The Development of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative at a Bilingual Post-Secondary Institution in Canada


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Abstract

This article capitalizes on the notion of linguistic risk-taking (Beebe, 1983; Cervantes, 2013) focusing on a new pedagogical initiative at a Canadian bilingual postsecondary institution where courses, programs, and services in both English and French are available. In this bilingual context, we define linguistic risks as authentic communicative acts in learners’ second official language (French/English), which may be “risky” due to discomfort about making mistakes, being misunderstood, misunderstanding others, being judged, taking on a different identity, and changing previously established language choice patterns. This may cause learners to miss campus-wide opportunities for authentic and meaningful second language engagement. To encourage risk-taking, we designed an initiative offering a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport (26-page booklet with over 70 risks) distributed to over 500 French/English learners. The risks represent authentic activities outside the language classroom (e.g. speak the second language at the library, approach a passer-by for directions, order food at the cafeteria, interact with a professor/administrator, attend an event, etc.). Learners autonomously check off risks in their passports, comment on difficulty levels, propose additional risks, and can submit passports for prizes. We survey theoretical constructs related to linguistic risk-taking, detail the development of the initiative, and conclude with future directions, including technology use.

Keywords: linguistic risk-taking; bilingualism; autonomy; authenticity; experiential learning; gamification

Recent work in second and foreign language learning has emphasized approaches that draw on authenticity (e.g. Lazarton, 2014; Roberts and Cooke, 2009), autonomy (e.g. Albero & Poteaux, 2014; Benson, 2007; 2011; 2013), and gamification (e.g. Holden & Sykes, 2011; Kapp, 2012), amongst others. In addition, there is long standing literature on language anxiety (e.g. Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2017; Scovel, 1978; MacIntyre, 2017), motivation (e.g. Dörnyei, 2005; 2009; Dörnyei et al., 2015; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1959), and willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998; 2011), as well as less extensive literature on linguistic risk-taking (e.g.
In this article we draw inspiration from a mixture of theoretical constructs and pedagogical practices and describe the birth and implementation of a novel language learning initiative at a Canadian postsecondary institution. The institution where the initiative was conceived is officially bilingual and thus both English and French are used in course and program delivery, services, administration, and daily interactions. However, not all students are necessarily able to use both languages. Some have native or near-native proficiency in both languages and may be able to do coursework and/or interact in both without hesitation. Others have sufficient knowledge of one of the two official languages to pursue their studies in it, but only limited skills in the other official language. Still others have knowledge of one of the two languages but not the other, and thus use only one language for their studies and life on campus. The institution welcomes all students and generally offers them the choice to pursue their studies in either language or in both; it also explicitly values French-English bilingualism and has targets and programs in place to keep increasing the level of bilingualism within the entire university community. It offers various courses and initiatives for those who want to start learning or improve their second official language and engage in bilingual activities. In this context, we created the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative for learners of either French or English. At the heart of the initiative is a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport used as an autonomous and authentic language learning tool to supplement classroom instruction and encourage learners to live bilingually on campus and beyond.

With the above background in mind, the rest of this article is organized as follows. In the next section we provide an overview of some relevant theoretical and pedagogical constructs and practices that underlie the development of the initiative. In section three, we offer more details about the context of the institution, highlighting both the opportunities and the challenges associated with second language learning on a large bilingual campus. In section four, we move on to the conception, design and implementation of the initiative. In section five, we offer a general discussion. We conclude in section six by drawing a larger picture where we position the initiative as a rich, newly-emerging program of research, development and practice, with multiple opportunities for expansion, including new technologies, new educational contexts, new inter-institutional and international partnerships, and additional languages and modalities. It should be noted that this exploratory article’s primary purpose is to relate in detail the combined conceptual and practical insights of our initiative. As such, reporting research data from the initiative falls beyond the length and scope of the article. However, we offer a flavour of the research questions and data analysis that underway and are being reported in separate publications.

2. Background

2.1 Theoretical Concepts: Language Anxiety, Motivation, Willingness to Communicate and Linguistic Risk-Taking
It is well known that second language learning and bilingualism can be affected by a complex array of cognitive, linguistic, affective, educational, and situational variables. In this section, we outline a few constructs that we consider relevant to our initiative and to the bilingual context in which it was implemented.

Research on the impact of affective dimensions in language learning is not new. A curious early example in second/foreign language acquisition research was offered in Alexander Guiora’s research program in the 1970s and 1980s. This work focused on the relationship between language acquisition and a person’s inhibitions. Guiora and his colleagues, influenced at the time by Freudian theory, proposed the construct of a Language Ego and argued that successful acquisition depended on lowering one’s inhibitions. To investigate this, they conducted studies on the effects of alcohol and diazepam (valium) on pronunciation in a foreign language with learners at the language institute of the US Defense Department (Guiora et al., 1972; 1980). While the research involving diazepam was generally unsuccessful, the authors found that in some cases small amounts of alcohol could help learners to better approximate authentic pronunciation in languages that they are not familiar with.

Related to the above insights is a large body of literature addressing language anxiety in language learning. Language anxiety is an important and frequently investigated factor: as MacIntyre (2017) points out, it is perhaps the most studied emotion in second language acquisition, likely because it is “both an intense and a frequent experience” (p. 11). In earlier work, Scovel (1978) offered a well-known overview of studies relating to language anxiety and remarked that the construct was complex and not well-understood, and that research into it yielded confusing and mixed results. Over the years, some of the issues that have been investigated relate to whether language anxiety is socially constructed or an internal state of the individual; whether it is a cause or an effect of language performance; and whether it can be debilitating or facilitating. While an extensive overview of these issues is beyond the scope of this article, we will briefly focus on the last one, as it is directly relevant to the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative described in section four.

On the one hand, language anxiety can be viewed as an entirely negative emotional state related to unpleasant feelings, tensions, pressures, and situations that an individual wants to eliminate or escape from (MacIntyre, 2017). On the other hand, some researchers have argued that certain (threshold) amounts of anxiety can be facilitative (e.g. Chastain 1975) in generating a degree of excitement that may influence language alertness or performance positively. Several researchers have treated facilitating and debilitating anxiety as related constructs but not necessarily as opposite ends on the same continuum, and thus necessarily measured on separate scales (Alpert & Haber, 1960; Kleinnmann, 1977; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). According to MacIntyre (2017) and Horwitz (2017; Horwitz et al., 1986) language anxiety is best captured as debilitating while potentially positive effects may be related to different concepts, unrelated to anxiety but related to motivation, among others.

The literature on second language motivation is also extensive and cannot be summarized in detail here. The initial seminal work done by Gardner and Lambert (1959) included notions
such as integrative and instrumental motivation and focused on a macro perspective that traced overall language disposition of large learner samples (Dörnyei et al., 2015). Over time, however, these concepts and their analyses were further developed or challenged and in the 1990s, more micro-level analyses of motivation were proposed. As Dörnyei et al. (2015) point out, these were often focused on behaviours in specific learning contexts (e.g. L2 classrooms) and due to considerable individual differences in learners’ motivational dispositions, relevant research became more process-oriented (e.g. Dörnyei, 2000; Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). Such work was to a large degree based on cause-effect relationships and did not necessarily yield satisfactory accounts of motivation in real-life situations (Dörnyei et al., 2015; among others). Recent research has included a focus on more dynamic approaches (Dörnyei et al., 2015). Overall, some of the influential theoretical frameworks in motivational work include the socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Noels et al., 2000), the motivational self-system (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009), as well as investment and identity as linked to the social world (Norton, 2013), among many others.

Another relevant proposal is the construct of Willingness to Communicate (WTC), developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998; see also 2011). Defined as a “state of readiness to engage in the L2, the culmination of processes that prepare the learner to initiate L2 communication with a specific person at a specific time” the notion of WTC brings together a range of psychological, linguistic, educational, and communicative variables that the authors argue have typically been studied separately in the past (MacIntyre, 2011, p. 82). Willingness to Communicate is relevant and important to consider in the context of our initiative. It underscores that there are certain situations in which learners experience high WTC and others in which the same learners may be unwilling to communicate (WnWTC). A core feature of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport that will be described below is the option for learners to choose their own risks (i.e. select communicative situations in which to engage) and self-rate the perceived level of risk. At the same time, as we will explain in section four, learners are encouraged to undertake as many risks as possible, and potentially receive rewards for their “braveness”.

Finally, it is important to note that scholarly work focusing specifically on linguistic risk-taking also exists. Cervantes (2013) offers an overview of the concept with a focus on speaking skills in ESL classrooms, while Beebe (1983) is generally credited as one of the first researchers to review the general social-psychological literature on risk-taking and adopt the notion in language learning (see also Dehbozorgi, 2012; Dewaele, 2012; Karimi & Biria, 2017; Gass & Selinker, 2008, a.o.). In considering general risk-taking situations (Bem, 1971) and making the transition to linguistic risk-taking, Beebe (1983) claims that “you take a risk every time you open your mouth in a foreign language, or for that matter in any learning situation where you are called on to perform” (p. 39). She also describes risk-taking as a situation where an individual has a choice between alternatives of different desirability and where the outcome of the choice is uncertain and may involve failure. For the purposes of our initiative, we expand the notion of linguistic risk-taking from the purely spoken production aspect of second/foreign language use suggested by Beebe to more general situations where the language learner may be involved in
(integrated) listening, reading, writing, speaking and oral interaction activities. In other words, listening or reading, which are sometimes described as passive or receptive aspects of language use, may also involve a certain degree of risk. Learners may decide not to listen or read in a specific language, given the alternative to do it in another language that they are more comfortable with. A further important point is that our initiative focuses on the positive aspects and potential rewards in linguistic risk-taking, while making every effort to minimize or potentially eliminate the chance of failure for students. We also differentiate our initiative from some of the previous literature in that we focus mainly on linguistic risk-taking activities outside of the classroom (while we explain and support the initiative in the classroom itself). By contrast, much of the previous work on linguistic risk-taking has focused on in-class activities or investigations.

To sum up, in the above section we offered a non-exhaustive overview of some theoretical concepts coming primarily from social psychology and related to the pedagogical initiative that we developed for our English-French bilingual campus. While none of these constructs are individually responsible for the creation of our initiative, we view them as a useful backdrop for our purposes, and as a general source of inspiration. In the next section, we review several pedagogical concepts that we also drew on in developing the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative.

2.2 Pedagogical Concepts: Autonomy, Authenticity, Content-Based and Task-Based Learning, and Gamification

The field of language teaching and learning has undergone tremendous changes over time. From traditional grammar-translation approaches, to communicative teaching, content and task-based approaches and gamification (to name just a few), the field has evolved to offer complex and multifaceted options for various learner and teacher preferences, styles, and contexts (Kapp, Blair & Mesch, 2013). A particularly useful notion for the purposes of this article is language learner autonomy. While this is not a new concept (e.g. Gremmo & Riley 1995; Little, 1991, 2000) interest in autonomy has grown exponentially in the 21st century resulting in multiple book-length publications, book chapters, research articles, encyclopedia entries, and teacher manuals, amongst others (Benson, 2007; 2011;). Autonomy has been investigated in various language teaching and learning contexts, including at the university level (Albero & Poteaux, 2014), the context most relevant to this article. The essential idea is that the teacher no longer takes a central place in instruction, but rather serves as a guide, a consultant or a motivating force that helps individual learners discover appropriate and continuous language learning opportunities in their journey to becoming competent, confident and independent users of other languages. While some of these opportunities may originate in the language classroom, in seeking to promote autonomy the goal is to encourage learners to gain awareness of and to draw on the full range of outside resources that are available to them in order to learn a language. This can include, for instance, helping students to become better and more regular users of online
resources or to gain access to resource centres that offer relevant interactions and activities beyond the walls of the language classroom. Our initiative, described in section four, capitalizes on this latter context.

Another important concept that has been emphasized in recent work is authenticity in language teaching materials, tasks, and activities. It is generally agreed that language learners need to be exposed to authentic communication in real-life situations. However, authenticity is not easy to accomplish, especially in classroom contexts where one can attempt to emulate or simulate authentic activities, but by its very nature the classroom remains a space that is different from real-life language use. As Lazarton (2014) points out, “the construct of authenticity itself is slippery–authentic for who, for what purpose and in what contexts?” (p. 108). If we focus on authentic teaching materials, there is some evidence that learners do not always benefit from artificially created pedagogical material (Roberts and Cooke, 2009) and that materials for L2 speaking often contain scripted dialogues that are not accurate representations of natural speech or interactions (Lazarton 2014). To further underscore the importance of authentic teaching materials researchers have also argued that they promote learner autonomy (Little, Devitt & Singleton, 1989), providing a bridge between these two important concepts. In developing the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative, one of the important goals was to seek ways to encourage learners to engage directly in authentic language use situations. As such, the main tool that we created is not a teaching material per se, but rather a source of scaffolding that offers students a guide to situations and tasks available to them in the community in order to engage in authentic and autonomous language interactions.

The above concepts fit well within content and task-based approaches to language learning. In a content based approach, language itself is not the exclusive target of instruction but rather comes through the medium of specific content, for example, a subject or course at a school or a university (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989; 2003). More recently, and more frequently in a European context, the term Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been used (Coyle et al. 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2011), further emphasizing the value of integrating content and language are both targeted in instruction.

Turning to task-based learning, a definition of a real-world task offered by Long (1985) includes “the one hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between” (p. 89). Such tasks include domestic chores, interactions between family members (e.g. parents and children, siblings, relatives, etc.), workplace activities, writing correspondence, doing personal banking, amongst others. Such activities can be turned into pedagogical tasks and can include problem solving, opinion exchange, and so on. In such contexts, even though no explicit focus is placed on grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary, learning occurs as students mobilize and use these resources in order to accomplish the assigned language tasks (Nunan, 2004).

Our initiative draws on the fundamental insights of content and task-based instruction, by encouraging learners to engage in various activities outside of class, including listening to a university lecture on a specific subject, participating in a town hall meeting, or engaging in a
particular daily social interaction (e.g. at the bookstore, cafeteria, library, registrar’s office, amongst others). In addition, however, our initiative is supported and complemented by various targeted classroom-based language courses at our institution, as will be detailed in section four.

The final important concept that we would like to review, before proceeding to more details about the context of our institution, is gamification. With unprecedented advances in technology affecting people’s daily lives in the 21st century, educators have made calls to harness game-based learning in new digital environments. As Kapp (2012) points out, gamification involves aesthetics and creative thinking that can engage people and promote learning. Gamification is still a relatively new field, particularly as it relates to language learning; however, in an era where most learners are Digital natives (Prensky, 2001) and where gamers are not necessarily only teenagers but people at various ages (McGonigal, 2011; see also Perry, 2015), gamification may unlock large language learning potentials because it offers customizable and socially relevant options that can be applied to the classroom and, more importantly, extend beyond it (Holden & Sykes, 2011). It is worth noting that using games in language teaching and learning is not new and pre-dates the digital era. Game-based tasks and activities that do not necessarily use technology can be found in various language teaching manuals, books, edited collections and so on (e.g. Celce-Murcia et al., 2014; among many others). In addition, certain learners may still prefer playing language learning games or related task-based activities without necessarily using technology. As such, the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative that we describe began as an option offering students a combination of non-digital and digital activities. Current work on the development of a new version of the initiative that will be delivered entirely in a digital environment will be discussed briefly in the conclusion section and reported on in more detail in a separate publication.

Overall, the notions of autonomy, authenticity, and gamification interact in complex and interesting ways in the realm of content-based and task-based approaches to language teaching and learning. In conceptualizing the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative, we were influenced by these pedagogical constructs, in addition to the constructs from social psychology introduced earlier. In what follows, we introduce more details of the institutional context in which the initiative was created.

3. The Institutional Context

The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative was conceived at a Canadian bilingual postsecondary institution where both English and French are used in multiple contexts, including program and course delivery, internal academic and support staff meetings and assemblies, and services across campus. In addition, the institution seeks to explicitly promote bilingualism in Canada’s two official languages and has various programs and initiatives to support and increase bilingual use among the entire community, including students, faculty and staff. These programs and initiatives are run by various academic or service departments of the institution. Some are also run by student organizations or associations.
Students can choose to pursue their studies in English or in French since many programs are offered in either language. As such, the institution does welcome students who may speak only one of Canada’s official languages. In addition, a certain number of programs is offered only in English or only in French. Another set of programs has a bilingual requirement, that is, students must take a certain number of courses and satisfy requirements in both languages. In some programs there are also courses that are offered bilingually, that is, the professor and students alternate between the two languages in class lectures and discussions. Students generally have the right to submit written work or do presentations or assignments in either language. For example, students enrolled in a course delivered in English may choose to submit their assignments and final papers in French and vice versa.

Professors generally understand both languages and thus have sufficient knowledge to evaluate student work, participate in meetings, and carry out daily chores in either language. However, not all professors speak both languages well enough to teach in both; thus, many teach only in English or only in French. Staff members that provide services to students or faculty members are generally bilingual at a high proficiency level where they can both understand and speak the two languages and can offer students and faculty members services in the client’s preferred language. Thus, at the library, the parking office, the cafeteria, the registrar’s office, the residence halls, the recreational facilities, the computing departments, the various reception desks across campus, and so on, one can approach an agent in either of the two languages and expect a response in that language. Furthermore, virtually all online applications, including teaching, evaluation, registration, and HR modules etc., as well as any remaining paper-based forms across the institution, are available in the user’s preferred language.

Focusing on students, it is important to point out that it is possible to live and function unilingually on campus, even though the institution is bilingual. For example, students who choose to follow their studies in English, and use English for all daily service interactions, can complete their degree entirely in English. This is influenced to a certain degree by the geographical location of the institution because, as is the case with all Canadian provinces, one of the official languages is a majority language and the other is a minority language. Thus, there is a higher degree of offering and use of the majority language spoken widely across the province at the institution, even though it is bilingual.

In this bilingual context, it is possible to identify traces of the “two solitudes” phenomenon, that is, the French-speaking and the English-speaking communities co-existing side by side, but living within their own linguistic and cultural worlds and not necessarily interacting with each other or speaking each other’s language (Cummins, 2008; MacLennan, 1945). The university’s vision and mission, however, aims to counter this by promoting bilingualism. Free language courses are generally available to students, faculty and staff. In addition, as already indicated, special initiatives are in place to encourage those who do not speak the other official language to start learning it, and to support those who have limited proficiency to continue to improve it.
To conclude this section, on the one hand the bilingual institutional context offers ideal opportunities for daily, authentic, and autonomous practice in a learner’s second official language. With such rich opportunities, learners can easily choose to immerse themselves almost completely in that language. On the other hand, if students default to their preferred language (which is their right and an easy option on campus), then they can miss many opportunities for authentic second-language interactions and practice. Even if a learner is enrolled in a second language course in English or French at the institution, it is not necessarily a given that the learner will also use that language outside of class in their daily interactions across campus. That is, learners can easily default to their preferred official language, which is usually the language they are more comfortable using and also the language that they are accustomed to use in their daily lives. In order to encourage students to step out of the comfort zone of their preferred language, we developed the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative described in more detail below.

4. The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative

4.1 Rationale

So far, we offered an overview of theoretical constructs such as language anxiety, motivation, willingness to communicate and linguistic risk-taking, and added pedagogical considerations related to authenticity, autonomy, content-based learning, and task-based learning. Drawing inspiration from the combined insights of these constructs and practices, we decided to capitalize on the notion of linguistic risk-taking as a construct that captures well the bilingual context of our institution. We define linguistic risks as authentic everyday communicative acts that take place outside of the language classroom and involve spontaneous and meaningful second language use. Although the concept of linguistic risk-taking can apply to classroom settings as well, and in fact most of the relevant literature mentioned earlier focuses on classroom contexts, the goal of our initiative was to encourage learners to make full use of the unique campus environment outside of the classroom; that is, to transform the campus into a living and breathing resource where people with various degrees of bilingualism would be encouraged to interact in their second official language. Furthermore, we wanted to raise the awareness of the importance of conscious linguistic risk-taking in real-life situations, as a crucial supplement to simulated classroom tasks. As such, our goal was to promote active and authentic second language use and development of life-long confidence and competence in that language.

We found the notion of risk particularly relevant because we are fully aware of the challenges that authentic communicative acts pose in a second language. As already mentioned, it is easy and natural for learners to choose to stay within the comfort zone of their preferred (stronger) language. Some of the “risk factors” that may deter learners from taking advantage of the opportunities for authentic practice outside of the classroom include being misunderstood or misunderstanding others, making errors, having different pronunciation from native speakers, being judged, and so on (cf. MacIntyre 2017, among others). Furthermore, as indicated earlier,
individuals with various levels of proficiency are present on campus, including bilinguals who are highly fluent in both languages and sometimes cannot be identified as francophone or anglophone based on their speech. Such individuals sometimes work as service agents at different offices and desks across campus, and it may be intimidating for learners to use their weaker language when they interact with such agents because of perceptions of “balanced” or “perfect” bilingualism as a norm and a target that they fall short of (see section six for more details). Furthermore, the primary purpose of campus services is not language practice and thus when learners approach an agent in their second language, if they do not seem confident or proficient enough in that language, the agent may switch to the other language in order to achieve more efficient communication. This may discourage learners from further attempts to use their second language in authentic situations and may lead them to default back to primarily classroom-based second language use, where the language teacher creates safe and comfortable spaces.

Another reason why learners may be hesitant to use their second language is related to language habits or language socialization (Duff & Talmy, 2011; Schieffelin & Ochs 1986). That is, learners may find it difficult or unnatural to start using their second official language in a context where they would normally and naturally use their first one, and have done so for a long time. Starting to use a different language in frequent daily interactions across campus may also involve taking on a different identity, something that not all learners may want to do, especially if they are surrounded by their peers on campus and may start to appear “different” or even “silly” in their eyes.

Returning to the notion of linguistic risk, we also recognize that it may entail negative aspects. For example, the possibility of failure was mentioned by Beebe (1983). In our context we try to reposition the meaning of the label and associate it with a feeling of achievement and reward, both personal and professional. That is, we endeavoured to create a tool that can recognize feelings related to fear or language anxiety and transform them into something positive and liberating, into a sense of fulfillment and achievement related to the institution’s mission to promote bilingualism. Our purpose was to generate both an awareness campaign and a tool that supports this mission in organic, real-life situations.

4.2 The Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport

At the heart of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative lies the creation of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport. The passport has a cover that resembles a travel passport, as indicated in figure 1 as well as a personal details page with the learner’s particulars, as indicated in figure 2.
Even though the passport is for use outside of the language classroom, it is distributed to language learners enrolled in English or French as a second language courses, respectively, along with instructions on how to use it. The personal details page contains the name and email address of the learner as well as information about the course (ESL or FSL) in which the passport was distributed.

The passport contains a welcome page, as well as pages explaining what a linguistic risk is, why it is important to take such risks across campus, and what the general rules for participation in the initiative are, as indicated in figure 3.
The passport (a 26-page booklet) currently contains over 70 risks that represent authentic language tasks or activities that learners can undertake on campus. Learners are asked to familiarize themselves with the various risks in the passport and over the course of the semester complete as many of them as possible. Depending on their personal preferences, interests, and level of proficiency, learners may choose different risks, thus creating a personalized experience for themselves. As learners complete risks, they autonomously check off the corresponding boxes in the passport. In addition, each time learners undertake a risk, they are also asked to indicate whether they perceived it to be high, medium or low. Most risks can be repeated up to three times (i.e. there are three checkboxes), which amounts to over 200 opportunities for authentic autonomous language practice and socialization into the language being learned.

The risks range from ordering food at the cafeteria, sending a professor an email, using campus service desks, using online applications (e.g. registration, course-related, financial, etc.) in the institution’s online portals, stopping passer-bys for directions and so on, in the language students are learning. Equivalent versions of the passports are available in both English and French and students receive the version that corresponds to the target language that they are learning. Figure 4 is a sample page with completed risks in the passport of a (hypothetical)
learner of French who completed three risks on that particular page: enrolling in a French conversation workshop (8), writing a CV or a letter of interest for a job in French (9), and completing some service transactions with a customer service agent in French (11). As indicated, some of these risks were repeated more than once, and the perceived level of risk varied (H=high; M=medium; L=low). In addition, learners have the option of writing general comments at the bottom of each page of the passport.

![Figure 4. Sample Risks Page](image)

Near the end of the semester, learners who have completed at least 20 risks in their passport, they can submit it to their language teacher or to a centralized reception desk to enter a draw for prizes. If learners complete the minimum number of risks early on in the semester, they are encouraged to continue using the passport until a time closer to the end of the session, and then submit it for the draw for prizes (that is, submissions for the draw are not accepted early).

Learners are also encouraged to propose additional risks, based on situations they have experienced or would like to engage in, that were not originally listed in the passport. Dedicated pages are provided in the passport booklet for that purpose, as indicated in figure 5. These are subsequently reviewed by the team that runs the initiative and, if appropriate, entered in a new version of the passport during the following semester, in order for other learners to benefit from enriched content with student-generated real-life experiences.
Learners are also encouraged to share risks they have taken or new risks they have proposed with their peers and their language teachers. This can be done in person in or outside of class or through dedicated social media sites and an email address available for the initiative. In addition, close-circuit campus-wide TV ads promote the initiative, so learners are aware of it and receive encouragement and reinforcement.

A team of graduate students involved in the implementation of the initiative offer special presentations as follows: once at the beginning of the semester when passports are distributed (explaining the initiative and motivating students to participate); once in the middle of the semester (reminding students to continue to take risks and mark them in their passports); and once at the end (distributing prizes and building a sense of accomplishment). As these implementation team members present the initiative, they speak in their second official language, to serve as models for the learners. That is, an English-speaker presents the initiative in French to French learners, and a French-speaker presents the initiative in English to English learners. The student team involved in the implementation also produced and shared short video capsules talking about the initiative and made social media posts throughout the semester.

Participants who misplace or lose their passports can get a replacement passport booklet or print a pdf version from the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative website. Interactive pdf passports are also available through this dedicated website for learners who prefer to use a fillable pdf online and submit completed passports via email.8

Figure 5. Propose Your Own Risks Page
The implementation of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport in each class where the initiative is being piloted varies depending on individual teachers’ preferences and styles. In some classes, teachers simply distribute the passports and do not incorporate the initiative explicitly into their syllabus. In other classes, teachers take an active role in organizing discussions on linguistic risk-taking, award credit for participation, assign risks as homework, or ask students to set reminders in their personal electronic devices, so they do not forget to take risks on campus regularly. The number of passports submitted for the draw for prizes varies from a few passports per class to full participation.

At the end of the initiative, students are encouraged to complete a self-evaluation page in the passport, responding to questions about the usefulness of the tool and whether their comfort level in using their second language has increased after participating. The passport also contains motivational quotes or slogans aimed at awareness raising and motivation building, as indicated in figure 6.

![Figure 6. Motivational Slogans Page](image)

5. Discussion

We believe the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative offers a stimulating new way of supplementing classroom language teaching at our institution. It fits within content and task-based approaches as it integrates second language learning into meaningful and authentic activities that are part of both students’ general learning and daily lives on campus. It seeks to transform language
learning and language use from an exclusively classroom based experience to one where students can and do “live” bilingually.

The passport is an example of a flexible and autonomous tool as students can use it on their own, depending on their needs and preferences. While they receive guidance and support in class, it is up to them to decide which risks to undertake, how often, and how many times. In addition, there are no “required” risks, which allows learners at different proficiency levels to use the tool; that is, they can choose risks ranging from simple tasks, such as ordering a cup of coffee or a croissant at the campus bakery to submitting an academic assignment in their second official language in a content course that is part of their academic program, or preparing a job application in that language. In this way, learners are given a high degree of control and a greater sense of autonomy as they themselves choose what is appropriate for their level of proficiency and level of comfort. This also constructs a new image around the notion of risk, giving it a “friendly face” and generating excitement around it, rather than emphasizing threat, and fear of failure that may be otherwise associated with academic requirements or evaluations. At the same time, the excitement about taking risks, checking off boxes for each task accomplished, and the opportunity to participate in a draw for prizes, generate what we believe to be a facilitating emotional state.

As an additional benefit, by asking learners to familiarize themselves with the possible risks listed in the passport without requiring that they undertake all of them, the initiative raises awareness about the need to engage in meaningful authentic practice in language learning. It also provides learners with an opportunity to evaluate different situations and to reflect on their own level of comfort for each of them. The ranking of risks as high, medium, and low, for example, has both an awareness-raising and a self-evaluation function. While we do not offer data analysis in this article, we are currently investigating various individual and group patterns that were attested in the collected passports and we will report on whether repeating certain risks leads to reduced perceived risk level (e.g. from high to medium to low, for example), in subsequent publications.

Overall, the initiative encourages students to practice their second official language, but also allows them to take ownership and control of their own learning, by customizing their activities and not feeling the stress of being formally evaluated. At the same time, generally speaking, the stakes are not very high, as students themselves choose in which activities to engage, and in most activities they can switch back to their preferred language, as needed. That is, a French learner can start a conversation in French when speaking to a professor or a service agent, for example, but if the need arises and the learner wants to fall back to the safety of the stronger language, the learner can easily switch back to English. Even in written work it is sometimes possible to write an assignment partially in English and partially in French (depending on student preferences and in consultation with professors).

We realize that many learners may be reluctant or simply forget to engage in risk-taking outside of the language classroom. We received anecdotal reports of students losing their passports, forgetting them at home, or simply forgetting about the Linguistic Risk-Taking
As already indicated, to address this, some teachers whose classes participate in the initiative have developed a system of gentle reminders that can support and encourage learners further. This motivational support can be achieved in various ways, depending on teachers’ own approaches and level of engagement (e.g. automatic reminders programmed in learner’s phones, in-class reminders, online reminders posted in specific class learning modules, social media, etc.). The draw for prizes included in the initiative is an additional motivating factor. Furthermore, the motivational slogans and quotes included in the passport intend to help build a linguistic risk-taking identity among students and thus increase their confidence as second language users. We also believe that the elements of gamification plays a role in this respect, as the initiative resembles a treasure hunt or a quest, where learners have a checklist of tasks or activities they can engage in as they move about campus.

Finally, we believe that the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment that a learner may get from undertaking a risk in their second language may also be an important motivational factor that can ultimately contribute to sustained lifelong language learning and engagement. While we already indicated that an analysis of the data generated by the initiative is ongoing and will be reported on in subsequent publications, we want to illustrate this point by relating a single example offered by one of the English-learning participants. The participant called a government toll-free number to request a service and the automated voice menu asked him for his preferred language in order to direct the call to an agent who could respond in that language. The participant did not think of risk-taking and following his typical language choice habits selected his preferred (stronger) language, which was French. However, due to a system error, he was connected to an English-speaking agent. The learner reported that he considered hanging up and redialing, or asking to be transferred to another agent, but then decided to take a linguistic risk and complete the call in the language he was learning (i.e. English). He then related this experience to his teacher in a class where the passports had been distributed and said he felt proud of taking this risk and was encouraged by the teacher to include this experience in the special section of the passport dedicated to newly proposed risks. The teacher provided praise and reinforcement in class, and the linguistic risk-taking implementation team later made sure this risk was added to the list for the next iteration of the passport during the following semester. Overall, this sense of accomplishment in one’s second language and active engagement in using that language is a core goal of the initiative. We believe that such episodes build both learner confidence and competence, and illustrate the overall usefulness of linguistic risk-taking as well as the opportunities for cyclical feedback embedded in the initiative.

6. Conclusion

The Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative has received positive responses across campus and from various outside institutions. We have also received requests for additional information and for collaborations in adapting the initiative to other contexts, including K-12 education, government
institutions, and cultural organizations. We believe that linguistic risk-taking, while not a new notion in the scholarly literature, receives a new practical implementation through our initiative and holds general appeal to various stakeholders, including learners, teachers, curriculum developers and language policy makers. Although the original initiative focuses on Canada’s two official languages, English and French, we are also currently exploring its potential to support language learning and maintenance in other languages, including heritage languages, Indigenous languages, and sign languages, as appropriate. Furthermore, we are investigating possibilities of creating versions of the initiative that reduce traditional separation lines between instruction in and use of more than one language, consistent with current plurilingual and translingual views.

While this is an exploratory article dedicated to outlining the rationale and the implementation of the initiative, we have also established an ambitious research program to analyze linguistic risks, not only in order to help with continuous improvement, but also to enhance the literature on linguistic risk-taking in interdisciplinary domains, such as applied linguistics, education and psychology. Some of the questions that we will be addressing in this emerging research program are based on the data analysis from the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passports themselves, while others are based on supplementary surveys that we have already administered, and on forthcoming interviews and focus groups with participants. We will focus on issues, such as number and types of risks taken, frequency of risk-taking, perceived risk level and its relationship with the nature of risks and number of times they were repeated, post-initiative student auto-evaluations, and the relationship between learners’ proficiency level and their linguistic risk-taking patterns, amongst others. Furthermore, research-based evaluations of the effectiveness of the initiative are also pending.

Another important aspect that was mentioned earlier is that we are aware of both the advantages and limitations of a paper-based Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport. On the one hand the paper booklet offers the authentic look and feel of a real passport that some learners may enjoy. On the other hand, a digital app installed on learners’ phones would eliminate many of the issues related to losing or forgetting passports at home. Also, an app may speak to a generation of digital natives, facilitate the participation of a much larger learner population, afford additional technological features such as QR codes, geo-mapping of linguistic risks, and the incorporation of participant interactions with AI technologies in language learning. We have recently developed a beta version of a Linguistic Risk-Taking App, which we intend to release for piloting as part of our initiative in the very near future. We believe that the app will be useful on multiple levels: increasing motivation and drawing on additional insights from gamification, improving access to the initiative, and facilitating research data collection. A report about the conceptualization and development of the app is currently in preparation and will be released to the pedagogical and scientific community.

To conclude, we would also like to highlight that the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative is positioned to raise awareness about more general issues in language teaching and learning, bilingualism, and multilingualism. One such important issue is the persistence of native speaker norms, expectations of fluent or perfect bilingualism, and deficiency views of language learners
Through our initiative we want to impart on language learners the benefits of linguistic risk-taking, regardless of their level of proficiency, accent, or ability to produce error-free utterances. In other words, we want them to trust and build on their abilities while resisting real or perceived expectations to conform to a native-speaker standard in the language they are learning. This is particularly important in our institutional environment where various degrees of bilingualism exist, and language learners do have exposure to highly bilingual peers, staff members and professors, who may approximate native speaker levels in both languages. Measuring up against such standards can be demotivating, or even intimidating for language learners. As such, our decision to capitalize on the notion of risk-taking was in part based on countering such notions. We hope that awareness-raising, coupled with consistent and creative new ways of engaging and rewarding learners can set them on a course of transformative language learning, integrated into real-life activities. The ultimate goal of the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative is to have a long-lasting impact on our students and guide them along a path of transition from classroom language learning to lifelong second language use.

Acknowledgements: to be added.

References


Slavkov, N. (2018). What is your ‘first’ language in bilingual Canada? A study of language background profiling at publicly funded elementary schools across three


1 However, please see the conclusion section for other languages and contexts where the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative can be applied and for our plans for future developments.

2 In the context of our institution, for convenience we use the traditional label second (official) language to refer to English or French. However, we acknowledge that for many students English and/or French may be additional languages and they may be bilingual in one official and one non-official language, or tri-, multi- or plurilingual.

3 Pending positive review or acceptance for publication, the authors would like to reveal the name of the institution and provide additional details about programs and student demographics. These are currently not disclosed to facilitate the anonymous review process.

4 The passport, and more generally, the initiative were developed by a team of professors, staff members and students. While not all team members are authors of this article, their names will be disclosed and acknowledged pending acceptance for publication.

5 Other passports related to language learning have been developed in the past. For example, the European Language Passport (europass) is a self-assessment tool for language skills and qualifications and is linked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). Another passport related to language learning is *Passeport pour le français* developed by Boiron and CAVILAM (2012). To the best of our knowledge, the passport that we have developed is the only one focusing specifically on linguistic risk-taking and uniquely based on the processes and pedagogical practices developed under our initiative.

6 Institutional information in all images has been suppressed for anonymous review but will be disclosed subsequently pending acceptance for publication.

7 Some of the risks can also be undertaken off campus and a few risks relate to classroom instruction or registering in specific language courses; nonetheless, most risks are about autonomous language learning outside of the classroom, advancing the core objectives of the tool. Some risks are variations of the same task (e.g. switch the language of your cell phone for one day, for one week, or permanently).

8 A linguistic risk-taking app will also be available (see conclusion section for more details).

9 We are currently analyzing questionnaire data that we collected and a systematic overview of such issues will be reported in subsequent publications.