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Linguistic Risk-Taking in Elementary School: Importance and Design of the Learning Environment

Abstract

This qualitative research study explores the influence of the learning environment on linguistic risk-taking among elementary school students. The study is divided into two phases. The first phase consists of developing practical ideas for the classroom based on a literature review. The second phase contains semi-structured expert interviews with two elementary school English teachers. The findings suggest that a positive classroom environment, feedback, and a positive attitude toward mistakes can support linguistic risk-taking. Furthermore, the developed practical ideas, the *English Experiment Corner* and *Tootling*, may support linguistic risk-taking among young learners. Consequently, the learning environment can contribute to promoting linguistic risk-taking in elementary school.

Diese qualitative Studie untersucht den Einfluss der Lernumgebung auf das sprachliche Risikoverhalten von Grundschüler*innen. Die Untersuchung gliedert sich in zwei Phasen. Die erste Phase umfasst die Entwicklung praxisnaher Unterrichtsideen auf Basis eines Literaturüberblicks. Die zweite Phase umfasst halbstrukturierte Expert*inneninterviews mit zwei Englischlehrkräften der Grundschule. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass eine positive Klassenraumumgebung, Feedback und eine positive Einstellung gegenüber Fehlern das sprachliche Risikoverhalten unterstützen können. Zudem können die vorgeschlagenen Praxisideen—die English Experiment Corner und Tootling—das sprachliche Risikoverhalten junger Lernender fördern. Folglich kann die Lernumgebung einen wichtigen Beitrag zur Förderung des sprachlichen Risikoverhaltens in der Grundschule leisten.

Keywords

linguistic risk-taking, learning environment, elementary school, EFL classrooms

Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT), sprachliche Risikobereitschaft, Lernumgebung, Grundschule, Englischunterricht, Englisch als Fremdsprache (EFL)

1. Introduction

Linguistic risk-taking refers to unfamiliar situations where learners must take chances when using a language, for example, ordering food in a foreign language or during a job interview (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, pp. 129–130). Opportunities for language learners to take linguistic risks are required for learning a new language (Dehbozorgi, 2012, p. 42). Since English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in German elementary schools, linguistic risk-taking should be encouraged in early EFL instruction. The classroom environment is another crucial aspect that fosters language learning (Jäger, 2020a). The

environment comprises various dimensions that can be explored in relation to their contribution to promoting Linguistic Risk-Taking among elementary school students.

Linguistic risk-taking is a relatively recent concept. While Beebe (1983) first related the idea of risk-taking to language learning, research on linguistic risk-taking started gaining popularity around 2012 (e.g., Dewaele, 2012; Dehbozorgi, 2012; Cervantes, 2013; Slavkov & Séror, 2019; Slavkov, 2020; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021). Even so, its relevance and implementation in schools—excluding universities—have not been sufficiently researched. Research on the connection between linguistic risk-taking and the elementary learning environment appears to be scarce. Therefore, the bachelor's thesis, which this article presents, aims to elaborate on the relationship between the learning environment and linguistic risk-taking, as well as to determine what the learning environment should provide to encourage linguistic risk-taking in elementary schools.

In this paper, the theoretical background on linguistic risk-taking and the classroom environment will be presented briefly first. The study will then be described. The first phase of the study involves examining the elements of the learning environment that may contribute to promoting linguistic risk-taking, as identified in the literature review, and developing practical ideas to support it. The second phase involves a semi-structured expert interview to gain insight into teachers' perspectives ($n = 2$) on the role of the learning environment in encouraging linguistic risk-taking. Following the description of the study design, the results will be presented and discussed based on categories, as well as a reflection of the study's limitations.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Linguistic Risk-Taking

When a person takes a risk, they are willing to try something unknown (Cervantes, 2013, p. 423; R. Young, 1991, p. 8). This incorporates a certain level of uncertainty concerning the action and outcome of said action, as well as the possibility of failure (Beebe, 1983, p. 39). Risk-taking may lead to a negative result, such as embarrassment or humiliation, which can then impact learners' vulnerability in other areas, including self-esteem or willingness to communicate in the new language (Cervantes, 2013, pp. 243, 423–424). Linguistic Risk-Taking is a form of risk-taking that focuses on learning and using a new language. Besides, linguistic risks are situations where language learners need to step out of their linguistic comfort zones (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129). Such situations are characterized as risky due to different possible negative consequences, like being misunderstood or making errors (Roodi & Slavkov, 2022, p. 187; Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 259). Listening and reading exercises and especially productive activities like speaking up are examples of these situations (Slavkov, 2020, p. 48; Bang, 1999, p. 64). However, conquering a linguistic risk can lead to the learner feeling a sense of accomplishment, which can result in higher language proficiency (Slavkov, 2020, p. 52). Nikolay Slavkov and his team focused on this aspect of linguistic risk-taking when developing

the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative (LRTI) at the University of Ottawa in Canada (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 255). The LRTI was created to encourage students to use their second language (English or French) beyond the classroom (Roodi & Slavkov, 2022, p. 187). It supplements language instruction with authentic, everyday challenges (Slavkov, 2020, p. 65). The initiative aims to reduce learners' anxiety and fear of failure by turning risk-taking into a positive and motivational experience (Roodi & Slavkov, 2022, p. 197; Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 260). The primary tool of the LRTI is the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport, which includes over 200 linguistic risks students can take (Slavkov, 2020, pp. 53–54; for more information on the passport, see Slavkov & Séror, 2019; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021).

Linguistic risk-taking is considered a crucial aspect of the language-learning process (Slavkov, 2020, p. 52; Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012, p. 36). According to Beebe (1983), foreign language (FL) or second language (L2) learning always includes taking risks (p. 40). A learner's ability to take linguistic risks is viewed as an essential skill for success in L2 or FL acquisition (Cervantes, 2013, p. 422; Suryani & Argawati, 2018, p. 36; Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012, p. 36). Therefore, it is essential to provide students with opportunities to take risks so successful language learning can occur (Dehbozorgi, 2012, p. 42).

2.2 Learning Environment

No single standardized definition of the elementary school classroom environment exists in the literature. Based on Wu and Wu (2008), many definitions focus on the learner's situation during the learning process (p. 213). However, the learning environment is often a "complex interrelationship of several dimensions" (Hiemstra, 1991b, p. 97). Some central aspects that contribute to the learning environment in schools are the emotional, physical, and social elements of a classroom, as well as the attitudes of the learners toward learning and the attitudes of the teacher toward errors and mistakes (Hiemstra, 1991a, p. 8; R. Young, 1991, p. 13). For this research, the classroom environment will be defined by its main dimensions: emotional aspects, attitudes towards language learning, the physical setting of the classroom, and the social situation within the classroom. Each element is specified in the following paragraphs. Moreover, in this article, the terms 'learning environment' and 'learning atmosphere' will be used interchangeably. However, it is important to note that the ideal learning environment varies depending on the individual learner (Byrne et al., 1986, p. 12).

The learning atmosphere is a significant aspect to consider when attempting to learn a language successfully (Jäger, 2020a). Ali et al. (2020) describe the EFL classroom as "an inherently face-threatening environment" (p. 318) since learners are required to constantly take risks when using the target language (TL). According to R. Young (1991), the classroom environment can foster linguistic risk-taking in young learners (p. 16). However, while it can encourage linguistic risk-taking, it can also be discouraging depending on the anticipated outcome and the creation of said environment (p. 13).

The following paragraphs will each address one of the four dimensions of the learning environment mentioned above, as well as its relevance for linguistic risk-taking. Firstly, emotional elements play an essential role in shaping the classroom environment as emotions influence our actions and the learning process (Hiemstra, 1991b, p. 94; Sambanis, 2015, p. 171). According to Sambanis (2015), positive emotions, such as enjoyment, have a facilitating effect on the learning process while negative emotions, like stress or fear, have debilitating effects (p. 172). Moreover, discomfort can lead to a decrease in risk-taking behaviors among students (Oxford, 1992, p. 38). Therefore, to promote risk-taking, the learning environment needs to be able to reduce students' anxieties and fears (Cervantes, 2013, p. 431). Some ways a teacher can minimize anxiety include providing positive encouragement, offering support, and avoiding overcorrection (Oxford, 1992, p. 36). The establishment of a positive learning environment also seems crucial (Sasan et al., 2023, p. 2922). An environment where students feel safe and comfortable is an aspect of a positive learning atmosphere. In a comfortable classroom atmosphere with emotional safety and stability, students are more willing to take risks (Ely, 1986, p. 23; R. Young, 1991, p. 16). Safe learning environments present students with opportunities to take risks without having to fear humiliation or criticism (Bialostok, 2012, p. 75). According to Dreßler (2020), students require a positive atmosphere to produce speech. In addition, students only risk their first productive language attempts in a non-restrictive and non-threatening classroom (Böttger, 2020, p. 22; Oxford, 1992, p. 38). In a study by Al-Obaydi (2020), a positive classroom environment was found to have a significant and positive effect on students' risk-taking behaviors. Furthermore, a safe learning environment presents learners with opportunities to take linguistic risks without the fear of humiliation or criticism (Bialostok, 2012, p. 75).

Another key element of the learning environment is the attitude of learners and teachers towards mistakes and errors. According to Bang (1999), students avoid taking risks due to the possibility of embarrassment when making mistakes (p. 64). Students should learn to accept making mistakes as part of the process and to view risk-taking as an essential and valuable part of language learning (Cervantes, 2013, p. 433; R. Young, 1991, p. 16). Furthermore, teachers should view errors not as failures but as indicators of the learner's competence level (Sambanis, 2015, p. 171). A teacher's positive attitude towards learners' errors can help the student learn from them and improve (Bang, 1999, p. 66). Therefore, an atmosphere in which mistakes and more than one answer are accepted further supports Linguistic Risk-Taking (Dufeu, 1994, as cited in Al-Obaydi, 2020, p. 353).

Third, the physical setting and its design are also important aspects of a child's learning environment (Hiemstra, 1991b, p. 94). According to Smith et al. (1978, as cited in Wu & Wu, 2008, p. 213), the physical setting in a classroom consists of the architecture, the structure, and the arrangement of the classroom. According to Al-Obaydi (2020), the physical layout contains pictures, equipment, and organization among other elements (p. 360). Grubaugh and Houston (1990) assert that the design of the classroom

setting is a helpful tool for creating an effective learning environment (p. 376). For instance, the students should perceive their classroom as friendly and aesthetically pleasing (Stadler-Altmann, 2016, p. 55). Due to the physical layout of a classroom being part of a positive learning environment, which was mentioned above as promoting linguistic risk-taking, it also plays a significant role in promoting and encouraging linguistic risk-taking (Al-Obaydi, 2020, p. 360). Suppose the physical space is created away from the direct watch of the teachers or other classmates. In that case, learners are more likely to experiment with the language, which is an important aspect of Linguistic Risk-Taking (Dewaele, 2012, p. 599).

The relationships and interactions between peers and between a student and the teacher, as well as the role of the teacher, belong to the fourth and last dimension of the classroom, the social dimension (Smith et al., 1978, as cited in Wu & Wu, 2008, p. 213). It is essential to foster relationships in EFL classrooms because a learner requires an emotionally positive relationship with their peers and the teacher to build the courage to take linguistic risks in the FL (Gledhill & Morgan, 2000, as cited in Cervantes, 2013, pp. 432–433). Jäger (2020a) also claims that students need an atmosphere of respect and kindness to have enough courage to test out the FL. According to R. Young (1991), the teacher plays a crucial role in creating the desired classroom environment (p. 13). It is the instructor's responsibility to create a learning atmosphere where the students feel safe enough to take risks (Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012, pp. 36–37). A teacher can achieve this by giving positive encouragement, being patient, and reinforcing positive behaviors (Bang, 1999, p. 64; Oxford, 1992, p. 360). Additionally, the teacher can support learners when they are feeling anxious (Oxford, 1992, p. 38).

3. The Study

3.1 Research Questions

This study aimed to investigate the importance of the learning environment in elementary schools in relation to linguistic risk-taking in EFL classes. Furthermore, the study intended to outline potential pedagogical implications for teachers when implementing linguistic risk-taking into their EFL classrooms. Therefore, the following research questions will be addressed:

RQ1: How can the classroom environment support linguistic risk-taking in elementary school?

RQ2: What aspects of the classroom environment can play a role in supporting linguistic risk-taking among elementary school students learning English as a foreign language?

3.2 Study Design

The study was divided into two interconnected phases, with each phase contributing to answering the research questions. The first phase focuses on examining elements of the learning environment supporting linguistic risk-taking and adapting practical ideas based on the theoretical background and existing literature on linguistic risk-taking in classrooms. In the second phase, teachers' evaluations of the practical ideas and other aspects of the learning environment that might contribute to supporting linguistic risk-taking were explored through semi-structured interviews.

Phase 1:

The goal of phase one was to provide an initial attempt at answering the research questions by adapting practical concepts from existing theoretical research. First, relevant literature on linguistic risk-taking as well as on the learning environment in English elementary school pedagogy was reviewed (cf. 2). The sources were selected based on possible connections between these topics. It is important to note that little literature exists regarding elementary school risk-taking. The customized practical ideas, with a focus on the classroom environment, include the English Experiment Corner, Foreign Language Consultation Hours, Tootling, Icebreakers, and Mindfulness Activities. Due to space limitations, two of the five ideas have been selected as examples in this paper. The English Experiment Corner and Tootling were chosen as they are particularly representative of the research interest and resulted in a higher amount of data in phase two.

English Experiment Corner

The English Experiment Corner is a comfortable corner of the physical classroom setting, where students can engage with the English language. The focus in an English classroom should be on experiencing and using the FL (Böttger, 2020, p. 79). However, the language classroom can be an intimidating place for students to try out a new language and take linguistic risks (Ali et al., 2020, p. 318). Therefore, the goal of the English Experiment Corner is to give students a safe space to experiment with the TL. MacDonald and Thompson (2019) created a similar concept, called the yellow sofa, where students can "practice speaking English in a casual way with teachers and other students" (p. 424). Both ideas encourage the learners to use the target language actively. Moreover, they allow students to take learning into their own hands and independently decide what they want to work on or discuss. However, while the yellow sofa focuses primarily on speaking, the English Experiment Corner also provides different materials to work with. The English Experiment Corner should be structured with various materials, for example, English books, games, or picture dictionaries, to enable students to learn independently, in pairs, or in small groups. The exact design of the corner may vary depending on the learners and the classroom.

The English Experiment Corner offers several advantages, particularly in fostering linguistic risk-taking. First, the corner provides the opportunity for both individualization and differentiation (Glombik, 2020). Children's needs and interests are different depending on the learner (Böttger, 2020, p. 74). Differentiation refers to the adaptation of the activities and materials to the individual class and learner to provide each student with individualized and optimized language learning opportunities (pp. 74, 87). Since a wide variety of materials can be incorporated into the English Experiment Corner, it can support differentiation in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, R. Young (1991) states that material with different difficulty levels, which is also a factor of differentiation, could promote risk-taking among learners (p. 20). Individualization, on the other hand, focuses more on how the learner engages with said material (Böttger, 2020, p. 138). The English Experiment Corner offers students a variety of choices due to the different materials it provides. According to Alloul et al. (2023), choice is known to be a strong motivator (p. 5). In the context of linguistic risk-taking, allowing students to choose what and how they learn in EFL class empowers them to experiment more with the language and take more linguistic risks (p. 5).

Another critical factor in promoting linguistic risk-taking is the availability of safe and low-pressure opportunities to use the FL (Cervantes, 2013, p. 431; Bialostok, 2012, p. 75). In elementary school English lessons, it is crucial to give students enough opportunities to use the TL because, especially in the German context, there are few naturally occurring opportunities to use English in and outside of the classroom (Frisch, 2017, p. 63). However, English lessons often lack the opportunities to use the FL (Böttger, 2020, p. 38). The English Experiment Corner may offer one of these opportunities where students can experiment with the language. The corner could be implemented in various ways. It can be incorporated into station learning or accessed when learners finish regular tasks. Some schools also have free learning periods in which learners can choose what they would like to work on. Such arrangements provide learners with additional spaces to take risks with the language. Learners are also more willing to take risks and use the FL if they can do so without their peers or the teacher listening (Dewaele, 2012, p. 599). Research has shown that classroom anxiety rises when learners have to speak the TL in front of others because their performance is being closely monitored and they have little control over the interaction (D. J. Young, 1991, p. 429; Liu & Jackson, 2008, p. 72). The English Experiment Corner addresses this issue by giving students opportunities to practice the TL in a semi-private environment. This may then lead to higher comfort with taking linguistic risks and then using the language in more public classroom situations.

Lastly, the English Experiment Corner can heighten learners' motivation to learn a FL, which in turn may enhance their willingness to take linguistic risks. For one, authentic material implemented in the corner can make learning English in elementary school more motivating (Böttger, 2020, p. 77). Authentic means that the materials chosen are used in everyday life in the target language, such as picture books or magazines

(Jäger, 2020a). Working with authentic material may reduce the inhibition students have to pronounce new words (Böttger, 2020, p. 79). This is related to linguistic risk-taking, as pronouncing new words can be seen as a risk by some learners. Moreover, it can increase confidence when learning a language, which can then support motivation to take risks in the FL (p. 79). Consequently, the English Experiment Corner is a practical idea that creates a motivating and safe environment where learners can engage in linguistic risk-taking, thereby promoting it in EFL classrooms.

Tootling

The concept of Tootling is a further approach to support linguistic risk-taking in elementary school. Tootling was initially developed by Skinner et al. (1998, as cited by Skinner et al., 2000) in the USA as a behavioral intervention and is defined as "reporting peers' prosocial behavior" (p. 265). The term was created by combining the words 'tattling' and 'tooting your own horn' (Skinner et al., 2000, p. 265). However, the goal of Tootling is not to toot one's own horn but rather to report a classmate's positive behavior (p. 265). Students report positive behavior of a classmate by writing down "who, did what, for whom" on an index card (Skinner et al., 2000, p. 266). The behaviors noted on the index cards are then praised and reflected upon by the entire class (Skinner et al., 2000, p. 266). Hintz et al. (2014) adapted the concept to the German educational context. They provide the option to have the learners fill out a Tootle-Ticket (Hintz et al., 2014, p. 441). They further illustrate how Tootling can be implemented within lessons (pp. 441–443).

Tootling presents a way to improve the social interaction between peers in the classroom. According to Böttger (2020), positive interactions between students and their peers as well as their teachers facilitate learning a new language (p. 22). For this, every class member must be valued and respected (Al-Obaydi, 2020, p. 358). In such a learning environment, learners are more willing to speak and experiment with the TL, which leads to increased risk-taking behaviors (Jäger, 2020b; R. Young, 1991, p. 20). Tootling provides a way for students to value and support each other by praising another classmate when filling out a ticket. Ali et al. (2020) claim that a supportive peer group is another essential part of successful learning (p. 318). Therefore, Tootling is, on the one hand, a pedagogical concept that can indirectly support linguistic risk-taking by fostering positive relationships in the classroom, creating an environment in which learners feel safe enough to take risks.

On the other hand, Tootling can be used to directly foster linguistic risk-taking by acknowledging and valuing linguistic risks completed by classmates. While Skinner et al. (2000) and Hintz et al. (2014) implemented Tootling in a more general sense of fostering positive behaviors in class, the concept can also be refined to concentrate on specific linguistic efforts in EFL classrooms. Such efforts may involve attempting new words or answering a question in English. When learners experience positive feedback

on their risk attempts, they are more willing to try new linguistic risks (Bang, 1999, p. 64).

Phase 2:
In the second phase of the study, semi-structured expert interviews were conducted to gain insight into the perspectives of teachers on the impact of the learning environment on linguistic risk-taking. Their assessment of the practical ideas developed in phase one was also of interest. Qualitative interviews provide the opportunity to capture the perspectives of the participants (Herzmann & König, 2023, p. 24). For the study, two participants were specifically chosen due to the large amount of data that results from qualitative research (Bortz & Döring, 2016, p. 26). Since English in elementary schools is a key aspect of the study, both participants were elementary school teachers who teach English. According to the definition of expert interviews, professionals on a specific topic need to be interviewed (Bortz & Döring, 2016, p. 375). The expertise of the interviewee can be determined by their work experience, current job, or their qualifications (p. 375). For this study, the expertise of the participants was measured by their level of work experience. As the first teacher (T1) had 22.5 years of work experience and the second teacher (T2) had 13 years of work experience, both could be seen as experts in their knowledge of school topics.

According to Roos and Leutwyler (2017), qualitative interviews allow for more openness when it comes to the answers than quantitative methods (pp. 226–227). Furthermore, a semi-structured interview form was chosen because it brings more freedom than fully structured interviews (Bortz & Döring, 2016, p. 372). The interviewer can adjust the questions and adapt to the interview situation, allowing the interviewee more freedom when answering (p. 372). Moreover, it allows for a deeper exploration of the interviewees' subjective views and the connections (Roos & Leutwyler, 2017, p. 230). A semi-structured interview is based on an interview guide prepared by the interviewer beforehand (Herzmann & König, 2023, p. 51). The interview guide was developed based on the literature review, with particular attention to the practical concepts and the interplay between linguistic risk-taking and the learning environment (Herzmann & König, 2023, p. 47). For this study, the guide was structured with an introduction to the topic, explaining linguistic risk-taking and the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative, followed by questions about the teachers' work experience. The following questions examined how the learning environment influences linguistic risk-taking and how it can support linguistic risk-taking through practical ideas in elementary EFL classrooms. Subsequently, the interviews were carried out by the author. With informed consent from the participants, the interviews were recorded for later anonymization and analysis.

For the analysis, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, p. 42) according to the extended content-semantic transcription by Dresing and Pehl (2018, pp. 21–25) due to the focus on the semantic content of

the interviewees' answers. Any personal information was anonymized during the transcribing process (Herzmann & König, 2023, p. 68).

The transcribed interviews were then analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). This method can systematically structure and condense large amounts of qualitative material, such as lengthy interview transcripts, and helps filter out relevant information (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, p. 42; Roos & Leutwyler, 2017, p. 294). The first step of the analysis was the creation of deductive main categories based on the interview guide (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, p. 76). This was followed by initial text work (pp. 132–133), where the transcripts were carefully read, and text passages that were relevant for the research questions were marked. Building on this, the inductive categories were developed from the data (p. 76). Therefore, the initial main categories were formed using a deductive-inductive approach (pp. 133–134). These categories were then edited, sorted, and condensed with the help of the material. The third step involved the first coding phase, utilizing the existing categories (p. 134). During this phase, the coding manual was developed, incorporating category definitions, coding rules, and prototypical examples derived from the transcripts. Then, the second coding phase followed, where the material was coded again as per the revised coding manual (pp. 142–143). This resulted in the final coded material and the final coding manual, which comprised 14 categories in total. Lastly, the categories were discussed in relation to the research questions and the theoretical background.

3.3 Results and Discussion

The results of the qualitative content analysis will be presented based on the categories (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 148–149). Since a detailed discussion of all 14 categories (see Tab. 1) exceeds the scope of this publication, only five categories will be presented (Subcategory 1.1, Subcategory 3.2, Category 4, Category 7, and Category 10). These were chosen based on the selected practical ideas and their relevance to the research questions.

Category 1	emotional aspects of the learning environment that support linguistic risk-taking
Subcategory 1.1	a safe and comfortable classroom where students feel appreciated and respected
Subcategory 1.2	motivation and experiences of success
Category 2	offers of assistance to support linguistic risk-taking
Category 3	social aspects of the learning environment that support linguistic risk-taking
Subcategory 3.1	relationship and interaction between peers
Subcategory 3.2	attitude towards mistakes and errors

Category 4	feedback that supports linguistic risk-taking
Category 5	other practical ideas to support linguistic risk-taking in the EFL classroom
Category 6	material for the English Experiment Corner
Category 7	advantages of the English Experiment Corner
Category 8	challenges regarding the *English Experiment Corner*
Subcategory 8.1	spatial and temporal capacity
Subcategory 8.2	difficulties for reserved students
Category 9	challenges regarding Foreign Language Consultation Hours
Category 10	implementation of *Tootling* and *Tootle-Tickets*
Category 11	use and effect of icebreakers in EFL lessons
Category 12	class discipline as a challenge regarding icebreakers in the EFL classroom
Category 13	use and effect of mindfulness activities in the EFL classroom
Category 14	challenges regarding mindfulness activities in the EFL classroom

Tab. 1: Overview of all the generated categories

Subcategory 1.1: a safe and comfortable classroom where students feel appreciated and respected

> Ähm und dann eben der emotionale Raum, der mir Sicherheit gibt, der mir Vertrautheit gibt, ähm wo ich mich wohlfühle (.) Risiken einzugehen. (T1, 95–96)
>
> Uhm and then well the emotional space that gives me security, that gives me familiarity, um where I feel comfortable (.) taking risks. (T1, 95–96)

This subcategory contains comments on the importance of a safe and comfortable learning environment to foster linguistic risk-taking. A positive learning environment where students feel safe and comfortable is a relevant emotional condition for linguistic risk-taking to occur (T1, 88–89.; 95–96; Sasan et al., 2023, p. 2922). The interviewed teachers stated that appreciative and respectful communication may be crucial in enabling learners to take linguistic risks (e.g., T1, 105–107; T2, 215). Every linguistic attempt by the student should be valued and appreciated (T1, 125–130). This could, for example, be done with the help of the *Tootle-Tickets* (cf. 3.2). Furthermore, according to Al-Obaydi (2020), a positive classroom atmosphere and an atmosphere of acceptance may have positive effects on learners' risk-taking in the classroom (p. 353).

Subcategory 3.2: attitude towards mistakes and errors

> Da wo ich mich nicht traue Fehler zu machen, ob es jetzt eine Sprache ist oder ob es Mathe ist oder was auch immer, ähm da gehe ich keinen Schritt weiter. Ähm also das brauche ich für jeden Lernzuwachs brauche ich eine Lernatmosphäre, in der klar ist, ‚Ich darf Fehler machen. Aus Fehlern lerne ich. Fehler sind Lernbegleiter.'. (T1, 102–105)

> There where I do not dare to make mistakes, whether it is a language or it is math or whatever, uhm there I do not go another step. Uhm also I need that for every learning progress I need a learning atmosphere, where it is clear, 'I can make mistakes. I learn from mistakes. Mistakes are learning companions.'. (T1, 102–105)

The focus of this subcategory is on comments concerning the necessity for a positive attitude towards mistakes in the EFL classroom. Both teachers mentioned such a need, particularly in relation to linguistic risk-taking (T1, 102–105; T2, 242–244). Learning and risk-taking can only occur if the learners accept that errors are a vital part of the learning process (T1, 102–105; R. Young, 1991, p. 16). Moreover, one teacher also stated that the focus should be on trying out the language and therefore the process rather than on achieving an error-free product (T2, 470–476). Such a process-oriented perspective may normalize mistakes, which can then create an environment in which learners feel safer attempting unfamiliar linguistic structures.

Category 4: feedback that supports linguistic risk-taking

> Denken wir mal da ähm, ich würde das Kind NICHT loben, ich würde dem Kind NICHT Mut machen. Das würde immer weiter versinken in ‚Ich kann doch gar nichts und ich trau mich nicht.'. Also das wäre ähm ein Dolchstoß, wenn ich das NICHT machen würde. Ähm das muss ich machen. Und ähm das zeigt auch sehr sehr große Wirkung. (.) Ähm das ist ganz klar. Also ohne meine / meine (.) positive Verstärkung bremse ich ein zögerliches Kind aus. [...] Aber die Kinder, die zögerlich sind, (.) die muss ich mithilfe von positiver Verstärkung anschieben. (T1, 444–451)

> Let us think uhm, I would NOT praise the child, I would NOT encourage the child. It would sink more and more into 'I cannot do anything anyway and I do not dare.'. Also that would be uhm a stab in the back if I did NOT do that. Uhm I need to do that. And uhm it also shows a really really big effect. (.) Uhm that is really clear. Also without my / my (.) positive reinforcement I would hold a hesitant child back. [...] But the children that are hesitant, (.) those I need to push with positive reinforcement. (T1, 444–451)

This category includes the teachers' comments on which types of feedback are significant when promoting Linguistic Risk-Taking in the learning environment. For instance, both teachers mentioned the importance of positive feedback and encouragement, particularly for hesitant or less confident learners (T1, 444–452; T2, 241–242). On the one hand, students can give each other positive feedback, for example, with the help of *Tootling*. On the other hand, teachers can offer learners positive encouragement. Bang (1999) also claims that positive reinforcement is needed for students to take risks (p. 64). A student's inhibition to take risks may increase if the teacher does not praise the student, especially if said student is reserved (T1, 444–452). Additionally, it is mentioned that a teacher should give corrective feedback indirectly to avoid discouraging the learner, which could lead to an unwillingness to try again (T2, 215–228, 244–245).

Category 7: advantages of the *English Experiment Corner* regarding Linguistic Risk-Taking

> Der [Sprechanlass] kommt ja dann von innen und nicht, weil ich sage ‚Du sollst jetzt einen Wetterbericht machen.', ähm sondern weil die da Lust drauf haben. (.) Und ähm ich glaube

> schon, dass das ähm (..) die Motivation ähm hebt und ähm einfach für / für eine deutliche Menge an / also größere Menge an Sprechanlässen ähm ähm fördert oder ähm ja bringt. (T1, 371–375)
>
> This [speaking prompt] then comes from within and not because I say 'You must now make a weather report.' uhm but because they are in the mood for it. (.) And uhm I really think that this uhm (..) heightens uhm the motivation and uhm simply for / for a considerable amount of / fosters uhm considerable amount of conversation starters uhm or uhm yes brings them. (T1, 371–375)

Category 7 focuses on the advantages that the *English Experiment Corner* may present regarding linguistic risk-taking, as stated by the teachers. The first advantage mentioned is that the corner and specifically the use of authentic materials within the corner can stimulate conversation and speaking, which is often the focus when researching linguistic risk-taking (Cervantes, 2013, p. 422; T1, 297–300). Böttger (2020) agrees by stating that authentic material can reduce the hesitation to speak a new language and thereby make it easier to take linguistic risks (p. 79). A further advantage is that the *English Experiment Corner* may increase the motivation to speak due to the corner being out of the teacher's focus (T2, 379–382). Learners are more willing to take risks if the teacher is not listening (Dewaele, 2012, p. 599). Since an increased motivation is frequently associated with higher risk-taking (Bang, 1999, p. 61), this aspect of the corner appears relevant. Motivation to speak can also be increased since students can choose what they want to work on (T2, 339–342). According to Alloul et al. (2023), choice is a significant factor in raising motivation and may lead to higher risk-taking (p. 5). Hence, the corner provides individualization and differentiation potential. Students can use the corner when they have already finished their assignment to experiment further with the language during lessons in a low-pressure context (T1, 315–320; T2, 271–273).

In summary, the *English Experiment Corner* may be suitable to foster linguistic risk-taking in elementary school EFL classrooms by creating an environment where learners feel more inclined to take linguistic risks. Although implementing this into classroom practice may also present challenges, such as space or time problems, these will not be addressed in this article due to space constraints. Nevertheless, they remain important considerations.

Category 10: implementation of Tootling and Tootle-Tickets

> Ähm bei ja Intervention dieser Art ist es immer so, dass es ein bisschen darauf ankommt, was daraus erwächst, ne? Ähm mit Sicherheit, wenn man es am Anfang vorstellt, wird es vermutlich sehr gehypt werden. (.) Und ähm dann ist (unv.) immer so ein bisschen die Frage, was / was kommt / was wird daraus, so, ne, wenn diese Wand einfach nur kommentarlos in der Klasse hängt, ähm dann wird sich das relativ schnell abnutzen. Wenn das ähm in irgendeiner Weise ähm ja gemeinsam reflektiert wird, zum Beispiel im Klassenrat, der im besten Fall wöchentlich stattfindet oder so, ähm und eben die Kinder dann auch mal ja für etwas positiv gewertschätzt werden, das nicht mit Fachkompetenz einhergehen muss, ähm dann ist das mit Sicherheit etwas, was nachhaltig auch gerne genutzt wird, (.) denk ich. (T2, 541–549)

> Uhm with yes interventions of this kind it is always so that it somewhat depends on what grows out of it, right? Uhm with certainty, when one imagines it in the beginning, it would probably be very hyped. (.) And uhm then is (unintelligible) always somewhat the question, what / what comes / what will come of it, so, right, when this wall just hangs without comments in the class, uhm then it will wear out relatively quickly. When it uhm in some way uhm yes is reflected together, for example in class council, which occurs in the best case weekly or so, uhm and the children then sometimes also are positively appreciated for something that does not have to go together with subject-specific competence, uhm then it is with certainty something that will sustainably be often used, (.) I think. (T2, 541–549)

This category contains comments on the use and implementation of *Tootling* in elementary school and EFL classrooms. In general, *Tootling* as a pedagogical concept for elementary school was received positively by the teachers (T1, 533–536; T2, 524–525). According to the teachers, the idea was already implemented in their classes in some form. Teacher 1 described using pictograms that a student can give to another learner while providing positive feedback (T1, 486–492). Teacher 2 talked about a "Wall of Good Deeds" (*Gute-Taten-Wand*) where learners can hang positive feedback on a specific wall in the classroom (T2, 510–512). As mentioned above (cf. 3.2), the tickets could also be used to praise linguistic risks that other classmates take. However, one teacher mentioned that using tickets in an EFL class may be challenging. This is because students may be too preoccupied with themselves while learning a new language to notice the positive behaviors or linguistic risks exhibited by other students (T1, 507–511). Moreover, using *Tootle-Tickets* may pull learners out of the English-speaking world (T1, 511–523). Skinner et al. (2000) state that the use of the tickets decreased without reinforcements. The interviewed teachers also claimed that students should be reminded of the tickets so that they can use them consistently (T1, 547–553; T2, 541–549).

In conclusion, *Tootling* has the potential to foster linguistic risk-taking by improving the social dimension of the learning environment and positively reinforcing linguistic risks. Nonetheless, its implementation in EFL classes should be carefully considered. Moreover, the thesis does not elaborate on the concrete implementation of *Tootling* or how learners might be guided to identify relevant behaviors or linguistic risks. This omission reflects the exploratory character of the study, which prioritized collecting initial ideas and teachers' perspectives regarding their potential to support linguistic risk-taking, rather than a detailed design or testing of specific classroom interventions. This gap highlights the opportunity for further research. Nevertheless, Hintz et al. (2014) offer an example of how *Tootling* could be implemented in school contexts.

4. Conclusion

This article explored the role of the learning environment in supporting linguistic risk-taking among elementary school students. The initial phase of the study involved researching the elements of the learning environment that may be relevant to linguistic risk-taking, as identified in existing literature. Based on said literature, practical ideas

were adapted to promote linguistic risk-taking in elementary schools. One approach is an *English Experiment Corner* in the EFL classroom where students can independently practice and engage with the TL (cf. 3.2). Furthermore, *Tootling* is a concept that enables students to praise their peers for exhibiting positive behavior and taking linguistic risks (cf. 3.2). The second study phase consisted of two semi-structured expert interviews to gain qualitative insight into the perceptions of English teachers on the role of the classroom environment in promoting linguistic risk-taking and on the practical ideas that had been developed to improve the learning environment.

The findings underline that the learning environment may influence the level of linguistic risk-taking. A respectful atmosphere, positive attitudes towards errors, and a supportive relationship between classmates are factors that may empower learners to experiment with the FL and take linguistic risks. The *English Experiment Corner* and *Tootling* illustrate potential ways to implement these factors into classroom practice. The *English Experiment Corner* offers advantages such as conversation stimulation, increased motivation, and differentiation, which may promote opportunities to practice the language in a safe environment. *Tootling* is a concept already implemented in some form in elementary schools (cf. 3.3), which fosters linguistic risk-taking indirectly by fostering positive relationships among students and a supportive classroom climate. *Tootling* can, however, also be used to reinforce the linguistic risks taken by the learners positively. Therefore, these two practical ideas can be helpful when supporting linguistic risk-taking. Although both ideas appear promising, they may come with challenges, so their implementation requires careful consideration and further testing.

As this article presents a condensed version of a bachelor's thesis with several limitations, the findings should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalized. Since the study was conducted as a thesis, the time and resource limitations restricted the number of participants and the extent of the data collection and analysis. Especially the small sample size of two participants in phase two limits the range of perspectives represented. Furthermore, the project was designed as an exploratory study rather than a fully developed empirical study. Additionally, the practical ideas were not tested in classroom practice, so the results of their actual effect are hypothetical. The interviews revealed potential challenges in implementing the concepts, including spatial and temporal issues with the *English Experiment Corner,* as well as the sustainability of the *Tootle-Tickets*. Further research is necessary to explore the viability and applicability of the practical concepts as well as the role of the learning environment regarding linguistic risk-taking.

While the study provides initial insights into the interplay between the learning environment and linguistic risk-taking, its findings should be understood as indicative rather than conclusive. However, this study suggests that the learning environment may contribute to supporting linguistic risk-taking in elementary EFL classrooms and has furthermore provided an initial evaluation of the modified practical concepts.

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