

Exploring Tolerance of Ambiguity and Grammar Achievement of Advanced EFL Learners

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Abstract

A lot of English as foreign language learners (EFL) have difficulty in acquiring foreign language (FL) grammar. Various speculations have been made regarding the factors affecting learning grammar. As such, teaching grammar should be cognizant of learning styles. It is necessary to take into consideration learning styles since learners' performance is affected by their learning styles (Ueno, 2005). Having this in mind, the present study aimed to investigate the tolerance/intolerance of ambiguity of EFL learners. It also sought the relationship between ambiguity tolerance (TA) and grammar acquisition of advanced EFL learners. To do so, a version of the TOEFL test was administered to measure the participants' achievement in grammar. Then, Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) was given to the learners. Based on the findings, advanced EFL learners were TA in some contexts and intolerant in some others. Findings also revealed that there is a significant relationship between overall grammar knowledge of Iranian EFL learners and TA. Moreover, the effect of learners' gender on TA was supported.

Keywords: tolerance of ambiguity, foreign language, gender

1. Introduction

TA as a learning style plays an important role in learning a language. Ambiguity tolerance-intolerance is a psychological concept which defines the relationship that individuals have with ambiguous events. Ambiguity tolerance-intolerance as a scientific concept is established by Else Frenkel-Brunswik (1949). She realized that tolerance or intolerance of ambiguity as a personality variable could predict one's behavioral features in ambiguous situations. It shows that when people face with ambiguous situations. Some important characteristics describe that people who have intolerance of ambiguity are : need for certainty, rejection of the unusual or different, authoritarian, dogmatic, rigid, uncreative, anxious, closed minded and aggressive. Ambiguity tolerance was connected in the study of personality. Research shows that TA comes from stressful life events and negative rumination, to depression.

Apart from the role of TA, grammar has a decisive role in learning a language. People quickly learn to communicate using their native language, and soon master the main rules of grammar or syntax without being taught. In fact, we can not communicate efficiently if we do not learn the important principles of grammar. Grammar is so useful for oral communication, dialogue because speaker and listeners use the same code. So grammar is very essential for written communication or any indirect communication because they depend on correct use of grammar as well as vocabulary and spelling, in order to ensure that messages are immediately comprehensible to the reader and not meaningless or ambiguous.

The essential role of ambiguity tolerance-intolerance in learning language is evident. In daily life, individuals spend more time to learn English language. Some people suffer from intolerance of ambiguity. For example, when they face some problems in learning grammar in English language, they can not continue to solve them. Because they have some problems like: rigid, uncreative, anxious, etc... intolerance of ambiguity.

A lot of English learners have difficulty in learning grammar because they have stress and anxious or something like them and they can not learn grammar well. In spite of importance of learning grammar, the teacher should teach it skillfully for learners who have intolerance of ambiguity.

Essential role of ambiguity tolerance-intolerance in learning grammar in foreign language and communicating is clear. Removing students' ambiguity-intolerance is necessary for learning. Many researchers have tried to find some solutions that improve ambiguity-tolerance. In this regard, there are a lot of studies about importance of using some ways to overcome the students' intolerance. By considering important role of the students' TA in learning grammar and in interacting with others, this study can be significant for different reasons: first, there are a lot of studies that have paid attention to this problem, such as Kostko's study (2013) that investigated specific teaching practices that facilitate TA and to reinforce these practices throughout the curriculum of EFL learners, but the researcher is going to study. Second, by teaching grammar allows students to form generalizations about grammatical rules after oral and written practices of examples given in class. However, some students are too easily confused if the rules are not presented directly before practice is

required. Third, when students can improve their TA, learning grammar and communicating will be easy to them, because ambiguity of intolerance should be removed and instead of ambiguity of intolerance should be educated and developed for learning grammar in foreign language.

Based on the importance of TA in learning a FL this study aims to investigate the relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and grammar acquisition by Iranian advanced EFL learners. Accordingly, it was attempted to remove the students' intolerance when they face with some problems of grammar on Iranian advanced EFL learners. It seems that it is necessary to investigate the TA of advanced EFL learners and to find out its relationship with their grammar achievement. The effect of gender was deemed to be of great importance. Therefore the research questions were formulated:

1. How tolerant/intolerant are EFL learners of ambiguity at advanced level?
2. Is there any relationship between grammar achievement and ambiguity tolerance?
3. Are females and males EFL advanced learners different in terms of their tolerance of ambiguity?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

At the beginning of this study, a "TOEFL Actual Tests" was administered among 75 intermediate and advanced EFL learners who were studying English at three language school in Kermanshah. They ranged in age from 16 to 22 years old. The purpose of this test was to make sure whether the participants who had been labeled as intermediate and advanced level participants by the institute were intermediate and advanced EFL learners. The test divided all the participants into three low, intermediate, and high groups in terms of their language proficiency level.

To do so the mean and standard deviation of the gained scores were calculated. Those participants who scored more than one standard deviation above the mean were placed into the high-level group. Those who scored between one standard deviation below and above the mean were considered in the intermediate-level group. And those who scored more than one standard deviation below the mean were placed into the low-level group. Then those learners who were diagnosed as elementary EFL learners were discarded. Interestingly, of 75 EFL learners, 6 were discarded as elementary learners.

3. Design

The design of the study was quantitative using a correlational approach in order to examine the association between EFL learners' TA and grammar achievement.

3.1 Instrumentation

Two tests were administered in the present study:

The first instrument was one of the validated tests of TOFEL test, taken from "Actual test of

TOFEL". The test consists of 30 multiple-choice items and is available in appendix A. It should be added that The TOEFL test was also employed to measure EFL learners' achievement in grammar.

The second instrument was Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) (Ely, 1995). It should be mentioned that some embedded demographic questions were added by the researcher. Although there are other scale for measuring TA available in the literature (e.g. Budner, 1962; Norton, 1975), to the best of the researcher's knowledge, the SLTAS is the only published scale especially designed for measuring ambiguity tolerance in language learning. The version of SLTAS used in this study has 12 items with a four point likert scale. The items aim to measure students' agreement level with statements depicting intolerance of ambiguity in given situations. This version of the SLTAS was previously reported to have high internal consistency (Kazamina, 2000) and was employed in this study with the consent of Professor Christopher M. Ely. In its original version the SLTAS was used with anchors being at 4 (Strongly Agree), 3 (Agree), 2 (Disagree), and 1 (Strongly Disagree). In this current study, however, to avoid any bias and not to make students take a forced decision between a negative or positive choice (Dörnyei, 2001), Ely's SLTAS was modified to have a five point Likert scale, inserting a new anchor 3 (not sure). Moreover, the scale, originally written in English, was translated into Turkish. Back translation measures were taken and no significant semantic shift was detected by two expert readers. The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability for Turkish version of the SLTAS with the five point Likert scale was found to be .75.

3.2 Procedure

The present study was conducted in three language schools in Kermanshah, a city in West of Iran. The procedure began with the first step, which was administering the TOEFL test.

After administering the questionnaire, the researcher collected them. It is worth mentioning that in order to avoid any ambiguity the questionnaire was translated in Persian, the first language of the learners. Through this questionnaire, the EFL learners' tolerance of ambiguity was measured. In order to receive the reliable evaluation by the students, the purpose of completing the questionnaire was explained by the researcher to make the students sure that their views would be kept confidential; besides.

EFL learners' questionnaires were coded numerically and they were asked not to write any names on their questionnaires. Providing some demographic information such as, gender, age, teaching experience, years of studying English and major was essential for the students.

4. Results

4.1 Addressing the First Research Question

The first research question guiding the study was:

How tolerant/intolerant are EFL learners of ambiguity at advanced level?

To identify the level of ambiguity tolerance of the students, descriptive statistics were used.

To avoid any misunderstandings, the readers are reminded that the items in the SLTAS sought respondents' reactions to statements describing intolerance of ambiguity in some language learning contexts. Disagreement with an item, then, is conversely a sign of tolerance. Therefore, while interpreting the data, a mean of 2.00, which the anchor was also for not sure, can be used as the borderline of tolerance/intolerance. Values below this borderline will indicate lower levels of tolerance while those above will suggest more tolerance depending on their distance to the mean score of 2.00. Further, a composite score of tolerance of ambiguity will be referred to rather than treating individual scale items as separate ambiguity indicators. Table 4.1 presents students' mean scores from the SLTAS.

Table 4.1. TA scores from the SLTAS

	Questionnaire Items	N	Mean	SD
1	When I'm reading something in English, I feel impatient when I don't totally understand the meaning	69	3	1.3
2	It bothers me that I don't understand everything the teacher says in English	69	2.5	.43
3	When I write English compositions, I don't like it when I can't express my ideas exactly.	69	3.1	1.03
4	It is frustrating that sometimes I don't understand completely some English grammar	69	3.2	1.06
5	I don't like the feeling that my English pronunciation is not quite correct	69	2.8	1.2
6	I don't enjoy reading something in English that takes a while to figure out completely	69	2.9	1.96
7	It bothers me that even though I study English grammar some of it is hard to use in speaking and writing	69	2.75	1.75
8	When I'm writing in English, I don't like the fact that I can't say exactly what I want	69	2.76	.75
9	It bothers me when the teacher uses an English word I don't know	69	3.66	.36
10	When I'm speaking in English, I feel uncomfortable if I can't communicate my idea clearly.	69	3.65	1.2
11	I don't like the fact that sometimes I can't find English words that mean the same as some words in my own language.	69	3.45	1.4
12	One thing I don't like about reading in English is having to guess what the meaning is.	69	3.25	1.43

As can be seen in the Table, learners are more tolerant of some contexts namely, 9, 10, 11, and 12, while less tolerant of some contexts reportedly 2, 8 and 9

4.2 Addressing the Second Research Question

The second research question was:

2. Is there any relationship between knowledge of grammar and TA?

Table 4.2. Descriptive Statistics on Learners' TA

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
VAR00001	69	21.00	46.00	32.7681	6.40575
VAR00002	69	18.00	37.00	26.2899	4.63078
Valid N (listwise)	69				

The descriptive statistics shows the maximum and minimum scores.

To test null hypotheses, a correlational analysis was executed to calculate the Pearson Correlation Coefficient. The results of the analyses are presented in this section. As Table 4.3 shows, Pearson Correlation Coefficient between Iranian EFL learners' TA and their overall grammar knowledge is found to be ($r = .638$) at significance level of (.000), which is not significant at $p < .05$. Therefore, H_0 is failed to be accepted, and it is revealed that there is a statistically significant relationship between TA and overall grammar knowledge of Iranian EFL learners.

Table 4.3. Pearson Correlation of AT and Grammar Knowledge

		VAR00001	VAR00002
VAR00001	Pearson Correlation	1	.638**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	69	69
VAR00002	Pearson Correlation	.638**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	69	69

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.3 Addressing the Third Research Question

Are females and males different in terms of their tolerance of ambiguity?

Gender is related to many affective constructs in the process of language learning. To identify any gender differences, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The results are

presented in Table 4.5.

Table 4.4. Descriptive Data on TA

	VAR00002	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
VAR00001	1.00	37	35.8108	5.88236	.96705
	2.00	32	29.2500	5.09902	.90139

As can be seen from Table 4.4, although both groups had a mean score that is above the mid-point indicating lower tolerance of ambiguity, female participants appeared to be less TA than their male peers. To further elaborate on this, the distribution of male and female participants to each of the previously identified tolerance groups was explored. An analysis of frequency confirmed the findings from the t-test. These can be seen in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5. *Independent Samples Test*

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
VAR01	1.408	.240	4.911	67	.000	6.56081	1.33587	3.89439	9.22723
			4.963	66.999	.000	6.56081	1.32200	3.92208	9.19954

A careful reading of the frequency analysis in Table 4.5 reveals that, in addition to mean differences in ambiguity scores, there is a significant difference between the males and females sig. = .000 which is lower than alpha decision level which was set as .05. So the null hypothesis can be rejected since the data can show the difference between the male and female participants and consequently the effect of gender on ambiguity tolerance

5. Conclusion

Many researchers have an interest in TA and it is compared with some variables, such as anxiety, empathy, self-esteem, motivation which have discussed and investigated by researchers. Tolerance of ambiguity has a strong influence second language learning process. Tolerance of ambiguity and the use of various strategies relating with specific skills in language learning, as well as the training of learners' TA so to help facilitate in class language learning efficiency as well as after class self-directed language learning.

In whole, English language learners seem to have higher tolerance when confronting ambiguous meanings, unknown words and unfamiliar topics in a text. Teachers can give a voluble insight into their students concerns, needs, learning difficulties by a suitable strategy for grammar acquisition. When teachers achieve such insight, they can help their students explore their learning styles for example: ambiguity tolerance. This is presented in Cohen's (2003) statement which considers the teacher as a "Language coach" (p. 281), who should provide situations for learners to make them aware of their own style performance. Furthermore, it is also vital that teacher tends to be sensitive towards ambiguous situations which worsen learning, and can predict or discover them and deal with them rather than trying to solve them. Designing, helpful activities, teacher's appropriate reaction to what may seem uncertain and ambiguous to learners, the risk taking environment and encouraging learners to take risks and guess all lead to having a suitable content for learners to explore their learning style and level of ambiguity tolerance. White (1999) emphasizes that if ambiguity is not tolerated reasonably, it can involve learners in stressful situations in which language learning and employment of appropriate strategies may be negatively affected. Regarding TA as one of the important variables, it can facilitate language learning.

The aim of this study was to consider the relationship between TA and grammar acquisition by the EFL advanced learners. The results show that high tolerance come over the problems of the grammar. If someone have high tolerance, he/she will solve the hard problems and he/she tries to do them. For gender differences, an independent samples T-test was conducted. It shows that female participants appeared to be less tolerant of ambiguity than their male peers. It was often reported that males are more field-independent than females and therefore can identify details from confusing backgrounds more effectively than their female peers. (Oxford, 1993) female students seem to be impatient and they can not consider the details from confusing situations and need to see them before making a decision. They do not pay attention to the details and impatient to jump to conclusions in ambiguous situations. In this study, findings show that females are less TA in the language classroom than their males peers. This may present us that since females are more intolerant they do not take thing for granted and study more to see the details. A significant correlation between these variables was found, which allows us to conclude that affective and cognitive factors do influence one another. For example, the most students are taught about the grammar they could employ when they do some grammatical problems in a FL, they have more tolerant. The findings suggested that gender have significant impact on EFL learners' tolerance of ambiguity. The understanding of the strong influence of ambiguity tolerance on foreign language learning is great value and should lead to teachers' alternations in planning and implementation of courses so to better help the language learners overcome psychological barriers. If learners are well informed about classroom procedures. They will feel more relaxed, self-assured, and motivated in the language classroom (Dornyei, 2015, Williams & Burden, 1997), which may help lower tolerance of ambiguity. In other words, the use of ambiguity reducing strategies by teacher is essential importance. Teachers are considered to have an important role in assisting learners with their struggle for success in language learning especially when learners encounter with ambiguities. They should increase learners' consciousness of methods, procedures and teaching content as well. The main method to collect data is questionnaire and

some other methods are also used in the investigation for some detailed information, such as classroom observations and individual interview. This study aims to investigate students' level of TA and grammar acquisition. The male group and the female group have significant differences in ambiguity tolerance on learning grammar. Students with higher TA will do better in grammar acquisition to some extent.

Teachers are more likely to give valuable guidance about what and how to learn in the language classroom. Teachers play an important role in the language class because they can give some ambiguity reducing strategies to the students. Students practice the grammar by themselves before their teacher teach it. Next, the determined grammar is taught by the teacher. In this way, this strategy seems to reduce intolerance in the grammar acquisition process, with high tolerance relating to perceived success.

Therefore, this has a clear message for language teachers in that they should be able to identify tasks such as let the students detect the rules for solving the problem of the grammar. Thus helping students to learn how to cope “without appeals to authority” (Ellis, 1994:518)

Teachers play an important role in the language classroom because they can use some useful strategies reducing intolerance of the learners in ambiguous situations. For example, the teacher can give some practices to them without the knowing the rules of that grammar. This way, the students involve in ambiguous situations. The learners generate the rules on their own may be wrong which creates ambiguity as a lack of clarity. This strategy is more ambiguous, may be language learners with more TA are better able to handle the more ambiguous situations. Because the learners who have more TA, they enjoy the ambiguity. This way that the learners learn the grammar by themselves can make them self-confidence and promote the development of TA.

It may be that the learners who have higher TA feel that they can do it and learn well when they handle the rigidity of grammar rules well. For example, “I do not really care if I hear a rule stated since I do not remember rules very well anyway.” which was borrowed from the Learning Style Survey (Cohen et al., 2001).

In whole, many learners are generally less TA and they are more dependent to their teacher. The student who have less tolerant, the teacher should teach the rules of the grammar explicitly because they can not involve in an ambiguous situations. In this study, the grammar are taught in different strategies. The male students can do the task well without the exact rules of the grammar. They come over the ambiguities but the female students try to depend on their teacher what she/he teaches them. To better understanding, the teacher use a mixed methods strategy, which combines together. In language classroom, there are both students who are more or less tolerant of ambiguity then the teacher should consider more the students who have less tolerant of ambiguity because they may struggle or become anxious in ambiguous situations and this anxiety has a negative effect on language learning and the students who have high AT, there is no difference for him/her in ambiguous or unambiguous situations. An individual with low AT evidently refrains from ambiguous stimuli while an individual with high AT regards ambiguous stimuli as appealing (Furnham, 1994). Ambiguity-tolerant learners learn most effectively when they are given chance of experiences,

risks and interactions. On the contrary, ambiguity-intolerant learners learn best in more rigid, more certain, and more structured situations (Reid, 1995).

Some students suffers from intolerance of ambiguity because they may be anxious, aggressive and etc. because of these problems in foreign language learning, the learning will be difficult. The teachers are strongly help the learners to improve their self perception by focusing positive experiences. For such students, language teachers need to update teaching-learning methods that will effectively address these specific difficulties. The instructors should help these students who have difficulties with language class will develop and solve their problems in learning a FL. Therefore, teachers are strongly discussed never to ignore these such students face real language learning difficulties and they must alleviate their intolerance.

Much tolerance of ambiguity can be an strong effect, which make the learners to become wishy-washy, accepting virtually every proposition before them, not efficiently subsuming necessary facts into their cognitive organizational structure”(Brown, 2000, p.120). As Ely (1989) states, language learning is full of uncertainty and there is a considerable amount of ambiguity in learning a FL. In an L2 context, learners are likely to have some difficulties in constructing meaningful interpretation due to the inadequacy of linguistic cues (Chapelle& Roberts, 1986).

The students who have high TA are more successful in foreign language learning because they explore unknown and ambiguous situations. High TA causes to facilitate language learning because it returns to psychological and personal behavior and it is very important in learning process. TA is an important role in language learning. Students who have TA can perceive and accept new information even though it involves many unknown elements. A good teacher knows that he/she is responsible for increasing the students’ TA because ambiguity tolerance affects their grammar acquisition. For these reasons, the instructors should consider a structured, consistent and simple style of teaching process.

As for the limitation of the study, the participants were restricted to 69 EFL learners from one educational context. Thus, it would be better to carry out a study with larger samples from diverse educational contexts in further research. Moreover, the scope of the study was confined to the descriptive data obtained from the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) and the grammar levels test designed to measure only grammar knowledge. Further research may be focused on the investigation of the relationship between TA and different variables. The study aimed to investigate how tolerant are Iranian EFL learners of foreign language ambiguities. It is going on the previous studies that have been explored EFL learners’ level of TA. In the study, the EFL learners were categorized into three different clusters with considered to their ambiguity scores on the grounds that individuals may show various levels of TA and the level of TA for every student is different.

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