

Contributory Role of Intermediate Iranian EFL Learners' Risk-taking Strategies in Improving their Speaking Fluency: The Case of Gender

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the relationship between male and female Iranian EFL learners' risk-taking and their use of language learning strategies to improve their speaking fluency. To this end, 50 intermediate EFL (English as a foreign language) learners (30 males and 20 females) were selected from a language institute in Isfahan, Iran. They ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old. The subjects were divided into two groups (males vs. females). Prior to the start of the experiment, a QPT test was administered to Data Collection of the learners. They also took part in a semi-structured interview. A two-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data. The results demonstrated that there was a significant relationship between risk-taking behavior and speaking fluency. The results revealed that the higher risk-takers had a better speaking fluency. The results demonstrated that high risk taking learners could obtain the highest fluency scores compared to moderate and low risk-taking learners. Also, it was observed that gender did not modify the effect of risk-taking level on the speaking fluency of the intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

Keywords: gender, language learning strategies, risk-taking, speaking fluency

INTRODUCTION

Risk-taking has been identified as one of the most important characteristics of successful learning in second language acquisition. EFL/ESL Learning is a complex and different process since it involves a number of factors both internal and external to the learner. Current reviews of SLA have drawn our attention to certain questions, such as why do EFL/ESL learners achieve different levels of proficiency? What internal factors affect the learning process and how we can use our knowledge to find answers to questions about improving learning and teaching? Speaking is an important skill as it is considered the bridge that connects people talking the same language. It enables people to express their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions. It is one of the productive skills

-speaking and writing- that learners use to produce language whether in a spoken or a written form. Illiterate people do not find any other means to convey and transfer their ideas except through speaking as they are naturally unable to write. El-Basel (2008, p. 74) argues that “speaking skills have been found a fundamental skill necessary for a person’s success in life. This study aimed at achieving the following objectives:

Firstly, to facilitate the communication and interaction between the learners and teacher by creating a voluntarily atmosphere in the classrooms. Secondly, to actively engage the learners in responding to the language tasks. Thirdly, in order to have a better communication between the teacher and the learner, reduce the risk – taking factor. Finally, to provide the learners with opportunities and relaxing situations to communicate efficiently with their peers and also their teacher.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For many years, a considerable amount of research has addressed the issue of second/foreign language learning. To date, several theorists have attempted to explain the human ability to learn a second language and all the factors that may hinder or facilitate this learning (e.g, Benson & Gao, 2008, Dewaele, 2012, Dörnyei, 2005).

The Concept of Risk-taking

Wen and Clément (2003) also explain the concept of uncertainty in risk taking in terms of outcomes. Nonetheless, their comments on risk taking are more socially oriented in the sense that both authors underline embarrassment and peer humiliation as possible results of the risk practice. Similarly, to prior definitions of risk taking, Wen and Clément’s observations on risks are noteworthy; however, their work mainly presents the negative side of this variable.

Characterization of Risk Takers

The literature in the field of second language acquisition has also brought to light other theories to describe risk takers. A clear example is Krashen’s Monitor Hypothesis. Although Krashen does not refer specifically to the concept of risk taking in his studies, the risk-taking construct and its characteristics are implied in many of them. In simple terms, risk takers and risk-averse students can be compared respectively to Krashen’s ‘under users’ and ‘over users’ (Ortega, 2009, p.198) of the monitor device. According to Krashen (as cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004), the over users are highly concerned with editing their language performance and carefully think their utterances; therefore, they usually show deficient oral fluency.

Variables Influencing Risk-taking Behaviors in Oral Communication

The estimation of risk levels is tied to diverse external and internal factors involving the learner, his/her personality, and the circumstances in which a risky response or action is expected. Thus, the importance of situational variables has been used to argue that the circumstances in which a risk-taking behavior is needed may act as deterrents or

facilitators of oral production. Kogan and Wallach (as cited in Beebe, 1983) state that one of the most important components of situational variables is the degree of skill or chance that learners may encounter in learning situations.

Advantages and Disadvantages of High and Low Risk Takers

On one hand, high risk takers enjoy several benefits when they venture into oral discourse. For example, researchers have acknowledged that fossilized structures tend to be less common in the speech of high risk takers. Since they are willing to try out new linguistic items and constantly look for opportunities to learn the language, they become “more resistant to fossilization” (Alshalabi, 2003, p.24, Ashouri & Fotovatnia, 2010, p.231). On the contrary, Hongwei (1996) points out that the timidity and inhibition which characterize low risk-taking speakers can lead to the development of erroneous patterns, i.e. fossilized structures in the interlanguage of such speaker.

METHOD

Design of the Study

Research design was qualitative in nature and also ex post facto design. In this study, gender and risk-taking level were two independent variables and speaking fluency was the dependent variable. In this study, participants carried out a semi-structured interview. In the semi-structured interview, interest was chosen and questions were formulated but the interviewer may modify the format or questions during the interview process. One characteristic that all qualitative interview formats share is that the questions were typically open ended (cannot be answered with a yes or no or simple response) and the questions were designed to reveal what was important to understand about the phenomenon under study.

Participants

The participants in this research were 50 Iranian EFL learners studying English at one of the language institute in Isfahan, Iran. The survey sample consisted of 30 male and 20 female students from eighteen to twenty-five years old who were randomly selected by researcher. They were all non-native student speaker (NNSS). It should be noted, all the participants participated in all the stages of the study.

Instruments

To meet the objectives of the study, the following instruments and materials were used: First, participants received an Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). In order to determine the students' homogeneity, a proficiency test, the OQPT, version 2 (2005), was administered to them. The test consists of 60 items. Second, in order to determine the strategy-taking levels participants received a strategy-taking questionnaire. Third, a semi-structured interview was developed and used by the researchers in order to assess the students' oral fluency skills.

Data Analysis

The present study, therefore, employed an ex post facto design to investigate the possible effects of gender and risk-taking levels on the L2 speaking fluency of intermediate Iranian EFL learners. Fifty intermediate EFL learners (30 male and 20 female) in four intact classes in a language institute in Isfahan were accessed. All the learners were given a risk taking questionnaire to fill out, and their fluency was measured during the interview they had for their final examination session. After collecting the data and estimating the scores, the results were analyzed using SPSS (ver 20). To make sure that male and female learners participating in this study were homogeneous in terms of their overall language proficiency, their OQPT test scores were compared through an independent-samples *t* test. Since gender and risk-taking level were two independent variables and speaking fluency was the dependent variable of the study, two-way ANOVA was used to compare the fluency scores of male and female learners with low, moderate, and high levels of risk taking.

RESULTS

In this part of the study the results are provided in two sections that are presented below:

Results of the Placement Test

To make sure that the male and female learners participating in this study were homogeneous in terms of their overall language proficiency, their QPT test scores were compared through an independent-samples *t* test. The results of the *t* test are shown in Tables 1 and 2:

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the QPT

	Groups	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
QPT	Male	30	36.11	2.58	.21
	Female	20	35.68	2.91	.53

The male learners' mean score on the placement test was 36.11 and the female learners' mean score was 35.68. In order to determine whether the difference between these two mean scores (and thus the two groups) on the QPT was statistically significant or not, the researcher had to examine the *p* value under the *Sig.* (2-tailed) column in the *t* test table (Table 4.2). A *p* value less than .05 would suggest a statistically significant difference between the two groups, and a *p* value larger than .05, on the other hand, would indicate a difference which failed to reach statistical significance:

Table 2. Results of Independent-Samples t Test Comparing the QPT Scores of Male and Female Learners

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t test for Equality of Means						
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	<i>Std. Error</i> Difference	95% Confidence Interval	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.13	.15	-.61	48	.37	.43	.52	-3.56	1.22
Equal variances not assumed			-.61	47.25	.37	.43	.52	-3.56	1.22

Table 2 shows that there was not a statistically significant difference in the QPT scores for males ($M = 36.11$, $SD = 2.58$) and females ($M = 35.68$, $SD = 2.91$), $t(48) = -.61$, $p = .37$ (two-tailed). This was so because the p value was found to be larger than the significance level ($p > .05$). Thus, it could be inferred that the learners in the two gender groups were at approximately the same level of proficiency at the outset of the study.

Answers to the Research Questions of the Study

It was pointed out earlier that the first research question was formulated to find out whether risk-taking strategies used by intermediate male Iranian EFL learners affected their speaking fluency, and the second research question was exactly the same as the first except that in the latter, the female learners were the object of investigation. Two-Way ANOVA was conducted to find answers to the two research question of the study since risk-taking level, and gender were considered as two independent variables and speaking fluency was the dependent variable. The results obtained via two-way ANOVA are presented in Tables 3 and 4:

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Fluency Scores of the Male and Female Learners with Different Risk-Taking Levels

Gender	RT	Mean	<i>Std.</i> Deviation	<i>N</i>
Male	Low RT	1.54	.10	14
	Moderate RT	1.63	.05	11
	High RT	1.87	.07	5
	Total	1.62	.14	30
Female	Low RT	1.54	.07	7
	Moderate RT	1.65	.14	9
	High RT	1.88	.10	4
	Total	1.66	.16	20
Total	Low RT	1.54	.09	21
	Moderate RT	1.64	.10	20
	High RT	1.87	.08	9
	Total	1.64	.15	50

Note: RT stands for risk taking

The mean scores of the male low RT, moderate RT, and high RT learners were 1.54, 1.63, and 1.87, respectively. Likewise, the mean scores of the female low RT, moderate RT, and high RT learners were found to be 1.54, 1.65, and 1.88, respectively. For both male and female learners, as the risk taking level increases, the fluency score increased as well. Although there were differences among the low RT, moderate RT, and high RT learners in both male and female groups, the total mean scores of the males ($M = 1.62$) and females ($M = 1.66$) did not indicate a large difference between these two gender groups. To find out whether the differences among the three RT groups and between the two genders were statistically significant or not, the researcher had to examine the p values in front of RT and Gender under the *Sig.* column in the two-way ANOVA table:

Table 4. Results of Two-Way ANOVA for Comparing the Fluency Scores of the Male and Female Learners with Different Risk-Taking Levels

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	.70	5	.14	14.38	.000	.62
Intercept	118.27	1	118.27	12111.24	.000	.99
Gender	.002	1	.002	.18	.67	.004
RT	.66	2	.33	34.24	.000	.60
Gender * RT	.002	2	.001	.07	.92	.004
Error	.43	44	.01			
Total	135.94	50				
Corrected Total	1.13	49				

As is shown in Table 4, there was not a statistically significant difference in the speaking fluency scores of the male and female Iranian EFL learners since the p value under the *Sig.* column in front of Gender was greater than the specified level of significance (i.e., $.67 > .05$). However, the p value corresponding to RT was indeed lower than the significance level ($.000 < .05$), implying that there was a statistically significant difference between at least one pair of the low RT, moderate RT, and high RT groups. To see where exactly the difference(s) is/are located, the researcher had to consult the Scheffe post hoc test results in Table 4.5. However, before taking a look at that table, it was also worth looking at the p value in front of Gender*RT in Table 4.4 to find out that the interaction effect of the two independent variables of the study (Gender and RT) failed to exert a statistically significant impact on the speaking fluency of the learners owing to the fact that the p value in front of Gender*RT appeared to be greater than the significance level ($.92 > .05$).

Table 5. Scheffe Post Hoc Test Results Comparing the Fluency Scores of the Learners with Different Risk-Taking Levels

RT Groups		Mean Difference	<i>Std.</i> Error	<i>Sig.</i>	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low RT	Moderate RT	-.10*	.03	.008	-.17	-.02
	High RT	-.33*	.03	.000	-.43	-.23
Moderate RT	Low RT	.10*	.03	.008	.02	.17
	High RT	-.23*	.03	.000	-.33	-.13
High RT	Low RT	.33*	.03	.000	.23	.43
	Moderate RT	.23*	.03	.000	.13	.33

The top row in this table revealed that the difference between the Low RT and the moderate RT groups was of statistical significance since the relevant p value for this comparison ($p = .008$) was lower than the significance level. Besides, the difference between low RT and high RT groups reached statistical significance as the corresponding p value for this analysis was .000, which is lower than .05. Finally, the difference between moderate RT and high RT groups was statistically significant as well ($p = .000$).

It could thus be concluded that high risk taking learners could obtain the highest fluency scores, moderate risk taking learners stood in the mid position, and the low risk taking learners had the lowest fluency scores. Also, it was observed that gender did not modify the effect of risk-taking level on the speaking fluency of the intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

DISCUSSION FOR THIS STUDY

This study aimed to investigate the relationship of risk-taking behavior and gender as an independent variable and speaking fluency as a dependent variable. The result of the study shows that there was not a statistically significant difference in the QPT scores for males ($M = 36.11$, $SD = 2.58$) and females ($M = 35.68$, $SD = 2.91$), $t(48) = -.61$, $p = .37$ (two-tailed). This was so because the p value was found to be larger than the significance level ($p > .05$). Thus, it could be inferred that the learners in the two gender groups were at approximately the same level of proficiency at the outset of the study.

The descriptive statistics for comparing the fluency scores of the male and female learners with different risk-taking levels has shown in Table .4.3. For both male and female learners, as the risk taking level increases, the fluency score increased as well. Although there were differences among the low RT, moderate RT, and high RT learners in both male and female groups, the total mean scores of the males ($M = 1.62$) and females ($M = 1.66$) did not indicate a large difference between these two gender groups.

To find out whether the differences among the three RT groups and between the two genders were statistically significant or not, the researcher had to examine the p values in front of RT and Gender under the *Sig.* column in the two-way ANOVA table. Basically, risk-taking behavior refers to a “developmental trait that consists of moving toward something without thinking of the consequences” (Alshalabi, 2003, p. 22). Language learners, then, engage in the act of taking risks simply by learning a second language because they are changing established linguistic patterns for other unfamiliar ones, which involves a game of “having a go” (Gledhill & Morgan, 2000, n.p). Risk taking may entail impulsiveness and keep a correlation with extroversion, introversion, and self-confidence among others. In terms of skills, most of the literature regarding risk taking has focused on speaking rather on the other macro skills (writing, listening, and reading). Oral production, especially, has received particular attention since second language teachers usually struggle with students who prefer not to take the risk of speaking in the second language class. Moreover, research on risk-taking behaviors has

been frequently related to other broader areas, for instance, the levels of motivation and anxiety present when talking in class (Dewaele, 2012).

Many authors have paid more attention to the process of risk taking rather than to its outcomes. Advocates of such view emphasize that the process of taking risks starts by having an array of actions to select in order to solve a task (Beebe, 1983). Other studies on individual differences and second language acquisition have focused on the consequences of risk taking rather than on the process in regard to student performance in speaking tasks. Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2008), for instance, propose that taking risks can have an essentially negative outcome because the learner might be involved in a loss or failure situation. Hence, the concept of risk taking tends to be associated with an unfavorable condition that may hinder oral communication in a second language. It is also possible that risk takers sacrifice accuracy for the sake of speed in speech production (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999).

In the field of second language learning, academic risk taking has been defined as a situation-based process that can be moderated by providing the appropriate contexts for its application (Hongwei, 1996). Lee & Ng (2010), on the other hand, explain that another classroom factor associated with the willingness to speak is the teacher's role and whether it can reduce student reticence to participate in the second language class. The literature in the field of second language acquisition has also brought to light other theories to describe risk takers. A clear example is Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis. Although Krashen does not refer specifically to the concept of risk taking in his studies, the risk-taking construct and its characteristics are implied in many of them. In simple terms, risk takers and risk-averse students can be compared respectively to Krashen's "under users" and "over users" (Ortega, 2009, p.198) of the monitor device. According to Krashen (as cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004)

Ortega (2009) reports that extraversion, a characteristic of most risk takers, and speaking styles are related. Extroverts are more competent communicators because of two reasons. First, extroverts have more cognitive resources, better short-term memory (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999). Second, they are more "impervious to stress and anxiety" (Ortega, 2009, p. 197). Ghoorchaei and Kassaian (2009) concluded in a study by investigating the relationship between risk-taking and oral language fluency revealed that that there was not a significant relationship between risk-taking and speaking fluency of Iranian EFL students but there was a significant relationship between risk-taking and grammatical accuracy in speaking of the participants. By means of comparing the mean ranks of high and low risk-taking groups on fluency and accuracy we find that high risk-takers speak more fluently than low risk takers.

CONCLUSION

To summarize and ending the finding of this study, firstly, it can be concluded that relationship between risk-taking and oral language proficiency revealed that there was a significant relationship between risk-taking and oral language proficiency and this

finding of the researcher is in contradictory to the finding of Ghoorchaei and kassaian (2009).

Additionally, the level of risk-taking (low-moderate-high) was different which affects Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) more effectively. The High risk-takers tended to speak more fluently but less accurately than the low risk-takers. Moreover, the results of the study showed that the medium risk-takers spoke more fluently than both high and low risk-takers. Descriptive statistics for comparing the fluency scores of the male and female learners with different risk-taking levels has shown in Table.4.3. For both male and female learners, as the risk taking level increases, the fluency score increased as well. Secondly, the results may also have implications in the realm of assessing speaking. Moreover, it can be suggested that teachers assess the speaking ability of students during the course and avoid grading them solely based on summative exams. This can encourage learners to take risks and improve fluency as well as accuracy in speaking.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

According to the findings of this study, some practical and useful pedagogical implications for English students and teachers could be summarized. The findings of this study help teachers informing the students of the importance of risk-taking and encouraging them to take part in the communication activities and tasks in class. The results can also help teachers to create a secure and intimate atmosphere to reduce students' level stress and anxiety, enabling them to express their ideas freely. Moreover, the findings of this study realize the importance of risk-taking and try to grasp more opportunities to take part in the discussions and communication activities in class. Finally, the findings of the study may have implications for material developers. Materials should be developed in a way as to enhance students' risk-taking. For example, the materials can focus on students' strengths and interests. Few studies have been carried out on the notion of risk-taking and its influence on EFL students' language ability in general and speaking ability in particular; therefore, there are several areas of potential research. In the present study, the relationship between risk-taking and EFL students' ability in speaking fluency was investigated.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study involved low numbers of participants. The participants of this study consisted of 50 intermediate EFL learners selected from a language institute. In order to be able to generalize these results to the whole population, it is needed to replicate the study with a larger sample. Such data may provide more profound insight with regard to the relationship between risk-taking and speaking fluently. Another limitation refers to the lack of time and budget to conduct the research in different educational settings with different learning materials. Moreover, the age of participants ranged from 18 to 24 years old. It was better to conduct the study on learners of the same age because the cognitive processes involved in learning the foreign language may be different for individuals of different ages.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The present study aimed to investigate the possible effects of gender and risk-taking levels on the L2 speaking fluency of intermediate Iranian EFL learners. Like many other studies in the field of language teaching, this research has dealt with only a small area of subject matter selected for investigation. Further research can be conducted with more participants in other situations and with different learning materials. Some suggestions for further study are as follows:

1. The relationship between risk-taking and other language skills and components (listening, reading comprehension, vocabulary, etc.) is also one of the important factors that worth being investigated.
2. The interaction of age and risk-taking that was left untouched in the present study is another potential area that can be handled in further research.
3. The population addressed in this study was that of young adult EFL learners in the Isfahan, Iran. Research should be conducted to assess the applicability of the findings to other groups of foreign language learners. For instance, there may be differences between adult EFL learners and school-age EFL students. Peer approval may be extremely important for school-age children, resulting in levels and effects of discomfort, risk taking, and sociability that differ from those among college students.

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