contribute to the success of learners in ESL/EFL classrooms.



Operating from the assumption that oral participation is associated with learning, students are always encouraged by their teachers or instructors to contribute to the classroom discourse. Sometimes, as a form of encouragement, oral participation is also evaluated according to the amount and quality of student talk (Warayet, 2011). The ultimate goal of this evaluation is somewhat to increase student involvement by offering grades as an incentive or source of motivation (Bean & Peterson, 1998). However, despite this encouragement, teachers are still experiencing two divergent scenarios of student oral participation in class. While many of them have had the experience of teaching courses where students participate frequently, there are, however, many other teachers too who have struggled to get their students to participate (Rocca, 2010).





It can be extremely frustrating for teachers when students remain silent in class, and when a small proportion of them actually participate (Fritschner, 2000). Despite the students being aware of the importance of oral contribution, and knowing that oral participation is encouraged, compulsory and sometimes graded, many teachers still face a great deal of quietness in the classroom. The students are said to remain non-participatory, quiet or behaving passively. In the field of communication and second language acquisition, this is a situation typically termed as ‘reticence’. This phenomenon, in relation to classroom learning context, is said to have negative effects on students’ efforts to learn, motivation, and general attitude towards the courses undertaken (Cieniewicz, 2007).

In the language classrooms, some students are always ready to engage using the target language whilst some are greatly hesitant to do so (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998). Such reticent behaviour disrupts not only the planned instructional activities, but also makes it difficult for instructors to facilitate active learning among students. Additionally, it becomes a major obstacle for students to develop oral proficiency as compared to the development of other skills such as reading and listening (Jenkins, 2008). This implies that reticent behaviour would restrict students from progressing in language learning. Due to these reasons, the act of being reticent has always been noted as the main source of frustration and failure for both instructors and students (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jackson, 2002; Zhang & Head, 2009).





In the case of ESL/EFL teacher training, similarly, a considerable concern is voiced among instructors over student teachers' reticence in various classes (Green, 2008; Savaşçı, 2014). The same scenario is also, surprisingly, found among Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) graduate students who struggle to acquire participation competence (Xia, 2009). All these examples infer that reticence is not a characteristic confined only to non-English major students in ESL/EFL classrooms. Reticence may also be found among pre-service English language teachers who have obtained a considerable level of proficiency. This is also true with Malaysian pre-service TESL teachers. In my experience as a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructor, my colleagues and I have constantly experienced and expressed a deep concern over our students' evident reticent behaviour in EAP classes in the TESL programme. We struggle in finding ways to break the uncomfortable silence while interacting with students. For many instructors, despite having many years of teaching, they still find it difficult to understand the reticent behaviour of their students and work out suitable strategies that will encourage their students to talk more in class. In response to the situation described above, it is important to find a way to help reticent students become more active in classroom oral participation.

## 1.1 Problem Statement

At the tertiary level, students are always expected to adopt active learning roles in the English language classroom. Such expectation is in line with the claims that students





learn better and retain more when they are active participants (Cieniewicz, 2007). In the context of ESL/EFL teacher education, overt participation or willingness to take opportunity to participate actively is also highly expected from all the student teachers or pre-service teachers as this is a way to develop their language competencies, oral communication skills and as a preparation for their future role as teachers (Green, 2008). However, some ESL/EFL student teachers' reticent behaviour in class has always hindered such expectation, despite much effort being put in by the instructors to make them participate actively. This is revealed in previously conducted researches from various countries which have consistently reported on this issue (Baktash & Chalak, 2016; Bursalı & Öz, 2017; Green, 2008; Savaşçı, 2014; Xia, 2009). Similarly, some Malaysian pre-service English teachers also face problems in their oral participation ability despite having the experience of learning the language for many years (Soo & Goh, 2013). The recurring findings reported in this area of study assert that the long-term existence of reticence is a critical and challenging issue that needs to be resolved.

Though many studies have addressed the issue of reticence, and there were some attempts to offer suggestions to solve the problem, many teachers and students still feel helpless whenever this phenomenon occurs in class (Liu, 2005). In order to meet the particular demand of students' learning needs at tertiary level, most institutions have in fact taken initiatives to offer various language and communication-related courses to help their students to achieve the desired communication competence. However, the outcomes of these efforts have turned out





to be disappointing as current researches still find many tertiary students being reticent in the classrooms (Hamouda, 2013; Savaşçı, 2014).

It is believed that many ESL/EFL instructors who frequently encounter reticent students in their classrooms have always attempted to understand the phenomenon and find ways to help this type of students. Nevertheless, the explanations and suggestions offered in many researches are normally simple and rely on stereotypical student characteristics of passivity, lack of cooperation or simply not having the desire to learn (Donald, 2010; Harumi, 2001). Furthermore, some teachers also misjudge reticent students and simply ascribe reticence to a lack of intelligence or lack of class preparation rather than to a lack of communication competence (Kelly, Phillips & Keaten, 1995). Taking this into consideration, the lack of in-depth knowledge about student reticence, and especially relevant documentation on specific intervention or technique to remedy reticence certainly becomes the cause for concern. Thus, on account of this issue, it is pertinent to put forward a research to examining this behaviour and formulate plans for remedial purpose.

In conclusion, although students' oral participation has always been a major emphasis in the effort of transforming the traditional classroom into a more interactive one, the effort to motivate reticent students to participate more is always a daunting task. As such, many teachers or instructors are still found dominating the classroom talk for most of the lesson while students are quiet and completing their assigned tasks (Fisher, Frey & Rothenberg, 2008). Therefore, finding way(s) to alleviate students'





reticent behaviour and to improve their classroom oral participation is deemed a critical issue that merits an investigation.

## 1.2 Rationale of the Study

In reality, many ESL/EFL teachers are confronted with at least some reticent students in their classrooms. Nonetheless, due to the lack of extensive and local-based research, it becomes difficult for teachers to understand this phenomenon and particularly to help the students. Whenever students behave in a reticent manner, they will be identified as “troubling, problematic, and disruptive” (Reda, 2009, p. 5). Due to this reason, many researchers and educators generally regard students who do not engage

orally as being passive and unmotivated (Cao, 2009).

There is a debate on the real factors behind students’ reticent behaviour in the ESL/EFL classrooms. Based on a massive pool of data in the present literature, numerous reasons have been identified and suggested for student reticence in previous studies conducted across the Asian regions. Most of these studies attribute student reticence to their linguistic competence, socio-cultural, psychological, personality and pedagogical factors (Delima, 2012; Jenkins, 2008; Li & Jia, 2006; Li & Liu, 2011; Liu & Jackson, 2009; Tsui, 1996; Xie, 2009). On this matter, Donald (2010) asserts that the attempt to identify factors causing student reticence is a complex issue, which has then made the issue problematic for practitioners whenever they are seeking ways to help the students. As a result, Jenkins (2008) predicts that the challenge of future





research is to identify specific causes of student reticence and to develop strategies that cope with the problem. Similarly, both Liu (2005) and Savaşçı (2014) advocated a need for further research in this subject and suggest useful strategies to engage ESL/EFL students to participate more in English classes.

Although there are numerous studies which have looked into the factors of reticence as mentioned above, there is still a lack of studies on the remediation of reticence (Tsou, 2005). This shortcoming has become a real handicap for teachers who intend to help reticent students in their classrooms. Additionally, the present study argues that it is inadequate for teachers to just provide stimuli for encouraging oral participation as it might only be effective in that particular class or time. Instead, tertiary students require self-directed and transferable learning strategies or skills which could help them to be successful in classroom oral participation. Due to this compelling reason, the present study examined if a researcher developed remedial course could help alleviate students' reticence problem. However, before a remedial plan could be devised, it is important to establish what cause the original pattern of the behaviour. Also, the present study holds that reticent individuals may not change the past but can still control the present and the future if they are given the necessary intervention.

Furthermore, many ESL/EFL practitioners hold a stereotypical view that reticence is uniquely possessed by students with low English proficiency, but surprisingly the same phenomenon is also discovered among those with satisfactory English language proficiency (Liu, Zhang & Lu, 2011; Shea, 2017). In a case study to





investigate student reticence among Chinese undergraduates who were highly proficient in English, Liu, et al. (2011) demonstrated that the students had a desire to interact with others, but only a few actively volunteered to share ideas while the rest remained reticent. In another study, Wen and Clement (2003) found discrepancy between students' high proficiency and deficiency in carrying out English conversations. Similarly, Green (2008) also discovered that those who had already acquired certain proficiency such as pre-service English language teacher trainees were reported having low level of overt participation in various classes. In general, these students were found to be hardly volunteering replies during discussion, seldom answering questions posed by teachers, giving brief replies and holding back from expressing their views (Cortazzi & Jin 1996; Jackson 2002). Although there is such contradicting perspective, the literature reporting on high proficiency reticent students is very limited. Thus, the present study intends to minimise this gap by investigating the issue of reticence among TESL students, who are considered high proficiency students.

### 1.3 Research Aims

The aim of the study is two-fold: (1) identification of reticent TESL students and their needs for remediation, and (2) development of a remedial course to alleviate reticent behaviour of TESL students in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom.





## 1.4 Research Objectives

Two research objectives are set in achieving the first aim of the study. The first objective is to identify the TESL students' level of reticence. The second objective is to identify the needs of reticent TESL students that should be considered for remediation. The theoretical aspect for undertaking the needs analysis are based on the approaches to needs analysis comprising both present situation analysis (PSA) and target situation analysis (TSA) (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998), which are currently in practice in the field of EAP. Based on these two approaches, the discussion into the students' needs for remediation is mainly addressed from four aspects: the nature of reticent behaviour, subscription of reticent belief, the perceived difficulty in oral participation, and the required oral competencies for active classroom oral



As for the second aim of the study, which is to develop a remedial course to alleviate reticent behaviour, two research objectives are involved. The first one is to design a remedial course based on a synthesis of related theories, models and the students' remediation needs. The second objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed remedial course in alleviating TESL students' reticent behaviour. For a comprehensive investigation into this topic, the above research objectives are guided by the following research questions.





## 1.5 Research Questions

The following research questions guide the present study.

**Research question 1:** What are the needs of reticent TESL students that should be included in a remedial course to alleviate reticence and to improve classroom oral participation?

**Research question 1.1:** What are the academic oral participation competencies or skills required by the reticent TESL students in EAP class?

**Research question 1.2:** Which oral participation tasks engender reticence among the TESL students in EAP class?

**Research question 1.3:** What beliefs do the reticent TESL students hold that caused them to be reticent or to refrain from engaging in oral participation in EAP class?

**Research question 1.4:** What are the reticent TESL students' suggestions for a remedial course to alleviate reticence and to improve oral participation?

**Research question 2:** To what extent does the proposed remedial course alter the reticent TESL students' beliefs about oral participation and their level of reticence?

**Research question 3:** To what extent does the remedial course increase the reticent TESL students' oral participation?

**Research question 4:** What components of the remedial course do the students perceive as helpful to alleviate reticent behaviour and to improve classroom oral participation?





## 1.6 Significance of the Study

The present study seeks to contribute to the fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and TESL education by devising a remedial course which could help address reticent behaviour among TESL students, and at the same time to offer pedagogical suggestions to improve student oral participation in class. Generally, this study offers both theoretical and pedagogical contributions to the issue of student reticence in the ESL/EFL/EAP classrooms.

First, from a theoretical perspective, the study hopes to enrich the literature on the phenomenon of student reticence in the ESL/EFL/EAP learning context. Predominantly, this study helps university instructors, language or communication course designers and students better understand the patterns of reticent behaviour demonstrated by learners in the classrooms. Although multiple researches have been conducted in the past, they are mostly based on the West and East Asian contexts. It is still an under-explored area in many learning situations, including Malaysia.

Another contribution of this study lies in the effort of exploring the behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions of high proficiency reticent students' reluctance to participate verbally in the classrooms. Previous studies have widely reported on the external and affective factors associated with students' reticence. Considering that little focus has been given to the cognitive and behavioural components, the present study is expected to narrow this gap.





Third, although a great amount of previous research have reported the association between students' reticent behaviour and their low proficiency level, students with satisfactory proficiency level were also surprisingly found to be reticent in various classrooms. Since previous literature has paid very little attention on high proficiency learners' reticence in class other than linguistic and cultural aspects, the attempt taken in this study is considered critical. Through a mixed-method approach, involving surveys, focus-group discussion, observation and semi-structured interview, this study provides a description of high proficiency ESL learners' reticent behaviour. So far, none of the studies examined the issue of student reticence with this approach.

In terms of practical implications, this study fundamentally seeks to provide suggestions for helping reticent TESL students. It is expected to contribute to developing a course for remediation purpose which is not only applicable in teacher education programme but also in contexts which share similar concern. The study will contribute in confirming the theoretical expectations that participating in the proposed course to alleviate reticence would bring positive outcome. This is motivated by previous attempts of remediation which highlight the possible benefits of using various techniques such as cognitive restructuring and skills-training in helping learners to modify other communication-related behaviour. This study would also raise educators' and students' awareness of how reticent behaviour could be addressed, and how classroom oral participation could be enhanced.

In addition to the above, both language and oral communication instructors could possibly employ the entire remedial course, including its tasks, instructional





strategies, materials and assessments, to train their reticent students. Furthermore, for institutions which have constraints or find it not feasible to offer an additional long-term course, the current study also seeks to provide remediation techniques, and to identify components that would have impact for a shorter course. In this case, the present study could help instructors to develop a shorter but equally effective course or workshop, and to equip them with knowledge of incorporating suitable tasks and skills in any relevant courses. It is believed that without a guideline as presented in this study, devising such a remedial course, workshop or module would be difficult, and possibly overlooked.

To conclude, this study helps ESL/EFL/EAP instructors in becoming more aware of aspects that need to be addressed when engaging reticent students in the class, and help such students to become more active contributors in classroom academic discourse.

## 1.7 Definition of Terms

In this section, several key terms used are defined to avoid different interpretations.

### 1.7.1 Reticence

Keaten and Kelly (2000) view reticence as an act of avoiding communication but for different reason where they advocate that reticent people avoid communication because ‘they believe it is better to remain silent than to risk appearing foolish’.





### 1.7.2 Reticent beliefs

In the conceptualization of reticence, both Phillips (1984) and Keaten and Kelly (2000) give emphasis to the word ‘believe’ in their definitions to illustrate reticent individuals’ subscription to a faulty sets of beliefs about communication in the reticence experience. In other words, reticent belief refers to what reticent individuals believe that put them in various degrees of reticent experience. It is one of the causative factors in classroom reticence. This definition is used in the present study.

### 1.7.3 Classroom oral participation

Classroom oral participation refers to any verbal interaction between a teacher and a student or more students (such as whole class), and between a student and a student or more students. Mohd, Noor Rahamah and Maizatul (2012) view oral participation as the behaviours of speaking or giving opinions in the classroom, answering and asking questions, giving comments and taking part in the classroom discussions.

### 1.7.4 Competency-based approach

The competency-based approach focuses on the students’ learning outcomes as the starting point of course design by identifying the tasks a learner need to perform within a specific setting (Richards, 2013). The proposed course in this study will be designed based on the competencies reticent students need in order to perform in the





classroom and in specific tasks such as maintaining group discussion, giving comments to peers, etc.

### 1.7.5 Remediation

In the context of this study, remediation refers to the process of improving or correcting a student behaviour in classroom situation.

### 1.7.6 English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

Wei and Flaitz (2005) view English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes or courses as the key components to help students to develop the kind of English language proficiency that will lead to success in their academic endeavours.

## 1.8 Summary

In this chapter, the problem statement, rationale of the study, research aims, research objectives, research questions and the significance of the study have been reported. The definitions of a few important terms utilised in the study are also presented. In the following chapter, the literature review on the phenomenon of student reticence and course development are provided. This information helps to contextualise the TESL students' reticent behaviour and to devise a course for remedial purpose.

