

**TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS, INTERACTION  
PATTERNS AND STRATEGIES TOWARDS  
IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS  
TO COMMUNICATE OR RETICENCE**

by

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**Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for  
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**To my husband, my parents and my parents in law**

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**PERSEPSI, CORAK INTERAKSI DAN STRATEGI GURU TERHADAP  
KEMAHUAN ATAU KETIDAKMAHUAN PELAJAR EFL IRAN  
UNTUK BERKOMUNIKASI**

**ABSTRAK**

Kajian ini merupakan kajian bilik darjah yang menggunakan reka bentuk kajian kes kualitatif dengan analisis kuantitatif tambahan untuk menyiasat bagaimana guru EFL Iran mewujudkan atau menghalang peluang untuk bercakap bagi pelajar yang ingin berkomunikasi (WTC) dan pelajar yang kurang ingin berkomunikasi dengan menggunakan corak interaksi dan strategi yang berbeza. Tiga orang guru dengan pelajar EFL yang WTC dan yang kurang ingin berkomunikasi dari sebuah institut bahasa swasta di Iran telah mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini. Analisis data adalah berkenaan sumbangan daripada pelajar yang WTC dan yang kurang ingin berkomunikasi. Di samping itu, kajian ini meneroka bagaimana faktor konteks, yang telah diabaikan dalam banyak kajian pengajaran bahasa, boleh membentuk corak interaksi dan strategi guru dengan pelajar mereka. Tambahan lagi, persepsi guru terhadap WTC dan ketidakmahuan berkomunikasi sebagai satu faktor yang menyumbang kepada tindakan guru telah dikaji. Pelbagai data telah dikumpulkan dalam tahun akademik 2011 melalui pemerhatian bilik darjah, nota lapangan, rakaman audio video, temu bual dan imbas kembali yang dirangsang. Analisis kandungan dan *discourse* telah digunakan untuk menganalisis semua transkrip. Berdasarkan teori sosiobudaya Vygotsky (1978), analisis data telah dijalankan di peringkat ontogenetik, mikrogenetik dan sejarah. Analisis kandungan data di peringkat ontogenetik mengenal pasti pelbagai isu mengenai aspek pengalaman dan

praktikal pengajaran pelajar WTC dan yang kurang ingin berkomunikasi. Analisis data di peringkat mikrogenetik menunjukkan pembezaan guru dalam menggunakan corak interaksi dan strategi berhubung dengan pelajar WTC dan yang kurang ingin berkomunikasi dalam kelas. Pada keseluruhannya, guru kurang kerap berinteraksi dengan pelajar-pelajar yang kurang ingin berkomunikasi. Guru membenarkan lebih banyak giliran bercakap secara sukarela bagi pelajar WTC manakala memberi kepada yang kurang ingin berkomunikasi dua kali ganda lebih giliran bercakap daripada pelajar WTC. Tambahan lagi, guru melanjutkan transaksi mereka dengan WTC dengan giliran yang lebih panjang yang membawa kepada penguasaan pelajar WTC dalam interaksi bilik darjah. Pelajar yang kurang ingin berkomunikasi kurang diberi peluang bercakap. Soalan kepada pelajar yang kurang ingin berkomunikasi kebanyakannya ialah jenis tertutup, dengan jawapan yang diketahui dan bertahap pemikiran kognitif yang lebih rendah. Perbezaan tersebut sangat mengurangkan peluang untuk pelajar yang kurang ingin berkomunikasi untuk bercakap. Analisis data di peringkat sejarah mengenal pasti isu-isu konteks yang membentuk penggunaan corak interaksi dan strategi yang berbeza. Isu-isu yang berbeza sebahagian besarnya timbul dari pandangan guru terhadap kualiti interaksi pelajar WTC dan yang kurang berkomunikasi, realiti praktis bilik darjah dan dasar sekolah. Pelbagai implikasi telah dibentangkan mengenai persepsi guru, corak interaksi dan strategi, dan isu-isu konteks. Implikasi ini berguna dalam konteks Iran dan konteks EFL lain yang serupa.

**TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS, INTERACTION PATTERNS AND  
STRATEGIES TOWARDS IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS  
TO COMMUNICATE OR RETICENCE**

**ABSTRACT**

This study is a classroom research adopting a qualitative case study design with supplementary quantitative analyses to investigate how the Iranian EFL teachers create or obstruct opportunities to talk for willing to communicate (WTC) and reticent students using different interaction patterns and strategies. Three Iranian EFL teachers and their respective WTC and reticent students from a private language institute participated in this study. The analysis of the data dealt with the amount of WTC and reticent students' contributions. In addition, this study explored how some contextual factors, which have been neglected in many studies on the language teaching, can shape the teachers' interaction patterns and strategies with their students. Moreover, teachers' perceptions about WTC and reticence as a contributing factor to teachers' action has been examined. Multiple data were collected in the academic year of 2011 through classroom observations, field notes, audio video recording, interviews, and stimulated recalls. Content and discourse analysis were used to analyze all of the transcribed data. Informed by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the analysis of the data was conducted at the ontogenetic, microgenetic, and historical levels. Content analysis of the data at the ontogenetic level identified a range of issues on experiential and practical aspects of teaching the WTC and the reticent. Analysis of the data at the microgenetic level showed teachers' differential use of interaction patterns and strategies in relation to WTC and

reticent students in a whole class setting. Overall, teachers interacted less frequently with the reticent. Teachers allowed more volunteered turns for the WTC while designating the reticent twice as many turns as the WTC. In addition teachers extended their transactions with the WTC for longer turns which led to WTC students' dominance in classroom interactions. The reticent were issued fewer elicitations. Questions addressed at the reticent were often closed-ended, display types with lower cognitive levels of thinking. Such differences reduced opportunities for the reticent students to talk to a great extent. Analyzing the data at the historical level, some contextual issues shaping the teachers differential use of interaction patterns and strategies were identified. Different issues largely arose from teachers' view of the WTC and reticent students' interaction quality, practical realities of the classroom and school policy. A range of implications have been presented addressing teacher perceptions, teacher interaction patterns and strategies, and contextual issues. These are useful for the Iranian context and other similar EFL contexts.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Overview

Central to the current approaches to language teaching is students' participation in communicative interaction. These approaches are based on the premise that student participation in communicative interaction contributes to a student's communication skills, fluency, L2 proficiency, as well as critical thinking and learning (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2006, 2008; Davis, 2009; Fassinger, 1995; Oller & Perkins, 1978; Skehan, 1989; Verplaetse, 2000).

Given the potential benefits of participation for students—enhanced fluency and proficiency—second language (SL) education should target increasing students' willingness to communicate (WTC) to take full advantage of communication opportunities using genuine language (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Donovan, 2003). WTC is considered both a situational construct and a personality trait. In actual classroom settings, language learners exhibit different levels of WTC, some might be talkative, others reticent. Learner reticence is an ongoing challenge for teachers. In particular, the ways in which teachers contribute to student reticence or WTC, under the school contextual constraints (e.g. the school policy, time and curriculum), is an important issue that deserves closer scrutiny.

## 1.2 Background of the Study

The omnipresent role of English in a variety of domains has placed the expectation on students that to benefit from higher education and to secure better jobs, they need to be competent English language users, regardless of their mother-tongue (Peng, 2007; Wu, 2001). This has led to the rapid growth of the number of non-native speakers in the language industry and English as a foreign language (EFL) institutions (Crystal, 2003; Gupta, 2004; Talebinezhad & Sadeghi, 2005) around the world. This growth has given rise to increased interest among language policymakers and teachers about how to enhance students' English communicative competence and fluency (Talebinezhad & Sadeghi, 2005). To address these concerns, teachers and policymakers have adopted the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, which uses language as a tool for classroom interaction and discussion.

Setting communicative competence as a goal for the CLT approach to language learning (Savignon, 2005), reticence has been highlighted as a recurring and frustrating issue in language classrooms (Cao, 2011; Katz, 1996; Tusi, 1996; Walsh, 2011). Reticence is an outcome of intricately interwoven factors (e.g. motivation, confidence, and anxiety), and deprives learners of essential opportunities for verbal practice to achieve fluency (Hashimoto, 2002; Liu, 2005; Zhang & Head, 2010). To identify the causal factors, MacIntyre et al. (1998) designed a six layered pyramidal model of the interrelated factors (i.e., enduring and situational) that affect communicative behavior.

However, the extent to which these factors contribute to students' reticence, or unwillingness to participate in class discussions, is not clear. Among all the situational

variables in a classroom instructional setting, researchers have noted that teachers' variables (e.g. teacher interaction strategies) have the biggest influence on students' reticence (Cao & Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005; Lèger & Storch, 2009; Weaver, 2009).

As the primary facilitators of student activity, teachers are the key creators of opportunities for speaking and participation in the classroom. Institutionally having right, power, and control at their disposal, teachers are ultimately responsible for creating, distributing and increasing opportunities for participation (Johnson, 1995; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997; Xie, 2010); they decide upon content (what is learnt), procedures, and discussion topics (Gil, 2002; Myhill & Dunkin, 2005; Walsh, 2006, 2011) and determine who talks, how they talk, who they talk to, how long they talk, and what and when they talk in classroom (Walsh, 2011). These opportunities for communicative participation are of great importance for EFL learners, given that language school may provide the only real opportunities for language practice (Walsh, 2011). MacIntyre et al. (1998) stressed the importance of opportunity, and maintained that students' intention must coincide with opportunity to produce communicative behavior. Similarly, Lee and Ng (2009) noted the important role of opportunity, stating that in the absence of opportunity student reticence emerges because students' wish to communicate has been ignored.

The extent to which teachers bring up or block opportunities for learner engagement hinge upon their classroom interaction strategies and patterns (Walsh, 2011), that is, types and cognitive levels of questions posed, response opportunities, types of subsequent feedback, focus on the form or meaning of the messages, the length and frequency of interactions with individual students, and allocation of turns

(Allwright, 1980; Lee & Ng, 2009; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Tsui, 1996; Walsh, 2011). Due to the apparent asymmetry of teacher institutional power and linguistic dominance, the pattern of classroom interaction is essentially transmissive, where the teacher transfers the knowledge to his or her students (Myhills, 2006). Such interaction patterns block genuine communication and communicative competence (Garton, 2012; Lyle, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012; Thoms, 2012).

The quality of student engagement in the classroom depends not only on teacher interaction, but is also affected by the context in which they operate. A growing body of research on classroom interaction outlines a range of contextual factors (e.g. teacher epistemology, teacher expectation, time pressure, prior teachers' own language learning, and teaching experience) that affect teacher-student interaction (Black, 2004; Johnson, 1995; Nystrand et al., 1997).

The most commonly reported factor, among all the factors outlined in educational literature, is that teachers utilize their perceptions when facing teaching challenges. Teacher perception is a trial-and-error process in the context of the class that leads them to modify what works or does not work (Mayer & Marland, 1997). As the primary source for assessing students' characteristics (e.g., motivation), teacher perceptions are shaped on their early impressions of the students, previous student performance, or their prior experiences with students of the same type (Rueda, Au, & Choi, 2004).

Teachers may even develop a stereotypical or biased view of reticent and vocal students based on their perceptions (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009). They may even

misrepresent what they view (Brophy & Good, 1974; Rubie-Davies, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2006). Such teachers' bias gives rise to the widening inequality among the students in terms of opportunity to talk (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Hall, 1997).

A substantial amount of the literature on education indicates that teachers' perceptions of their students' motivations have an effect on teachers' instructional decisions and activities in the classrooms (Hardré, Davis, & Sullivan, 2008). Differences in interactions between teachers and students, and their engagement, are based on teachers' perceptions of student motivation (Hardré et al., 2006, 2008; Yero, 2002). However, to the researcher's knowledge, these authors present the only literature which is closely linked to WTC. While, some research has highlighted the tendency of teachers to restrict their interactions with reticent students (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987; Liu, 2001), the results have been far from conclusive. Jones and Gerig (1994), conversely, reported that teachers evenly distribute participation opportunities across all students, regardless of whether they are reticent or vocal.

It appears that little empirical research has considered if, how, and to what extent teachers engage, or do not engage their reticent or WTC students in class activities. There are no detailed descriptions of specific interaction patterns or strategies used to interact with reticent and WTC students. If teacher-student interactions magnify students' initial level of willingness then those who have a high level of WTC benefit more from over participation. However, for those students whose initial level of willingness is low, lack of classroom interaction may further decrease their WTC, and, in a long run, ultimately make them become more reticent.

Consequently, reticence may become an entrenched characteristic of these students' behaviour. However, without empirical data, this proposition remains a hunch.

Moreover, the reasons for restrictions on teachers' interactions with reticent students are rarely reported. Teachers may hold negative perceptions of reticent students (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987), or may be uneasy about making them speak due to their lack of linguistic competency (Liu, 2001). Further research is needed to investigate teacher perception of WTC and reticence and examine the contextual factors that influence their interactions and allocation of communicative opportunities.

### **1.3 Education System of Public and Private Educational Institutions in Iran**

English is a compulsory subject taught in Iran junior high schools, high schools, pre-university and universities. While formal education in Iran starts at the age of seven, English is not in the syllabus of Iranian public elementary schools, except for some private elementary schools. Middle school comprises three years, and students in grades 1, 2 and 3 study English for three hours a week. Senior high school also lasts three years, followed by pre-university. The amount of time provided for English study in high school is three hours a week for students in grade 1, and two hours a week for students in grades 2 and 3. In pre-university, English is limited to four hours a week. In universities, English is taught as a major under the titles, English Language and Literature, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) or language education, and English Translation. Each course includes two years of general English instruction and two years of specialized study. English is also taught with other Majors (with 3 credits of general English and 3 credits of ESP, including English texts of their own special field) (Razmjoo & Riazi 2006;

Talebinezhad & Sadeghi, 2005). In addition to universities and schools, students wishing to learn English can choose from a great number of English language institutes, tutorial classes, and government organized English classes.

The drive behind the increased focus on English is largely due to the need for English for the internet use and entrance examinations of overseas universities (e.g. IELTS). Based on the latest accessible census results, educational language institutes are the largest institutes engaged in teaching English. There are 4678 educational language institutes in Iran, which constitute 42% of the total number of institutes in the country. The remaining 58% of institutes are centers teaching different disciplines, including English (Talebinezhad & Sadeghi, 2005), which fill the need to develop students' communicative competence not met by the inefficient school system (Talebinezhad & Sadeghi, 2005). These institutes offer different courses (Conversation, IELTS, and TOEFL) for different ages, ranging from 3 to 40. Normally, students are placed at appropriate levels based on their scores in a placement test designed by the institute. The total duration of instruction for a course is between 1530 to 1800 minutes with each class lasting for about 90 minutes. The institutes may offer classes twice a week (on even or odd days), once a week or three times a week (intensive courses). Students' final mark is based on their performance in a mid-term, a final exam, class activities, and class attendance.

### **1.3.1 Text Books**

Public school English textbooks are prepared by the Ministry of Education and contain dialogues, pattern practice and words. In high school, English books are designed for reading comprehension, teaching learners how to use the words in

sentences (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). These books ignore the communicative role of the language and English language culture (Dahmardeh, 2009). University textbooks are prepared by a center for research and development for university students (Farhady, Sajadi, Hezaveh, & Hedayati, 2010).

In the private language institutes, a variety of commercially produced text books are used for adult learners. The most popular are British and American series New Interchange, New Headways, Headways Plus, and Top Notch, which focus on pair work and group work. Analysis of the private institute textbooks shows their adherence to the CLT principles (Razmjoo, 2007). The Top Notch series, the most popular text used by most of the institutes (Soozandehfar & Sahragard, 2011), formed the materials used by the teachers in the present study. Joan Saslow and Allen Ascher are the authors of these American English texts, which are published by Pearson Longman Incorporation. According to the authors, Top- notch is 6-level course book which has been designed to enhance students' spoken and written English skills. To do so, the focus is on the natural language people use in their daily life. Each unit of the book includes six lessons.

### **1.3.2 Teaching Methods**

While the language teaching program in Iranian high schools stipulates the CLT approach (Abdullah & Hosseini, 2012), previous studies have shown that these classes feature the audiolingual and reading methods (Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004; Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). Most Iranian EFL teachers knowingly or unknowingly still dominate the talk time and issue display questions. The teacher dominants learning and limits learners' involvement in class activities, which ultimately leads to their

silence (Abdullah & Hosseini, 2012). This is in sharp contrast to CLT goals, which put learners at the center of interaction (Maftoon, 2002).

Teaching English at the university level for Majors other than English often focuses on translation and reading materials in their majors (Farhady et al., 2010). The objectives of these courses are to understand the texts' technical words and be able to present papers at conferences (Eslami-Rasekh, 2010). Analysis of classroom interaction at the university level has shown that teachers tend to use display questions (Shomoossi, 2004) with low cognitive level of thinking (Alavian, 2013) more than referential ones. Language institute teachers tend to hold a more positive attitude towards CLT and apply its principles (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). Nonetheless, most classes are still teacher centered, with a focus on form than message (Nazari & Allahyar, 2012). However, knowledge about the classroom interaction in language institutes is scarce. Even the few studies conducted in this area have shown no consistency on the features of these classes in terms of teacher-student interaction.

Some researchers have shown that private language schools are dialogic (Pishghadam, Hashemi, & Adel, 2010), while others claim that the change in language teaching is limited to the books teachers use to teach, not the way they teach, and that the choice of teacher language has remained unchanged and is similar to teacher-centered classes (Shamsipour & Allami, 2012). Display questions are more frequent than referential questions. Moreover, true interaction does not happen in the classes as real interaction requires an information gap (Behnam & Pouriran, 2009). The following table summarizes the Iranian Education system based on the literature presented in this section.

**Table 1.1** Iranian Education System and English Language Instruction

	Age	Level	Hours of instruction	Text book	Method
<b>In Public Schools</b>	7-11 12-14	Primary School Middle School	2 hours a week for the first grade, and 3 hours a week for the second and third grades	Prepared by the Ministry of Education	Audio-lingual and Reading method. Teachers dominate the talk time and often ask display questions
	15-17	Senior High School	3 hours a week for the first grade, and 2 hours a week for the second and third grade		√
	18	Pre-university	4 hours a week		√
		University	2 years of general English instruction and 2 years of specialized studies for Language Education, English Translation, English Literature	Prepared by Center for research and development of textbooks for university students	Teachers use display questions with low cognitive level of thinking more than referential ones
<b>In Private language Schools</b>	Kids	Tiny Talk New Parade Get Read	90 minutes of instruction for 17 to 20 classroom sessions	Commercially produced but approved by Ministry of Education	
	Teens	Project Hip- Hip Hooray Chatter box	90 minutes of instruction for 17 to 20 classroom sessions	√	
	Adolescent & Adult	Top Notch Headway plus New Interchange New Headways IELTS Textbooks TOEFL Textbooks	90 minutes of instruction for 17 to 20 classroom sessions	√	Some classes have dialogic features but some are still traditional in terms of teacher language use

#### 1.4 Statement of the Problem

The expansive role of English as the international language in a variety of disciplines has concomitantly generated the growing need for more English language teaching and learning in the Iranian context. To meet this need, English language is incorporated as a compulsory subject into the curriculum of secondary schools and higher education in Iran (Pazhouhesh, 2013; Talebinezhad & Sadeghi, 2005). In addition, Iranian students benefit from the growing number of bilingual schools and private language institutes. Notwithstanding these opportunities for learning how to communicate in English, the majority of the students are still communicatively incompetent in English (Dahmardeh, 2009; Razmjoo & Riazis, 2006; Talebinezhad & Sadeghi 2005), lack confidence in using the language to interact (Dahmardeh, 2009), and perceive their proficiency to be low for using the language as a means of communication (Eslami-Rasekh, 2010).

To serve the students' need of being competent and fluent in English, the CLT approach has been increasingly suggested to replace the teacher-centered approach. The latter approach usually requires the students to strive to memorize instructions so as to pass grammar tests. Despite following the suggestions by the teachers who hold positive attitudes towards CLT practices (Razmjoo & Riazis, 2006), no dramatic changes have been observed in English language learning (Abdullah & Hosseini, 2012; Shamsipour & Allami, 2012). CLT classroom results have proved to be far from satisfactory; the Iranian learners have failed to achieve the necessary fluency (Parvaresh, 2008).

The language teachers have commonly ascribed this unsatisfactory achievement to the learners' reticence to communicate. Teachers have portrayed learners as passive and unwilling to communicate, and just reply to teachers when they are asked a question, instead of taking a risk to apply whatever they have learnt (Abdullah & Hosseini, 2012; Kafipour, Yazdi, Soori, & Shokrpour, 2011; Rashidi & Mahmoudi Kia, 2012; Sorayaie Azar, 2012).

The language learner reticence has become a key concern for educational reform across Iran (Rashidi & Mahmoudi Kia, 2012) as well as other countries (Cao, 2011; Katz, 1996; Tsui, 1996; Walsh, 2011). The reticence of learners in English-medium classes has been noted as a source of teachers' annoyance and confusion (Jackson, 2002). Language teachers generally perceive a learner's reticence to be a sign of unsuccessful learning of communication skills (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Mariskind, 2013; Nakane, 2006).

Reticence is detrimental to teaching and learning English, particularly where student-centered approach is being practiced (Nanken, 2006). Reticent learners demonstrate slow reaction and little interest to communicate with their group members (Collin, 2012; Tong, 2010), frustrate teachers and classmates, and significantly decrease the opportunity for non-reticent students to practice language avoiding bilateral interaction (Hue, 2010). Furthermore, the avoidance of conversation leads to unproductive group discussions and unaccomplished assigned tasks (Xia, 2006). Accordingly, reticent students also become more disadvantaged relative to vocal ones because their lower participation level means they learn less (Hue, 2010).

Talk time and opportunities for group work in Iranian language classes are still limited, which leaves little room for students to practice speaking English in the class (Pishghadam et al., 2010; Riasati, 2012; Rashidi & Mahmoudi Kia, 2012). It is not uncommon for teachers to provide more interaction opportunities to vocal students over reticent ones, so not all students participate evenly in instructional processes (Delaney, 2012; Ellwood & Nakane, 2009).

Lack of agreement on the benefits of the communicative approach is not an issue, as there is a sense of hope that teachers can encourage students' participation in the classroom through more appropriate interactional patterns and strategies, and deal with reticence. To circumvent the reticence issue, the Iranian teachers have recently been called upon to revisit their language use and interaction patterns (Shamsipour & Allami, 2012) as some evidence shows that language classes are moving from didactic to constructivist pedagogy in Iran (Faruji, 2011; Pishghadam et al., 2010; Pishghadam & Navari, 2010; Shamsipour & Allami, 2012).

In an attempt to explain the reasons for Iranian students' passivity in class, a few studies have just focused on the implemental challenges in adapting western-oriented CLT methods to Asian socio-cultural, political, or physical contexts of EFL classes (Kalanzade, Mirchenari, & Bakhtiarvand, 2013; Maftoon, 2002; Tajadini & Sarani, 2009). The main challenges are negative beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of both teachers and students towards CLT. Empirical and anecdotal evidence have indicated that Iranian students hold a negative attitude towards learning English language as a result of inefficiency in developing students' communicative competence (Parvareh, 2008; Pishghadam et al., 2010). The negative attitude is also

attributable to the learners' academic culture. Their culture favors acceptance of teacher authority, which is in contrast with CLT principles (Jalali & Abedli, 2011; Maftoon, 2002; Tajadini & Sarani, 2009). These challenges work against active participation in the classroom and help to explain why CLT is less popular with Iranian EFL learners (Kafipour, Yazdi, Soori, & Shokrpour, 2011; Ward, 2001). However, empirical findings in this area are inconsistent and do not justify the claim that Iranian students cannot adjust to a western-culture of learning.

Kumaravadivelu (2003) argued that such communicative characteristics accredited to Asian students can be found among western students as well. Therefore, ascribing communication failures to culture and cultural stereotypes is misleading, leading to a one-dimensional portrayal of students. A growing body of evidence shows that Asian students have positive attitudes towards classroom participation, but are not interested to be spoon-fed by their teachers and rather prefer to discover knowledge by themselves (Cheng, 2000; Kim, 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Liu & Littlewood, 1997). In a similar vein, Iranian students have asked for cooperative learning, more opportunity to participate in class activities, and appreciated CLT (Eslami-Rasekh, 2010; Ghorbani & Nezamoshari'e, 2012; Marashi & Baygzadeh, 2010).

Evidence also indicates that reticence and WTC are situational, and the corollary of the interaction quality between teachers and students (i.e., students' access to opportunities to talk) rather than the students' disposition (Liu, 2001). Related literature links reticence to teachers' interaction efforts (Clifton, 2006; Cullen, 2002). However, only two empirical studies, by Xie (2010), and Lee and Ng

(2009) suggested a considerable contribution of teachers' interaction patterns and strategies to student WTC or reticence. In addition, further evidence for this claim, focusing on these interactions and strategies in detail has appeared neither in any other context nor in the local, Iranian setting. Even though there is a growing body of evidence that indicates the potential impact of CLT teaching methods, teachers are yet to be provided with practical pedagogical references that enhance second language learners' WTC (Weaver, 2009, 2010). The L2 WTC literature is devoid of any suggestions for teachers on how to enhance their students' WTC (Weaver, 2010). Existing studies relevant to L2 WTC have generally examined the enduring factors, such as personality traits of students that underlie the language learners' WTC rather than situational factors, which includes teachers' use of language (Weaver, 2009). A possible reason may be that situational factors represent a temporal status of learners' motivation (Weaver, 2009). Though educators are frequently called upon to reflect on the classroom communication practices and avoid favoritism towards vocal students, few studies explain what language opportunities are, and how to provide learners with them (Mortensen, 2008). Teachers' interaction patterns and strategies in the distribution of the communication opportunities associated with WTC or reticent behavior are yet to be clarified. This raises further questions as to whether or not there are any differences in the interaction patterns when a student is willing or unwilling to communicate in the language class.

The implementation of effective interaction patterns and strategies to optimize student interactions, and in turn their fluency, is not an easy task. Researchers have identified several contextual challenges (e.g. time constraints,

exam orientation, learning culture, and students' lack of ability to assess their speaking skills, teachers' lack of professional training, teachers' general theories of teaching, teachers' concerns about their authority and self-image) to interaction in foreign language classrooms (McNeil, 2010; Nazari & Allahyar, 2012; Rajab, 2013). These challenges have led to failure in many ingenious teaching projects which have been developed to implement changes in teaching methods in order to improve student fluency (Sleegers, Van den Berg, & Geijsel, 2000).

The failure of these projects has also been mainly attributed to teachers' perception (Geijsel, Sleegers, Van den Berg & Kelchtermans, 2001) of students' characteristics (Good & Nichols, 2001) which rarely was investigated (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010) and integrated in the innovations (Borg, 2006). The perception is often triggered whenever teachers face challenges in teaching (Mayer & Marland, 1997). The growing concern in educational literature and other fields (e.g., sports) is that inappropriate instructions, interaction patterns and strategies, exacerbate the challenges, particularly when teachers' intervention is based on the wrong diagnosis or erroneous perceptions (McKeon, 1994; Pelletier & Vallerand, 1996; Sarrazin, Tessier, Pelletier, Trouilloud, & Chanal, 2006; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). For example, inappropriate strategies adopted by teachers based on erroneous perceptions or diagnosis may decrease students' initial level of motivation rather than strengthen it (Pelletier & Vallerand, 1996; Sarrazin et al., 2006; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

From the presented research, it is necessary to look beyond the way teachers engage WTC and reticent students in class activities. Thorough examination of the

contextual challenges and teachers' perceptions can create a dialogic and dynamic learning environment for all students, and pave the way for school reform.

### **1.5 Objectives of the Study**

The research objectives (RO) are as follows:

RO 1: To investigate Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of the learners' reticence or willingness to communicate.

RO 2: To explore how the teachers' interaction patterns and strategies provide the WTC and reticent students with opportunities to talk, and to explain why the interaction patterns and strategies vary according to the students' level of WTC and reticence.

### **1.6 Research Questions**

The research questions (RQ) addressing the research objectives are:

RQ 1: What are the teachers' perceptions of the learners' reticence or willingness to communicate?

RQ 2: How do the teachers' interaction patterns and strategies provide the WTC and reticent students with opportunities to talk?

RQ 2.1: How do the teachers' frequency and methods of turn allocation provide the WTC and reticent students with opportunities to talk?

RQ 2.2: How do the teachers' types (open ended, close ended, display, and referential) and cognitive levels of questions provide the WTC and reticent students with opportunities to talk?

RQ 2.3: How does the teachers' focus (form vs. meaning) of the questions provide the WTC and reticent students with opportunities to talk?

RQ 2.4: How do the teachers' interaction (Initiation, Scaffolding Initiation, Response, and Follow-up) exchange structures provide the WTC and reticent students with opportunities to talk?

## **1.7 Rationale of the Study**

As an English language teacher, educational manager, and supervisor in Iran for 10 years, I have always struggled to understand why some students do not progress and leave language school before completion, or always are in the process of seeking better language instruction, alternating from one institute to another in an effort to improve their fluency. From time to time, I used to receive requests from students, who were not satisfied with their level of speaking, for private English instruction. They claimed they were rarely, if ever, given a chance to speak in class, and that the lessons were focused on grammar rules rather than conversation.

My colleagues' concerns over the lack of participation by some students and the difficulty of keeping students engaged have been widely discussed in the teachers' room for many years. My own observations from Iranian EFL classes have made me acquainted with that system of education, and the fact that teaching objectives are not

always realized. This has been despite efforts to move towards CLT, to use textbooks that fit in with the communicative approach, and to have teachers stimulate students to use the foreign language. Therefore, it is not hard to imagine that fluency and communicative competence in English is a challenge in the Iranian context.

In some classes, I have observed that teachers talk for 60% of the time while instructing the class, resulting in a quite low student talk time. More interestingly, the opportunity to speak has not been the same for all students. Some students have been given more chances to talk, and interacted differently by teachers, either qualitatively or quantitatively. Therefore, my language teaching and supervision experience have made me think teachers could be a major reason for students' reticence and lack of fluency.

Apart from my classroom observations, this study has been motivated by a call for empirical research on the micro-interactional practice used by teachers (Seedhouse, 1995), particularly in EFL whole class settings with reticent students (Xie, 2010). In addition, the present study can be considered a response to a need for examination of WTC from a qualitative perspective using different tools (Leger & Storch, 2009) to better capture effective student communication in relation to its context (Cullen, 1998), and understand the role of teachers' strategies in producing communication opportunities for reticent and WTC students.

The lack of research on English language teaching, and particularly communicative interaction also drive the need for this study. The bulk of studies in classroom interaction have been carried out in other subjects (e.g. science,

mathematics) rather than language. In particular, research on foreign language interaction whether students initiated their own turn or had control over topic selection is limited (Jacknick, 2011). Additionally, the reasons that lead teachers to adopt different interaction patterns and strategies need to be discovered.

Similarly, in the Iranian context, despite a growing body of literature on promoting students' WTC (Fahim, Hamidi, & Sarem, 2013; Riasati, 2012), empirical research on teachers' interaction patterns and strategies is scarce, especially in whole class settings which is where most students learn English. This knowledge scarcity also exists on how teachers from different cultural backgrounds and contexts (e.g., teachers in the Iranian context deal with student questions, and how effective are teachers' strategies to deal with this issue (Ohta & Nakaone, 2004).

Due to the lack of empirical data upon which to build policy changes, Iranian teacher training programs face problems in bridging the gap between theory and practice (Farhady et al., 2010). Surprisingly, only 9% of the studies have taken learners of Iranian language institutes as their subjects while this group of learners is great in number (Talebinezhad & Sadeghi, 2005).

Given the substantial number of English language learners attending private language schools in the Iranian context, this issue merits further exploration. If an educational goal is to encourage teachers to enhance student WTC, a better understanding of the conditions that affect teachers' actions is imperative. Further, if English language teacher perceptions are not investigated and challenged, which have so far attracted very little research interest (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010),

they could negatively affect teachers' actions despite the training efforts (Borg, 2006). The reasons for such scarcity are not apparent.

The few available studies on English language teachers' perception of students' silence and class participation in an intercultural context (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Mariskind, 2013) have focused on cultural mismatches (i.e. interaction style) between native-speaking English teachers and EFL Asian students. Consequently, their limited recommendations focused on "bridging cultural gaps", which are a convenient explanation for the WTC problem (Chen, 2003, p.260). It would seem promising to examine English teachers' perceptions of WTC and reticence in the Iranian context where such cultural mismatches between teachers and students do not exist.

Interestingly, while existing literature calls for promoting a dialogic class environment, empirical studies show even in classes where students are involved in participation, the benefits seems to be less prominent for reticent students because they interact less than others, and the students are choosing to be quiet, it is not a directive from their teacher (Chu & Kim, 1999; Jones & Gerig, 1994). Based on this phenomenon, House, (2004) calls the potential key role of opportunity on students' WTC into question. He suggests that students' WTC could be absent even if the opportunity is there but not perceived as suitable to communicate.

From the research gaps discussed above, this study hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of WTC and reticence. Specifically,

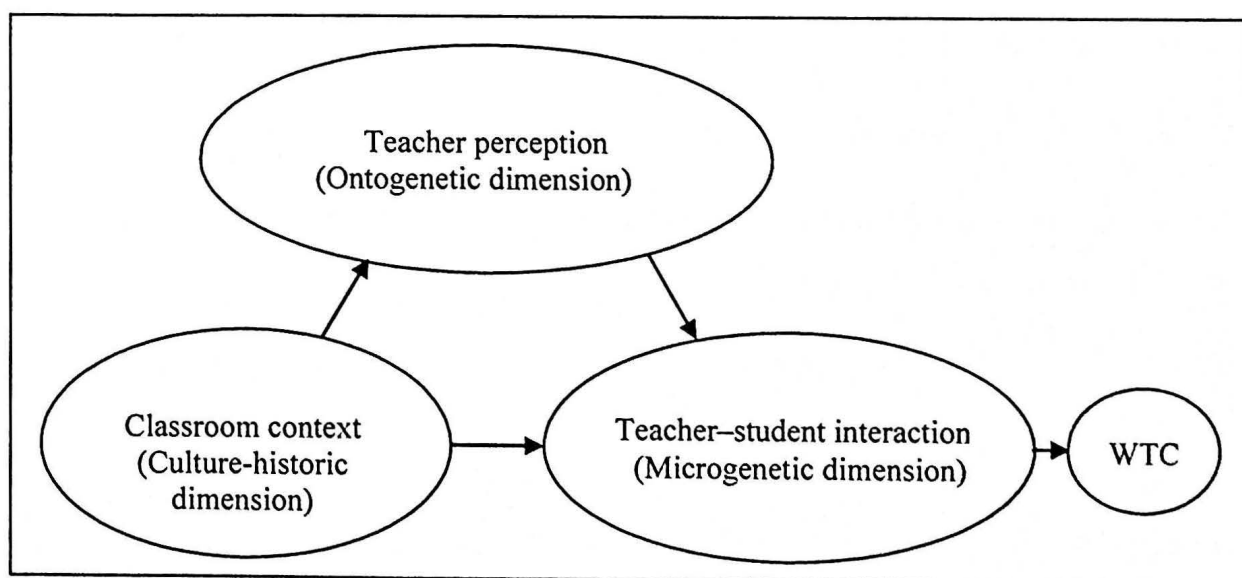
this research attempts to examine whether or how the teachers' interaction patterns scaffolding strategies obstruct the opportunities to talk for the reticent students.

## **1.8 Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The Vygotsky's sociolinguistic theory "put language production in a star role so to speak" (Swain, 2005, p. 480) and stresses opportunities to enter into dialogue (Mantero, 2003). According to the theory, learners' WTC is a social-situational construct and determined by the extent to which they are provided with opportunities to talk in the classroom. The sociolinguistic theory considers language learners as not passive recipients but rather as active participants who dynamically contribute to the sociolinguistic interaction (e.g., the initiation into the talk) as they find the utterances thought provoking and the questions of high cognitive level. The theory hereby highlights the teacher's sociolinguistic interaction patterns and strategies in relation to the opportunity to talk. Therefore, this qualitative study has drawn on the Vygotsky's sociolinguistic theory to explain the sociolinguistic interaction patterns between the teachers and students. It has further aimed at providing insights into how teachers use language as a mediation tool to scaffold (i.e., optimizing opportunities to talk via dialogic interactions) the learners in the language learning process (see Mercer & Howe, 2012).

As the theoretical perspective shown in Figure 1.2, the learner's willingness to communicate is mainly determined by microgenetic dimensions (i.e. teacher interaction patterns and strategies in the immediate context), which is associated with culture-historic and ontogenetic domains. The culture-historic dimension is the context in which teacher is situated as a teacher of English in the private language school. The context in which the teachers practice their teaching shapes the typical

ways they interact with their WTC and reticent students in the language school. For example Iranian teachers are socialized in culture of the school that promotes the traditional teaching methods. The teacher perception, what the teacher knows (i.e. teachers' practical pedagogical knowledge) and thinks about the learner' behavior and personality traits, is the ontogenetic dimension. The teachers' knowledge has been constructed through their experience as the language learners as well as teacher trainees or trainers. The teacher perception determines the distribution of opportunities to talk in the classroom setting, and thus, teacher-student interaction patterns. Eventually, the learner's willingness to communicate is facilitated or inhibited. Hence, teacher perception is considered a dynamic mediator between the context and teacher-student interaction patterns, thereby determining the opportunity to talk (i.e., student's willingness to communicate). Employing their personal pedagogical knowledge, the teachers pass on the interaction culture to their students (Wertsch, 1985). The sociolinguistic interaction culture in the classroom setting consists of the turn-taking rules and constraints for the interactions which are relative in every classroom (van Lier, 1998).



**Figure 1.2** Theoretical Framework of the Study (adapted from Cross, 2010)

## 1.9 Conceptual Framework

In the classroom setting, teachers institutionally have the right to decide upon whose voices (i.e., those who are perceived as WTC or reticent) to be heard and for how long. Having such an exclusive right of the decision, should they give opportunities to students who are willing to communicate or to those who are reticent to talk? To provide insights into this question, teachers' perceptions and interaction patterns should be explored in relation to the distribution of the opportunity to talk (Allahyar & Nazari, 2012). This study has aimed at this exploration and put it in the conceptual framework (see Figure 1.3). The framework shows that the decision is often based on the perception of the language teachers, referred to as what they think and their personal-pedagogical knowledge about behaviors and personal traits of the learners.

The opportunity to talk is the key for willingness to communicate. Following teachers' perceptions, their interaction patterns (i.e., initiation, scaffolding initiation, feedback, and response to students' questions) and strategies (i.e., types of question, cognitive challenges of those questions, and turn taking strategies) determine the opportunity to talk. The relationship between teachers' perceptions and the opportunity given to talk is not that simple and straightforward. The dissonance between the two requires a better understanding of the complexities of the contexts within which teaching practice takes place.