

# EXPLORING THE RETICENCE OF THAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS: STUDENT-CENTRED COPING STRATEGIES

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** This qualitative study explores the affective, cognitive, and behavioural factors influencing students' reticence in English language classrooms and subsequent potential coping strategies.

**Methods.** Data was collected from 472 Thai university students using open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews, and then thematically analysed.

**Results.** The findings revealed that students' reticence is likely to be contributed by affective factors such as perceived lack of confidence, fear of peer judgment, shyness and anxiety, dislike of the English language, and lack of rapport with peers; cognitive factors like difficulty in understanding teachers' questions, translating thoughts into English, and limited English proficiency; and behavioural factors such as teachers' inappropriate approach. However, these factors could be reduced through effective collaboration among students (e.g., being mindful and seeking comfort in making mistakes), peers (e.g., supporting each other), and teachers (e.g., frequent encour-

agement, alternating between L1, positive reinforcement, and adopting a progressive questioning approach)

**Conclusion.** The study concludes with potential theoretical and practical implications in the field of foreign language education.

**Keywords:** students' reticence, cause of reticence, coping strategies, EFL context, Thailand

## INTRODUCTION

Gerald M. Phillips (1984) defines reticence as the phenomenon where “people avoid communication because they believe they will lose more by talking than by remaining silent” (p. 52). This phenomenon is commonly observed among students in various Asian countries, including Thailand, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, India, Nepal, and Iran, among others (see Askari & Moinzadeh, 2015; Chaiyasat et al., 2022; Hanh, 2020; Harumi, 2011; Hongboontri et al., 2021; Verma, 2017; Wang, 2019; Wu, 2019; Zafarina, 2022). Reticence is more prevalent among EFL students (Wang, 2019) due to their linguistic challenges, cultural influences, and fear of making mistakes. Student reticence is often viewed as deleterious (Derakhshan et al., 2021; Hanh, 2020; Pawlak et al., 2022) and undesirable phenomenon (Chaiyasat et al., 2022; Hanh, 2020) that causes a huge burden on both teachers (Shao & Gao, 2016; Smith & King, 2018) and students themselves (Danckert et al., 2018; Pawlak et al., 2022). As with teachers, Lesley Smith and Jim King (2018) reported that when students are reticent in the classroom, it negatively affects their teaching performance, emotions, and well-being. Quing Shao and Xuesong Gao (2016) and Smith and King (2018) further highlighted that students' reticence, particularly when teachers seek their participation, discourages teachers as it prevents them from executing their lesson plans effectively. Pertaining to students, Ali Derakhshan et al. (2021) asserted that reticence in the classroom bores students and disrupts their physical and mental states. Additionally, James Danckert et al. (2018) divulged that students lose their interest in learning, and become restless, sleepy, fatigued, and so on when the classroom is silent. Chen Shan (2020) stressed that students' reticence is the primary cause of a cold and dull classroom atmosphere.

Researchers' claims thus far on reticence being negatively associated with both teachers and students indicate how classroom reticence, if not addressed, can be problematic for in L2 education. To lay the groundwork for addressing these issues in the second/foreign language teaching and learning, many studies have been conducted in Asian context such as in China (Wang, 2019; Wu, 2019), Indonesia (Zafarina, 2022), Vietnam (Hanh, 2020), Japan (Harumi, 2011), Iran (Askari & Moinzadeh, 2015), India (Verma, 2017), Nepal (Bista, 2012), including Thailand (Chaiyasat et al., 2022; Hongboontri et al., 2021). Although these studies have delineated the cause

and coping strategies of classroom reticence to some extent, most of them suggested that more research is required specifically from students' perspective because classroom reticence is a dynamic phenomenon and it is specific to individuals, influenced by diverse personal, cultural, and contextual factors (Hongboontri et al., 2021) that cannot be fully captured through one or two research studies. This study was thus conducted in response to the suggestions of studies reviewed for the current study. Moreover, not many of the abovementioned studies have explored the said phenomenon through the lens of cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of reticence proposed by James A. Keaten and Lyanne Kelly (2000) and Phillips (1984), the theory which was developed to explain the individuals' reasons behind their reticence. This makes the current study unique, as its findings are expected to expand upon previous research through the lens of the mentioned theory. Additionally, this study aims to provide in-depth, evidence-based insights into coping strategies for classroom reticence from students' perspectives. Consequently, it is anticipated that the study will serve as a guide for EFL teachers, particularly in Thailand, in addressing student reticence, which is one of the major issues in the country (Chaiyasat et al., 2022). To achieve these goals, this study seeks to answer the following two questions.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the cognitive, affective, and behavioural factors that contribute to Thai EFL students' reticence in English as a foreign language classroom?
- What are some potential coping strategies to overcome these factors of students' reticence in English as a foreign language classroom?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explores the theoretical framework underpinning this study and examines the reported causes of students' reticence, as well as their coping strategies, within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

### **Reticence: The Theoretical Framework of this Study**

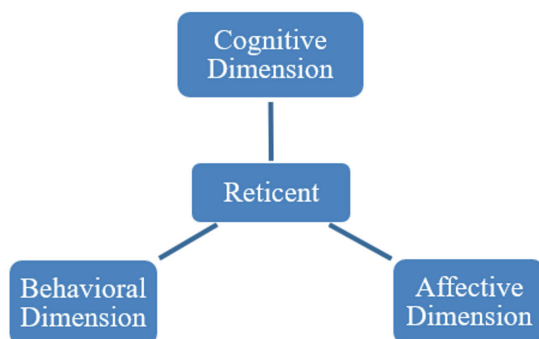
Various studies have offered diverse definitions and perspectives on reticence within the EFL context. For instance, Phillips (1984) defines reticence as the phenomenon where “people avoid communication because they believe they will lose more by talking than by remaining silent” (p. 52). Fenghua Xu et al. (2022)

view reticence as a distinct separation between students' cognitive engagement and their absence of verbal participation that is influenced by individual traits, classroom experiences and learning adjustment. Sri Erma Purwanti and Mel-da Yeni (2021) consider students' reticence as a phenomenon that frequently occurs in speaking classes, where students are not actively engaged in speaking activities. Suvarna Lakshmi Gangavarapu et al. (2022) define students' reticence as a lack of response to a teacher's question, often stemming from a lack of self-confidence. James Edward King (2013) defines students' reticence as a defensive strategy aimed at preserving face and avoiding embarrassment. Mardiana Astuti Bahar et al. (2024) describe reticence in their study as the fear that arises when students fail to perform, leaving no room for them to speak. The definitions presented so far suggest that reticence is an absence of speech or students' reluctance to participate in the classroom, which may stem from various factors such as linguistic, cultural, societal, and others. For this study, we define students' reticence as their silence when teachers ask content-related questions, perform group activities, and other forms of verbal participation related to the course content. Here, 'content' refers to the subject matter being taught by the teacher. In other words, we assume that students are more likely to remain silent when asked questions and assigned tasks about the subject matter. Conversely, students are less likely to exhibit reticence when teachers ask more casual questions, such as 'How are you?' Establishing an operational definition of students' reticence was essential for this study, as it is a complex phenomenon.

In line with the operational definition, the present study was based on Phillips's (1984) theoretical framework on reticence. Phillips (1984) believes that individuals remain reticent mainly due to their behavioural and cognitive dimensions. These two dimensions have been extensively used to explore factors influencing individuals' reticence. According to Keaten and Kelly (2000)

The behavioural dimension involves avoidance and ineptitude brought on by skills deficits in the rhetorical processes implicit in the five (invention, disposition, style, delivery and memory) canons of rhetoric, while the cognitive component of the problem is the faulty belief system which justifies the reticent person's avoidance of communication (p. 168).

Building on Phillips's (1984) theory as a theoretical foundation, Keaten and Kelly (2000) found that individuals' reticence extends beyond behavioural and cognitive dimensions. They argued that anxiety, often stemming from a fear of negative evaluation, can also contribute to reticence. In their response, Keaten and Kelly (2000) introduced an additional dimension—the affective dimension—to complement Phillips's (1984) earlier identified causes of reticence. The proposed theoretical model for this study is based on Phillips's (1984) and Keaten and Kelly's (2000) theories are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1***The Proposed Model for this Study*

Source. Adapted from Phillips (1984) and Keaten and Kelly (2000).

## Cause of Students' Reticence in EFL Classrooms

Researchers from different EFL contexts, who have studied the causes of students' reticence in foreign language classrooms have identified several reasons that contribute to it. These include but are not limited to, students' personality traits, situational factors, teaching approaches, cultural factors, somatic factors, language skills, emotions, classroom environment, teaching materials, and so forth (Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2022; Fen et al., 2020; Harumi, 2011; Hongboontri et al., 2021; Shan, 2020; Smith and King, 2018; Wang, 2019; Wu, 2019). Sachie Banks (2016) investigated what keeps Japanese students reticent in foreign language classrooms and reported that Japanese students prefer to keep themselves silent in the classroom mainly as a gesture of respect to teachers and peers, due to their inability to understand teachers' instructions and lack of English language skills. Huashan Wu (2019) mentioned similar reasons that Chinese students are reticent in the classroom mainly because of the lack of English proficiency, conservative nature, language anxiety, and teachers' personality traits. In another study, taking four graduate-level Turkish students as a sample who were studying in US academic settings, Sibel Tatar (2005) concluded that students remain reticence a) to save their image and avoid embarrassment, b) to show respect to teachers, c) due to inadequate language skills, and d) when there were listening activities in the classroom.

Similarly, Nguyen Thu Hanh (2020) explored the reasons behind Vietnamese students' reticence in the foreign language classroom. A total of 85 English-major university students from Hanoi participated. The findings of the study noted linguistic and psychological factors as two primary antecedents of students' reticence in the foreign language classroom. While linguistic factors involved a lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, poor pronunciation, and the overall English proficiency of students, psychological factors included students' personality traits such as shy-

ness, lack of confidence, and saving their face from teachers and friends. These findings were not so different from the study conducted by Eric A. Ambele and Yusop Boonsuk (2018) in the Thai context, in which they reported that most Thai students prefer to remain silent in the classroom because of inadequate language skills, psychological reasons (e.g., shyness, lack of confidence, face-saving, etc.) as mentioned above, and due to cultural practice in which interruption, when others are speaking, is considered impolite. As with the Indonesian context, Nabella Fariza Zafarina (2022) pointed out that Indonesian learners remain reticent in foreign language classrooms because of the lack of confidence to communicate with teachers, their attitude towards foreign languages, learners' disinterest in speaking a foreign language, lack of language proficiency, and to save their face from their mates and teachers. Similar reasons, the student's fear of being negatively assessed by their mates and teachers and losing face were presented by Piyawan Rungwarapong (2019) who conducted a study in the Thai context. Recently, Yun Zhou and Yijin Chen (2020) examined 118 Chinese University students to seek the answer to why the students are reluctant to participate in the EFL classroom. The results indicated that diffusion of responsibility was the main cause of reticence.

Furthermore, to gain a deeper understanding of what causes students' reticence while learning a foreign (English) language, Chantarath Hongboontri et al. (2021) interviewed, observed and collected written notes from 10 Thai University students. The study identified four primary factors contributing to students' reticence in foreign language classrooms. It included: teachers' pedagogical practices in the classroom, teachers' personality traits, students themselves (e.g., lack of confidence, lack of language skills, personality traits, etc.), subject matter, and classroom environment. Similar concerns were highlighted in the Japanese and Chinese contexts too (see Harumi, 2011; Wang, 2019). Most recently, Chatchawan Chaivasat and Arthit Intakaew (2022) have delved into the same phenomenon with 35 Thai University first-year students. Although their findings differ slightly in comparison with the previous studies, the general pattern of the findings was quite relatable to the previous studies, especially in the Thai context. They also found teachers' conduct, cultural factors, situational factors, and learner traits as key contributors to students' reticence in the classroom.

## **Coping Strategies for Students' Reticence in EFL Classrooms**

Many researchers have attempted to identify various innovative strategies to reduce/overcome classroom reticence in the literature. Among many, integration of game-based learning and group activities, reflective and interpretive tasks, appreciating students, establishing a positive rapport with students, boosting students' self-esteem and confidence, creating a friendly and conducive learning atmosphere, being unprejudiced towards silent students, motivating, and so forth were highlighted in the previous

studies (Harumi, 2011; Min, 2016; Zafarina, 2022). In Asian contexts, particularly in Japan, Seiko Harumi (2011) suggests that incorporating student-centered approaches in foreign language classrooms can effectively address students' reticence. They emphasise the importance of utilising classroom activities like role-play, group work, and other interactive exercises to enhance student interaction and engagement. Another study, conducted by Shan (2020) in China outlined similar coping strategies. The author divulged that teachers should work on how to improve the classroom environment and make it conducive for learners to interact with both teachers and their classmates.

In the same vein, Wu (2019) added that teachers should frequently use speaking activities, scaffold students, encourage students to speak in the classroom, and use interesting classroom activities. Along with this, the author suggested teachers work on their personality traits because students expect them to be friendly, humorous, and patient. Likewise, Hanh (2020), from the Vietnam context urged teachers to put efforts into developing students' confidence by frequently encouraging them on their achievement. Most importantly to work on how to break the fear of making mistakes and learning anxiety among students. The author further recommended motivating students, creating innovative classroom activities (e.g., role-play, debates, group discussion, etc), and creating a harmonious classroom environment. In addition, teachers were suggested to be friendly and avoid giving negative feedback to students. Similar coping strategies were highlighted in one of the recent studies conducted by Zafarina (2022) in the Indonesian context. In the Thai educational setting, Rungwarapong (2019) shed light on strategies that can effectively address students' reticence in the classroom. The study emphasises the importance of teachers adopting a supportive and polite approach when posing questions, providing clear instructions for assigned tasks, incorporating ICT tools to make activities enjoyable, creating a conducive learning environment, and fostering positive relationships with students. These strategies share similarities with approaches observed in other EFL contexts, highlighting their potential applicability beyond the Thai context.

The existing literature on classroom reticence highlights students' reticence as a prominent concern within the EFL context and the broader context of Asia. This undesirable phenomenon raises concerns among educational stakeholders and English language teachers regarding its potential negative effects on both teacher and student well-being, teachers' instruction, and students learning (Danckert et al., 2018; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Hanh, 2020; Harumi, 2011; Pawlak et al., 2022; Shao & Gao, 2016; Smith and King, 2018). To this significance, although several research studies were conducted to fully realize what causes students to remain reticence in foreign language classrooms and its subsequent coping strategies, little attention is given to the Thai context (Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2022; Hongboontri et al., 2021; Rungwarapong, 2019), especially from students' perspectives. To this end, and to uncover factors that contribute to students' reticence in foreign language classrooms, as well as some potential coping strategies from students' perspectives, this study was conducted. There was a need

for this study because the findings of this study can help educational stakeholders and foreign language educators improve their pedagogical strategies for dealing with/overcoming students' reticence in the foreign language classroom, and hence enhance the language skills of learners.

## METHOD

### Research Design and Participants

Framed by a qualitative approach, this study explored the cause of students' reticence in English classrooms as perceived by Thai EFL students and subsequent potential coping strategies to overcome it. To do this, employing the snowball and maximum variation sampling techniques, attached with the participant's consent form and a brief overview of the current research, the researchers invited their friends who work as English teachers at universities. The invitations were made via email, Facebook, and Line applications. Invited friends were further requested to forward the invitation to their acquaintances who teach English at universities in southern Thailand. Further, researchers personally visited some universities to reach the maximum variation of participants. In doing so, the data was collected from five Southern Thai universities (names were withheld for ethical reasons). Over three months, a total of 472 (males = 276, females = 196, referred to as P1, P2, ... P472), aged 18 to 23 participated in this study. These students were all Thai natives from different years of study (first to fourth year), majoring in different fields such as Architecture, Engineering, Nursing, Rubber Engineering, English, Biotechnology, ICT, Pharmacy, Tourism, Digital and Animation, Administration, and others. All these students were native Thai students with more than a decade of exposure to the English language. Of 472 students, 47 expressed their willingness to participate in the follow-up semi-structured interviews. However, only 32 (male = 13, female = 19, referred to as IP1, IP2, IP32) showed up. These were the same participants who responded to open-ended questions and follow-up interviews were conducted to delve deeper into their responses to open-ended questions.

### Instruments

This research instrument involved a survey (written open-ended questions) and semi-structured interviews. These instruments were used because while the written open-ended questionnaire encourages participants to freely write their thoughts about what is asked, semi-structured interviews help researchers further explore the unique perspective of participants. The instruments were developed by researchers based on research objectives. The survey consisted of three parts: The first part collected

the demographic information of the participants such as age, gender, major, educational levels, email address, etc. The second part, open-ended questions asked participants' perspectives on the cause of their reticence when teachers ask them content-related questions and the potential coping strategies to overcome it. The open-ended questions were: 1) What, in your opinion, causes you to remain silent in the English classroom when teachers ask content-related questions? Describe your response in as much detail as possible, and 2) What solutions can you suggest to cope with your experience of reticence in the classroom when teachers ask content-related questions? Participants were provided with both Thai and English questions and were given options to respond in the language of their choice (Thai/English). The final part asked participants whether they wanted to participate in the follow-up interviews. And, the semi-structured interview questions included five guided questions (see Appendix), which were developed based on research objectives. However, follow-up questions were asked whenever the researchers felt it was necessary. The guided questions used in this study for both the written open-ended survey and interviews underwent a pilot test with two random participants, and their responses were analyzed to assess the accuracy and appropriateness of the questions. Based on the findings from the pilot test/interviews, some modifications were made to the questions. Subsequently, the revised set of questions was sent to two expert researchers to enhance the appropriateness of the questions. After incorporating their valuable comments and suggestions, the final set of questions, as mentioned earlier, was deemed accurate and appropriate for the present study.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained by submitting the research proposal and all relevant documents to the Human Research Ethics Committee at Prince of Songkla University. Data collection commenced only after receiving official approval (PSU-HREC-2024-042-1-1). The data collection involved two phases. First, along with the invitation letter and consent form, a link to a Google Form and QR code consisting of two open-ended questions were sent to the potential participants through university lecturers via social media platforms such as Line and Facebook Messenger. Most of them were English teachers teaching in universities in southern Thailand and they were requested to share with their students. Teachers were instructed to give students two weeks to complete the survey. However, not many participants turn in. Following this, researchers personally visited several universities and requested lecturers personally to share the QR code in their classrooms. In the second phase, students who consented to participate in the follow-up interviews were contacted back through the given email address, and dates and times for the interviews were scheduled at their convenience. After that, the research assistant, Thai in native conducted the interviews in Thai using Zoom and it was recorded for the analysis after asking permission from

the participants. The interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes, with a minimum being 15 and a maximum of 25 minutes. The interviews were conducted primarily to complement participants' responses to the open-ended questions. Once the researchers collected data interviews, the responses were transcribed verbatim and sent to all participants for member checking (Birt et al., 2016). Then the transcriptions were translated into English with the assistance of experts for the thematic analysis.

## Data Analysis

The participants' responses to open-ended questionnaires and interviews were thematically analyzed following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) guidelines. The analysis process involved several steps: data familiarisation; initial coding; identifying themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes, and reporting. The researchers adopted a dual perspective, positioning themselves as both outsiders (non-Thai) and insiders (with more than 10 years of teaching experience) throughout the entire study. During the first and second phases, the researchers independently cleaned the data and performed initial coding based on research objectives. To accomplish this, the researchers thoroughly read and re-read the participants' responses to the open-ended questions and transcribed verbatim from the interviews. The researchers intentionally conducted the first two phases of data analysis independently based on the recommendation made by Cliodhna O'Connor and Helene Joffe (2020). Their suggestion emphasised the importance of having a minimum of two coders to enhance the intercoder-reliability of the generated code. Furthermore, Cohen's kappa coefficient indicated a strong level of agreement between the coders with an estimated value of 0.95.

In the third phase, the two researchers compared their initial codes and collaboratively categorised them into sub-themes, which were then categorised based on pre-determined themes based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Subsequently, in the fourth and fifth phases, the researchers engaged in a continuous process of jointly reviewing the generated sub-themes. They constantly went back and forth between participants' responses, the generated initial codes, and the themes to ensure accuracy and consistency before finalising the themes. In doing this, researchers identified three main themes and nine sub-themes under the cause of students' reticence and another three main themes and eight sub-themes under the coping strategies of students' reticence. To establish the trustworthiness of the thematic analysis, Lorelli S. Nowell et al., (2017) thematic analysis strategies were also taken into consideration throughout the study.

Before proceeding to the final step, which is reporting the findings, an audit trail (Carcary, 2020) was performed with the help of an expert researcher to establish the veracity of the findings, wherein the entire process of data collection and analyses was sent for review. Some changes were made based on experts' suggestions before reporting it. In the last phase, the researchers reported the generated themes and sub-

themes under two main sections: The cause of students' reticence in EFL classrooms and coping strategies for students' reticence in EFL classrooms. Finally, after considering all the processes involved such as the inter-coder agreement test, member checking, audit trail and researchers' positionality necessary to improve the credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness of this qualitative study, the findings presented in this paper were considered a valid reflection of the participants involved in this study.

## Findings

Themes and sub-themes crafted from participants' responses to the open-ended questions and interviews are presented below along with their frequency counts (number of students reporting the same cause and coping strategies of students' reticence in the EFL classroom). The reported frequency numbers are however lower than the total number of participants because some students did not report causes of reticence and coping strategies in their responses. For example, while some students wrote "I always respond to teachers," others just wrote nothing. Both the cause and coping strategies of students' reticence reported by participants are presented below.

### Cause of students' reticence

There appeared nine sub-themes under three main pre-determined themes (see Table 1). The broad theme affective dimension consisted of five sub-themes/factors likely to contribute to students' reticence in English classrooms. These included lack of confidence, fear of peer judgment, shyness and anxiety, dislike of the English language, and lack of rapport with peers. Likewise, under the main theme of cognitive dimension, three sub-themes difficulty in understanding teachers' questions, difficulty in translating thoughts to English, and limited English proficiency were identified as potential factors of students' reticence. As with the behavioural dimension, only one sub-theme that is inappropriate teachers' approach was identified. Relevant excerpts from the participants are provided below.

- Usually, I feel reluctant to express my opinions in English classrooms due to my shyness and lack of confidence (P31).
- I do not dare to participate or talk in English classes due to my lack of confidence, poor language skills, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient practice in interactive learning environments. Thai students in general are taught to listen in class and not to talk (IP11).
- This is because I have memories of being scolded and criticised by teachers when they answered incorrectly. This happened to me too when I was in high school (P217).
- I do not want to answer when the teacher asks questions in the classroom because most of the time, I do not understand the questions. So, I do not really want to join (P338).

**Table 1**  
*Cause of Students' Reticence*

Themes	Sub-themes/frequency count	Examples of representative codes
Affective Dimension	1. Lack of confidence (96)	1. I am not confident
	2. Fear of peer judgment (76)	2. I am worried that my friends will laugh at me if I make a mistake
	3. Shyness and anxiety (25)	3. I feel shy to speak in English
	4. Dislike of English language (14)	4. I do not like English so I keep quiet in the classroom
	5. Lack of rapport with peers (8)	5. I feel shy because I do not have friends
Cognitive Dimension	1. Difficulty in understanding teachers' questions (57)	1. I do not understand teachers' question
	2. Difficulty in translating thoughts to English (43)	2. I cannot express myself in English because of my poor English
	3. Limited English proficiency (38)	3. My English is not good
Behavioural Dimension	1. Inappropriate teacher's approach (11)	1. I am afraid that the teacher might scold me if I make a mistake

*Source.* Own research.

## COPING STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS' RETICENCE

As with coping strategies, three main themes appeared, namely, individual, peer, and teacher levels. Under these main themes of coping strategies, seven sub-themes were identified. At the individual level, participants reported that students can tackle their reticence by being mindful and seeking comfort in mistakes. At the peer level, participants mentioned that classmates should support each other instead of looking down at peers' mistakes. Finally, at the teacher level, it was suggested by present participants to frequently encourage students, use both Thai and English, positively reinforce students, and finally practice a progressive questioning approach. Examples of participants' excerpts are provided below.

- I think the teacher should make the English classroom fun and enjoyable. They should also help students feel comfortable and remind them that it is okay to make mistakes when speaking or using English (IP5).
- Sometimes, my friends laugh when I make mistakes. I feel shy. I think everybody will feel like answering questions if students support each other (P64)
- Students should practice mindfulness and not be too stressed. Teachers should make students think that there is no right or wrong in English. If we practice, everything will be easy (P149).
- The teacher may use words that are easy to understand first and then gradually increase the level of difficulty in using the words.... Most Thai children are still not yet comfortable using the English language (IP19).

- Teach using both English and Thai or Google Translator to increase understanding and reduce children’s fear of English. This way, students might participate more when teachers ask questions (P411).

**Table 2**  
*Coping Strategies for Students’ Reticence*

Themes	Sub-themes/frequency count	Examples of representative codes
Individual level	1. Being mindful (67) 2. Seeking comfort in mistakes (43)	1. I should remain mindful in English classroom 2. I should not be afraid of making mistakes while answering teachers in English
Peers level	1. Peer support (41)	1. Students should support each other
Teachers level	1. Encouragement from teachers (68) 2. Alternating between Thai and English (47) 3. Positive reinforcement from teachers (35) 4. Progressive questioning approach (26)	1. Teachers should encourage students to participate 2. Teachers should allow students to use both Thai and English in the classroom 3. Teachers should acknowledge students’ efforts and praise them 4. Teachers should start with a simple question and then gradually increase the difficulty levels

Source. Own research.

DISCUSSION

Guided by the theoretical framework of reticence proposed by Phillips (1984) and Keaten and Kelly (2000), this study investigated the causes of students’ reticence in EFL classrooms and potential coping strategies from students’ perspectives. To this end, the data collected from 472 Thai EFL students using open-ended questions and interviews were thematically analysed. In so doing, one of the initial findings of this study uncovered that affective dimension such as students’ perceived lack of confidence in speaking English is a likely significant contributing factor to their reticence in the classroom. This finding aligns with previous studies that have also identified the lack of learners’ confidence as a primary factor behind students’ reticence in foreign language classrooms (Hanh, 2020; Harumi, 2011; Hongboontri et al., 2021; Wang, 2019; Zafarina, 2022). In the context of Thailand, students’ perceived lack of confidence to speak English in the classroom can be attributed to their reported cognitive factors such as limited English proficiency. English language proficiency issues as the cause of students’ reticence were frequently raised by the current participants. This finding was however not surprising because Ambele and Boonsuk (2018)

have already established that Thai students prefer to remain silent in the classroom due to their inadequate language skills. Similar concerns were further expressed in the findings of earlier studies conducted in the same context (Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2022; Hongboontri et al., 2021; Rungwarapong, 2019). Apart from the Thai context, the lack of linguistic proficiency as a factor that leads to learners' reticence in foreign language classrooms has been emphasised in various other contexts, such as Japan (Banks, 2016; Harumi, 2011), China (Wang, 2019; Wu, 2019), the USA (Tatar, 2005), Vietnam (Hanh, 2020), Indonesia (Zafarina, 2022), among others. These findings confirm the linguistic aspect as one of the primary causes of students' reticence in EFL contexts.

The next affective factor that might result in students' reticent in the classroom is the fear of peer judgment or fear of being assessed negatively by peers (See Keaten & Kelly, 2000). Fear of peer judgment was the second most frequently reported antecedent of reticence in this study. Similarly, another important affective factor linked with students' peers was their perceived lack of rapport with their classmates. In this context, while previous studies (e.g., Ambele & Boonsuk, 2018; Hanh, 2020; Rungwarapong, 2019) have posited that students are likely to remain quiet because they respect peers, they have not highlighted that students may remain reticent in the classroom due to perceived fear of peer judgment and the perceived lack of rapport with their peers. This finding thus expands earlier findings on peer's role in students' reticence. Peers undoubtedly play a significant role because participants in this study mentioned that one way to reduce reticence among students is through appropriate peer support in the classroom (P64). Another potential reason behind students' reticence is likely linked with, what has been reported by Hanh (2020) as students' psychological aspect such as their feeling shy and anxious while speaking in class. Thai students frequently exhibit shyness and are anxious because of their cultural emphasis on saving face (see Ambele & Boonsuk, 2018; Rungwarapong, 2019). In other words, as highlighted by IP11, Thai students often hesitate to participate or speak in English classes due to their fear of making mistakes. To address this issue, English educators are encouraged to boost students' confidence by creating a comfortable classroom environment. As suggested by IP5, teachers should reassure students that making mistakes while speaking or using English is a natural part of the learning process.

Furthermore, learners' disinterest in learning the English language was identified as another affective factor that is likely to contribute to Thai students' reticence in foreign language classrooms. Although not many previous studies conducted in and outside Thai contexts have pointed out students' perceived disinterest in learning the English language as a factor that contributes to students' reticence, Zafarina (2022) partially supported our findings, stating that Indonesian students often choose to remain silent in the classroom, as they are disinterested to speak English. Thus, foreign language teachers are suggested to work on developing strategies to overcome learners' disinterest in learning the English language. As one participant in this study suggested, teachers should focus on creating a fun and enjoyable environment in the English classroom (IP5).

As with cognitive dimensions, learners may prefer to stay silent in the English classroom if they have difficulty understanding teachers' questions and translating their thoughts into English. Although the finding that students may remain silent when they do not understand teachers' questions was mentioned by earlier studies such as Banks (2016), which investigated what keeps Japanese students silent in foreign language classrooms, none have specifically mentioned that students are likely to be reticent in the classroom due to their difficulty in translating thoughts to English. As with the current participants, the difficulty of translating thoughts to English is likely to be again attributed to their low level of language proficiency, which was the third frequently mentioned cognitive factor of students' reticent in this study. In response to these issues, it was suggested by current participants that language teachers should use both Thai and English or Google Translator in the classroom (P411). This aligns with claims made by Ringphami Shimray and Thinley Wangdi (2023) and Wangdi and Shimray (2022b) in the same (Thai) context that judicious use of L1 in English classrooms enhances students' participation in the classroom. Another interesting coping strategy highlighted by present participants was the progressive approach to questioning. IP19 mentioned that teachers should start with simpler questions and then progressively move toward difficult questions. This suggestion might be ascribed to the belief that students gain confidence and build a sense of accomplishment as they answer simpler questions, which prepares them mentally to tackle more challenging questions.

Finally, only one behavioural factor (related to teachers) was identified in this study, which may influence students' reticence level in the classroom. This included teachers' inappropriate approach to students. It was surprising to learn that some teachers scolded and criticized in the classroom when answered incorrectly (P217). This finding suggests that teachers might need to work on how to improve their approach towards students, which again is directly linked with their personality traits. Teachers' personality trait seemingly plays a significant role in the Thai context. Rungwarapong (2019) suggested that instructors should cultivate an atmosphere of politeness, friendliness, and approachability while dealing with Thai students. Of greater significance, embracing qualities like friendliness, humour, kindness, supportiveness, politeness, and approachability (Wangdi & Shimray, 2022a) could potentially mitigate and address students' reticence in the English language classroom. Further, as pointed out by current participants, teachers should frequently encourage students, reinforce using positive words, and create a non-judgemental classroom environment.

## CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study investigated the cause of students' reticence in the English as a foreign language classroom and potential coping strategies from students' perspectives. There are several factors central to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, which

may contribute to students' reticence. At the affective level, EFL students are likely to remain reticent in the classrooms due to their perceived lack of confidence, fear of peer judgment, shyness and anxiety, dislike of the English language, and lack of rapport with peers. Likewise, at the cognitive level, students may choose to remain silent due to the difficulty in understanding teachers' questions, translating thoughts to English, and their limited English proficiency. As with the behavioural dimension, students might avoid participating in the classroom due to teachers' inappropriate behaviour/approach towards students. However, these factors are likely to be reduced to some extent through effective collaboration among individuals, peers, and teachers. For instance, students might need to learn how to remain mindful and seek comfort in making mistakes. Peers should learn how to support each other. Finally, teachers might need to frequently encourage students, provide positive reinforcement, use student's L1 in English classrooms to explain complex ideas and adopt the progressive approach of asking questions, as mentioned by the current participants.

Although the current study builds upon previous research on the affective, cognitive, and behavioural factors contributing to students' reticence in foreign language classrooms and introduces potential coping strategies, it is not without limitations. One limitation pertains to the instrument used in this study. The self-reported data, particularly from open-ended questionnaires, is frequently criticised (Gonyea, 2005) for potentially allowing participants to be biased and report only responses that are favorable to them and their community. Therefore, future researchers should consider conducting a similar, possibly longitudinal, study using Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) to confirm the present findings. It is also important to recognise that this type of research is context-specific, and the findings may vary across different settings. Future researchers should conduct further investigations to validate the present findings and compare them with those from their respective contexts before implementing (especially coping strategies) them into practice. Lastly, the causes of students' reticence and the potential coping strategies reported in this study need to be validated from the teachers' perspective, as this study did not consider teachers.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study offer valuable theoretical and practical contributions to the field of language education. The theoretical contribution is evident in how this study builds on prior research regarding students' reticence and potential coping strategies, framed within the under-represented theory of reticent proposed by Phillips (1984) and Keaten and Kelly (2000). This study thus offers future researchers a new perspective on the theoretical framework used in this study, which can be extended to further explore students' reticence, its effects, and potential coping strategies across different contexts. Another interesting theoretical contribution of the current study is that researchers can use the findings on various affective, cognitive, and behavioural factors contributing to EFL students' reticent highlighted in this study, to construct a questionnaire, validate it, and subsequently use it to investigate the potential relationship with EFL learners learning outcome and language proficiency in their respective contexts.

As for practical contributions, this study may benefit teacher trainers, teachers, and students. Teacher trainers and teachers can benefit from this study as it may serve as a foundation for training future teachers and providing continuous professional development training to help reduce teachers their students' reticence. Teachers need to be well-trained in strategies to overcome or alleviate reticence, particularly in Asian contexts because research consistently shows that reticence is a prevalent issue among Asian students. It should be acknowledged that student reticence harms teachers, students, and the general classroom dynamic (Danckert et al., 2018; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Hanh, 2020; Pawlak et al., 2022; Shao & Gao, 2016; Smith and King, 2018). Language teachers are advised to use the reported coping strategies to reduce classroom reticence and improve classroom participation and engagement. The importance of classroom participants and engagement and its positive relationship with students' academic performance and learning outcomes had been confirmed by Budi Waluyo and Wangdi (2024) in the same Thai context. Additionally, students will also benefit from this study, as it found that reticence is often ascribed to individuals' affective and cognitive dimensions Accordingly, students may work on tackling their weaknesses.

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## APPENDIX

### Guided Questions for Interviews

- What does “reticence” mean to you?
- Why do you think some of your friends are reticent when English teachers ask questions? Or in the English classroom?
- Have you ever stayed silent/express reticence when the English teacher asked a question? Why? How could this have been avoided?
- What should schools, English teachers, and students do to reduce your/Thai students reticent when teachers ask questions?
- Do you have any other thoughts on why students stay silent and how to deal with it in the English classroom?