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Linguistic Risk-Taking in Elementary School: Exploring the Children's Perspective through Semi-Structured Interviews

Abstract

This paper examines the communicative challenges (linguistic risks) that young learners (YL) encounter in daily life and the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, where their second language (L2) skills are developed. A literature review identified potential linguistic risks in the English classroom and supportive factors. Semi-structured interviews with five 4th graders were conducted and analyzed using qualitative content analysis to determine students' perceived linguistic risks in school and everyday life, and what may help them manage these risks. The results suggest that YL associate linguistic risks with English class (speaking, comprehension) and that various factors may support students (peer group, teacher, learning strategies). These factors, as well as the risks themselves, are influenced by the context, including the interlocutors, the situation, and the physical location. Data analysis led to preliminary hypotheses for Linguistic Risk-Taking with YL in early English language teaching.

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die kommunikativen Herausforderungen (sprachlichen Risiken), denen junge Lernende im Alltag und im Englischunterricht als Fremdsprache begegnen. Ein Literaturüberblick identifizierte zunächst potenzielle sprachliche Risiken im Englischunterricht sowie unterstützende Faktoren. Es wurden sodann halbstrukturierte Interviews mit fünf Viertklässler*innen durchgeführt und mittels qualitativer Inhaltsanalyse ausgewertet. Ziel war es, die sprachlichen Risiken in Schule und Alltag zu erfassen und zu verstehen, welche Faktoren den Lernenden helfen können, diese Risiken zu bewältigen. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass junge Lernende sprachliche Risiken mit dem Englischunterricht (Sprechen, Verstehen) verbinden und dass verschiedene Faktoren die Lernenden unterstützen können (Peers, Lehrkraft, Lernstrategien). Sowohl diese Faktoren als auch die Risiken selbst werden durch den Kontext beeinflusst, einschließlich der Gesprächspartner, der Situation und des physischen Ortes. Die Datenanalyse führte zu ersten Hypothesen in Bezug auf Linguistic Risk-Taking bei jungen Lernenden im frühen Englischunterricht.

Keywords

Linguistic Risk-Taking, elementary school, early ELT, EFL classroom, young language learners

Linguistic Risk-Taking (*LRT*), sprachliche Risikobereitschaft, Grundschulenglisch, früher Englischunterricht, Englisch als Fremdsprache, junge Lernende

1. Introduction

In our globalized and multilingual world, the importance of learning an additional language to be able to communicate with people worldwide in person as well as through digital media becomes apparent (Kolb & Schocker, 2021, pp. 15, 24). Trying out acquired language skills in an L2 by engaging in communicative situations (referring to all communicative skills) entails some kind of risk (Cervantes, 2013, p. 422; Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 257) but also exposes learners to new language input, provides opportunities to improve their skills and builds confidence in using the language (Slavkov, 2020, p. 49). Griffiths and Slavkov (2021, p. 129) define a *linguistic risk* as "an authentic, autonomous communicative act where learners are pushed out of their linguistic and cultural comfort zone". When appropriately scaffolded, risk-taking can be used as a language learning tool (Cervantes, 2013, pp. 424, 427). Often, students learn an L2 in school but may not feel capable of speaking it outside of the classroom. Scholars at the University of Ottawa designed a tool (*Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport*) that aims at giving students support and opportunities to engage in authentic language use in their daily life (Slavkov, 2020, pp. 49, 53).

YL begin elementary school with different preconditions and altogether form a heterogenous learning group (Kolb & Schocker, 2021, p. 25). During elementary school, students become more autonomous due to their cognitive development and their ability to read and write (Kolb & Schocker, 2021, p. 20), and they begin to learn an L2. Therefore, in this paper, it is assumed that YL may already encounter situations in school or their everyday life that pose linguistic risks to them. Further motivation for this study comes from the idea that Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT) holds pedagogical potential. Tools like the LRT passport, proposed by scholars at the University of Ottawa (e.g., Slavkov & Séror, 2019), can first help YL become more aware of linguistically challenging situations. In a second step, such tools support the development of initial strategies to address those challenges. This may also foster awareness of the positive aspects of LRT, such as learning opportunities and the pride in overcoming fears. Before such a language learning tool can be developed, YL perception on linguistic risks needs to be explored.

The present study was conducted as part of a master's thesis[1] at the University of Cologne with the aim to gain first insights of what students categorize as linguistic risks in school and in their daily lives as well as what may help them deal with linguistic risks. To answer these research questions, the perspectives of five 4th graders were explored with the help of semi-structured interviews. The results are summarized in this article. After shortly describing the construct of Linguistic Risk-Taking, the methodology of the present study is explained. Then, selected results are presented, first hypotheses proposed and finally discussed with respect to the initial research questions.

[1] Parts of this article are taken from the master's thesis.

2. Theoretical Background

Linguistic risks arise when learners engage in L2 activities that they would typically avoid due to a perceived lack of experience or language or cultural skills (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129). While students may prefer the comfort of their L1 (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129), taking linguistic risks can foster learners' confidence and raise their overall well-being. These positive emotions may be conducive to learning and can enhance students' language skills in the target language when linguistic risks are taken frequently (Slavkov, 2020, p. 52; Cervantes, 2013, p. 424). Identifying a situation as risky is highly individual (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129) but as risk-taking always holds the possibility of failure (Cervantes, 2013, p. 423), learners should not be encouraged to take extreme or reckless risks (Oxford, 1992, p. 38). They should rather develop an understanding of *healthy* risk-taking (Cervantes, 2013, p. 433). In this article, it is assumed that linguistically challenging situations may occur in any language a learner speaks (e.g., it can also feel risky to give a talk to a large group of people even if one uses their L1) (see also Schick & Rohde, 2025, pp. 253–254).

Publications on the concept of Linguistic Risk-Taking and its pedagogical implications exist (e.g., Ely, 1986; Cervantes, 2013), but are still limited (Slavkov, 2020, p. 52). Scholars at the University of Ottawa (the largest English-French bilingual university in the world) have created the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport with about 80 risks (e.g., asking somebody for directions, ordering a coffee, sending an email) (Slavkov, 2020, p. 53) that emboldens students to use the opportunities on the bilingual campus to practice their L2 in an authentic context (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 259). First studies report an overall positive experience and perceived increase of using the TL as a result of participating in the project (e.g., Slavkov, 2020; Rhéaume et al., 2021). There are attempts to use such a passport in elementary schools in Canada by adapting it to the age and needs of YL (Slavkov, 2023, p. 52). Thus, risks may be using one's L2 to ask somebody for help, to look at a book or to play with a toy (OLBI & LEARN, 2023, pp. 6–19)[2]. Before using the passport, students are introduced to risk-taking with the help of activities (e.g., setting goals, taking part in role plays). While using the passport, learners are supported with daily reminders, discussions and reflections (e.g., morning routine) (SPEAQ & LEARN 2023, pp. 7–9).[3] Still, research is needed to evaluate the passport and its effects on YL as well as its adaptability in different contexts, e.g., in the German school setting. In this regard, it is crucial to consider that the L2 (English or French) is widely spoken in this environment, which makes the context different from learning English as a foreign language in German elementary schools.

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[2] For a more detailed overview of the passport see OLBI & LEARN (2023), https://drive.google.com/file/d/19XrFfzl5RNexnkGSr9Ka5lq8_rdoNS25/view [03.03.2025]

[3] For a more detailed overview of the implementation see SPEAQ & LEARN (2023), https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fwvfuMd6VaXvSxQuRr0MKXi2jgKs6KFn/view [03.03.2025]

In English classes, one aim is to take all the different learners' needs, interests and abilities into account and to connect those with the learning requirements of the curriculum (MSB NRW, 2021, p. 37). To actively involve students in the learning process and to address heterogeneity, ELT scholars recommend using tasks (*Task-Based Language Learning*) (Elsner, 2015, pp. 18–19; Kolb & Schocker, 2021, p. 25). Among other advantages, tasks offer multiple approaches and solutions, and they should be personally meaningful (Elsner, 2015, p. 19). Griffiths and Slavkov (2021, p. 135) argue that risks represent "a special subset of tasks", sharing features such as focus on meaning, a communicative goal and the use of personal resources, by adding the emotional or affective feature to it (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 135). As the perception of risks is highly individual and the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport allows learners to select their own risks (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 135), it is assumed that dealing with linguistic risks would suit a heterogeneous learning group (see also Schick & Rohde, 2025, pp. 252–253).

3. The Study

3.1 Research Questions

LRT is considered beneficial for language learning, yet research on elementary school students' experiences with and responses to LRT remains limited. This small-scale study aimed to provide initial insights into YLs' perspectives on LRT.
The research questions of the project were formulated as follows:

RQ1: What may be linguistic risks for elementary school learners?
Which linguistic situations may they perceive as risky in school and in everyday life?
RQ2: What may help elementary school learners when dealing with linguistic risks?

The following sections explain how these research questions were attempted to be answered.

3.2 Study Design

To provide the learners' perspective on Linguistic Risk-Taking, both research questions were addressed through semi-structed interviews. Based on a literature review and the theoretical background of LRT, an interview guide was created. Prior to the interviews, one English lesson was used to introduce the whole class briefly to the idea/notion of (linguistic) risk-taking. Then, the author of this article conducted the interviews with participating students in a one-to-one setting. The interviews were recorded, later transcribed, anonymized and then analyzed with the help of qualitative content analysis to answer the given research questions. Lastly, first hypotheses were generated from the given data.

3.3 Literature Review

As "simple cause-and-effect relationships are rare in language learning" (Oxford, 1992, p. 30), it is crucial to consider that Linguistic Risk-Taking is one among various factors that interactively influence SLA (Oxford, 1992, p. 30; Pavlenko, 2013, p. 6). A literature review of some related constructs (*anxiety* (e.g., MacIntyre, 2017), *motivation* (e.g., Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013) and *willingness to communicate* (e.g., Cao, 2014)) helped to identify key components for the construction of the interview guide as well as for developing deductive categories that were part of the coding frame used to analyze the interviews. The following figure summarizes the results of the literature review[4] and presents the derived deductive categories and their descriptions (Tab. 1):

peer group	Students are usually less anxious and rather willing to speak in the TL when working in small groups (Horwitz, 2017, p. 43). By practicing with their peers before having to speak in an unforeseeable situation, students' self-confidence and willingness to take risks may be promoted (Lee & Lee, 2020, pp. 826–827). Further, students enjoy working together as they like to help and support each other. This way, students create a positive atmosphere (e.g., laughing together) (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016, pp. 225–226).
supportiveness of the teacher	When students feel more comfortable in class, they are more likely to participate and thus to take risks. A positive classroom environment is influenced by the teacher's behavior (e.g., praising, tolerating errors, respecting students' needs), which may enhance student-teacher interaction (Al-Obaydi, 2020, pp. 360, 362; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016, pp. 224–225, 231). Teachers can support students in various ways (emotional, motivational, linguistic and strategic support), which helps learners to take linguistic risks (Griffith & Slavkov, 2021, pp. 138–144). Further, teachers need to be aware of the classroom atmosphere and act accordingly to reduce stress and anxiety (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016, p. 231).
speaking/ presenting	Speaking in the TL is often seen as a primary source for foreign language anxiety (FLA) as students are afraid to make mistakes (e.g., pronunciation), to be ridiculed or to embarrass themselves (Fenyvesi, 2021, pp. 1, 12–14; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 8; Horwitz et. al., 1986, pp. 126–127, 129).
comprehension	Another source for FLA is comprehension (Gregerson & MacIntyre, 2014, pp. 8–9; Horwitz et. al. 1986, p. 126): students may feel insecure when word meanings are unclear, they do not comprehend what the teacher said, or the task is too difficult or unclear (Fenyvesi, 2021, p. 1, 13; Horwitz et. al. 1986, p. 130).

Tab. 1: Summary of literature review

[4] Some of the following references are based on studies conducted in a different context (e.g., another country, adolescent/adult learners). Nevertheless, they can provide important points of reference.

3.4 Participants

A sample of five students was chosen (age: 9–10 years old), who were all attending the same 4th grade in an elementary school in Germany at the time of the interviews. The participants started learning English in first grade and, thus, were already somewhat experienced in learning English. Students were chosen following the English teacher's assessment of two students tending to be less talkative and more restrained ($n = 2$) and three students tending to be more talkative and less restrained ($n = 3$) in English class. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their legal guardians. To compare students' perspectives on their risk-taking behavior and to see if differences in the perception of linguistic risks emerge, these two 'groups' were chosen (Herzmann & König, 2023, p. 40). However, generalizations should be avoided as the sampling of this small-scale study is not representative (Herzmann & König, 2023, p. 30). When conducting interviews with children, different challenges may arise that need to be anticipated and reflected to further adapt the interview situation to children's needs. Particular attention was paid to creating a child-friendly setting and fostering trust (e.g., introducing oneself, reading a book prior the interviews, reassuring students that it is acceptable not to know the answer) (Vogl, 2021, pp. 146–153).

3.5 Instruments and Measures

Based on the theoretical background and selected studies, the semi-structured interview guide was created. Accordingly, relevant topics structure the interview, and the questions were developed in advance. This way, the interview guides possible responses by the participants and allows for more comparable answers to the same questions from the participants. This provides a higher degree of standardization (Herzmann & König, 2023, p. 47). Nonetheless, the interview guide consists of open questions, allowing students to answer in their own words and to talk about their individual experiences. The interviewer is also allowed to change the order of the questions, omit or expand questions (Döring & Bortz, 2016, p. 358). The interview guide is structured according to content-related aspects to which initial questions were formulated. Further, follow-up questions allowed the interviewer to focus on students' elaborations or to ask more specifically. There were also questions to maintain the conversation or to ask students to elaborate on their answers (e.g., *Can you give examples?*) (Herzmann & König, 2023, p. 48).

3.6 Teaching Unit *The Koala Who Could*

Prior to the interviews, the interviewer introduced the students to the idea/notion of (linguistic) risk-taking in one English lesson with the help of the book *The Koala Who*

Could[5] (Bright, 2018). On the one hand, this was done to ensure a good start to the interview and to give children time to adjust to the situation (e.g., get to know the interviewer first). On the other hand, it was easier to interview the learners on this topic if they were already familiar with the notion of 'risks'. The book is about the koala, Kevin, who lives up in a tree. Even though his friends ask him to come down and play, he decides to cling to his tree. The tree is Kevin's safe space, where he feels comfortable, and the ground frightens him. Even though part of him wishes to join his friends, he decides that the adventure to the ground is too risky. One day Kevin's tree is cut down, forcing him to leave his safe space. He realizes that being on the ground is not as bad as he had feared and joins his friends to play. The book concludes "Because life can be great when you try something new!" (Bright, 2018, p. 29).

The story was read to the students according to the principles of the *storytelling method* (Bezirksregierung Detmold, 2008, pp. 14–16). In accordance with the message of the book ("Because life can be great when you try something new!" (Bright, 2018, p. 29)), students were given the post-task to write down and present their thoughts to the following questions: *What do you want to try? How do you feel when you try it?* The book *The Koala Who Could* was chosen as it thematizes taking risks and stepping outside one's comfort zone. In the form of a story, it hints at the duality of risk-taking, so the fear that arises in a challenging situation but also the joy that may occur when overcoming it. The students may relate to the character, making it easier for them to think about own challenges and risky situations.

3.7 Data Analysis

Altogether, about 130 minutes were recorded. The word-for-word transcription ('*(erweiterte) inhaltlich-semantische Transkription*') was chosen for the recordings according to the transcription rules by Dresing and Pehl (2018, pp. 20–25). As this study focuses on the content of what was said, aspects such as facial expression, gestures, body language, intonation were not transcribed (Dresing & Pehl, 2018, pp. 17–19). Anything in the data that might have revealed information about the interviewee's identity or their institution was anonymized. After transcription, the data was analyzed with qualitative content analysis ('*inhaltlich strukturierende qualitative Inhaltsanalyse*') according to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022). The final coding frame is comprised of an interplay of deductive and inductive categories, which is a common procedure in qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 39–40).

In a first step of data analysis, 100% of the data was carefully read, important passages were highlighted and first remarks were noted. In a second step, new emerging themes that were mentioned by the participants and that could not be assigned to the deductive categories derived from the literature review (section 3.3) were noted down

[5] Read aloud of book: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmgxgat6HFI&t=67s [03.03.2025]

(inductive categories). Parts of the interviews were analyzed to test the established categories, leading to step three, where every interview was analyzed in detail and passages were assigned to the different categories (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 132–134). During this process categories were adjusted, if needed, and subcategories were formed (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, p. 138) to establish the final coding frame: for each category, a label, a definition, at least one prototypical example and, if needed, a coding rule was provided (Herzmann & König, 2023, p. 71).

4. Results

In the following, the results of the study are presented based on the categories (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 148–150, 154–156). For better understanding, the categories will be defined, a prototypical coding-unit[6] will be given and the results will be explained. As qualitative research cannot only be used to describe generated data but may be used to explore interrelations, an attempt to formulate first hypotheses is made based on the preceding analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, p. 52). This serves to find potential answers to the initial research questions. As discussing all results would go beyond the scope of this paper, only selected categories will be presented[7]. These were chosen because they yielded the most interesting insights and because they best addressed the research questions. To ensure a systematic approach, categories addressing RQ1 will be outlined first, followed by those relevant to RQ2. If there are interrelations between the categories, they will be pointed out (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, p. 149).

RQ1) What may be linguistic risks for elementary school learners?

Category 4: comprehension

Comments on situations in which learners report having comprehension difficulties in the EFL classroom (e.g., understanding the teacher's talk, listening comprehension).

Prototypical Coding-Unit:

> Manchmal liest die Frau x Bücher vor und dann find ich es irgendwie schwer, die zu verstehen (.) alles (..). [...] Ähm pf (..) die Wörter halt zu verstehen, was die machen, [...]. (Interview B3, 162–167)
>
> 'Sometimes Mrs x reads books and then I find it somehow difficult to understand everything. [...]' So, to understand the words, what they are doing [...]' (Interview B3, 162–167)

Four out of five children reported having difficulties understanding everything in English class. One student mentioned that it was challenging for them to participate in the lessons if they did not understand classmates' utterances or the listening comprehension exercises. This category is closely related to the strategies learners may or may not use to help themselves (cat. 7), which is further emphasized by a student from group 2,

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6 Since the interviews were conducted in German, the coding-units will be translated into English.

7 An overview of all categories and established hypothesis may be found in the appendix A.

who sometimes did not dare to ask when they did not understand something, further resulting in not understanding the whole topic. The category may also be related to how the teacher may help to make comprehension easier (see cat. 3.2).

There is no hypothesis for this category due to insufficient evidence.

Category 5: speaking/presenting

Comments on situations in which learners report having difficulties presenting or speaking in the EFL classroom (e.g., speaking in front of others, constructing sentences, pronunciation).

Prototypical Coding-Unit:

> [...] aber es ist halt für mich schwer immer mitzumachen, weil ich das nicht verstehe oder auch noch keine Sätze bilden kann, wie manche oder auch wir nicht lernen, Sätze zu bilden. Aber wenn wir zum Beispiel was bilden sollen, dann müssen wir's halt können. (Interview B2, 268–271)

> '[...] but it is difficult for me to participate because I do not understand it or I cannot form sentences like others yet or we also do not learn how to form sentences. But when we have to form sentences, then we are expected be able to do it.' (Interview B2, 268–271)

All learners referred to speaking in English as difficult. For learners it was challenging to construct sentences by themselves, which may be related to students' language learning goals (cat. 9) to speak more freely in the future, to pronounce words whose spelling differs from the pronunciation and to speak in front of others in English class. It seems that the described difficulties are closely related to the context/location (cat. 2), in which students have to speak English. One student mentioned that presenting something is especially difficult as words are not easy to pronounce and at the same time everybody is watching you. Also, among other things, speaking may be facilitated or impeded, depending on teacher (see cat. 3) or peer support (see cat. 1).

Hypothesis: Open speaking opportunities, as well as pronouncing words correctly, pose a challenge to students, especially when having to speak in front of the class.

RQ2) What may help elementary school learners when dealing with linguistic risks?

Category 1.1: supportive peer group

This category comments on situations in which the peer group is perceived as supportive, peers help each other or the individual reports on helping peers.

Additional coding rule: In contrast to location/context (cat. 2), the relationship between the learners is the main focus.

Prototypical Coding-Unit:

> Weil es meistens meine Freunde sind, mit denen ich in einer Gruppe bin und bei denen habe ich keine Angst, dass ich was falsch sage. Und bei denen/die helfen mir auch, wenn ich etwas nicht gut kann. (Interview B1, 99–101)

> 'Usually, I am in a group with my friends and with them I am not afraid to say something wrong. And they also help me when I am not good at something.' (Interview B1, 99–101)

All learners reported that they liked working with their peers in English class. They mentioned that friends were more familiar, which made it easier to talk and work with. Moreover, when working with friends, every interviewee said that they were able to ask for help, that peers could help each other and work collaboratively (e.g., one person translates, the other one writes). This category seems to be associated with category 2 (*location/context*) as the received support when working in a group makes it easier for them than working alone as the familiarity of peers not only facilitates presenting something in front of their peers, but standing with a group of friends in front of the whole class is also perceived as less challenging.

Hypothesis: Learners in elementary school are more likely to take the risk of speaking or presenting something if they perceive their peer group as supportive.

Subcategory 1.2: unsupportive peer group

Comments on situations in which the peer group is unsupportive of other peers, which influences learners' linguistic behavior negatively.

Prototypical Coding-Unit:

> Weil manchmal sagen Kinder was Falsches und dann werden sie ausgelacht oder (.) halt (.) nicht so gut behandelt. Deswegen/ und deswegen trau ich mich manchmal nicht, halt Sachen zu sagen. (Interview B1, 180–183)
>
> 'Because sometimes children say something wrong and then they are laughed at or not treated well. That is why I sometimes do not dare to say something.' (Interview B1, 180–183)

The peer group cannot only be supportive: students mentioned that other students sometimes shout the right answer or laugh when somebody says something incorrect. The latter cause was mentioned by both group 2 children, giving rise to the assumption that these children are more afraid to say something in class because they fear being ridiculed even more than their classmates. The *context/location* (cat. 2) seems to play a crucial part. Working in smaller groups, students seem to feel more comfortable to participate, however, in a bigger group (e.g., the whole class) peers seem to behave differently.

Hypothesis: Learners in elementary school are more risk-averse if they perceive their peer group as non-supportive.

Category 2: location/context[8]

Comments on how the context or location of a communicative situation influences the learner's linguistic behavior.

Additional coding rule: In contrast to *supportive peer group* (subcat. 1.1), the context and location of the communicative situation is the main focus.

Prototypical Coding-Unit:

[8] Based on a category of Schick & Rohde (2025)

> Also Fragen beantworten. Hm. Ja, das find ich auch ziemlich einfach, weil ich so sitzen bleibe. Also auf dem Platz sitze. [...]
>
> Wenn die vorne an der Tafel sowas verbinden, so nen Bild von nem Löwen oder so dann *lion* das da hinziehen oder so. Das mach ich eigentlich nicht so oft, aber ich wüsste die Antworten dann.
>
> *Okay, wieso machst du das nicht so oft?*
>
> Weil ich ähm find's nicht so toll, wenn ich lange vor der Klasse bleibe. [...] Also ich bin so ein bisschen nervös. (Interview B5, 289–290, 538–548)
>
> 'So answering questions. Yes, I find that quite easy because I can stay seated. So, I can stay on my seat. [...]
>
> When they are at the blackboard matching something, so a picture of a lion and then matching it with *lion*. I do not do that often but I would know the answers.
>
> *Why do you not do that often?*
>
> Because I do not like it when I have to stay in front of the class for a longer time. I am a bit nervous then.' (Interview B5, 289–290, 538–548)

The context of a communicative situation seems to influence students' linguistic behavior. Whilst they may initially be somewhat cautious when talking to strangers, this generally does not seem to be risky for students (e.g., going to the shops, making new friends). However, two students mentioned they found speaking in class challenging at times due to the fear of making mistakes. In contrast, they feel more comfortable speaking to their friends in the schoolyard (referring to any language) or in group work (category 1.1). When working in groups, students seem to feel more comfortable accepting the risk of speaking in English as fewer people are listening. Students reported that standing in front of the class (e.g., to present something) was difficult for them and one student said that they rather stayed seated (prototypical coding-unit). Moreover, when talking about challenging situations in school, two students mentioned the English lessons immediately. So, it seems that students may feel more judged and observed in institutionalized contexts. These seem to feel more demanding to students than communicative situations in their free time. The results show the tendency that especially the English lessons are challenging for students. Still, this is to be viewed with caution as students knew that the interview would be about their English lessons and thus, may have been prejudiced. Further, staying seated and working in smaller groups may give students some comfort as they are not on display.

Hypothesis: The classroom context, especially when students feel observed or evaluated (e.g., English class), displays a higher risk than contexts in students' free time (e.g., breaks, going to the shops, making friends).[9]

[9] In accordance with Schick & Rohde (2025, p. 267)

Subcategory 3.1: teacher's emotional support
Comments on situations or interactions in the classroom that the individual learner perceives as emotionally supportive that influences the learners' linguistic behavior positively (e.g., praise, error correction).
Prototypical Coding-Unit:

> Also wenn ich zum Beispiel ein Wort ausgesprochen hab und sie dann irgendwas sagt ‚Ja, gut B4'. Das ist dann schon schönes Gefühl. (Interview B4, 373–374)
>
> 'When I pronounce a word and she says something like 'Yes, well done, B4'. That is a nice feeling.' (Interview B4, 373–374)

Students said they feel good in (English) class when they have done something well (e.g., correct pronunciation) which is associated with the teacher's praise (e.g., prototypical coding unit). One student of group 2 reported that the teacher's feedback pointing out their improvement has made them more confident and willing to participate. Further, students seem to appreciate how their teacher handles the situation if they make a mistake ('*That's okay!*', '*It's pronounced this way …!*', '*Think about it again!*'). In contrast, one student from group 2 noted that they occasionally feel less comfortable in English class, particularly when they are not fully satisfied with the way feedback is given. They were also able to reflect on the types of feedback that work well for them, such as praise, eye contact or feeling seen, and encouragement. Overall, most statements suggest that praise and sensitive error correction help them feel comfortable in class.

Hypothesis: The teacher's emotional support (e.g., praise, sensitive error correction) may enhance students' well-being and thus, their willingness to accept the risk of participating.

5. Discussion

This study was an attempt to gain first insights of YLs' perspectives on (linguistic) risk-taking. As there is only a small number of participants, results should not be generalized. Learners' statements may rather give first hints of what might be important and may provide an incentive for further investigation. In the following, results of this study will be discussed in an exemplary manner.

5.1 Reflection of Study Results

As can be seen in section 4, the results of this study suggest that students' risk-taking behavior is influenced by various interrelated aspects (e.g., peers, location, teacher, learner's personality) (see also Schick & Rohde, 2025, p. 269). This aligns with existing research, where it is reported that "risk taking is not an isolated construct" (Cervantes, 2013, p. 425) but it involves the learners, their decisions, their willingness to engage with the language and the educational context (Cervantes 2013, p. 425). From the given

data, hypotheses were already generated to answer the initial research questions (see section 4). These results will now be pulled together to be discussed in summary.

RQ1) What may be linguistic risks for elementary school learners?

Regarding RQ1, it seems that students primarily associate linguistic risks with classroom situations (cat. 2). It suggests that their opportunities to use English occur mainly in school. When asked about age-appropriate scenarios in any language (e.g., *buying a bread roll, talking to strangers*), students initially expressed caution but reported no difficulties. It aligns with the idea that YL are higher risk-takers, at least outside the classroom (e.g., Cervantes, 2013, p. 428). Still, it needs to be considered that children were only asked in a very general way and further, it cannot be expected that they mention a risk ad-hoc.

Regarding English lessons, the data revealed that students find speaking challenging (cat. 5). They refer to pronunciation being difficult, suggesting an early awareness of the opaque English orthography (*language awareness*; MSB NRW, 2021, p. 48). Students reported that open speaking opportunities (e.g., forming sentences on their own) were demanding and they expressed a desire to communicate more freely. It may show both the frustration of not yet being able to communicate as in one's L1 (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128), and students' motivation to learn the language. Possible risks could include talking to others in more unmonitored and unguided contexts or practicing pronouncing words. With respect to *healthy risk-taking*, these risks could be seen as intermediate stages (e.g., *talk to a person I know*) that may prepare learners for their goal to talk to someone abroad. Moreover, the results indicate that students are afraid to make mistakes or to be laughed at (cat. 8; cat. 1.2). It suggests that speaking in front of the whole class is particularly challenging, aligning with existing research that speaking in the TL is a common source of difficulty and anxiety (e.g., Fenyvesi, 2021, pp. 12–13; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, pp. 148–149).

Understanding TL communication (cat. 4) also caused discomfort and frustration, mirroring findings of Fenyvesi (2021, p. 13) that comprehension issues lead to anxiety and embarrassment in children. The teacher seems to adhere to the 'as much English as possible' recommendation by the curriculum (*funktionale Einsprachigkeit*; MSB NRW, 2021, p. 37), which seems to overwhelm students as some desire more German translations (cat. 10). In line with Oxford (1992, p. 38) and Fenyvesi (2021, p. 13) it may be noted that a low level of ambiguity tolerance may be linked to reduced risk-taking and can lead to an increase of FLA. It suggests that fostering students' tolerance of ambiguity may be beneficial to learners' risk-taking behavior. Some students were hesitant to ask for help which impeded their comprehension (see cat. 8). Asking for clarification (e.g., *I asked for the meaning of a word*) may be a possible risk that enhances students' comprehension and the development of productive language learning strategies (see also OLBI & LEARN, 2023, p. 9).

RQ2) What may help elementary school learners when dealing with linguistic risks?
With regard to RQ2, different factors seem to help students when dealing with challenging situations. In line with existing research, the peer group can build a resource for learning as students report helping each other and working collaboratively when in small groups (cat. 1.1) (e.g., Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016, p. 226). In accordance with other studies (e.g., Horwitz, 2017, p. 43; Lee & Lee, 2020, pp. 826–827) students reported feeling more comfortable speaking English in their small groups as well as suggesting that the peer group may facilitate the risk of speaking in the TL. Like MacIntyre et al. (2011, p. 89) reported, error correction through peers is highly dependent on the context. In small groups or with friends, help and error correction (e.g., pronunciation) is welcomed, however, when being corrected by peers in front of the whole class (e.g., peers interject when the answer is incorrect), students seem to be less willing to participate. The peer group is also perceived as unsupportive when ridiculing other students, which again may impede students' participation (cat. 1.2; cat. 8). Hence, it seems that students feel more comfortable and willing to take risks in the context of their small peer group. This seems to confirm that learners should have "the opportunity to take risks in group settings" (Cervantes, 2013, p. 433) before having to take a risk in front of the whole class (e.g., reading out loud, unmonitored speaking opportunities). Further, teacher support seems to be crucial for students' risk-taking behavior. Aligning with existing research (e.g., Al-Obaydi 2020, pp. 362–363), the teacher's emotional support (e.g., praise, sensitive error correction, feeling seen) lets students feel more comfortable in class and might lead to a greater willingness to take linguistic risks.

There were no major differences between the two groups. Still, group 2 students appeared more hesitant to ask for help, had more concerns about peer evaluation, and were in greater need of teacher support. However, these are only initial impressions as the sample size is too small for conclusions.

6. Final Reflections, Pedagogical Implications and Limitations

This study was only a starting point for gaining insight into YL' perceptions on Linguistic Risk-Taking. It focused on what they might find challenging in English class and what may help them. Students' answers can be seen as first hints to the initial research questions. Still, more research is needed to evaluate and complement the results and hypotheses generated in this paper. Another step could be to discuss pedagogical implications by designing and evaluating a conceptual framework and a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport that is appropriate for YL in Germany. For YL, the construct of Linguistic Risk-Taking may be too abstract and should be explained in a playful way, as was done in this study by embedding the notion of risk-taking in storytelling. The students attending the lesson before taking part in the interviews seemed to approve of the story *The Koala Who Could* (Bright, 2018). They actively participated during storytelling and stated that they had enjoyed it. Still, this is just a first impression, and the suitability of the

story needs to be further evaluated. More generally, reflecting on and discussing (students') fears may help them to understand that many students experience those thoughts, feelings and worries. Talking openly about concerns and difficulties can help to reduce students' anxiety and can contribute to establishing a safe learning environment (Horwitz, 2017, p. 44). Including rituals like discussing risks in a morning routine as well as setting individual goals (e.g., *How did I feel before and after taking the risk?*) may be useful to familiarize learners with the notion and the benefits/importance of risk-taking for learning (SPEAQ & LEARN, 2023, p. 9).

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