



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2. Issue 3., 2015 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNING AND RISK TAKING

SARATH WITHANARACHCHI SAMARANAYAKE

Shinas College of Technology, Al-Aqr, PO Box: 77, PC 324, Shinas, Sultanate of Oman.
Email Address: mailwita@yahoo.com



SARATH
WITHANARACHCHI
SAMARANAYAKE

ABSTRACT

Learning an additional language (AL) is thought to be a highly complex and difficult process since it involves a number of factors both internal and external to the learner. Current views of second language acquisition has drawn our attention to certain questions such as why AL learners achieve different levels of proficiency, what factors internal to the learners affect AL learning and how we can use our knowledge to find answers to the questions above to improve our AL teaching. In this attempt, it is necessary for us to have a clear understanding about these factors which are internal to the learners. They are generally known as individual factors such as maturational, cognitive and affective factors. A number of empirical studies has confirmed that these factors can affect L2 learners in different ways in their acquisition of L2. In this article, an attempt is made to describe and discuss how risk taking, one of the affective factors, can affect learning an additional language with specific reference to research studies undertaken to date in the domain of individual factors in SLA.

Key words: cognitive factors, affective factors, risk taking, relationship, interaction.

©KY Publications

Risk-taking has been identified as one of the important characteristics of successful learning in a second or foreign language. Because of a strong intention of achieving success on leaning something, students yearn for mastering. When it comes to ESL/EFL learning, language learners are willing to acquire new knowledge and experience from their teachers and peers spontaneously because classroom is a critical place for students' interpersonal and educational development (Pierce, 1994), but how to do this is a challenging task for them. In order to gain new experience in using a foreign language, learners are required to interact with their teachers and peers taking a risk. Although it may be impulsive and too awkward to make a mistake; a good language learner should be prepared to take the risk of being wrong to succeed in L2 acquisition. According to Brown, (2000, p. 150) "Interaction requires the risk of failing to produce intended meaning, of failing to interpret intended meaning, of being laughed at, of being shunned or rejected. The rewards, of course, are great and worth risks". Beebe also (1983, p. 39) observes that, "Every human being takes risks" Therefore, when learners learn a second/or an AL, they should be willing to gamble a bit and try out hunches about the language (Brown, 2000, p. 149).

Given the crucial role that affective factors play in language learning and teaching, it is necessary for an EFL teacher to have a broad understanding about affect them for two reasons. First, attention to affective factors can lead to more effective language learning. A second reason is that focusing attention on affect in the language classroom reaches beyond language teaching as we teach the language, we also can educate learners to live more satisfying lives and be responsible members of society (Arnold & Brown, 1998). With this background knowledge in mind, it is appropriate for me to examine the definition provided for risk-taking by Beebe (1983) below.

Beebe (1983) defines 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 line with Beebe's definition as stated above, in every EFL/ESL classroom, we find silent children who do not talk much with the teachers. Judging from their behavior, most teachers sometimes tend to come to conclusions concerning their personal traits. Labov (1969) claims that silent students operate on the assumption that anything they say can be used against them. They remain silent whenever possible or use other means to avoid answering questions. However, those silent students are often found to be talkative with their peers. Beebe (1983) elaborates that a student who believes that anything he/she says will be held against him/her is one who perceives talking in the class as a high risk-low gain proposition, while speaking with peers is a low risk-high gain situation. Answering to the question, "Why are L2 learners shy speaking a foreign or second language around peers from their own language group than around native speakers and teachers?" Beebe (1983) replies that EFL/ESL learners perceive the risk of looking foolish as greater in the presence of peers from their own community. However, when EFL/ESL learners interact with native speakers, they figure out that native speakers do not laugh at them or care about the mistakes that EFL/ESL learners are likely to make in speaking. Instead, native speakers help them by creating favorable conditions for them to communicate.

According to Beebe (1983, p. 43) though we find students who do not speak with the teacher in the classroom, we should not regard them as "nonverbal". These students tend to think that anything they say can be used against them. But they are found to be more comfortable in speech with their peers. Furthermore, they do not want to look foolish before the others. In order to support the view that Beebe has elaborated above concerning shy students, we have ample evidence from our own classrooms where we have observed this kind of behavior among some students.

Rubin (1975) outlines seven general strategies that good language learner is supposed to use when learning a second or a foreign language. However, Beebe (1983) argues that three strategies of the seven, willing to guess, willing to appear foolish in order to communicate and willing to use what knowledge they do have of the target language are related to risk taking even though Rubin (1975) states them as abilities the poor language learners need to develop. Beebe describes that willing to guess is part of risk-taking, willingness to appear foolish is willing to take a risk and willingness to use knowledge to make up new sentences is again related to risk-taking. Beebe, moreover, asserts that motivation which Rubin claims to be second crucial variable in good language learning is also related to risk-taking.

The following section will examine what research studies undertaken to date concerning the construct of risk-taking reveals and its effects on EFL/ESL learners because these factors may be helpful for linguists and EFL/ESL teachers to have a broader understanding about the relationship between additional language learning and risk-taking.

Empirical evidence of risk-taking behavior of EFL learners

In a study conducted to investigate the risk-taking behavior of university students by Ely (1986) found that the students' risk-taking behavior was a positive predictor of students' voluntary classroom participation while Beebe (1983), summing up the results of her research which was conducted with Puerto Rican third graders, has reported that there is a casual connection between interviewer ethnicity and risk-taking. She, furthermore, has observed that socio-linguistic setting is a crucial variable affecting amount of talk, amount of volunteering, and syntactic complexity. Beebe has mentioned that research shows that risk-taking and

accuracy are negatively correlated. We must therefore choose between the two. To do this, she has suggested that we should distinguish the goals of language use in different settings. If the goal is to communicate as much as possible, the error that our learners are likely to make should be tolerated because, in such a teaching context, much attention should not be paid to accuracy but if our goal is to demonstrate high grammatical accuracy on writing task, the best strategy is to avoid using difficult structures. Given the findings of her study, Beebe (1983) has concluded that children should be encouraged to be moderate risk-takers because high risk-taking can lead to the rather probability of failure.

Another study conducted with Chinese first year 547 undergraduate EFL learners by Lim and Jackson (2008) have reported that a 70-item survey has revealed that most of the students were willing to participate in interpersonal conversations, but many of them did not like to risk using/speaking English in class and more than one third of the students felt anxious in their English language classrooms because they feared being negatively evaluated and were apprehensive about public speaking and tests. Similar to Lim and Jackson's (2008) study, to investigate college students' perception towards risk-taking behavior for oral proficiency and the factors which help and or hinder the students' active risk-taking behavior in an EFL classroom, a study was conducted by Youngjoo (1999) in Korean EFL context. Based on the findings of her study, Youngjoo stated that all the participants perceived the importance of risk-taking behavior for oral proficiency in class. They responded the affective factors and socio-cultural factors contributed to regulating their risk-taking behavior. Likewise, Dehbozorgi (2012) investigated the effects of attitude towards language learning and risk-taking on EFL students' proficiency in an Iranian university and he recorded that the results showed that the relationship between proficiency level—high, middle, and low—and attitude towards language learning was not significant and the middle proficient participants were higher risk-takers. The results demonstrated differences in risk-taking between high and intermediate levels students. Moreover, there was no significant difference between high and low groups and low and middle groups. Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between attitude towards language learning and risk-taking ($r=.20$, $p < 0.05$). Besides, language proficiency and attitude towards language learning did not have a significant correlation ($r= .06$, $p > 0.05$).

Implications of risk-taking to other areas

It is assumed implications of risk-taking affect all areas including testing and general teaching methodologies. Therefore, it is evident that learners cannot be taught one strategy and asked to use it everywhere instead teachers should clarify the value of risk-taking in various communicative and testing situations in the classroom. If we consider reading, we find as indicated by Smith (1971 in Beebe, 1983, p. 60) "all aspects of reading, from identification of individual letters or words to the comprehension of entire passage, involve the reduction of uncertainty". Smith, furthermore, has stated that the more often you want to be right, the more often you must tolerate being wrong. This means that good readers are those who take risks. According to Beebe, another area which is related to risk-taking is feedback. It seems equally important that teachers should first respond to the area where the learners perceive a risk when giving feedback rather than concentrate on the evaluation of form. In other words, first, the teacher should react to the act of communicating their meaning and later should attend to the technical accuracy of their words.

What can we do to silent learners?

Taken together the theoretical, empirical and pedagogical views of the construct of risk-taking, we come to believe that silent learners who may fall behind the other active students because of their language ego and self-esteem. Therefore, EFL/ESL teachers have to encourage silent learners properly to increase their self-confidence. To this, we find the suggestions useful that Woolfolk (2001) has made in this regard. The following 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.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper contains a brief review of one of the important affective factors-risk-taking in SLA. Given the nature and impact of risk-taking as a crucial affective factor in additional language learning, it can be concluded that AL learners should be trained to take risks in their learning so that they may perceive that it is necessary for them to develop their skills through communication even though communication with others in a foreign language involves some risk-taking. The factors discussed above are not the exhaustive but they tend to help EFL/ESL teachers and linguists understand the relationship between AL language learning and risk-taking as well as their implications of this knowledge for the EFL/ESL classroom and finally, we are inclined to believe in the old adage, “nothing ventured, and nothing gained’.

REFERENCES

- Arnold, J., & Brown, H. D. (1999). A map of the terrain. In J. Arnold (Ed.). *Affect in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beebe, L.M. 1983. Risk-taking and the language learner. In H. W. Seliger&M. L. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition*. Pp (39-66). Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.
- Brown, H.D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. Addison Wesley Longman.
- Dehbozorgi, E. (2012). Effects of Attitude towards Language Learning and Risk-taking on EFL Student's Proficiency. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 2. 2.DOI: 10.5539/ijel.v2n2p41
- Ely. C. (1986). An analysis of discomfort, risktaking, sociability and motivation in the L2classroom. *Language Learning*, 36, 1-25.
- Labov, W. (1969). *The Study of Nonstandard English*. Washington, DC: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Liu, M. & Jacson, J. (2008). An Exploration of Chinese EFL Learners' Unwillingness to Communicate and Foreign Language Anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92, 71–86.doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00687.x
- Pierce, C. (1994). Importance of classroom climate for at-risk learners. *Journal of Educational Research*, 88, 37-42
- Rubin, J. (1975). What the good language learner can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly*, 9, 41-51.
- Woolfolk, H. A. (2001). Leading for learning: An educational psychologist's perspective. *UCEA: The Review*, 43(3), 1-4.
- Youngjoo, B. (1999). *Factors affecting Korean students' risk-taking behavior in EFL classroom*. (Doctoral Thesis, Ohio State University. USA).
- Retrieved from https://etd.ohiolink.edu/ap/10?0:NO:10:P10_ACCESSION_NUM:osu1243019322