

## The Effects of Risk Taking on the Learning of Spoken English at University

### **Abstract:**

This paper deals with the effects of risk taking on the learning of spoken English at university. A series of classroom tasks is undertaken to find out to what extent risk taking as a personality trait and spoken English learning are related. The findings confirm that the research variables are positively correlated. Hence, an amount of risk taking is really recommended in the language classroom.

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### **Résumé:**

Cet article traite des effets de la prise de risque sur l'apprentissage de l'anglais parlé à l'université. Pour ce faire, une série de tâches en classe ont été réalisés pour découvrir dans quelle mesure la prise de risque comme un trait de personnalité et l'apprentissage de l'anglais parlé vont de pair. Les résultats confirment la corrélation des variables de recherche d'où une certaine mesure de prise de risques devient vraisemblablement recommandée dans la classe de langue.

### **Introduction :**

Second language learning has gained recently more interests regarding the multiplicity of needs in the world-wide societies and markets. As a developing country, Algeria has adopted an extensive policy to meet with the international developments; the Algerian universities are opened to satisfy the needs of the Algerian learners and educational

community. Practically speaking, the speaking skill has always been considered as the most important skill which is very much needed by the English language users. On the other side, risk taking as a personality feature is greatly favoured in the language classroom, and it will be efficiently useful to start this research paper defining the term “risk taking”.

### **What is Risk Taking?**

Risk taking is understood, in a way or another, as being or doing something dangerous and uncertain. Beebe (1983) identifies risk taking 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” (in Gass & [Selinker](#), 2008, p.433).

Furthermore, Morris (1979) assumed that risk taking has some relation with adventuresomeness: spontaneity and flexibility in social behaviour, contrasted with social inhibition and restraint (Ely, 1986). In other words, risk taking is seen as the tendency to engage in behaviours that can be harmful, dangerous, frightening, with a large room for pain, criticism, embarrassment and even loss; yet, at the same time it provides the opportunity for positive outcomes to appear. Because we will discuss the relationship of risk taking and spoken English proficiency, it is undeniable to talk about inhibition. That latter has various definitions via different fields; for the Cambridge Advanced Learners’ Dictionary (2003) inhibition is: “A feeling of embarrassment or worry that prevents you from saying or doing what you want”, and for the Oxford Dictionary of Psychology (2003) it is basically “The act or process of restraining or preventing something or the state of being restrained or prevented”. Inhibition may exist, in a way or another, in the language classroom, where students may get inhibited to escape from contribution in the language learning process.

### **1. Risk Taking and Spoken English Learning**

#### **1.1 Risk Takers**

Risk taking is seen as a good student’s quality most of language teachers favour in classroom, and it is greatly assumed that it is associated with language learning success (Skehan, 1989). As far as language learning is concerned, Ely (1986) has argued that language class risk taking is more profoundly referred to as a learner’s tendency to use the second language in classroom. It is also claimed that risk taking appears in situations where students

face challenging tasks, and the possibility of failure is very expected (Nunan, 1992). In the language classroom, most of the risk takers are talkative, impulsive, and adventurous; tend to guess, imagine, and even fail. Thus, Hurd and Murphy (2005) argue that:

“Taking risks in language learning means 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” (p.56).

Many studies are carried out to find the relationship of risk taking with second language proficiency; Rastegar (2002) attempted to prove the relationship between the self-esteem, extroversion, and risk taking of Iranian TEFL students and proficiency in English. He found that risk taking has non-significant correlation with second language proficiency (in Chitsaz & Sahragard, 2007). Ely (1986) investigated the impact of language class discomfort, risk taking, and sociability on 2LL to come up with these outcomes: language class discomfort negatively predicted risk taking and sociability. Risk taking positively predicted participation which positively predicted oral correctness. Thanks to such results, risk taking is always regarded as a crucial affective predictor of second language proficiency. It pushes learners to get involved in activities, practice more, cooperate with peers, learn by correcting mistakes and reinforcing knowledge and consequently achieves foreign language proficiency (Brown, 1994).

### **1. 2. Inhibited Learners**

For a long time, inhibition was regarded as a barrier with a negative impact on SLA; it discourages risk-taking which is necessary for rapid progress in oral production. It is assumed that inhibition influences 2L pronunciation negatively. Inhibition is closely related to self-esteem, learners who are very concerned about what their classmates think about them, and cannot accept others laughing at them, face many troubles. Such students with weaker self-esteem maintain walls of inhibition to protect themselves, because the weaker self-esteem is the stronger inhibition will be (Andres, 2002). In this respect, Freud (1948) has reported that inhibition is seen as: “The expression of a restriction of an ego-function” (in Granger, 2004). The inhibited learners feel afraid and shy to express themselves and usually they lack enough knowledge and skills. It is also claimed that: “Learners with limited educational background

and low literacy levels were particularly vulnerable to academic inhibition” (White, 2003).

## **2. Methodology**

### **2. 1. Subject**

The research sample is randomly selected. We have dealt with a sample of 91 second year students selected among a whole population of nearly 550 students doing English attending second year classes in the English department of the University of Constantine 1 (Algeria).

### **2. 2. Scope**

This study hypothesized that the risky students can be proficient English speakers in comparison to the inhibited ones. Thus, some classroom tasks are developed to find out who is the risk taker and who is the inhibited in the Oral Expression classroom. The scope is to undertake specific tasks to collect appropriate data to measure the students’ risk taking. Accordingly, Crookes (1986) has claimed: “a task is a piece of work or an activity, usually with specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research” (in Ellis, 2003). Much related to the classroom context, Nunan (1989) has argued that the communicative task can be considered as:

“ A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focus on meaning rather than form. The task should also have the sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right” (ibid, p.3).

### **2. 3. The Classroom Tasks**

We shall introduce the six classroom tasks mentioning their objectives, and the way they were administered, everyone is presented in tow sessions.

#### **2. 3. 1. Idiomatic Expression**

Teaching idioms involves not only their meaning, but also the conventions of their use, and learning idioms implies recognizing some aspects like: identifying their meaning, knowing the words with which idiom parts can be

substituted, and the ability of using idioms in the appropriate register at the right social circumstances (Gewehr & Catsimali, 1998). Besides their role in teaching authentic English, they provide necessary data. Two lists of idioms are introduced, 10 idioms in the 1<sup>st</sup> session while in the other 12 idioms are debated. We dictate a number of sentences each of which contains an idiom in a given context.

### **2. 3. 2. Problem Solving**

Problem solving is used to enhance the learners' reasoning to develop a critical thinking when providing a large language input. The students were asked to image this situation: *“Suppose that you are going to create your dream project, which steps would you follow? In order to choose your employees you have to decide between two categories of people. The first category of people has many years of experience doing projects very similar to yours but have only a high school education. The other category of people is recent university graduates that have degrees in a field closely related to your company's business, without any experience in handling projects”*. The problem is **“Which category would you choose to achieve your dream project?”**

### **3. 3. 3. Playing Cards**

The specificity of that task in this study is different from the usually used one. Students are used to make subgroups and each group select a card containing a topic and start asking questions about the topic to their friends in other groups (Kahi, 2006). In our class, we write only one key word on the blackboard and make the students infer the rest of a debating question to be discussed in class.

### **2. 3. 4. Personal Qualities**

Speaking about personal qualities is a task that enables students to speak about their own qualities and characters. Klippel (1984) has suggested a similar task proposing to write a list of adjectives on the blackboard, and asked students to classify the adjectives according to their importance and value. Similarly, the students start working individually then they discuss their choices.

### **2. 3. 5. Movie Narrating**

Film is often one of the more current and comprehensive ways to show the look, feel, and rhythm of a culture (Peterson, & Coltrane, 2003). Because we make the students narrate movies or favorite videos to the class, it will be an opportunity that promotes the learners' talk and so to determine the risk takers.

### 2. 3. 6. Story Completion

Story completion is a task that enhances the learner's imagination and creativity. We start narrating the beginning of an imaginary story, and then ask the students to complete the rest of the story having all the freedom to add characters, events, or other details.

All the tasks are very close to the students' age, interests, and needs. During every task, the researcher was busy observing the course progress, the students' participations, and the risky and inhibited learners' interactions.

## 3. Results and Interpretations

### 3. 1. Idiomatic Expressions Task Analysis

In both sessions, the students show a great motivation to learn idioms and take risks to infer their meaning. The results reveal that the students' risk taking percentage (S1 31, 70%; S2 43, 90%) is low in both sessions in comparison to that of inhibition (S1 68, 29%; S2 56, 09%). The graph below illustrates the data.

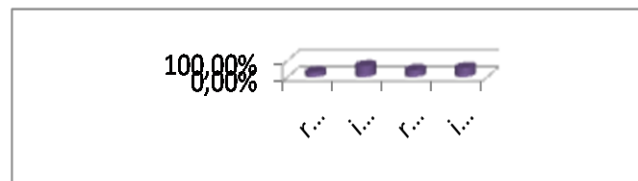


Figure 1: Students Risk Taking in the First Task

### 4. 2. Problem Solving

Problem solving is among the debatable tasks because every student tries to provide the perfect successful solution to the inquiry. We can say that such a task creates a warm discussion along the two sessions. However, the rate

of risk taking (33,33%; 42,22%) is still lower than that of inhibition (66,66%; 57,77%).

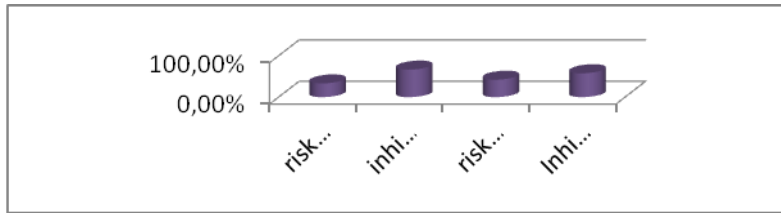


Figure 2: Students Risk Taking during the Second Task

### 3. 3. Playing Cards

We attempt to discuss two different topics. First, the students speak about “**Could students evaluate a teacher?**” then, they discuss “**Could people clothes/appearance reflect their personality/religious perspective?**” Although, the risk takers (33,33%; 46,42%) are less than the inhibited students (66,66%; 53,57%), still they could dominate the class and express their views warmly.

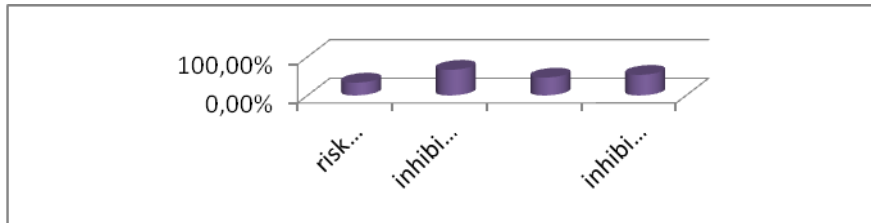


Figure 3: Students Risk Taking during the Third Task

### 3. 4. Personal Qualities

Personal qualities task is the task par excellence that enhances the students’ participation and risk taking. The students were quite motivated to speak about their characteristics, and qualities. The risk taking rate (38, 09%; 34, 11%) remains less than that of inhibition (61,90%; 65,88%), as it is shown.

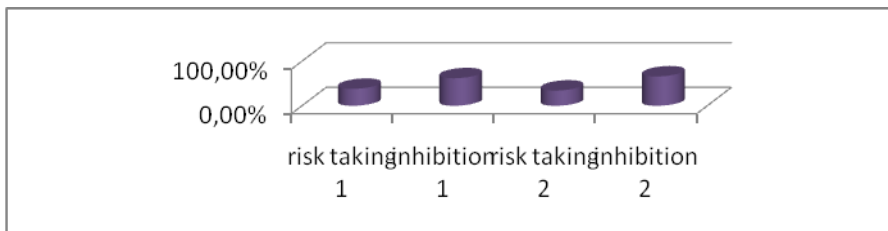
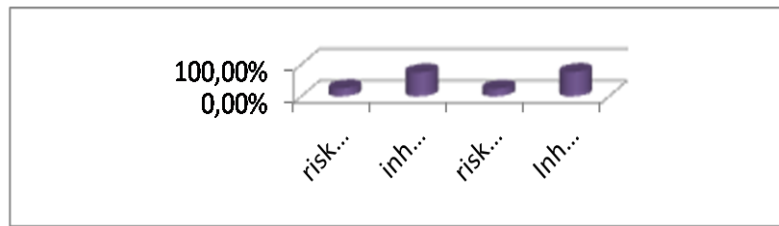


Figure 4: Students Risk Taking during the Fourth Task

3. 5. Movie Narrating

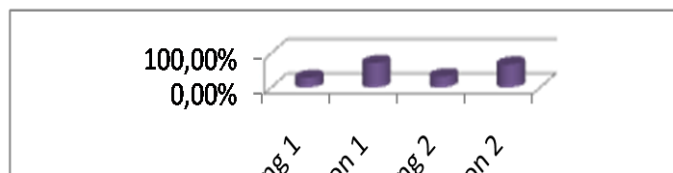


Movie narrating could not make the students motivated to tell movies they have already watched because of various movie events and lack of suitable vocabulary. Along the tow sessions, few students (25, 28%, 23,80%) try to narrate movies, however the others (74,71%, 76,19%) remain silent; as it is illustrated.

Figure 5: Students Risk Taking during the Fifth Task

3. 6. Story Completion

Unlike the previous task, story completion promotes the students' talk and imagination. In terms of rate (28, 23%; 32, 53%) of risk taking is revealed.



Whereas, it is always less than the inhibition rate (71, 76%; 67, 46%).

Figure 6: Students Risk Taking during the Sixth Task

5. Data Scoring

Specific tasks are devoted to test the students' risk taking/inhibition dimension in the Oral Expression class; a checklist is introduced to clarify who are the risk takers and how much they take risk per session. For scoring the data, we count how much the individual participates along the 12<sup>th</sup> classes; in fact, no one has contributed in all sessions. Therefore, if any student participates more than 3 or 4 times per session without any interference or ordering from the teacher he/she gets 1 i.e. an excellent contributor or risk taker should own 12 participations out of 12 classes. Accordingly, we have found that most of the good risk takers score less than 10/12. For students who have never participated in class, they normally score 0 and since this



0 could bias the calculations, we assume to give 0,5 /12. Henceforth, good risk takers may score 5 and more while inhibited ones score less than 5. As much as we believe that good participants in class are the owners of the best marks in exam, we select 2<sup>nd</sup> term grades as the 2<sup>nd</sup> part to establish correlation between risk taking and spoken English proficiency (SEP). To evaluate the students' talk, we adopt a 9-points rating scale; 2 for grammar, 2 for pronunciation, 2 for fluency, and 3 for frequency (frequency means the risk taken during exam, some students answer the questions briefly and they score less marks than those who take the risk to expand their responses and support them with further explanations and illustrations).

Finally, correlation will be measured through the Pearson correlation coefficient test that requires scores of risk taking that extend from 0,5 to 12 and SEP scores which vary from 1 to 9. Once applying the correlation test formula, the results reveal that the  $r=0,81$ ; it means that risk taking and spoken English proficiency have a very high positive correlation.

#### 4. 1. Risk Taking/Inhibition Overall Interpretation

It is evidently agreed among researchers that risk taking is a vital factor contributing in SLA proficiency; according to that respect, it is pointed out that:

“Risk taking in the manipulation of the target language and the evident desire to be linguistically creative should be promoted by teachers and actively pursued by learners. Risk-taking is an essential stage in language-learning” (Collectif, 1998, p. 99)

For that reason, it is believed that risk taking is the trait par excellence that has a positive impact on spoken English learning. It is assumed that as much as the students take risks participating in the OE class without being afraid the better they will get access to many opportunities to speak the target language. Whereas, being inhibited suggests being silent, and missing the majority of opportunities.

#### 4. 2. Risk Taking and Spoken English Proficiency Correlation

As far as correlation is concerned, it is revealed that the  $r=0,81$ . So, it is significantly proved that risk taking and SEP are positively related which means that the test confirms a **strong positive correlation**. In order to assure the results significance, it is found that the r-tabulated at 0,05 level of significance with a degree of freedom of (89) is  $r=0,20$  and the r-obtained is  $r=0,81$ . As much as the obtained  $r=0,81$  is much higher than the required  $r=0,20$ , it is proved that

the results are statistically significant. Therefore, the results are not found due to chance, and risk taking is a strong predictor for oral production success in SLA.

### **Conclusion**

It has been proved that affective factors have a major role in achieving second language proficiency. Therefore, we can say, with some evidence that risk taking as a personality variable has a vital positive impact on achieving native-like spoken English proficiency. Henceforth, the present study is not only carried out to prove the correlation of risk taking and SEP, but also to draw teachers', instructors' as well as students' attention to the efficiency of affective features if they are well controlled in classroom. To sum up, it is the teacher's job to promote risk taking in class and make learners aware of the importance of their personal qualities in achieving native-like proficiency effortlessly.

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