

# RISK-TAKING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LEARNING: CONFESSIONS FROM EFL LEARNERS

**Reni Kusumaningputri**

**Abstrak.** Pembelajaran atau pemerolehan bahasa kedua di dalam konteks bahasa asing seperti Bahasa Inggris merupakan perjalanan yang sangat rumit. Kesuksesannya bergantung pada banyak aspek. Salah satunya adalah pada keinginan pembelajar untuk berpartisipasi dalam interaksi yang mengharuskan mereka menggunakan bahasa yang mereka pelajari tersebut pada situasi-situasi yang tidak bisa diprediksikan keberhasilannya. Pembelajar yang bisa mengatasi situasi ini dan mengubahnya menjadi sebuah pencapaian dinamakan sebagai pembelajar yang mau mengambil resiko (risk-taker). Namun, di kelas-kelas bahasa asing banyak ditemukan kondisi lemahnya partisipasi penggunaan bahasa asing/bahasa kedua (B2) baik di dalam dan luar kelas. Karenanya studi ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui gambaran apa saja situasi-situasi yang pembelajar maknai sebagai situasi yang tidak bisa diprediksi dan bagaimana mereka melihat situasi-situasi ini sesungguhnya. Hasil studi menunjukkan bahwa resiko disindir guru/dosen, resiko ditolak, resiko diajak berbicara lebih lama dengan menggunakan B2, resiko nilai, dan resiko bertindak dan berkata tidak sopan adalah 5 situasi yang paling dianggap tidak bisa diprediksi. Lima hal ini menjadi sumber kegelisahan mereka yang pada akhirnya menjadikan mereka kurang aktif dalam menggunakan Bahasa Inggris baik di dalam maupun di luar kelas.

*Kata kunci: risk taking, second/ foreign language, optimum learning*

Learners are the agents of acquisition and learning of certain languages. Their perception to what hamper them from success of learning/ acquisition is a window to teachers/ learners to maximize the outcome of learning/acquisition itself. Risk taking is seen as the way the learners perceive ambiguous situations as sources of threat (Budner in Johnson: 2001). If learners are risk takers, they will have a good starting point to develop themselves toward success of language learning/ acquisition. However, what is generally found around academic situation is learners' low participation in communication. They seem to play safe. They do not want to speak. Therefore, to know what is risk from their point of view is interesting in order to find solutions on the way teachers' encourage learners to participate in communication using the language.

Gebhard (2003) says that one of typical learners of foreign language is that they are very reluctant or taciturn to make themselves active in communication especially

oral skills. Therefore teachers try very hard to encourage them to speak using the learned language, and learners seem to refuse or to negate the effort. From what is seen, it is very common to find classes with minimum use of English. This also means that classes are highly overwhelmed with the use of native language no matter in what level (semester) the learners are. This happens with classes where English is obligatory, not where English is optional like in non-English classes. What has happened?

What cause them to behave like this? How do they perceive risks while learning? Do they not know that the risks will benefit them the most in helping them develop their skills, especially speaking skill? Or do they actually know the benefit, but they make a decision not to participate in the communication? If yes, why do they act like that? Is it because of the situations? Is it because of the teachers? Or do the problems solely lie within themselves, the learners? These questions are hovering around the edges from many different perspectives; at least from teachers' and learners' perspectives. This paper therefore describes learners' point of view toward what *risks* are.

## **Literature review**

### **Condition of optimum language acquisition/ learning**

Many factors affect the success of language acquisition and learning. Generally, the factors are grouped into two broad categories; internal and external factors. Internal factors are commonly believed to be factors lying within individuals, meanwhile external factors are those which stood to affect the success of acquisition and learning from outside the individuals. The examples of external factors are teachers, classroom, facilities, curriculum, institution policy, and many other things. On the other hand, examples of internal factors are acculturation, ego, personality, emotion, belief, attitude, and motivation (Dornyei: 1990, Erhman: 1996, Gardner: 1980, MacIntyre and Charos: 1996 in Dehbozorgi: 2012).

Affective aspect has been proven to influence learners in their second language acquisition/ learning. Oxford (1996) asserted that affective factors are the most influential aspect in language success or failure. The reason why affective factor is influential is because learners are powerful in themselves as human organisms. Learners construct their own language as they have Language Acquisition Device (LAD) since they were little kids, enabling them to develop language and tied psychologically to

their feeling. In human themselves, feeling gives impacts to language learning/ acquisition success. This is so big thus leading us to consider affective factors contribute significantly to the success of language learning as aptitude does (Noels, Pelletier, Vallerand: 2000 in Dehborzorgi, 2012). Popham (2011) also said that what made affective variables important is that the variables could be predictors of future learners' success. When learners have positive attitude toward learning, they will be more inclined to pursue their learning development.

## **Risk Taking**

Risk taking is an internal property of every learner. This part of affective domain is built in the individuals as they grow. Society certainly takes part in the making up of the individual itself. Not only society, but parents, family, friends, environment are also some other considering factors which constitute personality and attitude of language learners. It is because learners stand in the ramification of society's norms and values, thus in some extend their belief toward what learning is and how they act to learning are different from places to places.

It is possible that in Indonesian classrooms contexts, teachers way of facilitating learning effect both in positive and negative ways. In relation to risk taking situations developed in classroom or outside classroom, teachers are the agents to whom students/ learners are relied on. The acts of teachers affect students' responses and held belief. Brown (2001) states that many instructional contexts around the world do not encourage risk-taking; instead, they encourage correctness, right answers, and withhold "guesses" until one is sure to be correct.

This certainly discourages risk-taking activities and personnels. When learners are not encouraged to feel and think that making mistakes are normal and that it is a part of learning process, and when teachers do not give enough atmosphere to forgiving-situations for learners, many situations in classroom and outside classroom will become anxiety-provoking areas. As anxiety becomes higher, risk takers will not be mediated. McDonough and Shaw (in Dehborzogi, 2012) stated:

Success is thought to be based on such factors as checking one's performance in a language, being willing to guess and to 'take risks' with both comprehension and production, seeking out opportunities to practice, developing efficient memorizing strategies, and many others.

On the study of anxiety done in Turkey, Cubukcu (2007) found that there are some main sources of anxiety in foreign language classes like presenting before class, making mistakes, losing faces, inability to express oneself, fear of failure, fear of living up to the standards, and teachers. Some situations listed are where risk-taking property could not be facilitated. Anxiety and risk taking are two factors that seem to be connected to each other in a way that anxiety provoking situations feed risk taking property to live or to die. Students with risk taking property, risk takers, will see those main sources of anxiety as a gain not a loss. Those who can strive against the hardest and turn out the ambiguous situations into a gain will be equipped with the risk taking property.

## **Method of study**

This paper is based on classes observation especially made while students took oral tests. Oral tests are meant to be a form of evaluation of the courses; Reading Comprehension 03 for sophomore and Introduction to Psycholinguistics for junior students. In the courses, students were asked questions related to texts they read, and presented some different issues given by the lecturer and receive clarification and understanding questions dealing with the presented issues. Afterward, I used unstructured interview to uncover their true inner feelings and students' perceptions to what made them seem to struggle very intensely apart from their test anxiety, to express themselves using English. The students were asked about their perception on the way they saw risks while having communication with teachers in and out of classroom. Forty (40) students joined the unstructured interview. I jotted down all variations of answer's items and group them into 5 categories. They are 1) risk of getting satire 2) risk of refusal 3) risk of having long talk 4) risk of score 5) risk of acting and saying inappropriately.

## **Discussion**

### **Risk of getting satire**

Almost all participants (87,5%) or 35 students admit to fear of getting satirical responses from lecturers. Satire here is more like sinical utterances made by lecturers, usually to student(s) who could not satisfy teachers' questions in terms of performance mostly in the area of grammar in the classroom. The example of utterances are like :

1. "You are fifth or seventh semester students already, but you could not distingusish when to use *-to be-* or not..."
2. "How could you not know what "x....(words)" is. What semester are you now?"
3. "if you do not know what this word means, you need to retake grammar 1"
4. "What semester are you now?"

To students, these sentences are considered very traumatic as they acknowledged that whenever they try to communicate their ideas in and out of classroom, especially communication made with teachers, they will think first about the consequences. They also believe that they are really bad, and they are not smart, therefore they feel down. The risk of getting satire and feeling so humiliated are very big so that they said that they feel down only by thinking about getting the similar utterances. The trauma does not only happen to the students who receive the sentences, but this trauma is contagiuous. Students who never receive such sentences think that they will be humiliated, and feel down also. They think that the sentences are unbearable, that the risks are too big to take. This thing makes communication, English use in and out the classroom, a big challenge to pass.

Besides getting satire from lecturers, the satire from friends is also one big considering factor to students to initiate talk, answer in classroom sessions and probably in outside classroom situations while carrying out conversation also. Friends here mean classmates. During classroom sessions, while answering lecturers' questions, students are distracted by other friends' looks, and gestures. Some of them said that friends got the looks and gestures which result their reluctance to participate in interaction in the class. Friends' looks and gestures like sinical, humiliating look showing in the friends' face and body gestures are risks to pass. And this does not happen in classroom only, but it continuous to outside class therefore making the students rare of using English.

## **Risk of Refusal**

Around 50 % students (20 students out of 40 students) said that risk of refusal is one of the risks that hamper them from making communication with teachers in and out classroom. Risk of refusal here means risk of loosing face and feeling afraid because teachers do not respond to their initial interaction through sentences, like greeting, clarifying certain issues such as consulting scores, assignments, apologizing for mistakes and many similar things. They acknowledged that these kinds of feeling make them uncomfortable to initiate talk with teachers. Though they sometimes feel that teachers would not refuse them, but their previous experience or their friends' experience and story along with teachers' facial expression and gestures, very often make them think that initiating communication using English with teachers is too fearfull.

This occurrence does happen to sophomore and junior students. This implies many things like teachers' real facial gestures contribute a lot in shaping students' perspective toward what risk is. Many teachers may not realize that facial expression along with gestures, intonation and diction affect the meaning of their utterances to be sinical although it is not intended to be sinical one actually. However, students unfortunately portrayed them into 'the high-risk look' thus hampering students from initiating and making use of English in and out classroom.

Another possible implication toward this phenomenon is that students themselves do not yet develop ability in socializing, therefore they are lack of experience of how to deal with teachers formally and informally in academic setting. The possible difference of atmosphere between senior high school setting and college setting may cause them to have confusion in positing themselves in the correct ramification of status and social values.

### **Risk of having long talks**

This risk is closely related to risk of shame and fear of failing in talk contribution with lecturers and somehow with friends because students feel to have no enough vocabulary and good enough grammar to deal with longer sentences. Almost all students (96%) believe that they do not have sufficient vocabulary and good sense of grammar and stucture, making them to feel low to initiate talk with people, especially lecturers. The problem lies with their perception that talking with lecturers must be carried out in a high sophisticated sense of English. This perception is somewhat shaped

by their being English department students as they are expected to speak, pronounce, display knowledge of English. Since they feel that they do not reach the level yet, they withdraw themselves in communication participation.

Another problems which provoke low interaction conducted in English besides their held belief described previously lies on their ability, fearfulness to perceive their lack of vocabulary and poor grammar and structure ability as threats to feel confused and to feel embarrassed of not knowing how to respond and act. Once students perceive such situation as ambiguous provoking situations they seem to decide not to participate in classroom interaction and outside classroom communication. Indeed, perception to what risks are is a true key to overcome problems.

### **Risk of score**

Classroom situation especially one when students are taking oral examinations is one of risky situations that hamper them in making use of English. The perception of how learners perceive ambiguous situation in speaking test is the core problem of risk-rising situation. By thinking that they would not be successful in the speaking test, that they would score low in test is enough to shape their peception that oral test is a source of threat. About 40 % students agree to perceive oral exam this way.

The problem is that somehow the experinces in speaking exam or any exam which is performed in oral, especially which of making them to feel low and less self-esteem, feeling unsucessful are brought into real communication in and out classroom. Their feeling of negative language ability, the unsuccess of delivering opinion, transferring ideas to teachers and friends (especially in formal settings), their inappropriateness of pronouncing words, of structuring their sentences lead them to confusion, feeling very embarressed.

### **Risk of acting and saying inapropriately**

Spielman and Radnofsky (2001) mentioned that one of classroom anxiety type is affective tension when there is unsatisfactory interaction with other learners and instructor. Indeed, risk of acting and saying inappropriately, even producing incorrect grammar whenever communication is carried out with teachers or friends can be one out of some risks to deal with. Thirty percent (30%) students said that when they want to interact and use English as a media of communication with lecturers, they feel too embarrest, and doubt somehow mixed with fear because they do not know whether their

sentences are polite, whether their attitude is fine from lecturers' point of view. What is interesting is that it seems that they also do not make any significant progress in terms of interaction in line with their length of being English department students.

There are some possibilities why this occurrence arises. First, they do not have enough information, or complete knowledge about how to act politely in informal and formal settings conducted in L2. They probably do not seem to be aware of the possibility of different values existing between English and Indonesia. Due to lack of knowledge or incomplete information about how to behave acceptably with teachers in academic setting both in informal and formal situations, or to feel not too sure about such correct and acceptable structure and grammatically correct sentences, they avoid to talk.

Second, learners' avoidance to apply the learned culture into their interaction with lecturers is also one possible reason of why they see acting and saying using L2 become a risk. It is because in some ways they see the culture of English and Indonesia very similar or very different, they feel doubt and feel confused and finally afraid of making unacceptable behaviour. Gass and Selinker (2009) based on Kleinmann (1977) and Schachter (1974) studies about what made students avoid to choose certain structures mentioned that this is because of differences between L1 and L2 making students feel doubt about what structure is correct, leading them to rethink again whether or not they participate in L2 interaction. Besides, the complexity of structure becomes one of considering factors whether to apply or not the structure they are learning.

However, above all, there is always a possibility to say that it does not have to do with language proficiency. That the doubt students have to participate in the interaction using L2 is merely because of their culture, because of their surrounding belief which gives impacts on their perception of what a risk is. Teachers' and staffs' behaviour, the uphold beliefs of those people along with students' psychological maturity and also sociolinguistic property give enough exposure to how students see a risk. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) mentioned that developmental process of human takes place through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings like family life, peers-group interaction, and in institutional context like schooling, organized sport activities, work places and some others. This means that environment



gives much effect to how somebody sees something, in this case, how students see a risk in their language learning/ acquisition.

## Conclusion

It is not too much to say that people affect another. That at a certain point, we also contribute to the shaping and reshaping of a human behavior. Risk-taking in language learning is crucial in a sense that this particular mental property gives a big impact to students' academic life. Language learning is nothing more than a readiness of a human organism to interact with the environment and to interact with him/herself. Environment, one of them is teachers, is still considered a massive influence to language learners. Once the learner likes the teacher, the course he/she is facilitating becomes very easy, and the other way around. Teachers' responses both linguistically and non-linguistically, somehow, at a certain extent, define what learners' do next. Further, it decides what the learners are in future. How fragile this mental state is, therefore making teachers (and all participants in learners' life) become a critical item of a complete and successful learning jigsaw of every learner.

## References

- Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language Pedagogy*. New York: Addition Wesley: Longman, Inc.
- Cubukcu, feryal. 2007. *Foreign Language Anxiety*. Iranian Journal of Language Studies (IJLS), Vol. 1(2), 2007 (pp. 133-142). Downloaded from <http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=Cubukcu%2C+feryal.+2007.+Foreign+Language+Anxiety.+Iranian+Journal+of+Language+Studies> Accessed on May 12, 2012.
- Dehbozorgi, Elham. 2012. *Effects of Attitude towards Language Learning and Risk-taking on EFL Student's Proficiency*. International Journal of English Linguistics. Vol.2 No.2 April 2012. Downloaded from [www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php](http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php) . Accessed on May 3, 2012.
- Dornyei, Z. (1990). *Conceptualizing Motivation in Foreign-Language Learning*. *Language Learning* , 40(1), 45-75. Downloaded from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1990.tb00954.x> . Accessed on April 12, 2012
- Gass, Susan. Larry Selinker. 2008. *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. Routledge: New York
- Gebhard, Jerry G. 2000. *Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Langugae*. The University of Michigan Press: Michigan US

Johnson, Keith. 2001. *An Introduction to Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Pearson Educated Limited. England

Lantolf, James P and Stephen L. Thorne. 2006. *Sociocultural theory and Second Language Acquisition*. Routledge. Downloaded from [http://books.google.co.id/books?id=YfTGXD8VwC&dq=sociocultural+theory,+lantolf,+thorne&hl=id&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.co.id/books?id=YfTGXD8VwC&dq=sociocultural+theory,+lantolf,+thorne&hl=id&source=gbs_navlinks_s). Accessed on March 5, 2012

Oxford, R. (1996). *Language learning strategies around the world: Cross-cultural perspectives*. Hawaii, Manoa: Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center.

Popham, W. J. (2011). *Classroom assessment: What teachers need to know*. Boston, MA: Pearson.