

The Role of Risk-Taking Behavior in the Development of Speaking Skills in ESL Classrooms

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Abstract

This essay presents an overview of different perspectives of the risk-taking construct in the development of speaking skills in the second language classroom. Its main purpose is to examine the role of risk taking in the acquisition of a foreign or second language and the improvement of oral proficiency. The first section introduces the concept of risk taking from markedly different perspectives of several authors. The second section focuses on the particular traits that characterize risk takers in the language learning scenario. The third section explains the distinctive variables, namely, situational, social and individual, which are responsible for differences in risk-taking levels. The last section compares and contrasts the high and low use of risk-taking behaviors which leads to a final discussion and reflection on some pedagogical issues concerning risk taking in the second language classroom.

Key words: risk taking, language learning, language acquisition, speaking skills

Resumen

Este ensayo hace un análisis de la toma de riesgos en el desarrollo de las destrezas orales en las clases de inglés. Se examina el papel que juega este factor en la adquisición de una segunda lengua y se describen las características de los estudiantes que asumen riesgos en la clase y las de aquellos que los evitan. Se comparan los dos tipos de estudiantes y se discuten las implicaciones pedagógicas de esta comparación para el beneficio de profesores y estudiantes de una segunda lengua.

Palabras claves: riesgos, aprendizaje de una lengua, adquisición de una segunda lengua, destrezas orales

Introduction

The study of second language learning has been the subject of considerable exploration for many years. Several theorists have tried to explain the human ability to learn a second language and all the factors that may facilitate or hinder this learning (Benson & Gao, 2008; Dewaele, 2012; Dörnyei, 2005). Certainly, the process of acquiring a second language has to be understood as both a process of learning rules and one in which several individual differences come into play. The environmental conditions, age, attitude towards the target language and learning itself, neuroticism, motivation as well as extroversion are common examples of individual differences worth studying when helping students learn a second language.

In addition to the ones mentioned, learners' ability to take risks appears as an important individual difference, which has been considered a predictor variable of success in second language learning (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Thus, this essay intends to determine if risk-taking behaviors facilitate second language acquisition and help learners improve their oral proficiency.

Basically, risk-taking behavior refers to a "developmental trait that consists of moving toward something without thinking of the consequences" (Alshalabi, 2003, p. 22). Language learners, then, engage in the act of taking risks simply by learning a second language because they are changing established linguistic patterns for other unfamiliar ones, which involves a game of "having a go" (Gledhill & Morgan, 2000, n.p). Similarly, to communicate using the new language, either orally or in writing, and to venture into linguistic tasks where the outcome is unknown challenge students as well. Risk taking may entail impulsiveness and keep a correlation with extroversion, introversion, and self-confidence among others.

In terms of skills, most of the literature regarding risk taking has focused on speaking rather on the other macro skills (writing, listening, and reading). Oral production, especially, has received particular attention since second language teachers usually struggle with students who prefer not to take the risk of speaking in the second language class. Moreover, research on risk-taking behaviors has been frequently related to other broader areas, for instance, the levels of motivation and anxiety present when talking in class (Dewaele, 2012). In still other cases, it has been modestly explained as a personality trait desirable for second language acquisition. Therefore, the need to study the implications and concepts pertaining to risk taking becomes relevant in the area of second language learning.

The present overview aims at meeting such need. It will answer many questions related to academic risk taking; for instance, is it an inconvenience rather than a benefit? What individual and social factors may influence risk-taking behaviors? And what are some of the consequences of risk taking in the educational environment? This essay also seeks to fill some of the information gaps which still remain in regard to the studies conducted on learners' willingness to take risks in the language classroom. It should also be mentioned that this essay focuses on the role of risk taking in the development of speaking skills. In other

words, writing, reading and listening are not examined here since risk-taking practices are rarely observable or do not have a profound impact on these skills as they do on students' oral production (Liu & Jackson, 2008). This essay, hence, firstly examines the concept of risk taking in the words of various authors. Secondly, it explores the characterization of students who are risk takers. In its third and fourth sections, information related to the variables that influence risk taking specifically for the speaking area as well as the benefits and drawbacks of risk taking will be provided. Finally, considerable classroom implications will be discussed including some suggestions for teachers of second languages.

The concept of risk taking

The theoretical concept of risk taking includes several aspects of ambiguity and unexpectedness. At its most general, risk taking refers to the willingness to be risky in certain circumstances. Many authors have paid more attention to the process of risk taking rather than to its outcomes. Advocates of such view emphasize that the process of taking risks starts by having an array of actions to select in order to solve a task (Beebe, 1983). Bem (as cited in Beebe, 1983) recognizes the importance of choices and further considers risk taking a process of constant selection of actions which can lead the learner to a "worse position" (*ibid*). On the one hand, it can be argued that Bem's negative view of language risk taking does not recognize the value or usefulness of being venturous in the classroom. Bem does not pose the idea of risk taking as a possible positive agent in the academic scenario, but he mentions an essential component of the risk-taking process: selection of courses of action. Certainly, a risk taker has to choose what is considered the best option at the moment of making a decision. Thus, risk taking involves uncertainty not only of the outcome but also of the action or procedure selected to perform an oral task.

Other studies on individual differences and second language acquisition have focused on the consequences of risk taking rather than on the process in regard to student performance in speaking tasks. Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2008), for instance, propose that taking risks can have an essentially negative outcome because the learner might be involved in a loss or failure situation. Hence, the concept of risk taking tends to be associated with an unfavorable condition that may hinder oral communication in a second language. It is also possible that risk takers sacrifice accuracy for the sake of speed in speech production (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999), which might lead the learner to produce poor linguistic output. Suffice it to say, high levels of risk taking affect other areas, e.g., self-esteem, willingness to communicate and confidence, which may put the learner in a vulnerable position. In other words, the more risks a learner takes the more chances he has to be emotionally constrained.

Wen and Clément (2003) also explain the concept of uncertainty in risk taking in terms of outcomes. Nonetheless, their comments on risk taking are more

socially-oriented in the sense that both authors underline embarrassment and peer humiliation as possible results of the risk practice. Similarly to prior definitions of risk taking, Wen and Clément's observations on risks are noteworthy; however, their work mainly presents the negative side of this variable. What is novel about their definition is the incorporation of a conscious-unconscious continuum of risk-taking behaviors. Even though the correlation between consciousness and unconsciousness can be a rich source of investigation for the literature on risk taking, the authors make brief mentions of it; this represents one of the main weaknesses of their article entitled *Willingness to Communicate in ESL*.

In the field of second language learning, academic risk taking has been defined as a situation-based process that can be moderated by providing the appropriate contexts for its application (Lee & Ng, 2010). The contexts may range from the ones in which the learner knows what skill to use and under what conditions to the ones in which learning occurs in a probabilistic setting. The latter can lead students to extremes in the use of risk taking. The fact that risk taking is not a fixed personality trait that is stable across situations has allowed researchers to consider it a potential tool that students can use for the improvement of their learning when appropriately regulated.

Additionally, a bulk of work published in the literature of the field has related risk taking to other classroom factors. A case in point is Ely's characterization of risk taking. In a study carried out in 1986 (as cited in Nga, 2002), he explains that taking risks is intrinsically related to classroom participation and self-confidence. Ely reveals a key pedagogical factor that was not included in previous definitions of the term and that is essential in a language class: willingness to participate. Classroom participation may represent for language learners a valuable opportunity to practice and improve their skills in the target language (Hongwei, 1996). Lee & Ng (2010), on the other hand, explain that another classroom factor associated with the willingness to speak is the teacher's role and whether it can reduce student reticence to participate in the second language class.

Since there have been many different approaches to the term risk taking, the attempts to define it and its educational rationale have varied so much that research on learner differences has not come to a unified explanation of the term yet. In spite of this fact, one of the most comprehensive definitions of risk taking is found in the words of Beebe, one of the leading researchers in the field. In her analysis of risk taking, she carefully captures most of its main characteristics. She describes the term as a "situation where an individual has to make a decision involving choice between alternatives of different desirability; the outcome of the choice is uncertain; there is a possibility of failure" (Beebe, 1983, p.39). Her definition of risk taking resonates with the observations of other authors, for instance, Wen & Clément's uncertainty of outcomes and the selection of actions stated by Bem. Beebe does not clearly explain the pedagogical implication of risk taking; however, from her definition of the term, teachers and learners can infer that the risk of being right or wrong, i.e. failure, is inherent to learning to speak a second language.

From all the characteristics of the risk-taking construct reviewed so far, we can say that risk taking is not an isolated construct but is closely related to other pivotal learner variables such as classroom participation and willingness to communicate in a second language. What should be highlighted from the literature on risk taking is that this term involves interplay between the learner and the decisions that he makes, his willingness to participate, and the educational setting. Thus, the traits of risk-taking students have also been issues of concern for further research on individual differences.

Characterization of risk takers

Certainly, the definitions of risk taking have also prompted research to account for the specific traits that a risk taker should have. In regard to the requirements that learners have to meet in order to be considered risk takers, one of the most powerful reports corresponds to Ely's dimensions. According to Ely's (as cited in Alshalabi, 2003) first dimension, risk takers are not hesitant about using a newly encountered linguistic element. The second dimension refers to risk takers' willingness to use linguistic elements perceived to be complex or difficult. This dimension explains why risk takers develop levels of tolerance towards vagueness and ambiguity to the extent in which a difficult or new situation does not really represent an issue of concern for them (Alshalabi, 2003). The third and fourth dimensions describe respectively how risk takers become tolerant toward possible incorrectness or inexactitude in using the language and how they are inclined to rehearse a new element silently before attempting to use it aloud. This rehearsal issue, nonetheless, is further discussed by other researchers who believe that prior preparation before producing utterances may hinder risk taking (Hongwei, 1996). Indeed, mental preparation is said to be a characteristic of more cautious students who on certain occasions spend so much time preparing to talk that they decide not to take the risk of speaking in front of others.

The literature in the field of second language acquisition has also brought to light other theories to describe risk takers. A clear example is Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis. Although Krashen does not refer specifically to the concept of risk taking in his studies, the risk-taking construct and its characteristics are implied in many of them. In simple terms, risk takers and risk-averse students can be compared respectively to Krashen's "underusers" and "overusers" (Ortega, 2009, p.198) of the monitor device. According to Krashen (as cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004), the overusers are highly concerned with editing their language performance and carefully think their utterances; therefore, they usually show deficient oral fluency. Monitor overusers have the characteristic of "cautiousness" shared by risk-averse students in the language classroom. On the other hand, underusers are believed to be more reckless in their use of the language. Their utterances are not the product of mental correctness. In addition, underusers show high levels of risk taking since they prefer to say what

they want without worrying about the details like risk takers usually do. Beebe (1983) clearly summarizes the relationship between Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis and the concept of risk taking: "It is possible that Krashen's cautious overuser is a low risk taker. His monitor underuser is a high risk-taker. The optimal monitor user calculates the appropriate time and place for monitoring" (p. 47). The optimal user suggested by Krashen then would match the moderate risk-taking student who is able to take accurate risks when appropriate.

Like the overuser-underuser correlation with risk taking, the Variable Competence Model developed by Ellis (1994) proves useful to characterize risk takers as well. However, this model concentrates especially on the students' linguistic output and the degree of mental preparation that it requires. Ellis claims that the product in language use is the result of either planned or unplanned discourse being the former the one thought in advance before being produced while unplanned discourse implies spontaneous speech with lack of preparation. For the purposes of risk taking, students who are risk-averse opt for the planned discourse in order to avoid mistakes; thus, they are less likely to take risks and their linguistic product is carefully elaborated. Conversely, risk-taking students prefer the unplanned speech and are more engaged in the expression of ideas to discover if these are acceptable in the target language. They probably tend to take more substantial risks to develop their linguistic oral proficiency.

Considering the characteristics of risk takers, students displaying this personality trait highly value opportunities to produce language; therefore, they engage more actively in classroom participation (Alshalabi, 2003). In addition, risk takers usually show extroverted traits and apply strategic techniques such as guessing (Beebe, 1983) to cope with the uncertainty and risk levels involved in a particular situation. They are generally advocates of ideas that on some occasions are not supported by others. Such characteristics are conducive to important levels of responsibility management since the exposure to mischance usually implies feelings of danger or ridicule especially when speaking in front of others. As a result, risk takers require courage and responsibility to assume the consequences of their linguistic decisions, even when they are not supported by others, in order to handle risk-taking situations. On the contrary, low-risk takers tend to be more inhibited and use less complex structures so that their levels of linguistic oral accuracy do not decrease considerably. The problem with inhibition on the part of low-risk takers is that it diminishes risk taking which is necessary for rapid progress in a L2.

Ortega (2009) reports that extraversion, a characteristic of most risk takers, and speaking styles are related. Extroverts are more competent communicators because of two reasons. First, extroverts have more cognitive resources, e.g., better short-term memory (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999). Second, they are more "impervious to stress and anxiety" (Ortega, 2009, p. 197). Risk takers are at an advantage, then, compared to risk-averse students. If extraversion is conducive to less anxiety, it is not surprising that risk takers are fluent even under stressful situations, a characteristic that in turn makes them better communicators. Additional characteristics of risk-taking students include their ability to initiate

communication regardless of the situation and the number and type of interlocutors (Ortega, 2009) and their lack of fear toward negative evaluation. The analysis of the characteristics of risk takers leads us now to make several observations concerning situations and classroom variables which are key elements regulating risk-taking behaviors. .

Variables influencing risk-taking behaviors in oral communication

The estimation of risk levels is tied to diverse external and internal factors involving the learner, his/her personality, and the circumstances in which a risky response or action is expected. Thus, the importance of situational variables has been used to argue that the circumstances in which a risk-taking behavior is needed may act as deterrents or facilitators of oral production. Kogan and Wallach (as cited in Beebe, 1983) state that one of the most important components of situational variables is the degree of skill or chance that learners may encounter in learning situations. If the context provides the students with skills to perform, risk taking is moderate. Students provided with the linguistic tools, for instance, expressions and grammar aspects tend to be more able to manage risk taking successfully. However, a “chance context” (ibid) appears to be particularly risky, especially for low risk-taking students who often try to be in control of the learning situation. An extremely risky situation would prompt those students to remain silent or not to take the risk at all.

Furthermore, rewarding students may be an influential factor in risk-taking situations. Students may change their behaviors when they have to make risky decisions if they situation provides them with a reward. On the one hand, feedback or an actual prize can influence the decision-making process of risk-taking students, and eventually, this type of rewards may act as the motivators for the risk-taking behavior. On the other hand, learners can also be discouraged to speak if they find that the situation may cause a serious loss or failure. Research on situational variables has confirmed that on many occasions a negative perception of how much the situation will make the student lose can be a more powerful disincentive for the students than thinking of the possible success (Kogan and Wallach as cited in Beebe, 1983).

Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky’s (as cited in Gass and Selinker, 2008) perspective of reward and loss in risk taking is rather different from what Kogan and Wallach propose. These three authors point out that learners are more risk-seeking when they foresee some kind of loss; in these cases, learners will try almost anything possible, and they will take many risks in order to avoid that loss. Risk-averse students tend to be more conservative if they consider that they are going to obtain some gain from that situation. Learners’ evaluation of the situation then is what Gass & Selinker termed “a framing problem” (p. 434). Learners’ evaluation of the potential outcome of a situation (framing the situation as a gain or a loss) might be more important than the learners’ personal characteristics that led them to take the risk.

Another variable influencing risk-taking behaviors corresponds to previous experiences of success or failure that the students can recall. However, this variable has been the subject of inconclusive discussion by many authors; disagreements have centered on classifying the variable as an individual or situational difference. This topic still lacks in-depth exploration.

Equally important are the social variables related to group versus individual decisions in terms of risk taking. Research has confirmed that the involvement in risk-taking situations varies whether the individual or a group is part of the decision-making process. Studies on student reticence (Lee & Ng, 2010) have demonstrated that groups tend to embark on greater risks than students usually do when they are alone. Working in groups allows learners to rehearse their thoughts and have the support of their peers whenever they put a comment forward which makes them feel they are in a low-risk but high-gain situation (Tsui, 1996). Corporate work might explain then why the actual interaction of reluctant risk takers with peers in a group setting can motivate them to turn to the more socially valued risky alternatives. Moreover, social variables support the idea that certain societal norms facilitate risk-taking behaviors. Students' willingness to speak may also depend on whether their society highly values or rejects risk-taking behaviors because these produce a negative reaction.

In addition to situational and social variables, individual factors also influence learners' willingness to take risks. Bem (as cited in Beebe, 1983) clearly highlights the importance of age and sex in his classification of individual variables. No compelling arguments regarding age and sex are still found in the literature since inconclusive evidence has not demonstrated that men or women engage more in risk-taking behaviors to develop oral production. In the case of age, it is mentioned that younger students show higher risk-taking preferences; however, the studies consulted allow no room for generalizations on the topic since older students may also be uninhibited to produce oral output if the context of the risk-taking situation permits it.

Another intriguing individual variable refers to "locus of control" (Rotter as cited in Beebe, 1983, p.41). The rationale behind this concept explains that people with internal low control evaluate their own actions as results of their personal internal decisions; on the contrary, those more externally oriented assess their outcomes in terms of external causes out of their own control, for instance, fate or luck. The importance of the locus of control concept rests in its apparent capacity to modify risk-taking behaviors in the classroom. Students who possess internal locus of control may be more cautious to express themselves orally. They internalize feelings of responsibility for their own actions, and therefore, for their own mistakes and failure to communicate. Unlike these students, those learners with more external locus of control may be better risk takers in speaking tasks; they attribute the outcomes obtained to extrinsic factors that they could not possibly handle otherwise.

To end this section on variables influencing risk taking, the self-esteem factor will be examined. Self-esteem appears as the least discussed individual variable in the study of risk taking. The role of self-esteem in the development

of speaking abilities in a risky context remains blurred and undefined. Although Beebe (1983) mentions that risk takers are oriented to display average levels of self-esteem, her comments lack specifications on what an average level means and ultimately become non-promising findings for the study of risk taking. In spite of the limited research on the influence of self-esteem on risk taking, one can say that the fact that students have either a poor or a favorable personal perception of themselves may, in certain cases, represent a barrier in the development of an oral task. Students with low self-esteem might be more likely to think that they are neither capable of managing uncertainty in the language nor able to succeed in an oral task.

To summarize, consideration of individual variables suggests each student's individual traits, i.e. age, sex, locus of control orientation, and self-esteem influence the levels of risk taking shown when performing an oral task. More importantly, the combination of locus of control, age, sex, and self-esteem may vary from one student to another; this proves the principle of uniqueness in every student's acquisition of a second language. The evidence available on situational, social and individual variables stands as a rich source of study. Being aware of these variables helps teachers to understand that risk-taking behaviors depend on the learner but also on the specific circumstances and other individuals involved in a particular oral task.

Advantages and disadvantages of high and low risk takers

The realization that taking risks is conducive to learning has led authors to question whether an overuse or low use of risk taking is more valuable for both learning a second language and maximizing L2 speaking ability. On one hand, high risk takers enjoy several benefits when they venture into oral discourse. For example, researchers have acknowledged that fossilized structures tend to be less common in the speech of high risk takers. Since they are willing to try out new linguistic items and constantly look for opportunities to learn the language, they become "more resistant to fossilization" (Ashouri & Fotovatnia, 2010, p.231; Alshalabi, 2003, p.24). On the contrary, Hongwei (1996) points out that the timidity and inhibition which characterize low risk-taking speakers can lead to the development of erroneous patterns, i.e. fossilized structures in the interlanguage of such speaker.

Another advantage of high levels of risk taking corresponds to the quantity and quality of the linguistic input that learners receive. Students who display risk-taking behaviors in the second language classroom may show a considerable increase of the linguistic input obtained in comparison to low risk-taking students. This may be proven by risk takers' readiness to deal with discourse; they make constant attempts to use new linguistic structures in the target language although they may not know the correct use of such forms. Consequently, high risk takers are more able to transform oral input into practical intake (Beebe, 1983). In Krashen's terms (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2008), the availability of

useful intake certainly benefits high risk takers since they probably have more access to comprehensible input, which is a key element for the successful acquisition of a second language. Moreover, high risk takers' willingness to communicate in almost any type of social setting increases their opportunities to hear and obtain a sufficient number of linguistic structures which sharply contrast with the input that low risk takers receive due to their reluctance to interact. In general, such acquisition of input on the part of high risk takers improves their language proficiency, especially for speaking purposes.

In addition to the avoidance of fossilized patterns and the quality of the input that learners receive, it has been suggested that high risk takers exhibit high levels of linguistic fluency in their speech since one of their concerns is to express themselves freely in the second language. Nevertheless, fluent speech does not necessarily translate into grammatical accuracy. The fluency-accuracy controversy has been treated with extreme care in the field of language acquisition. The reason for such care originates in classes where it has been observed that low risk takers sacrifice fluency for the sake of accuracy leading to the development of an unnatural type of language full of pauses. One of the strongest positions on the fluency-accuracy dilemma maintains that high risk takers are more successful L2 speakers because their willingness to make mistakes encourages them to communicate in a more effective manner (Beebe, 1983). Low risk takers, on the contrary, avoid reducing their linguistic accuracy levels when speaking; then, they become very concerned users of the language. Before being uttered, their linguistic products are edited. When their structures are expressed, they are accurate but lack fluency.

In relation to the topic of fluency, it has also been suggested that high risk takers are able to effectively tolerate ambiguity in the language classroom. Wen and Clément (2003) and Dewaele (2012) place special emphasis on high risk takers' tolerance to ambiguity because they focus their attention on meaning rather than on form. Thus, high risk takers become active speakers who reduce their anxiety to communicate more efficiently and fluently.

Even though the preference for fluency may give high risk-taking students more advantages, the literature against risk taking discredits the idea that students should favor fluency over accuracy. As Hongwei (1996) states, "Those bold and carefree students are more likely to make mistakes" (p.20) and should be prepared for and warned about the consequences of being wrong. The extent to which students should favor fluency over precision remains unclear. Although the answer may depend upon the purpose of the pedagogical approach, researchers reject the idea of having fluent students whose production cannot be understood by other speakers and learners of the language. Research on this topic recognizes the advantages that low risk takers may have by being accurate speakers; however, the reasons for such claim have not been studied in depth.

One of the most powerful arguments against the overuse of risk taking in the language classroom refers to fear. The affective role of fear when students speak a second language may certainly represent a disadvantage for high risk takers in the sense that the construct of risk itself entails fear, and this becomes "a barrier

to learning” (Gledhill and Morgan, 2000, n.p.). It is undeniable, then, that the fear of speaking a new language which the students do not fully master can heighten the feelings of nervousness and apprehension. Some of the most common fears that students may experience when venturing into speaking a second language include social fears such as peer reactions, derision, humiliations, disapproval as well as personal fears. Furthermore, students may even be afraid because of the context, i.e. the English classroom. There, the fear of obtaining a bad grade, failing an exam, being punished or embarrassed may translate into major drawbacks for high risk-taking students. Similarly, when students are outside the English classroom and practice the language orally, they are afraid of looking ridiculous, feeling frustrated, having a blank look, not being understood, and feeling alienated among others (Gledhill & Morgan, 2000). In this respect, low risk takers gain an advantage in comparison to high risk-taking students since they are expected to experience lower levels of fear that could hinder their speaking abilities.

Ashouri & Fotovatnia (2010) found that high risk takers had a negative belief about using translation in the second language class. Although the authors do not regard this idea as an advantage of high risk taking, they acknowledge the fact that high risk takers are eager to learn and prefer to use the target language regardless of embarrassment or failure instead of translating input into their mother tongue. Unlike high risk takers, low risk takers hold a very positive opinion about translation. Since they do not like uncertainty and are more cautious about their speech, it is not surprising that they find in translation an opportunity to check what they are going to say in their native language before actually saying it in the target language.

From the aforementioned issues, high risk takers, in general terms, enjoy more benefits to develop their oral proficiency than low risk takers do. If students who exhibit notorious risk-taking behaviors are able to avoid fossilization, obtain useful input, become more fluent, are able to tolerate ambiguity, and avoid using their mother tongue in the second language classroom, they will certainly be one step ahead the oral performance of low risk-taking students. Despite these advantages, the literature has highlighted that high risk-taking students should be cautious about two factors, i.e. accuracy and fear, because they represent major obstacles for the successful learning of a second language. The optimal solution, then, would consist of providing risk-taking students with classroom situations where fear levels would be minimized whereas accuracy and fluency would be emphasized. Therefore, the language classroom as well as the teacher should have a pivotal role to determine and use the advantages that high risk takers already have to promote healthy language acquisition by reducing fear in the learning environment.

Synthesis and reflection

Studies on language acquisition share a common conviction that successful mastery of a second language depends on several factors; risk taking is one

of them. As mentioned previously, the risk-taking construct has been criticized because it might involve loss or failure and prevent students from speaking in class. Some of the literature on risk taking concentrates on the possible positive outcomes which can emerge from risk-taking behaviors while other authors have focused on the process rather on the consequences that a risk-taking situation might bring to the student. In addition, understanding risk taking requires an analysis of the common characteristics of risk takers. Research has shown how risk takers appear as uninhibited students willing to communicate and to find opportunities for such purpose. They venture into using new language, and they are eager to produce new linguistic structures although they may not be completely certain about their usage in the target language. Reticent risk takers, in contrast, tend to display introverted behaviors and produce carefully edited output.

Certain ideas about the characterization of risk takers are still ambiguous. For instance, topics like rehearsal on the part of risk takers have not been clarified in the field. What has been argued with a greater degree of accuracy corresponds to the variables that may influence risk-taking behaviors to improve oral proficiency. In general terms, personality traits, social versus individual decisions, and more importantly, the situation in which the risk takers are expected to demonstrate their daring conducts will eventually modify learners' oral performance. To pinpoint risk takers' characteristics has served to claim that in most cases being a high risk taker is more convenient than being a low risk taker in order to develop speaking abilities. Nevertheless, as was explained in previous sections, the practice of risk-taking behaviors is evocative of fear, a major deterrent of both language learning and development of oral expression.

An analysis of risk taking and its characteristics is necessary in order to examine some of its pedagogical implications. To a certain extent, the studies conducted on risk taking have confirmed that learning is expected to occur in an environment where language students have the opportunity to take risks and are encouraged to do so (Alshalabi, 2003; Brown, 2000). The consequences of fear in the second language class caused by the encouragement of risk taking can be regulated by understanding what causes fear particularly in relation to the use of the target language in the classroom. It has been suggested that novel, complex, unfamiliar linguistic oral tasks as well as those with insufficient information for the students to handle considerably increase the feelings of fear in the students (Wen & Clément, 2003). Thus, students should learn to think of such tasks as possible opportunities to try out the language in different ways, and they should learn to tolerate the ambiguity that oral tasks usually bring with them.

According to Gledhill and Morgan (2000), three crucial aspects about language teaching may stimulate healthy risk-taking practices. Firstly, fostering constructive relationships is considered essential in the ESL classroom. Establishing an adequate affective bond between the learner, peers, and the language teacher can build confidence in the students so that they can take risks.

Secondly, the classroom environment should be equally conducive to risk taking by promoting a comfortable atmosphere in which even furniture, decorations and visual cues to assist students when speaking should harmonize with the physical layout of the classroom. Lastly, the teaching sequence must keep a direct relationship with the subject matter that risk takers are expected to learn. By giving learners clear instructions and enough practice before expressing themselves orally, teachers can achieve a balanced teaching-learning sequence able to encourage risk taking.

Moreover, teachers and the language classroom can become important facilitators of healthy risk-taking practices by aiming at students' improvement of speaking skills. The role of the language teacher is relevant since he/she needs to be supportive and has to create classroom environments that suit the students' levels of risk taking (Lee & Ng, 2010). The teacher should also be a supporter of efforts, linguistic attempts, and decisions made by the students no matter what the results of the student's oral performance are. Furthermore, teachers should not disregard the fact that some students feel more confident with their peers while talking than producing language in front of an English-speaking person or a teacher. For this reason, those students who seem risk-averse should be provided with the opportunity to take risks in group settings before prompting themselves to undertake risky activities in front of the language teacher. In order to accomplish such a task, students need to understand that risk taking can be valued in the class instead of being a source of disapproval. Additionally, students who are willing to try using new language structures should be taught that errors are part of both language learning and the natural human development of almost any individual. Understanding that errors are natural will help students interact in a climate of tolerance and be less concerned about making mistakes.

Conclusion

Even though risk taking does not equal learning, it is a personality asset strongly related to ultimate second language learning success. In his article about willingness to communicate, Yashima (2002) states that "the more one communicates, the more practice one has in talking and the more one learns" (p. 55). If risk takers seek more opportunities to use the target language, it can be argued that they will learn more and improve their language proficiency significantly. When students speak, they test out their hypotheses about the language. They struggle to make themselves understood and are in a constant process of negotiation and reformulation of output. Language teachers should guide students in this trial-and-error process by encouraging them to take risks, by providing them with contexts in which learners can take risks, and by helping learners develop a positive attitude towards errors. These three teaching behaviors will undoubtedly enhance the students' language learning process. If learning is the result of taking risks, then risk taking is worth trying.

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