

***FOSTERING RISK-TAKING THROUGH PAIR WORK ACTIVITIES IN AN EFL***

***SETTING: Case Study***

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***Abstract***

This case study is aimed at fostering risk-taking through the implementation of pair-work activities as a means to enhance high school students' participation in English classes. I used two qualitative data collection instruments, observations and interviews with six students of EFL at a public school, and the data was compared using constant comparison strategy to gather an in-depth understanding of the problem under study. The results show that promoting risk-taking through pair work activities has a lot of benefits for the participants. Students became the center of the class, self-monitored their class performance, and enhanced self-esteem to improve their communication skills. In conclusion, the implementation of pair work activities encouraged students to become more efficient English learners and to promote interaction among them.

**Key words:** Risk taking, pair-work activities, interaction, participation, class environment



## ***Resumen***

Esta investigación de estudio de caso tuvo como objetivo fomentar la toma de riesgo a través de la implementación de las actividades en parejas como una forma de promover la participación de los estudiantes en las clases de inglés. Para la recolección de la información, utilicé dos instrumentos, observaciones y entrevistas con seis estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en un colegio público. Los resultados de la investigación demuestran que promover la toma de riesgo tiene muchos beneficios para los participantes. Los estudiantes se convirtieron en el centro del proceso en las clases, se auto corrigieron y desarrollaron su auto estima para mejorar sus habilidades comunicativas. En conclusión, la implementación de las actividades en parejas motivó a los estudiantes a ser más eficientes y a tener mayor interacción en clase.

Palabras claves: Toma de riesgo, trabajo en pareja, interacción, ambiente de las clases, participación.

## *Introduction*

The influence of risk-taking on EFL learning is now a focus of discussion between teachers and investigators. Most agree that risk-taking has a great role to play in the EFL learning process. It heightens their language skills in L<sub>2</sub> through constant class participation and provides them with more background to show their learning. According to Beebe et al. (1983) risk-taking has a great impact in EFL learning; students overcome their fears to express their ideas or discuss with their classmates about a class activity. Although several research studies explain the importance of risk-taking as a means of increasing students' talking time, in the majority of public schools learners do not participate in the activities because they have become accustomed to play a passive role in class discussions.

Under these circumstances, this study aimed at promoting risk-taking through the implementation of pair work activities as a means to empower speaking skills in a public school. The results of this study proved that pair work activities have positive outcomes for EFL English learners. Pair work activities served as a means to involve all learners in the lessons, decrease anxiety and increase their opportunities to participate in class. Pair work activities also enhanced cooperation among the students and the teacher allowing them to work as a team to complete the activities and receive effective feedback from the teacher and their classmates.

## **Description of the context**

This study was conducted at a public high school in Colombia. The school is viewed as the main educational institution in the city and it has a long history in educating young learners from pre-school to high school level and it is one of the oldest and most prestigious public schools in the state. The study was developed with students from ninth grade. Each class lasts sixty minutes and this grade level has three hours of English per week. Their school schedule begins at twelve-fifteen and finishes at six-twenty with a thirty-minute break.

## **Description of the problem**

Young et al. (1999) affirms that risk-taking is the ability students develop in class which enables them to play an active role in English language learning and it is related to an increase in the speaking skill. Hence, risk-taking is vital for learners to develop oral abilities and to master oral communication in the target language. In addition, some authors say that risk-taking has a relationship with pair work activities since both of them facilitate the practice of the language. For instance, McCray (2010) suggests that pair work activities help students to speak with their classmates in L2.



However, at the place where this study took place, six learners showed serious difficulties that restricted them from participating in the activities. These students were afraid, anxious and silent in the majority of the class activities. They were worried about making mistakes and reluctant to participate in class so they took a passive role because they felt insecure in speaking in front of the class. The teacher and their classmates asked questions but they did not answer them. Moreover, their classmates provided an intimidating classroom atmosphere. They smirked and corrected them wrongly. They always laughed at them and murmured about their performance in the different activities. Considering the above described problem, I decided to conduct this study with the purpose of involving the students in pair work activities to verify whether this strategy helped not only these learners, but also the teacher and their classmates. This study aims to answer three questions:

1. To what extent do pair-work activities foster students' risk taking in an EFL setting?
2. What are the students' perceptions about pair-work activities and risk-taking in an EFL setting?
3. How effective are pair work activities as a means to enhance risk-taking in an EFL setting?



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## *Literature Review*

This section stresses two main topics; risk-taking and pair work activities. I also offer explanations about pair work activities and its relation to risk-taking in English classes and restate previous studies on pair work activities.

### **Risk-taking in English learning**

According to Young (1984) risk-taking is an impulse to make a decision without putting the primary focus on success or failure. It is an opportunity learners have to share their ideas and become active participants in class discussions without thinking about the results. Bang (1999) states that risk-taking in language learning implies a dynamic oral contribution in class such as: asking questions, answering them, and making comments during the lesson. In short, risk-taking is a desire that learners express to take part in the activities constantly. The author analyzed the Korean student's perception toward risk-taking in oral proficiency and factors which helped or hindered learners' active risk-taking in an EFL classroom. He utilized diaries, questionnaires and observations, with fifteen learners who were studying English at a college in a Korean University. The findings revealed that all participants (100%) demonstrated an optimistic opinion of risk-taking. Their opinions were associated with improved English ability and more opportunities to gain precision in oral practice, to learn new phrases and to express suggestions and opinions in class. He also



asserted that risk-taking was related to English language learning. The students who participated constantly in class gained more experience to express their thoughts.

Similarly, Luft (2007) investigated the significance of learners' risk-taking to learn Japanese. This study involved four learners enrolled in Japanese language classes and used questionnaires and observations as a means to collect data. The finding of this study suggested that communicating in the class was fundamental to language learning. Also, Tabuse (1991) coordinated a research study whose main focus was to examine several affective variables and the effect on learners' final grade. The participants in this study were students enrolled in first-year of university level of a Japanese language course. They used self-reports and questionnaires to gather data. They found that among other variables risk-taking promoted speaking skills, however, they did not study how to encourage risk-taking specifically.

Furthermore, Ely (2007) conducted a study on the causal relationships between risk-taking and oral proficiency. Data was collected through classroom observations and audio records. A questionnaire on risk-taking was administered to 75 freshman students learning Spanish at a university in California. He found that risk-taking is closely related to classroom



participation and it helps to show a good predisposition towards class. His study revealed that risk-taking was essential to promote interaction in class.

In practice, risk-taking and pair-work activities are two related teaching strategies which facilitate the acquisition of the foreign language. Both encourage learners to practice oral communication and provide learners with opportunities to get involved in meaningful, flexible and interesting lessons in which they play the main roles.

### **Pair-work activities**

According to Storch (2001), pair-work is a teaching strategy in language learning in which students work together with the assistance of a classmate who helps to complete the assignments. They work as a team to fulfill class requirements and prepare themselves to play an active role in the lessons. In other words, pair-work activities are fundamental to enhance students' participation and increase their talking time.

McFadden (2010) suggested that pair-work activities assisted learners to practice speaking and use all their opportunities in class. They had a more genuine conversation than when they worked alone. The activities are more 'daily-life' oriented; the students worked in

teams and it was similar to real communication. Harmer (2007) argued that pair-work was a good technique to develop in the classroom. It built an optimistic environment and children were less afraid of making mistakes in class. According to his view, the use of pair work in an EFL setting was a way to promote risk-taking since pair-work activities fostered learners' contributions. (As cited in Bercicova, 2000)

Samimy (1991) conducted a study to examine the benefits of pair-work activities in class. He used observation, interviews and surveys to collect data. The study was conducted at a school in the USA. The participants were 12 learners in a Spanish class. The students worked in pairs for one hour each lesson. He indicated that pair-work activities have a lot of benefits for students. The teacher corrected students gently to maintain group harmony or not show authority. He anticipated possible mistakes by giving clear recommendations and helping the weakest learners in the group to lower their anxiety levels before they spoke to the group. The interaction that arose from the use of pair-work activities encouraged learners to accept and value the corrections from the teacher and classmates. They felt the community accepted them with their limitations and were eager to see them as better language learners.

Phillips (1995) conducted a study on how to provide correct feedback in a public institution in Korea. He stated that the teacher needed to understand that feedback should be provided only when they do not affect students' motivation. Therefore, he gave feedback carefully and only when there was an absolute cooperative atmosphere in the classroom. This increased learners' opportunities to use the language in the class because they were not waiting to be corrected since the teacher accepted their mistakes as common issues in the language learning process. In pair-work activities, the teacher was aware that the young learners saw him as source of information who also encouraged them to take an active role in the class discussions. This allowed him to change the way he provided suggestions to the students.

McFadden (2010) also investigated the role of pair-work in ESL/EFL and its effect in learning outcomes. She used observations, surveys and weekly oral comprehension assessments to collect data. Information was gathered for three months. The study was conducted at Yakina Valley community college in Washington D.C, USA. The participants were 10 learners in a monolingual class; they were all Spanish speakers. The students met on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. They worked in pairs for about sixty minutes every class. Learners were paired according to their levels (high-high/ medium-medium), according to pairs selected by other class students, or finally, the investigator chose the pairs. She found that students always liked to work in pairs because pair-work helped them



to take part in the class. The students did better when they worked with a partner that had the same English level as this fact gave them more confidence.

In summary, there are at least three reasons for exploring the correspondence between risk-taking and pair-work activities. First, pair-work activities may promote classroom interaction; second, risk-taking may be promoted using pair-work activities; third, the language classroom becomes a natural scenario if risk-taking is increased in EFL setting.

### ***Methodology***

This research study adopted an intrinsic case study as I wanted to carry out an in-depth analysis of the problem using different instruments to gather data. Yin (1984) defined a case study as a process to examine and describe a particular case thoroughly, with the objective of gathering an in-depth understanding of the problem under study. This study was conducted in such a way because I analyzed perceptions and observed behavior. This process involved planning, observing, acting, and reflecting.

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study were six ninth grade students from a public school, three girls and three boys between 12 and 15 years old. These six learners had an A2 level in English, based on the parameters of the Common European Framework. They were chosen to be participants of this study because they all had the same difficulties: 1) they did



not take risks in class, 2) they felt anxious to speak in class, 3) they did not like to work alone, 4) they were not eager to learn English 5) they were not willing to ask and/or answer questions, 6) they had a short attention span towards English, 7) they did not actively participate in class, and 8) they liked grammar and reading exercises.

### ***Observations***

I observed the students twelve times on different days of the week. These observations lasted 40 minutes each and they were conducted from July to October, 2011. Data from the observations was collected through video recordings to make sure that all information was documented. Before the classroom observations, we talked to the teacher and the participants about the general goals of the observations to ensure they would be familiar with our presence since it could interfere with normal class process. These observations were conducted before the interviews and helped to have a general description of the behaviour of the students. The participants were observed at the beginning and at the end of the study to compare data. All participants consented to take part in the project by means of a letter. Since the participants were minors, their parents were required to authorize their participation through a written letter.

### ***Interviews***



I interviewed the participants of the study twelve times. Interviews were conducted with each one of the participants to clarify and expand on the information gathered previously during the observations. These in-depth interviews were carried out in a quiet room to avoid interference. Participants were informed that all data collected would remain confidential. In the interviews, I used an interview checklist to maintain the study focus and record the information that students provided. However, at the time of the interviews I asked more questions to contrast what they were saying to me. I also took notes during the observations. This helped to direct the interview and to keep the most important information. Each interview lasted 45 minutes. The subjects were interviewed separately to analyse how different their answers were.

### ***Data analysis and interpretation***

In order to analyze the data, I followed a constant comparison strategy to examine the information of the problem under study. This process started with the transcription of observations and interviews on Word documents. It was a systematic plan of action. First, I transcribed the information from the observations and interviews. Second, I read all the information several times to identify the recurring themes and labeled the data at the margin. Third, I segmented the data, stated the initial codes and assigned names to the initial codes. Then I verified the initial codes with repeating codes, examined the codes to construct the categories and finally I interpreted the information through reading, comparing and analyzing the subjects' quotes.

### *Findings and discussion*

Ideas and exchanging their opinions with the group using dialogues. For example, while being observed two participants had this dialogue in front of the group:

Arley: Hi Vievo! How are you doing?

Vievo: I am fine thanks, and you?

Arley: Not bad.

Arley: Tell me about your family. I want to know about them

Vievo: Well, my father is back home and my mom is happy

Arley: That is good

That was surprising because these students did not like to participate in class. However, here they did so because risk-taking was the opportunity to be involved in class and exchange knowledge and talk about what they wanted to express. Risk-taking increased their confidence; consequently, their talking time increased day by day. In the observations, it was common to see students talking in front of their classmates. While being observed two participants had this dialogue in front of the group:

Yasiry: Hello friend! How are you?

Yasney: well thanks, and you?

Yasiry: Good

Yasney: Can you pass me your pen?

Yasiry: Of course, you can

Yasney: Thanks

Participants felt secure in practicing their knowledge with their classmates, asking for favors and concentrated more in the activities. Risk-taking provided them with experience in the target language by increasing their talking time in class without fear of being criticized in the lessons. Consequently, anxiety decreased and students changed their passive role to become active members of their English language learning process in that grade. This is illustrated with the voice of one of the participants in the study.

“Risk-taking is vital in my English learning process. It helps me to acquire the ability to express my ideas and thoughts to the whole group. It does not matter if I make mistakes. The key is to demonstrate that I can speak in class without fear of criticisms or smirks”

For this participant, risk-taking is an important skill needed to acquire a foreign language. He interacts with his classmates by rehearsing experiences, opinions, and feelings with them. He sees risk-taking as a means of improving and learning from his failures. He



also thinks risk-taking offers him the chance to show classmates that it is possible to communicate in English and take an active role in the class.

Promoting risk-taking helped participants to overcome their weaknesses in their English class. Students received feedback from their classmates and from the teacher who worked together to provide effective advice to improve students' limitation in the language. While being interviewed one of the participants stated: "Risk-taking is good for me. My teacher and my friends correct me and I learn more and show my motivation". For this participant, teacher and classmates' clarifications are important in order to improve in the language and a strategy to express doubts about the activities and topics. It is the possibility to be corrected by her classmates and the teacher and also to learn more. While being observed, a participant received feedback from the teacher and two classmates. She forgot how to ask her classmate a question.

Yasney: Good afternoon. How does you feel today?

Yasiry: Yasney, It is better to say. How do you feel today?

Teacher: Yasney, Yasiry is right. Don't forget that for you we ask with "do"

Yasney: Thank you teacher and Yasiry for clarifications. I won't forget it. How do you feel today?

Yasiry and the teacher: That is correct.

For this participant, the teacher and classmates develop harmony in class by providing positive feedback that enhance a better understanding of the language and allowing her to expand her ability in the language. The teacher and classmates gave her clear clarifications, which provided clarity and deeper understanding to reinforce skills in the language. This assistance influenced her positively and facilitated the learning of new phrases or refined her knowledge.

Most of the participants in the study chose pair work activities as the most appropriate strategy to promote risk-taking in English classes. They felt secure with the presence of a partner who provided chance to talk about their ideas and increased participation. Pair work activities provided an authentic language production. This is illustrated with the voice of one of the participants in the study.

“I tend to communicate in pair work activities because it is better to take risks in class. A peer helps me to be more involved and to take every opportunity to demonstrate what I have learnt. Pair work activities increase my motivation to learn English through participating in the lessons and getting good correction from the teacher and my classmates”

The participants expressed this view toward pair work activities because they practiced the language to perform meaningful activities such as: negotiating meaning and sharing different points of view and practice daily life situation in class. This strategy also provided more time to discuss and interact with the teacher and the students to decrease the difficulties in the language, their anxiety and the criticisms from the teacher and their classmates. They experienced the language without fear of making mistakes.

### *Students' perception towards pair work activities*

The participants of this study viewed pair work activities as a method which motivated them to take an active role in the English class. They spoke English with their classmates and participated in discussions. They applied what they had learnt during the previous academic process; they interacted and exchanged their knowledge with the group. They improved their speaking skill through constant practice which facilitated the

acquisition of the language. The activities were based on communication which catered for the students' needs. This is illustrated with the voice of one of the participants in the study.

“Pair work activities encourage me to pay close attention to the activities and the teacher's explanation. My partner asks me to focus on the class objective to clarify and understand the explanations from the teacher or another classmate. A partner also helps me to increase my willingness to participate”

Working with a classmate encourages students to practice speaking in the English class. They joined conversations and assessments which they were interested in. They told stories, talked about their lives, and asked and answered questions related to their lives. The activities focus on oral skills as is demonstrated with the voice of a participant “A classmate warns me to participate in class and inspired me with words such as you are good, your participation is excellent. It stimulates me to speak”. The students had time to prepare their message and receive clarifications from partners and the teacher. They became confident in their participation due to their classmates motivating them to be active participants in class.

### *Discussion*

Risk-taking provides students with more opportunities to receive suggestions, clarifications and advice from teacher, and support from classmates; consequently fear and anxiety

decreases significantly. They become empowered to use their vocabulary and expressions in their discourse. Students' motivation and interest to participate in class is more noticeable, as seen when learners raise their hands to ask and answer questions to and from their teacher and classmates. Moreover, there is a better classroom atmosphere in which learners express their ideas and interact with partners and as a result each student's ideas and contributions are valued and acknowledged. The students become aware of the need to improve oral communication.

The use of pair-work activities fosters participation in English and offers students the possibility to learn the language in a contextualized way, where communication is meaningful and the language is used to express their feelings. The use pair-work activities in the classroom change the type of tasks from grammar oriented and reading classes to communicative activities. Students play active roles by contributing to the class discussions, sharing their insights with their classmates and getting ready to answer questions in class. The students gain confidence and work cooperatively to better express their ideas regardless of mistakes.

The implementation of pair-work activities enhances risk-taking. The students talk to their classmates and express their thoughts more often. Pair work activities help learners to build their self-confidence as well as a good class atmosphere where the teacher and learners cooperate in a less intimidating environment. This type of interaction provides the teacher with more time to understand student's individual behavior and to value their presence in

class. Students learn to respect their different ways of working and learning and this motivates them to be active participants in class. Students are more comfortable and willing to take risks once they realize that mistakes are normal in the learning process, and they work cooperatively to perform the different class activities.

### ***Conclusions and pedagogical implications***

This study aimed at enhancing risk-taking in a public school through pair work activities. The results revealed that participants have a favorable view towards pair work activities as a good strategy to enhance risk-taking in an EFL context. This is a positive signal to language teachers in Colombia, and worldwide, since pair-work activities promote interactions, autonomy and increase students talking time. The students assume active roles in the class by participating in the discussions and exchanging their ideas and thoughts with their classmates. Pair-work activities also changed students and teacher's attitude towards mistakes in class. Before the study, the teacher corrected participants with criticisms and rebukes; however, the implementations of this strategy in the lessons helped the teachers and students to accept mistakes as a fundamental part of English learning and changed criticisms and rebukes for motivating advice and clarifications.

It should be noted that the implementation of pair work activities fostered participation in English and impacted the class atmosphere positively. The students gained



confidence and worked together to express their ideas without making mistakes. The students became aware of the need improve oral communication through working with their classmates and being willing to express their ideas in teams and to the whole class. It offered them more time to receive suggestions, clarifications and advice from the teacher and the classmates to lower their fears and anxiety to participate in the lessons.

Pair-work activities help learners to build their self-confidence, as well as a good class atmosphere where the teacher and learners cooperate in a less intimidating environment. This type of interaction provides the teacher with more time to understand student's individual behavior and to value their presence in class. Students learn to respect their different learning styles and this motivates students. They are comfortable and eager to speak in class, once they realize that slips are normal in the learning process, and they work cooperatively to perform the different class activities. They even learn to negotiate and divide the activities according to the time given to make sure each one has the same chance to participate in class.

A powerful factor is that pair-work activities enhance speaking. The students have more opportunities to rehearse daily conversations, which help them to practice their knowledge inside and outside the classroom. They negotiate among themselves to reach



agreements upon different point of views, discuss relevant topics and defended their viewpoints and beliefs. Pair-work activities offer them the opportunity to learn the language in a contextualized way, where communication is meaningful and the language is used to express their feelings and opinions about relevant topics. The type of tasks and activities in the classroom change from grammar and reading oriented to communicative tasks. Students shared their insights with their classmates and got ready to ask and answer questions in class.

The implication of this study suggests that teachers, educators and policy makers should include pair-work activities in the curriculum in education laws because this strategy helps learners to acquire the language easily, promote speaking and autonomous learning. Students become self-confident, trust themselves and build their self-esteem. They believe in what they do in class and this encourages them to change their passive role and become the center of the learning process. They cooperate and work as a team to reach common objectives. Students lower their rebukes and criticisms and collaborate to complete the activities so that they make new friends in class and build harmonious relationships, which create a good atmosphere for the students, for the teacher and for society as well.





Finally, this study demonstrated that more studies should be carried out on the topic, such as: linguistic control and turn taking during pair-work activities.



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