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# Linguistic risk-taking in inclusive contexts: The case of Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)

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## Abstract

*A Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport is an excellent means to orchestrate Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and different learner needs in inclusive settings. We identified core areas in which learners with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) face linguistic risk-taking. Two semi-structured expert interviews were conducted and qualitative content analysis was carried out to identify specific linguistic risks of learners with DLD in and outside of school.*

*Our results suggest that learners with DLD need systematic support in choosing and facing the next appropriate linguistic risks that lead to healthy risk-taking. We argue that this can contribute to an exploitation of their learning potential and to social-emotional well-being. Numerous linguistic risks are related to an increased sensitivity in the affective domain. The data analysis led to tentative hypotheses for a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport for learners with DLD.*

*Keywords: linguistic risk-taking, task-based language learning, inclusion, Developmental Language Disorder, real life tasks*

## Résumé

*Un passeport de prise de risques linguistiques est un excellent moyen d'orchestrer l'enseignement des langues basé sur les tâches (ELBT) et les différents besoins des apprenants dans des environnements inclusifs. Nous avons identifié les principaux domaines dans lesquels les apprenants ayant un trouble du développement du langage (TDL) sont confrontés à une prise de risques linguistiques. Deux entretiens semi-dirigés avec des experts ont été menés et une analyse qualitative du contenu a été effectuée pour identifier les risques linguistiques spécifiques des apprenants avec un TDL à l'école et en dehors de l'école.*


*Nos résultats suggèrent que les apprenants avec un TDL ont besoin d'un soutien systématique pour choisir et affronter une séquence appropriée de risques linguistiques appropriés qui correspondent à une saine prise de risque. Nous soutenons que cela peut contribuer à*

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*l'exploitation de leur potentiel d'apprentissage et au bien-être social et émotionnel. De nombreux risques linguistiques sont liés à une sensibilité accrue dans le domaine affectif. L'analyse des données a permis de formuler des hypothèses préliminaires pour un passeport de prise de risque linguistique destiné aux apprenants atteints de TDL.*

*Mots-clés : prise de risques linguistiques, enseignement des langues basé sur les tâches (ELBT), enseignement inclusif, trouble du développement du langage (TDL), tâches de la vie réelle*

## **Introduction**

Inclusion means that heterogeneity and diversity are considered the norm and an asset both in society and the classroom (Grosche & Vock, 2018). Learners differ in many ways, be it with respect to gender, their linguistic background or an individual special need. Disabilities and needs are not seen as something that lies within the individual. Rather, barriers are constructed in an interaction between the individual and their environment (Gerlach & Schmidt, 2021) and can thus be minimized or removed. We focus on two out of four goals of inclusion, according to Piezunka et al. (2017):

1. offering the best possible service and support for individual learner groups with respect to academic attainment;
2. participation, appreciation, and well-being of all learners.

Task-Based Language Teaching is often considered a particularly promising approach for inclusive communicative language teaching, especially due to its openness (e.g., articles in Chilla & Vogt, 2017). Learners can find different ways of solving a task so that differentiation and adaptation to learners' needs is to some extent naturally given and easily implemented.

A linguistic risk is “an authentic, autonomous communicative act where learners are pushed out of their linguistic and cultural comfort zone” (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021, p. 129). According to Griffiths and Slavkov (2021), linguistic risks feed into modern communicative language teaching as they “fall within the continuum of task criteria” (p. 135) and can be considered a subset of tasks. The special potential of linguistic risk-taking is that learners do not only choose their individual solutions but also their very own individual tasks (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021). We argue that some learners need additional guidance in choosing appropriate linguistic risks that lead to *healthy* risk-taking (Cervantes, 2013) and to exploiting learning potential. A Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport such as the one introduced at the University of Ottawa (e.g., Slavkov, 2020; Slavkov & Séror, 2019) can offer such guidance while still allowing learners to act autonomously. It can contribute to improving

academic performance (especially language learning) as well as participation, appreciation and well-being.

Accommodating diverse learner needs in a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport necessitates a thorough exploration of specific dimensions of heterogeneity. What learners perceive as a linguistic risk is highly individual. In an inclusive educational context, it is extremely important to consider those individual perceptions. We will concentrate on learners with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) who may be particularly vulnerable: These learners are exposed to developmental risks and have a poor prognosis if adequate support is not provided. This article aims to make a contribution to developing a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport for learners with DLD. This is done by taking into account

- existing findings on symptoms and vulnerable core areas of learners with DLD; and
- expert (teacher) perspectives in order to further identify the specific linguistic risks of these learners.

After providing the necessary theoretical background on linguistic risk-taking and DLD, phase one of the study will be presented by summarizing the main findings of a literature review on vulnerabilities and strengths of learners with DLD. Subsequently, the methodology and findings of phase two will be outlined: our expert interviews with the aim of identifying specific linguistic risks of learners with DLD. These findings will then be the basis for drawing tentative conclusions for a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport for learners with DLD.

## ***Theoretical background***

### **Linguistic risk-taking**

Language teachers are confronted with the challenging task of encouraging their learners to use and expose themselves to a second language (L2) in and beyond the classroom. Learners often prefer to stay within their comfort zones, meaning they are hesitant to experiment with their L2 in particular situations or prefer using their first language (L1) when given the choice. This can be due to them feeling a lack in linguistic or cultural competence and experience in the L2 that they would need in order to confidently deal with the situation (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021).

For learners with DLD also using their L1(s) as a communicative tool can feel risky at times and their perceptions of what constitutes a risk in different languages may differ from that of more typically developing learners. We therefore expand the view on linguistic risk-taking from primarily focusing on

L2(s) to looking at all the different languages of learners with DLD, including their L1(s). Like Slavkov and Séror (2019) we do not restrict risk-taking to language production or to speaking, but rather include challenges that arise through all four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

Learners should be encouraged to take linguistic risks and to set their own goals in order to make use of their (language) learning potential, in order to participate in expressing their needs, thoughts and desires as well as in forming and maintaining friendships and other social relationships. No learner will have their teacher with them at all times and throughout life (Littlewood, 1999, in Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021). This is in line with viewing the learner as a social, interested and personally invested agent taking responsibility for their own learning.

The Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport by the University of Ottawa is the essential element of the Canadian linguistic risk-taking initiative. It comes in the form of a travel passport and contains a list of approximately 70 risks, i.e. situations and contexts that learners may face on campus (e.g., ordering food at the cafeteria in the L2, using online applications in the L2, sending an email in the L2). After an initial distribution and introduction of the passport in their language classrooms, the university learners autonomously complete and check off risks in their passports. They can also rate risks, propose new risks and share them with others (Slavkov & Séror, 2019).

Linguistic risk-taking in the context of DLD as examined in our study refers to risks both in and outside of the classroom. We strongly support the necessity to move beyond the classroom walls, but we argue that healthy linguistic risk-taking is not possible for many learners with DLD if they are not provided with *very close* guidance and support in their initial risk-taking steps in the classroom. Initially introducing linguistic risk-taking with classroom support for all learners also led to higher engagement levels in a study by Rhéaume et al. (2021). The term *healthy* risk-taking was introduced by Cervantes (2013). Without using the term healthy risk-taking, Oxford (1992) already pointed out the importance of knowing when and how to take risks and that moderate and intelligent risks are more useful than taking no or extreme uninformed risks. A Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport also has the potential to incorporate the different languages of learners and thus can, as we argue, contribute to implementing pedagogical translanguaging (Cummins, 2022) in schools.

Learners' ability to take risks is a construct discussed as a significant individual difference and predictor variable of success in L2 learning (e.g., Cervantes, 2013; Dewaele, 2012; Oxford, 1992). It is closely intertwined in complex ways with other external and internal factors, such as anxiety, self-esteem, willingness to communicate or the classroom environment (Cervantes,

2013; Oxford, 1992). The risk-taking construct draws on different theoretical backgrounds. Most importantly, risk-taking is not a fixed personality trait but rather relates to a context and can hence be reframed as a (pedagogical) tool to improve learning (Cervantes, 2013; Cajka et al., 2023).

### Developmental Language Disorder

With a prevalence between 5–8% for a North American context (Noterdaeme, 2020), DLD is one of the most common developmental disorders in children (Kauschke et al., 2019). On average, 1 out of 14 children is affected. It is a common condition that still often goes unnoticed (Raising Awareness of Developmental Language Disorder [RADLD], 2023). Especially problems of language comprehension are often overlooked or misinterpreted as behavior difficulties or lack of attention/motivation (Noterdaeme, 2020; RADLD, 2023; Schönauer-Schneider, 2022). Unlike other conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or dyslexia, DLD is still not as well known and frequently discussed by non-specialists as would be desirable, which is why it is of importance to improve public awareness (Bishop et al., 2017; RADLD, 2023).

DLD emerges in early childhood but is a longstanding problem that often persists over a lifespan (RADLD, 2023). Learners with DLD can struggle with different aspects of language (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics, comprehension, production) as predominant symptoms are individual and dynamic over time (Noterdaeme, 2020). All languages of a learner are affected (Ruberg & Rothweiler, 2016).

DLD is now the preferred term for what used to be *Specific Language Impairment* for a long time. As the result of an interdisciplinary discourse in English-speaking countries that started in approximately 2016 (CATALISE Study — Bishop et al., 2016; Bishop et al., 2017), the attribute *specific* was abandoned, since it suggested that the problems these learners experience refer to language exclusively and do not extend into other areas (Noterdaeme, 2020). In reality, however, children with DLD also frequently struggle in cognitive, sensorimotor or behavioral domains (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD, learning disabilities, behavioral, and emotional disorders) (Bishop et al., 2017; Kauschke et al., 2019; Noterdaeme, 2020; RADLD, 2023). Such *co-occurring conditions* are found too frequently to be explicable by chance and have an impact on how impairment manifests itself in the individual and affects response to intervention, though the causal relation to the language problems is still unclear for the most part (Bishop et al., 2017). Co-occurring conditions as well as *risk-factors* are now, under the new consensus, accommodated within the DLD definition (Bishop et al., 2017). Risk-factors can be biological or environmental and refer to statistical predictors of DLD. One example is the fact that more boys than girls are affected by DLD (Noterdaeme, 2020).

*Language disorders associated with differentiating conditions*, however, do not fall under the current definition of DLD (Bishop, 2017; Bishop et al., 2017; Kauschke et al., 2019).

DLD is a multifactorial condition with assumed genetic and neurobiological factors that still necessitate further research (Bishop et al., 2016). Environmental factors can have a moderating function in the sense that socio-economic factors can contribute to the intensity or persistence of the negative impacts caused by the underlying genetic and neurodevelopmental foundations of DLD (Noterdaeme, 2020).

Without adequate intervention, DLD can have severe effects on school, educational outcomes, and social-emotional well-being. Learners with DLD are reported to often experience problematic internalizing (anxiety, depression) and externalizing (aggression) behavior and their language problems can affect relationships with peers and adults and their mental health (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2019; RADLD, 2023). Language is the primary medium of instruction in school so that language problems can negatively affect academic attainment, literacy, and cognitive development. All in all, DLD can have severe consequences for the development of learners (Noterdaeme, 2020). Learners with DLD can succeed at school and in life, however, when they are identified and adequate intervention is provided.

## *The study*

### **Research questions and thesis statements**

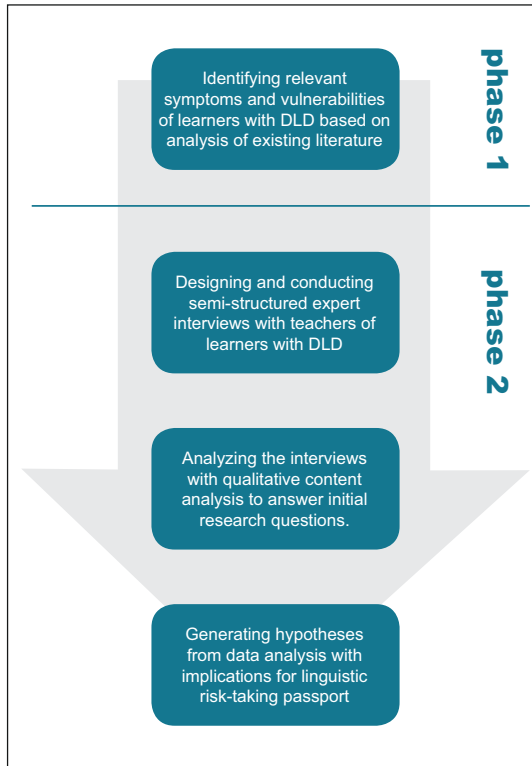
The aim of this article is to explore linguistic risks for elementary and secondary school learners with DLD in Germany. The research questions were formulated as follows:

**RQ 1:** What may characterize specific linguistic risks for learners with DLD?

- Which linguistic actions may be particularly risky in and outside of school?
- In which areas may these learners need to take (more) linguistic risks in order to realize their learning potential?

**RQ 2:** (How) Does a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport need to be adapted for learners with DLD?

Insights into the linguistic risks of learners with DLD can help to provide targeted support measures for these learners in and beyond the classroom. One such measure can be designing and using a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport in a way that fits the specific needs of these learners. The underlying assumption is that such a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport can lead to more autonomy so that learners can help themselves to overcome challenging situations to

**Figure 1**

*Study design linguistic risk-taking in learners with DLD*

exploit their language learning potential, to enjoy the learning process and to improve their communication skills. This, in turn, can contribute to alleviating the social-emotional and academic consequences they may face otherwise.

### **Study design**

RQ 1 was addressed through an extensive review of research literature on causes, symptoms and secondary effects of DLD in phase one of the study. In phase two, a semi-structured expert interview was designed and conducted with two teachers of learners with DLD. The purpose of the interviews was to (further) answer RQ 1 and RQ 2. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). Information gathered from both phases was targeted towards generating hypotheses relevant for adapting a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport to the needs of learners with DLD (Figure 1).

## **Literature review on DLD (Phase 1)**

In this article, we focus on symptoms on the behavioral level. The underlying assumption is that learners will experience linguistic risks especially in those identified vulnerable core areas in which they are confronted with linguistic barriers and their effects on academic achievement, communication as well as social- and emotional well-being. Overall, we identified five core areas that we consider relevant for the purpose of our article (Table 1). This helped us to establish deductive categories for analyzing the semi-structured expert interviews.

The following deductive categories for qualitative content analysis of our interviews in phase two were established:

- limited comprehension monitoring;
- limited strategy use, including experimenting with language;
- impaired speech production and comprehensibility;
- social relationships;
- (high or low) self-awareness and reflection (including awareness of the impairment) and associated emotional states.

These deductive categories were complemented by inductive categories from the interview data in order to establish a final coding manual.

## **Semi-structured expert interviews (Phase 2)**

### *Participants*

Two teachers agreed to participate in the semi-structured expert interview. They are special needs teachers who each have more than 20 years of work experience with learners with DLD at elementary school level (teacher 1) and elementary as well as secondary school level (teacher 2). Elementary school level in Germany means grades 1–4 (learners age 6–10 years); secondary school level in Germany comprises grades 5–10 (learners age 11–16). Both teachers have taught various subjects over the years, among them German, math, English, physical education, and art.

### *Instruments and measures*

The purpose of a semi-structured expert interview is how experts' knowledge manifests itself in their actions and how they assess and evaluate expertise-related information (Herzmann & König, 2023). Thus, a certain expertise is attributed to the interviewees. We follow a broad understanding of expertise in this article, where the interviewees can be seen as experts of their own semantic



**Table 1***Summary of literature review*

Identified vulnerable core area	Summary of main findings	Examples from the literature
Limited comprehension monitoring (listening and text comprehension)	Learners with DLD are often not aware of their lack of comprehension and are used to not very precisely understanding what they hear or read. They strongly rely on key word comprehension, world knowledge or situational context. They have difficulties distinguishing between guessing, knowing, and not-knowing.	Dollaghan & Kaston, 1986; Klumpp & Schönauer-Schneider, 2020, p. 47; Skarakis-Doyle et al., 2008
Limited awareness of possible reasons for lack of comprehension	Learners with DLD are often not aware of possible reasons that can cause comprehension difficulties, which makes clarification more difficult. They also may not realize that failing comprehension is not always their fault, as there can be other reasons (e.g., background noise) (impact on emotional states & self-awareness).	Dollaghan, 1987; Hachul & Schönauer-Schneider, 2019, p. 201; Klumpp & Schönauer-Schneider, 2020, p. 47; Skarakis-Doyle et al., 1990
Limited use of strategies (e.g., vocabulary learning strategies, comprehension monitoring strategies)	Learners with DLD show limited use of productive learning and communication strategies compared to more typically developing learners. Learners often try to conceal their difficulties and avoid asking, even after being encouraged to do so. This can be due to negative experiences when people were irritated with them for asking too many questions. Asking questions is a powerful strategy through which learning opportunities arise. Strategies need to be taught, practiced, and reflected upon more explicitly.	Hargrove et al., 1988; Klumpp & Schönauer-Schneider, 2020, p. 47; Marks, 2017, p. 51; Motsch et al., 2018, pp. 36, 38–39, 113, 414–115; Schönauer-Schneider, 2018, p. 14; Schönauer-Schneider, 2022, pp. 370–373

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**Table 1** (con'd)

Identified vulnerable core area	Summary of main findings	Examples from the literature
Impaired speech production and comprehensibility	Speech production is often impaired in learners with DLD and affects comprehensibility, acceptance, and educational success. Articulation issues are particularly obvious in early childhood. Grammatical phenomena that are already vulnerable in unimpaired language development are even more vulnerable in learners with DLD. They show deficits both in breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge, and in pragmatic competence. Compensation strategies such as using short and safe sentence structures or words are common. Examples are familiar sentence structures or “all-purpose words” such as <i>thing, make, and do</i> .	Dubois et al., 2020; Mayer & Ulrich, 2017; Noterdaeme, 2020, pp. 247–248
Affective and emotional dimension: Self-awareness, emotional states, social relationships	The described linguistic barriers can be either associated with a high level of self-awareness or a lack thereof in other individuals. Anxiety and increased self-awareness (especially awareness of the impairment) can lead to social-emotional as well as behavioral problems like withdrawal from communicative situations (internalization) or aggression (externalization). More misunderstandings, stress and mental overload can arise for learners with DLD when interacting with others/peers. On a larger scale, this can result in mental health issues and difficulties building and maintaining friendships. For learners with DLD, more cases of bullying, social isolation as well as depression, panic, and lower levels of self-confidence are reported for example.	Conti-Ramsden et al., 2019; Schönauer-Schneider, 2022, pp. 371–373

content (Herzmann & König, 2023). *Expertise* is complex knowledge that a person has, which comprises explicit as well-as implicit knowledge. The latter manifests itself within actions (Herzmann & König, 2023).

We worked with a protocol of previously prepared questions ranging from initial open questions to a prompt where we showed the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport of the University of Ottawa to the teachers. Such a prompt is used to initiate a conversation (Herzmann & König, 2023)—in this case about practical ideas to encourage linguistic risk-taking in learners with DLD. The open questions were sometimes followed by further inquiry for specification (“Which communicative acts outside of school do you perceive as particularly risky for your learners?”), communicative validation (“Did I understand correctly that...?”), or to maintain the conversation (“Could you give an example or reasons?”) (Herzmann & König, 2023, pp. 42–43, pp. 47–48). The questions as well as the prompt (showing the passport) together made up our expert interview. The purpose of the interview was to generate answers from different experts to the same questions/prompt, which could then be compared in the subsequent data analysis (Herzmann & König, 2023).

### *Data analysis*

In total, 112 minutes of recordings were generated. As our analysis focuses on content rather than the way of speaking, we chose a word-for-word transcription that neglects aspects such as pauses, dialect, facial expression, body language and intonation (Herzmann & König, 2023). Any information that refers to the identity of individuals or specific institutions was anonymized.

In the analysis of the interview data we conducted a *qualitative content analysis* (more specifically *inhaltlich-strukturierende qualitative Inhaltsanalyse*) according to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022; also Schreier, 2014).

#### Step 1:

During the extensive literature review, deductive categories for the interview had already been established. These categories were then tested and verified by the first author of this article in a preliminary analysis of approx. 50% of the interviews. In several sessions over the course of about four weeks, parts of the interviews were analyzed repeatedly with the so far established categories. When necessary, the categories were adapted, merged, split or complemented by coding rules. Also, additional inductive categories were developed from the interview data itself during this preliminary analysis. Whenever new relevant aspects for our research questions were found in the data, a new category was added. This interplay of deductive and inductive categories is common in qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

This way, our final coding manual was established. It included a label for each constructed category, a definition, a prototypical example from the interviews and, when necessary, a coding rule (Herzmann & König, 2023). This resulting coding manual is the core of our analysis and subsequently served as the systematic analysis framework for the data of both interviews.

#### Step 2:

At this stage, 100% of the data were analyzed by the first author of this article with the established coding manual. Coding units in the transcripts were identified and matched with the categories. No substantial adaption of the coding manual was necessary at this point. Questions were noted down to be discussed with author two in step three.

#### Step 3:

In the final stage of the analysis, the interviews were analyzed by both authors of this paper with the help of our coding manual. This took two sessions in which the authors intensively discussed each coding unit found in the transcripts of the interviews until consensus was reached for each decision.

### **Results**

We chose a presentation of our results based on our categories (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). From the main analysis based on the coding manual, we were able to generate a first set of hypotheses (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022) regarding the linguistic risk-taking behavior of learners with DLD for most of the categories (Table 2). These hypotheses contribute to answering our initial RQ 1. Subsequently, we offer a careful attempt of an answer to RQ 2 in our final reflections, by generating a second set of three further hypotheses. Since discussing all categories (12 total) and hypotheses in detail goes beyond the scope of this publication, we will present four categories for which we were able to find numerous coding units in the interviews and for which we consider the coding units to be particularly substantial. These four categories will now be briefly defined, prototypical coding units will be presented and the results will be explained followed by the respective hypothesis that was generated for the category to answer RQ 1.

#### **Results for four exemplary categories and generated hypotheses**

##### *Category 2: Strategy use*

This category comprises comments on the extent to which learners use learning, communication or compensation strategies, e.g., vocabulary learning strategies (asking for the meaning of words) or comprehension strategies

**Table 2***Overview of all categories and generated hypotheses for RQ 1*

Category	Hypothesis	Category absent
1. Exposure to input		No examples were found in the data for this category — category kept as part of the coding manual for future interviews.
2. Strategy use	Learners with DLD prefer sticking to safe constructions and vocabulary rather than varying or experimenting with pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary and have trouble using strategies such as requesting information or clarification.	
3. Impaired speech production and comprehensibility	Impaired comprehensibility in terms of 1. Pronunciation, and 2. Morpho-syntax or verbal expression in general can increase the perception of speaking as a high risk.	
4. Strong communicative will		No sufficient evidence for this category was found in the data to generate a hypothesis (only one coding unit) — category kept as part of the coding manual for future interviews.
5. Location/context	Institutionalized and evaluative settings are associated with high risks (classroom, parent teacher conference, class council, large group setting); free and safe settings are associated with lower risks (open all-day school, breaks, corridor).	
6. Interlocutor	Approaching and talking to teachers and unknown adults/strangers is associated with a higher risk than talking to peers or familiar individuals, an exception being when peers make fun of learners with DLD.	

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**Table 2** (con'd)

Category	Hypothesis	Category absent
7. Different languages		No sufficient evidence for this category was found in the data to generate a hypothesis (only one coding unit) — category kept as part of the coding manual for future interviews.
8. Topic of the conversation	Topics that learners with DLD are interested in lead to a higher willingness to take linguistic risks. Emotional topics are associated with higher risks.	
9. Supportiveness of environment	Appreciative/accepting and familiar environments lead to a higher willingness in learners with DLD to take linguistic risks.	
10. Social relationships	Working/cooperating with friends leads to more openness towards risk-taking, both, when communicating with friends and when taking risks in the real world that involve other people.	
11. Self-awareness and emotional states		
11.1. High self-awareness and emotional states	Learners with DLD can have high problem awareness and low self-esteem (possibly combined with a discrepancy between self-expectation and performance) which means that smaller steps already constitute healthy risks for this subgroup of learners with DLD.	
11.2. Limited self-awareness and emotional states	Learners with DLD that show limited self-awareness are more difficult to integrate into a linguistic risk-taking passport.	
12. Additional linguistic risks suggested by experts	There are additional risks that do not fit into any of the other categories.	

(asking for repetition or clarification). This includes comments on observations about the willingness of learners to experiment with language:

- The extent to which they vary their syntax, test new constructions or if they stick to constructions that feel *safe*;
- The range of vocabulary used, e.g., if they prefer to use *safety* words and to which extent they are willing and curious to experiment with new words and a variety of vocabulary.

Prototypical coding unit:

dass sie [gemeint sind Lehrkräfte] darauf achten, dass das Kind nicht immer nur das Wort, was weiß ich welches ‚gehen, gehen, gehen‘ nimmt, sondern auch mal ’n anderes Wort, was in dieses Feld gehört, ne, das kann ich mir schon vorstellen, aber die müssen drauf achten ... Ein neues Wort, das nicht in meinem, ich möchte meinen Wortschatz erweitern, indem ich jetzt auch mal andere Wörter in diesem Umfeld, also in diesem Themenkomplex benutze. (Interview 2, lines 495–505)

that they [referring to the teachers] pay attention that the child does not always only pick the [same] word, I don’t know, like ‘go’, but also another word belonging to this field, you know, this is something I could imagine, but they have to pay attention to this ... A new word which is not in my... I want to expand my vocabulary by also using other words in this field, I mean in this topic. (Interview 2, lines 495–505)

Both experts referred to strategy use in learners with DLD several times. In their comments, the experts explained that they observe a missing inquiry about the meaning of words when word storage is inaccurate or false in their learners. Furthermore, the experts reported a tendency of learners with DLD to use words, grammar constructions or pronunciation that they feel *safe* with if they are not prompted by the teacher (see e.g., prototypical coding unit). The experts also suggested that using strategies like asking for information or clarification would be good risks for learners with DLD.

*Hypothesis: Learners with DLD prefer sticking to safe constructions and vocabulary rather than varying or experimenting with pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary and have trouble using strategies such as requesting information or clarification.*

#### *Category 5: Location/context*

This category comprises comments on how the location or context of a communicative situation influences the linguistic behavior of learners.

Prototypical coding unit:

und da ist ein Junge, der ist zweisprachig, da erzählen die Eltern das auch so, er spricht dann 1:1 mit der Logopädin lebhaft, hier, mit 'nem Freund auf dem Schulhof, lebhaft, und in der Klasse auch ganz leise. (Interview 1, ll. 137–139)

and there is a boy who is bilingual, and his parents report it that way, he talks vividly when he is one on one with the speech therapist, here with a friend in the schoolyard also vividly, but in the classroom very quietly. (Interview 1, ll. 137–139)

Prototypical coding unit:

Interviewer: Kannst du sagen, welche Kontexte risikobehafteter sind?

Teacher: Aus dem Erleben des Kindes?

I: Ja

T: Ja der Unterricht, leider, ist so ja, aber ich denk, die kommen ja auch so an, die haben ja auch schon die Erfahrung gemacht, dass auf ihre Sprache geachtet wurde, ne. Die wurden überprüft, denen wurde dann gesagt die kommen auf diese Schule, die sind oft schon in logopädischer Behandlung und das ist so. Und aber ja, aber schön ist ja, dass die meisten Kinder hier in der OGS sind, dass die im schulischen Gebäude, also irgendwie ja auch im schulischen Kontext offener miteinander sprechen. (Interview 1, ll. 153–167)

Interviewer Can you say which contexts feel more risky?

Teacher: From the perspective of the child?

I: Yes

T: Yes, the classroom/lesson, unfortunately, that is how it is. But I think, they already come here this way, they have had the experience that others have focused on the language, right. They were tested, then were told that they will go to a different school, they have often been to see a speech therapist and that is how it is. But yes, but it is nice that most children are also here for after-school care/activities in the school building so that they also speak more openly in the school context in a way. (Interview 1, ll. 153–167)

What seems to matter about the location/context in which a conversation takes place is to what extent this place is associated with a more official institutionalized feeling, where learners with DLD are potentially scrutinized, e.g., a classroom where lessons and exams take place, a parent teacher conference where academic performance and behavior are discussed, a large group setting in class where other learners can judge you. Free contexts like breaks or talking in the hallway are associated with a lower risk-level given they are contexts in which learners with DLD feel safe, e.g., because it is a familiar or ritualized context with people they like. However, free contexts that are less guided can be associated with high risks if they feel unpredictable (playground setting with typically developing children, transfer to the real world, e.g., when shopping).



Hypothesis: *Institutionalized and evaluative settings are associated with high risks (classroom, parent teacher conference, class council, large group setting), free and safe settings are associated with lower risks (after-school activities, breaks, hallway).*

### *Category 9: Supportiveness of environment*

This category comprises comments on how the individually perceived supportiveness of the environment (e.g., class atmosphere, parents' encouraging behavior) influences the linguistic behavior of learners.

Additional coding rule: Environment as defined here goes beyond location in that it does not only consider the place where interactions take place but a combination of the place with the people acting in this environment and to which extent this combination is perceived as supportive and appreciative.

Prototypical coding unit:

Also, das liegt natürlich an der Gruppenkonstellation, wie die mit dem Risiko umgehen, und ich erlebe das so, dass in einer Klasse, wo die Interaktion friedlich verläuft und die Kinder so grundsätzlich die Haltung haben, ‚wir lassen Fehler zu und wir nehmen uns so an, wie wir sind‘, dass es viel einfacher ist, so ein Risiko einzugehen und die Kinder sogar so weit gehen können, dass es für sie gar nicht immer so als Risiko erlebt wird, also wo die Schwelle also sehr, sehr niederschwellig ist, diese Motivation zu sprechen.

Es gibt aber andere Konstellationen, wo die Kinder sich so kritisch unter die Lupe nehmen, sag' ich mal, was Fehler angeht, dass die sich fast nicht trauen, ganze Sätze zu formulieren. Und das sowohl in der Muttersprache als auch in der Fremdsprache. (Interview 1, ll. 14–23)

Well, this obviously depends on the group constellation, how they deal with the risk, and I am experiencing this in such a way that in a class in which the interaction is peaceful and the children have the basic attitude 'we tolerate mistakes and accept each other as we are', that it is much easier to take such a risk and the children can even go as far as to not always experience this as a risk, so where the threshold is very, very low, this motivation to speak.

However, there are other constellations where the children focus on each other so critically, to give an example, with regard to mistakes, that they nearly don't dare to formulate whole sentences. And this in their first as well as in their foreign language. (Interview 1, ll. 14–23)

Both experts referred to the perceived (un-)supportiveness as being a decisive factor when it comes to the willingness of learners with DLD to take linguistic risks. If the environment is perceived as appreciative, e.g., if a teacher manages to create an accepting class atmosphere or when group dynamics in a peer group/a class environment have a positive vibe, then learners with DLD are more likely and willing to take linguistic risks. If, however, learners within a class are very critical with one another, parents at home are demanding,

or peers make fun of each other during the break, those environments are perceived as less accepting environments in which linguistic behavior feels riskier and the stress level increases.

*Hypothesis: Appreciative, accepting, and familiar environments lead to a higher willingness in learners with DLD to take linguistic risks.*

#### *Category 11.1: High level of self-awareness and emotional states*

This category comprises comments on how a high level of self-awareness and associated emotional states influence linguistic behavior in learners with DLD. Self-awareness is defined as knowing your own emotions, strengths, needs, and weaknesses and refers to both, emotional and cognitive self-awareness (Leidig et al., 2020). Emotional states can be observed in both internalizing and externalizing behavior. This category includes comments on e.g., high/excessive awareness of themselves and their impairment, anxiety, fearfulness, lower level of self-esteem, panic, depression, behavioral issues, aggression, and hyperactivity.

Prototypical coding unit:

wie z.B. die sprechgehemmten Kinder. Heute war es noch so, die überlassen das dann komplett uns, da lassen die das dann einfach vorlesen und sitzen dann da so [imitiert Hände im Schoß, scheuer Blick], aber immerhin haben sie sich schon mal rausgewagt, indem sie das [ihre Gedanken, Wünsche und Beschwerden] haben verschriftlichen lassen, aber sie hätte das auch genauso sagen können, das traut sie sich aber noch nicht. (Interview 1, ll. 367–371)

like, for example, the speech-inhibited children. Today it was just that way, they completely leave it to us, they simply have us read them [their thoughts] out to the class and they are sitting there like [imitates hands in their lap, shy look], but at least they have dared to venture out by having put them [their thoughts, wishes and complaints] into writing, but she could as well have said it herself, but she still does not dare to do it. (Interview 1, ll. 367–371)

Both experts commented on a high level of self-awareness and associated emotional states several times throughout the interviews. The experts described high self-awareness and awareness of the discrepancy between the learners' performance and their self-expectation or the perceived expectations of others. This was described in the interviews as leading to low self-esteem and internalizing behavior (withdrawal, limiting oneself to nonverbal communication like body language, gestures, selective mutism, letting others speak for you, fearfulness) as well as externalizing behavior (crying, hitting oneself, hectic communication). Learners with DLD are, according to our experts, heavily influenced by previous negative experiences in which they were not understood, made fun of or tested and evaluated within the education system (e.g., sent to a different/special needs school).

Hypothesis: *Learners with DLD can have high problem awareness and low self-esteem (possibly combined with a discrepancy between self-expectation and performance) which means that smaller steps already constitute healthy risks for this subgroup of learners with DLD.*

### ***Final reflections, limitations, and pedagogical implications***

Our data are in line with what Cervantes (2013) and Oxford (1992) state about risk-taking being a complex interplay between many internal and external factors, e.g., the learner, their decisions, their personalities, self-esteem, anxiety and the educational setting for example.

With respect to our initial research questions, our analysis and the generated hypotheses for RQ 1 suggest that the linguistic risks for learners with DLD are not fundamentally different from risks that more typically developing learners face and the factors that influence risk-taking overlap with the factors mentioned for more typically developing learners (e.g., Cervantes, 2013). Nonetheless, our article suggests that learners with DLD need to be closely guided in their risk-taking behavior, especially to ensure that they engage in what might be considered *healthy* risk-taking. They might otherwise not be aware of (appropriate) moments in which to take linguistic risks or the type of risks they can take. On the one hand, an unguided approach might result in missing or continued avoidance of linguistic risk-taking opportunities. It could also, on the other hand, lead to reckless risk-taking and additional negative experience that only amplifies anxiety and negative awareness of their impairment. Cervantes (2013) also highlights the importance of scaffolding for learners to manage risk-taking successfully. While scaffolding is important for all learners, our interview data and literature review suggest that learners with DLD rely on scaffolding to an even stronger degree. In order to demonstrate what this could include we generated a set of three further hypotheses as a careful attempt to offer an answer to RQ 2:

1. *Hypothesis 1 for RQ 2: The introduction and implementation of a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport needs to be accompanied by a stronger degree of prompting for learners with DLD.*

Teachers, classmates, parents, and other reference persons can explicitly direct learners' attention to moments in which they could take risks, e.g., ask questions or experiment with vocabulary or syntax. Prompts to take risks may be repeatedly necessary over longer periods of time and with the involvement of different reference persons, until learners with DLD are able to autonomously transfer linguistic risk-taking behavior to other situations and contexts.

2. *Hypothesis 2 for RQ 2: Reframing and strong emotional support that encourages learners with DLD to take linguistic risks may be achieved*

*through embedding linguistic risk-taking in motivational stories or introducing linguistic risk-taking pals and role models (e.g., classmates as peer support, hand puppets for younger learners).*

Learners' evaluation of the potential outcome of the risky situation as gain rather than as potential loss or threat is crucial. As could be seen from the literature and our own data, learners with DLD are heavily influenced by previous experiences of failure or embarrassment affecting their self-esteem. We argue that positive *reframing* (Cervantes, 2013; Oxford, 1992) can be supported by the fashion in which a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport is introduced and supervised in class, thus working against previous negative experiences and providing the necessary scaffolding. This may be just as important as the type of risks a passport incorporates. With reframing and motivational stories mentioned in the hypothesis, we would like to suggest building on existing and empirically evaluated therapy and teaching programs for learners with DLD such as the "lexicon pirate", for example (Motsch et al., 2018). In this program, a little pirate (hand-puppet and role model) ventures out into the world to find "treasures" in the form of unknown words. His ventures include asking many questions. We see great potential in linking such programs with the idea of a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport and would like to further explore this in the future. Our assumption is that motivational stories, role models and peer support can contribute to establishing the necessary appreciative and accepting environment learners with DLD may need to be more willing to take linguistic risks.

3. *Hypothesis 3 for RQ 2: Clear and consistent routines of reflecting on real-world linguistic risk-taking experiences together with learners in a safe classroom environment may be crucial for learners with DLD in order to cope with linguistic risk-taking in the real world.*

This is similarly suggested for learners in general by Griffiths & Slavkov (2021). Strictly and reliably allowing for time and room for such reflection phases with classmates and the teacher when working with learners with DLD seems to be of utmost importance when coping with linguistic risk-taking experiences.

We argue that a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport that takes into account our findings (as well as past and future studies) on learners with DLD can adequately guide and prompt learners with DLD in their risk-taking behavior so that they can become more autonomous learners, make full use of their learning potential and engage in successful communication and social interaction. This

article contributes preliminary findings to what healthy risk-taking can mean for learners with DLD. This can form a basis for developing a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport for these learners in the future.

Further studies on risk-taking in learners with DLD are planned (work in progress):

- further interviews with experts on learners with DLD;
- interviews with learners with DLD;
- interviews with younger learners without DLD.

This will contribute to a stronger scientific foundation for establishing a passport for learners with DLD and allow an analysis of differences and similarities in risk-taking behavior of younger learners with and without DLD. Classroom or field observations of risk-taking behavior of learners should be done to gain further insight into this field. Subsequent to its development, a Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport would yet have to be tested and evaluated in schools (pedagogical implementation).

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