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## Risk Taking, Gender and Oral Narrative Proficiency in Persian Learners of English

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### Abstract

Personality factors have been shown in the literature to relate to language learning. However, scant attention is paid to investigate the relationship between risk-taking and oral narrative proficiency. Therefore, this study aimed at investigating the relationship between risk-taking, gender and oral narrative proficiency in the Iranian EFL context. 62 participants (31 male and 31 female) completed the Persian version of Venturesomeness subscale of Eysenck's IVE Questionnaire. Afterwards, they were asked to do two oral narrative tasks including storytelling based on a picture prompt, and storytelling based on the first day experience at the university. Students' speech samples were rated by two raters and the inter-rater reliability analysis indicated a high degree of consistency between the two ratings. Since gender is a dichotomous variable, two correlations including Pearson Product-Moment Correlation and Point Biserial Correlation were used in the study. The findings suggest that there is not a significant relationship between risk-taking and oral narrative proficiency of Iranian EFL students ( $r=0.18$ ). Also, no significant relationship was found between gender and narrative proficiency of the participants ( $r=0.14$ ). The results have some implications for language teaching.

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*Keywords:* Risk-taking; Gender; Oral; Narrative; Proficiency

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### 1. Introduction

Due to globalization and the widespread use of English in the world today, speaking seems to be the prominent skill to be developed by language learners. Accordingly, research on speaking has been on the rise in the

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EFL context. Furthermore, the link between learner variables (e.g. gender and personality factors) and language leaning has always been of interest to the researchers in the field. Personality factors have been shown to affect educational attainment (Crozier, 1997). However, the problem with studies on personality factors in the area of EFL/ESL learning is that there is often no theoretical basis for predicting which personality variable will be positively or negatively related to which aspect of L2 proficiency (Ellis, 1994). The present study aims to study the relationship between the personality factor of risk-taking, gender and oral narrative proficiency of EFL learners of English. In other words, the study investigates the oral narrative proficiency of EFL learners of English in relation with their gender and risk-taking. Therefore, before we proceed, an account of risk-taking and its relationship with language leaning will be presented, along with a brief reference to gender differences in language leaning as well as a description of oral narrative tasks.

### 1.1. Risk Taking

Risk-taking is an important characteristic of successful second language learning (Brown, 2007). It is defined in the dictionary of *Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992) as “a personality factor which concerns the degree to which a person is willing to undertake actions that involve a significant degree of risk” (p. 317). Much earlier, Kogan and Wallach (1967) claimed that people with high motivation to achieve were moderate, not high, risk-takers, who wish to be in the center; they do not take wild risks and avoid situations where there is no win. They also avoid getting involved in low risk situations. According to Gage and Berliner (1988), people with high achievement motivation select tasks which are of moderate risk. On the other hand, those with low achievement motivation select tasks of either high or low risk. Kogan and Wallach (1967) also believed that people with high need for approval were likely to take courses of action which were extremely risky; they are less likely to modify risk-taking behavior even if it leads to failure. Brown (2001) finds self-confidence and language ego laying the ground work for risk-taking. Cognitive developmental theories of human motivation, implicitly or explicitly, associate moderate risk-taking with beneficial cognitive and motivational effects (Clifford & Chou, 1991). This provides highly valued information about one's ability and encourages positive response to error making and failure (Kim & Clifford, 1988).

### 1.2. Risk-taking and language learning

Risk-taking is said to be an important characteristic in successful second language learning, because learners must be willing “to try out hunches about the new language and take the risk of being wrong” (Richards, Platt and Platt., 1992, p.317). Many studies have been carried out on risk-taking and language learning. For instance, Ely (1986) found that people who were willing to take risks in a language class were more likely to participate in the classroom. Evensen and Bednar (As cited in Jonassen & Grabowsky, 1993) found that high risk-takers reported greater perceived depth of communication. Also, Clifford (1990) shows how students choose more difficult problems when the number of points offered increases with the difficulty of the problem, and when a risk-taking task was presented within a game or practice situation.

In the Iranian EFL context, Kiany and Pournia (2006) found no statistically significant relationship between risk-taking, syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy in either descriptive or expository writing. However, they found that low risk-takers tended to make fewer errors in descriptive and expository writing compared to high and moderate risk-takers. Also, they found that the moderate and high risk-takers tended to use more complicated T-units (which are concerned with the length and complexity of sentences in a written text) in their expository writing than low risk-takers. Also, Ghoorchaie and Kassaian's (2009) study showed that there was not a statistically significant relationship between risk-taking and speaking fluency; but it was found that there was a statistically significant relationship between risk-taking and grammatical accuracy in speaking.

### 1.3. Gender Differences and Risk-Taking

Research studies show that males tend to behave in ways that are more risky than females; also, younger males are more prone than females to take risks in relation to conflict (Campbell, 1999), and sexual behavior (Clift, Wilkins & Davidson, 1993), as well as in such situations as car driving, accident risks (Fetchnauer & Rohde, 2002), and gambling and financial decisions (Powell & Ansic, 1997).

Indeed, the interaction patterns are gender-related only to some extent (Shomoossi, Amouzadeh & Ketabi, 2008). It is also shown that gender differences in risk-taking occur even in simple everyday situations; for instance, men are more likely to cross busy roads than females. Majority of such studies show that men take more risks in stressful situations. Byrnes, Miller and Schafer (1999) compared the risk-taking tendencies of male and female participants and explored that in almost all aspects of risk-taking, male participants are more willing to take risks than females. Gardner and Steinberg (2005) also showed that males reported more benefits and fewer risks when asked about the consequences of risky behaviors.

Therefore, one can take the idea to language education and claim that men are more willing to venture to speak or show their language proficiency in front of others. Maubach and Morgan (2001) reported that self-esteem and self-confidence, asking questions in the class, anxiety and tolerance of ambiguity are all gender-related issues in which boys are superior to girls. Brown (2007) claimed that all these attributes highly correlated with risk taking. Maubach and Morgan (2001, p. 44) believed that greater self-confidence in the language classroom may lead to longer and more frequent oral contributions. Female learners tend to be more careful about what they say; they try to use fewer sentences and less complex structure to reduce mistakes. They tend to think before any oral production and "this conscientiousness can be a barrier to effective communication in a foreign language, where rapid responses are necessary to keep a conversation going" (Maubach & Morgan, 2001, p. 44). On the other hand, boys tend to follow their instincts and even due to their self-confidence and risk-taking take part in an oral conversation without preparation. Females may also be found more anxious in stressful situations such as exams than males are (Shomoossi, Kassian & Ketabi, 2009).

### 1.4. Oral Narrative Tasks

Of the four key language skills, *speaking* seems to be the most important in learning a second or foreign language. Therefore, oral tasks preparing learners for effective communication have their own value in Foreign Language Teaching. Narrative tasks are a well-established and frequently researched task type (see Bygate, 1999; Robinson, 1995; Skehan & Foster, 1997). They usually involve the creation of a story in response to a certain stimulus: a picture strip or a short film. As in most cases, the stimuli given are purely visual and their verbal representations depend on the storyteller to a great extent; this task type seems ideal as far as the manifestation of creativity is concerned. In general, the oral narrative task is based on a story, where the participants intend to report it to the interviewer. Although the plot of the story is already determined by a series of pictures or a main topic, the creativity of language learners may play a significant role in adding details to the story.

## 2. The Present Study

The study investigates the relationship between oral narrative proficiency and risk-taking. Gender is also singled out to examine its relationship with oral narrative proficiency. Therefore, the study attempted to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between risk-taking and oral narrative proficiency of Iranian EFL students?

RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between gender and oral narrative proficiency of Iranian EFL students?

### 2.1. Participants

The data were collected from 82 university students in Mashhad, Iran (including Ferdowsi University, Islamic Azad University of Mashhad and Khayyam Non-Profit University). A Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT) was also given to the participants in order to evaluate their English proficiency levels and to select a homogeneous sample. Out of this number, 62 participants were chosen as the participants in the main phase of the study (With both male and female cases of equal number and homogeneous age groups).

### 2.2. Instrumentation

Three research instruments were used for collecting data from the participants. First, a modified version of Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT), consisting of 54 items, was given to the participants to assign them into homogeneous groups. The original 70-item test was already piloted to 80 English major students at Islamic Azad University of Mashhad, Iran (Ziaee, 2010); the group was almost similar to the study sample of the present study regarding their language level, gender and age. Having calculated the item facility (IF) and item discrimination (ID) indices, Ziaee (2010) discarded sixteen deficient items from the test; as a result, the number of items was reduced from 70 to 54. Then, the reliability of the test was computed using the KR-21 formula ( $r=0.82$ ) which indicated that the test was reliable (Ziaee, 2010). The test consisted of three sub-tests (a 22-item grammar section, a 15-item vocabulary section, and a 17-item reading comprehension section).

Second, the Persian version of Venturesomeness subscale of Eysenck's IVE questionnaire validated by Kiany and Pournia (2006) was utilized in order to determine the participants' risk-taking scores (see appendices 1 & 2). All participants (31 male and 31 female) completed the questionnaire and the results of the test were calculated and fed into the statistical software SPSS.

Third, two very similar versions of an oral narrative task involved both (1) inventing a story on the basis of a picture prompt (i.e. a picture description task), and (2) telling the story of their first day experience at the university. Participants performed the task in a friendly environment. The tasks were presented to the students by the second author. The aim of the task was to invent a short oral narrative based on a series of pictures and to report it to the interviewer after a one-minute planning time. The planning time was intended to give the students an opportunity to plan the content of their story.

### 2.3. Procedure

At first, the modified version of the CELT was administered to the participants to ensure that there was no significant difference between the two groups regarding their language proficiency levels. The time allotted to the test was 60 minutes. A total number of 82 male and female participants took the test. The mean, variance, and standard deviation of the CELT administered to 82 learners were calculated, and 14 outliers were excluded from the study. The cut-off point of homogeneity was one standard deviation below and above the mean of the CELT scores. Therefore, 68 participants remained to be the main participants. They were found to be homogenous in terms of their general language ability; however, 6 participants could not attend and take one or both of the oral narrative tasks, and were excluded from the study; the final sample then consisted of 62 participants.

After that, the risk-taking test was administered to the participants. The participants were asked to provide information about their name, age and e-mail addresses on the papers in order to be identified throughout stages of the study. They were also ensured that all tests and questionnaires of this study would have no influence on their final exams, and that they were asked to be as honest as possible; they were reassured that their personal information would be kept confidential and used specifically for the present study, and not for other purposes.

As for the oral narrative task, participants received a picture prompt; they were given a one-minute preparation time to look through the pictures and create a reasonable story, and to describe in about two minutes.

The aim of this task was to elicit speech samples sufficient for an overall evaluation. They were assessed on how well they performed as regards pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and fluency. As for the second task, three weeks later, the participants were asked to tell a story about their *first day experience at university* or school. They were given a one-minute preparation time to think and remember the details of the occasion.

Finally, two raters were asked to listen to the audiotaped oral performances and rate them based on a scale modified from Harris (1969). The mean of the two ratings was computed for each participant, and was considered as individual's *oral narrative proficiency* of the participants.

Harris's (1969) scale was modified in our study so that it could help us determine oral narrative proficiency of the subjects. Since we did not test the speaking ability in an interview task, the comprehension subscale was crossed out. Therefore, in our modified scale, there are four subscales of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and fluency. Being equally weighed each subscale has 5 levels. Therefore, the lowest and highest score in each subscale is 1 and 5 respectively. Accordingly, the potential the highest and lowest narrative proficiency scores were 20 and 4 respectively. In other words, the students' oral proficiency was rated using a 20-point scale. However, for the ease of calculations, each participant's score was multiplied by 5 in the end (See Appendix 3). Oral narrative proficiency of the subjects is considered to be the mean performance of the subjects in the two oral narrative tasks.

### 3. Results

The study involved 82 university learners of English in Mashhad, Iran; their age ranged from 20 to 26. After calculating the means and the standard deviations of the participants' scores in CELT, learners with scores one SD below and above the mean were included, and the rest (20 participants) were excluded from the study. Inter-rater reliability analyses were carried out to estimate the correlation between the scores given by the two raters on the oral narrative tasks.

Table 1. The Inter-rater Reliability in Oral Narrative Tasks

	Raters	M	SD	V	<i>r</i>
Oral Narrative	Rater 1	59.96	8.059	64.94	0.705
Task 1	Rater 2	61.58	7.16	51.32	
Oral Narrative	Rater 1	59.74	7.97	63.670	0.8085
Task 2	Rater 2	62.22	6.94	48.243	

Therefore, using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation formula, the correlation coefficients were calculated and found to be acceptable: 0.70, for the first oral task and 0.80, for the second oral task (See Table 1). In order to test the hypotheses of the study, several statistical procedures were utilized. The results are presented below.

#### 3.1. Testing the first null hypothesis

The first null hypothesis of the study posed that there was no relationship between risk-taking and oral narrative proficiency of Iranian EFL students. To test this hypothesis, Pearson correlation was used as the statistical procedure.

Table 2. The Correlation between Risk-taking and Oral Narrative Proficiency

		Risk	Oral Narrative Task
Risk	Pearson Correlation	1	.182
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.157
	N	62	62
ONT	Pearson Correlation	.182	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.157	
	N	62	62

As shown in Table 2, the correlation coefficient between risk-taking and oral narrative proficiency was 0.18. Based on the above table, there was low positive correlation between the variables and the first null hypothesis was retained. In other words, the results indicated that there was not a significant relationship between risk-taking and oral narrative proficiency of Iranian EFL students.

3.2. Testing the second null hypothesis

The second null hypothesis of the study posed that there was no relationship between gender and oral narrative proficiency of Iranian EFL students. To test this hypothesis, Point Biserial correlation was used as the statistical procedure.

Table 3 below shows that there is low positive correlation between gender and oral narrative proficiency (i.e. 0.14). This means that there is not a statistically significant relationship between gender and oral narrative proficiency.

Table 3. Correlation between gender and oral narrative proficiency scores

		Oral Narrative Task	gender
ONT	Point Biserial Correlation	1	.144
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.266
	N	62	62
gender	Point Biserial Correlation	.144	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.266	
	N	62	62

#### 4. Discussion

The present study attempted to investigate the relationship between risk-taking, gender and oral narrative proficiency. The results indicated that there exists a correlation between risk-taking and oral narrative proficiency of Iranian EFL students. However, this relationship was not significant. Also, it was shown that there was no statistically significant relationship between gender and oral narrative proficiency.

The findings are consistent with those of earlier studies such as Ghoorchaei and Kassaian (2009) who found that there was not a significant relationship between risk-taking and fluency in oral production. Also, they are in line with Oxford and Brown (as cited in Oxford, 1999) that “it is more useful for language learners to take moderate but intelligent risks” rather than taking extreme or no (extreme) risk (p. 63). They also tend to accord with Jonassen and Grabowsky’s (1993) statement that “much documentation exist that encourages moderate risk-taking for the empowerment and creative development of the students especially in academic settings”(p. 408). The findings of this study showed that there was not a significant relationship between gender and students' oral narrative proficiency. This consolidates Koosha and colleagues’ (2011) finding that there was not a significant relationship between gender and speaking skills of Iranian EFL students.

To sum up, the results of this study showed that risk-taking might not influence the performance of language learners in oral narrative task. In addition, the gender of participants has no considerable role in doing the same tasks.

#### 5. Conclusion

Based on the results, there was a relationship between risk taking and oral narrative proficiency of Iranian EFL students. However, this relationship was not significant. A number of researchers have stressed the importance of getting the learners to take calculated risks in attempting to use language (e.g. Brown, 2001; Kiany & Pournia, 2006). For instance, Brown (2001) suggests a number of ideas so that a classroom reflects the principle of risk-taking:

- Creating an atmosphere in the classroom that encourages students to try out language, to venture a response, and not wait for someone else to volunteer,
- Providing reasonable challenges in teaching techniques by keeping them neither too easy nor too hard,
- Helping students to understand what calculated risk-taking is, and
- Responding to students' risky attempts with positive affirmation, praising them for trying while at the same time warmly but firmly attending to their language (pp. 63-4).

Therefore, teachers may encourage students (both male and female) to take an optimal level of risk-taking by integrating appropriate teaching techniques because if they avoid risk-taking they become “stalled by anticipated criticism from others or by self-criticism that they themselves supply. When they do not have enough practice, their language development becomes seriously stunted (Oxford, 1999, p. 63). Future research studies can be planned to investigate the relationship between risk-taking and other language skills and components (listening, reading comprehension, vocabulary, etc.). Also, studies with a larger sample size could be carried out to consolidate the findings. The interaction between risk-taking, gender and oral narrative task could also be another potential area of research.

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