



The Interface Between Risk Taking and Foreign Language Speaking

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Öz

Risk taking, which is defined as the willingness even if individuals are not so sure of how to do it, is one of the vital points in the educational setting. Therefore, the study aims at primarily exploring the risk taking levels of pre-service teachers at the English language Teaching Department, secondly finding out the relation between gender and risk taking and thirdly the relation between the overall achievement score and risk taking inclination. The Risk Taking Scale was administered to find out their tendencies and it was revealed that there is no significant relation between the gender and risk taking and between the GPA and risk taking levels with an emphasis that pre-service teachers try to take risks in speaking with a high level of confidence.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Risktaking, speaking, language, pre-service teachers



Introduction

Risk-Taking

Risk-taking is a natural property of people since they gain daily life experiences through taking a chance to see what can happen, so it is necessary to take risks to learn and grow through venture to the unknown (Levenson, 1990). Risk-taking can be defined 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: 39). Moreover, risk-taking comes to mean “being prepared to have a go at saying or writing something even if you are not exactly sure how to do it, without worrying that you might get wrong” (Hurd & Murphy, 2005: 56). To put it in different way, it can be explained as a tendency to do something different and uncertain. The concept of risk-taking behaviour came into the fore as a subject matter in the field of psychology and linguistics in 1960s (Meriem, 2015). It is clear that risk-taking represents both an individual trait and language learning process.

It is suggested that people display risk-taking behaviours in relation with five categories; intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions as shown in Figure 1 (Neihart, 1999: 290).

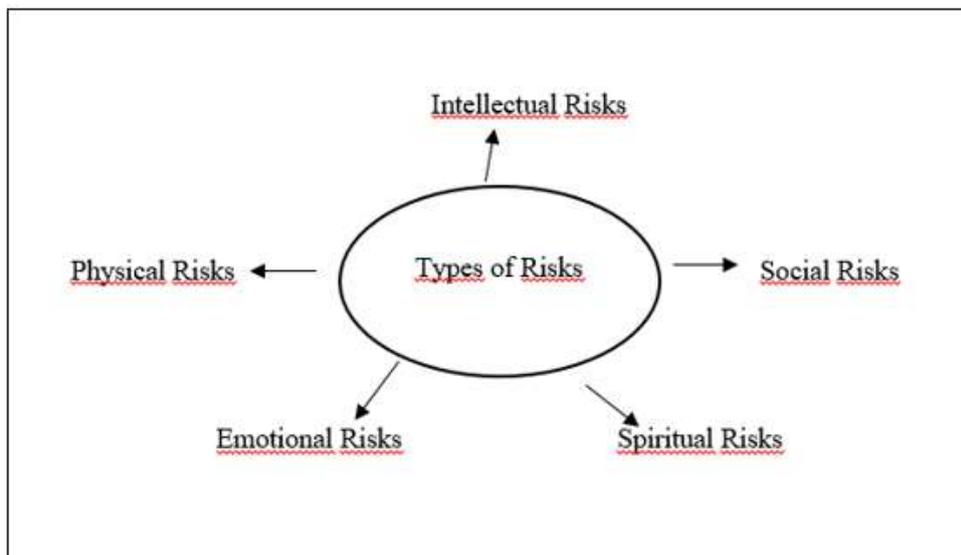


Figure 1. Types of Risks (Neihart, 1999: 290)

Intellectual risk-taking takes place when students enroll a course that is beyond their current proficiency levels, while social risk-taking might include communicating with foreigners (Levenson, 1990). Emotional risk-taking comes into play when a person’s feelings and beliefs are challenged as in the case of rejection, embarrassment and anger (Gass & Selinker, 2008).



It seems easy to observe physical risk-taking including behaviours ending up with the possibility of being injured such as paragliding and skydiving (Lvenson, 1990). On the other hand, clarifying spiritual risk-taking might be difficult as it involves personal insights and abstract thinking as in the example of changing religious beliefs (Neihart, 1999).

Risk-takers' behaviours can be explained with different levels showing the degrees of their risky behaviours including uninhibited risk-takers, analytical risk-takers, cautious risk-takers, inhibited risk-takers and nonrisk-takers as in Figure 2 (Young, 1991: 8).

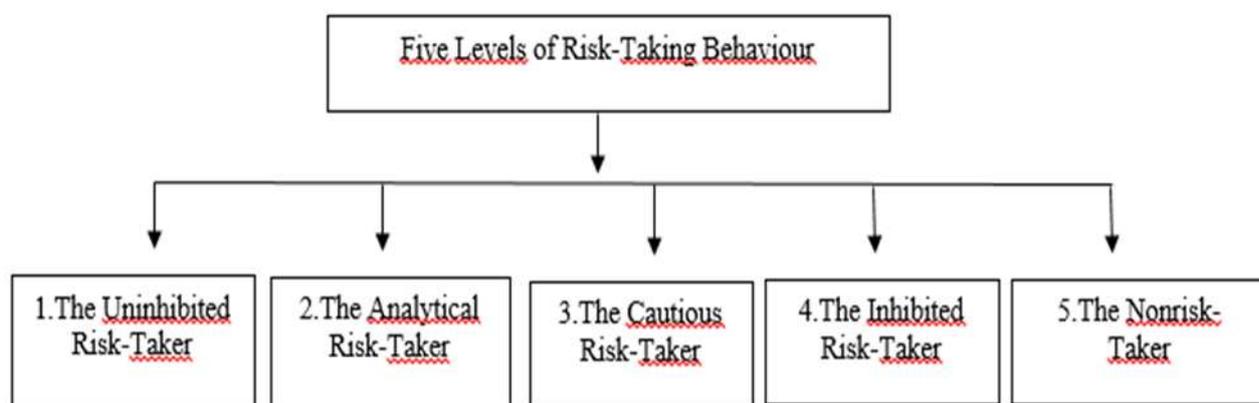


Figure 2. Five Levels of Risk-Taking Behaviour (Young, 1991: 8).

The uninhibited risk-takers fall into the highest level pointing at a strong desire for adding new experiences to their life (Young, 1991). The second highest level includes analytical risk-takers who analyze all the factors before engaging in the activity (Neihart, 1999). The cautious risk-takers who observe others' venture rather than displaying risky behaviours rank as the third level (Young, 1991). The fourth level corresponds to the inhibited risk-takers attaching importance to certainty when they gain experience by learning new things (Oxford, 1992). Lastly, nonrisk-takers are determined to avoid taking part in the activities that are new and different for them, hence it might be difficult to change their learning behaviour (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

Risk-Taking and Language Learning

The fact that each learner is different from the other in terms of their success in language learning process can be attributed to individual differences including personality, anxiety, motivation, and risk-taking ability (Skehan, 1989). Risk-taking is considered as a characteristic behaviour of good language learners (Young, 1991). It provides opportunities for students to learn from their own mistakes, which is counted as a crucial condition for effective language learning (Gass & Selinker, 2008). According to Ely (as cited in Gorjian &



Prorkar, 2017) risk-taking students are characterized by four features including “being confident in utilizing a newly encountered linguistic constituent; being willing to employ linguistic elements supposed to be intricate or difficult; being tolerant toward probable incorrectness or inexactitude in using the language and having a desire to rehearse a new element silently before attempting to use it aloud” (91). These features pave the way for accomplishment in language learning on the part of students with risk-taking property (Bebee, 1983).

It is noteworthy to mention a wide range of studies (Dehbozorgi, 2012; Shojaee & Sahragard, 2012) which draw attention to the relationship of risk-taking with language learning. In this respect, Gorjian and Prorkar (2017) conducted a research upon the effect of risk taking strategy on English learners' oral performance at the pre-intermediate level and revealed that the high risk-takers outperformed their counterparts. Accordingly, Ghoorchaie and Kassaian (2009) sought out the relationship between risk-taking, speaking fluency and grammatical accuracy of Iranian EFL students. They laid stress on the superiority of high risk-takers over low risk-takers in relation with both fluency and accuracy. In a similar vein, Ely (1986) investigated the effect of language class risk-taking and sociability on second language learning and he came up with that risk-taking positively predicts participation, which plays an essential role in increasing students' oral correctness.

On the other hand, there are nonrisk-takers who hesitate to take risks such as making mistakes, communication breakdowns and misunderstandings while learning another language (Bebee, 1983). Therefore, they do not volunteer to ask and answer questions when they face vagueness and intricacy since they regard these situations as a danger to their comfort zone, which in turn, creates a barrier to effective language learning (Oxford, 1992). In that vein, in her study, Meriem (2015) proved her hypothesis that the risk-taking students can be proficient English speakers in comparison to the inhibited ones by underlining a strong positive correlation between students risk-taking property and their spoken English proficiency. In a nutshell, nonrisk-takers are not open to pursue their language development by engaging in the challenging tasks which might result in failure.

The fact that taking risks is an indispensable aspect of language learning process highlights the importance of encouraging students to become risk-takers as Oxford (1992) puts emphasis on that “risk-taking ability, though sometimes considered inherent character traits, can be developed through a non-threatening classroom climate, class discussion of fears, individual counseling with inhibited students, and training in strategies that facilitate taking risks” (38). With the help of a stress-free classroom atmosphere, students can feel secure enough to take risks as confirmed in the study of Kusumaningputri (2012) who investigates the confessions of junior students about risk-taking in foreign language acquisition and learning and highlights the conclusion that learners become ready mentally to take risks when there is not a possibility of being humiliated and criticized which, eliminates the students' negative feelings about their language ability by accelerating their academic success.



A sincere sensitivity of teacher to each student makes a contribution to students' self-confidence by allowing them to overcome their anxiety and shyness (Beebe, 1983). At this point, Labov (1969) observed black students learning English as a second language within class and outside the classroom. He came to the conclusion that the students avoid communication with their teacher during oral practices in the lessons, however, they are very talkative when it comes to the communication with their classmates after the lesson. Therefore, it can be deduced that learners' 'perception of risk-taking is related with friendly attitude of the teacher which has a power to promote risk-avoider learners' ability to take risks at a certain extent (Young, 1991).

It is commonly accepted that learners' ability to take risks is considered as an important indicator of success in language learning (Skehan, 1989). Nevertheless, there are also research findings pointing to a nonsignificant relationship between risk-taking and language learning; the study of Chitsaz and Sahragard (2003) which examines Iranian EFL learners' risk-taking properties and their performance in an English language test indicates that there is no correlation between risk-taking and achievement in language tests. Similarly, the study of Maeda (2010) reveals the possible associations between the application of word emphasis and risk-taking behaviors of adult Japanese English-language learners (ELLs) in the scope of foreign accent modification. As a result, no correlation is found between changes the ELLs made and their scores on the risk-taking questionnaire.

Risk-taking learners are believed to be extroverts who make use of all the opportunities to use language by engaging in classroom conversation, so they are expected to be more successful in language learning process (Neihart, 1999). However, Zafar and Meenakshi (2012) who aim to find the relationship between two dimensions of personality; extroversion and introversion and risk-taking suggest that learners with a more introverted personality may be better suited to classroom learning, especially reading and writing skills. Correspondingly, Gledhill and Morgan (2000) underline the outcome that low risk-taking students gain an advantage in speaking activities in comparison with high risk-taking students due to the fact that they have lower degrees of anxiety and fear affecting their communication skills negatively. Furthermore, Ashouri and Fotovatnia (2010) state that low risk takers precede their peers with high risk-taking property when it comes to translation activities, inasmuch as they have chances to verify whether their sentences in the target language are grammatically correct and meaningful or not, which eliminates their negative attitudes towards uncertainty.

It is apparent that research findings yield mixed results, namely, some studies (Dehbozorgi, 2012; Ely, 1986) affirm that high risk-taking students have the edge on language learning, whereas other studies (Gledhill & Morgan, 2000; Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012) do not show any significant relation of students' risk-taking abilities with their success in language learning. Therefore, uncertainty remains in this research area, so the present study tries to shed light on the relationship between risk-taking and language learning. Hence, the research questions are defined as follows:



- a. What are the perceptions of language learners in relation with risk-taking?
- b. Is there a relationship between risk taking and speaking in second language?
- c. Is gender important in risk taking?
- d. Is GPA important in risk taking?
- e. Is age important in risk taking?

Method

Participants

66 students (28 females and 38 males) at the English Language Department of one of the western universities in Turkey acted as participants in this study. The students were from 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades and they participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Their proficiency level was between high intermediate and advanced.

Instrumentation

This study utilized a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire by Suryani and Argawati (2018) and the Cronbach's Alpha value of the questionnaire was measured as .81.

Procedure

Before the study was conducted, the participants were informed about the procedure and goal of the study, and they were asked to sign the consent forms that stated their participation in the study was on a voluntary basis. After they agreed to participate in the study, the questionnaire was given to the students and the data collection was completed with the participation of 66 students.

Data Analysis

SPSS 25 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was utilized to analyse the data. To compare the means of groups regarding their age and gender, Independent sample t-tests were administered while One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to assess their GPA scores. The significance level was determined as $p < .05$.

Data Results

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of the items*

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
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1. When I hesitate to respond in English, I avoid speaking	66	2.82	1.23
2. In group discussions, I will not give an opinion again when my new idea has been laughed at before	66	2.85	1.32
3. I dislike to ask/speak when I am in doubt	66	3.06	1.08
4. I feel embarrassed when new ideas I put forward in a group discussion have been rejected	66	2.88	1.11
5. I use my mother tongue to express difficult words to avoid mistakes	66	2.61	.93
6. I feel more challenged when speaking English with a friend or teacher with an English background	66	2.61	1.14
7. I use simple sentences to avoid errors	66	3.03	1.21
8. I am eager to read the English articles though I do not know all the contents	66	3.91	1.10
9. I feel uneasy when getting an offer for participate in competitions in English	66	2.58	1.09
10. I always provide solutions to problems that are difficult to solve in groups	66	3.64	.99
11. I am not confident with speaking English with native speakers	66	2.24	1.30
12. I try to avoid speaking English with people using complex sentences.	66	2.24	1.06
13. I don't feel confident when my writing is shown to the others because if there is an error will be known to many people	66	2.39	1.29
14. I never feel hopeless learning English even though I make a lot of mistakes	66	3.91	1.28
15. When I make a mistake, I change the topic so my mistakes don't get noticed	66	2.15	1.06
16. I am only ready to state my opinion in English if the material has been prepared in advance	66	3.24	3.54

As shown in Table 1, the findings of the questionnaire revealed that participants did not tend to avoid speaking English when they felt hesitant (2.82) or when they had to use sentences with complex structures (2.24). They also did not feel comfortable with using their mother tongue (2.61) to avoid mistakes while speaking English. However, the use of simple sentences (3.03) was considered as a choice by some participants to avoid mistakes while speaking English. It was also obvious that other people's negative thoughts about the participants' ideas



did not prevent them from expressing themselves and speaking English (2.85) or they did not hesitate to show their writings to others (2.39) and they did not think that it was not important that people might see their mistakes. Doubt (3.06) seemed to slightly affect the participants' risk takings while embarrassment (2.88) had even little effect. Moreover, speaking with people who had English background (2.61) was not perceived as a factor that influence the participants' risk-taking strategies. Nevertheless, the results revealed that the participants had relatively higher courage when they had the chance to read articles (3.91). In terms of competing in English (2.58), the participants were found willing to join the competition. Additionally, the participants were found to be eager to share their ideas to solve difficult problems (3.64), which indicated that the participants tended to speak more while they were with their friends. The participants were not afraid to communicate with native speakers of English (2.24). Additionally, the participants were quite optimistic about their learning English and they were not discouraged because of their mistakes (3.91) because it was revealed that they did not change the topic of speech to distract people from noticing their mistakes. Finally, the participants stated that they felt comfortable speaking when the material was prepared in advance (3.24).

Table 2. Independent Sample T-test Results by Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Female	28	47.71	6.36	.38
Male	38	45.00	10.14	

In Table 2, independent sample t-test results by gender were presented. It was revealed that although the mean for females was higher than that of males, this difference was not significant (.38).

Table 3. Independent Sample T-test Results by Age

Age	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
20 and under	34	48.41	8.24	.12
21+	32	43.75	8.83	

In Table 3, the independent sample t-test results by age of the participants indicated that the participants who were 20 and younger had a higher mean than those who were above 20. However, this did not imply a significant difference (.127)

Table 4. One-way Anova Results by GPA



	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	32.32	2	16.16	.20	.81
Within Groups	2405.91	30	80.19		
Total	2438.24	32			

In Table 4, it was shown that the participants' risk-taking attitudes were not significantly different in terms of their GPA scores.

Discussion and Conclusion

The process of learning a language requires learning a lot of rules as well as the sustainable study, exposure, interaction. Besides, individual differences play a significant role. 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 (Cervantes, 2013:422). Gass and Selinker (2008) maintain that risk-taking is one of the most important characteristics that help learners achieve the acquisition process. Those who take more risks are likely to seize more opportunities to speak and have interactions with peers and teachers.

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. The participants in this study showed a different attitude when it is reading. They take risks in reading (3.9) but not in speaking especially with native speakers (2.24) and when they realize that the interlocutors have a better speaking skill and they can use more sophisticated vocabulary (2.24) although they are considered as proficient learners as they are in the English department. Although they express embarrassment in speaking English, they also state that they are very confident in themselves, therefore they can be considered as emotional risk takers in terms of Gass and Selinker's categorization (2008).

In terms of age, gender and GPA, risk taking does not show any significant differences, which is not aligned with a lot of studies (Dehbozorgi, 2012; Ely, 1986; Shojaee & Sahragard, 2012) and students' risk taking inclinations do not have any impact on language learning success. However, they speak less frequently and are overwhelmed with the feelings of uneasiness and embarrassment in the class. Despite this, they do not lose their enthusiasm and trust in themselves to push themselves further and the related literature has also similar studies (Ashouri & Fotovatnia, 2010; Kusumaningputri, 2012). This might sound like a discrepancy between confidence and embarrassment, but this confidence element shows that



learners care about speaking in public a lot and the other one, embarrassment is about the personal beliefs about self-worth and resilience in not giving up.

In a situation where the learner has to make a choice between speaking and staying silent thinking of the result of failure or the possibility of committing some errors, Hongwei (1996) believes that classroom opportunity is important and Lee and Ng (2010) state that the teacher's role is more vital than the risk taking inclinations of the learners.

The findings suggest that demographic issues such as age and gender are not so crucial in risk taking and learners' risk taking is high especially with the more knowledgeable other in speaking not in reading or writing. However, these findings need to be interpreted with some caution. First, although our sample is fairly diverse with respect to demographic data, it is self-selected. Secondly, although this quantitative study may help us gain a better understanding of the inquiry, the data were analysed from an individual trait-like perspective; risk taking.



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