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## The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative: Conception and Validation of a Digital Tool

### Abstract

The linguistic risk-taking initiative for language teaching and learning was developed at the bilingual English-French University of Ottawa, Canada. The initiative encourages learners of either language to step out of their comfort zone and practice their language skills in authentic everyday contexts. The initiative originally included a passport-styled booklet where learners checked off linguistic risks that they had taken around campus to expand the scope of their language learning and to participate in real-life situations. Subsequently, a digital app was added to offer new features and affordances aimed at increasing engagement, confidence, and competence in the target language. This article showcases the digital app and presents preliminary results from a validation study of the tool. The initiative fits into a new general approach to language teaching and learning, grounded in insights from language socialization, plurilingualism, and positive psychology.

Die Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT) Initiative für Sprachunterricht und Sprachenlernen wurde an der zweisprachigen (englisch-französischen) Universität Ottawa in Kanada entwickelt. Sie ermutigt Lernende beider Sprachen, ihre Komfortzone zu verlassen und ihre Sprachkenntnisse in authentischen Alltagssituationen anzuwenden. Ursprünglich umfasste sie ein Heft im Reisepassformat, in dem Lernende eingegangene sprachliche Risiken dokumentieren konnten, um ihr Sprachenlernen zu erweitern und in realen Situationen anzuwenden. Anschließend wurde eine digitale *Linguistic Risk* App entwickelt, die zusätzliche Funktionen bietet und darauf abzielt, Engagement, Selbstvertrauen und Kompetenz in der Zielsprache zu steigern. Der Artikel stellt die App vor und präsentiert vorläufige Ergebnisse einer Validierungsstudie. Die Initiative fügt sich in einen umfassenderen Ansatz für Sprachunterricht und Sprachenlernen ein, der auf Erkenntnissen aus Sprachsozialisation, Mehrsprachigkeit/Plurilingualismus und Positiver Psychologie basiert.

### Keywords

linguistic risk-taking, language socialization, positive psychology, digital technology, plurilingualism

*Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT)*, sprachliche Risikobereitschaft, Sprachsozialisation, Positive Psychologie, Digitale Technologie, Mehrsprachigkeit, Plurilingualismus



## 1. Introduction

Linguistic risk-taking is a less-known concept in the language teaching and learning literature, as compared to motivation, anxiety, or willingness to communicate. Classroom approaches or teaching tools based on linguistic risk-taking are rare in the field. This article begins by providing theoretical and pedagogical context for a linguistic risk-taking initiative developed at the largest English-French bilingual university in the world, the University of Ottawa, located in Canada's capital. The article describes the development and the functionality of a *Linguistic Risk* digital app, reports preliminary results of a validation study, and discusses implications for language-teaching practitioners or researchers who may be interested in designing similar initiatives in their own contexts.

### 1.1 What is Linguistic Risk-Taking?

Learners may experience various situations in a second (L2) or an additional language as risks.<sup>1</sup> This may be due to multiple—real or perceived—factors, such as making mistakes, being misunderstood, misunderstanding others, not being able to express oneself fully, feeling judged or not competent enough, having to change previously established socialization patterns, or performing cognitively demanding tasks in the new language (Slavkov, 2023; 2020; Slavkov & Séror, 2019). Such factors make it difficult for many language learners to step out of their comfort zone and engage in meaningful communication in the target language. Even if learners engage fully in L2 classroom practice activities, they may shy away from using their L2 in the real world and choose to use their first language instead. Some learners may even choose to remain silent over expressing themselves in the second language. This is why taking linguistic risks frequently and regularly in real-life settings must be encouraged (Lee & Lee, 2020). The purpose of linguistic risk-taking is thus to increase authentic language practice, expand the number of linguistic domains in which a learner feels comfortable, augment the potential for language socialization with target language speakers, and boost engagement with the target language groups or communities. In addition, linguistic risk-taking has the potential of giving learners the opportunity to learn informally or gamify their learning trajectories (Cajka et al., 2023; Roodi & Slavkov, 2022; Slavkov, 2023), thus achieving a higher level of satisfaction and enjoyment.

Previous work has operationalized the construct of linguistic risk as an authentic, autonomous communicative act where learners are pushed out of their comfort zone to

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<sup>1</sup> The term *second language* is commonly used in Canada and is the label used in the University of Ottawa's related programs and courses, even though for many language learners English or French may be a third, fourth, etc. language and thus *additional language* may be a more appropriate term. This article uses the terms interchangeably.

engage in meaningful language practice beyond the classroom (Slavkov & Séror, 2019). The construct is also associated with learner meta-awareness of both the challenge and the potential benefits of overcoming it. That is, by targeting specific language learning situations as challenges and proactively embarking on them, learners may be able to manage or overcome language anxiety and at the same time derive a sense of enjoyment or pleasure (see also Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; 2016; Dewaele et al., 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Linguistic risk-taking is positioned positively and does not relate to what is typically thought of as risky behaviors or to physical danger; it draws on the idea that “you take a risk every time you open your mouth in [another] language, or for that matter in any learning situation where you are called on to perform” (Beebe, 1983, p. 39). Limited literature exists on this notion as applied to language (e.g., Cervantes, 2013; Dehbozorgi, 2012; Dewaele, 2012; Karimi & Biria, 2017; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Lee & Lee, 2020; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2024; Wang & Lin, 2015) and certain aspects of the construct remain underdeveloped (but see Atkinson, 1957, and later work for risk-taking in other domains).

Investigating how linguistic risks can be harnessed to improve language competence and confidence and whether such an approach may lead to learners experiencing a sense of accomplishment and well-being represents a new research agenda with a potential for fresh insights into long-standing issues of effective language teaching and learning.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Linguistic Risk-Taking at the University of Ottawa

To encourage learners to take linguistic risks and systematically benefit from such experiences, a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport with over 80 risks was developed in the bilingual context of the University of Ottawa (Slavkov 2020; Slavkov & Séror, 2019). The initial passport was a paper booklet that was subsequently transformed into a digital phone app called *Linguistic Risk*; the app contains over 100 risks.<sup>4</sup> These risks represent a list of authentic daily activities or tasks in the target language (English or French), such as: approach a passer-by for directions; order food at the cafeteria; interact with a professor/authority figure; compose an email; sit for a job interview; set the language

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<sup>2</sup> The literature on positive psychology uses both the terms *pleasure* and *enjoyment*. In this article, they are used interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> This article uses the terms *initiative* and *approach* in regard to linguistic risk-taking. Although there is a certain degree of overlap, the term *initiative* is used to refer to the specific linguistic risk-taking project developed at the University of Ottawa. The term *approach* is used more generally, to refer to a novel concept of teaching and learning languages at this particular university and beyond. See also the introductory article in this volume for additional insights on use of the terms *initiative*, *tool*, and *approach*, among others.

<sup>4</sup> The number of risks in the app is continuously growing as learners are also able to propose new risks and the project moderator adds them to the existing list on an ongoing basis.

on your mobile device to the target language for a day, a week, or permanently; change personal daily language habits and speak to a loved one or a friend in the target language; sing karaoke in the target language, and so on. Learners can scroll through, search by keyword, or filter the list to find risks that are interesting and relevant to them and check them off in the app once completed. Most risks in the app can be repeated up to three times in order to foster continuous learning and reinforcement; however, risks cannot be checked off more than three times to encourage learners to keep trying new risks. Learners are also asked to report the perceived level of difficulty (risk level) and the perceived level of enjoyment (fun level) for each risk they take, using low-to-high digital slider scales that appear on the screen each time a risk is selected to be checked off. Comment fields are available with each risk taken and learners can also propose new risks (i.e., situations that are not yet included in the app). Furthermore, game-based elements (Flores, 2015) are incorporated as well: users receive points and progress through different achievement levels (e.g., silver, gold, platinum) based on the number of risks they have checked off. Users can also choose to compete in different leaderboards, view what risks are trending among other users, or click on a button to generate a random risk from the database and accept the challenge of taking that particular risk. Some of these app features are illustrated in Fig. 1-4.

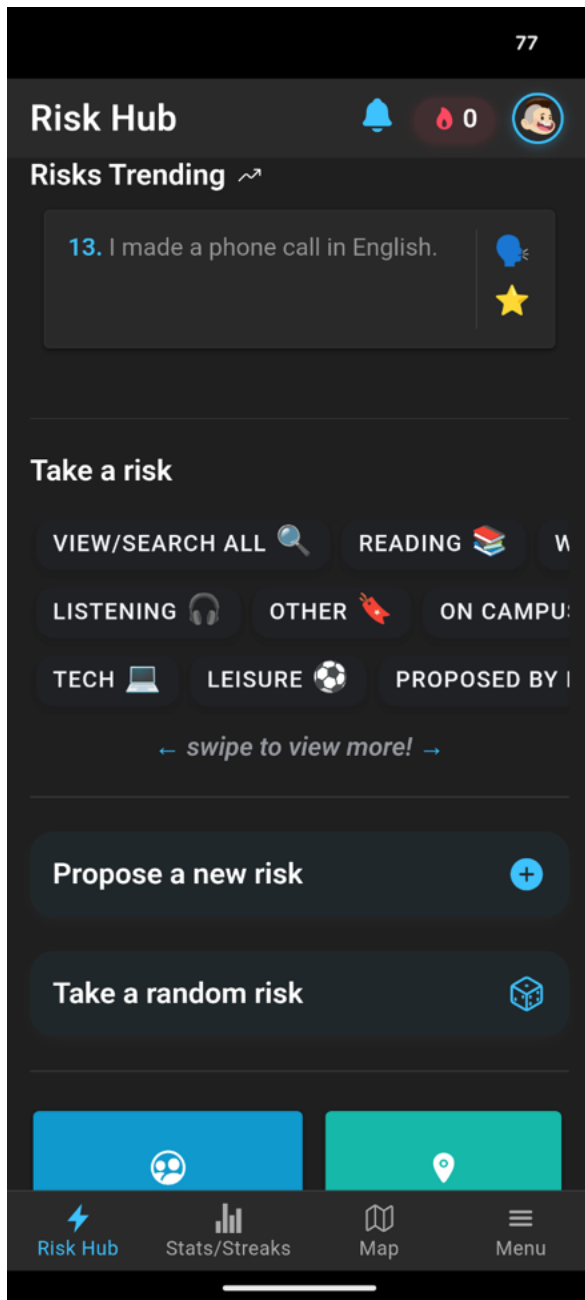


Fig. 1: Linguistic Risk App (main screen)

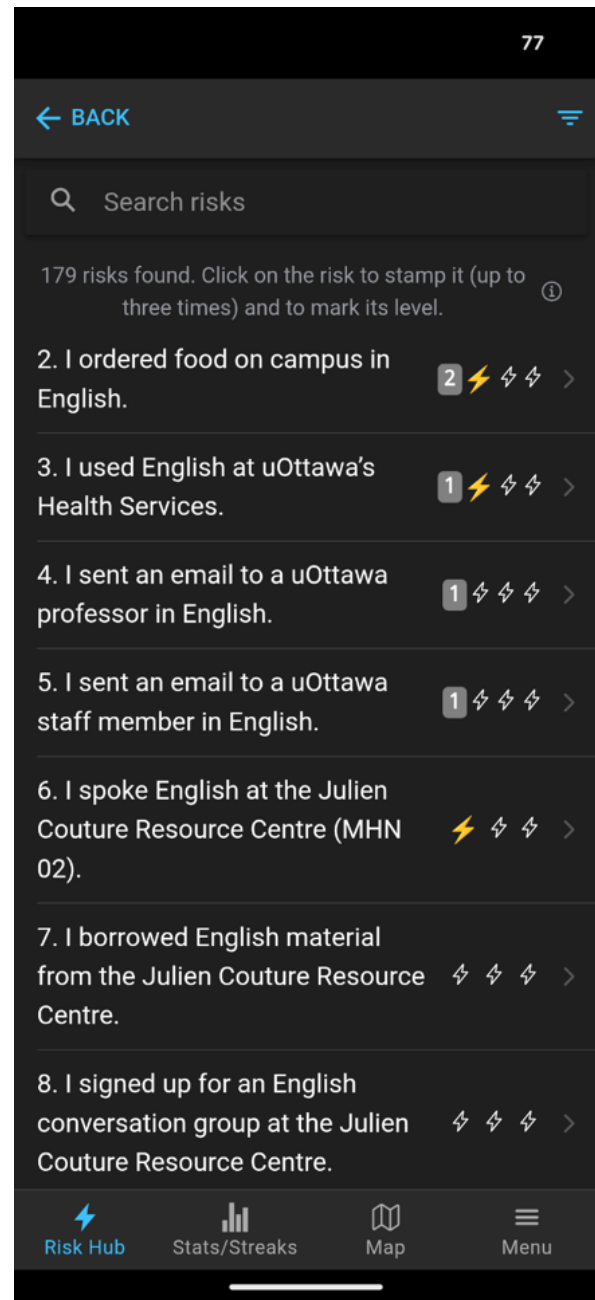


Fig. 2: Linguistic Risk App (scrollable list of risks)

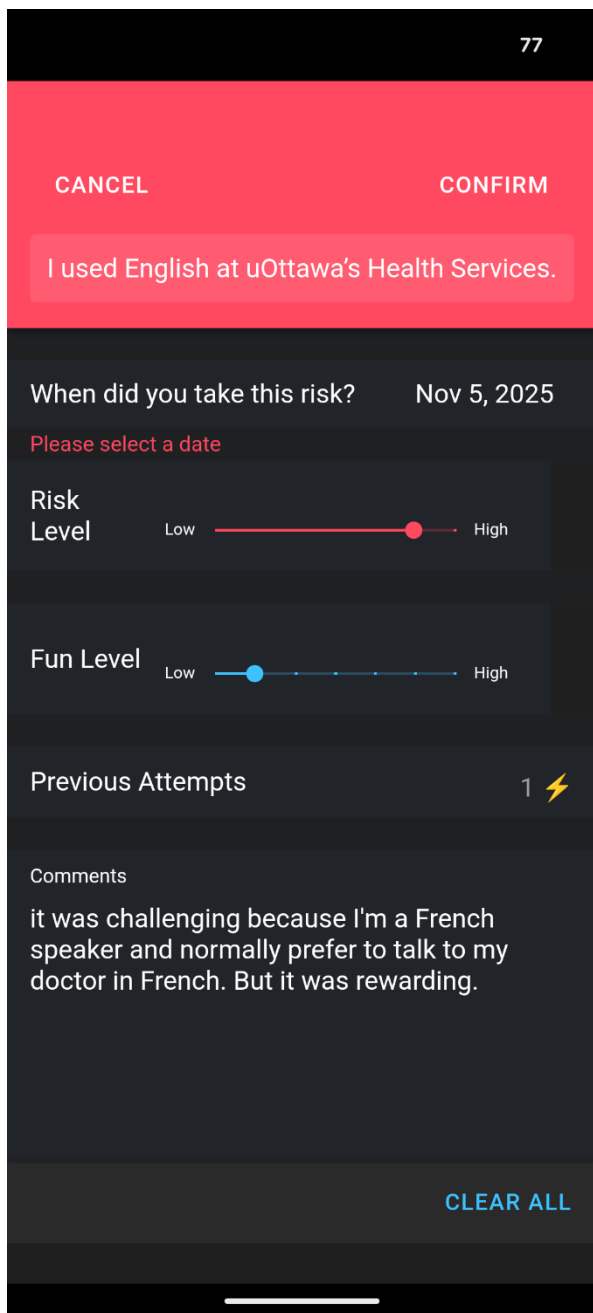


Fig. 3 : Linguistic Risk App (risk and fun sliders and comments field)

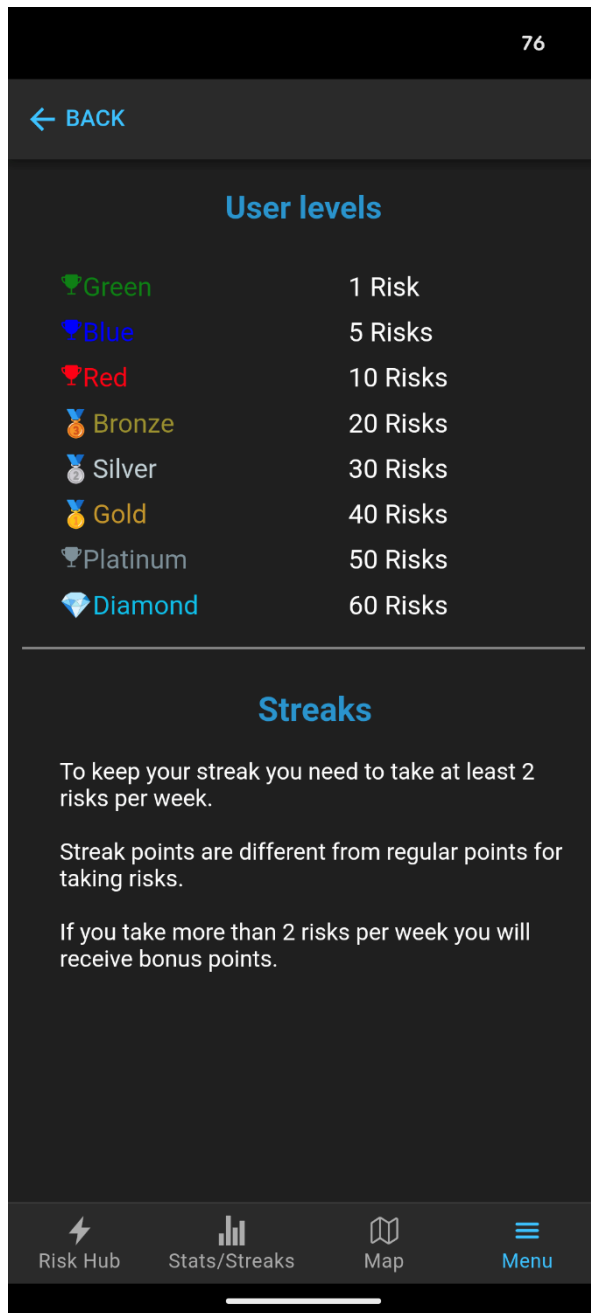


Fig. 4: Linguistic Risk App (achievement levels and streaks)

To foster learner autonomy, the tool also allows users to self-analyze their activities. They can track their own usage by generating individualized graphs based on: the number of risks taken weekly, monthly, or over a 12-month period; the number of risks taken by the language skills involved (oral interaction, reading, writing or listening); the number of risks taken by thematic category (academic, professional, daily life, leisure, technology). Some of these app features are illustrated in Fig. 5–6.

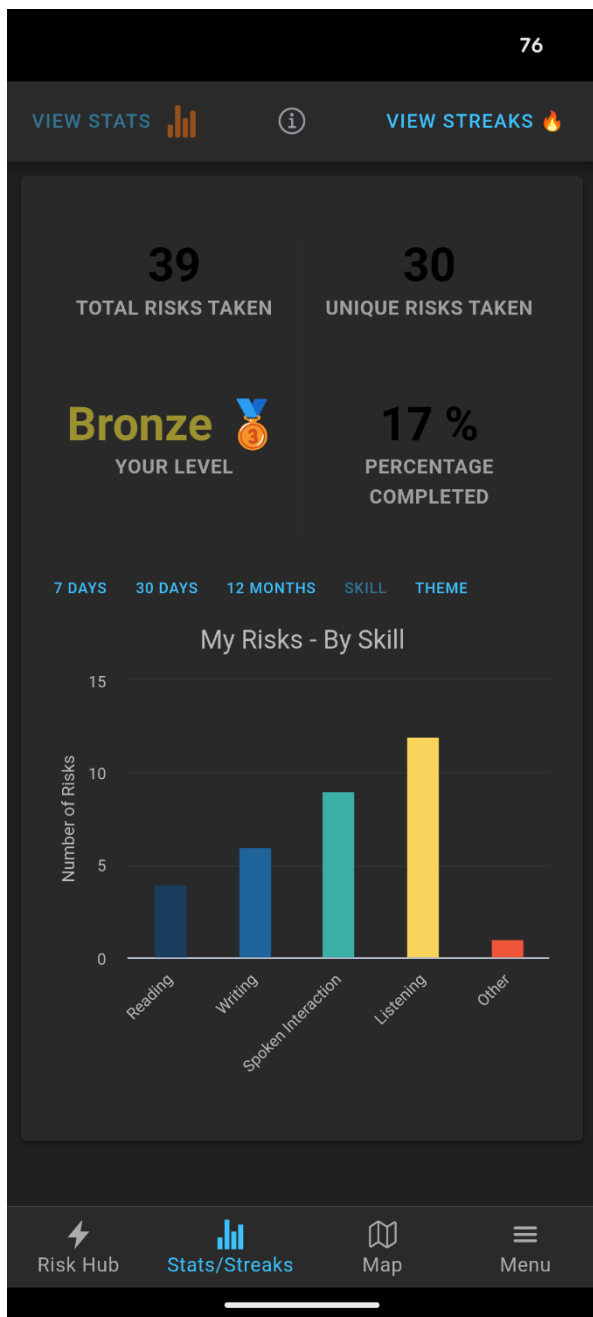


Fig. 5: Linguistic Risk App (track my risks by skill)

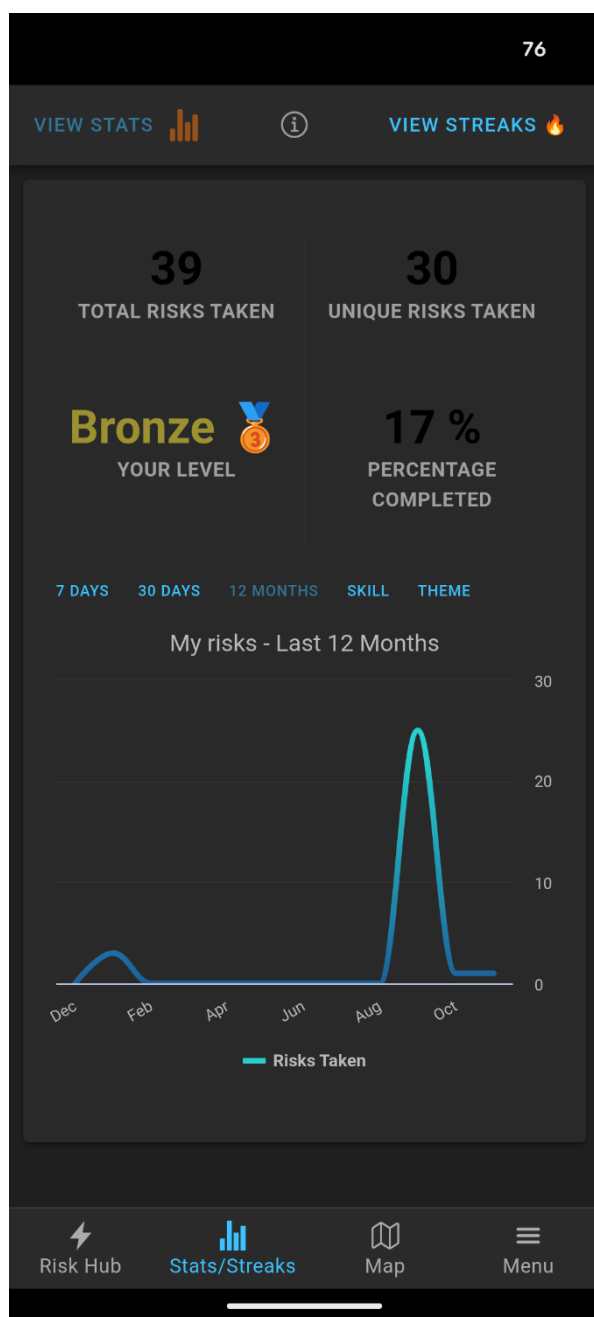


Fig. 6: Linguistic Risk App (track my risks over time)

Learners who have completed a minimum of 20 risks or show evidence of other meaningful patterns of use (e.g., write insightful comments, propose new risks, etc.) may be selected to receive prizes. It is important to underscore that the *Linguistic Risk App* is not a virtual reality app. All activities are done in real life and checked off in the app by the users, which provides a maximum level of authenticity.

As a pedagogical tool, the app serves the purpose of connecting classroom instruction to real-life language practices. As a research tool, it generates rich and varied quantitative data (usage patterns) and qualitative data (learner comments and newly proposed risks).

## 2. Background

The *Linguistic Risk App* described in this article relies on some well-known pedagogical, psychological, and broader theoretical notions.

### 2.1 Pedagogical Underpinnings

The design of the *Linguistic Risk* digital app draws on current notions in the literature on language pedagogy (see also Slavkov, 2023; Slavkov, 2020) as follows:

1. the concept of autonomy of the language learner, whereby the teacher does not take a central role in instruction but rather serves as a guide, a consultant, or a motivating force that helps individual learners discover appropriate and continuous language learning opportunities in becoming independent second/additional language users (Albero & Poteaux, 2014; Benson, 2007; 2011; Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Little, 1991; 2000);
2. the concept of authenticity and experiential learning, whereby language learning activities must be rooted in meaningful real-life communicative situations or experiences (Collentine & Freed, 2004; Lantolf, 2000; Lazarson, 2014; Roberts & Cooke, 2009);
3. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Action-Oriented Language Learning, whereby communicative activities/daily interactions, such as talking to peers, colleagues, or family members, running errands, writing correspondence, performing workplace duties, using technology, asking for directions, etc., are the basis of pedagogical tasks or learning scenarios (Ellis, 2009; Long, 1985; Nunan, 2004; Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Willis & Willis, 2007; Council of Europe, 2001; 2018);
4. informal and game-based learning, whereby enjoyable digital or non-digital activities are developed to engage learners in meaningful language practice and to unlock powerful learning potentials that may start in the classroom but extend beyond it, into daily life (Cajka et al, 2023; Flores, 2015; Holden & Sykes, 2011; Kapp, 2012; McGonigal, 2011; Prensky, 2001).

## 2.2 Psychological Underpinnings

Linguistic risk-taking relates to prominent concepts in the psychology of language learning, including language anxiety and enjoyment. Language anxiety is among the most studied emotions in second language acquisition, as it represents a powerful common experience (MacIntyre, 2017). Over the years, there has been a debate as to whether language anxiety should be viewed as an entirely negative emotional state or whether a certain threshold level of anxiety may be beneficial in generating excitement or providing target language use impetus. Most current thinking positions language anxiety as debilitating (see Horwitz, 2017; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2017). Thus, the question is how to reduce or circumvent anxiety. Potentially positive effects of linguistic risk-taking, however, may be related to other concepts, such as enjoyment, measured on a separate scale. An individual language learner may experience various degrees of anxiety and enjoyment at the same time (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; 2016; Dewaele et al., 2018). Based on such findings, linguistic risk-taking can be viewed as a construct that encapsulates both anxiety and enjoyment. On the one hand, it captures the uncertainty and discomfort of second/additional language use experienced by learners; on the other hand, it highlights the excitement and satisfaction associated with taking on challenges and overcoming them. Another relevant psychological concept is Willingness to Communicate (WTC), succinctly defined as the willingness to speak or to remain silent given free choice (MacIntyre et al., 1998; 2011; MacIntyre, 2007). Overall, studies have demonstrated that increased WTC leads to increased language learning outcomes (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2011). Linguistic risk-taking is related to WTC as it raises awareness of specific actions that can be taken, in order to increase the amount of authentic communication in the target language. Additionally, a study by Sadoughi & Hejazi (2024) suggests that linguistic risk-taking has a mediating function between a growth language mindset and WTC.

## 2.3 Broader Theoretical Underpinnings

The linguistic risk-taking approach to language teaching and learning is inspired by interdisciplinary social, educational, and psychological theories. Linguistic risk-taking can be viewed as a pathway to increased socialization in a new language. Thus, the approach draws on language socialization and sociocultural theory and adopts the tenet that language learning occurs as a result of mediated social interactions with others (family members, peers, educators, community members, and so on) who model and impart, both explicitly and implicitly, specific practices, conventions, and (language) behaviors (Duff, 2008; 2017; Duff & Talmy, 2011; Eun & Lim, 2009; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2008; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). The theory of plurilingualism (Coste et al., 1997; 2009 and subsequent work) is also relevant to linguistic risk-taking. Plurilingualism focuses on individual speakers' language

repertoires and recognizes that perfect bilingualism or perfect multilingualism (i.e., equal proficiency in two or more languages) is rarely, if ever, possible (see also Grosjean, 1989). Much of the world's population is represented by plurilingual speakers who possess various languages in their repertoires and use them in different domains, with different purposes, proficiencies, interlocutors, and at different times (see also Canagarajah, 2007, 2009; Coste & Simon, 2009; Dagenais & Moore, 2008; Marshall & Moore, 2013; Taylor & Snoddon, 2013, among others). This framework empowers linguistic risk-taking without reifying unrealistic notions of perfect competence or idealized native speaker norms (see also Cook, 1991; 1999; Slavkov et al., 2022). It draws on positive feelings and the value of using various languages in a speaker's repertoire, regardless of the ability to produce error-free communication. This in turn invokes positive psychology, the study of how people thrive and flourish, and how ordinary human strengths and virtues contribute to general well-being (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2011; Lopez & Snyder, 2009; Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology is thus an appropriate framework for encouraging language learners to build their skills by selecting goals and challenges that lead to enjoyment or a sense of accomplishment, ultimately leading to not only linguistic gains but also overall well-being (see MacIntyre & Mercer, 2015 for the role of positive psychology in second language acquisition).

To sum up, the above interconnected theoretical perspectives inform the linguistic risk-taking initiative described in this article. They are also reflected in the research questions and study design presented in the next section.

### 3. Research Questions and Methodology

Several other studies of the linguistic risk-taking initiative developed at the University of Ottawa have been published previously. They have focused on the initial creation of the paper-based passport-styled booklet, on classroom implementation, on learner perspectives and self-assessment questionnaires, on teacher perspectives, and on the overall research agenda that drives the project (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021; Rhéaume et al. 2021; Roodi & Slavkov, 2022; Slavkov, 2020, 2023; Slavkov & Séror, 2019). The current study is the first one that focuses specifically on the *Linguistic Risk* digital app and represents an initial evaluation of the tool, its implementation, and the learner experiences associated with it. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to provide validity evidence for the overall perceived usefulness and effectiveness of the digital tool in second language learning as well as to examine the linguistic risk-taking approach to language teaching and learning more generally. The study is based on quantitative and qualitative language learner data from the following three sources: usage patterns and com-

ments generated through the *Linguistic Risk App*; questionnaires focused on learner experiences with linguistic risk-taking and evaluation of the app; and follow-up semi-structured interviews designed to further contextualize and enrich the usage patterns and questionnaire data. The study should be considered preliminary, as data collection and analyses based on a larger pool of participants and measures are ongoing and will be published in future work.

The research questions (RQs) that this study addresses are as follows:

- RQ 1: What are the overall experiences of English and French language learners with the linguistic risk-taking initiative in general and with the digital app specifically?
- RQ 2: What features and aspects of the digital app did the learners appreciate the most?
- RQ 3: What features and aspects of the digital app did the learners appreciate the least?
- RQ 4: Did the learners experience language gains as a result of linguistic risk-taking?
- RQ 5: Did the learners experience socio-emotional gains as a result of linguistic risk-taking?

This is a mixed methods study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) that involved gathering qualitative and quantitative data using several different instruments. The data were analyzed using (mostly descriptive) statistics and thematic analysis, as indicated in the sections that follow.

### 3.1 Participants and Data Collection Instruments

The participants were 321 university students enrolled in French as a second language (FLS) and English as a second language (ESL) courses at the University of Ottawa.<sup>5</sup> These courses are offered for credit and can be part of students' major or minor programs or count as electives in their degrees. The university is located in the English-speaking Canadian province of Ontario, and thus the majority language on campus is English, even though the university is officially bilingual. Most students are more proficient in English than in French, and thus there is a higher demand for French as a second language courses than English as a second language courses. Consequently, the number of participants in the linguistic risk-taking initiative who are English language learners is smaller than the number of French learners. An additional contextual nuance is that students generally report a higher degree of societal pressure to use English than French in real life, since the majority language of the city of Ottawa is English, even

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<sup>5</sup> The acronym FLS stands for *Français langue seconde* "French as a second language" and ESL stands for English as a second language (but see also footnote 1).

though all services on the university campus are available in both languages. This resulted in a lower number of English learning participants for the study (see section 3.1.3 below).

### 3.1.1 Digital App

The following data usage patterns were collected from the backend of the *Linguistic Risk App*: number of risks taken; newly proposed risks by learners (i.e., risks that were not already included in the app); perceived risk level on a 7-point Likert type scale for each risk taken; perceived fun level on a 7-point Likert scale for each risk taken;<sup>6</sup> and user comments about each risk taken (if provided). In this article, only the number of risks and user comments from the app are analyzed.

### 3.1.2 Questionnaire

A subset of 144 app users was offered a questionnaire about their experiences with linguistic risk-taking in general and with the digital app in particular.<sup>7</sup> The questionnaire contained multiple choice, Likert scale, multiple checkbox (check all that apply), and open-ended questions. These questions asked learners whether they had had previous experience with the concept of linguistic risk-taking, what situations they may find particularly difficult or intimidating in real-life target language use, what situations they may find fun or rewarding, whether they thought that their target language use outside of the classroom had increased as a result of participating in the initiative, whether they felt they had experienced gains in confidence and motivation due to linguistic risk-taking activities, how they felt about the usefulness and user-friendliness of the digital app, what particular features and functionalities they saw as engaging or not engaging, what general improvements they may recommend, and whether future students should be exposed to the linguistic risk-taking initiative.

### 3.1.3 Follow-up Interviews

A subset of 105 participants who responded to the questionnaire were also interested in participating in semi-structured follow-up interviews that further contextualized their responses and offered deeper insights into their experiences.

The total number of participants contributing to each of the three data collection instruments is summarized in Tab. 1.

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<sup>6</sup> Both 5 and 7-point Likert scale surveys are common in the literature. The current study chose the 7-point Likert scale for its potential of generating more fine-grained results. But see also footnote 11 for one exception.

<sup>7</sup> Due to practical considerations, it was not possible to collect questionnaire data from all 321 participants (convenience sampling).

Data Collection Instrument	Number of English as a second language (ESL) participants	Number of French as a second language (FLS) participants	Total
Digital App	39	282	321
Questionnaire	18	126	144
Follow-up Interviews	12	93	105

Tab. 1: Summary of Participants and Instruments

### 3.2 Procedures and Data Analysis

The digital app was introduced to the students in selected FLS and ESL courses at the University of Ottawa, ranging from beginner to advanced levels.<sup>8</sup> The courses at this university run on an academic term basis, each term lasting 12 weeks. Data were collected over a period of 2 years during the fall and winter terms. At the beginning of each term, students were given an explanation of the rationale behind the linguistic risk-taking initiative and invited to install the app and start using it. Instructors had a choice of how to implement the initiative, based on their own goals and teaching style. As mentioned earlier, the primary purpose of the linguistic risk-taking initiative is to serve as an opportunity for learners to apply their classroom-acquired skills in real life, outside the classroom. Some instructors simply provided the information about the app to the learners at the beginning of the term and did not follow up further. Others chose to integrate the app in their courses by having regular discussions with learners about linguistic risks, by asking students to write reflections about their linguistic risk-taking experiences, or by awarding points that counted towards the final mark of the course for using the app.

The questionnaires were administered online at the end of each term, and the follow-up interviews were scheduled within one to four weeks following the completion of the questionnaire. The interviews were done in the language of preference of the participants. Some encouragement was given to use the target language, but participants were allowed to switch to the language in which they can express themselves better. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The quantitative data from the digital app and the questionnaires were extracted and analyzed numerically while the comments from the app, the open-ended questions

<sup>8</sup> The University of Ottawa does not use the widely known CEFR levels in its language course sequences. The linguistic risk-taking initiative is intended for learners with various levels of proficiency as the risks vary in their level of difficulty and competences required. Learners are encouraged to choose risks that are relevant to them both in terms of interest and in terms of their own perception of what constitutes a challenge that they would like to attempt in the target language.

from the questionnaires, and the follow-up interviews were uploaded to Nvivo (Gilbert et al., 2014) for coding and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012).

## 4. Results

The presentation of the results of the study begins with the data collected through the digital app, followed by the data collected through the questionnaire, and then by the data collected through the follow-up interviews.

### 4.1 Digital App

Over the course of the two years, the participants checked off a total of 13,465 risks in the *Linguistic Risk App*. The average number of risks per participant was 42 risks. There were nine participants who took fewer than five risks and 15 participants who took more than 100 risks. Fig. 7 provides more details on the distribution of risks among the participants.<sup>9,10</sup>

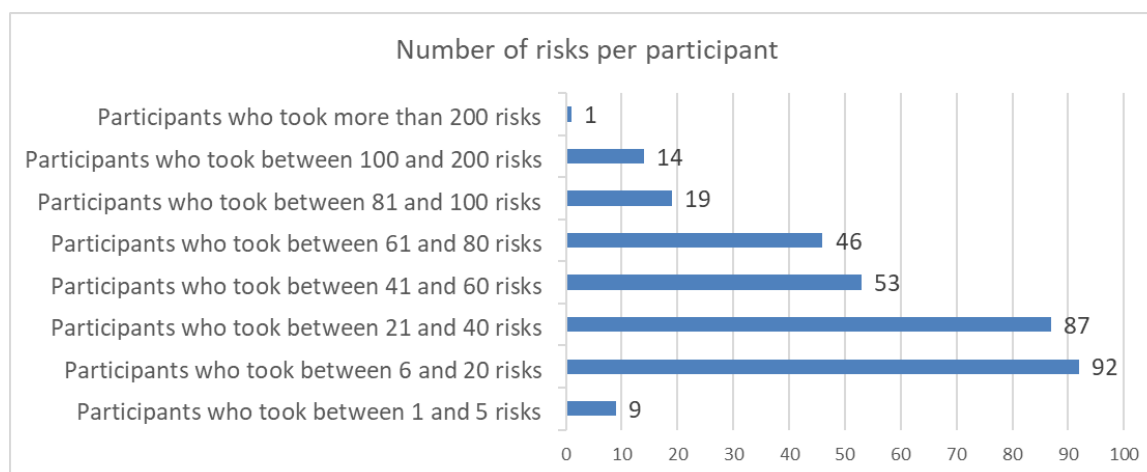


Fig. 7: Distribution of risks

The average number of risks per participant per 12-week semester was approximately 3.5 risks per week. As indicated earlier, course instructors had freedom over whether

<sup>9</sup> The data for English and French learners are presented together in most cases as the app and the questionnaires were exact equivalents in both languages. In a few cases where contextual or other differences need to be highlighted, the results are reported separately for each group.

<sup>10</sup> The intervals for Fig. 7 are uneven and were chosen with the following considerations in mind: participants who took fewer than 5 risks were considered to not have engaged with the app meaningfully; participants who had taken a minimum of 20 risks were eligible to receive a prize and thus this unit was used as the standard interval for the sake of continuity; participants who took more than 100 or more than 200 risks were considered to have exceptional engagement with the app but since there were few participants in these categories, the figure did not keep the 20 unit interval beyond 100 risks for the purpose of visual representation simplicity.

to require participants to take risks regularly and incorporate the linguistic risk-taking initiative in their curriculum or simply expose the participants to the initiative and leave it up to the learners themselves to decide to what extent they wished to participate. This explains the wide variation of number of risks taken by different participants. It should also be mentioned that the *Linguistic Risk App* had an optional leaderboard feature, which may have served as extra motivation for the more competitive users, especially the ones who took 100 risks or more (the analysis of this aspect of the study is left for future research).

In terms of the types of risks taken, there was also some variability. As indicated earlier, the app contains more than 100 different risks and learners are free to choose which ones to take, based on their personal preferences and interests. Tab. 2 lists the ten most frequently taken risks. These are reported separately for French and English learners.

Rank	French learners: most popular risks (number of times taken)	English learners: most popular risks (number of times taken)
1	J'ai envoyé un texto en français. (72)	I sent an email to a uOttawa professor in English. (39)
2	J'ai envoyé un courriel en français à un professeur de l'uOttawa. (57)	I ordered food on campus in English. (38)
3	J'ai parlé avec une camarade de classe en français. (52)	I sent a text message in English. (38)
4	J'ai reçu un courriel bilingue et j'ai lu la partie en français. (48)	I made a phone call in English. (34)
5	J'ai parlé à un proche en français. (46)	I read a book or a magazine in English. (24)
6	J'ai lu un livre ou un magazine en français. (43)	I watched a YouTube video in English. (22)
7	J'ai regardé une vidéo YouTube en français. (43)	I switched the language on my computer to English for one day. (21)
8	J'ai commandé à manger sur le campus en français. (40)	I attended an event on campus (e.g., activity, lecture, etc.) in English. (20)
9	J'ai parlé français à un ami avec lequel je parle normalement en anglais ou une autre langue. (39)	I switched the language of my smart phone or tablet to English for one day. (20)
10	J'ai changé la langue de mon téléphone intelligent ou de ma tablette en français pendant une journée. (38)	I watched a movie or a show at home in English without subtitles. (20)

Tab. 2: Ten most frequently taken risks by French and English learners

Tab. 2 indicates that there was some overlap in the top ten risks selected by the two learner groups (e.g., sending an email or a text message, watching a YouTube video, ordering food on campus, and switching the language on one's phone or tablet). There are also certain differences between the two groups (e.g., the risks in lines 4, 7, 8 and 10 taken by English learners are not among the top 10 risks taken by French learners; conversely, the risks in lines 4, 5 and 9 taken by French learners are not among the top 10 risks taken by English learners). This finding may be explained tentatively by the majority-minority status of the target language that is different for each participant group. Alternatively, it may be due to normal variation, the different size of the two groups, or to some independent reasons that cannot be explained on the basis of the data collected in this study.

## 4.2 Questionnaires

The questionnaires were focused on the learners' experiences both with the linguistic risk-taking initiative in general and with the different features or functionalities of the app, including how engaging, user-friendly, and useful they were perceived to be. In terms of experiences with the linguistic risk-taking initiative in general, the participants reported on whether they believed that their use of the target language (French or English), their confidence, and their motivation had increased, as a result of participating in this initiative. As indicated in Fig. 8, 9, and 10, most responses fell within the highest three categories of the 7-point scales.

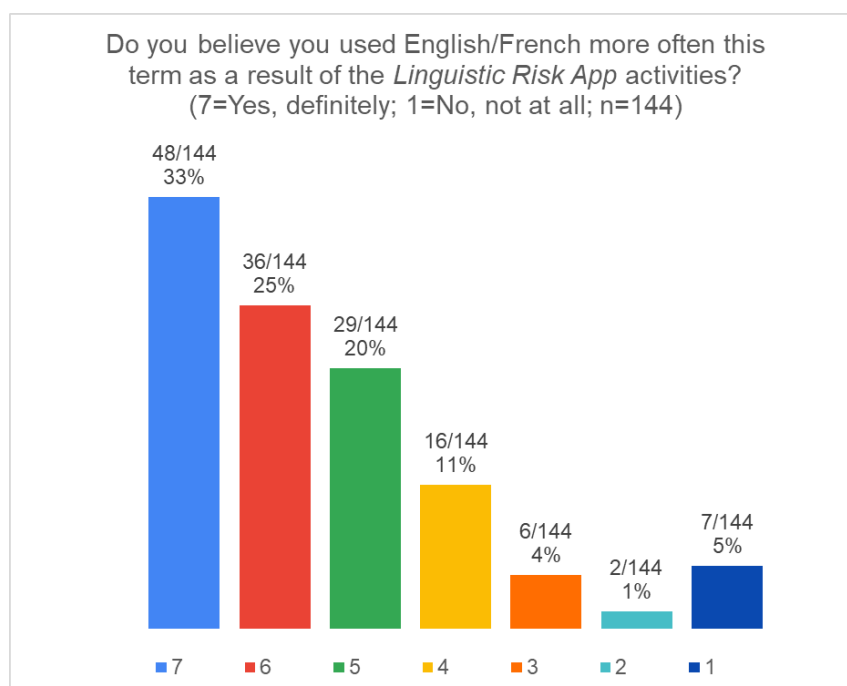


Fig. 8: Increased use of the target language

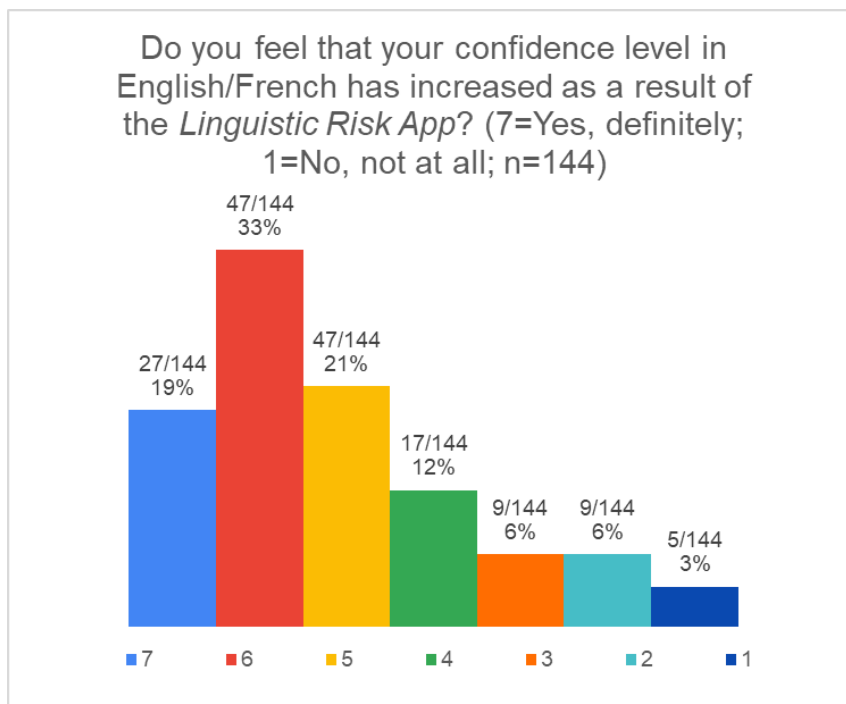


Fig. 9: Increased level of confidence

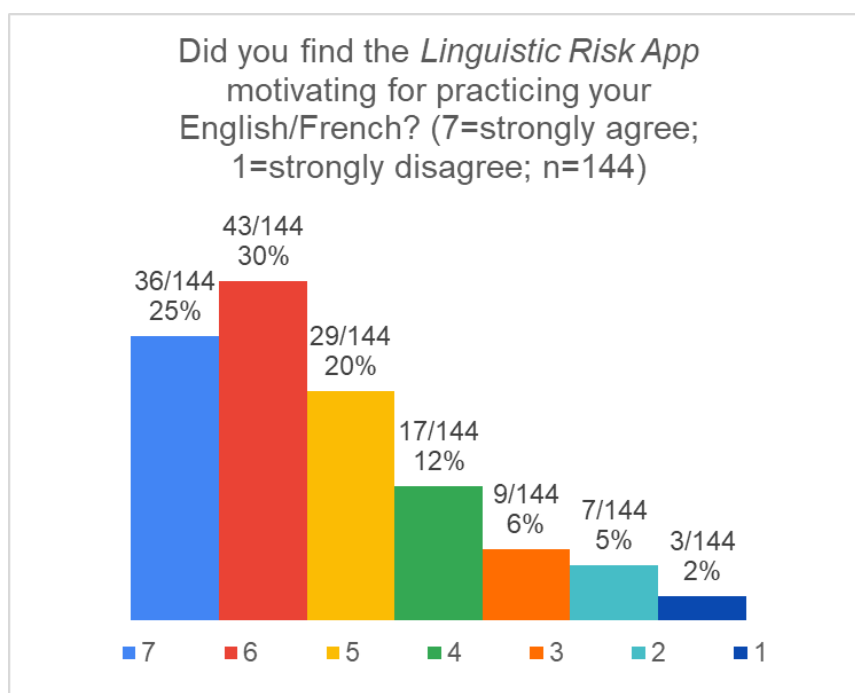


Fig. 10: Increased motivation

Regarding the *Linguistic Risk App* specifically, the participants were asked if they found it useful, fun, both, or neither. These data are summarized in Fig. 11.

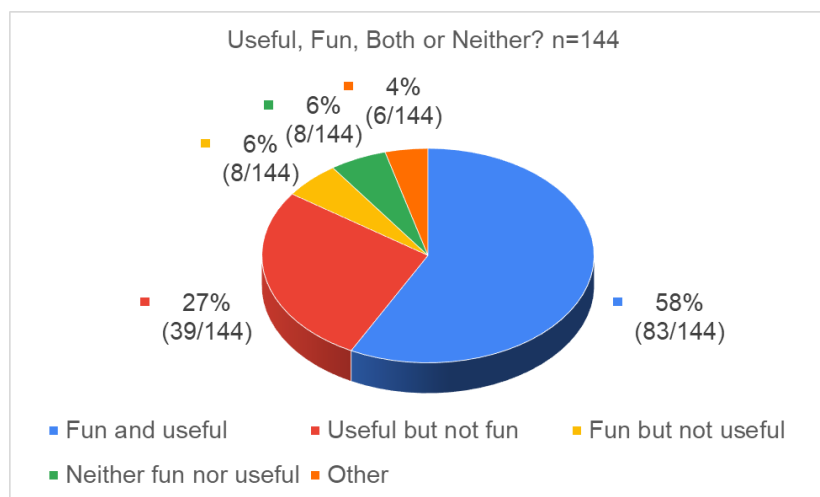


Fig. 11: Usefulness and fun of the *Linguistic Risk App*

The data indicate that the majority of participants found the app both useful and fun (58%) while close to one third (27%) found it useful but not fun. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test revealed a statistically significant deviation from a uniform distribution,  $\chi^2(4, N = 144) = 153.71, p < .001$ . Post hoc pairwise comparisons using z-tests for proportions with Bonferroni correction revealed that the “Fun and useful” and “Useful but not fun” categories, respectively, were selected significantly more often ( $p < .001$ ) than the categories ranked below them. No significant differences in selection were found among the three lower-ranked categories: “Fun but not useful”, “Neither fun nor useful” and “Other”. Overall, these results suggest that the app is perceived as effective by more than three quarters of the population. A higher degree of fun (gamification) can be achieved in the future to make it not only useful but also enjoyable for a higher proportion of the users (see also the discussion section).

Learners were also asked to rate the various features and functionalities of the app on a five-point scale, from most to least engaging.<sup>11</sup> These results are summarized in Fig. 12.

<sup>11</sup> These specific questions were in a clustered block in the questionnaire, and the software offered better display and higher device compatibility when using a 5-point Likert scale in this case. While this constitutes an inconsistency with the 7-point Likert scales reported in Fig. 8, 9, 10, and 13, no direct comparisons are drawn with the data from those figures and thus the validity is not compromised.



Fig. 12: Engagement scale for the different app features

The My Stats module, where users can view customized charts about the number, type, and timeline of the risks they have taken was rated the most engaging feature (4.13/5), while the ‘risks trending by other users’ feature was reported to be the least engaging one (3.31/5). It must be mentioned that these differences are currently not statistically significant, but this trend has been consistent over several iterations of the questionnaire and thus once the additional data that is currently being collected is added, it is expected that these trends will reach significance levels.

The questionnaire also asked participants if they thought they would continue to use the *Linguistic Risk App* after completing the 12-week course. These results are summarized in Fig. 13.

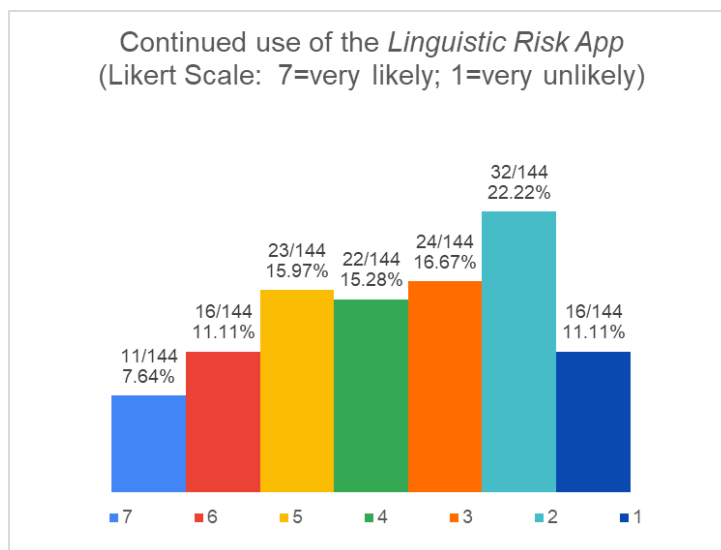


Fig. 13: Continued use of the *Linguistic Risk App*

As the data indicate, most students report that they are unlikely to use the app in the future, after completion of the course. This is not surprising, considering that even though the app is perceived as useful, it is currently not gamified enough to merit spontaneous and autonomous long-term use without being paired with a language class (see Roodi & Slavkov, 2022, for an earlier assessment of the gamification of the initiative).

### 4.3 In-app Comments, Open-ended Questionnaire Items, and Follow-up Interviews

The thematic analysis of the qualitative comments collected with the digital app, the open-ended questionnaire items, and the follow-up interviews revealed a number of recurrent themes and patterns. This article reports on a subset of preliminary themes that were developed in response to the research questions presented in section 3 and with an initial focus on 50 participants. Analysis of a more detailed corpus with richer themes and sub-themes is in progress and will be presented in future work.

The qualitative data indicate that over the course of the 12 weeks during which the participants were exposed to the concept of linguistic risk-taking and the digital app, they experienced improvement and growth on both linguistic and socio-emotional dimensions. Some learners reported that being exposed to the linguistic risk-taking initiative resulted in more real-life practice of the target language (French or English) and this in turn led to improved language skills, as illustrated in (1)–(2).<sup>12</sup>

#### Theme 1: Language improvement

- 1) Yes, I never felt like I had an issue with hearing to other people speak French or like reading French [or] writing French. My biggest issue was speaking French and again once you're forced into a situation where you have to speak it that's the only way or that's a big way that you will end up learning the language. So, for sure it strengthened [my language skills] by the end of the course.
- 2) Hmm. I know it's the yeah [...] like maybe presentation maybe the writing or [...] I will say the application. [...] the application yeah the linguistic risk application and you know we had two presentations in front of the class. I will say these two things helped me [improve] most.

Apart from improved language skills, many participants reported that linguistic risk-taking offered them socio-emotional benefits, such as feelings of enjoyment, increased

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<sup>12</sup> All qualitative comments from the digital app, the questionnaire, and the follow-up interviews are reported without correction of errors. Ellipsis in square brackets [...] indicates pauses or interruptions in the speech flow. Words in square brackets indicate material that was inserted by the researcher to disambiguate, clarify or translate a participant statement into English (in cases where code-switching occurs). In cases where both the interviewer and the participant's speech are reported, capital letters I and P are used to differentiate between the speakers.

confidence, or impetus to seek and benefit from authentic daily target language use. Some examples are provided in (3)–(5).

Theme 2: Socio-emotional gains: enjoyment, increased confidence, feeling encouraged

- 3) It [linguistic risk-taking] definitely did encourage me to use it [French] more often because I can also see the benefit of using French in my day-to-day life, whether it be speaking, reading, or writing, improving my overall French understanding and abilities.
- 4) I: Does this kind of [difficult] situation [linguistic risks] kind of discourage you to use English?  
P: No, it's the I think, no. It's the opposite okay. It's the inverse. It's encouraging me to improve my [...] yeah to learn English.
- 5) Like I said, it helps you to express yourself in English and to get more confident and yes, and it's so fun.

Another set of socio-emotional benefits were expressed by participants who focused on personal growth and new discoveries they made through their exposure to the linguistic risk-taking initiative. By discovering new ways of learning through taking linguistic risks, the participants were able to grow both on a linguistic and personal level, as indicated in (6)–(7).

Theme 3: Novelty, personal growth

- 6) So, [the app] is a really cool thing to have because I've never heard of [linguistic risk-taking] before this French class. So, it does for sure kind of push me to do things that I would have never done before.
- 7) This semester has kind of made me grow a lot, so yeah.

Some participants commented on initial anxiety or fear that they experienced in relation to using the target language in real life, but once they were pushed out of their comfort zone through class discussions on linguistic risk-taking and/or use of the digital app, they were able to overcome their fears and find pleasure in taking risks, as indicated in (8)–(10).

Theme 4: Anxiety and Enjoyment: overcoming anxiety or fear and discovering positive emotions

- 8) I put a lot of pressure on myself as a second language learner to be the same as somebody who is a first language French speaker... mais cette application m'aidait [but this application helped me] to kind of break through these thoughts ... you know, I am a second language learner, I need to like not put as much pressure on myself and then it has helped me be like, oh yeah, like you can make mistakes, which I was always afraid of making before.
- 9) So just the presentation was difficult to me. But it was not difficult. I was scared before. [...] Yes, I was scared before because I was talking to myself, oh it's, it will be in front

of the class.[...] I was scared that someone laugh at me or yeah but it was really fun, I enjoyed it.

- 10) Definitely just like using French in public [is scary]. It was a lot scarier to me at the beginning than it is now.

A few participants were initially reluctant to take risks or were skeptical about the initiative. They did not think this was necessarily going to be helpful or pleasant. However, once they started taking linguistic risks, they gradually changed their mind and ultimately felt capable and empowered, as suggested in examples (11)–(12).

#### Theme 5: Overcoming initial hesitance or skepticism

- 11) So, the professor asked, asked [made] us to do the risk. And but that's there [at the beginning]. Yeah, but and...After trying after [sometime]. I took the risk by my own.
- 12) Funny enough, I, this is something that I struggled with, but I took [this] course [...] about like speaking in French and like I was pushed to take more risks and when I started doing it more often and had more opportunities to speak in French, I realized that I actually can do it and I was at first [...] doubting myself on the inside, I was like, maybe I won't because I don't want to embarrass myself. I don't want to. I don't want to be not understood, but once you start doing it, you realize that's not true. [...] Yeah, 100% similarly to what I said before, now that I prove to myself that I can do it.

Although negative experiences or reports that the concept of linguistic risk-taking was not useful were rare, as already illustrated by the questionnaire data earlier, there was a limited number of learners who did not enjoy the approach. Some also reported that they were already comfortable taking linguistic risks and did not need the app to encourage them to do so, or did not find the app user-friendly enough and preferred to simply take risks without using the app. Some of these comments are illustrated in (13)–(15).

#### Theme 6: Negative experiences or lack of usefulness of the approach

- 13) [The app] was fun and useful, but also extremely stressful.
- 14) [...] I really think the app is good and the concept and intention behind it. But at the same time, I don't think it was the best for me or did that big of a difference for me personally.
- 15) The app seemed well organized and useful but for me as a person, I never stick to agendas, or goals, journals, or trackers, it's easier for me to do things in the spur of the moment.

## 5. Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative data presented above allow us to return to the five research questions of this study. RQ1, which draws on positive psychology, focused on

the overall experiences of English and French language learners with the linguistic risk-taking initiative in general and with the digital app specifically. The questionnaire data revealed that the overall experiences of the learners were positive. The total number of risks taken (13,465) was quite high, and the average number of risks per participant (42) exceeded the expectations set by the researchers and the instructors (minimum 20 risks to be eligible for a prize). There were students who enjoyed taking linguistic risks to the point of exceeding the 100 or even 200 marks (recall Fig. 12). In addition, the questionnaire results showed a high percentage of participants that reported an increased use of the target language, an increased level of confidence, and higher motivation to use the target language, as a result of being exposed to the linguistic risk-taking approach to language learning. However, it is also noteworthy that the majority of students stated they will not continue using the app past the end of the course (this point will be discussed further below).

Regarding the digital app specifically, the quantitative data showed an overwhelmingly positive response in that 85% of the learners found the app useful and 27% of these learners found it both useful and fun. The qualitative data from the comments provided through the app, the additional open-ended questionnaire questions, and the follow-up interviews reinforced these findings, offering examples of various rewarding experiences. These results offer validation evidence for the linguistic risk-taking initiative in general and for the digital app at the center of this initiative.

There is also evidence that a small portion of the population (e.g., 6% in Fig. 11) do not appreciate the initiative or the app. This may be due to personal preferences, different learning styles, or in some cases lower level of satisfaction with the app's interface or functionalities (see also Rhéaume et al., 2021; Slavkov, 2023). Although limited, these responses are important not only for future technical improvements but also in terms of an increased pedagogical awareness that some learners may need to be given the opportunity to opt out and engage in alternative learning activities, using a different approach (Slavkov, 2023).

RQs 2 and 3, which are related to gamification, focused on what features of the digital app were most and least appreciated by the users. From the quantitative findings, it emerged that the user statistics feature was ranked as most appreciated while the risk trending feature ranked as least appreciated. These results are preliminary, as the differences did not reach statistical significance and thus further testing is needed in the future. It is important to also mention that even if some features are not used or not appreciated by all students, these features should not be eliminated from the app. Students can simply choose to ignore them and focus on the ones that correspond to their personal preferences. Qualitative data that were not discussed in detail in this article also suggest that in some cases learners have contrasting opinions about the same feature, so it would not be advisable to remove any content at this point.

Another point that merits discussion is that the digital app was rated much higher on the usefulness than on the fun dimension. This offers potential explanation as to why the majority of learners indicated they were unlikely to continue using the app independently after the end of their 12-week language course. In this respect, a more effective gamification concept must be developed in the future. At the same time, it must be recognized that only highly motivated and invested language learners might continue to use the app on their own in the long run, even if it were highly gamified. As such, combining the app with course instruction (e.g., introducing the notion of linguistic risk-taking and the app in class, having discussions about the benefits of linguistic risk-taking, and assigning risks as out-of-class practice or homework) may be the most effective way of ensuring that learners benefit fully from the initiative.

RQ 4 focused on language gains related to linguistic risk-taking. A high percentage of participants responded that their real-life use of and socialization in the target language have increased due to the linguistic risk-taking initiative. It is reasonable to assume that this increased use comes with tangible improvements in the target language. The qualitative data also supported the idea of linguistic improvements as a result of taking linguistic risks. This is, of course, based on self-reports and not an objective finding, as there was no pre- and post- proficiency testing included in this study. In any case, it would be hard to implement objective measures and associate them directly with the linguistic risk-taking initiative, as it may be that language gains do occur simply as a result of taking a 12-week language course regardless of the added linguistic risk-taking activities. That is, causality would be difficult to establish and as such, objective testing would not necessarily be useful.

RQ 5 focused on socio-emotional gains as a result of the linguistic risk-taking initiative. This can be seen to some degree in the questionnaire data where a higher level of motivation and confidence were reported. The qualitative data, however, are an even stronger indicator of the rich and varied socio-emotional benefits that the learners reported. Some of these included feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment, new discoveries, and personal growth. Such findings are consistent with the theoretical insights of positive psychology and plurilingualism. Furthermore, the essence of the concept of linguistic risk is cornerstone to the idea of counterbalancing the commonly experienced feelings of language anxiety or fear with positive emotions related to overcoming those feelings of anxiety or fear. A variety of such benefits were reported: new discoveries (i.e., situations in which learners would not have dared to use the target language before); pleasure in taking on linguistic challenges; feeling less embarrassed or less scared to use the target language; enjoying communicating with others or enjoying speaking in public; and overall personal growth.

## 6. Conclusion

Beyond addressing the research questions directly, it is important to also extend the scope of the discussion further into the interdisciplinary theoretical framework that motivated this study. As mentioned earlier, the linguistic risk-taking initiative is related to socialization, positive psychology, and plurilingualism. The findings of the study offer evidence indicating that participants who were encouraged to connect classroom language learning with the outside world were able to participate in socialization experiences with the target-language community and increasingly use the target language in various interpersonal daily situations. In terms of positive psychology, most learners reported enriching experiences related not only to language learning, but also to personal development, contentedness, and enjoyment. These can be seen as indicators of overall language-related subjective well-being (see De Houwer, 2020, for an overview). Finally, aspects of plurilingual theory were also supported by the data since participants reported an increased level of comfort with their learner identity, a higher tolerance for making mistakes, and decreased desire to try to measure up against the harmful notion of a native speaker. On the whole, these results are highly encouraging and offer validation evidence for the linguistic risk-taking initiative and digital app, making them an exciting novel avenue for further exploration and development in various contexts around the world.

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