

Who are Our Students? Investigating Learners' Risk Taking Ability and Achievement on Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract : Teachers of second language, to be most effective, should be aware of who their students really are. It means that teachers must comprehend diversities among their students in many individual characteristics, such as age, self-esteem, motivation and motivation span, sex, cooperation, competition, language learning techniques, strategies, styles, and the last and one of the distinctive individual characteristics is risk-taking ability. All of these variables are directly related to achievement; however the general purpose of this study is to overview the links between learners' risk-taking ability and achievement on second language acquisition in a comprehensive manner. The study examines three stages. The first part of this paper presents the general overview of learners' risk-taking ability and behaviors on language acquisition process and its effects on learners. The second part introduces how it affects achievement, the proportion between risk-taking ability and achievement. The third part of the article is related to advantages and disadvantages of risk-taking on second language teaching. The article concludes with how teachers and learners use this character positively.

Key words: *Risk-taking ability, L2 learning, achievement, individual differences.*

*“The world lies in the hands
of those who have the courage
to dream and who take the risk
of living out their dreams- each
according to his or her own
talent.”*

Paul Coelho

Introduction

The term “risk-taking” is defined “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). On the other hand, according to some linguists, they define risk-taking as the ability of being eager and ambitious to experience new information intelligently regardless of embarrassment in linguistics. (cited in Hui-An Yu, 2005). Risk-taking is not only one of the dimensions of individual differences (IDs), but also, it is one of the important parts in second language learning process; moreover, it is a language learning strategy for good language learners who are willing to take risks (cited in Gass & Selinker, 2000). Language learners are willing to understand new knowledge from their teachers; however, how should they communicate or interact with teacher? or how should language teachers understand important learning-related differences among their students? how should they courage and support their students? For students, the answer is taking risk (Dörnyei, 2005, Hui-An Yu, 2005). For teachers, the answer is about encouraging students to take risk (Oxford, 1992). Therefore, in order to reinforce risk-taking, language teachers should organize risk-taking process.

Oxford, (1992; p.38) implicated that classroom atmosphere affects learners’ learning process in risk-taking situation;

“[...] a non-threatening classroom climate, class discussion of fears, individual counseling with inhibited students, and training in strategies that facilitate taking risks (e.g., compensation strategies like guessing or using synonyms). Teachers can help learners relax and not be worried if they do not understand everything right away; and at the same time, they have the ability to assist learners in knowing when and how to take risks, particularly in conversational settings”.

It means that it is necessary to develop positive classroom climate and to reinforce risk-taking, [language] teachers should arrange and develop an ample affective framework to overcome learners’ anxiety of learning the target language (Brown, 2000).

Table 1 shows that Skehan (1989), and Dörnyei (2005) look insight IDs such as language aptitude, personality, motivation and the other less central IDs. Nevertheless, they have an important role in L2 learning process; for instance, intelligence, self-esteem and “risk-taking” (Ellis, 2008). In the literature, many different studies focused on IDs and second language learning. For example, “Aptitude, attitude and motivation in second language proficiency” by Clement and Kruidenier (1985), “Personality and speech production: a pilot study of second language Learners” by Dewaele and Furnman (2000), “Individual differences in second language learning” by Dörnyei (2005) and Skehan (2003), “Language anxiety and achievement” by Horwitz (1986), and “Risk-taking and language learner” by Beebe (1983).

Skehan (1989)	Robinson (2002)	Dörnyei (2005)
1- Language aptitude	1- Intelligence	1- Personality
2-Motivation	2- Motivation	2- Language Aptitude
3-Language learning strategies	3- Anxiety	3- Motivation
4- Cognitive and affective factors:	4- Language Aptitude	4- Learning and cognitive strategies
a) extroversion/introversion	5-Working memory	5- Other learner characteristics
b) risk-taking	6-Age	a) anxiety
c) intelligence		b) creativity
d) field independent		c) willingness to communicate
e) anxiety		d) self-esteem
		e) learners beliefs

Table 1: Factors listed as influencing individual learner differences in language learning three surveys
Source: Adopted from Ellis, R. (2008). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: OUP, p.644

“Explaining Individual Differences”

In this paper we will focus on one particular psychological dimension about risk-taking and its effects on second language learning and achievement. After the review of the literature, we shall discuss advantages and disadvantages of risk-taking ability and how language teachers stimulate their students to be riskier in oral proficiency.

The Literature Review

Risk-taking behavior appeared in the literature of psychology in 1960s (Kogan & Wallach, 1967), and 1970s (Bem, 1971) and it appeared in literature of linguistics and English as a Second Language (ESL) in 1960s, (Labov, 1969), 1980s (Beebe, 1983, Ely, 1986a). Kogan and Wallach correlated two personality dimensions, motivation and risk-taking behavior to this basis McClelland –Atkinson position, which is a theory of achievement motivation developed by McClelland, Atkinson, Clark and Lowell in 1953, (cited in Beebe, 1983).

In this context, Kogan and Wallach (1967) implicates that high motivated persons are prone to achieve moderate but not high risk takers contrary to popular belief. Also Beebe (1983) advocates that “[...] low need achievers, persons who strongly fear failure, and those with a high need for approval, are likely to take courses of action which are extremely risky or extremely conservative. They are less likely to change their risk-taking behavior even when it leads to failure” (p. 41).

According to Kogan and Wallach, this theory has been repeatedly tested out and confirmed, however, they do not admit that it controlled for individual differences in skill and studied chance condition. Another study about risk-taking is of Bem (1971) who studied risk-taking behavior through three categories; all of these categories are external as: the situation (e.g.: previous experience), the individual (e.g.: personality factors) and the social setting (e.g.: cultural value for risk) (cited in Beebe, 1983).

Studies on language learning and risk-taking are few in number. We turn to examine some research studies literature in linguistics and ESL related to risk-taking. Labov (1969) had a study on black students who never speak teachers in class or during conversational and oral practice. These students and ESL students, who behave like this, are in common. However, we should not label them “nonverbal” (Labov, 1969). Although they are often quite talkative students in their peer groups, they are quiet with their teachers. Their perception of risks involved in oral skill in classroom atmosphere. On the other hand, Beebe (1983, p.43) emphasizes that when students act with their peers, speaking is a low risk – high gain situation. Trimpop (1994) named risk-takers in two characters depending on their base-levels; one of them is “risk-avoider (... *Coward*) and the other is risk-seeker (...*Hero*). Thus, we can deduce that the risk-avoider students, basically, could be risk-seeker in their peer groups. It depends on atmosphere and situation. Language teachers should know how to behave their students both inside and outside of the class, because it affects students’ risk-taking behavior. Beebe (1983) illustrated that “encouraged dread of risk-taking both in classroom and in natural settings can cause some of negative ramifications, such as a bad trade in the course, a fail on the exam, a scolding from teacher, a sneer from a classmate, punishment or embarrassment either inside the classroom or outside the classroom” (p. 40). It means that the negative factors both inside and outside of the classroom may affect language learners’ intention and aptitude of risk-taking. Moreover, language learners who fear the frequent ambiguities of language learning often suffer reduced risk-taking ability (cited in Beebe, 1983). Because of these important reasons, as Woolfolk (2001) noted and advised that activities can be done in order to increase the confidence of silent students in the classroom;

1. Break instructions into small steps and provide short activities, chosen and sequenced by the teacher.
2. Cover material thoroughly and at a moderate pace, give plenty of practice, immediate feedback and specific praise.
3. Have students work as a whole class so that the teacher can supervise. Avoid individualized, self-paced, or independent work.
4. Maintain a level of difficulty that guarantees high rates of success.
5. Ask convergent questions – one correct answer.
6. Make sure to call on everyone, and stay with a student until a question has been answered.
7. Avoid interpretations, open-ended questions, and non-academic conversations.
8. Emphasize short, frequent paper-and-pencil exercises, not games, arts, craft, discovery or inquiry learning activities (Johannessen, 2003).

These activities, especially to improve students’ oral skills, reduce anxiety level, and risk-taking ability improves. Hence, students show that they are not afraid of their possible off beam guesses and as a result take the risk of going wrong (Woolfolk, 2001).

Ely (1986a) studied risk-taking behavior of university students and studied the relationship between risk-taking tendencies and classroom participation. At the end of the study, Ely (1986a) found that a correlation

between risk-taking tendencies and classroom participation, the students' risk-taking behavior was a positive predictor of students' voluntary classroom participation. On the other hand, although the correlation of risk-taking and participation was high, the relationship with actual success was relatively weak. This result supports the idea that individual differences and personality affect language learning in a specific manner. Personality (risk-taking behavior) does not affect longer term success (Gass & Selinker, 2000). Besides, Ely (1986b) reported that "the learners with a high level of discomfort were less likely to take risks in class suggesting that high anxiety negatively affected motivation" (Ellis, 2008, p.694).

Another study about classroom participation and risk-taking ability, Beebe (1983) tried to find the reason why L2 learners are shy a second language around peers or classmates from their mother tongue group than around native speaker and teachers is that they perceive the risk of looking foolish as a greater in the presence of peers from their own country. Beebe (1983) presented data from twenty Puerto Rican bilingual (Spanish-English) children who were selected randomly from one school in the New York area. The study maintained in four occasions with these children. The children were interviewed in English once by a bilingual (Spanish dominant) interviewer, once by a monolingual English-speaking interviewer and then again by a bilingual interviewer, but this time the interviewer is English dominant, and once by all three interviewers (in groups of three children). In this context, Gass and Selinker (2000) explains that "Beebe operationally defined risk-taking in terms of a number factors, among them number of attempts to use particular grammatical factors avoidance, amount of talk, amount of information volunteering" (p. 361). At the end of the study, the results showed that risk-taking was the greatest with monolingual interviewer (Gass & Selinker, 2000). It means that taking risks may depend on situation and learners' willingness, not only with their general type (Beebe, 1983, Gass & Selinker, 2000).

Beebe (1983), also states willingness and risk-taking relationship, willing to guess and accurate guesser, willing to appear foolish in order to communicate, willing to use what knowledge they do have of the target language, we know these three strategies from seven general strategies research by Rubin (1975) that the Good Language Learner. Beebe asserts that they are related risk-taking although Rubin does not directly say. For Rubin, these strategies are abilities for poor language learners need to develop. Beebe states that all of these three strategies are related risk-taking, for example willing to guess is a part of risk-taking and willingness to appear foolish is willing to take risk. Beebe also added about motivation which Rubin claims to be second crucial variable in good language learning. The students do not want to look foolish in the classroom and do not take risk. I have practically observed this behavior among some students in my speaking class. Some of my students are silent and look like stressful throughout the lesson. After the lesson, when I asked the reason, why they did not attend the conversations, their explanation about that their friends might laugh them and this situation could disturb their psychology and learning enthusiasm. This is a common student thought about them. However, as Beebe's cogitation, "willingness to appear foolish is willing to take risk." Willingness is a part of risk-taking.

Advantages and disadvantages of risk-taking on second language teaching

When we see again Skehan (1989), Robinson (2002), Dörnyei (2005) researches about individual differences table, we can realize that risk-taking behavior is one of the personality - cognitive - affective factors. It is clear that all of these factors are correlated each other like a chain. For instance, "extrovert students tend to participate more in classroom interactions, worry less about accuracy and have a tendency to take risks with their language, all of which are assets when it comes to communicative oral competence" (Kelly, 2004). Extroversion may well have a role to play in the development of oral skills. Last of all, these students are motivated, have less anxiety and are in an advantaged position while L2 learning process. However, introvert students have some problems about L2 learning, because they have anxiety of speaking inhibition themselves and anxiety causes ambiguousness. So, risk-taking is related to competitiveness and in these kinds of situation, risk-taking may cause anxiety; anxiety may encourage or discourage risk taking; and inference, insofar as it involves an element of guesswork, is a risk-taking activity. For these reasons, some students keep in the background while risk-takers have chance to speak, attend to the lesson, be more active, learn better etc. Shortly, sometimes risk-taking behavior brings disadvantaged position for some students who are mostly introvert. Consequently, "the advantage for a learner is to motivate them to learn language and increase their imagination; the disadvantage for a learner is to deduce theory impulsively" (Hui-An Yu, 2005, p.9).

Discussion and Conclusion

In the conclusion, risk-taking ability effects L2 learning in many ways and has a significant role in L2 acquisition, risk-taking ability is associated with success in second language teaching (Emerson, 2005) and it

affects oral proficiency (Beebe, 1983, Ely, 1986b, Gass & Selinker, 2000; Johannessen, 2003, Kelly, 2004, Labov, 1969, Hui-An Yu, 2005). Teachers should establish an encouraging class atmosphere in their classes to reveal risk takers. Oxford (1992) noted that “risk-taking ability, though sometimes considered inherent character traits, can be developed through a nonthreatening classroom climate, class discussion of fears, individual counseling with inhibited students, and training in strategies that facilitate taking risks (e.g., compensation strategies like guessing or using synonyms)” (p. 38). Language teachers should be aware of who their students are, what are the individual differences among their students. Because, learners need teacher’s reward and respect to boost their learning style. If the teachers assure this atmosphere in their classes, learners are not afraid of being blamed and humiliated, also, they can be risk-takers in many situations when they talk and share their ideas, they will take part in the class willingly and do well on L2 acquisition unconsciously. Researches suggest that language learners should take moderate but intelligent risks to learn L2 better, for instance “guessing meanings based on background knowledge and speaking up despite the possibility of making occasional mistakes, rather than taking no risks at all or taking extreme, uninformed risks” (Oxford, 1992, p. 38).

In many research shown, the key point to accomplish L2 learning, be sure the personality differences among learners, classroom should be student-centered and being a risk taker in many situations, because an outgoing and risk-taking person inclining to take advantage of learning the language. Further research may search relationship between the strategies language learning and risk-taking they feel might help the learners to become more effective in their learning experience and also researching may be done with questionnaires or the whole year (in the first and second term) language teacher may observe his/her speaking class (for speaking skill), but firstly, at the beginning of the year, she makes an interview in English with the students about English, its difficulties, personal differences and then at the end of the year, she may ask the same questions (make the same interview) to the students. Between these two terms, most probably, teacher, also students realize the differences. Results may show us “risk avoiders” or “risk seekers” (Trimpot, 1994).

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