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Kim-Sarah Schick, Natascha Mizelle, Andreas Rohde

The Pedagogical Potential of Healthy Linguistic Risk-Taking for Promoting Well-Being

Abstract

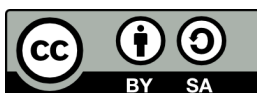
Language learner well-being is increasingly recognized as vital for effective language acquisition. The linguistic risk-taking (LRT) initiative offers promising support in this regard but has not received the same attention as constructs like willingness to communicate (WTC). LRT encourages learners to engage with linguistic challenges by reframing risk as a manageable and meaningful part of language use. Drawing on positive psychology frameworks such as PERMA and EMPATHICS, this article explores the potential of healthy LRT, which supports well-being dimensions like self-efficacy, agency, motivation, and resilience, in particular through emotion regulation and a growth-oriented language mindset. We argue that conceptual overlap within well-being models is a strength, not a limitation, and illustrates LRT's broad relevance. Based on a literature review, this conceptual article refines the LRT construct and proposes a model for its pedagogical application.

Das *Well-Being* von Sprachlernenden wird zunehmend als entscheidend für effektiven Spracherwerb anerkannt, und die *Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT) Initiative* birgt in dieser Hinsicht vielversprechendes Potenzial. *LRT* ermutigt Lernende, sich sprachlichen Herausforderungen zu stellen, indem es das Eingehen von Risiken als bewältigbaren und sinnvollen Teil des Sprachgebrauchs neu definiert. Basierend auf positiver Psychologie und Modellen wie PERMA und EMPATHICS untersucht dieser Artikel, wie ‚gesundes‘ *LRT* Aspekte des Well-Beings wie Selbstwirksamkeit, Handlungsfähigkeit, Motivation und Resilienz fördert, insbesondere durch Emotionsregulation und eine wachstumsorientierte Einstellung zur Sprache. *Risk-Taking* hat bislang weniger Aufmerksamkeit erhalten als Konstrukte wie Kommunikationsbereitschaft (*WTC*). Neuere Arbeiten von Slavkov et al. (Universität Ottawa) rücken das Potenzial von *LRT* stärker in den Fokus. Wir argumentieren, dass konzeptionelle Überschneidungen innerhalb von *Well-Being*-Modellen eine Stärke darstellen und die Anschlussfähigkeit von *LRT* verdeutlichen. Basierend auf einer Literaturrecherche präzisiert dieser konzeptionelle Artikel das *LRT*-Konstrukt und schlägt ein Modell für die pädagogisch-didaktische Umsetzung einer *LRT*-Initiative vor.

Keywords

linguistic risk-taking, healthy risk-taking, well-being, positive psychology, PERMA, EMPATHICS, resilience

Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT), sprachliche Risikobereitschaft, *Risk-Taking*, *Well-Being*, Kommunikationsbereitschaft (*WTC*), Positive Psychologie, PERMA, EMPATHICS, Resilienz, Emotionsregulation



1. Introduction

A linguistic risk is an authentic, autonomous communicative act where learners are pushed out of their linguistic and cultural comfort zone through using the target language (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 254; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129; Slavkov, 2023, p. 35). Linguistic risk-taking (LRT) can be embedded in contemporary pedagogical, psychological, and social frameworks such as positive psychology and well-being (Slavkov, 2023, pp. 33, 38). However, risk-taking has not been prioritized in applied linguistics and language teaching research and practice as much as constructs like willingness to communicate, motivation, identity or anxiety until a Canadian initiative at the University of Ottawa (Slavkov & Séror, 2019) began to spotlight the potential of LRT. Recent publications from this line of research (e.g., Slavkov, 2023) have brought attention to LRT's usefulness for *pedagogical practice*, underscoring the importance of further exploration and application of this construct, especially since the LRT construct remains underdeveloped in many respects (Slavkov, 2023, p. 37).

The essential pedagogical tool within the LRT initiative is the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport, which was designed for the bilingual university campus in Canada (uOttawa). It lists approximately 80 risks in the format of a travel passport. Risk examples are changing one's phone settings to the target language, ordering in the cafeteria, speaking to a superior or writing an email to a professor in the L2. Whilst university students can independently complete and check off those risks, the passport itself is introduced in language classes of the university. Students can also rate risk-potential, propose new risks and share them with others (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, pp. 260–264; Slavkov, 2023, pp. 34–37). The LRT passport is also available as a digital app called *Linguistic Risk* for members of the campus of the University of Ottawa (Slavkov, 2026). For more details on how the LRT initiative works at the University of Ottawa, please see Slavkov (2026). The initiative has since been adapted for the contexts of university learners of English as a foreign language in Japan (MacDonald & Thompson, 2019), L2 learners of German in Austria (Cajka et al., 2023), as a handbook of language challenges for the European Day of Languages (European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe, 2025), in K-12 school-settings and within rehabilitation and health sciences for people that stutter (Slavkov, 2023, p. 52; Slavkov, 2020, p. 64). These examples underline the adaptation potential of the LRT initiative (Slavkov, 2023, p. 52).

In this conceptual article, we argue that the special potential of the LRT initiative lies in its contribution to language learner well-being and in its pedagogical potential for customization for different learning contexts and learner needs. The following steps are undertaken through a comprehensive literature review. We contribute to the field by clarifying our understanding of well-being and the LRT construct within language pedagogy. We do so by analyzing LRT through the lens of well-being, thus pointing out why and how LRT can contribute to prioritizing and promoting learner well-being. We

place particular emphasis on the notion of ‘healthy’ risk-taking (Cervantes, 2013), which necessitates further exploration and specification and may suggest directions for future research on applying LRT in real-world language classrooms.

2. Theoretical and Terminological Background

2.1 Well-Being & Positive Psychology

Like LRT, well-being is highly personal and subjective in how it is perceived by individuals (Resnik & Mercer, 2024, p. 112). Mercer (2021, pp. 14–16) argues that well-being is not only a subjective and individual experience, but also socially situated, i.e., collective and systemically determined. Therefore, working towards well-being becomes a collective responsibility in the community. In language education, such communities encompass, amongst others, teachers, learners, administrators and caretakers. If well-being is shaped and negotiated socially within communities, then Mercer & Gregersen (2023, p. 1) ask how an individual can be thought of as flourishing if others in their communities are not? Inclusive language education thus needs to address models of (language learner) well-being. Well-being is an important dimension and goal of inclusion (Piezunka et al., 2017, p. 207). Not only has it been incorporated into the UN future goals for Edu2030 and the OECD PISA profiles, but it is also accounted for in transversal curricula worldwide (Mercer, 2021, p. 14).

Well-being as a psychological construct has been given more priority in the field of applied linguistics and language learning in recent years. In this paper, we will refer to the multidimensional PERMA model of well-being (Seligman, 2011) as well as to EMPATHICS (Oxford, 2016a; 2016b), a model of *language learner* well-being that builds on PERMA. *PERMA* is a general model of well-being that is well-operationalized and based on evidence-based empirical research (Seligman, 2013, pp. 15–20, as cited in Marx, 2020, p. 133). Within the PERMA model, well-being consists of five elements: *Positive emotion, Engagement, positive Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishments*.

EMPATHICS (Oxford, 2016a; 2016b) is a model of language learner well-being that is grounded in complex dynamic systems theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Dörnyei, 2009c, pp. 195–196; the latter cited in Oxford, 2016b, p. 10), expands PERMA and relates it to the field of language learning. The acronym EMPATHICS consists of significant psychological dimensions that make up well-being and can have a positive impact on language learning (achievement and proficiency) (Oxford, 2016b, p. 10): *E*: emotion and empathy; *M*: meaning and motivation; *P*: perseverance, including resilience, hope and optimism; *A*: agency and autonomy; *T*: time; *H*: hardiness and habits of mind; *I*: intelligences; *C*: character strengths; and *S*: self factors (self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem, self-verification).

Any model of *language learner* well-being is still work-in-progress. Marx (2020, p. 134) argues that some of the explicitly mentioned dimensions of EMPATHICS are an inherent part of PERMA. She furthermore points out that the main elements of PERMA can be clearly separated, whereas the EMPATHICS elements cannot. Alrabai and Dewaele (2023) argue similarly and, building onto Oxford's EMPATHICS, propose a revised trimmed-down *E4MC* model of language learner well-being, according to which *Empathy, Emotions, Emotional intelligence, Engagement, Motivation & Character strengths* lie at the heart of language learner well-being.

It is positive that language learner models of well-being continue to be discussed and refined. For our article, we will refer to a selection of relevant dimensions of versions of the aforementioned models while analyzing how LRT can contribute to well-being.

When considering the language classroom, well-being and positive psychology are inseparable. "Positive psychology examines and promotes human well-being" (Oxford, 2016a, p. 21). Positive psychology has its beginnings in the 1998 election of Martin Seligman as president of the American Psychological Association. It represents a move away from a focus on distress, healing, pathology, disease and repairing damage. Instead, the focus in positive psychology is on positive qualities and developments in the human psyche and experience. Positive psychology takes into consideration facing difficulties, but from a perspective of well-being and exploring what is necessary for building strong, fulfilled, flourishing and thriving individuals and communities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; MacIntyre, 2016, pp. 4–5; Oxford, 2016a, p. 22). MacIntyre (2016, pp. 4–5) states that the most straightforward definition of positive psychology is one offered by Peterson (2006): "The scientific study of what goes right in life". Positive psychology relies on the assumption that strength- and resource-oriented interventions can improve the well-being of individuals and communities. Education and language are at the heart of these processes (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 5). Such interventions can take place in educational institutions such as schools through positive education (Seligman et al., 2009).

Slavkov (2023, pp. 38–40) places LRT within positive psychology by arguing that it creates enabling affective resources for language learning. LRT can achieve this by making learners aware of potential stresses and anxieties they may experience and, at the same time, facilitating a positive attitude towards challenging linguistic and social situations through reflection, ultimately contributing to positive emotions such as pride and joy. Using this argumentation as a starting point, this article provides an in-depth exploration of why and how LRT can help learners to thrive and flourish.

2.2 The Linguistic Risk-Taking Construct

Risk-Taking was initially related to language and language learning by Beebe (1983) in her review of social-psychological as well as linguistic and ESL (English as a Second Language) literature on the construct. Risk-taking has since been revisited by different authors in the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition (Cervantes, 2013; Dehbozorgi, 2012; Dewaele, 2012; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Karimi & Biria, 2017; among others as cited in Slavkov, 2023, p. 33).

Beebe (1983, p. 39) discusses risk-taking as “a situation where an individual has to *make a decision involving choice between alternatives of different desirability; the outcome of the choice is uncertain; there is a possibility of failure*” (Beebe, 1983, p. 39, *emphasis added*). Such decisions can be trying out new and difficult structures the learner is unsure of or listening to input that is beyond the learner’s proficiency (Beebe, 1983, pp. 46–47, 60). The LRT passport (uOttawa) lists a plethora of situations and activities that require language learners to make such decisions. Language learners face a range of potential failures, including making errors, being misunderstood, or failing to communicate effectively. These linguistic and communicative failures may lead to negative evaluations against language norms—such as being perceived as less intelligent or likable, unfavorable comparisons with peers, social discomfort, and even perceived threats to one’s identity or self-concept (Beebe, 1983, pp. 44–45, 60; Slavkov, 2023, p. 33).

Risk potential exists across all four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), although spoken interactions may overall carry more risk-value (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 257; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129). This understanding goes beyond Beebe (1983) who originally only discussed risk-taking in spoken interactions (Slavkov, 2023, p. 37). Receptive LRT occurs when learners engage with spoken or written input that exceeds their current linguistic competence, often resulting in feelings of anxiety. This might involve, for instance, attempting to read a text or listen to a podcast that appears too advanced for their current or perceived level. In the Canadian discussion of LRT and for the purpose of their LRT initiative on the bilingual campus of the University of Ottawa, Slavkov and Séror (2019, p. 259) defined “linguistic risks as authentic everyday communicative acts that take place outside of the language classroom and involve spontaneous and meaningful second language use.” For our research contexts and interests, we expand this perspective by arguing that linguistic risk-taking can take place when using and learning any second language, but also when using and learning a first language. Linguistic risk-taking can take place both inside and outside of the classroom walls and in many different domains. This may be especially true for vulnerable learners, e.g., learners with Developmental Language Disorder (Schick & Rohde, 2025; Riehemann & Eberhardt-Juchem, 2026). Especially when aiming to develop the LRT initiative for diverse learners and learning contexts, it is important to adopt a very broad and multidimensional perspective on linguistic risk-taking. Such risks need not

be conceived only in terms of potential failure but can equally involve moments of playfulness or pleasure, for example by attempting a joke, experimenting with a pun or ordering a treat in a new language. These are situations in which stepping slightly beyond one's comfort zone can be both engaging and rewarding.

What differentiates risk-taking in a more general sense within communication (exposing one's political views in an utterance, disagreeing with others) from *linguistic* risk-taking, is that the latter specifically refers to the phenomenon that an utterance can become a risk more because of how the risk is 'packaged' linguistically (pronunciation, syntax, socio-pragmatically) than because of the actual potential for conflict in its content or context. Complexity of the communicative situation, task or content on the one hand and language on the other hand interact, of course, so that context and content can make linguistic expression or language comprehension more challenging. In our understanding of LRT, however, the linguistic en- or decoding is what adds the decisive layer to turning a situation into a linguistic risk.

The construct of 'risk' is a slippery term as it largely depends on the individual learner to assess a particular utterance as a risk, especially in the context of learners with particular challenges such as Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) or autism (Alvarez & Wolfe, 2023). From a linguistic or socio-pragmatic stance respectively, the term "risk" may be impossible to define. "[Y]ou take a risk every time you open your mouth in a foreign language, or for that matter in any learning situation where you are called on to perform" (Beebe 1983, p. 39). According to this claim, every utterance can be a potential risk. We could in this case invoke the framework of speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). However, "speech act theory forces a sentence-based, speaker-oriented mode of analysis requiring attribution of speech act categories [...]" (Brown et al., 1987, p. 10). A speaker-oriented mode of analysis may be in line with our understanding of 'risk', however a clear-cut attribution of utterances to speech acts may be difficult in learner language and, more importantly, classic speech act theory only recognizes a very limited number as bona fide speech acts. We may therefore move towards a more far-reaching socio-pragmatic construct: face. This construct was originally used by Goffman (1955; 1972) and further developed by Brown et al. (1987), who tied face up with "notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or 'losing face'" (Brown et al., 1987, p. 61). Brown et al. exclusively focus on face with regard to (positive and negative) politeness, which they consider to be universal despite cultural differences, as well as on both maintenance and enhancement of face. Positive politeness strengthens the speakers' and hearers' positive face, i.e., the desire to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other individuals. Negative politeness is geared towards somebody's negative face, i.e., the desire to be free from impositions (Brown et al., 1987; Sifianou & Tzanne, 2021, p. 252).

We would like to adopt a less specific notion of ‘face’. Politeness may be marginally relevant for our learners, especially those with DLD. In contrast to Brown et al. (1987) we are more specifically interested in what Ting-Toomey and Turogi (1998, p. 190) refer to as the “affective layer of face” (e.g., feelings of self-esteem and pride on the one hand, and embarrassment and shame on the other). Those feelings of empowerment, self-esteem and pride may be the learners’ favorable experiences strengthening their (positive) face. They can be related to the well-being dimensions of (positive) emotions (PERMA, EMPATHICS, E4MC) as well as self-factors (EMPATHICS).

On the downside, the affective layer of face also includes something we would like to refer to as ‘self-threats’ to one’s positive face (see the quote above from Beebe: “[Y]ou take a risk every time you open your mouth (in a foreign language)”). Especially for DLD learners, this may also be true for L1 utterances (Schick & Rohde, 2025). In other words, one’s utterances may cause embarrassing and humiliating situations for the speakers themselves as they are derided or disapproved of by interlocutors. What counts as a self-threat to face cannot be determined on universal grounds; it is, especially in the case of children with DLD, a highly individual decision and experience. A self-threat may be caused by inappropriate language, i.e., accidental rudeness, or simply mispronunciation or incorrect and inadequate choice of vocabulary and syntax, or the use of a language variety with low prestige (again, in both L1 and L2 acquisition). Cajka and Vetter (2026) address this issue when discussing LRT in the context of minoritized languages.

However, what counts as a threat for one child may not be a risk for another. One individual may not hesitate to utter a request and may not fear any potential consequences, whereas for another it may be an insurmountable hurdle. This, in turn, follows van der Bom and Mills (2015, p. 187, as cited in Sifianou & Tzanne, 2021, p. 250) for whom face is seen as a situated and discursively negotiated phenomenon rather than as a static entity as in Brown et al. (1987), who are criticized for being preoccupied with “decontextualized acts” (Sifianou & Tzanne, 2021, p. 253). In order to do justice to potential face-threats in communicative encounters, it will be necessary to look at the individual learners and their individual challenges in concrete communicative situations.

Perceptions of risk-taking are individual and dynamic. It is difficult to establish, for example, what constitutes a moderate risk for any specific learner in any specific situation (Beebe, 1983, p. 59). In deciding whether a risk is ‘worth it’, learners can perceive situations and factors contributing to this very differently. Cervantes (2013, p. 433) provides the example of some students feeling more confident taking a risk with their peers rather than in the presence of a language teacher. Data from our own study, however, suggests that students with DLD may perceive a strong fear of being laughed at by peers, but also that this highly depends on any specific group dynamics (Schick & Rohde, 2025).

2.3 Pedagogical Terminology in the Context of Linguistic Risk-Taking

Since risk-taking is not a stable personality variable, but rather dynamic and influenced by situational variables such as prior experience or reward as well as the social setting (Beebe, 1983, pp. 41–42), we argue that it has the potential to be used in pedagogical practice within language learning and teaching. Similarly, Rhéaume et al. (2021, p. 1216) state that if LRT is guided and scaffolded, language competence, confidence, target language exposure and opportunity to practice can be increased (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, pp. 259–260; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, pp. 128–129, 132).

Slavkov (2023) refers to LRT as a “*pedagogical practice*” (p. 33) and an “*approach to language teaching and learning (supplementing classroom instruction)*” (p. 49, *emphasis added*). Through this, he initiates the recognition of the importance of LRT for language teaching. When discussing LRT in practice in the context of the University of Ottawa, Slavkov (2023) furthermore uses the term LRT *initiative* (p. 34) for the larger institutional framework and attitude centering around the LRT passport, with the goal of encouraging university students to seize opportunities of using their L2. The term *tool* is used for the LRT passport specifically (Slavkov, 2023, p. 34). Slavkov (2023, p. 37) also refers to the passport as a *pedagogical resource* and research tool.

The linguistic risk-taking approach to language teaching and learning is not meant to replace classroom teaching, but to supplement it, offering an anchor into real-life applications, which can potentially lead to a higher degree of autonomy and life-long commitment to continued language learning. [...] The implications of this approach can be far-reaching as interested practitioners and institutions around the world can use the experience and the model presented here and design their own linguistic risk-taking initiatives, adapting the passport tool to their individual contexts. (Slavkov, 2023, p. 52).

For the time being, we refer to Linguistic Risk Taking as a *pedagogical initiative*, differentiating from Slavkov’s (2023) term *pedagogical approach*, as we believe ‘*approach*’ typically refers to a broader theoretical concept, such as a philosophy or belief system reflecting theories on language and language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 22). Approaches do not prescribe specific teaching actions in a teaching scenario (Anthony, 1963; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). An approach would be positive psychology, for example, while LRT can be seen as one way of enacting such an approach. LRT is also in line with action-oriented approaches such as TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching; Slavkov, 2023, p. 36; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021). Some risks can even be considered a task or a special subcategory of task that has to entail a dimension of experiential learning and emotion-regulation thus moving beyond cognitive learning (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 135; Slavkov, 2023, p. 36).

We acknowledge that LRT may well develop into an approach at some point in the future, especially with it being further developed and validated all over the world (Slavkov, 2020, p. 64).

Thus, additional validation of linguistic risk-taking as an approach with a positive impact on language learning and maintenance is expected in the future from other languages and contexts both in Canada and in other corners of the world (Slavkov, 2020, p. 64).

LRT initiative, then, refers to the general lived attitude and encouragement in the environment or at an institution that enables learners to take linguistic risks. Just like Slavkov, we use the term *pedagogical tool* for the LRT passport and the *Linguistic Risk* app. A pedagogical tool here is understood as any resource (strategy, method, material) used by educators to facilitate learning and improve students' language competence as well as well-being. As tools within the LRT initiative, the passport and the app enable learners to engage in autonomous LRT experiences. They would need to be complemented with *pedagogical guidance* to actively support students. Slavkov (2026) found that a combination of *Linguistic Risk* app use, course instruction, and guidance appears to help ensure that learners benefit from an LRT initiative. Building on Griffiths and Slavkov (2021), we view autonomous LRT and the need for ongoing reflection and support as part of a continuous cycle. The following figure summarizes and visualizes our use of pedagogical terminology regarding LRT (Fig. 1).

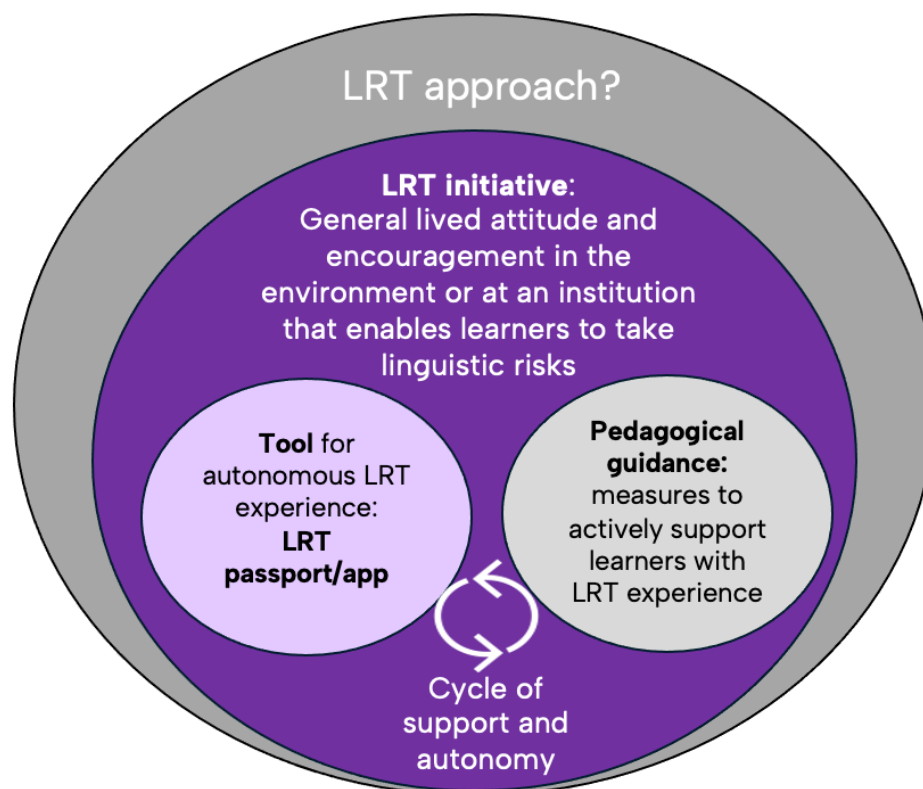


Fig. 1: Modeling the LRT initiative

Slavkov et al. link the notion of LRT to different significant pedagogical notions such as autonomy, authenticity, gamification and task and content-based teaching (e.g., Slav-

kov, 2023, p. 39; Slavkov & Séror, 2019, pp. 257–259). Most of the risks listed in the Canadian passport focus on L2 use outside the classroom in the French-English bilingual context of Ottawa (Slavkov, 2023, pp. 36, 52). LRT pursues the goal of bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world by encouraging learners to experiment with the target language not just in, but especially beyond, the classroom walls (Cajka et al., 2023, p. 208). It is *conscious* linguistic risk-taking in real-life situations that has first been recognized as a promising supplement to classroom instruction within the Canadian initiative (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 259). Slavkov (2023, pp. 36, 52) refers to the LRT passport as a tool for raising awareness and helping learners manage both their emotional responses and the learning opportunities that arise from engaging in LRT. Thus, it is fair to conclude that in order for LRT to be conscious, pedagogical guidance and an accompanying LRT tool are required.

3. Healthy Risk-Taking: Pedagogical LRT through the Lens of Well-Being

Linguistic Risk-Taking can contribute to language learner well-being if it constitutes healthy risk-taking. The term healthy risk-taking was first introduced by Cervantes (2013), although earlier work (e.g., Beebe, 1983; Oxford, 1992) had referred to different aspects of this notion. It is an important construct as it highlights a key challenge in researching and promoting linguistic risk-taking.

Without using the term healthy risk-taking, Beebe (1983, pp. 58–59) discussed the difficulty of determining an abstract ideal level of risk-taking. While high risks increase the likelihood of failure, low risk-taking is neither realistic in real-life situations in societies that value risk-taking, nor is it conducive to educational success. When discussing the importance of when and how to take risks, Oxford (1992, p. 38) argues that moderate and intelligent risks are more advantageous than taking either no or reckless, uninformed risks.

Healthy risk-taking necessitates pedagogical guidance of LRT experience. Cervantes (2013, pp. 432–433) discusses three aspects that contribute to healthy risk-taking by referring to Gledhill & Morgan (2000): 1. Fostering positive relationships in the sense that learners, peers and the language teacher need to bond on an affective level. 2. A classroom environment and a comfortable atmosphere that is advantageous to risk-taking, which can include aspects like furniture, decoration items and visuals that encourage risk-taking 3. A teaching sequence that fosters risk-taking by ensuring learners feel prepared to take risks through clear instructions and practice opportunities beforehand.

Furthermore, Cervantes (2013, p. 433) highlights the role of the teacher in facilitating healthy risk-taking. As LRT is all about attempting and possibly failing, the

teacher needs to be supportive of any attempt, no matter the outcome for the student. It needs to be clear for the class that risk-taking and therefore also possible errors or failure of any kind are valued in a general climate of tolerance. The following analysis of LRT through the lens of well-being aims to further define the characteristics of healthy risk-taking.

3.1 Tuning in with Emotions: LRT as Awareness–Raising and Managing Tool

What is new and highly relevant about the Canadian approach to LRT is the emphasis on reframing LRT as a path to awareness of positive emotions such as language learning enjoyment, hopefulness and achievement. In line with Slavkov (2023, pp. 38–39), we argue that this is one of the main reasons why LRT can contribute to well-being in language learning. It is also when LRT can be considered healthy.

In the initial stages when learners step out of their comfort zone, they might experience negative emotions such as discomfort and anxiety due to the uncertainty of the outcome and the possibility of failure. Overcoming such fears and negative emotions and taking a linguistic risk, however, can lead to positive emotions and experiences of empowerment, joy, pride and confidence (Slavkov, 2023, p. 33). On the one hand, this can be due to taking the risk and experiencing a positive outcome, e.g., by getting your intention across or by successfully understanding others. On the other hand, a risk can make a learner proud even if the attempt was unsuccessful. This would be the case because they ventured out of their comfort zone, ‘faced their demons’ and overcame their fears and worries. Experiencing the freedom to communicate one’s own ideas can be perceived as a high gain situation (Beebe, 1983, p. 62).

Positive emotions are at the heart of well-being within the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) as well as of EMPATHICS (Oxford, 2016a; 2016b) and E4MC (Alrabai & Dewaele, 2023). They can enhance well-being and have a beneficial role in language learning (Khajavy & Vaziri, 2024, p. 155). One important pillar of LRT is fostering a focus on positive emotions (Slavkov, 2023, p. 37). Marx (2020, p. 134) argues that positive emotions influence the development of a learning foundation referred to as broadening (Frederickson, 2001). Broadening means opening up to learning opportunities which enables learners to take in and process new information and experiences (Marx, 2020, p. 134). LRT can thus contribute to broadening.

Both, language anxiety as well as language enjoyment are an inherent part of language learning (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). It is therefore important to acknowledge and to ‘normalize’ negative emotions as a natural part of language learning and as something every language learner experiences at times. Marx (2020, p. 135 by referring to Eynde & Turner, 2006) points out that negative emotions can also be beneficial for language learning as they can lead to a focus on problems that can be important for solving tasks. Marx (2020, p. 136) concludes that while positive emotions play an important part

in any learning process, they are merely a part of the complex network of learning. LRT is of particular relevance, then, as it reflects this complexity in that it accounts for both positive as well as negative emotions and experiences. LRT thus fits well into the ‘positive and negative emotions phase’ in current research on emotions in language learning (Dewaele & Li, 2020, pp. 2–4), in which the relationship between negative and positive emotions as well as a wider spectrum of emotions that may influence language learning are explored (Almukhaild & King, 2023, pp. 60–61). Almukhaild and King (2023, p. 61) provide an overview of this more nuanced and expanded research into different emotions (Tab. 1):

Studies	Positive emotions	Negative emotions
Boudreau et al. (2018); Dewaele & Alfawzan (2018); Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014, 2016)	enjoyment	anxiety
Lie et al. (2021); Nakamura et al. (2021); Pawlak et al. (2020)		boredom
Pavelescu & Petrić (2018)	love, enjoyment	
Ross & Stracke (2016)	pride	
Teimouri (2018)		guilt, shame
MacIntyre & Vincze (2017)	joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love	anger, shame, contempt, disgust, embarrassment, guilt, hate, sadness, feeling scared, and being stressed
Piniel & Albert (2018)	pride, contentment, comfort, relaxation, enjoyment	anxiety

Tab. 1: Emotions in prior L2 literature (Almukhaild & King, 2023, p. 61)

Oxford (2016b, p. 16) also addresses complex combinations of mixed emotional responses in language learning situations that cannot be reduced to just one or two emotions.

According to Slavkov (2023, p. 36), LRT can have both an awareness-raising and managing function regarding emotions. He points out that risks are slightly different from tasks or a special subset of them as they have to entail this emotional dimension of learners becoming aware of and managing their own emotions. With respect to well-being, the teacher’s role would be to help their learners transform negative emotions

into learning opportunities with positive outcomes and/or emotions. This can entail understanding that failing to communicate can mean learning to communicate (Beebe, 1983, pp. 44–45).

By referring to research on positive psychology with respect to language anxiety (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012b), Slavkov (2023, pp. 38–39) argues that an explicit approach to LRT can lead to a more positive attitude toward demanding social and linguistic situations and to their acceptance as a natural part of using and learning language. This can be achieved by raising awareness and reflecting on potential stressors that can pose a threat to learners' well-being, on the one hand, but also on subsequently encouraging them to discover the pleasurable aspects of language use and learning, on the other hand. This can eventually enable learners to move away from a negativity perspective, de-emphasize the expectance of failure, and increase their resilience and well-being.

In this context, emotion regulation and meta-affect may be of relevance. They refer to awareness and control of affect. Bown and White (2010, p. 434) point out that meta-affect is rather unexplored in comparison to metacognition (awareness and control of cognition). They see self-regulation of affect as the psychological self being “involved in overcoming self-doubt, managing different forms of anxiety, or generating positive emotions, for example, to enhance language achievement” (Bown & White, 2010, p. 434).

An explicit approach to LRT as a pedagogical approach has the potential to provide the context and incentive for learners to experiment with meta-affect. We argue that pedagogical guidance of LRT experiences can empower learners by supporting the development of “learner-initiated processes and strategies which manage and change affect in a productive way to enhance achievement” (Bown & White, 2010, p. 434). We consider linguistic risks to be learning opportunities closely linked to the potential of developing meta-affect, affect-regulation and affective strategies. Learners need to be empowered to take charge of their affective experiences and conditions so that they can participate in healthy linguistic risk-taking.

In a recent study by Slavkov (2023) involving 554 learners of English and French using the LRT Passport, participants reported a range of positive experiences, not only related to language learning but also to their overall well-being and life satisfaction (p. 46). The study concluded that the passport helped learners develop strategies to manage anxiety and suggested that the initiative could empower both language learning and broader life experiences (p. 51). In another study, Slavkov (2026) explored the socio-emotional gains of LRT based on quantitative and qualitative data from university students on a bilingual campus. Learners reported benefits like new discoveries, feeling satisfaction, enjoyment or experiencing personal growth, which Slavkov interprets as indicators of overall well-being. These findings provide evidence that the LRT initiative helps learners take charge of their affective experiences.

3.2 Growth Mindset, Self-Efficacy & Future Language Self (Motivation)

If we define LRT as learners being pushed out of their linguistic and cultural comfort zone (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129), the question arises as to when this push leads them into the space “where the magic happens” (Slavkov, 2020, p. 47), that is, where they can learn and grow, rather than where they experience overwhelming anxiety, panic or frustration. Healthy LRT would mean for a person to challenge themselves beyond their current abilities, but not so much that they become overwhelmed. This can be linked with the notions of fixed and growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) that Rhéaume et al. (2021) discussed within the context of LRT. These mindsets guide people in their lives in terms of behavior, interpretation and their perceptions of themselves. With respect to language learning, a fixed mindset can, for example, mean that learners believe they either possess a talent for language learning or they do not. Having a growth mindset, on the other hand, would mean that learners believe in the positive effect of effort, experience and work in language learning (Mercer & Ryan, 2010; Khajavy et al., 2021). Promoting healthy LRT should thus entail promoting a growth mindset so that learners seek adequate challenges and learn and bounce back from setbacks (resilience).

When people view ability as something that can be improved, then developing that ability (by taking on challenging learning goals) can become more important, effort may be seen as a tool in this process, and setbacks can more readily be seen as information about the learning process. When this happens, persistence can be sustained. (Dweck & Yeager, 2019, p. 5)

We believe that an explicit LRT initiative has the potential to offer a way of transmitting a growth mindset, and that a growth mindset can, in turn, promote LRT—an interplay that still necessitates research.

Rhéaume et al. (2021, p. 1217) emphasize that learners can move from a fixed to a growth mindset and that an encouraging or limiting inner voice can play a role in that. They suggest countering a limiting inner voice by setting goals within motivational frameworks such as the ideal L2 self (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015) that helps learners cultivate visions of their desired future language selves. Future self guides have a major motivating function (Dörnyei, 2009b, as cited in Oxford 2016b, p. 63) and are part of the complex self-concept (Rubio, 2014; Oxford, 2016b, p. 63). They are furthermore linked with self-efficacy beliefs, i.e., the extent to which individuals assess their chances of succeeding in a particular task in a given context (Oxford, 2016b, p. 27). Both self-concept and self-efficacy are covered by the EMPATHICS model (Oxford, 2016b).

We believe that the study by Rhéaume et al. (2021) suggests that pairing LRT with visions of future language selves holds the potential to promote positive self-efficacy beliefs and a growth language mindset. In their study, Rhéaume et al. (2021) based their pedagogical scaffolding of LRT in French as a second language (intermediate level) amongst university students at the University of Ottawa on the theoretical constructs of

mindsets and goal setting (S.M.A.R.T. goals). The study comprised 13 one-semester courses taught over the course of five semesters. The courses offered explicit addressing of LRT alongside awareness-raising for mindsets through self-questioning, reflections, S.M.A.R.T. goals and a visualization of the ideal L2 self. Through participatory action research methodology, the authors explored 296 student perspectives through an anonymous student survey and one teacher perspective through teacher self-reflections in a log. The student surveys were administered in a cyclic fashion at the end of each teaching cycle and, in line with participatory action research, evolved over time (as did the pedagogical guidance). According to the authors, the pedagogical activities as well as the teacher guidance offered a passage from self-images based on fixed to growth mindsets. The survey results reveal that the activities had a positive impact on students' LRT. Students were empowered to step out of their comfort zones while engaging in LRT. This study offers important insights into pedagogical strategies of promoting healthy LRT based on mindsets and the ideal L2 self. Its findings should be taken into consideration when tailoring pedagogical guidance of LRT to different learning contexts in future research.

In another study, Sadoughi and Hejazi (2024) investigate the possible mediating or moderating role of LRT and learning experience with regard to growth language mindset and willingness to communicate (WTC). In a quantitative approach, they conducted questionnaires with 392 intermediate Iranian EFL learners, aged 15-30, chosen through multi-stage cluster sampling from eight private language institutes. The questionnaire included items measuring demographic features, growth language mindset, WTC, LRT and L2 learning experience. The authors concluded that LRT mediates the association between growth mindset and WTC. According to them, growth mindset positively impacts LRT, which then ultimately enhances WTC. In other words, learners who view L2 use more optimistically—as something enjoyable—who perceive challenges as less threatening, and who see themselves as having more control over learning through practice and effort, are more willing to engage in LRT. A growth mindset means possessing more cognitive and psychological resources that make learners more resilient and comfortable when engaging in LRT. This, in turn, leads to higher willingness to communicate. These results further underline the importance of actively building a growth mindset in learners as part of LRT initiatives, thereby ensuring healthy LRT.

3.3 Autonomy, Agency, Engagement, & Authenticity

Healthy risk-taking also requires and promotes a level of learner agency and autonomy. Learners have to make independent decisions in uncertain situations by taking risks of their own choosing. These decisions will affect the outcome. Agency is the departure point for autonomy in language learning (Benson, 2007, p. 30, as cited in Oxford 2016b), as it refers to volitional actions and behavior to affect outcome (Oxford, 2016b, p. 39).

This ultimately can lead to independence from external care and guidance, as the self assumes responsibility for care and direction—one understanding of behavioral autonomy (Oxford, 2016b, p. 40).

As learners assume more responsibility for their own learning, they assign meaning and authenticity to the tasks and activities they choose to engage with in the context of LRT. Through the LRT initiative, learners become social actors who are encouraged to independently engage in authentic language use. Linguistic risks are genuine real-life communicative activities, situations and experiences that can encompass authentic production, reception, interaction or mediation (Slavkov, 2023, p. 36). At the University of Ottawa, the LRT initiative encourages students using the LRT passport and app to select the risks they decide to engage in. Instead of having risks assigned by their language teacher or determined by their proficiency level, learners are free to make their own choices. This reflects the principle that effective linguistic risk-taking is personal. Learners are given the freedom to choose, which helps them avoid risks that might trigger anxiety while also avoiding ones that feel trivial or boring. This supports the selection of balanced, thoughtful risks.

Griffiths and Slavkov (2021, p. 133 by citing Littlewood, 1999, p. 73) point out that no learner can have a teacher by their side at all times and throughout life. The required level of autonomy in LRT can be a challenge for learners and will therefore require (initial) pedagogical guidance and support for healthy LRT. Teachers can take on the role of guides and motivators in the process of discovering learning opportunities through LRT, but do not occupy a central role (Slavkov, 2023, p. 39). Learner autonomy is a pivotal goal in language teaching and so is viewing learners as engaged agents that take responsibility for their learning process and become independent language users. Engagement—defined as involvement on a behavioral, cognitive and emotional level—is another key element of well-being in PERMA (Seligman, 2011). LRT requires and promotes engagement on all these levels (behavioral, cognitive, emotional). Higher learner engagement in ELT can lead to higher classroom enjoyment and higher achievement, self-efficacy, motivation, interest, and enjoyment (Mercer, 2019, p. 644; Khajavy & Vaziri, 2024, p. 155). Learners with high self-efficacy, in turn, show agency and autonomy by employing learning strategies (Oxford, 2016b, p. 62).

3.4 Meaning & Social Relationships

As we have seen, meaning can be found in experiencing autonomy and agency during LRT—an idea we will relate to Oxford's notion of being responsible in the present moment (Oxford, 2016a, p. 28; 2016b, p. 20). Successful language learners choose contexts, tasks and materials that are meaningful in an agentic way (Oxford, 2016b, p. 18). LRT offers them this space/freedom for agency and autonomy as they select risks of their own choosing.

Meaning in the well-being debate goes beyond that. Humans are goal-seeking creatures that construct meaning and seek personal purpose. Meaning refers to a) seeing a greater purpose and relevance for oneself in life, b) adopting a perspective that views life as extending beyond the current moment, and c) discovering sense in one's experience—i.e., becoming aware of one's self-worth and the value of other aspects in life, resulting in directing energies accordingly (Oxford, 2016a, p. 28; Oxford, 2016b, pp. 18–24). We argue that LRT can contribute to finding meaning in language use and language learning. It offers learners opportunities to experience language use as genuine communication, as a means of expressing one's own needs, thoughts, and desires, and as a means to form and maintain social relationships (e.g., friendships). Positive relationships that are shaped by support and feelings of connectedness are another key element of well-being within the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011; Khajavy & Vaziri, 2024, p. 155). Oxford (2016b, p. 20) also points out the significance of social relationships in reaching meaning. Slavkov (2023, p. 52) mentions language socialization and using acquired language skills from the classroom in real-life situations involving real relationships (friendships, love) as one of the goals of the LRT initiative. LRT's potential for constructing meaning, building relationships and exercising autonomy suggests its broader value within well-being-oriented language teaching.

3.5 Character Strengths

Regarding healthy LRT, another highly interesting aspect of well-being are character strengths. Character strengths are part of psychological dimensions that can have a positive impact on well-being and language learning (EMPATHICS, Oxford, 2016a, p. 26). Twenty-four cross-culturally recognized character strengths are classified within positive psychology and subsumed by six universal virtues (Values in Action (VIA) Institute's Inventory of Strengths, cf. MacIntyre, 2016, p. 7; Oxford, 2016b, pp. 57–60). The character strengths are not fixed and include for example bravery, creativity, curiosity and the love of learning—all of which can be assumed to be linked to healthy LRT experiences. A strengths- and resource-oriented approach to learning and teaching would place emphasis on, and cultivate, character strengths. This does not mean that problems, difficulties and negative emotions such as language anxiety are ignored. Rather, learners are encouraged to take linguistic risks despite those barriers or difficulties while utilizing their character strengths and virtues (e.g., the virtue of courage) as protective shields (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 8; Oxford, 2016a, p. 22). Drawing on MacIntyre (2016, pp. 8, 11), we argue that healthy linguistic risk-taking from the perspective of well-being and positive psychology may mean that learners can capitalize on their individual character strengths to decide when (not) to push and expand their linguistic and communicative boundaries. Ideas for pedagogical activities are already offered in the literature (e.g., Seligman et al., 2009; Piasecka, 2016) and they entail students writing narratives

in which they reflect on moments when they were at their best and identify character strengths they possessed and used at the time. While some activities aim at making learners aware of the different character strengths they possess, others focus on supporting learners in developing character strengths they do not yet possess. Such activities can be paired with LRT quests, with preceding class discussions in which students reflect on how they can activate and expand their strengths during LRT. If character strengths were to be fostered alongside LRT, learners could be empowered to independently engage in healthy risk-taking, ultimately enabling them to emerge from such challenging linguistic and communicative situations strengthened rather than weakened. We believe that further exploration of an explicit approach to character strengths alongside LRT seems promising.

3.6 Linguistic–Communicative Resilience

Resilience plays a pivotal role when it comes to well-being. Within the EMPATHICS model of language learner well-being, resilience is embedded in P-perseverance, which also includes the elements hope and optimism (Oxford, 2016b, p. 29). At the same time, resilience is linked to several other elements within EMPATHICS, for example meaning and character strengths (Oxford, 2016b, p. 30). Marx (2020, p. 133) describes the PERMA model of well-being as outlining features that characterize resilient—and therefore successful—individuals.

Resilience entails bouncing back and adapting after trauma, adversity and stress (Oxford, 2016a, p. 29). It can be defined as “a set of competences which reflect a person’s ability to successfully manage routine challenges and stressors as well as to cope with more severe negative experiences or adversity” (Williams et al., 2021, p. 162, as cited in Ludwig & Sambanis, 2024, p. 83). There is no consensus on the nature of adversity and these stressors (Willems, 2023, p. 58). Rather, the literature identifies a spectrum of stressors ranging from daily school challenges (Smith, 2020, as cited in Willems, 2023, p. 58) to serious threats to child development (Wustmann Seiler, 2020, as cited in Willems, 2023, p. 58). There is general agreement in the resilience literature, however, that resilience is an ongoing adaptive process. This means that an individual’s resilience fluctuates over time and with changing life circumstances. It can be viewed as an interaction and negotiation of individuals and their environments. From a pedagogical perspective, resilience can therefore be cultivated and practiced (e.g., Riehemann, 2024; APA, 2020; Truebridge, 2010, pp. 22, 24; Ludwig & Sambanis, 2024, p. 83).

In the context of LRT, an interesting suggestion by Petermann and Schmidt (2006) is to look at resilience as situational and context dependent rather than universal. Building on this idea of domain-specific resilience, Riehemann (2024, pp. 216–217) suggests the term communicative resilience meaning the skills and resources needed by a person to navigate challenging interactions, irrespective of their linguistic competence.

According to her, communicative resilience is based on the trust that one can master communicative barriers either independently, using one's own resources, or with the help of others. This highlights the close connection between communicative resilience and LRT. Building on this concept of communicative resilience and linking it to LRT, the definition may need to be broadened to include not only challenging interactions but also demanding linguistic tasks involving listening or reading, for example. While interactions and speaking may be at the heart of linguistic risk taking, we have clarified that LRT refers to all four skills. In the context of LRT, we would therefore like to suggest expanding the term suggested by Riehemann. We would, hence, use the term linguistic-communicative resilience referring to skills and resources required by an individual to navigate challenging linguistic and communicative tasks and situations, regardless of their level of language competence. The lower one's linguistic competences, the sooner one will face challenges in communication (e.g., when using a foreign language) (Riehemann, 2024, p. 217). Citing one of her own studies, Oxford (2016b, p. 29) states that successful language learners demonstrate resilience in particularly challenging situations.

Resilience can be approached in terms of protective resources competing with potential stressors (Willems, 2023, p. 58). One way of fostering resilience may therefore be to focus on those protective factors that can be cultivated in order to counteract stressors (Willems, 2023). Examples include supporting learners by forming meaningful relationships or working on problem solving skills. This aligns with a pedagogical emphasis of individual components of resilience that—unlike genetic factors—may be influenced by the (pedagogical) environment (Wustmann, 2021, as cited in Riehemann, 2024, p. 216). One such component is self-efficacy beliefs, which also play a central role in the EMPATHICS model (Oxford, 2016b, pp. 60–62). The different components of resilience cannot be clearly separated and are intertwined (Riehemann, 2024, p. 216; see Riehemann & Eberhardt-Juchem, 2026, for further elaboration). The existing literature already offers valuable starting points for resilience interventions in language learning contexts that future research on LRT and linguistic-communicative resilience can build on (e.g., Willems, 2023; APA, 2020).

Based on a thorough literature review and an ongoing study (Schick et al., work in progress), both Riehemann and Eberhardt-Juchem (2026) as well as we argue that healthy LRT and resilience are two sides of a coin. On the one side, learners build resilience through engaging in LRT. On the other side, resilient learners are more willing to take linguistic risks. We expect positive synergy effects when LRT and linguistic-communicative resilience are fostered alongside each other. In other words, LRT can be healthier when accompanied by pedagogical guidance that simultaneously targets the development of linguistic-communicative resilience, especially in vulnerable learners.

4. Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that many of the well-being dimensions we have addressed overlap—for example, meaning with authenticity, or self-efficacy with resilience, agency and motivation. While this overlap may still present challenges for the operationalization of well-being models such as EMPATHICS (Alrabi & Dewaele, 2023; Marx, 2020, p. 134), it seems a strength in the context of our discussion of linguistic risk-taking. It shows that LRT engages with multiple dimensions relevant to well-being in language learning, thereby enhancing its pedagogical relevance and value.

In her comprehensive chapter on EMPATHICS (2016b), Oxford outlines nine hypotheses about language learners with high well-being (p. 69). To conclude, we draw on several of these hypotheses and relate them to LRT. We believe our analysis has shown that:

- LRT can help language learners recognize and manage their emotions more effectively.
- LRT offers language learners opportunities to seek and create meaning, which can enhance their motivation.
- LRT can require and teach language learners to persevere in their learning and communication efforts; in particular, LRT and linguistic-communicative resilience may have a synergistic relationship.
- LRT offers language learners both the freedom and the responsibility to exercise agency and autonomy.
- LRT may not only draw on but also foster and raise awareness of a range of character strengths that benefit language learners both in their studies and in their lives. LRT—especially when combined with envisioning future ideal language selves and promoting a growth language mindset—can contribute to the development of positive self-efficacy beliefs and self-concepts.

We acknowledge that not all dimensions of the EMPATHICS model could be addressed in our discussion of LRT. One challenge was the model's breadth: EMPATHICS addresses numerous complex constructs and relating them all to LRT would have exceeded the scope of this article. We thus focused on a selection of relevant dimensions and constructs. Nonetheless, several aspects of well-being and LRT remain unexplored. Future research could explore aspects such as self-esteem and self-verification (Oxford, 2016b, pp. 64–68) in the context of LRT. Overall, our analysis shows that a well-being perspective on LRT seems productive and necessitates further research. Such research should contribute to the development and contextual adaptation of pedagogical tools and guidance for LRT across different learning environments (Schick & Mizelle, 2026; Schick et al., work in progress).

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Nikolay Slavkov

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.¹ 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

¹ 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).²

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.³

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.⁴ 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

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

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

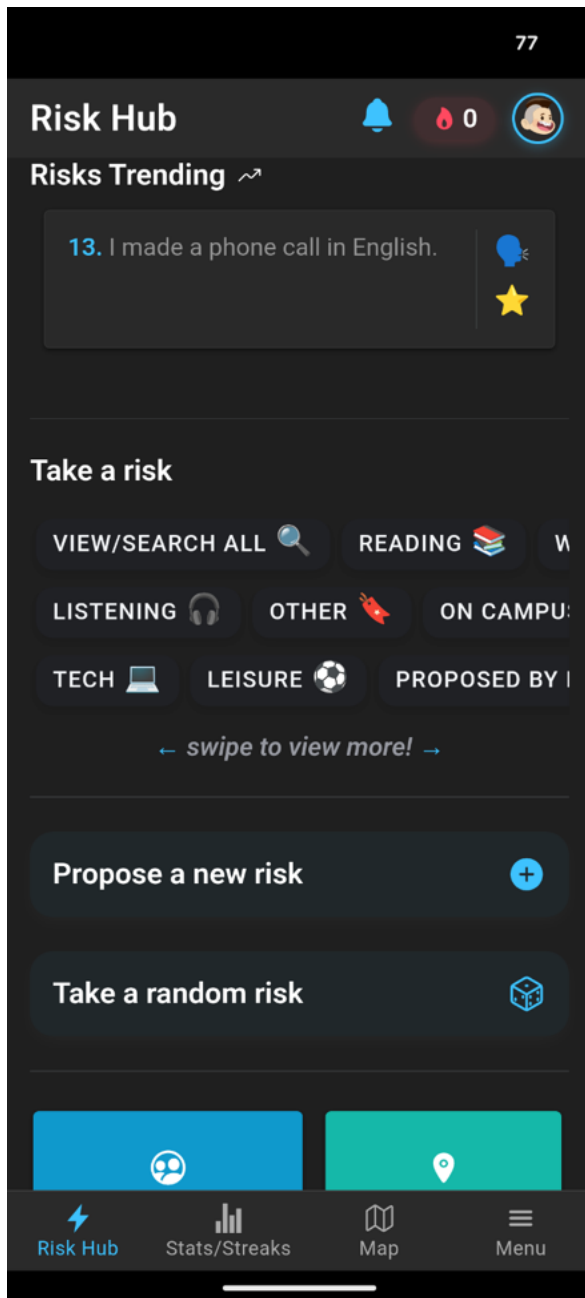


Fig. 1: Linguistic Risk App (main screen)

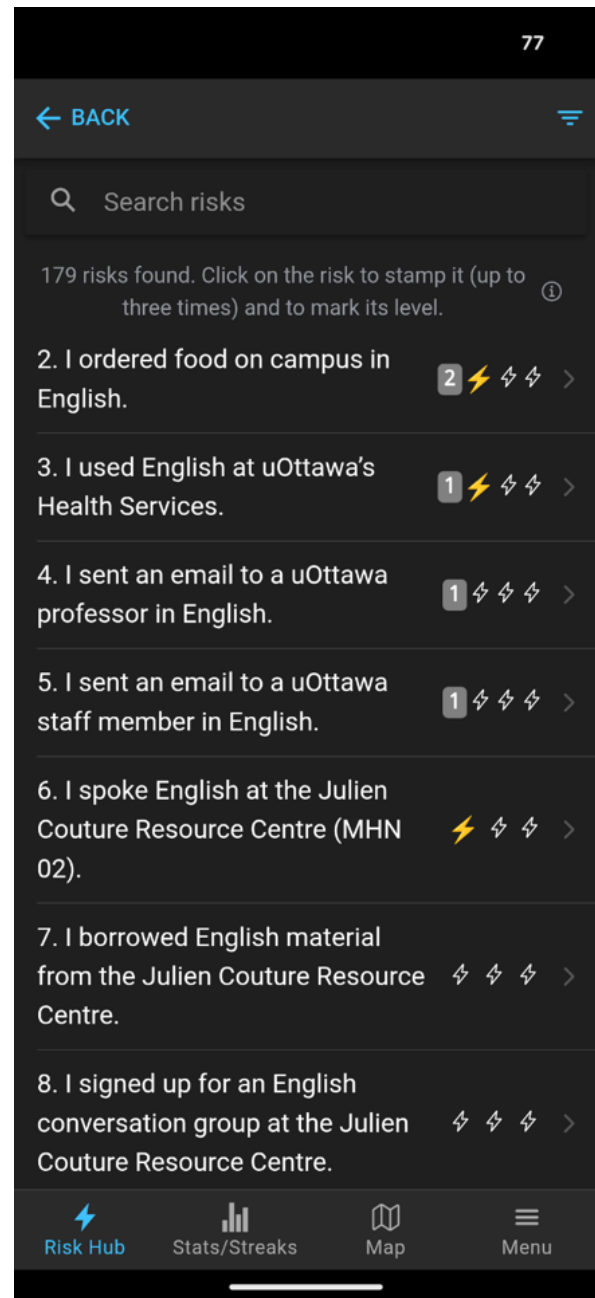


Fig. 2: Linguistic Risk App (scrollable list of risks)

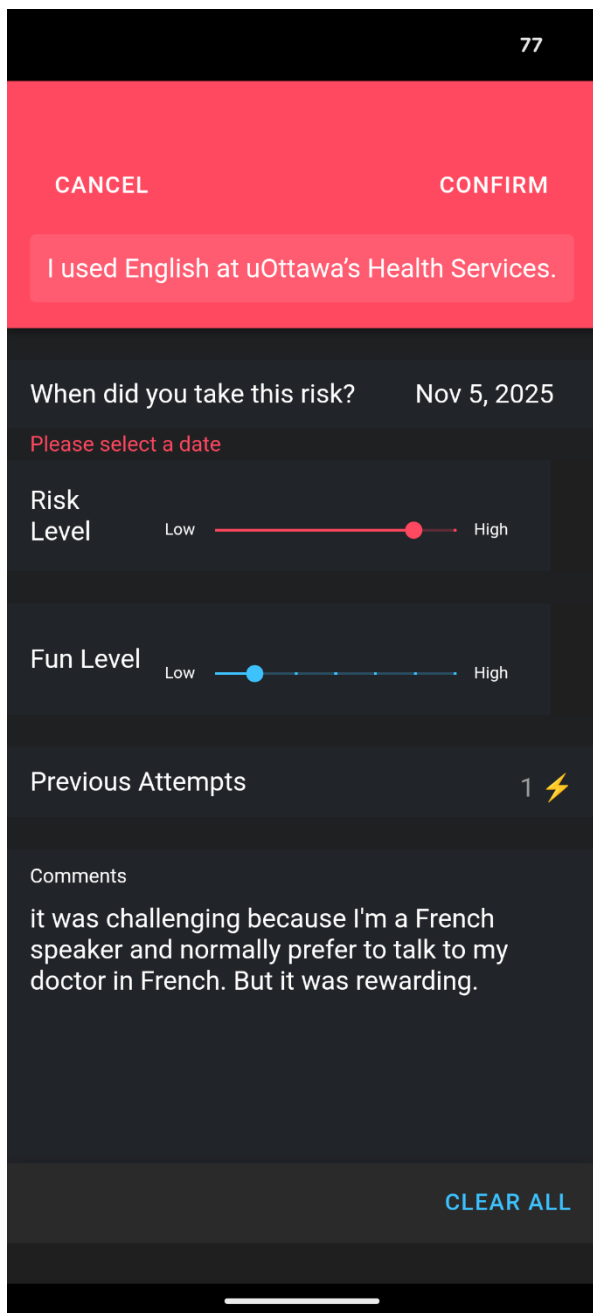


Fig. 3 : Linguistic Risk App (risk and fun sliders and comments field)

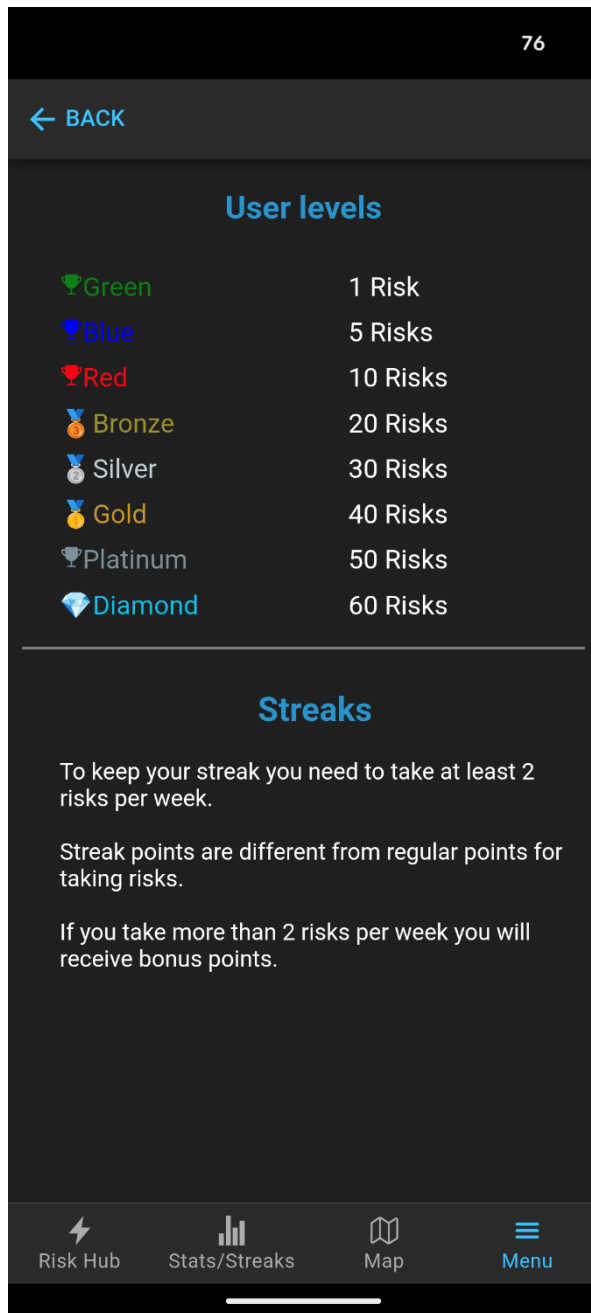


Fig. 4: Linguistic Risk App (achievement levels and streaks)

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.

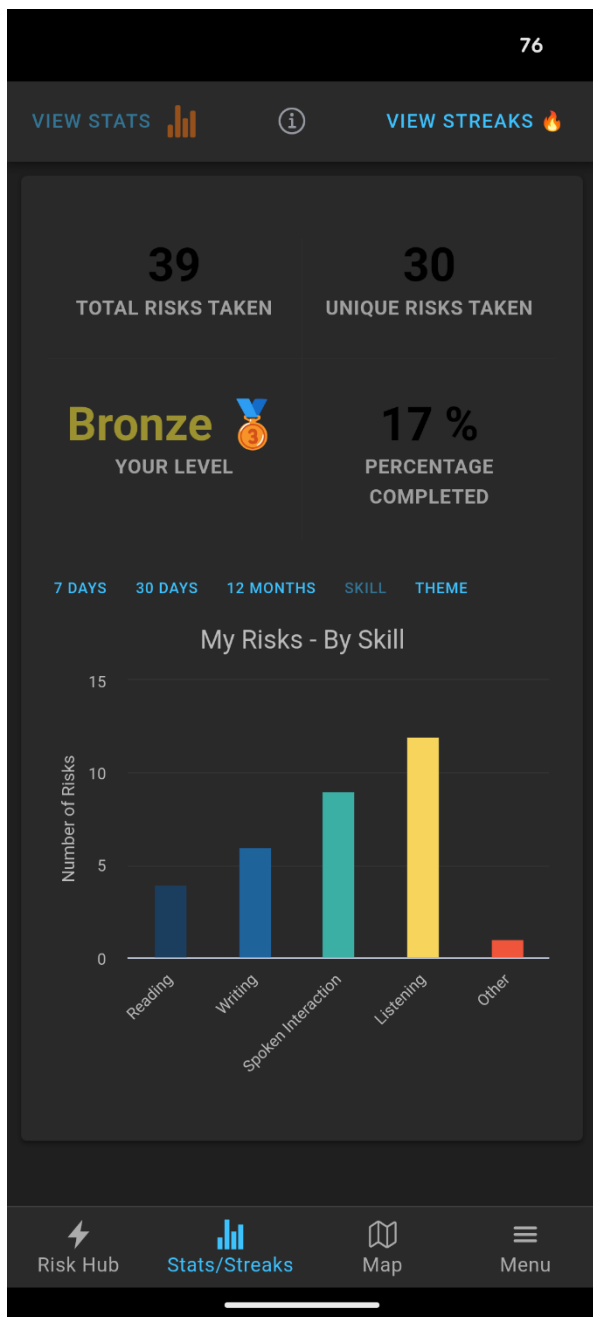


Fig. 5: Linguistic Risk App (track my risks by skill)

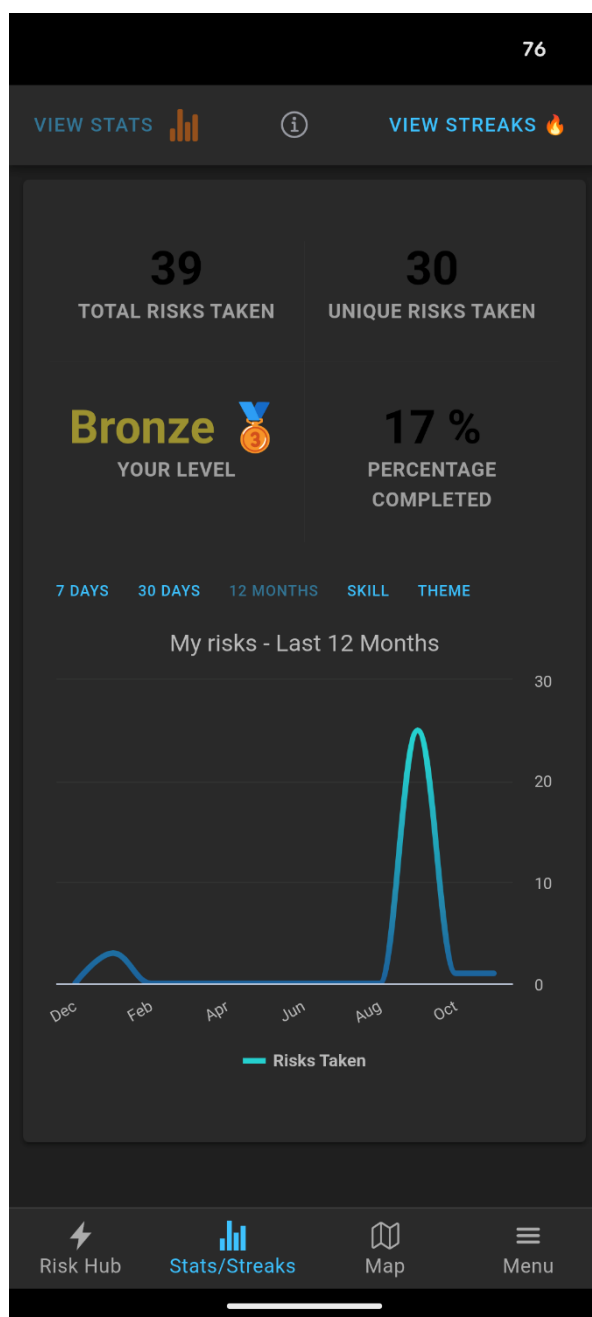


Fig. 6: Linguistic Risk App (track my risks over time)

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.⁵ 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

⁵ 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;⁶ 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.⁷ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.⁸ 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

⁸ 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.^{9,10}

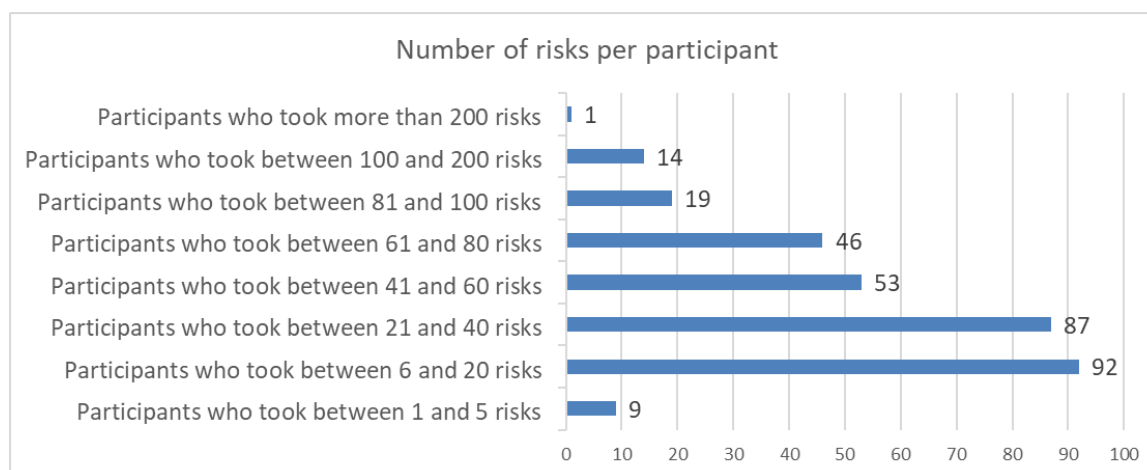


Fig. 7: Distribution of risks

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

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

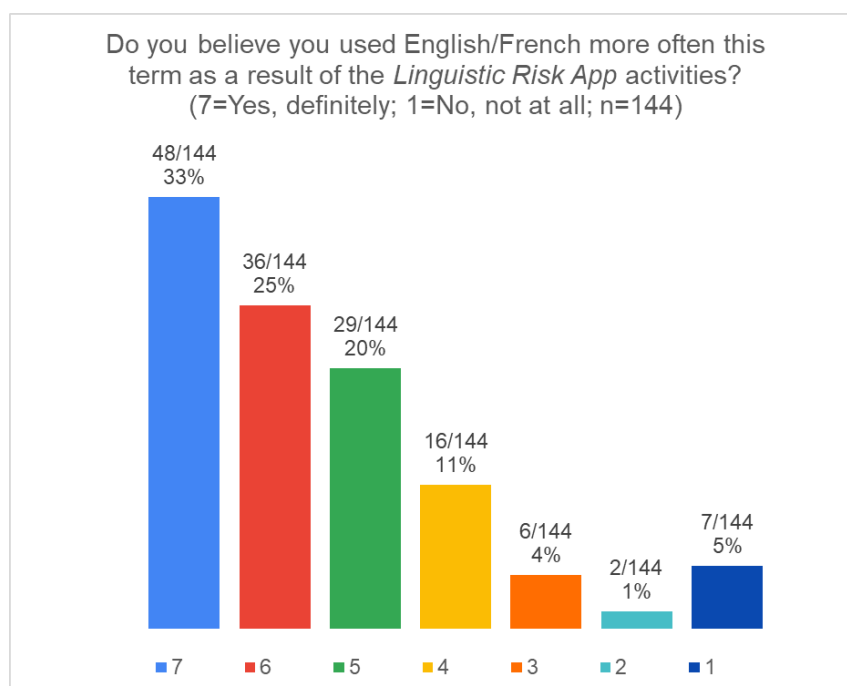


Fig. 8: Increased use of the target language

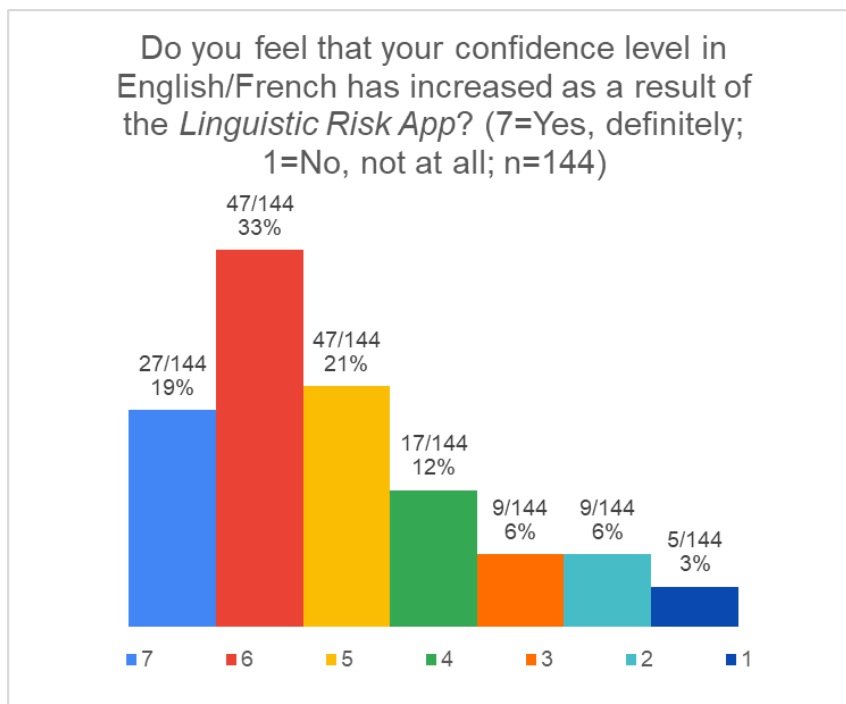


Fig. 9: Increased level of confidence

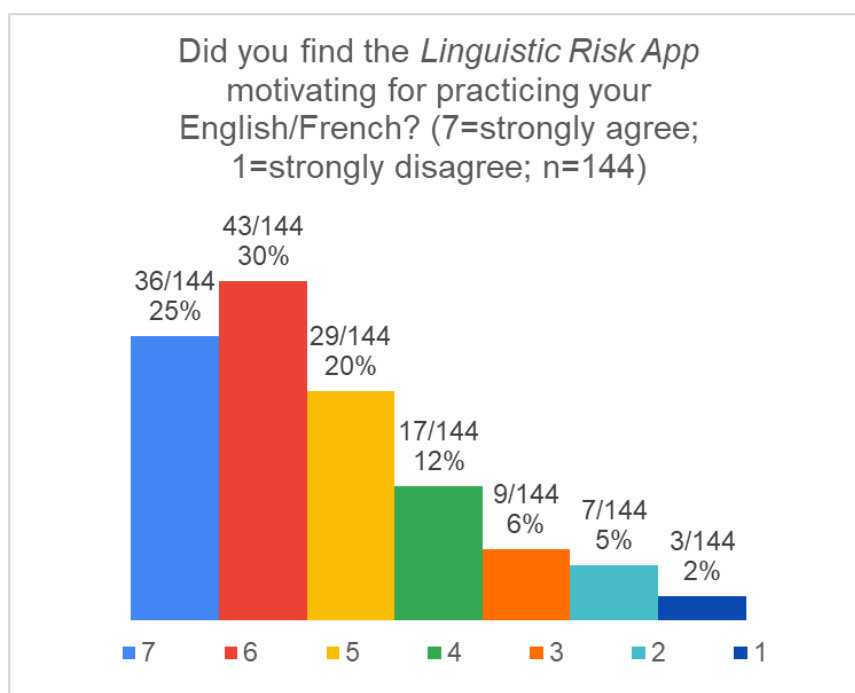


Fig. 10: Increased motivation

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.

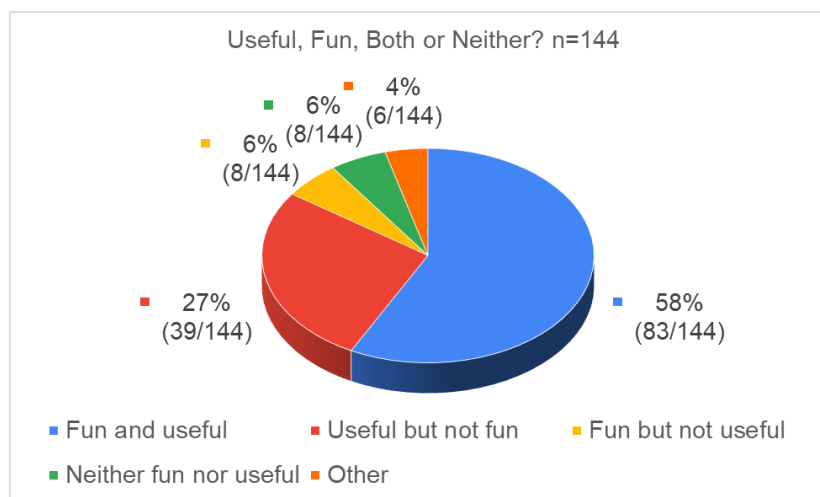


Fig. 11: Usefulness and fun of the *Linguistic Risk App*

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.¹¹ These results are summarized in Fig. 12.

¹¹ 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.

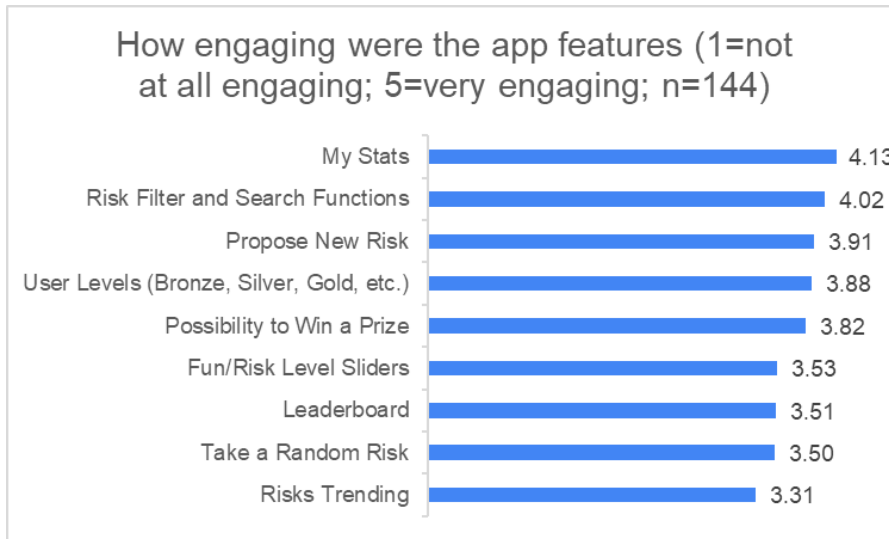


Fig. 12: Engagement scale for the different app features

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.

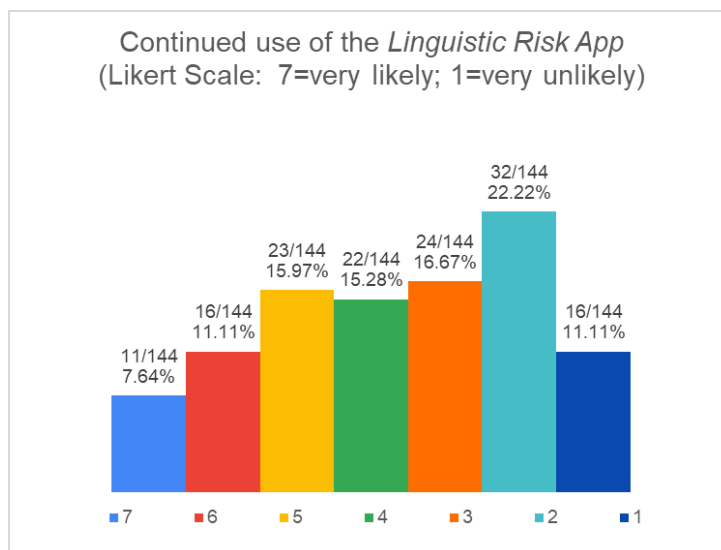


Fig. 13: Continued use of the *Linguistic Risk App*

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).¹²

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

¹² 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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Stefanie Cajka & Eva Vetter

Linguistic Risk-Taking for Minoritized Languages: A Reflection on Relevant Considerations

Abstract

The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative is usually employed in contexts of learning majority languages such as English, French, or German (Cajka, 2021; Cajka et al., 2023; Slavkov & Séror, 2019). This paper, however, pursues a different approach and explores the potential and the implementation of linguistic risk-taking for minoritized languages. It draws on the work of the HORIZON EUROPE project ‘RISE UP—Revitalising Languages and Safeguarding Cultural Diversity’ and reflects on important considerations for adapting the initiative for minoritized language contexts. The theoretical basis for these reflections rests on three main pillars, which are language ecology, new speakers, and a dynamic usage-based approach to language learning. The paper also elaborates on the implementation of linguistic risk-taking in the RISE UP project.

Die *Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT)* Initiative wird in der Regel im Zusammenhang mit dem Erlernen von Mehrheitssprachen wie Englisch, Französisch oder Deutsch eingesetzt (Cajka, 2021; Cajka et al., 2023; Slavkov & Séror, 2019). Dieser Beitrag verfolgt jedoch einen anderen Ansatz und untersucht das Potenzial sowie die Umsetzung von *LRT* für minorisierte Sprachen. Er stützt sich auf die Arbeit des HORIZON EUROPE Projekts „RISE UP—Revitalising Languages and Safeguarding Cultural Diversity“ und reflektiert wichtige Überlegungen zur Adaptierung der Initiative für Kontexte minorisierter Sprachen. Die theoretische Grundlage für diese Überlegungen beruht auf drei Säulen: Sprachökologie, neue Sprecher*innen (*New Speakers*) und ein dynamischer, gebrauchsbasierter Ansatz zum Sprachenlernen. Der Beitrag geht zudem auf die Umsetzung von *LRT* im Projekt RISE UP ein.

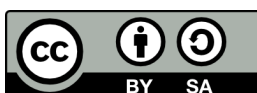
Keywords

linguistic risk-taking, minoritized languages, language ecology, new speakers, usage-based language learning

Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT), sprachliche Risikobereitschaft, minorisierte Sprachen, Sprachökologie, neue Sprecher*innen (*New Speakers*), gebrauchsbasiertes Sprachenlernen

1. Introduction

The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative originally emerged in a bilingual university context (Slavkov & Séror, 2019) and aimed to promote widely used languages. Minority languages are, by definition, not widely used and their main context of use is not tertiary education. Although the contexts of language use that we would like to link in this article could not be more different, there is something that connects them: the language



users' pathways towards a particular language or variety. We will argue that the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative offers general strategies and opportunities that support these pathways and can be adapted to minoritized languages if certain considerations are addressed.

This paper is organized as follows: First, a brief overview of the RISE UP project is given, as the reflections in this paper originate from our work and research in this project. We then discuss the main theoretical pillars that underpin our considerations: language ecology, new speakers, and a dynamic usage-based language learning approach. The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative is presented and related research is briefly discussed. To conclude the background section, we then bring the theoretical concepts and linguistic risk-taking together. The third section is dedicated to linguistic risk-taking for minoritized languages. We elaborate on important considerations that—in our perspective—should be taken into account when adapting the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative to a minoritized language context. The implementation of linguistic risk-taking in the project RISE UP is also discussed. Overall, the objective of this paper is twofold: firstly, to underscore the potential of linguistic risk-taking in the context of language revitalization; and secondly, to reflect on what should be taken into consideration when implementing it in a minoritized language context.

2. Background

2.1 The RISE UP Project

The project 'RISE UP—Revitalising Languages and Safeguarding Cultural Diversity' is a HORIZON EUROPE project of the type 'Coordination & Support Action' with a duration of three years (02/2023–01/2026). Eight partners from six countries are collaborating in the project, namely MINDS & SPARKS GmbH, University of Tartu, University of Vienna, ESPRONCEDA Institute of Art & Culture, Youth of European Nationalities, NUROGAMES GmbH, School of Oriental and African Studies, and University of Roehampton. RISE UP has several project objectives, including the definition of a European Language Promotion Ecosystem, the creation of guidelines and methodologies for the revitalization of minoritized languages, and the development of a RISE UP digital toolkit, among others. Overall, the project aims to empower minoritized language communities. It focuses on five selected ones in Europe, which are Aranese, Aromanian, Burgenland Croatian, Cornish, and Seto.¹

One aspect of the project is concerned with the examination of already available language revitalization resources and the development of new strategies in this regard.

¹ If you want to learn more about the project, please visit the project website: www.riseupproject.eu [10.09.2025]

This is the aspect we build on in this paper, reflecting on linguistic risk-taking as a strategy for language revitalization. The theoretical concepts employed are discussed in the following section.

2.2 The Three Main Pillars of the Theoretical Framework

Our investigation of revitalization strategies is embedded in a theoretical framework based on three main pillars: language ecology, new speakers, and a dynamic usage-based approach to language learning (Cajka et al., 2024a). We summarize these pillars under the headings “the danger of a single solution”, “the power of new speakers” and “Use it, don’t lose it!” (more detailed information can be found in Cajka et al., 2024a).

As far as language ecology is concerned, it is assumed that languages—like the components of an ecosystem—cannot be considered separately (Haugen, 1971). From this perspective, the promotion of languages and varieties requires that the entire language ecology is taken into account. The revitalization of languages must therefore focus on the preservation of linguistic ecologies rather than languages. In the tradition of Mühlhäusler, the main issue is the nature of the ecology “[...] that enables a diversity of languages to be sustained over long periods of time” (Mühlhäusler, 2003, p. 235). Within this framework, the aim is to create the long-term sustainability of languages and varieties, to maintain linguistic diversity, to restore functional links between different languages and varieties, and to embed languages in a meaningful cultural, economic, and ecological context (Mühlhäusler, 2018). Hence, the ecology metaphor highlights “[...] the dynamics, interrelatedness, and situatedness of human communication” (Ludwig et al., 2018, p. 5). It follows that the specific context is key to language ecologies: language ecologies vary from context to context. This is a warning against a single solution when looking at revitalization strategies in the sense of searching for an ecology that enables a diversity of languages to be sustained. “The problem is that there is no single solution, that each ecology requires a different support system” (Mühlhäusler, 2018, p. 337).

With regard to the second pillar, the new speakers, we build on the criticism that the traditional concepts of endangerment and revitalization have significant shortcomings when it comes to capturing the current sociolinguistic state of language ecologies with minoritized languages and varieties. The well-known vitality scales, some of which, like EGIDS (Lewis & Simons, 2010), have emerged directly from Fishman’s (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), still focus on intergenerational transmission. However, the so-called new speakers have become a strong driving force for revitalization. This is particularly true for communities with very small numbers of language users (Jaffe, 2015; O’Rourke & Pujolar, 2013). These new speakers may even dominate in terms of numbers and emerge from situations where no active native language users seem to be left, as was the case for Manx or Cornish. However, the notion of new speaker has been questioned for its dichotomic nature (new versus traditional) and the ideological questions it brings about (Dołowy-Rybińska & Ratajczak, 2023;

Hornsby, 2015; Kircher et al., 2023). Within minoritized community contexts, language experience is highly diversified due to different proficiency levels, acquisition trajectories, policies, and practices around language (Puigdevall et al., 2018; Pujolar & Puigdevall, 2015). This leads to a diversity of ideologies and norms (Avineri & Kroskrity, 2014, p. 2), the ideologically loaded tensions between new and traditional speakers, and the questioning of the legitimacy of new as well as traditional speakers (albeit from different perspectives) (Hornsby, 2022). In order to tackle these issues, we adopt an open and broad definition and understand new speakers “[...] as individuals who put their energy and effort into learning and using a minoritized language, be they originally labelled ‘traditional’ speakers with partial competence, newcomers, or be they any other member of the communities” (Cajka et al., 2024b, p. 12).

Acknowledging the vagueness of categories for language users brings us to the third pillar of the theoretical framework, namely the theoretical position on language learning. We see learning and using language as closely interwoven and hence adopt a dynamic usage-based approach combining Dynamic Systems Theory (De Bot et al., 2007) and usage-based linguistics (Ghalebi & Sadighi, 2015, p. 191). Within this scope, language learning is less about memorizing grammatical structures or vocabulary, and more about meaningful encounters. Personal engagement with the language and immersion contribute strongly to the learning process. There is first research evidence that connecting using and learning may even be productive in dealing with ideological issues in the context of minorization. Where language use connects learners and so-called traditional speakers, ideological boundaries may become permeable, learning takes place, and awareness of each other’s position grows (Hornsby, 2022, p. 396).

The theoretical framework commits us to looking closely at the particular context since ecologies are different, to acknowledging the diversified learning pathways of new speakers, and finally to closely connecting learning and using language. This means to include ‘the wilds’ (Hutchins, 1995; Thorne & Hellerman, 2022) in the learning endeavor—that occurs beyond institutional language learning settings and is hence open to linguistic risk-taking presented in this paper.

2.3 The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative

The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative was initially developed at the University of Ottawa in Canada (e.g., Séror & Slavkov, 2019; Slavkov & Séror, 2019; Slavkov, 2020; Slavkov, 2023). In the context of this English-French bilingual university, the initiative aims to encourage students to make use of their bilingual environment in order to practice their second official language (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 259) and to foster organic socialization into the target community and language (Slavkov, 2023, p. 34). Another main goal is to raise awareness of the importance of linguistic risk-taking in addition to language learning in formal settings like a classroom (Slavkov & Séror, 2019). Linguistic risk-taking may not only lead to a sense of success or achievement of overcoming the challenge, but extending the language practice may also result in a perceived or real increase in

target language competence (Slavkov, 2023, p. 33). Within the initiative, linguistic risks are defined as “[...] authentic everyday communicative acts that take place outside of the language classroom and involve spontaneous and meaningful second language use.” (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 259). Therefore, they encompass activities such as writing emails, watching a film, or ordering food in the target language.

The centerpiece of the initiative is a tool called the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport. It is available in both English and French, corresponding to the language being learnt (i.e., French learners use the French passport). In its current version² it offers 89 linguistic risks. Learners can take these risks, check them off, and indicate their perceived risk level (see e.g., Slavkov & Séror, 2019, for a thorough description of the passport). There is also a digitized version called the Linguistic Risk app, with additional features such as user statistics, a search function for risks, or progression through different levels (Roodi & Slavkov, 2022).

Besides its pedagogical approach, the initiative is also related to a broader research agenda and linguistic risk-taking is even described as a research approach and research program (Slavkov, 2023). With regard to the initiative in Canada, publications have covered the investigation of several aspects. Slavkov (2020) examined the impact of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative by analyzing learners’ responses to a self-report tool embedded in the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport. Griffiths and Slavkov (2021) analyzed interviews with participating teachers and self-report data from learners to formulate pedagogical implications with the goal to improve the implementation of the initiative. Another aim was to locate linguistic risk-taking within a broader Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) framework. Rhéaume et al. (2021) analyzed a teacher’s reflections and student survey data and examined “[...] how a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport is used to support language learners’ autonomous language practice in combination with metacognitive awareness activities and goal setting.” (Rhéaume et al., 2021, p. 1214). Roodi and Slavkov (2022) approached the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative from the angle of gamification, evaluating the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport and also the digital app with regards to the presence of game and gamification elements. Slavkov (2023) analyzed data from over 500 completed Linguistic Risk-Taking Passports, highlighting the passport as a tool for data collection and reporting on learner patterns and qualitative data (i.e., participants’ reflections and comments).

The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative, however, did not appear to be fruitful only for the Canadian context, as adaptations and implementations followed in a variety of settings. For instance, MacDonald and Thompson (2019) report on the adaptation of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative for students learning English in a Japanese university context. Cajka (2021; see also Cajka et al., 2023) adapted the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative for learners of German as a second language in an Austrian university context.

² Available here: <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/official-languages-bilingualism-institute/ccer-bal/research-groups/linguistic-risk/participate> [10.09.2025]

The target group were prospective students enrolled in German courses to prepare for a supplementary examination in German ('Ergänzungsprüfung Deutsch'), which serves as a proof of German language proficiency so they can be admitted to a degree program. Using a mixed methods design, Cajka (2021) examined these learners' perspectives on their use of the '*Riskier was!*' booklets (the German counterpart to the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport) and the relevance of the initiative for their language learning. She also analyzed where the teachers saw potential for improvement with regards to the initiative. There has also been collaborative work bridging the initiatives in Canada and Austria: Cajka et al. (2023) discuss the perspectives of participating learners that were interviewed in both contexts, with a focus on the implementation of the initiative in the digital realm. Windisch (2023a) adapted the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative to the context of a study trip, i.e., for German language learning students in Spain who spent a week in Vienna for cultural purposes. More recently, there is also a larger research focus on linguistic risk-taking at the University of Cologne. The two main sub-projects have the titles "Linguistic risk-taking for younger and vulnerable learner groups in the German school system" and "Linguistic risk-taking for university students studying to be English teachers" (Universität zu Köln, 2024), promising to explore new avenues with regard to the adaptation of linguistic risk-taking. One strand of research concerns linguistic risk-taking in inclusive settings, focusing on the needs of learners with Developmental Language Disorder and developing hypotheses for the implementation of a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport in this context (Schick & Rohde, 2025).

The concept of linguistic risk-taking has been adapted not only to contexts of majority language learning, but also for minoritized languages. For example, a booklet has been developed for Occitan, called "GAUSAR LA LENGA: Initiative de prise de risques linguistiques" (Institut d'Estudis Occitans, n.d.). Windisch (2023b) adapted the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative for Galego, called "Retos lingüísticos para estudantes de galego en Galicia" (Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2023). However, no comprehensive descriptions or publications could be found on adapting the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative for minoritized languages. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this gap to a certain extent by elaborating on relevant considerations in this regard.

Although the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative is a relatively recent approach in relation to minoritized languages, there are initiatives in minoritized language contexts that are based on a similar idea or could easily be combined with linguistic risk-taking. "Ya d'ar brezhoneg" (in English 'Yes to Breton'), for instance, is an initiative launched in 2001 by l'Office Public de la Langue Bretonne. Its goal is to foster the development and use of the Breton language in public life, as well as in the social and economic sphere (Ofis Publik ar Brezhoneg, n.d.). For Aranese, the Conselh Generau d'Aran launched the campaign "L'as ena punta dera lengua, trè er aranés" in 2023, targeting especially the younger generation and raising awareness of the importance of using Aranese (Conselh

Generau d'Aran, 2023). It includes online videos³, posters in the public spaces (e.g., at bus stops), merchandise, and flyers. A third example is “Repte 21 dies”, an initiative to promote the use of Catalan in the province of Girona (CNL de Girona, 2025). The goal is to speak Catalan to everyone, everywhere, for 21 days.

2.4 Bringing the Concepts Together

In our understanding, linguistic risk-taking is a concept that ties in well with the three main pillars of our theoretical framework. With its focus on engaging in authentic and meaningful situations in the target language, it encourages language learners to tap into the ecology of the language they are learning and to develop individual pathways. As mentioned above, Slavkov (2023, p. 34) considers one main goal of the initiative “[...] to get socialized in organic ways into the target language and community.” Through their (communicative or receptive) presence, the learners themselves will also contribute to shaping the language ecology. According to our definition (see section 2.2), linguistic risk-takers can be considered as new speakers, as they actively engage in using a minoritized language. Or, vice versa, the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative could be a way of encouraging people to use a minoritized language (more) and, in this sense, become new speakers. Moreover, the rationale of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative clearly follows a usage-based approach to language learning. This is illustrated by the following quote, highlighting the connection of target language use with an increase in language proficiency:

In addition to feelings of achievement and success, linguistic risk-taking may result in perceived or real proficiency increases because of the extended language practice that comes with actively seeking opportunities to use the target language. That is, linguistic risk-taking may not only be useful from a socio-psychological point of view, but also from the point of view of increasing one's language competence. (Slavkov, 2023, p. 33)

The interwovenness of using and learning a language constitutes an essential principle in the conceptualization of linguistic risk-taking that we are adopting.

3. Linguistic Risk-Taking for Minoritized Languages

This section first addresses what needs to be considered when adapting the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative to a minoritized language context. It then elaborates on the implementation of linguistic risk-taking in the RISE UP project.

³ Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4auf2Goz0E&list=PLqFXgQYmVi1VagvujuY-yIXkmNY57nhLBi&index=2> [10.09.2025]

3.1 Important Considerations

The considerations discussed here are based on reflections by the authors. These reflections are rooted in a review of literature on linguistic risk-taking, engagement in linguistic risk-taking research as well as language revitalization research, and fieldwork conducted with different minoritized language communities within the RISE UP project. The considerations presented here are the result of an interplay between these sources and are intended for discussion.

Implementing the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative in a new context usually requires some form of adaptation. This may concern the selection and compilation of appropriate risks, as well as the choice and design of the tool (paper booklet or app) used to foster linguistic risk-taking (see Cajka, 2021, who describes the adaptation process of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative for German language learners in Vienna, Austria). However, adapting the initiative for a minoritized language should go beyond these aspects because of the situation of minorization.

One main point of consideration is the language ecology of the respective minoritized language. Most implementations of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative aim at strengthening majority languages such as English, French, or German as their target languages. They are also located in environments where these languages are available; either because they are the languages of the immediate spatial environment, or because they are otherwise easily accessible (online, through shows or media, etc.). This is not necessarily the case for minoritized languages, which often have very small numbers of speakers and few resources (see Cajka et al., 2024a).

It is therefore important to consider whether there are proficient speakers of the language when adapting the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative to a minoritized language context. While some minoritized languages, such as Catalan, have a comparatively large number of proficient speakers across all age groups, there are also other languages, such as Guernésiais, where there are very few proficient speakers.

This leads to the next consideration, which is whether there are situations in everyday life where interactions in the minoritized language can take place. Are there events, places, etc. where a learner can encounter more proficient speakers of the language and start a conversation? Are there opportunities for spoken interaction in the minoritized language? These questions concern not only the availability of (more) proficient speakers, but also the spatial circumstances. Are the learners in an area where the language is used to a certain extent? Or is it more of a diaspora situation?

In addition to these reflections of spatial factors and aspects of language accessibility, the prevailing attitudes and ideologies towards the respective minoritized language also need to be taken into account. A minoritized language is, by definition, not the most prestigious language in a given pre-defined area (i.e., a country, a city, etc.). Therefore, it is important to consider whether there are actual disadvantages and social barriers for people using the minoritized language.

An element of risk is inherent in any act of linguistic risk-taking. As described in relation to the original Canadian initiative, the risk of using a majority language typically encompasses aspects such as making mistakes, being misunderstood, changing existing language habits, etc. (Slavkov & Séror, 2019). What constitutes a risk is individual and this should not be contested here. However, it can be assumed that using a majority language is socially perceived as desirable because it is a (more) prestigious variety. In a minoritized language context, the potential risk of being othered and discriminated against due to the language used comes more strongly into play. This is not to trivialize the experiences of discrimination that language learners may make when using a majority language, which certainly also occur. Rather, this aims at highlighting an additional layer of discrimination and minorization that these minoritized languages and their users may be confronted with.

No one should ever experience any harm through linguistic risk-taking. Therefore, a sensitive approach is required. As a researcher or educational practitioner who aims to implement linguistic risk-taking for a minoritized language, one should assess these dangers very carefully. If an implication of linguistic risk-taking is deemed as fruitful and relevant, the linguistic risks should be carefully selected. Depending on the language ecology of the minoritized language, the chosen risks may be similar to the ones for majority languages or very different from them. It may be a good idea to examine whether there are any safe spaces for the language and its use. Moreover, the interaction with available resources such as media (newspapers, social media, websites, podcasts, radio, etc.) or linguistic risk-taking in the digital sphere may be more fruitful and relevant.

However, linguistic risk-taking could also serve as an activity to reclaim a minoritized language. It may empower learners and also more proficient speakers to make use of the language in spaces where it has not been used before. The initiative could be a starting point for raising awareness of the risks that are connected to using minoritized languages. Ideally, it empowers learners and speakers to push the prevailing boundaries and reclaim the use of their language in different spaces and spheres. Again, profound knowledge of the respective context and the community involved is crucial in this regard.

These considerations go hand in hand with knowledge of the resources available for the respective minoritized language. We have a very broad understanding of what counts as a resource, defining it as “[...] something that requires the active or passive use of the minoritized language. I.e., people have to use the minoritized language to interact with the respective resource or engage in the respective activity.” (Cajka et al., 2024a, p. 15). As mentioned above, opportunities for personal interactions may be scarce in minoritized language contexts. Hence, the interaction with other resources is even more important. This can include activities such as reading a newspaper, posting on social media, listening to a radio program, watching TV, attending an event where

the language is used, etc. Linking linguistic risk-taking to the available resources is beneficial in several ways. It raises users' awareness of existing resources and familiarizes them with content of the community. It may also be of interest to proficient speakers of the minoritized language who want to find more opportunities to actually use the language.

Another decision to be made is which tool to use for linguistic risk-taking. Should it be a paper booklet or a digital solution, such as an app? What design choices are made—are they carried over from previous linguistic risk-taking tools (i.e., should the passport design be maintained)? Which other elements of existing implementations of the initiative are used (e.g., rating the risk-level, rating the fun-level, other gamification elements, comments sections, self-report survey, linguistic risk-taker profile) and do they need to be adapted in any way?

Once these decisions are made, it is important to think about the distribution of the tool. Are there any language courses in the respective minoritized language context where the initiative could be presented (or even integrated)? Are there teachers who would be interested in working with linguistic risk-taking? Are there other institutions like cultural or community centers that would be interested to advertise the initiative or even distribute the developed tool? Would it make sense to organize events to present the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative? Is there any media that would be interested in reporting about the initiative?

3.2 The Implementation of Linguistic Risk-Taking in the RISE UP Project

As described in section 2.2, we follow a usage-based approach to language learning and strongly link language use to language revitalization. This emphasizes the importance of meaningful social interaction and also the relevance of engaging with resources in the minoritized languages, which ties in well with the rationale of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative. In our efforts to develop new strategies for language revitalization, we therefore considered linguistic risk-taking as a valuable approach. In order to implement it for the five selected language communities (Aranese, Aromanian, Burgenland Croatian, Cornish and Seto), two major achievements serve as our foundation for the reflection on the above-mentioned considerations.

The first important step towards the implementation of linguistic risk-taking was the collection of resources available for the five case study communities which can be accessed (and expanded by adding new resources) on the project website.⁴ As mentioned in the previous section, our understanding of resources is very broad. They can cover anything involving the active or passive use of the minoritized language. However, this does not imply that all resources are exclusively in the minoritized language. Considering how languages constantly interact and influence each other, it is questionable if entirely monolingual resources do even exist. The aim was to identify resources

⁴ The collection of resources can be found here: <https://www.riseupproject.eu/resources/> [10.09.2025]

that make substantial use of the minoritized language or require its use to a meaningful extent (Cajka et al., 2024a).

In order to classify the identified resources, they were assigned to different categories. The category system that was developed for this purpose comprises seven main categories and five subcategories (Cajka et al., 2024a, pp. 18–19):

- Media
 - Print Media
 - Websites
 - Social Media
 - Auditory Media
 - Audiovisual Media
- Events
- Associations
- Facilities and Services (institutional offers that are not related to schools)
- Competitions and Awards
- Digital Apps and Services
- Further Resources (including anything not covered by the other categories)
- +
- Books
- Music

The two additional categories, ‘Books’ and ‘Music’, do not have listed specific resources, as identifying all available resources in these categories would have been beyond the scope of our work. However, there are reflections on the availability and role of books and music in the five selected communities outlined in Cajka et al. (2024a).

Another major step towards the implementation of linguistic risk-taking was to gain an understanding of the language ecologies of the minoritized communities in focus. As elaborated in the previous section, many relevant considerations regarding linguistic risk-taking for minoritized languages are related to knowing the respective communities and their language ecologies. In the RISE UP project, research on this has been conducted in multiple ways, such as ethnographic fieldwork and through the RISE UP survey. This survey has a total of 68 questions and was set up in a joint effort of the partners in RISE UP (Cajka et al., 2024a). It was slightly adapted for each of the five case study communities and translated into more than 15 language varieties.

As part of the project, a report has been written on the description of a European language preservation ecosystem (Sallabank & Ugwuanyi, 2025), highlighting the ecological conditions that affect the vitality of the five communities RISE UP focuses on.

Having acquired knowledge about the available resources as well as the ecological conditions of the minoritized language communities serves as a solid foundation for the implementation of linguistic risk-taking. It allows for an informed reflection on the rel-

evant considerations discussed in the previous section. The process of the actual implementation of linguistic risk-taking in the RISE UP project is, however, still ongoing at the time of writing (September 2025).

Incorporating linguistic risk-taking into the RISE UP digital toolkit emerged as the ideal approach for implementation within the scope of the RISE UP project. The RISE UP digital toolkit, which is currently still in development (fall 2025), is designed as a comprehensive platform to support minoritized language learning, practice, and revitalization. This is achieved through a combination of advanced technologies, gamification elements, and community-driven features. As outlined by Cajka and Shekhawat (2024), the planned key features of the RISE UP digital toolkit are:

- Language learning games
- Digital resources
- Linguistic Risk-Taking Tracker
- Community forum

We elaborate here especially on the Linguistic Risk-Taking Tracker. We believe that linguistic risk-taking has the potential to benefit both learners and (more) proficient users of minoritized languages. Less proficient language users could benefit from linguistic risk-taking as it provides inspiration for where to use their target language, in which activities to engage in, and where to interact with the language. This is particularly relevant for individuals who are not active in the respective community and are not familiar with the available resources. Following a dynamic usage-based approach to language learning (and also the remarks of Slavkov (2023) that linguistic risk-taking may lead to improved language proficiency), this would ideally lead to an increase in their minoritized language skills.

More proficient language users could benefit from linguistic risk-taking, as it could raise their awareness of available resources that require or allow the use of their minoritized language. Our research has shown that members of minoritized language communities are often unaware of potentially available resources (Cajka et al., 2024b).

In addition, embedding the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative in a digital toolkit seems promising. Linguistic risks can be used, for example, as fun and engaging side quests alongside the language learning games. The community section could be a place to suggest and discuss new risks. This would also allow moderators/researchers/educators to see how suggested risks are perceived by other app users, before they are added to the linguistic risk content in the digital toolkit.

4. Conclusion and Outlook

In this paper, we draw on the work conducted in the RISE UP project and elaborate on relevant considerations and also the implementation of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative for minoritized languages. Building on three main theoretical pillars—language

ecology, new speakers, and a dynamic usage-based approach to language learning—we have sought to demonstrate the compatibility of linguistic risk-taking with language revitalization efforts and its potential in this regard. However, the implementation of linguistic risk-taking in new contexts always requires adaptations; in the case of minoritized languages, these adaptation processes require careful reflection, consideration and a further refinement of the risk-taking framework. The main aim of this paper has been to elaborate on these adjustment processes in order to facilitate the efforts of researchers, educators, activists, etc. who wish to adapt the initiative to minoritized language contexts in the future.

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Kim–Sarah Schick & Natascha Mizelle

Linguistic Risk–Taking: Exploring the Perspective of Future Language Educators

Abstract

This article relates linguistic risk-taking (LRT) to the context of future language educators. LRT refers to language learners stepping beyond their comfort zones by using a target language in challenging communicative situations—experiences that can lead to personal growth, enjoyment and a sense of accomplishment. While LRT has been recognized as a valuable element in language learning, its role among teacher trainees remains underexplored. Yet, this group is uniquely positioned to influence LRT in their future classrooms, acting as practitioners and role models for their future students. Raising awareness among teacher candidates about the educational and emotional benefits of LRT is important. Choosing a participatory approach, a survey of 81 university students training to become English teachers was conducted. The results reveal insights into their perceptions and preferences of LRT, particularly for tailoring the Canadian LRT initiative to their needs (Slavkov & Séror, 2019) within their learning context.

Diese Studie untersucht *Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT)* erstmalig im Kontext zukünftiger Sprachlehrkräfte. *LRT* bezeichnet das Verlassen der Komfortzone durch Sprachlernende, indem sie die Zielsprache in sprachlich und kommunikativ anspruchsvollen Situationen anwenden—Erfahrungen, die zu persönlichem Wachstum, Freude und Erfolgserlebnissen führen können. Die Rolle von *LRT* bei Lehramtsstudierenden ist bislang empirisch kaum erforscht. Diese Zielgruppe wird als Vorbild einer positiven *LRT*-Kultur in ihren zukünftigen Klassenzimmern fungieren. Es ist daher wichtig, bei Lehramtsstudierenden ein Bewusstsein für die pädagogischen und emotionalen Vorteile von *LRT* zu schaffen. Im Rahmen eines partizipativen Forschungsansatzes wurde eine Umfrage unter Lehramtsstudierenden im Fach Englisch (n=81) durchgeführt. Die Ergebnisse liefern Einblicke in ihre Wahrnehmung und Präferenzen bzgl. *LRT*, u.a. auch hinsichtlich der kontextsensiblen Anpassung der kanadischen *LRT-Initiative* (Slavkov & Séror, 2019) an ihre Bedürfnisse.

Keywords

linguistic risk-taking, risk-taking, foreign language confidence, language educators, teacher education

Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT), Fremdsprachenunterricht, sprachliche Risikobereitschaft, Lehrer*innenbildung

1. Introduction

This article explores Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT) which refers to how learners can derive a sense of pride and enjoyment from using a new language in situations in which



they need to step out of their comfort zones to overcome linguistic and communicative challenges (Slavkov, 2023a, pp. 38–39). Linguistic risk-taking can promote general well-being and result in increased learning outcomes (Slavkov, 2023a, pp. 51, 53). However, LRT had remained a largely underexplored dimension in applied linguistics and language teaching research and practice until it was foregrounded by a Canadian initiative within the bilingual context of the University of Ottawa (Slavkov & Séror, 2019). As part of this initiative, an LRT Passport and a *Linguistic Risk* app were developed (Slavkov & Séror, 2019; Slavkov, 2023a; Slavkov, 2026). This article presents first results of an ongoing research project that intends to build on an international research collaboration with the LRT initiative at the University of Ottawa through the adaptation of the LRT initiative including the passport and the app to the context of future language educators (university students/teacher trainees) in Germany.

Fostering linguistic risk-taking is not only about enhancing language skills but also about supporting the holistic development of future educators—boosting their foreign language confidence and overall well-being. As future teachers, they will eventually design and implement classroom practices and, by practicing LRT themselves¹, they will become role models who can demonstrate to their future students that engaging in linguistic risk-taking is a beneficial part of language learning. It is thus worthwhile to explore how future language educators' LRT practice and their awareness of the importance of LRT in language learning will carry over into their teaching practice. Future English teachers serve a dual role: most of them as learners of the language and all of them as future facilitators of language learning. While exploring and addressing this dual role is the overarching aim of our LRT project and initiative, the article and pilot study at hand explores prospective language educators in their role as language learners regarding their own LRT experience in their learning contexts.

However, research on LRT among future language educators is limited. An LRT initiative for our teacher trainees should be participatory, taking into consideration their perspective on LRT within their own language learning journey. To our knowledge, no study has elicited the perspective of future foreign language teachers regarding LRT. The studies conducted with university students in Ottawa (Slavkov & Séror, 2019; Séror & Slavkov, 2019; Slavkov, 2020; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021; Rhéaume et al., 2021; Roodi & Slavkov, 2022; Slavkov, 2023a; Slavkov, 2026) offer valuable insights for our research context, yet they focus on a different learning environment as Ottawa is a bilingual environment and the L2 (French/English) is used widely on campus and beyond. The study by MacDonald and Thompson (2019) needs to be taken into account for our research purpose as it focuses on the context of *English as a foreign language* at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. However, to our knowledge, no

¹ Language teachers can for example share their own LRT experiences from outside of the classroom with their learners and elaborate on how they felt during those experiences.

study so far focuses specifically on participants that are future foreign language educators.

To address the research gap in LRT within teacher training programs, we conducted a student survey with future English language educators ($n = 81$) in Germany. The survey elicited the pre-service teachers' perspectives regarding their own LRT experience as well as their views and wishes for the pedagogical guidance an LRT initiative should entail. Our research aims to identify good practices for integrating LRT into teacher training curricula in Germany. The goal is to provide evidence-based recommendations for the design of an LRT tool (app/passport) and its pedagogical guidance within an LRT initiative, employing a participatory approach in which the stakeholders (teacher trainees) themselves play an active role in shaping the initiative. The survey results presented in this article constitute a first step towards these research efforts.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Linguistic Risk-Taking and Foreign Language Confidence

A linguistic risk is operationalized as an authentic, autonomous communicative act where learners are compelled to move beyond their linguistic and cultural comfort zones by engaging in the use of the target language (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 254; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129; Slavkov, 2023a, p. 35). All four language skills—reading, writing, speaking and listening—entail varying degrees of risk potential, though spoken interactions are generally perceived as involving a higher degree of risk (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 257; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129).

Risk-taking requires “a situation where an individual has to make a decision involving choice between alternatives of different desirability; the outcome of the choice is uncertain; there is a possibility of failure” (Beebe, 1983, p. 39). Such decisions may involve experimenting with unfamiliar or complex linguistic structures or engaging with input that exceeds the learner's current level of proficiency (Beebe, 1983, pp. 46–47, 60). Language learners are exposed to various potential failures, such as producing errors, being misunderstood, or experiencing breakdowns in communication. These linguistic and communicative setbacks can result in negative judgments based on language norms, including perceptions of diminished intelligence or likability, unfavorable comparisons with peers, social discomfort, and, in some cases, perceived threats to the learner's identity or self-concept (Beebe, 1983, pp. 44–45, 60; Slavkov, 2023a, p. 33).

Language learners may be reluctant to make such choices, particularly in situations that appear to exceed their linguistic competence. As such, LRT inherently encompasses elements of anxiety and discomfort (Beebe, 1983, pp. 44–45; Slavkov, 2023a, p. 33, 38). Nevertheless, engagement in LRT is essential, as it facilitates linguistic problem-solving and contributes to the development of greater competence and confidence in using the target language and interacting with its speakers and communities across var-

ious linguistic domains. It also enhances language exposure and offers authentic opportunities for practice (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, pp. 259–260; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, pp. 128–129, 132). Crucially, engaging in LRT can evoke feelings of empowerment, pride, enjoyment, and success. This dual nature—encompassing both potential challenges and positive affective outcomes—is central to its pedagogical value. The LRT initiative seeks to reframe linguistic risks as opportunities for enjoyment and growth, while helping the learner to minimize their emphasis on failure and to make failure an acceptable/inherent part of learning (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 140; Slavkov, 2023a, p. 38). LRT can serve as a tool for raising awareness and managing both practice opportunities and emotional experiences in language learning (Slavkov, 2023a, pp. 38–39, 52). For a more detailed analysis of the LRT construct that also relates LRT to contributions of authors beyond the Canadian research group, please refer to other articles in this issue (e.g., Cajka & Vetter, 2026; Schick et al., 2026).

For our research context, we propose examining LRT by drawing on Liu's (2025) nuanced model of foreign language² confidence. To our knowledge, this model has not been related to LRT. It addresses many constructs that have been related to LRT, e.g., language anxiety³ and integrates many of the constructs that LRT aims to promote. Furthermore, it closely aligns with the intended outcomes we envision for an LRT initiative among our target group of future language educators: building perceived competence, reducing language anxiety, enhancing language enjoyment, and fostering both linguistic security and a sense of professional ownership. The model comprises three key dimensions: foreign language competence, linguistic security and linguistic ownership (Fig. 1). Foreign language competence is conceptualized as EFL learners' belief in their overall ability to use English effectively for communication and meaning making, rather than in isolated language skills. Linguistic security pertains to learners' awareness of the diverse varieties of English and their comfort in using their own variety within both professional and broader communicative settings. Linguistic ownership refers to the degree to which learners identify with the English language, take pride in using it, and feel a personal connection to it, regardless of their linguistic background (Liu, 2025, p. 296).

² We acknowledge that English is not always a foreign language for future language educators in Germany, but can also be L1, L2, L3 or Lx. This is why we chose to include a question on this in our survey (see Fig. 3).

³ LRT has been related to more well-known constructs like language anxiety and willingness to communicate (for further elaboration see e.g., Slavkov & Séror, 2019, pp. 255–257; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2024). Exploring them here goes beyond the scope of this article, in which we chose foreign language confidence (Liu, 2025) as the theoretical foundation besides LRT.

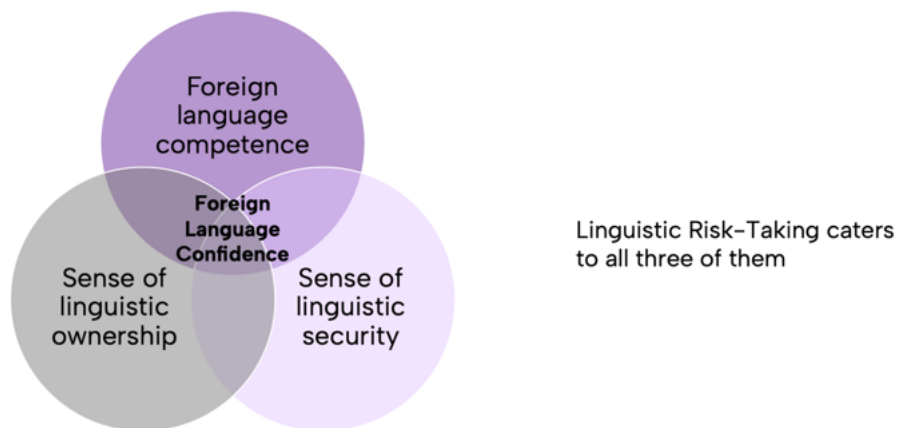


Fig. 1: Foreign language confidence based on Liu (2025, p. 296)

This conceptualization of foreign language confidence is relevant to our research, because it frames confidence as both dynamic and developable—qualities that can be achieved through LRT. The model views learners as active in the construction of foreign language confidence. It reflects both cognitive and affective perspectives on language learning and language use—the latter offering potential regarding emotion management as part of learners’ constructing foreign language confidence. Liu’s (2025) model is context dependent, responding to shifts in perceived proficiency and emotions such as anxiety, discomfort or enjoyment and pride. This aligns well with LRT’s potential dual role—not only as an individual experience but also as a pedagogical application that aims at showing learners’ paths to managing their emotions and to experiencing language enjoyment (Slavkov, 2023a, pp. 38–39, 52). Finally, this model acknowledges the diverse sociolinguistic realities of EFL learners and thus to learning and teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). Both our future language educators and their future students in schools are speakers and learners of English with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

2.2 The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative at the University of Ottawa

Two tools, the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport and the *Linguistic Risk* app, are at the heart of the LRT initiative, which was developed for the bilingual French-English university campus of the University of Ottawa, Canada (uOttawa). The LRT passport is a booklet in the style of a travel passport that lists approximately 80 linguistic risks. Examples include sending an email to a professor, ordering food on campus or doing a job interview in the L2. While it is introduced in university language classes (e.g., Rhéaume et al., 2021), its primary purpose is to encourage autonomous engagement with the target language beyond the classroom walls, as university students independently complete listed or individually proposed risks. Each risk can also be rated for its risk potential (high/medium/low) in the passport (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, pp. 260–264; Slavkov,

2023a, pp. 34–37). The LRT passport has also been launched as a digital app called *Linguistic Risk* for members of the campus of the University of Ottawa (uOttawa; Slavkov, 2026), thus incorporating gamification features (e.g., achievement levels, virtual trophies) and digital media into the initiative (Slavkov, 2026). Since most risk-activity takes place in real life, the app is not a virtual reality app but rather scaffolds experiential and authentic language use and learning. The app allows advanced/in depth sharing of experiences and perspectives by enabling users to rate their anxiety and enjoyment levels for completed risks and to comment on them. In addition, it provides automated progress tracking with individualized graphs and charts (e.g., number of risks taken, risk repetition frequency, risks taken sorted by theme or skill), which has the pedagogical function of promoting learner autonomy. To ensure ongoing encouragement and engagement, the app allows goal setting (i.e., lets users select risks, due date and set reminders), shows trending risks and offers a feature that suggests a random risk.

Many examples highlight the adaptability potential of the LRT initiative to different learning contexts (MacDonald & Thompson, 2019; Cajka et al., 2023; European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe, 2025; Slavkov, 2020, p. 64; Slavkov, 2023a, p. 52; OLBI & LEARN, 2023; SPEAQ & LEARN, 2023). In this regard, our aim is to contribute to the field by examining the adaptability of the LRT initiative in the context of prospective foreign language educators in Germany.

2.3 The University of Cologne and the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative

With approximately 46.000 students, the University Cologne is the largest in-person university in Germany. The target group for this initiative, teacher trainees, represent the largest percentage of students studying in the arts and humanities at the University of Cologne. The study at hand was conducted in the Department of English II, where all students are preparing for careers as teachers, including special needs, elementary school and secondary education. As future educators, these teacher trainees will serve as role models who can demonstrate to their future students that engaging in LRT is both an important and beneficial part of language learning. This underscores the need to foster LRT awareness and practice within this target group.

All classes in the Department of English II are taught in the target language, yet German is dominant both on campus and in the wider community. LRT is therefore of particular interest in contexts like Germany, where the prevalence of German can stand in the way of authentic communicative situations and may create additional challenges for engaging in risk-taking. Beyond the classroom, natural English-speaking environments and opportunities are scarce, even though there is significant potential in the dominance of English in digital media, pop culture and similar domains. In this context, LRT can serve as a tool by raising students' awareness of the existing opportunities for practice around them.

Griffith & Slavkov (2021, p. 129) and Slavkov (2023a, p. 32) emphasize the importance of authentic settings in which the target language is used during LRT. Such

settings exist on bilingual campuses such as the one of the University of Ottawa. In Cologne, however, a predominantly German-speaking environment, identifying opportunities for authentic LRT outside of the classroom poses more of a challenge for pre-service teachers. This challenge would be amplified if all LRT opportunities were required to be encounters in which German was not the more convenient option for the speakers. Within the University of Cologne, LRT opportunities also arise in the English language classrooms, as all English classes are taught in the target language. However, even in those classes both teachers and students are usually proficient in German, with German as the L1 for many. It is therefore important that English interactions in these classroom scenarios are implemented in a way that allows all participants to experience these L2 interactions as natural and spontaneous through habituation and a positive classroom atmosphere. An LRT initiative can contribute to this implementation. When students and teachers alike have fewer opportunities for authentic English interactions outside the classroom, LRT becomes a critical strategy for ensuring that English is used as a living, functional language outside of the classroom beyond it being an academic subject. For our research purposes, we therefore refine the definition of LRT as follows:

Linguistic risks are autonomous meaningful communicative acts where learners are pushed out of their linguistic and cultural comfort zone, both within and beyond the language classroom, in settings that require either authentic use of the target language in real-life situations or convincingly modeled representations of real-life communicative situations or experiences.

3. The Study

3.1 Research Objective and Research Questions

The present study is embedded in a larger ongoing study on LRT at the University Cologne in collaboration with the LRT initiative at the University of Ottawa in which we seek to

- Make the *Linguistic Risk* app accessible for our students at the University of Cologne
- Develop the LRT initiative for a higher education teacher training program and an environment in which English is not spoken widely outside the classroom
- Implement and validate the LRT initiative in our context

For the preparatory study at hand, we conducted a student-survey following a participatory approach in designing an LRT initiative and aiming to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perspectives on LRT of university students pursuing a career in English language teaching in Germany?

RQ2: What are these university students' perspectives on how they can be pedagogically supported in a higher education context to engage with the target language (English) through LRT?

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Research Instrument: Student Survey

We used a pilot survey as a first step to take into account the student perspective in developing an LRT initiative. The survey attempted

- to capture what they perceive as risky
- to find out what risks they could imagine engaging in
- to identify factors that might encourage risk-taking
- and to learn in what ways the students would like to be supported.

The survey comprised 24 questions in total. Of these, eight gathered demographic information. The remaining 16 focused on perspectives on linguistic risks and included 69 items to be rated on a 6-point Likert scale or ranked in order of preference, along with three open-ended questions for more detailed responses. Demographic questions collected background information, e.g., their age, study program or linguistic background (years of learning English, other family languages).

The majority of the questions were Matrix-questions with 6-point Likert scales to measure agreement, perceptions (e.g., perceived riskiness), attitudes or behaviors (e.g., usage of L2 skills) across multiple items. We chose a 6-point Likert scale to remove the neutral midpoint thus encouraging respondents toward expressing either agreement or disagreement. Some ranking questions asked respondents to rank items in order of preference (e.g., communities in which to reflect on LRT experience). Three questions were open-ended for richer insights into potential risks to an LRT tool (passport/app), e.g., allowing students to suggest linguistic risks they would like to take in the future.

The survey was conducted in four bachelor's courses and one master's course in summer 2024. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. At the beginning of the survey, students were provided with information about the research project, including how the survey data would be used, stored and processed, so that students could individually make an informed decision about giving their consent by participating in the survey.

3.2.2 Participants

Of all participants ($n = 82$), approximately 80% were female and the median age was 22. One participant was excluded from analysis for not completing the demographic questions, so that the final analysis was based on the answers of 81 participants.

Within the cohort, 35.8% were studying to be elementary school, 40.7% secondary school teachers, and 23.5% special needs education teachers. This distribution closely

reflects that of our department overall, where 40% of students are pursuing a degree as elementary school teachers (bachelor’s 27% / master’s 13%), 41% a degree as secondary school teachers (bachelor’s 30% / master’s 10%) and 19% a degree as special needs teachers (bachelor’s 12% / master’s 7%; University of Cologne, 2023, p. 6).

91.25% of the survey participants had studied English for more than ten years (Fig. 2), with the vast majority learning it as a foreign language rather than acquiring it in the family or in early childhood as a first or second language (Fig. 3). In addition, one third of the cohort reported having another family language besides German (Fig. 4).

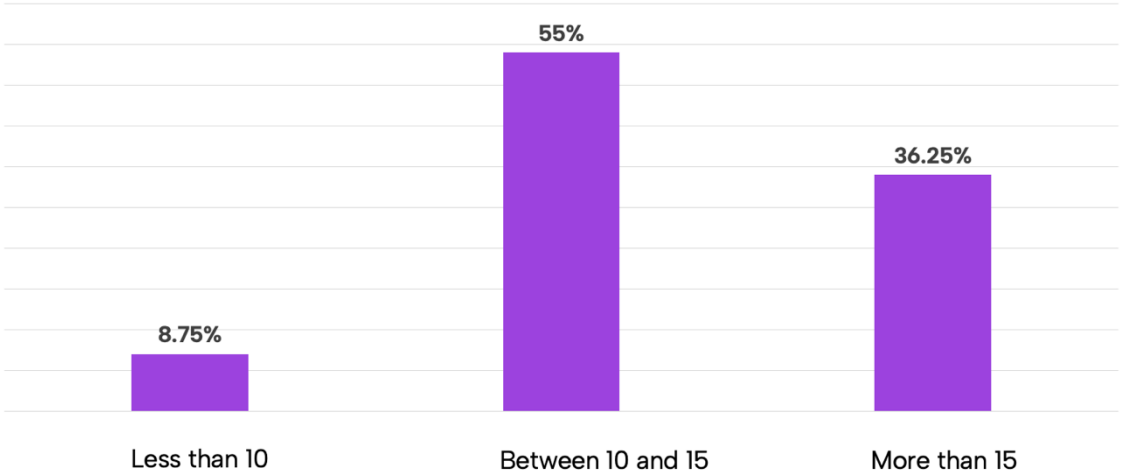


Fig. 2: Years of studying English (percentage)

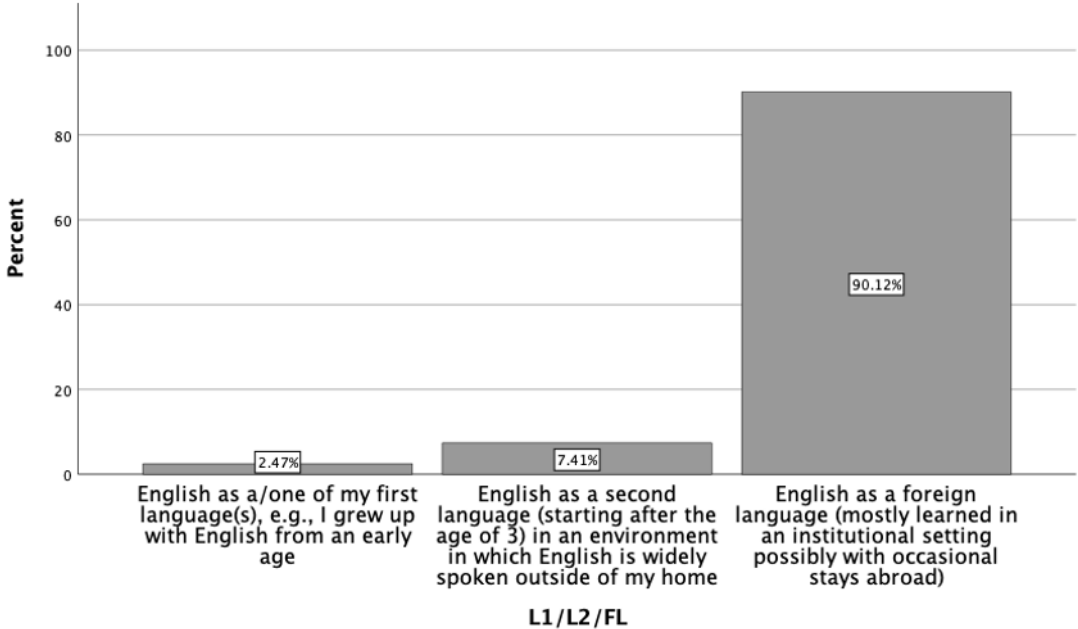


Fig. 3: Learning context percentage within cohort (percentage)

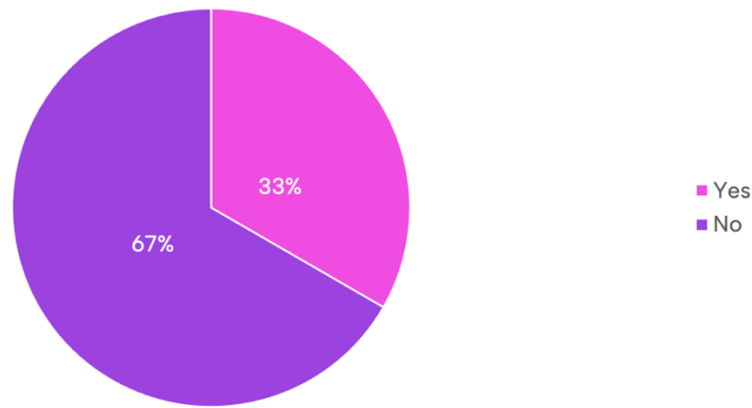


Fig. 4: other family languages besides German (percentage)

3.3 Results (Descriptive Statistics)

3.3.1 Survey Items Relating to RQ1

RQ1: What is the perspective on LRT of university students pursuing a career in English language teaching in Germany?

Many students reported using their receptive skills (listening, reading) almost daily, but indicated less frequent use of their productive skills (Fig. 5). The survey did not specify whether this referred to use within or outside the university. When asked which skills they most wanted to improve in an additional question, over half of the students selected speaking, while 23% chose all skills equally (18% writing / 5% listening / 2% reading comprehension). Based on these findings, we suggest that LRT for teacher trainees should prioritize productive skills, especially speaking.

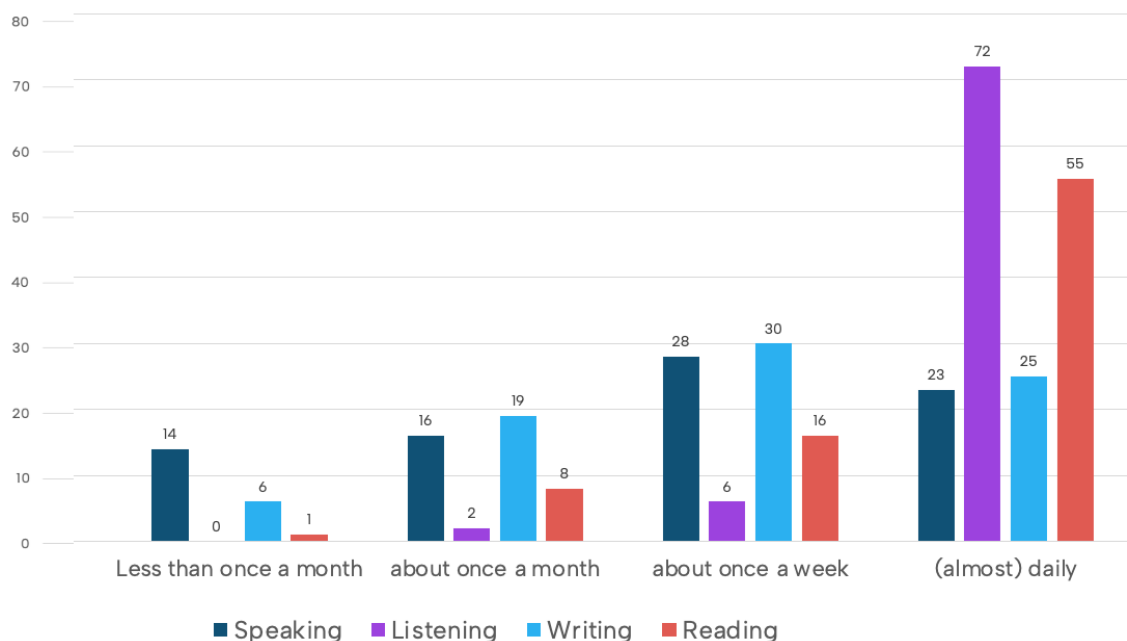


Fig. 5: Frequency of English usage (raw count)

We asked participants whether they generally feel comfortable and confident using English. The data shows a slight skew to the left, indicating that students feel less at ease in academic contexts compared to everyday situations outside the university, where they appear more confident and comfortable (Fig. 6). This seems to suggest a need to promote LRT within academic contexts, as confidence in these settings is central to developing their professional identities as future English teachers. This finding may also underscore a difference between the Canadian LRT initiative and our German teacher trainee context, where LRT in an academic context may play a special role given the expectations for professional English proficiency in teaching careers. In the master's cohort in particular, we would have liked to see a growth in comfort within an academic context over the course of their studies; however, the data does not seem to indicate such growth. This finding tentatively suggests that targeted LRT could help address this gap and better support students as they prepare to enter their professional careers.

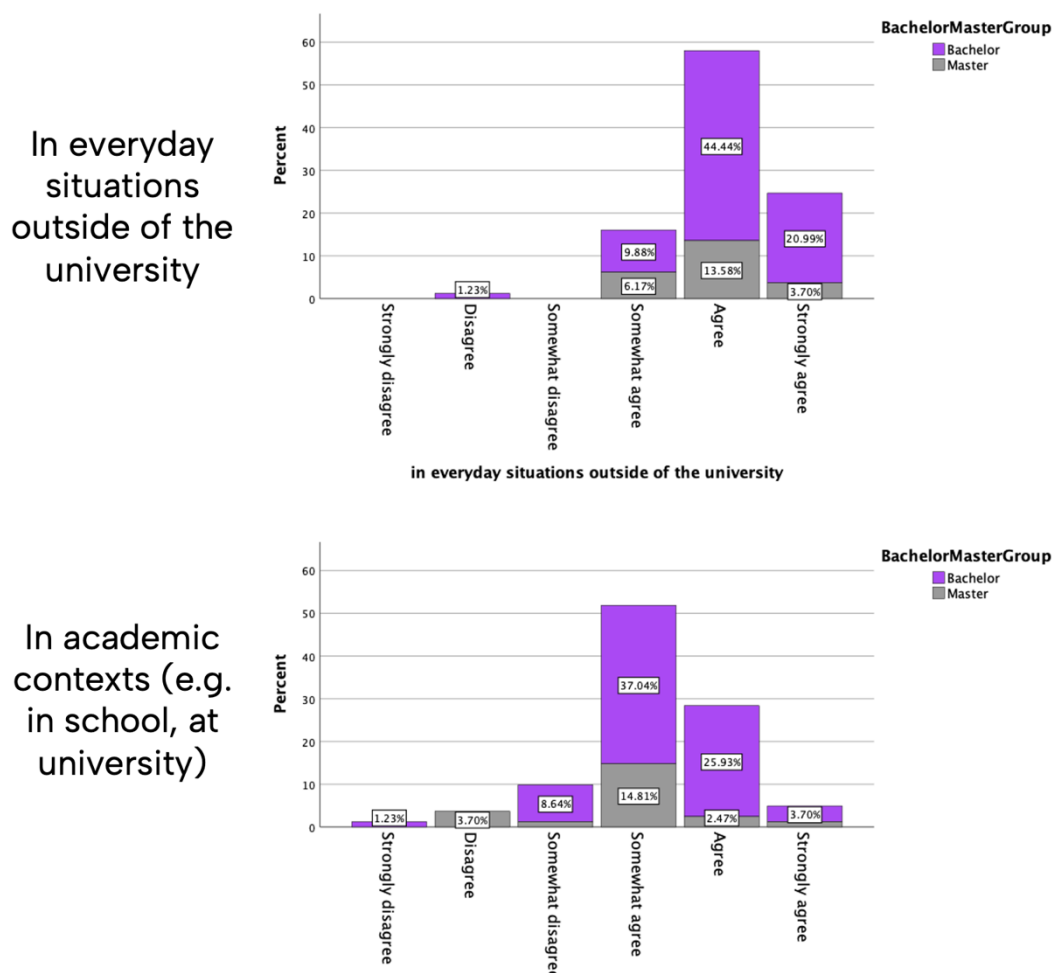


Fig. 6: Comfort of English usage (percentage)

Building on the general question about overall comfort, another survey item asked about students' level of comfort using English in specific situations and with particular

interlocutors (Fig. 7). Once again, the data (overall) suggests that the cohort feels relatively comfortable, with the blue-to-green bars in the graph representing levels of comfort and the red-to-yellow bars representing perceived risk. Students reported the greatest comfort when using English with another person they know who is also studying to be an English teacher. By contrast, they felt least comfortable when interacting with someone whose English they perceived as better than their own or when required to speak in front of a group. These results could point to a potential need to support students' foreign language confidence in this regard, as their future profession as English teachers will require them to be comfortable speaking in front of different groups and to feel confident in their English skills in different contexts. It is possible that social desirability might have influenced the overall high levels of reported comfort, since future teachers would be expected to feel comfortable using English. Future research with rephrased questions may yield clearer insights. At the same time, these responses align with other findings from our survey (see e.g., Fig. 12, on preferred communities for discussing LRT experiences).

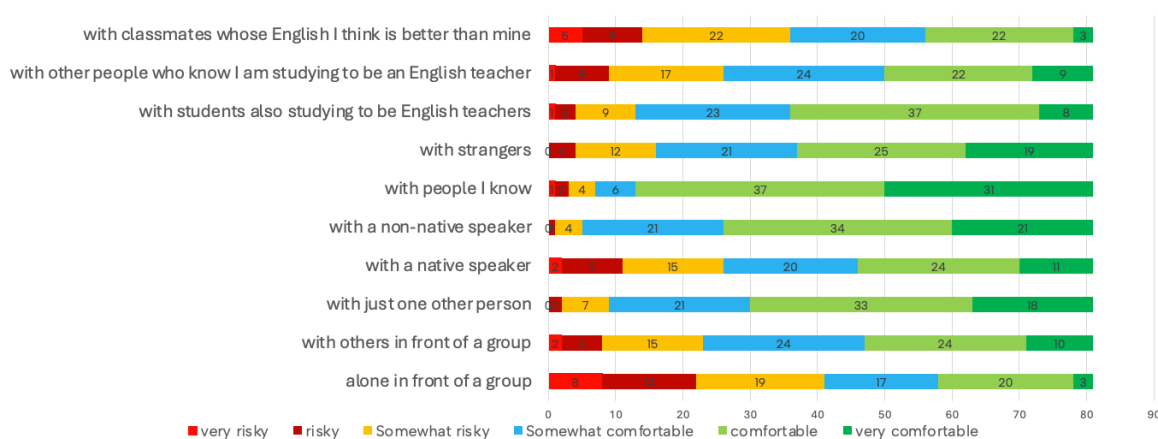


Fig. 7: Level of comfort when using English specified (raw count)

In another survey item, students were asked to rate the extent to which certain factors present barriers to using English (Fig. 8). Anxiety stemming from negative experience and interacting with native speakers do not appear to constitute major barriers. This may be explained by their many years of language study, which may have helped them overcome possible past negative experiences. In contrast, the fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary and self-consciousness about pronunciation and accent emerged as potential barriers. The survey data suggests a certain degree of insecurity that could be addressed in an LRT initiative, because future English teachers are generally expected to demonstrate a broad vocabulary and accurate pronunciation in the target language. Against this background, engaging in LRT would be of particular importance, as LRT experiences can help build a resilient linguistic identity. By continuously challenging

themselves to use English despite potential errors or misunderstandings, pre-service teachers can learn to view language learning as an evolving process rather than a series of failures.

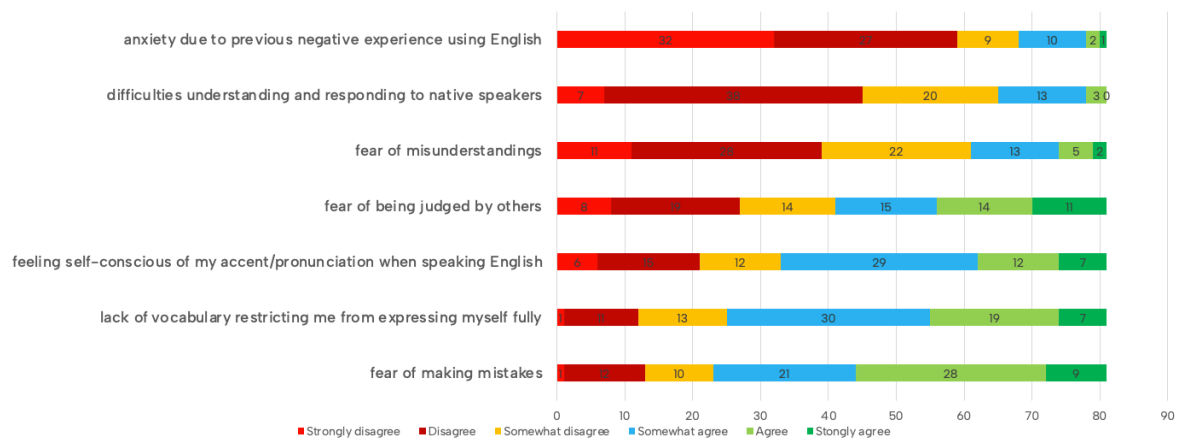


Fig. 8: Barriers to using English (raw count)

The open-ended questions invited students to suggest linguistic risks they envisioned taking. Their responses were categorized by skill (listening, reading, speaking, writing) and theme (e.g., academic, off campus) and then subsequently compared to the Canadian LRT passport and app. This process led to the integration of our students' risk-suggestions into a pilot version of the LRT passport, adapted specifically to our university and teacher trainee context in Germany. The passport is freely accessible online and included in the appendix of this article (appendix, LRT University of Cologne website).

3.3.2 Survey Items Relating to RQ2

We now turn to survey items addressing Research Question 2: What are university students' perspectives on how they can be pedagogically supported in a higher education context to engage with the target language (English) through LRT?

One survey question asked students to indicate their level of agreement regarding the role of external encouragement as well as opportunities to use English (Fig. 9). Overall agreement across all items of this question was high, suggesting both a need for more external encouragement to use English and supporting the view that LRT is not self-driven (Slavkov, 2023b). Notably, students expressed strong agreement with the wish for more opportunities to use English (item 5) and the perception that such opportunities are lacking (item 6), while also admitting that they do not always take advantage of existing opportunities (item 1). The responses further indicate that while students generally seem to desire encouragement and opportunities to use English, their hesitation on item 4 (instructors should be more insistent on English being spoken in class) indicates that too much insistence from instructors might be perceived as undue pressure rather than support. These findings suggest that the challenge for an LRT initiative is to

strike a balance between encouragement and pressure. Taken together, the responses underline the importance of well-planned and thought-out pedagogical guidance for LRT.

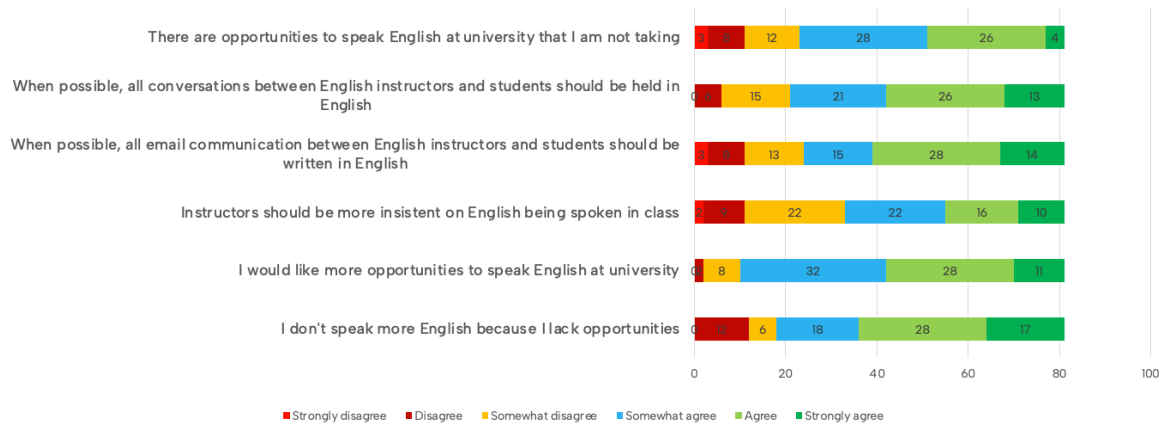


Fig. 9: External encouragement and practice opportunities (raw count)

Another survey question asked which factors would inspire students to take linguistic risks (Fig. 10). We focused on three: access to the app, opportunities to reflect with classmates and instructors, and observing role models taking risks. The results suggest that students would like access to the *Linguistic Risk* app and opportunities to discuss LRT with classmates and instructors. With respect to role models, peers appear more influential than external role models such as influencers.

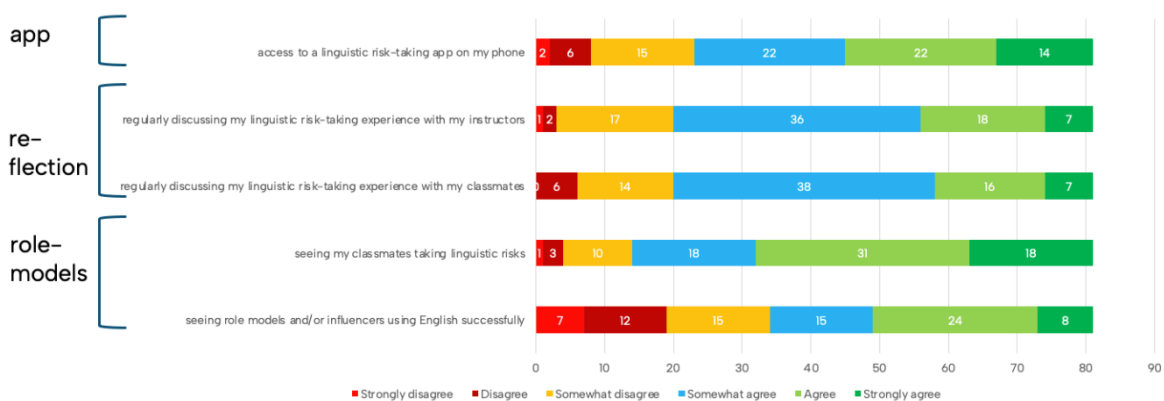


Fig. 10: factors that would inspire taking linguistic risks (raw count)

Students were furthermore asked to rank settings for discussing their LRT experiences from most to least comfortable (Fig. 11). The figure shows the number of students who selected each setting as their most comfortable. Only students' first choice rankings are shown in Fig. 11 to highlight their strongest preferences. Subsequent ranks are not dis-

played. A large majority (74 out of 81 students) prefer informal settings with lower levels of commitment⁴. Settings that were more formal and required greater commitment tended to rank lower in the students' preferences.

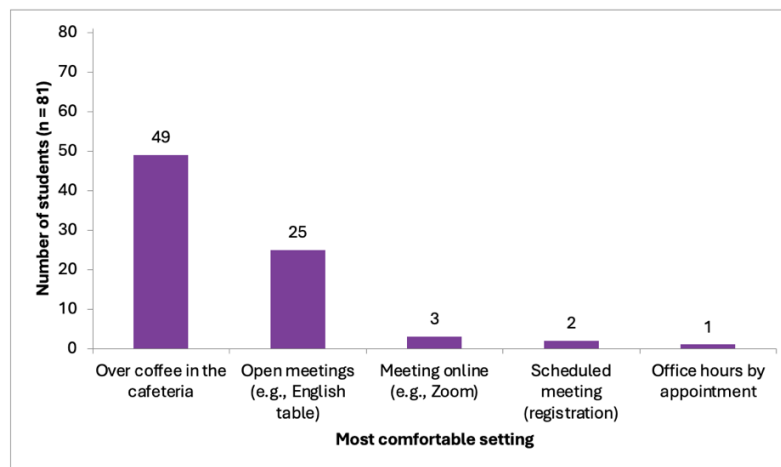


Fig. 11: Number of students who ranked each setting as their *most comfortable* for discussing LRT experiences (raw count, $n = 81$).

In addition to ranking preferred settings, students were also asked to rank the communities in which they would most prefer to discuss their LRT experiences (Fig. 12). The figure shows the number of students who ranked each community as their most preferred. Their preferences again point towards familiarity and relatability—primarily peers—as well as autonomy, such as choosing group members.

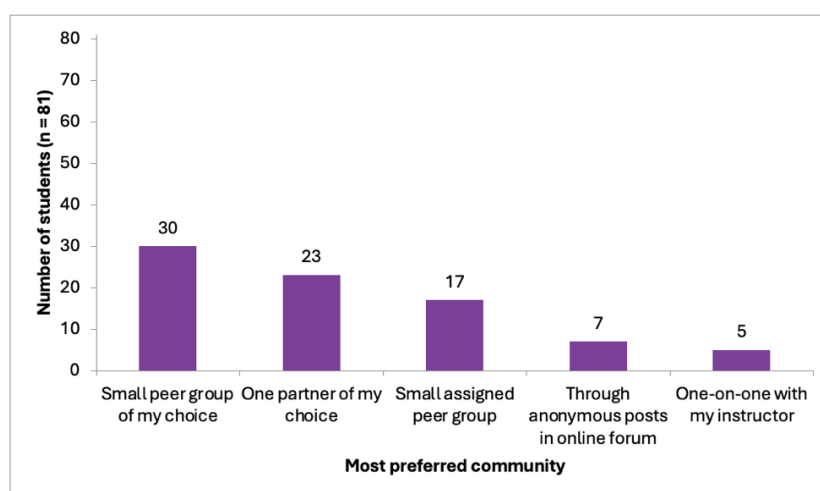


Fig. 12: Number of students who ranked each community as their most preferred for discussing LRT experiences (raw count, $n = 81$)

⁴ The English table is an extracurricular activity offered at our department which takes place over coffee in the cafeteria.

Students were asked whether they would use a Linguistic Risk-Taking app to improve their English skills (Fig. 13). As this was a hypothetical question—since none of the students had had access to or been introduced to the *Linguistic Risk* app—the responses should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, the majority of students expressed some level of agreement, which is a promising result, as it suggests a general interest and openness towards the idea of integrating such a tool into an LRT initiative.

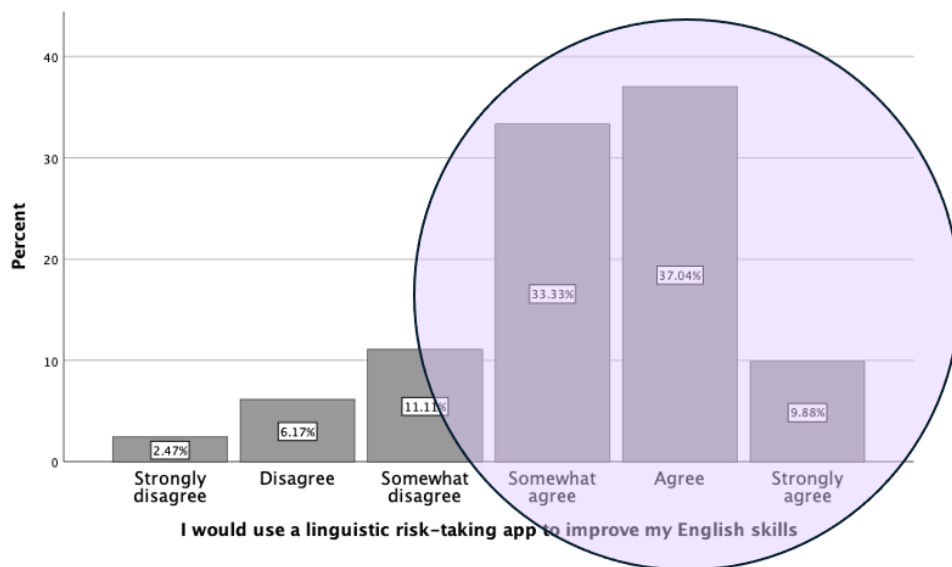


Fig. 13: Potential usage of *Linguistic Risk* app to improve English skills (percentage)

Another survey item asked about specific app features and whether students would find them useful and motivating (Fig. 14). The high levels of agreement regarding regularly suggested challenges, different achievement levels, progress tracking, virtual recognition and rewards, options for collaboration, the option to create a profile as well as an appealing interface seem to suggest that their preferences align with the current design of the *Linguistic Risk* app. The ideas of sharing progress on social media and of an avatar appear to be the less well received.

The aim of the question was to elicit initial insights into learners' perceptions of key features of the *Linguistic Risk* app. Future research will be necessary to capture more nuanced feedback, once students have direct access to the app and can form impressions based on actual rather than hypothetical use.

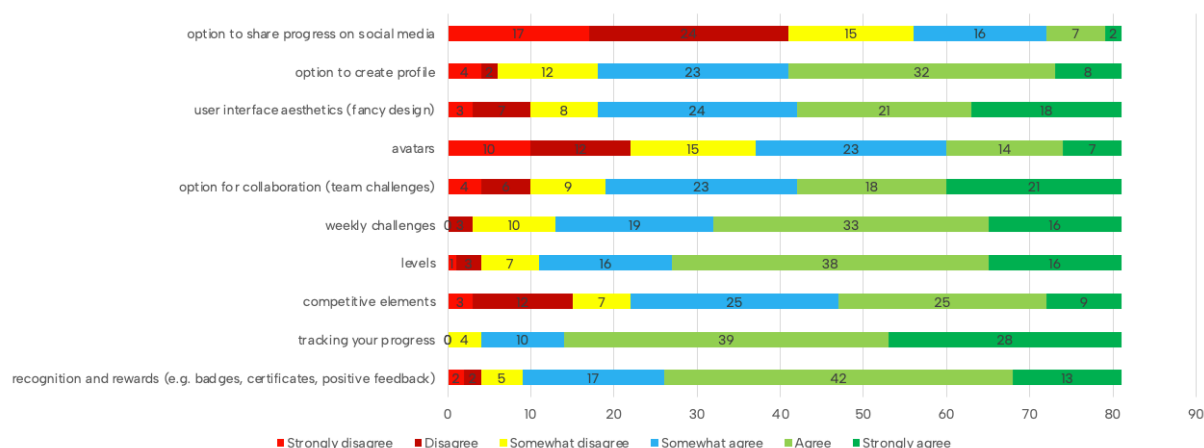


Fig. 14: Potential motivating features of a *Linguistic Risk* app

4. Discussion

The survey aimed to attempt an answer to the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the perspective on LRT of university students pursuing a career in English language teaching in Germany?

RQ2: What are these university students' perspectives on how they can be pedagogically supported in a higher education context to engage with the target language (English) through LRT?

With regard to the first research question, the results seem to confirm that future language educators perceive a lack of opportunities to use English, while concurrently acknowledging that existing opportunities are not fully taken advantage of. This highlights the need to raise awareness both of available practice opportunities and of the importance of LRT itself. Productive skills and the use of the target language in academic contexts seem to be perceived as riskier than receptive skills or informal contexts. These findings, together with the risks suggested by the students in the open-ended questions, informed the adaptation of the LRT passport for our university and teacher trainee context. The resulting pilot version of the LRT passport for future language educators at the Department of English II (appendix, LRT University of Cologne website), constitutes a key outcome of this survey.

With respect to the second research question, the results suggest that most respondents would welcome: 1. access to an LRT app, 2. opportunities to reflect on their LRT experience with instructors and peers, and 3. modeling of LRT—especially through peers. At the same time, the data reveals a particular challenge for an LRT initiative in our university context, namely the need to carefully navigate contradictory needs, wishes and preferences:

On the one hand, students expressed a desire for autonomy and showed hesitance toward external insistence on target language use. They tend to prefer settings with low

levels of commitment as well as familiar, self-chosen communities for LRT reflection. The challenge for an LRT initiative will be to meet these expectations while balancing these preferences with the understanding that LRT is not primarily a self-driven process (Slavkov, 2023b).

The results need to be interpreted carefully, as our cohort included more bachelor's than master's students. Future research could investigate differences in perceptions of LRT and support preferences depending on students' stage of study (bachelor's vs. master's degree) and could be conducted with larger cohorts. Some survey items would benefit from rephrasing to reduce the influence of social desirability bias in the respondents' answers, and follow-up questions could allow for more in-depth exploration of key issues (e.g., why students are not taking full advantage of available opportunities to use the target language). A mixed-methods approach could complement the largely quantitative data of our survey with qualitative data, e.g., through semi-structured interviews with a subset of participants. A first step in this direction has already been taken by Schulz (2025), whose as-yet unpublished bachelor's thesis explored students' perspectives through semi-structured interviews ($n = 6$) revealing interesting insights into their own LRT experience and the extent to which this could carry over into their future teaching practice. In terms of establishing and developing an LRT initiative at our institution, a study by Rhéaume et al. (2021) provides particularly relevant guidance. It suggests practical ways to incorporate a growth language mindset and goal setting by promoting the ideal L2 self. Building on their findings can serve as a strong foundation for designing an LRT initiative tailored to our institution.

5. Conclusion

Our survey offers initial insights into teacher trainees' perceptions of LRT and their preferences regarding an LRT initiative. It allowed us to adapt the LRT passport to the foreign-language learning and teacher-trainee context at our university. This is an important first step that follow-up studies can build on in implementing and validating an LRT initiative both at our institution and in language education programs across the world.

For future educators, embracing linguistic risk-taking models a positive attitude toward language use and learning. This not only has the potential to strengthen their own language learning and foreign language confidence but can also equip them with strategies to encourage similar behaviors in their future classrooms. In this way, the benefits of LRT can potentially extend beyond individual learning to teaching practice. By discovering language enjoyment and a sense of accomplishment through LRT, future language educators can boost both academic and emotional well-being and strengthen foreign language confidence. This confidence is advantageous, as it not only supports language development but also has the potential to transfer to their professional lives, better preparing them for their future teaching roles.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all students who participated in our survey and shared their perspectives on LRT with us. Their contributions have informed both the academic and practical outcomes of this pilot study—specifically, the design of a prototype Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport (and, prospectively, the *Linguistic Risk* app) for future English educators and this scientific publication.

We are also grateful for the transatlantic collaboration with the Official Language and Bilingualism Institute of the University of Ottawa and Prof. Nikolay Slavkov, whose support has been instrumental in advancing our LRT research efforts. These research efforts were also made possible through ‘initial seed funding’ from the faculty of arts and humanities of the University of Cologne.

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Natascha Mizelle is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of English II at the University of Cologne, Germany. She founded the Language Table – an extracurricular initiative offered within the department – and co-leads a research project on Linguistic Risk-Taking and Well-Being among prospective English teachers with Kim Schick.

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Appendix: Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport for Future English Educators

(Kim Schick & Natascha Mizelle, Linguistic Risk-Taking Project, Department of English II, University of Cologne, Version January 2026)



PASSPORT

University of Cologne
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH II

Last Name: _____

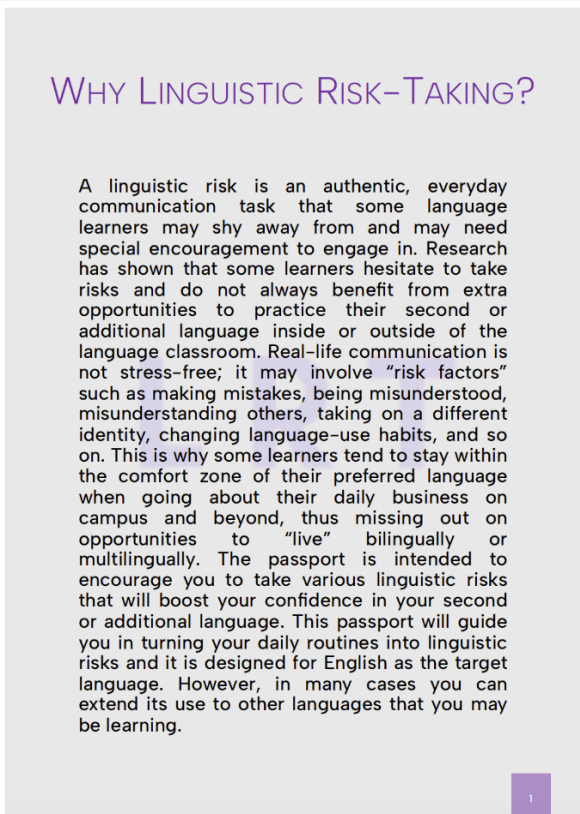
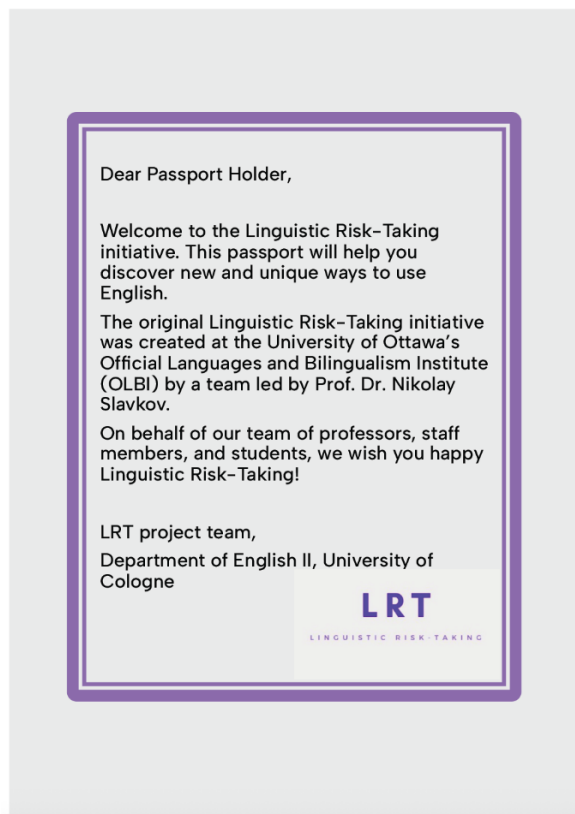
First Name: _____

Email address (@mail.uni-koeln.de): _____

Study program: _____

Number of semesters: _____
 Bachelor Master

LRT
LINGUISTIC RISK-TAKING



RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

It's simple and it's fun:

- Take as many risks as possible from the list included in this passport.
- Give yourself a check mark (✓) for each risk taken:
 - Most risks can be repeated up to three times (see number of checkboxes by each risk).
 - Risks can be taken in any order you like.
 - You do not need to undertake all risks listed.
 - Each time you undertake a risk, indicate whether you thought the level of risk was Low (L), Medium (M), or High (H) by circling the corresponding letter next to the checkbox.
- Feel free to use the blank passport pages provided at the end to propose additional risks.

2



LINGUISTIC RISKS

Most risks can be repeated up to three times (see number of checkboxes by each risk); no particular order is required; please rate each risk as Low (L), Medium (M), or High (H) each time you undertake it.

Example 1: I read the rules of engagement of the linguistic risk-taking passport.

- L M **H**
- L **M** H
- L** M H

Example 2: I talked about the linguistic risk-taking passport with a friend.

- L M **H**
- L** M H
- L M H

Comments:

3



Academic

- I submitted a class assignment or a paper in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H
- I studied for an exam in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H
- I took an exam in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H
- I participated in class discussions in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H
- I gave an oral presentation to the whole class in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

4




Academic

- I contributed to a plenary discussion held in English in a class taught in a lecture hall. L M H
 L M H
 L M H
- I wrote an academic text without using AI or any translation tool. L M H
 L M H
 L M H
- I used phraseology from an academic text I read and used it in my own writing. L M H
 L M H
 L M H
- I participated in a survey in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H
- I went to my instructor to seek advice on improving my English skills. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

5



Academic

11. I asked my instructor / professor for feedback on something I produced. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

12. I used English in a setting in which I will be graded based on my linguistic skills. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


13. I made a contribution in class although I felt unsure about my statement. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

14. I made a contribution in class about a topic I feel strongly about. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

15. I made a contribution in class although my opinion deviated from those expressed by others. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

6



Academic

16. I deliberately joined a group with more fluent English speakers for group work. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

17. I sent an email to a university professor in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


18. I spoke English in a class that was not a language class. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

19. I asked for clarification / repetition / elaboration of something in class. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

20. I admitted that I didn't know the answer to a question in a class held in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

7



Academic

21. I used English during group work in class. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

22. I shared my experiences of taking linguistic risks with a fellow student. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


23. I shared my experience of taking linguistic risks with an instructor. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

24. I made an agreement with my professor / instructor to be more insistent on English being spoken in class. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

25. I made an agreement with classmates to be insistent on English being spoken in class. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

8



Spoken interactions

26. I left a voicemail in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

27. I told a friend about the linguistic risk-taking passport in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


28. I spoke to a loved one in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

29. I spoke English to a friend with whom I normally speak German or another language. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

30. I spoke English with my friend. L M H
 L M H

Comments:

9



Spoken interactions

31. I made a phone call in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

32. I used English at work. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


33. I helped someone who does not speak English by translating for them L M H
 L M H
 L M H

34. I had a job interview in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

35. I used English when traveling abroad. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

10



Spoken interactions

36. I spoke to my siblings in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

37. I spoke to a flight attendant in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

38. I initiated a conversation with a stranger who knew English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

39. I spoke with a classmate in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

40. I spoke English all day. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

11



Spoken interactions

41. I stopped someone and asked for directions in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

42. I had an emotional conversation in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

43. I had a discussion on a controversial topic in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

44. I helped a tourist by giving directions in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

45. I asked someone to tell me about their day in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

12



Spoken interactions

46. I had a conversation with a native speaker. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

47. I thanked someone in English for holding the door for me. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


48. I complimented a stranger in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

49. I attended an English-speaking networking event. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

50. I babysat or tutored someone in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

13



Writing

51. I prepared a resume or a cover letter in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

52. I sent a text message in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


53. I made a social media post in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

54. I participated in an online forum / discussion board in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

55. I wrote a journal entry in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

14



Writing

56. I wrote a story in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

57. I wrote a short book review in English (on social media). L M H
 L M H
 L M H


58. I wrote a summary of a news article in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

59. I wrote a to-do list in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

60. I wrote my own song lyrics in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

15



Writing


61. I wrote a poem in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

62. I wrote a thank-you note to a loved one in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

63. I wrote a review for a product or service in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

16



Reading

64. I read a book or magazine in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

65. I read a news article in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


66. I read and followed a recipe in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

67. I read and followed instructions in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

68. I read a newsletter in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

17



Reading

69. I read into a topic I am interested in using English websites / sources. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

70. I read a novel in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


71. I read a short book review in English on social media. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

72. I received a bilingual email and read the English part. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

73. I used a dictionary, an online corpus, or another source to look up 10 new words in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

18



Listening

74. I listened to five songs sung in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

75. I listened to five songs sung in English and explained the lyrics / meaning to someone afterwards. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


76. I subscribed/listened to a podcast episode in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

77. I created a playlist with favorite songs in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

78. I took an audio tour or a guided tour in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

19



Listening

79. I signed up for a webinar in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

80. I listened to a radio station in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

81. I listened to a House of Commons / Congress debate. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

82. I listened to a press conference in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

83. I listened to a newscast in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

20



Listening

84. I listened to a TED talk in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

85. I listened to a variety show in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


86. I listened to an episode of a web series in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

87. I listened to a political podcast in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

88. I listened to an audiobook in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

21



Leisure

89. I participated in an English-language quiz night. L M H

90. I spoke to a stranger in English during a night out. L M H


91. I went to karaoke and sang a song in English. L M H

92. I watched a movie or show at home in English with subtitles. L M H

93. I watched a movie or show at home in English without subtitles. L M H

Comments:

22



Leisure

94. I saw a film at a movie theater in English. L M H

95. I watched a documentary in English. L M H


96. I watched a YouTube video in English. L M H

97. I played a board game in English. L M H

98. I played Scrabble in English without a dictionary. L M H

Comments:

23



Leisure

99. I played trivia or a word game in English. L M H

100. I participated in an English-only fun event (e.g. collaborating with the *Fachschaft*). L M H


101. I initiated an English-only fun event (e.g. collaborating with the *Fachschaft*). L M H

102. I participated in an international exchange setting. L M H

103. I watched my favorite sport on TV in English. L M H

Comments:

24



Leisure

104. I went to see a play in English. L M H


105. I listened to a short film in English. L M H

106. I watched five TikTok videos in English. L M H

107. I watched a video about a science topic in English. L M H

Comments:

25



Technology

108. I downloaded and used a smartphone app in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

109. I used Google apps in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


110. I switched the language of my smartphone / tablet to English for one day. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

111. I switched the language of my smartphone / tablet to English for one week. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

112. I switched the language of my smartphone / tablet to English permanently. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

26



Technology

113. I switched the language of my computer to English for one day. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

114. I switched the language of my computer to English for one week. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


115. I switched the language of my computer to English permanently. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

116. I used a self-checkout machine in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

117. I used an English-only chatbot or AI assistant to practice conversations. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

27



Daily life

118. I ordered pizza on the phone or online in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

119. I ordered my food from the drive-through in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H


120. I bought a bus ticket or made other travel arrangements in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

121. I applied for a visa in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

122. I filled out a form in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

28



Daily life

123. I activated a new credit / debit card using English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

124. I made an appointment in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

125. I asked for service in English at a museum, government building, or community center. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

126. I used Google Maps or GPS in English. L M H
 L M H
 L M H

Comments:

29

PROPOSE YOUR OWN RISKS

Use these blank pages to describe additional risks that you may have undertaken (optional). Please rate each risk as Low (L), Medium (M), or High (H).

_____	<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> H
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> H
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> H
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> H
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> H
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> H
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> H
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> H
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> H
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34

LINGUISTIC RISK-TAKER PROFILE

I am eager to use my second language everywhere on campus and beyond!

Yes, I may have an accent but that's what makes me unique!

I am not a native speaker of this language and I am okay with that!

I am not afraid of making errors; they are natural and normal in language use

35

SELF-ASSESSMENT

After having completed the passport...

- 1. I am more comfortable speaking English with strangers.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 2. I am more comfortable speaking English with people I know.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 3. Overall, I am more comfortable taking risks in English.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 4. I am more likely to communicate in English outside of the classroom.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 5. I am inspired to use English more often.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 6. My confidence in English has improved.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 7. This passport has helped me discover new opportunities for practicing English.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 8. Overall, this experience had a positive impact on my English skills.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree

36

SELF-ASSESSMENT

After having completed the passport...

- 1. Reflection of LRT has led to me to recognize that failure, anxiety, discomfort and stress are a natural part of language use and language learning.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 2. This realization will translate into my feeling more empathy toward my future students' learning experiences.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 3. Due to our reflection of LRT, I see taking linguistic risks as empowering, making me proud and contributing to language enjoyment.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 4. This realization will lead me to reflect on LRT with my future students and to show them paths toward language enjoyment.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 5. As a language educator, I plan to implement LRT in my future language classroom.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree
- 6. I believe LRT can contribute to language learner well-being.**
Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Neutral – Agree – Strongly Agree

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Stephanie Riehemann & Melanie Eberhardt-Juchem

Healthy Linguistic Risk-Taking and Communicative Resilience in Children with DLD: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Abstract

This article expands on the existing LRT initiative in two ways. First, it focuses on vulnerable language learners with developmental language disorders and the particular challenges they face. Their case shows how linguistic risks can arise in the context of first language acquisition and how healthy linguistic risk-taking can possibly support communicative participation and language development. Second, this article summarizes the extensive resilience research conducted over the past decades and concludes with an initial conceptualization of communicative resilience, thereby attempting to provide new impetus to the LRT initiative.

Dieser Artikel erweitert die *Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT)* Initiative in zweierlei Hinsicht. Er konzentriert sich auf vulnerable Sprachlernende mit Sprachentwicklungsstörungen und die besonderen Herausforderungen, denen sie gegenüberstehen. Ihr Fall zeigt, wie *LRT* im Kontext des Erstspracherwerbs entstehen und wie ‚gesundes‘ *LRT* möglicherweise die kommunikative Teilhabe und die Sprachentwicklung fördern kann. Damit trägt dieser Beitrag zur Erschließung des *LRT*-Konstrukts für die sonderpädagogische Forschung bei. Weiterhin fasst dieser Artikel die umfangreiche Resilienzforschung der letzten Jahrzehnte zusammen und schließt mit einer ersten Konzeptualisierung der kommunikativen Resilienz als Impuls für die LRT-Initiative.

Keywords

developmental language disorder, well-being, resilience, communicative participation, linguistic risk-taking

Sprachentwicklungsstörung, *Well-Being*, Resilienz, Kommunikative Teilhabe, *Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT)*, Sprachliche Risikobereitschaft, Kommunikative Resilienz

1. Introduction

The term **linguistic risk** refers to a situation in which language learners must step out of their comfort zone and face challenges in meaningful and authentic communication (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129). Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT) offers opportunities to raise language learners' awareness about their associated feelings and their current language competence at the same time. The concept combines interdisciplinary perspectives and can be related to various social, medical, psychological and pedagogical concepts and theories (cf. Slavkov, 2023, p. 33).



LRT can be helpful for learners of a foreign language and those in multilingual contexts (Slavkov, 2023, p. 52). However, it could also be suitable for **vulnerable language learners**. On the one hand, the learners' choices are related to their cognitive, emotional, social and linguistic abilities. The lower these are, the greater the likelihood that students will hesitate or even avoid overcoming their own doubts, discomfort or anxiety in the process. On the other hand, LRT might give them the chance to discover feelings of empowerment and enjoyment (Slavkov, 2023, p. 52). In line with Slavkov (2023, p. 39), we argue that taking linguistic risks in a healthy and playful way can promote language development, well-being and resilience.

Schick and Rohde (2025, p. 253) assume that children with **developmental language disorders** (DLD) regularly experience situations that pose a linguistic risk. Even in everyday interactions, they might be confronted with interactions of uncertain outcome and “the possibility of failure” (Beebe, 1983, p. 39). Based on this insight, our article aims to present the special needs of children with DLD. To this end, empirical findings on well-being, resilience and communicative participation of this group are summarized. Subsequently, “healthy risk-taking practices” as described by Cervantes (2013, p. 432) are related to children with DLD. The article concludes with an initial conceptualization of communicative resilience. It intends to contribute to making the LRT initiative accessible to vulnerable language learners. In our view, theoretical and empirical integration with current resilience research provides an important impetus for the further development of LRT as a pedagogical approach, especially in inclusive school settings.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Well-Being and Resilience

Traditionally, medicine and psychology tend to deal with people's (mental) health problems. A paradigm shift was first initiated in the 1970s by the sociologist Antonovsky. His research with women who survived the Holocaust showed that—despite their traumatic experiences as a child—around one third of them continued to live in good health. Antonovsky (1979, p. 68) concluded that **well-being** should not be understood as a passive state, but as an active process. His salutogenesis theory focuses on factors that serve to maintain or restore mental and physical health. Today, modern brain researchers investigate neuronal processes ensuring that people see their problems less as paralyzing obstacles “but simply as challenges that can be faced, overcome and learned from” (Siegel & Payne Bryson, 2018, p. 15). The integration of different brain regions seems to be crucial in this context. However, according to these authors, a well-integrated brain is not inherited. It does not form on its own but is shaped by everyday interactions and individual experiences.

Developmental psychologist Emmy Werner studied the entire 1955 birth cohort on the island of Kawaii ($n = 698$) for 40 years. She found that many of the subjects were

exposed to high-risk stress (mainly due to poverty and low education). Werner was particularly interested in those who, nevertheless, developed well. In line with Antonovsky's studies, this group made up approximately one third of the participants. Werner (2011, pp. 37–38) identified personal and social **protective factors** that mitigate potential life risks and make positive developmental trajectories more likely. These include, for example, good cognitive skills, a high level of social competence and optimism. Werner repeatedly described secure bonding to at least one caregiver as the most important social protective factor. In addition, other social resources (e.g., peer friendships) are now also regarded as empirically proven protective factors (Wustmann Seiler, 2021, p. 116).

In fact, well-being is a multidimensional construct that depends on individual, situational and contextual factors. Its conceptualization in the last 25 years has particularly been driven by positive psychology. The early PERMA model which was developed by Seligman (2011) and the EMPATHICS model of learner well-being by Oxford (2016) contain many components (e.g., emotion, meaning, hope, agency, time and relationships). That is why they can hardly be operationalized and should be validated and revised (Alrabai & Dewaele, 2023, p. 8). However, they already offer an important theoretical framework for language teachers as well as speech and language pathologists.

Resilience refers to maintaining well-being in the face of adversity. There is international agreement that the term means bouncing back from serious stressors and coping with challenges (Avdagic et al., 2020, pp. 2070–2071; Lyons & Roulstone, 2018, p. 325). Resilience is not an innate personality trait. It rather describes a “process whereby a child develops capacity to make effective adaptations” when experiencing adverse circumstances (Avdagic et al., 2020, p. 2074). It develops dynamically with the demands of life. The more demanding it is, the greater resilience can become. It helps in dealing with ongoing crises as well as in acute stress situations. However, once resilience has been gained, it can also be lost again or only relate to certain aspects of life. Just like well-being, resilience is a complex construct which consists of several components, some of which cannot be clearly distinguished from one another and are mutually dependent (Avdagic et al., 2020, p. 2071; Masten, 2014, p. 14; Wustmann Seiler, 2021, pp. 115–116).

According to Ungar (2015, p. 4) resilience is determined both by individual and social aspects. The number and naming of these aspects vary depending on the cultural, scientific and contextual background of researchers (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012, p. 2299). For a child, “resilience reflects all the adaptive capacity available at a given time in a given context that can be drawn upon to respond to current or future challenges facing the individual, through many different processes and connections” (Masten & Barnes, 2018, p. 2). Unfortunately, until now there is no international agreement on which criteria are mandatory or optional for resilience. It is also unclear to what extent they interact and influence each other. Further studies are needed to answer these questions.

2.2 Personal Resilience Factors and Social Resources

The active role of the individual in overcoming challenges is fundamental. That is why educational research focuses primarily on personal resilience factors and social resources which—in contrast to genetic components—can be acquired throughout social interactions or influenced by the environment (Wustmann Seiler, 2021, p. 33). Personal resilience factors show a high degree of conceptual overlap with the theoretical frameworks of well-being by Oxford (2016) and Alrabai & Dewaele (2023). The differentiated analysis of international reviews and studies by Froehlich-Gildhoff and Roennau-Boese (2024, pp. 42–58) shows that, at the personal level, six resilience factors are particularly relevant for overcoming challenges:

1. **Self-awareness:** appropriate self-assessment of one's own emotions and thoughts
2. **Self-efficacy:** confidence in one's own competences and the conviction of being able to overcome challenges, knowledge of one's own strengths
3. **Self-regulation:** the control of one's own feelings, arousal and thoughts (both activation and calming), emotional flexibility
4. **Social competences:** help-seeking, self-assertation, adequate conflict resolution, empathy and theory of mind
5. **Problem solving skills:** goal orientation, recourse to past experiences and analogies, brainstorming, reduction to a single task
6. **Adaptive strategies:** flexible use of different coping strategies, assessment of situations and options, knowledge of one's own limits

Furthermore, resilience is not only an individual achievement of the child. Ungar (2015, p. 7) points out that it is always a matter of the interaction between a person and their environment. The social network influences the process immensely. According to Wustmann Seiler (2021, p. 111) most studies have shown that a caring, appropriately demanding upbringing is of central importance for the development of resilience. The author also states that empirical studies show that a caring environment outside the family plays a crucial compensatory role, both in terms of direct support and positive role modeling. After all, the most prominent social resources are appreciation (recognizing and showing that someone is valuable), secure attachment (to at least one caregiver), autonomy (experience of volition, freedom and control) and support (feedback, praise, encouragement).

The following framework (Fig. 1) is based on the work of Froehlich Gildhoff and Roennau-Boese (2024). The starting point is a **challenge** (blue) which may occur acutely in a specific situation or over a longer period. Challenges for children can also be age-appropriate developmental tasks (e.g., an argument with a friend) or transitions (e.g., starting school). The interaction of **personal factors** (orange) and **social resources** (purple) results in an adaptation and facilitates the **coping** (green). The more of these re-

sources and factors are available and the better they work together; the more likely coping becomes. In return, each successful coping process can promote the consolidation of the resilience factors and social resources already acquired.

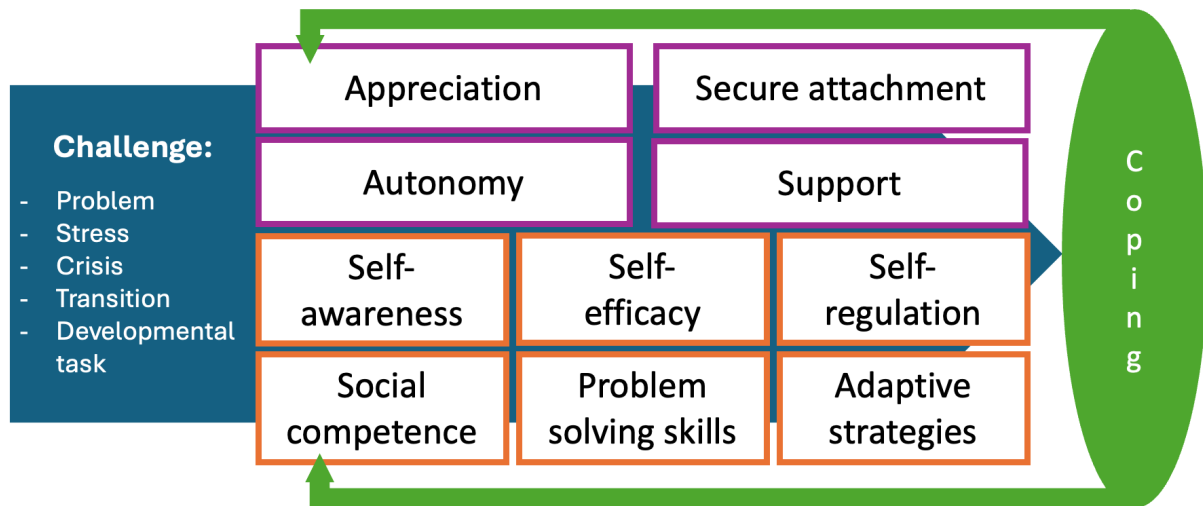


Fig. 1: Resilience factor model (based on Froehlich-Gildhoff & Roennau-Boese, 2024, p. 44)

It should be noted that this model shows only a selection of possible aspects. It does not claim to be complete and should be seen as work in progress. Nevertheless, it offers starting points for the development of effective and preventive interventions for diverse vulnerable populations (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

3. Vulnerable Learners with Developmental Language Disorder

3.1 Developmental Language Disorder

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is defined by persistent difficulties in the acquisition, understanding, production or use of language (spoken or signed) (WHO, 2019; ICD-11 6A01.2). The difficulties arise during the early developmental period and cannot be explained by another neurodevelopmental disorder (e.g., autism), a sensory impairment (e.g., deafness) or neurological condition (including the effects of brain injury or infections). The language and communicative abilities are below those expected for the individual's age (WHO, 2019).

To better understand the characteristics of language disorder, Paul (2020, p. 23) summarizes the domains and components of our language system: DLD includes difficulties in form, content and use of the language system (Tab. 1).

phonology	morphology syntax	form
semantics		content
pragmatics		use

Tab. 1: Domains of our language system

The symptoms at the different levels may vary over time, mainly including reduced vocabulary, limited sentences and impairments in discourse, and they can affect speaking as well as understanding language (for an overview of the diagnostic criteria see Calder et al. 2022, p. 2045). Developmental language disorder with

- impairment of receptive and expressive language (6A01.20)
- impairment of mainly expressive language (6A01.21)
- impairment of mainly pragmatic language (6A01.22)

are distinguished in the ICD-11 (WHO, 2019).

As mentioned above, DLD is defined in the absence of another primary diagnosis. Nevertheless, children with DLD show difficulties that are not only specific to language—for example, in executive function or motor coordination. Evidence and clinical experience as well as poor agreement on the terminology itself led to a multinational and multidisciplinary Delphi consensus study (Bishop et al., 2017). Subsequently, the nomenclature changed from specific language impairment (SLI) to developmental language disorder (DLD).

Different studies from English-speaking countries indicate a prevalence rate of 7% among 4- to 5-year-old children, with higher rates for the receptive and combined receptive-expressive disorder (Calder et al., 2022, p. 2044). Language delays and difficulties associated with other disorders like intellectual disabilities, autism, deafness or ADHD are not included in these studies. Thus, the proportion of children showing language difficulties in most classrooms is much higher. Although it is one of the most prevalent neurodevelopmental disorders—if not the most—there is limited awareness in society, even in professional (medical or educational) contexts (Bishop et al., 2012, p. 259; Calder et al., 2022, p. 2045).

In summary, DLD shows considerable variation in terms of symptoms, developmental trajectory and comorbid disorders. In line with this heterogeneity, no single underlying cause for DLD has been identified yet. Paul (2020, pp. 25–28) discusses a constellation of genetic, biological and cognitive factors. The way children learn (language) is central to explanatory models for DLD today, which include auditory processing deficits, working memory deficits, and procedural memory deficits. The persistence of DLD into adulthood is emphasized by many authors. Paul (2020, p. 22) summarizes that children who show persistent deficits into school age are at high risk for continued communicative as well as literacy problems. Furthermore, symptoms of social, emotional, behavioral and academic difficulties often occur.

3.2 Impact of DLD on Well-Being

There is burgeoning evidence to suggest that the quality-of-life of children with DLD may be compromised in several ways (Duinmeijer et al., 2025; Feeney et al., 2012; St. Clair et al., 2011). Adverse experiences may depend on both the impairment itself and external barriers. In many cases, there is a negative impact across the entire lifespan. Although individuals with DLD are considerably heterogeneous, researchers have found that they are more likely to

- experience bullying and peer victimization (Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2007; Redmond, 2011; Gerbig et al., 2018),
- feel excluded and lonely (Wilmot et al., 2024; Lloyd-Esenkaya et al., 2020) and
- have poor quality friendships (Lyons & Roulstone, 2018; Durkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2010).

Links between DLD and socio-emotional and behavioral difficulties (SEB) are theoretically and empirically well established. Current studies indicate that there is a high risk of co-occurring SEB for children with DLD, even if the complexity of the connections and correlations are not fully analyzed and understood yet (Burnley et al., 2023, 2024; Ekström et al., 2023). DLD may contribute to internalizing conditions such as low self-esteem, (social) anxiety, depression and social withdrawal (Wilmot et al., 2024). Further research supports that some children with DLD may also show externalizing (i.e., aggressive) behavior due to misunderstandings or constant communicative exhaustion (Burnley et al., 2024).

But these conditions are by no means inevitable and cannot be wholly explained by linguistic limitations alone. The evidence base indicates a range of other/additional risk factors that mediate SEB in children with DLD. For example, difficulties with emotion regulation have been frequently observed in this population. Burnley et al. (2023, p. 2) point out that such difficulties could be linked to limited vocabulary and grammatical problems. Furthermore, there is initial evidence that some children with DLD show an “intolerance of uncertainty”, which may stem from reduced control of social interactions due to language difficulties (Burnley et al., 2024, p. 3013). In this context, insistence on sameness—such as (strict adherence to) timetables and classroom routines—and control-like behaviors could therefore be understood as coping strategies and the attempt to gain autonomy, particularly “when much of their day to day felt out of their control” (Burnley et al., 2023, p. 3).

3.3 Impact of DLD on Education and Communicative Participation in School

Education and learning processes strongly depend on language abilities. It is therefore not surprising that there is global evidence suggesting that children with DLD are at elevated risk of experiencing severe academic difficulties, such as poor reading and writing skills, low academic self-esteem, limited use of learning strategies, and academic underachievement (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2009; Ekström et al., 2023, p. 1169).

In addition, DLD may have a lasting impact on the daily communicative participation at school as it limits the children's ability to interact (Singer et al., 2023). Communicative participation in classroom activities means, for example, understanding the teacher's instructions, taking part in group work or initiating discussions with fellow students. "Children with DLD may begin to perceive themselves as 'stupid' or 'lazy' in the school context and may camouflage (i.e., mask) their difficulties to 'fit in' with peers" (Wilmot et al., 2024, p. 7). Constantly hiding their language problems in social interactions and compensating for not understanding or speaking to others during classroom activities might lead to mental and physical exhaustion of many children with DLD. In a qualitative study of Wilmot et al. (2024, p. 6), an adult with DLD reports: "[...] it is a tiring process, and I don't think people actually understand how much effort we have to go through on a daily basis." This statement clearly shows that individuals with DLD need a 'person-centered' support in everyday school life, whether it is in inclusive settings or at special needs schools (Merrick, 2020, p. 103).

However, empirical studies show great variations in communicative participation of children with DLD (Singer et al., 2023). As seen before, their behavior also depends on emotional and cognitive factors. Therefore, the evaluation and handling of communicative challenges strongly depend on individual experiences. Some children with DLD are effective communicators and others are not. The way children use gestures, facial expressions and social behavior determines the effectiveness of their daily communication (Bruinsma et al., 2024). Furthermore, low awareness of DLD in the community can lead to continuous excessive demands, especially in school.

3.4 Impact of DLD on Resilience

So far, little research has been conducted on the resilience of children with DLD and how they navigate daily life. Studies have mainly focused on their linguistic deficits rather than their emotional strengths and social competences. Little is known about protective factors in the context of DLD or the strategies children use in potentially adverse situations, nor about the impact these might have on their resilience.

Burnley et al. (2024) explored individual psychosocial experiences through semi-structured interviews with $n = 11$ mothers of children with DLD and $n = 5$ adults with DLD. As a result, the authors conceptualized a maintenance cycle (Fig. 2). While it is unsurprising that experiences of anxiety are associated with social frustration and that these are maintained by various factors (e.g., exhaustion or low self-esteem), this noteworthy study also highlights, for the first time, the relative strengths of the children affected. Despite their linguistic limitations, empathy and kindness are often displayed through caring actions and body language (e.g., care given to animals, attempts to include others). Another nonverbal way of expressing themselves appeared to be creativity (e.g., drawing). "All mothers described great admiration for their children, that despite their difficulties, they persevered and showed great resilience" (Burnley et al.,

2024, p. 3021). Overall, the researchers suggest that the recurring and ongoing challenges in everyday communication might lead to particularly strong resilience in some children with DLD. Based on the early studies discussed above, it can be assumed that this applies to about one-third of children with DLD.

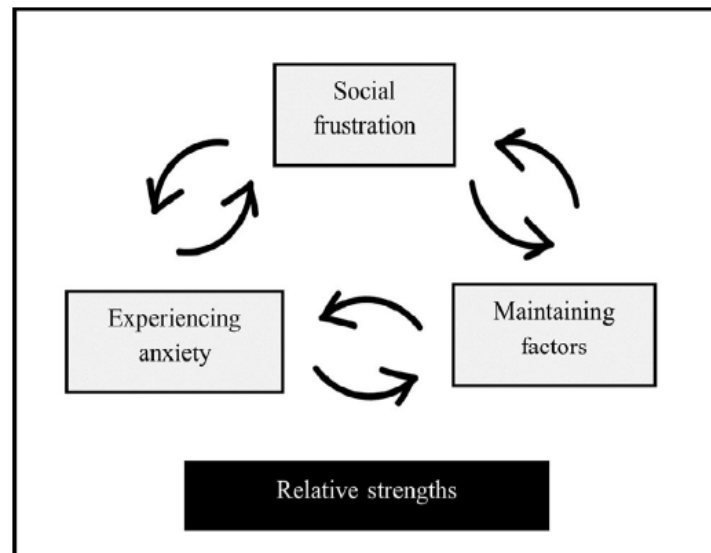


Fig. 2: Visualization of the core themes identified by Burnley et al. (2024, p. 3013)

Lyons and Roulstone (2018, p. 326) emphasize the strong relevance of coping strategies when addressing language difficulties. They analyzed 59 narrative interviews with $n = 11$ children with DLD. Based on the experiences described by the participants, the authors identified three potential protective factors:

1. **Optimistic mindset:** focusing on improvements, reframing negative experiences, building on overcoming obstacles in the past, co-constructing hope with others (family, peers, teachers and therapists).
2. **Agency/autonomy:** belief of control, sense of purpose and coherence, experiences of empowerment, being proactive, making choices, exerting influence in different everyday situations and settings.
3. **Positive relationships:** friendships, supportive social network, finding advocates and allies, affirmation by others, perceptions of being valued.

Both Ekström et al. (2023, pp. 1176–1177) and Lyons and Roulstone (2018, p. 340) highlight the importance of social resources regarding resilience. It is crucial that the environment recognizes and understands the individual language problems of the child in order to provide appropriate reactions and support. The social network must take the child's concerns and fears seriously. In doing so, it becomes possible to develop hopeful visions together and achieve communicative improvements.

4. LRT in Children with DLD

4.1 Linguistic Risks for Children with DLD

One way or another, most children with DLD experience linguistic risks in everyday (school) life. Schick and Rohde (2025, p. 10) identify relevant symptoms and vulnerabilities of students with DLD based on their literature review. They assume that these children are more likely to struggle with linguistic risks in the following core areas based on the symptoms and their effects of learning, communication and well-being:

- Limited comprehension monitoring, including difficulties in assessing and regulating understanding during verbal communication or text reading as well as limited awareness of potential causes of misunderstanding
- Limited use of language learning strategies (e.g., vocabulary) and communication strategies (e.g., asking), including experimenting with language
- Impaired speech production and comprehensibility; including compensation strategies (e.g., all-purpose words like 'thing' or 'do')
- Difficulties in building and maintaining social relationships, especially peer friendships
- High or low self-awareness and reflection (including awareness of the impairment) and associated emotional states.

Furthermore, based on preliminary results from their $n = 2$ expert interviews with special education teachers, the authors identify specifically risky situations for children with DLD. The *location* and *context* seem to be crucial: classroom situations and large group settings are judged as high-risk situations, whereas free contexts like breaks or talking to friends are classified as lower risk-level (Schick & Rohde, 2025, p. 263). Challenging conversational situations (in the classroom) may include teacher-centered instruction, asking for help, speaking in front of a group or conflicts with classmates (Riehemann, 2024, p. 217).

Comparable results can be seen for other vulnerable learner groups, e.g., people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which is characterized by difficulties in social (pragmatic) communication (WHO, 2019). A particularly relevant study by Howard and Sedgewick (2021) investigates the communicative preferences of people with ASD. In this study, adults with ASD had to rank communication modes (e.g., email, phone call, live messaging) according to their preference in different scenarios (e.g., education, customer services, family) and were then interviewed to explain their rankings. The results indicate that the mode of communication could be “enabling or disabling” (Howard & Sedgewick, 2021, p. 2265). People with ASD often prefer written communication, e.g., when interacting with unfamiliar individuals. Preferences for face-to-face communication, by contrast, were found to depend on the perceived closeness and acceptance of the communicative partner.

4.2 Healthy vs. Heavy LRT

Based on these results, the question arises as to what role linguistic risk-taking could play in supporting well-being and resilience in children with DLD. To date, special educational support and therapeutic interventions have primarily focused on *reducing* challenges. On the one hand, this is done through communicative relief—for example, when children are exempted from certain tasks, such as giving a speech in front of the class or writing essays. On the other hand, professional caretakers aim to increase awareness within the child's social environment—particularly among teachers—thus enabling specific support in everyday activities, such as providing linguistically optimized reading texts.

In contrast to this, LRT's goal is to consciously challenge language learners by placing them in new situations with unknown procedures and uncertain outcomes. At first glance, this may seem contradictory and counterproductive. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that linguistic risks not only lead to unpleasant feelings, such as anxiety, or to mistakes. Rather, overcoming a challenge can also give rise to positive feelings—such as joy or pride—and expand linguistic competence. There seems to be a fine line between communicative overload and appropriate challenges. This idea is illustrated by the adapted three-zone model of Luckner and Nadler (1997) as shown in Fig. 3.

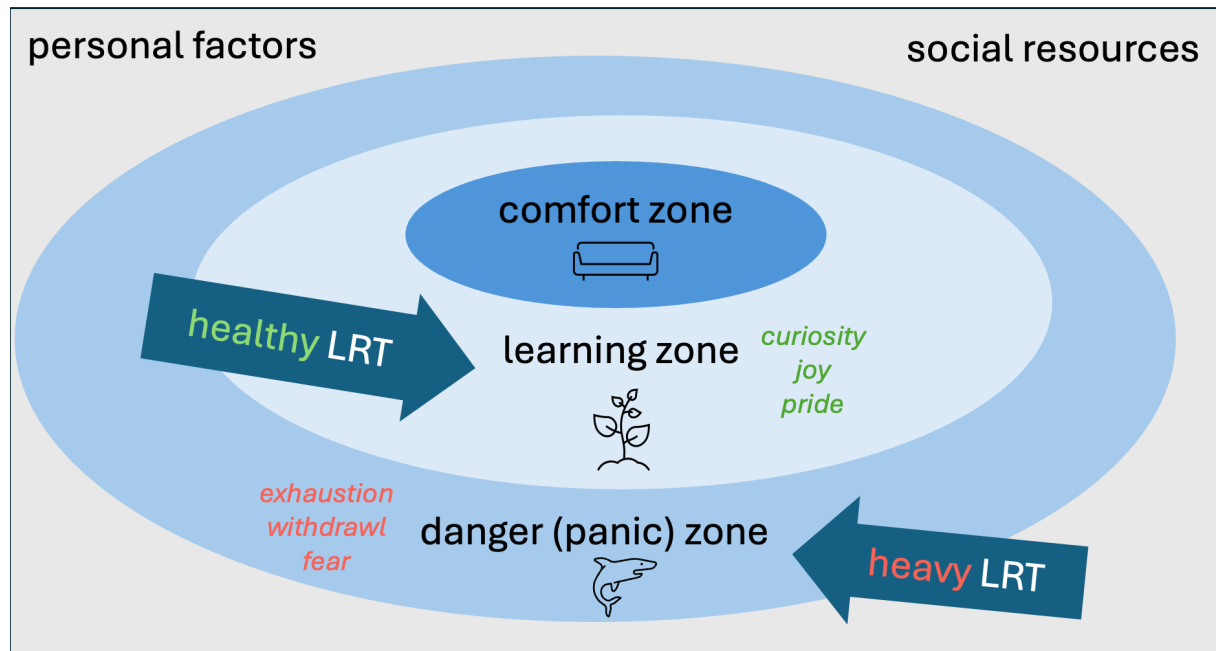


Fig. 3: Healthy and heavy LRT in the three-zone-model

According to this model, learners feel most at ease in the *comfort zone*. However, change—and therefore learning—is only possible when they leave it and venture into the unknown, into something new. This is called the *learning zone*. Curiosity drives the

learner, and new insights or skills lead to feelings such as joy or pride. From this perspective, the reduction or even prevention of risky situations through the creation of an entirely “safe space” can be disadvantageous in the long term. All language learners necessarily need a certain degree of willingness and courage to take **healthy linguistic risks** within the learning zone to expand their language and communication skills. However, if learners stray too far from their comfort zone, they experience excessive demands, strong negative emotions (e.g., fear, anger or exhaustion) and they show defensive reactions (e.g., social withdrawal or masking). This is called the *danger or panic zone*. In this zone, risk-taking becomes heavy. There is no progress in this zone. In fact, repeatedly experiencing **heavy LRT** could lead learners to withdraw from taking linguistic risks altogether and to language learning being permanently compromised.

Linguistic risk-taking and the courage to face communicative challenges are embedded in diverse internal (personal) and external (social and context) factors (Cervantes, 2013). These factors not only determine whether learners choose to leave the comfort zone in the first place, but also how they respond to failure and frustration within the danger zone. In our view, these factors highly overlap with the resilience factors and social resources discussed earlier (see Fig. 1).

Vulnerable language learners need to be particularly resilient when it comes to LRT. The lower their level of linguistic competence, the more quickly communication becomes a linguistic risk or even a burden. Their comfort and learning zones might be smaller due to limited language competences on all levels and modalities (see Tab. 1). As a result, they are more likely to reach their individual danger zones quickly. In such cases, the boundaries between relaxed, challenging and overwhelming language learning situations might become blurred (Fig. 4).

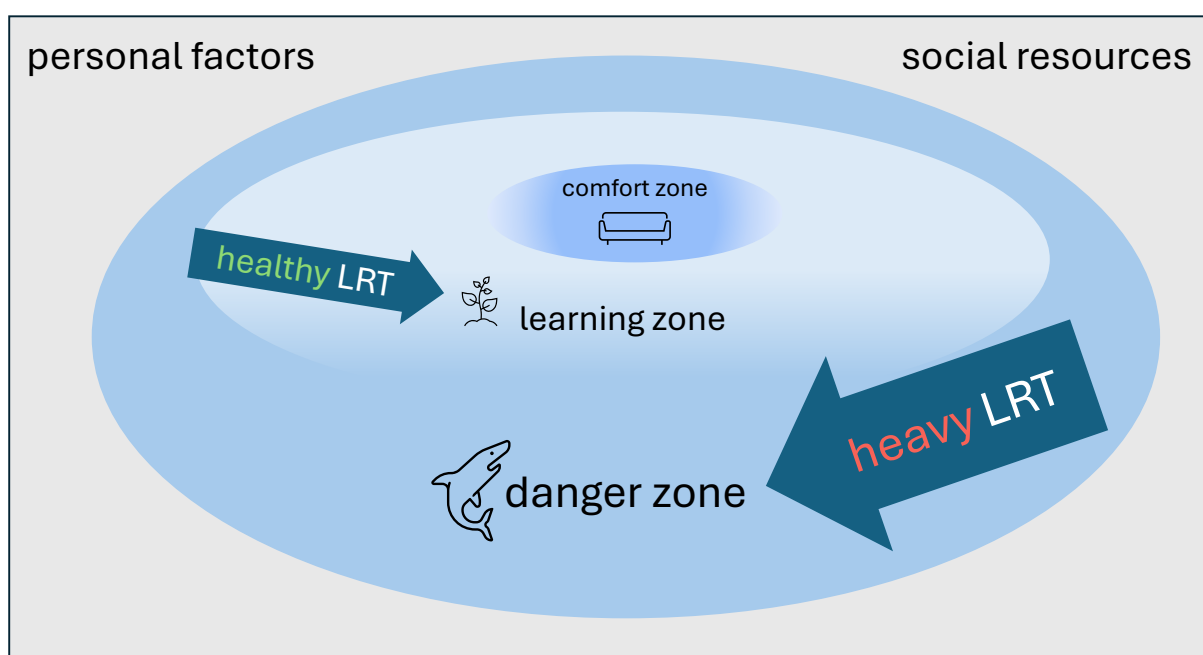


Fig. 4: Healthy and heavy LRT in children with DLD

As a result, children with DLD are more likely to experience heavy LRT than typically developing peers. This may also explain the well-intentioned desire of many teachers to “spare” children with DLD from linguistic challenges. The question of when a risk is healthy and when it is already heavy is not easy to answer and the answer may vary from child to child, but also from day to day. Regular exposure to the danger zone should be largely prevented with close educational support. Nevertheless, heavy LRT cannot be completely prevented in children with DLD. Thus, they need resilience in many communicative situations and settings.

4.3 LRT and Communicative Resilience

Research shows that there is no universal resilience in the sense of perpetual invulnerability; an individual’s ability to cope with adversity and stress varies depending on context and situation. Petermann and Schmidt (2006, p. 1) therefore suggest differentiating between domain-specific forms of resilience. Wustmann Seiler (2021, p. 329) points out that resilience in one specific area of life cannot automatically be transferred to other areas. The author distinguishes between academic, emotional, social, cultural and behavioral resilience. Although some of these forms could also be relevant for heavy LRT, it also seems appropriate to define a specific form called **communicative resilience**. According to Riehemann (2024, p. 217), it is formed by the competences and resources a person needs to master linguistic and interactive challenges, regardless of their current language skills. This form of resilience is based on the confidence that communication barriers can be successfully overcome, either by one's own means or with the help of others. In this context, it is irrelevant whether language is used orally or in writing, or whether it is a matter of language production or comprehension. Even competent speakers experience such challenging situations from time to time—for example, when reading a complex article or having a difficult conversation.

The observable reactions of students with DLD in the danger zone are often adverse and have a negative impact on their social and communicative participation (see 3.2/3.3). Communicative resilience is indispensable because it helps children with DLD to bounce back from heavy to healthy risk-taking. Consider the following scenario: A child with DLD does not understand a task on a worksheet. For many of their peers, asking for clarification would be a healthy risk to take. However, because this student frequently experiences such situations, they attempt to hide their misunderstanding. Feelings of shame and frustration arise and asking for help in front of others becomes a heavy linguistic risk for them. In such cases, communicative resilience makes it easier for the learner to manage this situation. Self-calming, making eye contact with the teacher, or asking a classmate are behaviors that indicate strong personal resilience factors, while a supportive environment is characterized, for example, by a thoughtful teacher who takes the initiative to explain the task again.

The social resources of resilience presumably play a crucial role in fostering healthy LRT in children with DLD. Familiar communication partners or peer-buddies

are also identified as important aspects of linguistic risk-taking in the interviews conducted by Schick and Rohde (2025). According to Cervantes (2013, p. 432) “fostering constructive relationships” and “establishing an adequate affective bondage [sic] between the learner, peers, and the language teacher” are considered essential for healthy LRT. Furthermore, healthy LRT should balance support and autonomy. Schick and Rohde (2025, p. 269) conclude that children with DLD need close support to acquire a healthy risk-taking mindset. Otherwise, these children might experience long term restrictions in communicative participation or become dependent on ongoing external support.

Moreover, children with DLD need proactive behavior and functional coping strategies. In line with personal resilience factors, the research literature on LRT discusses various variables that influence risk-taking behavior. For example, previous experiences of success or failure are directly reflected in self-efficacy and lead to different problem-solving skills or adaptive strategies. Self-esteem is another variable frequently addressed in LRT studies. Cervantes (2013) points out that learners with low self-esteem might be more hesitant to take risks. Self-awareness as an important personal factor of resilience was also mentioned in the interviews conducted by Schick and Rohde (2025, pp. 268–269).

Based on the studies mentioned above, it can be assumed that approximately one-third of all children with DLD develop communicative resilience, even under high levels of stress. Conversely, this implies that the majority of children with DLD would benefit from preventative support.

The fact that risk-taking is not associated with a fixed personality trait allows researchers to consider it a potential tool that students can use to improve their language learning when appropriately regulated (Cervantes, 2013). Promoting healthy LRT represents a possible paradigm shift in the treatment of children with DLD. Instead of focusing solely on eliminating language difficulties and minimizing potential risk factors, LRT emphasizes emotional and personal empowerment as well as the strengthening of protective factors. The goal is not simply for the children to speak better in the future, but rather for them to be able to cope with communicative challenges more easily, calmly and successfully—regardless of their current linguistic abilities.

Building resilience and taking risks is not solely the responsibility of the children themselves but also involves their environment. Prevention programs are most effective when they consistently involve this environment, address the realities of children's daily lives, and are implemented over an extended period (Froehlich-Gildhoff et al., 2020; Froehlich-Gildhoff & Roennau-Boese, 2024). Failing, trying again and not giving up are important lessons from which all children can grow. With close support, even vulnerable language learners might seek more opportunities to communicate and take linguistic risks. Early 'easy wins' and a sense of feasibility are required to initiate the process. Once students have had initial positive experiences in risky situations, it is important to reflect on their associated emotions and evaluate risks together. Building on this foundation, the risk level can be increased step by step—for example, by changing

support/cooperative settings, the complexity of the challenge or the linguistic modality. Ultimately, taking risks could improve not only their communicative resilience but also their language proficiency in the first place.

To further investigate the possibilities of preventive promotion of LRT in the context of DLD, more interviews with professional caretakers have already been conducted at the University of Cologne and are currently being evaluated.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results presented here, we assume that—unlike the original target groups of university students in multilingual environments—vulnerable learners with DLD require greater support and guidance, if they are to take linguistic risks, particularly at younger ages. For them, **healthy linguistic risk-taking** means:

- Being open to new experiences while learning to choose their own risks wisely.
- Coping with setbacks by developing self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.
- Trying out different strategies in difficult interactions to find a suitable/individual solution.
- Reflecting on their own actions and recognizing their own possibilities.
- Receiving positive feedback and support from teachers and peers.
- Having a supportive environment, inside and outside the classroom.

In this sense, taking healthy linguistic risks and building communicative resilience are two sides of the same coin—and always a collaborative effort.

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Sebastian Windisch

The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative for Academic Short-Term Study Abroad

Abstract

This article outlines the implementation and evaluation of the Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT) Initiative (Slavkov & Séror, 2019) for German learners on short-term academic excursions¹. The initiative encourages students to step outside their linguistic comfort zones by engaging in small, authentic linguistic risks, referred to here as 'challenges'. These challenges are documented in an adapted version of the LRT passport, the *Studienreisepass (STRP)*, which was piloted with A2-level learners from France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, and refined through an action research cycle. A mixed-methods research design combining questionnaires, *STRP* records, observations, and interviews was used to examine the influence of the *STRP* on learners' perceived language proficiency and Willingness to Communicate (WTC). The findings suggest that the *STRP* may foster both, particularly when embedded in a structured pedagogical framework, and that it is especially effective for learners with higher levels of autonomy and self-regulation.

Der Artikel beschreibt die Implementierung und Evaluation der *Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT)* Initiative (Slavkov & Séror, 2019) für DaF-Lernende im Rahmen von Studienreisen im deutschsprachigen Ausland. Dabei setzt sich die Initiative zum Ziel, Lernende dazu anzuregen, ihre sprachlichen Komfortzonen zu verlassen und im Zielland kleine authentische sprachliche Risiken, sogenannte *Challenges* eingehen. Diese werden im Studienreisepass (*STRP*) dokumentiert, der für Deutschlernende von Universitäten aus Frankreich, Spanien, Portugal und Italien auf dem GeRS-Niveau A2 entwickelt und im Rahmen eines Aktionsforschungszyklus weiter angepasst wurde. Mithilfe eines Mixed-Methods-Designs wurde untersucht, inwiefern der *STRP* die wahrgenommene Sprachkompetenz und die Kommunikationsbereitschaft der Lernenden unterstützt. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass der *STRP* beide Bereiche fördern kann, insbesondere wenn die *LRT*-Initiative in einen strukturierten pädagogischen Rahmen eingebettet wird.

Keywords

linguistic risk-taking, German as a Second/Additional Language (Deutsch als Fremdsprache (DaF)), short-term study abroad, Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Gamification

Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT), sprachliche Risikobereitschaft, Deutsch als Fremdsprache (DaF), Kurzzeit-Studienaufenthalte im Ausland, Kommunikationsbereitschaft (*WTC*), *Gamification*

¹ In German: *Studienreise*



1. Introduction

Short-term academic excursions abroad are a well-established format in European higher education, offering opportunities for language learning embedded in culturally situated interaction (Dalhaus, 2009, p. 267; Marques-Schäfer & Sant'Anna Bolacio Filho, 2020, p. 572). Typically lasting several days to one week, they are more flexible and cost-effective than semester-long programs such as Erasmus (Teichler, 2015, p. 16; Windisch & Vetter, 2024). They have been described as a form of language tourism, serving the dual purpose of promoting linguistic development in informal settings and facilitating cultural immersion (Iglesias, 2020). While longer-term study abroad programs have been extensively investigated with regard to linguistic development and social interaction (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2015), there is still a lack of systematic research on short-term mobility formats. Their limited duration often restricts sustained immersion and spontaneous interaction (Castañeda & Zirger, 2011, p. 545; Dewey et al., 2013a, p. 92).

A recurring challenge is students' tendency to remain within familiar peer groups, missing opportunities to engage in authentic interaction with target-language-speaking interlocutors beyond their study group. While interactions with international peers may foster intercultural awareness, they often take place in *lingua francas* and offer little opportunity for active use of the target language(s) of the country being visited. To address this, various pedagogical interventions have been developed to help learners access the target culture during their stay abroad—such as culture-related preparatory tasks (Cohen et al., 2002; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005, p. 255), reflective diary work (Plews & Misfeldt, 2018), and structured formats like tandem conversations or cultural mentoring (Vande Berg et al., 2009, p. 11).

In response to these challenges, the LRT initiative offers a structured approach to fostering target-language interaction in real-world settings. To counteract this tendency, the LRT initiative was developed as a pedagogical strategy to encourage learners to step beyond their linguistic comfort zones by engaging in authentic, real-world communication in the target language. Rooted in the concept of risk-taking in language learning (Beebe, 1983, p. 44), the LRT initiative promotes the idea that communicative development occurs when learners actively confront situations in which they may make mistakes, are misunderstood, or step outside rehearsed language use. The initiative translates this idea into a set of small, achievable tasks that require learners to initiate and sustain interactions in everyday situations.

Originally implemented in bilingual university contexts in Canada, the LRT initiative has since been adapted to a variety of educational settings, including second language classrooms, international mobility programs, and higher education contexts across Europe and North America (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 265; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021; Slavkov et al., 2022).

The present study introduces the *STRP*—a new version of the LRT passport tailored specifically for CEFR A2 learners of German participating in short academic excursions to Vienna in 2022 and 2023.

The following section outlines the theoretical foundations of the LRT initiative and explains how its core principles were adapted to the context of short-term study abroad through the development of the *STRP*.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Short-Term Academic Excursions and the “Inner Circle” Dynamic

While short-term academic excursions offer exposure to authentic language environments, studies have shown that their linguistic potential is often underutilized (Castañeda & Zirger, 2011, p. 546; Dewey et al., 2013a). Coleman’s concentric circles framework (Coleman, 2013; 2015) helps explain this dynamic. It distinguishes between the inner circle (co-nationals), middle circle (other international students), and outer circle (local residents).² While the middle circle often includes international students and may support intercultural encounters, research suggests that communication within this circle tends to take place in lingua francas rather than the local target language (Coleman, 2013, p. 31), reducing opportunities for authentic language use (Fig. 1).

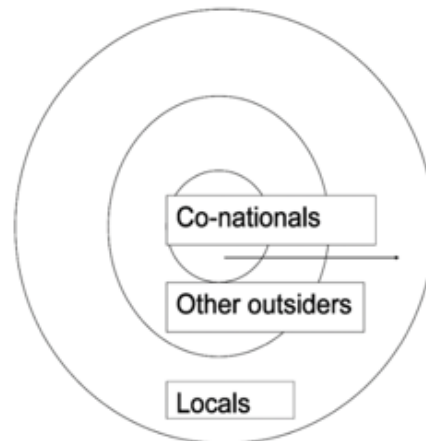


Fig. 1: Concentric circles representation of study abroad social networks (Coleman 2013, p. 31)

As shown in Fig. 1, Coleman’s (2013, p. 31) model describes social networks during study abroad as concentric circles: learners primarily engage with co-nationals (inner circle),

² While many pedagogical models aim to facilitate learner access to the so-called *target culture*, this notion has been increasingly questioned in the context of multilingual and pluricultural settings. Rather than assuming a fixed cultural endpoint, recent work within the LRT framework emphasizes learner agency, situated practices, and the negotiation of meaning in diverse interactional contexts (Slavkov et al., 2022).

followed by other international students (middle circle), and only occasionally with so-called local residents (outer circle).

2.2 Linguistic Risk-Taking: From Concept to Pedagogical Model

The notion of risk-taking in language learning was introduced by Beebe (1983, p. 44), who emphasized that successful language learners are often those who take linguistic risks despite fear of making errors or limited proficiency. Although Beebe did not use the exact term *linguistic risk-taking*, her work laid the conceptual foundation for understanding risk-oriented behavior as a key characteristic of effective language learning. Building on this foundation, the specific term *linguistic risk-taking* was later coined and operationalized by Slavkov and colleagues (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 258) as part of a pedagogical initiative developed at the University of Ottawa. The LRT initiative integrates this concept into a structured tool designed to promote authentic language use through real-world, communicative challenges. These tasks aim to foster learner autonomy, metacognitive reflection, and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006, p. 6; Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, pp. 130–132).

At the heart of the initiative lies the LRT passport—a printed (and later digital) booklet containing a set of small, meaningful tasks, each framed as a first-person “I” statement (e.g., “*I asked someone for directions*”). These tasks are not formally evaluated but are intended to nudge learners toward low-stake, authentic interaction in the target language.

Originally implemented in bilingual university settings in Canada, the initiative has since been adapted to a variety of educational contexts. These include a version for German as a foreign language (Deutsch als Fremdsprache—DaF) learners in Vienna (Vetter & Cajka, 2019), and a version aimed at younger learners in schools across Europe, developed in the context of the European Day of Languages to promote multilingualism (Council of Europe & ECML, 2018). These adaptations demonstrate the initiative’s conceptual flexibility and pedagogical relevance across different proficiency levels and institutional settings.

This study presents an adaptation of the LRT initiative for short-term academic excursions: the *STRP*. It was developed to help CEFR A2-level learners for DaF engage in real-life language use through manageable, context-based challenges that make the idea of risk-taking more accessible and practical.

2.3 Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

In this study, LRT is understood as the pedagogical framework and intervention (i.e., the *STRP*), whereas WTC constitutes the primary analytical construct. The construct of WTC refers to a learner’s readiness to communicate, either by initiating or responding, when an opportunity to use the target language arises (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Originally developed for first language (L1) communication, the construct has been adapted for

second language (L2) contexts to describe the interplay of psychological, linguistic, and situational factors influencing learners' communication behavior. WTC is considered both trait-like and state-like, meaning it can be relatively stable or vary depending on the context (MacIntyre, 2013, p. 689). In study abroad contexts, WTC has been identified as a key factor in enabling authentic language use beyond the classroom, thus fostering communicative growth in socially and culturally immersive environments (Dewey et al., 2013a, 2013b).

In the present study, WTC was not operationalized through a single measure, but rather through the triangulation of (1) self-reported questionnaire data, (2) observational data, and (3) students' engagement with *STRP* tasks, which served as behavioral indicators of their willingness to communicate. Each *STRP* task represents a concrete communicative action formulated in the first person and aligned with the activities described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Students documented completed tasks by checking them off in their *STRP* booklets. The number and type of completed challenges illustrated learners' willingness to engage in L2 communication during the short-term excursion.

2.4 The LRT Passport and its Adaptations

The original LRT passport, developed at the University of Ottawa (Slavkov, 2018), featured 89 tasks framed as “I” statements across all four language skills. Learners assessed the perceived linguistic risk of each task individually on a 3-point scale, evaluating how challenging or anxiety-inducing the task felt in relation to their own language skills and confidence (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 258).

In this article, communicative “risks” are understood as learner-selected, goal-oriented tasks in real-world settings. While this aligns with a TBLT perspective (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021), the *STRP* uses the more accessible term *challenge* to reduce anxiety and foster engagement among A2 learners. The LRT initiative has already been piloted in the context of DaF in Vienna, where Cajka (2021) implemented and evaluated an adapted version of the passport for international students.

2.5 New LRT Passport Design

The *STRP* (Fig. 2) is a compact, pedagogically guided adaptation of the original LRT passport. It was developed by the author specifically for A2-level DaF learners on short-term academic excursions. The *STRP* was piloted during one-week programs in Vienna in 2022 and 2023, during which it was adapted to the sociolinguistic and logistical conditions of the setting.

The *STRP* contains 55 small, communicative tasks designed to foster linguistic risk-taking in authentic contexts. While the initiative originally referred to these tasks as “risks,” the *STRP* itself uses the term “challenges” to better reflect their motivational and gamified nature. This terminological shift was made deliberately during the tool's

development to avoid the potentially negative connotations of ‘risk’ and to support a more positive, learner-centered approach. In this article, the term ‘challenges’ is used accordingly, aligning with the updated *STRP* terminology and its learner-centered rationale.

Each challenge is a first-person statement in the past tense (e.g., *Ich habe ein Reisetagebuch geschrieben* / I have written an entry in my travel journal) covering key areas of communicative competence (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020). Task types are marked with skill-based icons (e.g., speaking, listening, mediation) and align with CEFR descriptors to ensure level-appropriate scaffolding. These challenges encourage learners to interact with their environment by initiating service encounters, asking questions during guided tours, and navigating public spaces in German.

The booklet also provides space for reflections and links to learning tools (e.g., glossary, apps, media resources). As part of the iterative development cycle typical of action research—where tools are tested, evaluated, and refined based on learner feedback and observation—the 2022 version included an individual risk-rating scale inspired by the original LRT passport.


However, both observations and feedback showed that rating the perceived risk was too cognitively demanding for many A2 learners. For students already challenged by the task itself, assessing the risk afterward added unnecessary complexity. Many skipped the scale entirely or defaulted to the neutral option—patterns also observed in other LRT implementations (Rhéaume et al., 2021, p. 1224). These difficulties were also noted in earlier LRT implementations (Marshall, 2018, p.44; Rhéaume et al., 2021, p. 1224), where students often avoided rating their perceived risk levels.

In response, the 2023 version introduced a simplified gamified system using fixed “Courage Points” and symbolic badges. Based on its communicative and cognitive demands, a point value was pre-assigned to each task, following a custom classification scheme derived from the CEFR. For example, interactional speaking or mediation tasks received more points than listening or reading activities. In line with this concept, students accumulated points by completing *STRP* challenges throughout the excursion. At the end of the week, the students themselves totaled their points and participated in a non-evaluative closing ceremony, during which symbolic badges (e.g., Starter, Expert) and small prizes were awarded by the instructors. This playful conclusion aimed to celebrate engagement rather than performance, reinforcing the initiative’s low-pressure, learner-centered approach.

The *STRP* booklet itself is available via the official repository of the University of Vienna: <https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/detail/o:2132474>

Challenges		Challenges	
Meine Courage points: _____		Meine Courage points: _____	
34	Ich habe jemanden gebeten, mit mir Deutsch zu sprechen, als er/sie mir auf Englisch geantwortet hat oder antworten wollte.	37	Ich habe jemanden gebeten, etwas langsamer auf Deutsch zu sprechen.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Courage points 3	<input type="checkbox"/>	Courage points 3
<input type="text"/>	Tag/Notizen	<input type="text"/>	Tag/Notizen
35	Ich habe den Guide etwas zu einer Sehenswürdigkeit auf Deutsch gefragt.	38	Ich habe mit einem Lehrer oder einer Lehrerin für mind. 2 Minuten über das Zielland unterhalten.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Courage points 4	<input type="checkbox"/>	Courage points 5
<input type="text"/>	Tag/Notizen	<input type="text"/>	Tag/Notizen
36	Ich habe den Guide gefragt, etwas zu wiederholen, wenn ich etwas nicht verstanden hatte.	39	Ich habe den Audioguide mind. 10 Minuten auf Deutsch verwendet und aktiv zugehört.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Courage points 3	<input type="checkbox"/>	Courage points 3
<input type="text"/>	Tag/Notizen	<input type="text"/>	Tag/Notizen

18 19

Meine Courage points		Auflösung: Badges	
Addiere nun deine Courage points von allen Challenges und lies die Auflösung.		90-120 Courage points: STARTER	
Seite	Courage points	 <p>Gratulation zum Badge STARTER. Toll, dass du den Studienreisepass verwendet hast. Du könntest noch mehr aus deiner Komfortzone gehen und mehr riskieren. Vergiss nicht, dass du auch zu Hause dafür Möglichkeiten hast! Überlege, wie du unangenehme Gefühle beim Sprachenlernen überwinden könntest. Riskier was!</p>	
7-8			
9-10			
11-12			
13-14			
15-16			
17-18			
19-20			
21-22			
23-24			
26-27			
GESAMT:			

30 31

Fig. 2: Studienreisepass (STRP): Linguistic Risk-Taking for short-term stays in German as a Foreign Language (DaF) (Windisch, 2025b)

2.6 Institutional Framework: “Europas Jugend lernt Wien kennen” (“Europe’s Youth Gets to Know Vienna”—a Mobility Program by the Austrian Ministry of Education)

The academic excursions were embedded in the “Europas Jugend lernt Wien kennen” program (BMBWF, 2024)—a mobility initiative coordinated by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and supported by the City of Vienna. It enables international student groups to participate in one-week educational visits to Vienna, focused on culture, history, and citizenship education.

The program’s structured itinerary—featuring guided city tours, museum visits, and thematic sessions—provided a stable framework for both research cycles (2022 and 2023) and facilitated the integration of the STRP as a pedagogical tool, which was introduced to students during the pre-departure phase in a ‘preparatory class’ by the accompanying instructors, who explained its purpose, structure, and use. Many STRP challenges were directly linked to typical program situations, such as asking questions during tours, interacting in restaurants, or reflecting on workshop topics. Embedding

the *STRP* in this structure encouraged learners to engage linguistically not only during scheduled activities but also in informal moments between them.

3. Methodology

3.1 Objectives

While the broader dissertation study (Windisch, 2025a) investigated the pedagogical potential of short-term academic excursions more generally, this paper focuses specifically on the implementation and evaluation of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative (*STRP*) within that framework—following specific objectives:

1. To examine students' perceptions of their individual communicative competence and WTC during a short-term academic excursion in relation to the *STRP*.
2. To observe as a teacher's perspective in the field the extent to which the *STRP* influences students' WTC in German.
3. To identify communicative behaviors—as well as missed opportunities for interaction—associated with *STRP* use during the excursions.
4. To derive pedagogical recommendations for the further development and implementation of the LRT initiative and the *STRP* in short-term mobility programs.

3.2 Research Design

The study followed a mixed-methods action research design (Altrichter et al., 2018), implemented across two short-term excursions to Vienna in 2022 and 2023. Each cycle included a preparation, implementation, and reflection phase, allowing for iterative refinement of the *STRP* and its pedagogical implementation. Insights from the first cycle were used to revise and improve both the *STRP* and its pedagogical implementation in the second cycle. In total, 78 undergraduate students from Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France participated. All were enrolled in German language courses at their home universities and had reached CEFR A2 level at the time of the excursions. Prior to departure, students provided their informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms for pseudonymized data handling.

The research design employed methodological triangulation (Kuckartz, 2014), integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to capture learner perceptions alongside observable communicative behaviors.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection

Five main tools were used for data collection (Fig. 3):

- *Pre- and post-trip questionnaires*: Questionnaires were administered approximately 2–3 days before and after each excursion to capture students' self-assessed communicative competence and WTC. Participants rated themselves on an 8-point

Likert scale based on simplified CEFR A2 descriptors, enabling them to reflect on their perceived communicative competence and WTC before and after the trip. Additional items included both closed and open-ended questions concerning students' experiences with the *STRP*—such as its perceived usefulness, implementation challenges, and suggestions for improvement. To ensure clarity and accessibility, the questionnaires were translated into the students' first languages (Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian) (cf. Caspari, 2016; Riemer, 2016, p. 159) (Appendix A: Selected Items from Pre/Post Questionnaire).

- *Participant observation* was conducted by the accompanying instructors (including the author) using a structured observation protocol and a research diary. Observations followed an “observer-as-participant” approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 208) and focused on communicative behavior, missed opportunities, and group dynamics. The observation protocol (provided in German in the appendix) allowed instructors to document both group-wide and individual learner interactions in shared situations (e.g., guided tours, meals). In addition, a reflective research diary captured pedagogical implementation details, informal learner reactions, and emergent themes from each day. Both instruments were used to generate qualitative data that informed the coding process and were included in the mixed-methods triangulation (see 3.4) (Appendix B: Observation Protocol).
- *STRP booklets*, completed by participants during the excursions, served as engagement records. Engagement with the *STRP* was assessed based on two indicators: (1) the number of completed tasks checked off in each student's booklet, and (2) additional contextual notes (e.g., date, location, or comments) added by participants. These annotations were interpreted as evidence of authentic task execution and were used to differentiate superficial from real engagement. Engagement was triangulated by cross-referencing *STRP* entries (Excel Data Sheet) with observational data (protocols) and interview narratives (transcriptions)
- *Problem-centered interviews* were conducted with selected students—based on voluntary interest, as well as differentiated responses in the pre-trip questionnaire, particularly regarding WTC and communicative competence—before, during, and after each excursion, following Witzel's (2000) approach. This method combines a focus on a specific issue (here: linguistic risk-taking and self-perceived proficiency) with flexibility and sensitivity to participants' perspectives. An interview guide structured the conversation while allowing room for spontaneous elaboration (Appendix C: Interview Guide). Interviews covered themes such as WTC, linguistic confidence, task engagement, and experiences with the *STRP* (cf. Trautmann, 2012; Misoch, 2019). In this article, selected excerpts from the interviews are used to illustrate individual learner experiences and triangulate findings from the questionnaires and observation data.

Since participants were A2-level learners of German, questionnaires and interviews were not conducted in German. To ensure accessibility and clarity, the written questionnaires were translated into the students' main languages (French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese) and administered via Microsoft Teams. Interviews were conducted primarily in Spanish, facilitated by the author's multilingual background, enabling participants to express themselves more fully and accurately.

In both research cycles, respondent validation with students was conducted to enhance credibility and ensure alignment with participants' perspectives. The results were presented in accessible language versions (e.g., Spanish, Portuguese), and students were invited to provide feedback on the findings. This process served as a communicative validation step and allowed for clarification, confirmation, or critical reflection on the researchers' interpretations. This approach is in line with the principles of action research, where participants are not only subjects of study but also actively involved in the research process. In this sense, the students were treated as co-constructors of knowledge, contributing to the interpretation and validation of the results.















Field Research	Phase	Intervention	Data Collection (Survey)
 Observation-log: Research-Diary- Protocols 	PRE	Preparatory session, consent form, anonymized code (students) 	Questionnaires  Interviews (Case Study) 
	WHILE	LRT-passport use  Communicative interaction and language use 	Completion rate, ratings, tagged risks in LRT-passport  Interviews (Case Study) 
	POST	Follow-up-session with students 	Questionnaires  Interviews (Case Study) 
	Respondent validation with students	Presentation video of results 	Questionnaires 

Fig. 3: Overview of interventions and data collection phases

3.4 Data Processing and Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires and *STRP* records were processed using *Jamovi* (The Jamovi Project, 2022) and Excel. The analyses followed current methodological standards (Kerby, 2014; R Core Team, 2021). Normality assumptions were tested using the Shapiro–Wilk test, followed by paired samples t-tests or Wilcoxon signed-rank tests as appropriate. Cohen’s *d* was calculated for effect sizes. Correlational analyses (Pearson’s *r*) explored relationships between *STRP* completion rates and perceived learning gains³.

Qualitative data from observation protocols, research diaries, and interview-transcriptions were analyzed using content-structuring qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019, p. 88) with a combination of deductive (based on the research objectives) and inductive coding, particularly regarding category formation, transparency, and iterative refinement. (Mayring, 2016, p. 114). The coding process was conducted in MAXQDA and focused on identifying recurring themes related to linguistic risk-taking, learner autonomy, and instructional scaffolding.

To analyze the qualitative interview material, a content-structuring qualitative content analysis was conducted following Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022). Analytical categories were developed both deductively—based on the study’s key constructs (e.g., willingness to communicate, task engagement)—and inductively from the data using a multi-cycle coding process. Analytical categories were derived deductively from the study’s key constructs (e.g., willingness to communicate and task engagement) and the structure of the problem-centered interview guide. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and questionnaire responses were triangulated to identify individual patterns. The case studies were developed by coding participant data according to these categories and interpreting them in relation to questionnaire results and observed behavior, ensuring alignment between data collection and analysis.

The notion of ‘engaged learners’ in this article is informed by observational data collected via a structured observation protocol. Indicators included the frequency and spontaneity of German-language use, the variety of communicative acts (e.g., asking questions, initiating conversations), and documented interactions involving the *STRP*. These patterns were cross-referenced with learners’ *STRP* entries and interview reflections to interpret individual engagement profiles as both observable behavior and self-reported disposition. The study generated a substantial and heterogeneous dataset, the analysis of which proved highly demanding—particularly with regard to triangulating different sources. The aim was to avoid relying solely on self-reported data by incorporating observational material and interview insights to provide more objective perspectives. The author was solely responsible for processing and interpreting this volume of data, which represented a considerable workload. For the present article, only a limited

³ Statistical consultation and support during the doctoral research project on which this article is based was provided by Dr. Michael Plöchl.

selection of interview excerpts and observation notes is included—specifically those that offered particularly relevant insights and supported the core findings of the quantitative analysis.

Supplementary materials and datasets (e.g., the full *STRP* booklet, translated questionnaires, and coding structure) are archived in the institutional repository of the University of Vienna (PHAIDRA) for transparency and reproducibility (see Windisch, 2025, 2026a, 2026b).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All participants gave their informed consent, and participation was voluntary and confidential. Pseudonyms were used throughout to protect participants' identities. The dual role of the author as both instructor and researcher was critically reflected upon in line with ethical standards for action research (Altrichter et al., 2018). Special attention was paid to power dynamics during interviews and observations. To address potential power dynamics in the dual role of instructor and researcher, several steps were taken to ensure ethical transparency and participant autonomy. Students received information and consent forms in their first languages (Spanish, Portuguese, or French), chose anonymized codes for data handling, and were assured that participation was voluntary and unrelated to grading⁴.

In accordance with the participatory ethos of action research, students were explicitly informed about the nature and goals of the study—not merely as participants, but as active contributors to the exploration of their own linguistic development. This transparency aimed to reduce the potential influence of *social desirability bias*, a common methodological effect in language education research (Porst, 2014, p. 126). Instead, students were encouraged to see themselves as co-researchers, reflecting on their own communicative behaviors and learning processes.

As part of the action research framework, learners were not seen merely as subjects of research but as reflective contributors within the process (Altrichter et al., 2018). After each trip, preliminary findings were shared with participants through a short multilingual video summary. In line with the principles of communicative validation (*kommunikative Validierung*; Altrichter et al., 2018), participants were explicitly invited to comment on, question, or supplement the researchers' interpretations. This feedback was not merely collected as an add-on but actively integrated into the ongoing analysis to increase transparency and ensure contextual and pedagogical relevance. Communicative validation thus served as a dialogical quality assurance method within

⁴ These measures included multilingual preparatory sessions, the use of simplified participant information, piloting of all instruments, and interviews conducted in participants' first languages. See Windisch (2025a) for details on research ethics and methodological preparation in line with Altrichter et al. (2018) and Porst (2014, p. 126) regarding social desirability bias.

the action research process, fostering shared understanding and reducing researcher bias.

4. Results

4.1 Communicative Competence

The analysis of the pre- and post-trip questionnaires showed statistically significant self-assessed gains in communicative competence, particularly in grammar (see example Tab. 1), vocabulary, and oral interaction—skills that were explicitly targeted by *STRP* tasks. These gains were especially noted by students who actively engaged with the *STRP*, both in self-reports and through instructor observation.⁵

Item: "Despite some mistakes, I can form simple grammatical sentences correctly."				
	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Cycle 1	2.40	35	.022	0.39
Cycle 2	2.52	41	.015	0.39

Tab. 1: Example of paired samples t-tests on students' self-assessed communicative competence (grammar, Cycles 1 and 2)⁶

The analysis of the pre- and post-trip questionnaires showed statistically significant self-assessed gains in communicative competence, particularly in grammar (see example Tab. 1), vocabulary, and oral interaction—skills explicitly targeted by *STRP* tasks. These improvements were especially noted among participants who actively engaged with the *STRP*, both in their questionnaire responses and in instructor observation. Based on interview and observation data, it can be assumed that these self-assessed improvements were at least partially linked to the use of the *STRP*. Learners who consistently reported using the *STRP* described structured language use in real-world contexts as a key factor in their perceived progress. These findings emerged from the content analysis of interview transcripts and observation notes, which were coded under categories such as *task engagement*, *perceived progress*, and *instructional scaffolding*.

The following case studies are based on a theory-guided content analysis of the interview transcripts in their original languages (Spanish and Portuguese), using categories derived from the interview guide and the core constructs of the study (e.g., WTC,

⁵ (Shapiro-Wilk: $W = 0.900$, $p = 0.001$). The effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.41$) suggests a small to moderate improvement, aligning with expected outcomes from a one-week A2-level immersion.

⁶ (Cycle 1: $t(35) = 2.40$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.39$; Cycle 2: $t(41) = 2.52$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.39$). In Cycle 1, a significant gain was also observed in oral interaction ($t(35) = 2.86$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.47$). In Cycle 2, additional improvements were found in coherence ($t(41) = 2.04$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.31$), vocabulary use ($t(41) = 2.63$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.41$), and in the combined category oral interaction & coherence ($t(41) = 2.67$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.41$). Other areas showed positive shifts, though they did not reach statistical significance.

linguistic confidence, and *STRP* engagement). M8M and L4C (pseudonyms for participants)—illustrate some examples. M8M, who had previously struggled with word order and verb placement in spoken German, stated in the post-trip interview that low-stakes tasks like ordering food or asking for directions helped them develop more automatic use of grammatical structures. Instructor field notes also confirmed their frequent engagement with *STRP* challenges in daily interactions. L4C, although already more confident at baseline, used the *STRP* to systematically reflect on vocabulary through journaling. This participant reported an increased ability to produce coherent sentences in both writing and speech.

By contrast, participants such as H1S and OZ7 (pseudonyms), who engaged minimally with the *STRP*, showed fewer or less specific improvements. H1S expressed a preference for spontaneous language use without having to “tick off” tasks, while OZ7 avoided many tasks due to low confidence and tended to revert to their first language in group situations. These contrasts suggest that the *STRP* was most effective when used deliberately and reflectively. Frequent, goal-oriented use of German in structured settings appears to have increased learners’ communicative competence—and, in turn, their WTC.

L4C, by contrast, entered the program with a higher proficiency level (B2) and participated in the excursion for the second time. They also reported active use of the *STRP* but emphasized that their progress was most noticeable in written communication, reflecting their stated preference for written over spoken input due to a hearing issue. Despite this, they credited the *STRP* with providing a framework for applying vocabulary in real contexts and increasing their linguistic awareness. As a returning participant, they also noted that the overall experience—compared to the previous year—felt more accessible due to improved listening comprehension and familiarity with the setting. By contrast, H1S made only limited use of the *STRP* and attributed their linguistic progress primarily to informal interactions during the trip. Similarly, there is no indication that OZ7 engaged with the *STRP* in a meaningful way; their reported improvements were minor and appeared to be influenced more by social experiences than by structured task completion.

4.2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Self-reported WTC—understood here as learners’ perceived ability and readiness to initiate communication in German—increased significantly across several measured domains, including “asking questions in group situations,” “engaging in spontaneous conversations,” and “ordering something.” These gains were assessed via pre- and post-trip questionnaires in which participants rated their WTC in managing typical communication scenarios derived from or inspired by *STRP* tasks using an 8-point Likert scale. For example, the average rating for the item “I ask the teacher a question in German during group situations” increased from 4.6 to 6.3, with a paired samples t-test confirming the

statistical significance of this change (see Tab. 2 for selected results). While a standardized WTC scale was not used, the questionnaire items were conceptually based on the model by MacIntyre et al. (1998) and adapted both linguistically and didactically to suit CEFR A2-level learners of DaF (cf. Caspari, 2016, p.164). The items focused on typical communicative behaviors likely to occur during the excursion, reflecting real-world language use opportunities.

Item: "In class or during the excursion, I ask a question aloud in German in front of the group."				
	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Cycle 1	2.34	35	.025	0.39
Cycle 2	4.11	41	< .001	0.64

Tab. 2: Example of paired samples t-tests on students' self-assessed Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (asking questions in group situations, Cycles 1 and 2)⁷

Observational and interview data suggest that students were most willing to engage in low-risk, routine interactions—particularly with teachers or service staff who already used German with them—while more demanding communicative situations, such as initiating conversations with unfamiliar interlocutors or sustaining unstructured dialogues, continued to pose a challenge.

Nonetheless, the structured design of the *STRP* appeared to support LRT, especially among the same student profile discussed in the previous chapter: learners who actively used the *STRP* and were perceived as motivated by instructors. *STRP* usage patterns, however, varied considerably. While over half of the students completed at least 50% of the 55 available tasks (see Fig. 4), some booklets showed signs of retrospective completion—for example, multiple tasks were checked off at once without accompanying contextual notes (e.g., date, place), or entire clusters of similar tasks were marked consecutively near the end of the week, suggesting post-hoc rather than real-time documentation.

On average, students checked off 57.5% of tasks, with a clear preference for low-threshold, time-efficient items such as ordering food or asking for repetition. In contrast, tasks requiring greater time investment—such as recording a short video, writing a travel diary, or reflecting in written form—were rarely attempted unless they were explicitly integrated into structured group activities. These higher-effort tasks were often perceived as too demanding within the limited timeframe of the excursion.

⁷ In Tab. 2, *t* refers to the t-value of the paired samples t-test, which measures whether the difference in students' self-assessed WTC before and after the excursion was statistically significant. The *df* (degrees of freedom) corresponds to the number of participants included in the analysis minus one. The *p*-value indicates the probability that the observed difference occurred by chance; values below .05 are considered statistically significant. Cohen's *d* represents the effect size and provides information on the practical significance of the change: values around 0.2 indicate a small effect, 0.5 a medium effect, and 0.8 a large effect.

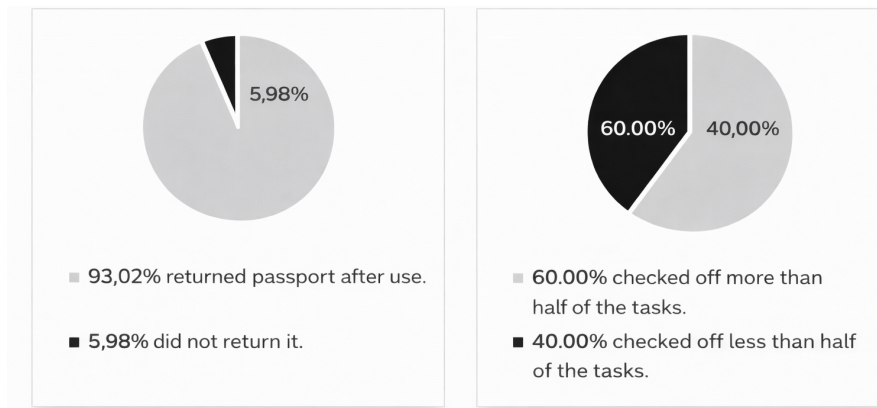


Fig. 4: Students' use of the *STRP* (Second journey)

Some learners engaged with the *STRP* even during informal moments such as meals or group outings. Instructors observed students discussing *STRP* tasks at breakfast or checking off items on the go—suggesting intrinsic motivation, especially when tasks were socially embedded. Case study narratives, based on interview data and analysis of individual *STRP* booklets, further illustrate this range of engagement and its relation to WTC:

- M8M used the *STRP* to set daily goals and practice specific challenges. They initially felt insecure when formulating questions in group settings but reported increased confidence by the end of the trip. A turning point came when they successfully asked a question during a guided tour. They attributed their progress to repeated real-life interactions and to the *STRP*'s role as a motivating and structuring tool.
- L4C, a returning participant with higher proficiency, completed almost 65% of the *STRP* and preferred written tasks such as keeping a travel diary in German. While describing themselves as reserved, they reported increased willingness to speak in familiar, one-on-one situations (e.g., with teachers) and found the gamified badge system highly motivating.
- H1S used the *STRP* only sporadically and later expressed regret over their limited engagement. They focused on easy, low-risk tasks and often completed them retrospectively. Although they noted slight WTC gains in typical scenarios like ordering food, their overall communicative behavior remained cautious. They attributed this not to anxiety, but to a preference for informal, low-pressure interactions and difficulties with planning and structuring their learning independently.
- OZ7, with relatively low proficiency, completed approximately 52% of the *STRP* and avoided more complex tasks. Nevertheless, they showed initiative in socially supported settings, such as a tandem exchange, and demonstrated a willingness to take linguistic risks when supported by the context.

The shift from a risk-rating scale (Cycle 1) to a gamified badge system (Cycle 2) improved usability for many learners—particularly those already inclined to participate. Interviews and observations confirmed that several students found the badges motivating and used them to set personal goals. However, *STRP* completion data showed no substantial increase in overall participation between the two cycles: students in Cycle 1 completed on average 31 out of 55 tasks (56.4%), while those in Cycle 2 completed 32 out of 55 tasks (58.2%). This minor difference was not statistically significant and suggests that while gamification supported motivation on an individual level, it did not consistently lead to broader or deeper engagement with the *STRP*. Triangulated findings thus indicate that gamification functioned more as a motivational enhancer than as a universal driver of increased participation in linguistic risk-taking.

Crucially, the *STRP* appeared most beneficial when pedagogically anchored. This became evident in a triangulated analysis: triangulated data from observation protocols, instructor diaries, and student interviews indicated that instructor reminders—such as setting daily goals or sending prompts via WhatsApp—played a key role in sustaining engagement. Students often cited these cues as motivational triggers, and field notes showed increased *STRP* activity following such pedagogical interventions—especially when challenges were discussed collectively or embedded into group routines like visits to museums. In the absence of such support, however, many students tended to neglect the tool. Interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses indicate that this was often due to the dense excursion schedule and limited free time. Several students noted that they simply forgot about the *STRP* unless reminded explicitly.

In summary, *STRP* engagement varied widely and appeared to depend on factors such as learner motivation, instructor involvement, program structure, and the communicative relevance of the tasks. While some students integrated the *STRP* into their daily routine, others used it more sporadically or minimally. These usage patterns were also reflected in the varying impact on learners' *WTC*. The data suggest that the *STRP* offered structured opportunities for language use, but its uptake and effectiveness were shaped by the surrounding pedagogical and situational conditions. A more detailed interpretation of these dynamics follows in the discussion.

5. Discussion

5.1 Communicative Competence Gains

Findings suggest that the *STRP* supported learners' development of communicative competence during the short-term academic excursion. This was especially the case for students who reported using the *STRP* actively or were perceived as engaged by instructors. These students rated themselves significantly higher in the statistical sense in several areas after the trip—particularly in statements such as “*I can formulate simple sentences grammatically correctly,*” “*I can use newly learned words in conversation,*” “*I can*

have short conversations about familiar topics,” and *“I can connect short phrases and sentences.”* These self-assessments, based on aligned items derived from CEFR descriptors, indicate an increase in perceived communicative competence. Interview and observation data suggest that frequent language use in meaningful situations—prompted by *STRP* tasks—helped learners to apply grammatical structures and vocabulary more effectively. This increased ability to use the target language in context appears to have contributed to greater ease in participating in everyday communication, which, in turn, may have supported their WTC.

Listening comprehension was rated as the most improved skill across the sample. This likely reflects the high number of guided tours and structured activities, which exposed students to authentic spoken German throughout the week.

However, some students reported that they found it difficult to stay engaged during longer receptive phases, such as museum tours. In contrast, they showed higher responsiveness in dialogic speaking situations (e.g., one-on-one interactions with teachers or locals), which offered more opportunities for authentic linguistic adjustment. This observation aligns with findings by Campbell (1996), who suggested that dialogic situations promote deeper processing of input, while learners are more likely to disengage in less interactive group settings.

A direct level gain in the sense of a full CEFR proficiency leap was neither expected nor measurable within the short timeframe of the excursion. Language proficiency in immersive, real-world contexts is difficult to quantify due to the influence of numerous sociocultural variables and individual learner trajectories (DeKeyser, 2014; Isabelli-García et al., 2018). Kinginger (2008) likewise emphasizes that language learning success during study abroad depends strongly on learners’ prior experiences, motivation, and their ability to pursue consistent target language use in everyday contexts.

5.2 Structural Constraints and Challenges

In line with findings from other short-term mobility programs (e.g., Castañeda & Zirger, 2011; Marques-Schäfer & Sant’Anna Bolacio Filho, 2020) this study highlights key structural limitations. The dense itinerary left little time for spontaneous communication beyond structured contexts. As a result, most interactions were limited to predictable, low-risk scenarios such as ordering services. Moreover, student responses and interviews indicate that the *STRP* alone was not sufficient. Its potential was only realized when embedded in instructional routines, integrated into program activities, and supported by available time. Several students reported forgetting the *STRP* unless instructors reminded them—often due to cognitive overload and limited autonomy in scheduling.

5.3 Role of Pedagogical Integration

The success of the *STRP* depended heavily on how it was introduced and supported by instructors. Teachers who actively embedded the passport into the daily program—for example, by assigning small daily goals or sending reminders via WhatsApp—helped sustain student engagement. These measures served not as instructions but rather as facilitative prompts that normalized the *STRP* as part of the study routine.

Learners like M8M and L4C benefitted from such structured environments, where the *STRP* was consistently referenced and framed as relevant. In contrast, students like H1S, who accepted less instructional support or relied more on informal approaches, engaged less and reported fewer perceived gains.

This highlights that the *STRP* should not be seen as a standalone intervention, but as a tool whose effectiveness depends on pedagogical mediation. Active teacher involvement was key to transforming the *STRP* from a checklist into a meaningful support for communicative engagement. The *STRP*'s role is not a standalone solution, but a facilitative structure that requires active mediation by teachers.

5.4 *STRP* Development Potential

While the transition from an abstract risk scale (2022) to a gamified points-and-badge system (2023) improved usability, it did not substantially increase task completion. Students still favored low-effort tasks unless higher-risk ones were embedded into group settings. To strengthen future versions of the *STRP*:

- Tasks should be tightly linked to planned program events.
- Pre-trip preparation (e.g., vocabulary training, simulations) should be expanded.
- Gamification could be made more interactive, including team elements.
- Reflective moments (e.g., group debriefs) should be built in.

Importantly, the *STRP* should continue to focus on engagement, not assessment.

5.5 Methodological Considerations

The mixed-methods design provided valuable insights but comes with limitations:

- The sample size (< 100) limits generalizability.
- Reliance on self-assessment may introduce bias.
- The absence of formal testing restricts objective language measurement.
- The short program duration may conflate short-term motivation with lasting progress.
- The researcher's dual role (teacher/researcher) may have influenced responses, despite safeguards.

Despite these limitations, the triangulated data offer strong indications of the impact of the *STRP* on short-term sojourn programs regarding learners' WTC, perceived language proficiency, and the pedagogical relevance of structured engagement tools.

5.6 Outlook and Recommendations

The *STRP* appeared to function as a motivating and adaptable tool—particularly when embedded in a supportive learning environment. Based on the findings of this study, the following considerations may support future implementations:

- Embed the *STRP* into the daily rhythm of the program,
- Provide clear instructions and orientation, both before and during the trip, to help students understand the purpose and use of the *STRP*.
- Include reflection and social sharing to reinforce motivation,
- Offer optional tandem or peer activities to risk firstly in structured learning sessions and to be prepared for higher-risk engagement in authentic situations.

The *STRP* works best as part of a guided learning culture—not as an isolated intervention. With thoughtful integration, it may significantly enhance the linguistic value of short-term study abroad experiences.

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Appendix B (Observation Protocol – original, German)

This is the original observation protocol (in German) used by instructors during the excursions to document communicative behavior in group situations.

Beobachtungsbogen für Gruppensituationen Gruppensituation / Szenario (Handlungsspielraum):		Name:	Datum/Zeit:	Nr.
Kommunikative Handlungen bitten um Wiederholung/langsamer zu sprechen, sprechen D mit Begleitler*innen, sprechen auch untereinander Deutsch,, lesen/hören/schreiben etwas auf D posten etwas auf D, bestellen, fragen etwas, bitten um Auskunft, geben Auskunft, verwenden Audioguide auf D, verwenden den Aufgabenkatalog..... monologisches/dialogisches Sprechen, übersetzen/dolmetschen	Verstehen Rezeptive Aktivitäten und Strategien: Hörverstehen allgemein/Gespräche zwischen Muttersprachlern// als Zuschauer/Zuhörer im Publikum, Ankündigungen, Durchsagen, mündliche und schriftliche Anweisungen/ Leseverstehen allgemein/visuelle rezeptive Aktivitäten, zur Orientierung lesen/audiovisuelle Rezeption, Hinweise identifizieren / erschließen	Gemiedene Kommunikation setzen keine komm. Handlungen, reagieren nicht, antworten in Erstsprache/n könnte eine Aufgabe sein		
Weitere Beobachtungen/Anmerkungen		AZ: Komm. Sprachkompetenzen (vereinfacht) Grammatische Kompetenz Kann einfache korrekte Sätze formulieren. Phonologische Kompetenz Kann trotz Akzents verständlich aussprechen. Soziolinguistische Kompetenz Kann an einfachen Gesprächen teilnehmen (reden/antworten). Flexibilität Kann neu gelernte Wörter anwenden. Sprecherwechsel Kann einfache, kurze Gespräche anfangen, aufrechterhalten, beenden. Themenabwicklung Kann einfach beschreiben oder erzählen, z.B. durch einfache Aufzählung. Kohäsion Kann einfache Konnektoren verwenden Flüssigkeit Kann trotz Störungen eine vollständige Konversation abwickeln. Genauigkeit Kann sich in den meisten Fällen mitteilen.		
Kontext, Ereignis, Manifestation (WAS?) Thema/Topik, Art des Sprechakts; wörtliche Mitschrift; Intention		Art der Operationalisierung (WIE?) Sprecheröffnung: eigenes Handeln, Aufforderung Aussagen/Turns: singuläre/mehrfach/ Gesprächsende/Closing keine Aussage, Danksagung, Verabschiedung		
Initiator/in, Beteiligte (WER)		Kommunikative Einzelperformanzen Resultat (MIT WELCHEM ERGEBNIS?) Störung: Abbruch, Verzögerungen, Pausen; Nachfragen (Reparatur), Verwendung der Erstsprache;; Reaktionen, Strategien Kommunikative Sprachkompetenz		

Appendix C. Excerpt from Interview Guide (original, German)

Excerpt from the pre-trip problem-centered interview guide, adapted to students' language level and conducted in their first language (e.g., Spanish).

<p>Nr. Interview: _____</p> <p style="text-align: right;">PROBLEMZENTRIERTES INTERVIEW (DAVOR)</p> <p>Code zur Anonymisierung: _____</p> <p>Sprachniveau des/der Studierenden: _____</p> <p>Datum: _____</p> <p>Beginn des Interviews: _____</p> <p>Ende des Interviews: _____</p> <p>Geschlecht: _____</p> <p>Alter: _____</p>																								
Begrüßung und Information																								
<p><i>Ich habe nun schon über mein Forschungsvorhaben in der Vorbereitungsstunde zur Studienreise berichtet. Ich möchte gern über die Studienreise und das Sprechverhalten forschen. Außerdem möchte ich gerne die didaktische Planung einer Studienreise verbessern.</i></p> <p><i>Danke, dass du dich freiwillig zusätzlich zur Befragung mit Fragebogen für insgesamt 3 Interviews zur Verfügung stellst. Ich werde dich also heute, einmal während und einmal nach dem Aufenthalt interviewen.</i></p> <p><i>Das Interview wird hier mit dem Handy aufgezeichnet.</i></p> <p><i>Du weißt, es gibt keine richtigen oder falschen Antworten, sondern es geht um deine Einschätzung und Wahrnehmung. Das Interview wird anonymisiert durch deinen Code (siehe oben)</i></p> <p><i>Du kannst eine nachträgliche Löschung des Interviews beantragen, sofern du das willst.</i></p> <p><i>Du kannst mich während des Interviews gerne unterbrechen und mir z.B. eine Frage stellen.</i></p> <p><i>Ich beginne jetzt mit dem Interview und bitte dich um deine Erlaubnis, mit der Aufnahme zu beginnen.</i></p>																								
Einstieg und Kommunikationsbereitschaft																								
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erzähle über deine Erfahrung beim Deutschlernen. • In welchem Sprachkurs bist du gerade ? (Niveau): _____ • WARUM hast du im Fragebogen unter Punkt 1. „Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass du in folgenden Situationen Deutsch sprichst?“ wie folgt angekreuzt? <p>1 Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass du in den folgenden Situationen Deutsch sprichst?</p> <p>A. Ich werde hier in der Stadt auf Deutsch angesprochen und ich soll in einfachen Worten den Weg erklären, nehme dabei vielleicht auf einen Plan oder auf eine Karte Bezug.</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td>0</td><td>1</td><td>2</td><td>3</td><td>4</td><td>5</td><td>6</td><td>7</td> </tr> </table> <p>B. Ich führe ein spontanes Gespräch mit eine*m deutschen Erasmus-Studierenden, eine kurze Konversation darüber, wer ich bin, woher ich komme.</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td>0</td><td>1</td><td>2</td><td>3</td><td>4</td><td>5</td><td>6</td><td>7</td> </tr> </table> <p>C. Ich bitte im Sprachkurs den Lehrenden, das Gesagte zu wiederholen, wenn ich etwas nicht verstanden habe.</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td>0</td><td>1</td><td>2</td><td>3</td><td>4</td><td>5</td><td>6</td><td>7</td> </tr> </table>	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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Nicole Marx

Linguistic Risk-Taking and Multilingualism Pedagogies: Encouraging Plurilingualism in Lower Secondary Education

Abstract

This school project, carried out regularly within a university education course at master's level, explores the application of the Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT) Initiative in promoting plurilingual engagement among younger secondary school students. During these week-long classroom projects, participants engage in a range of self-selected language-related challenges and reflect on their experiences during classroom discussions and in an individual written survey. Results for one such project are described here. Most school students reported developing a more positive attitude toward multilingualism and greater interest in language learning over the course of the short project, and they experimented with diverse linguistic tasks. However, they also experienced challenges with task difficulty and lack of motivation. Recommendations for further classroom projects include extending the duration of the LRT project and integrating regular structured discussions to encourage long-term student participation.

Das hier vorgestellte schulische Projekt wird regelmäßig im Rahmen eines universitären Lehramtsstudiums auf Masterniveau durchgeführt. Es untersucht die Anwendung der *Linguistic Risk-Taking* (LRT) Initiative zur Förderung plurilingualen Engagements bei jüngeren Sekundarstufenschüler*innen. Während der einwöchigen Unterrichtsprojekte bearbeiten die teilnehmenden Schüler*innen eine Reihe selbstgewählter sprachlicher Risiken und reflektieren ihre Erfahrungen in Klassendiskussionen sowie in einer individuellen schriftlichen Befragung. Die Ergebnisse eines solchen Projekts werden hier dargestellt. Die meisten Schüler*innen berichteten im Verlauf des kurzen Projekts von einer positiveren Einstellung zur Mehrsprachigkeit und einem gesteigerten Interesse am Sprachenlernen und erprobten vielfältige sprachliche Aufgaben. Gleichzeitig traten Herausforderungen in Bezug auf die Aufgabenschwierigkeit und mangelnde Motivation auf. Empfehlungen für zukünftige Projekte umfassen eine Verlängerung der Projektdauer sowie die Integration regelmäßiger strukturierter Diskussionen zur Förderung einer langfristigen Teilnahme.

Keywords

Linguistic Risk Taking, practice example, pre-service teacher training, multilingualism pedagogies

Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT), sprachliche Risikobereitschaft, Praxisbeispiel, Lehrer*innenbildung, Mehrsprachigkeitsorientierte Didaktiken



1. Plurilingual Repertoires, Multilingualism Pedagogies and LRT

Plurilingualism, i.e., an individual's "ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency of varying degrees, in several languages, and experience of several cultures" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 168), is not only the worldwide norm—it is also a goal of many educational systems. This goal of plurilingualism has led, in recent decades, to the development of a wide variety of pedagogical approaches to language learning which go beyond a monolingual focus on the *one* language currently being learned and taught within *one* language class to include broader measures to support the development of multilingualism and skills for multiple language learning. Such integrated approaches to language teaching and learning (Marx & Hufeisen, 2026)—also termed "multilingualism pedagogies" (Melo-Pfeifer & Ollivier, 2026)—attempt to recognize and include all languages of an individual's linguistic repertoire in language teaching. They thus incorporate not only the second/foreign (i.e., additional) languages being taught, but also the language(s) of schooling and other languages that students may use, such as heritage languages or further languages learned outside the school. Multilingualism pedagogies thus strive to expand students' plurilingual repertoires as highly individual and dynamic sets of resources that evolve over time (cf. Beacco et al., 2016; Candelier et al., 2012; Jessner & Kramersch, 2015) and that can be flexibly drawn upon in communicative settings to support both concrete communicative needs and further linguistic and cognitive development.

Multilingualism pedagogies focus on specific language skills which are translingual, i.e., cross individual language boundaries. One of the best-known examples of an attempt to delineate such skills for educational practice is found in the Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 160–162), which specifies pluricultural and plurilingual *competence*, the "practical functional ability to exploit plurilingualism" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 127), as a central goal of language(s) learning. In contrast to the original CEFR, it includes a number of descriptors, scaled to the CEFR levels A1–C2, for this ability. These include being able to recognize internationalisms common to different languages (CEFR level A1, see Council of Europe, 2020, p. 126) or to use words or phrases from different languages to uphold communication (CEFR level A2, see Council of Europe, 2020, p. 128). In the same context, but through a much more detailed catalogue, the FREPA (Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures, Candelier et al., 2012) looks specifically at pluralistic approaches, provides descriptors for plurilingual competence, and offers a wide range of suggestions for teaching in the context of multiple language use and development.

The acceptance and further development of plurilingual repertoires becomes particularly relevant in linguistically diverse classrooms, where students' individual plurilingual repertoires are often neglected or even dissuaded when they extend beyond

the language of schooling and the specific target language. Further languages—such as family languages other than the language of schooling or heritage languages (Brehmer & Mehlhorn, 2018)—can be, at best, overlooked and, at worst, seen as problematic or devalued. For these students, multilingualism pedagogies not only encourage skill-building for lifelong language learning, but also may help empower students by validating their plurality of cultural and linguistic identities (Cummins, 2021, p. 67). By including diverse languages, schools can create linguistic safe spaces where plurilingualism is viewed as an educational and intellectual resource, and students' interest in and respect for different cultures and languages is cultivated.

Multilingualism pedagogies and their goal of plurilingual repertoire development thus can help educators to understand language as a flexible and highly individual tool for communication which goes beyond specific school subjects. Consequently, motivating students to engage with their own plurilingual repertoires in everyday activities is a cornerstone of multilingualism pedagogies.

However, in the classroom context, a number of hurdles become apparent when multilingualism pedagogies are considered (Hufeisen & Marx, 2024). In addition to aspects of teacher training and motivation, curricular restrictions, and classroom management (Fäcke et al., 2024), insecurities which language learners face when communicating in an additional language can become a central problem for individual development of plurilingual repertoires. These may stem from, amongst others, a fear of making mistakes, difficulty in understanding spoken or written communication in the language, or misinterpreting interlocutors using that language (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), and can result in learners being less willing to engage in communicative activities (“willingness to communicate”, Dörnyei, 2005; MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 546).

One promising approach to encouraging willingness to communicate among learners of additional languages is the Linguistic Risk-Taking (LRT) Initiative (Slavkov, n.d.). Originally developed at the bilingual University of Ottawa, it aimed to encourage university students learning French or English to use their less-active language in daily life and to enhance language confidence by engaging in “risks”, defined in the language learning context as “authentic communicative acts in learners' second official language (French/English), which may be ‘risky’ due to discomfort about making mistakes, being misunderstood, misunderstanding others, being judged, taking on a different identity, and changing previously established language choice patterns” (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 1). Engaging in such linguistic risks allow students to move beyond their linguistic and cultural comfort zones, while ensuring that the risks involved are manageable, can be autonomously chosen by learners, and have a good chance of positive outcomes (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021; Slavkov, 2023). Importantly, the initiative aims to support students' willingness to engage with a target language by allowing them to choose which communicative situations they seek out outside of the classroom (Griffiths &

Slavkov, 2021; Slavkov, 2023). As such, it is based on the principles of task-based language teaching and learning (Long, 2014), involving learner-centered engagement in meaningful communicative activities of their own choosing.

The development of linguistic risks extends beyond the descriptors of the CEFR Companion Volume and offers a selection of 89 concrete activities in a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport (available in print and over the website in French and English, see Slavkov, n.d.). Risks are designed around everyday activities and situations where learners engage with a specific target language outside of formal coursework. Examples include using the target language to order food at the university cafeteria, compose an email to an instructor, or watch a YouTube video. Risks are chosen individually by the learners, attempted, and then reflected upon according to their level of perceived risk and difficulty, and students' work with the passport can be integrated into language coursework and university language requirements.

The initiative has garnered wide interest, and has been applied to and adapted for further university contexts in, for example, Japan (MacDonald & Thompson, 2019), Austria (Cajka et al., 2023), and Germany (Goethe Institut et al., n.d.).

The LRT initiative is thus a promising concept for reducing communicative anxiety, increasing willingness to communicate, and supporting the autonomous development of (one) language in authentic communicative contexts. However, its applicability to other populations and contexts is unclear. First, since it explicitly focuses on one target language, its usefulness in expanding plurilingual repertoires is yet to be determined. Second, the LRT initiative has to date generally focused on highly educated adult learners at university, who are generally good learners, are capable of and interested in autonomous learning experiences, and have the motivation and self-concept to engage in new learning behaviors, especially if these are directly related to a specific target language required for their course of studies.

Considering these limitations, it would be informative to evaluate the expansion of the LRT initiative into multilingualism pedagogies by allowing learners to choose not only which risks they will engage in, but also the language in which the activity is carried out. As well, its application in further contexts such as adults with less formal education or schoolchildren should be considered.

Children are an especially intriguing learner group: they possess very different cognitive capabilities, learning autonomy, and motivations for language learning compared to the target groups of previous LRT initiatives, and they may themselves be growing up in multilingual contexts and developing a wide range of individual plurilingual repertoires. This stands in contrast to learning situations in the classroom, which are often highly monolingual (Gogolin, 2008). The present project thus turned to this relatively underexplored group of schoolchildren in linguistically diverse learning contexts, aiming to raise awareness of plurilingual repertoires and to encourage linguistic risk-taking in a number of different languages selected by the students themselves. The

following sections present the project and its iterations, examining the constraints, opportunities, and challenges involved in implementing the LRT initiative with younger plurilingual learners.

2. Plurilingualism Teaching Project at the University of Cologne

In the Master of Education (MEd)¹ program at the University of Cologne, the author regularly teaches a course entitled *Multilingualism Pedagogies in School Contexts*. The course is embedded within the “DSSZ-Modul” (commonly referred to as the *DaZ* or “German as a Second Language” module), which is designed to prepare pre-service teachers for work in linguistically diverse classrooms. This module, composed of a lecture and a further course, is compulsory for all MEd students, regardless of their subject specializations, though it offers a wide range of course options. Since the *Multilingualism Pedagogies* course is conducted in both German and English, it tends to attract students who have chosen English as one of their two main subjects, although this is not exclusively the case.

Within the *Multilingualism Pedagogies* course, students select one of four plurilingualism projects to implement in a school of their choice. One such project is LRT; the others include multilingual and multilinear story writing (Marx, 2022), multilingual explorations (Behr et al., 2005), and a mathematics unit on linguistic diversity in the classroom (Brockmann & Marx, 2024). As part of their chosen project, students engage with relevant literature on multilingualism pedagogies, design and adapt teaching materials for the specific classroom context, implement the project, and subsequently evaluate the outcomes using project-specific questionnaires. The course is therefore structured around the primary pedagogical aim of familiarizing pre-service teachers with concepts of plurilingualism and multilingualism pedagogies. At the same time, it pursues a secondary aim: to bring these approaches directly into schools by encouraging pupils to draw on their individual plurilingual repertoires and by supporting in-service teachers in adopting practical, accessible strategies for multilingual pedagogy in linguistically diverse classrooms.

To date, the LRT project has been implemented across six different courses with successive cohorts of MEd students. For the purpose of illustration, and given the variability of classroom contexts, the discussion here focuses exclusively on the course and materials from the Winter Term 2023/2024.

¹ In Germany, all Education students must complete both a Bachelor of Education and a Master of Education degree in order to receive a teaching certificate. The official length of study is three years for the Bachelor of Education degree and an additional two years for the Master of Education degree.

2.1 Project Goals

The overarching goal of the project is to provide concrete opportunities for students to develop their awareness of and willingness to communicate in languages other than the language of schooling (German) and the first additional language taught as a school subject (English). In alignment with the goals of multilingualism pedagogies and the expansion of students' plurilingual repertoires, there are three main goals:

1. Promote plurilingualism: In predominantly monolingual school environments, bilingualism and plurilingualism can be marginalized. The LRT project aimed to make the use of multiple languages in daily life more visible and accepted, help students develop strategies for facing language challenges, and spark students' curiosity about languages they might not use themselves.
2. Emphasize the intrinsic value of all languages: Beyond students, teachers and educational institutions need to foster recognition and respect for all languages. The project aimed to promote an understanding of language practices as constructive learning opportunities, irrespective of the languages involved.
3. Increase learner autonomy: Within multilingualism pedagogy, a main goal is to reduce the active role of the instructor and encourage learners to seek appropriate opportunities for authentic language learning outside of the classroom.

2.2 Context and Participants

The Linguistic Risk-Taking project reported here was conducted in a fifth-grade English class at a *Realschule*, a lower-secondary, non-academic school form. The school is situated in a culturally diverse area of northern Cologne, a large city in western Germany, and thus reflects the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity of its surrounding community. In alignment with this demographic, the school operates under the guiding principle of "Learning Together in Cultural Diversity", which emphasizes the promotion of intercultural competence and fosters a general attitude of tolerance and appreciation for diverse backgrounds. The school's educational approach also includes a commitment to language-sensitive instruction, ensuring that students from multilingual backgrounds receive the necessary support for acquiring and using German effectively.² However, when asked about the support of plurilingualism, the teacher of the participating class reported that only newly immigrated students were offered additional assistance in German; other languages were not mentioned beyond English and French, which are taught as school subjects.

The language curriculum at the school includes English as the first obligatory additional language and French as an elective second foreign language from sixth grade onwards. Grade 5 is the first year of secondary education in Germany, so students had been attending the school for only four months, but they had been learning English

² To ensure anonymity of the school, the references to its website are not included here.

since Grade 1. The project aligns well with one of the stated overall goals of language instruction in the state's schools: "der Mehrsprachigkeit [kommt] in einer globalisierten Welt eine besondere Bedeutung zu. Das differenzierte Fremdsprachenangebot [...] trägt der Vielfalt an Sprachen und Kulturen Rechnung und ermöglicht den Schülerinnen und Schülern den Erwerb einer breiten Fremdsprachenkompetenz." ("Multilingualism [is] particularly important in a globalised world. The diverse range of foreign languages on offer [...] takes account of the diversity of languages and cultures and enables pupils to acquire a broad range of language skills.") (Ministerium für Schule, Jugend und Kinder, 2021). The teacher agreed to allow a focus on plurilingualism in the LRT project, i.e., English was only one of many possible languages with which students could decide to engage during the project.

The class consisted of 28 students aged 10–11, of whom 22 participated in the LRT project; a further six were absent on at least one of the project days. Notably, the class was linguistically diverse: 20 students reported speaking a language other than German at home, including Turkish, Arabic, Italian, Persian, Vietnamese, and Swahili. Despite this rich linguistic environment, a short classroom discussion conducted at the start of the project indicated that most students rarely engaged in discussions about their plurilingualism and generally did not use their home languages in the school environment.

2.3 Modification of the LRT Initiative for the Project

Building on the University of Ottawa's LRT initiative, the project was adapted for a lower-secondary school context with a particular emphasis on plurilingual competence. As stated above, a notable advantage was the class's linguistic heterogeneity: nearly all pupils used heritage languages at home and were accustomed to shifting between languages depending on context (for instance, using German at school and Arabic within the family).

Earlier iterations of the project employed the *Sprachen-Challenge: Handbuch für Geheimagenten und -agentinnen*, a translated version of the LRT passport provided by the Council of Europe (Goethe Institut et al., n.d.). This resource, adapted from the University of Vienna's LRT passport (Sprachenzentrum et al., n.d.), incorporates both activities designed for the target languages as well as risks explicitly designed to engage multiple languages. However, because the *Handbuch* was originally developed for older students (Grade 9), it was considered too advanced for younger learners in a non-academic track. In addition, time constraints—the school allocated only two class periods within a single week for the project—necessitated a significant reduction in scope.

The *Handbuch* was modified by the project group (Galetke et al., 2024) in consultation with the course instructor and the classroom teacher. It was shortened to include only 13 simplified tasks to support willingness to participate in the project without causing undue stress. The tasks included productive skills (speaking and writing) and recep-

tive skills (reading, listening, and watching), and were designed to be relevant to students' daily lives and experiences. Tasks are listed (in English translation) in Appendix 1.

Classroom time was divided between introduction of the project (Lesson 1) and its review (Lesson 2; see Results). In the first lesson, the project group asked participants to reflect on their own plurilingualism before introducing the concept of linguistic risk-taking. Each student was then provided with an LRT passport. To familiarize students with the structure of the activities, several exercises were completed collectively in class. This included learning greetings in different languages and practicing basic signs in German Sign Language. Students were encouraged to actively share their knowledge of different languages with peers. At the end of the lesson, they took their LRT passports home and were given one week to select and complete further risks independently.

The second and final lesson, one week later, was reserved for evaluation (see below). The students retained their language passports and discussed how they might continue to use them in future.

3. Results of the Project

After completing the project, students were asked to fill out a short questionnaire about their experiences with the language passport, the activities they had undertaken, and their attitudes toward multilingualism and language learning (see Appendix 2). The questionnaire, intended primarily to inform future iterations of the project within MED teacher training, included both closed (Likert-scale) and open-ended questions, although many students left the latter unanswered. A classroom discussion followed, providing students with greater flexibility to articulate their views on the project.

Whilst the project is exploratory in nature and was not intended to be accompanied by an empirical study, the findings of the 22 completed questionnaires point to several interesting aspects. These include aspects regarding both the classroom context itself and the broader application of the LRT initiative in plurilingual lower-secondary settings.

First, with respect to attitudes toward multilingualism (Q7–9), the responses were generally positive. Fifteen students reported feeling comfortable in multilingual settings, 20 indicated an intention to make greater use of their plurilingual repertoire in the future, and 19 expressed a desire to continue to learn additional languages. While these findings do not directly evaluate the project itself, such positive attitudes can facilitate students' engagement with the LRT tasks.

Second, students provided insights into the specific risks they chose to undertake (Q1). Of the 14 students who responded to the open-ended question, five indicated that they had watched a video in another language. Additional activities mentioned included trying out a recipe in another language, listening to a song, and learning to greet someone in a different language. These activities were seen as enjoyable (Q2). Conversely,

activities perceived as more challenging included watching an entire film or translating (Q3). Only one student reported feeling uncomfortable engaging in LRT activities (Q5), while 16 students indicated that the project helped them to become more interested in other languages (Q6).

Finally, the follow-up classroom discussion revealed that most students were enthusiastic about the various activities and exchanged ideas with their peers. The LRT project, albeit brief, provided an opportunity to deviate from conventional language instruction, encouraging students to incorporate multiple languages into their everyday activities and consider heritage and family languages in school settings where they are typically excluded.

4. Limitations and Recommendations

Several challenges of the application of the LRT initiative in this context were also apparent. Despite modifications to ensure the tasks aligned with the linguistic realities of students in Grade 5, many still found tasks overly demanding, and some students lacked motivation to complete any activities at all.

To enhance engagement and effectiveness, future iterations of the project should, first, be extended over a longer period, incorporating regular, brief guided exchanges with the project group to discuss risks, future plans, and experiences, to guide choices for risks, to rank them according to perceived interest and difficulty level, and to provide explicit time within the classroom to attempt risks. Second, more low-risk tasks could be included, such as ones that can be carried out easily within the classroom context. Third, students might be given more space to develop their own risks; however, this could also be difficult with younger children, as the present project suggests; only three students made suggestions for new risks (Q4).

Finally, although the cooperating class teacher initially expressed interest in the project, she did not implement it during the project group's absence and discontinued its use immediately following the final discussion. Greater support for the teacher, along with a more continuous and structured integration of the project into the classroom curriculum, could help promote its sustainability.

5. Conclusion

The LRT project demonstrated potential for encouraging students to explore their plurilingual repertoires beyond the formal classroom setting and support curiosity both about languages already present in their individual repertoires and about new languages. However, difficulties resulting from task complexity and limited teacher involvement show potential challenges in the application of the LRT initiative, particularly with younger learners in non-academic streams. Future iterations should include

longer implementation periods, structured and regular peer discussions of language activities, and increased teacher support to encourage engagement. Overall, the LRT projects have been received positively by students, pre-service teachers and teachers, indicating their potential to promote the development of individual plurilingual repertoires as well as greater acceptance of different languages in the school context.

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Appendix 1: Risks included in the passport

1. Learn and use a greeting in a new language.
2. Introduce yourself in another language (e.g., name, age, hobbies).
3. Order something in another language (food, drink).
4. Cook a recipe in another language.
5. Watch a film/series in another language (with subtitles).
6. Read a short story/fairy tale/comic in another language.
7. Learn a word in sign language.
8. Listen to a song in another language.
9. Watch a short video in another language (TikTok, YouTube).
10. Change the language on your mobile phone/computer/tablet/video game.
11. Ask a relative to teach you a new word in another language.
12. Help someone translate something from one language to another.
13. Tell a joke in a language other than your usual one (explain it if necessary).

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

(N.B. Questions 1-4 were open questions; 5-9 were closed with limited options).

1. Which risks did you try out?
2. Which risks did you like most?
3. Which tasks did you find difficult?
4. Do you have any ideas for other risks you think should be included in the buddy book?
5. How well did you feel when working on the individual risks?
6. Would you say you have now developed more interest in other languages?
7. How comfortable do you feel when a number of languages are being used (for example, not just German)?
8. Will you try to use your language skills more often in the future?
9. Do you want to learn more languages?

Jana-Luisa Rüter

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

Abstract

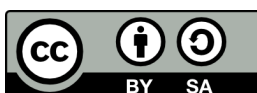
This paper examines the communicative challenges (linguistic risks) that young learners (YL) encounter in daily life and the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, where their second language (L2) skills are developed. A literature review identified potential linguistic risks in the English classroom 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 thesis¹ 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.

² For a more detailed overview of the passport see OLBI & LEARN (2023), https://drive.google.com/file/d/19XrFz15RNexnkGSr9Ka5lq8_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-structured 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 review⁴ 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-unit⁶ 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 presented⁷. 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,

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 traue 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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Appendix

The following figure shows all categories¹⁰ and established hypotheses¹¹ based on the data analysis:

Category 1: peer group
Hypothesis for subcategory 1.1: supportive peer-group* Learners in elementary school are more likely to take the risk of speaking or presenting something if they perceive their peer group as supportive.
Hypothesis for subcategory 1.2: unsupportive peer group* Learners in elementary school are more risk-averse if they perceive their peer group as non-supportive.
Hypothesis for category 2: location/context 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).
Category 3: supportiveness of teacher
Hypothesis for subcategory 3.1: teacher's emotional support* 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.
Subcategory 3.2: teacher's linguistic & strategic support*
Category 4: comprehension
Hypothesis for category 5: speaking/presenting Open speaking opportunities, as well as pronouncing words correctly, pose a challenge to students, especially when having to speak in front of the class.
Category 6: reading
Hypothesis for category 7: strategies Language learning and communication strategies help students to deal with linguistic risks (e.g., comprehension).
Hypothesis for category 8: own perspectives regarding uncertainties or errors Negative self-perceptions may impede elementary school students from accepting risks.
Hypothesis for category 9: language learning goals Intermediate steps of language learning goals may be translated into linguistic risks.
Category 10: requested linguistic support and needs
Category 11: additional difficulties/risks

¹⁰ Categories marked with a * emerged from deductive categories, however, were split into two categories after the analysis.

¹¹ Hypotheses could not be formulated for all categories yet (e.g., due to insufficient evidence).

Marlene Wenning

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

Abstract

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

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

Keywords

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

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

1. Introduction

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



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

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

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

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Linguistic Risk-Taking

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

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

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

2.2 Learning Environment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. The Study

3.1 Research Questions

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

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

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

3.2 Study Design

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

Phase 1:

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

English Experiment Corner

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

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

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

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

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

Tootling

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

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

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

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

Phase 2:

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

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

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

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

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

3.3 Results and Discussion

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

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

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

Tab. 1: Overview of all the generated categories

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

Ähm und dann eben der emotionale Raum, der mir Sicherheit gibt, der mir Vertrautheit gibt, ähm wo ich mich wohlfühle (.) Risiken einzugehen. (T1, 95–96)

Uhm and then well the emotional space that gives me security, that gives me familiarity, um where I feel comfortable (.) taking risks. (T1, 95–96)

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

Subcategory 3.2: attitude towards mistakes and errors

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

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

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

Category 4: feedback that supports linguistic risk-taking

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

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

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

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

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

schon, dass das ähm (..) die Motivation ähm hebt und ähm einfach für / für eine deutliche Menge an / also größere Menge an Sprechansätzen ähm ähm fördert oder ähm ja bringt. (T1, 371–375)

This [speaking prompt] then comes from within and not because I say 'You must now make a weather report.' uhm but because they are in the mood for it. (.) And uhm I really think that this uhm (..) heightens uhm the motivation and uhm simply for / for a considerable amount of / fosters uhm considerable amount of conversation starters uhm or uhm yes brings them. (T1, 371–375)

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

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

Category 10: implementation of Tootling and Tootle-Tickets

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

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

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

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

4. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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