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## The Perception of EFL University Students in Tolerance of Ambiguity

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### Abstract

Ambiguity tolerance (AT), is defined as "the degree to which you are cognitively willing to tolerate ideas and propositions that run counter to your belief system or structure of knowledge." Ambiguity tolerance is one of the most important learning styles that focus on the learners' learning more than the methodology. The study aims to investigate the EFL students' perception of ambiguity tolerance. The study is a quantitative descriptive one. The sample of 53 students was selected randomly from the fourth stage at the department of English Language, College of Education for Women/ University of Baghdad. They responded to the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) modified by Erten and Topkaya (2009). The study tool's validity is ascertained by giving the scale to the number of experts to decide its suitability to measure the study aims, while the reliability has been ascertained by using the alpha-Cronbach formula. After finding out the waiting means and percentages of the scale items, the results showed that the degree of tolerance of ambiguity is moderated for all the scale items. This result indicates that the EFL students' willing to tolerate moderately the ambiguity of the foreign language structure and knowledge that run counter to their native language structure and knowledge. Accordingly, several recommendations and suggestions are set forward.

**Keywords:** EFL students, tolerance of ambiguity, university students' perception

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ادراك طلبة الجامعة الدارسي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية لتحمل الغموض

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قسم اللغة الإنكليزية/ كلية التربية للبنات/ جامعة بغداد

**الملخص :** يعرف تحمل الغموض على أنه الدرجة التي يكون الفرد عندها على استعداد معرفي لتحمل الأفكار والاقتراحات التي تتعارض مع نظام معتقداتك أو هيكل معرفتك . يعد تحمل الغموض أحد أهم أساليب التعلم التي تركز على تعلم المتعلمين أكثر من المنهجية. تهدف الدراسة إلى التحقق من تصور طلاب اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية لتحمل الغموض. الدراسة وصفية كمية و تتألف العينة من 53 طالبًا تم اختيارهم عشوائياً من المرحلة الرابعة في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية ، كلية التربية للبنات / جامعة بغداد للعام الدراسي 2020-2021، وقد استجابوا لمقياس التسامح للغة الاجنبية في مقياس الغموض (SLTAS) المعدل بواسطة Erten and Topkaya (2009). تم التحقق من صدق الأداة من خلال عرض المقياس على عدد من الخبراء لتحديد مدى ملاءمتها لقياس أهداف الدراسة ، في حين تم التأكد من الثبات باستخدام صيغة alpha-Cronbach. بعد ايجاد المتوسطات والنسب المئوية لفقرات المقياس ، تظهر النتائج أن درجة تحمل الغموض معتدلة لجميع فقرات المقياس. هذه النتيجة تشير إلى أن طلاب اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية على استعداد لتحمل الغموض بدرجة متوسطة وذلك لغموض بنية اللغة الأجنبية والمعرفتها التي تتعارض مع بنية اللغة الأم ومعرفتها. ووفقاً للنتائج قدمت العديد من التوصيات والاقتراحات.

**الكلمات الدالة:** طلبة اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية، تحمل الغموض، ادراك طلبة الجامعة.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the most significant change in language teaching and learning has been a shift away from a focus on language teaching methodology and toward language learners and learner factors that affect language learning, as mentioned by Saalh & Srayisah (2017) "The psychological and social aspects are as important as intellectual perspectives for language learner. Motivation and attitude are psychological aspects for language learning" 95. The same with Saalh& Kadhim (2020) who presented academic balance as an important factor in learning reading and writing. Individual differences and learning styles have become increasingly important due to this shift in focus, as they are seen to play a critical role in assisting learners in achieving tremendous success in language learning. Ambiguity tolerance (AT), is described as "the degree to which you are cognitively willing to tolerate ideas and propositions that go opposed to your belief system or structure of knowledge"(White, 1999:443). English language learning is very important since it is the most dominating language worldwide (Saalh & Saim, 2020). However, Language learning is fraught with uncertainty, and learning a foreign language is no exception. Due to a lack of linguistic clues, learners in an L2

environment are likely to have some difficulty developing meaningful interpretations. Saalh (2020) presents language learning in Iraq as a real problem that needs to be tackled from different phases. They barely understand the precise meaning of a lexical item, believe they are correctly pronouncing an L2 sound, and comprehend the precise temporal reference of a second language verb form. For some students, ambiguity makes learning a second language interesting, while for others, it makes studying a foreign language incredibly frustrating. As a result, ambiguity is a significant feature of a foreign language learning setting, and it has the potential to inhibit or enhance language learning. It may produce significant levels of stress in learners and have a negative impact on language learning if it is not permitted in a reasonable manner (White, 1999). Because it contains novel linguistic and cultural patterns that are prone to cause misunderstanding among new English learners, the process of learning English can be ambiguous to some level (Abbe, Gulick, & Herman, 2007)

Furthermore, Ellis described AT as "an ability to deal with confusing new inputs without frustration or appeals to authority, allowing for indeterminate rather than strict classification" that can be applied to the learning setting (1994: 518). Accordingly, there is a necessity to investigate the EFL student's perception of this variable since no previous study has investigated this problem.

This study aims to explore the EFL university students' perception of the tolerance of ambiguity. The present study hoped to value both teachers and learners who deal with English foreign language, and it helps students understand the ambiguity in English foreign language sentences and how to talk without any ambiguity.

Many theoretical definitions for tolerance ambiguity are presented, such as:

Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA) is defined as the "tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as desirable" (Budner, 1962:29).

According to Furnham and Ribchester (1995), "refers to the way an individual (or group) perceives and processes information about ambiguous situations when confronted by an array of unfamiliar, complex or incongruent cues . . . The person with low tolerance of ambiguity experiences stress reacts prematurely, and avoids ambiguous stimuli". However, the operational definition is the EFL university students' scores on the TA scale.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1. Ambiguity Tolerance in EFL**

One of the most difficult challenges facing foreign language teachers is responding to individual differences among students. Many teachers plan lessons very carefully, providing various activities for their classes, but all the students do not respond in the same way. Although the same material may be taught the same way to all students, a wide range in performance on an achievement test is common in a typical class. The degree of readiness, such as foreign language proficiency, can be one reason for the different results. However, it is not the only factor that explains the diverse results of the achievement test. The reason for the difference in scores has motivated researchers that examine individual learners. Some studies have looked for the reason for learning styles and cultural differences (Nelson,1995), gender differences, and tolerance of Ambiguity (Ely, 1995). Specifically, tolerance of ambiguity has been shown to affect students' foreign language learning in EFL classes. For example, if an ESL (or an EFL) learner experiences a feeling of threat or discomfort when confronted with linguistic

uncertainty, he/she may be less inclined to take risks and might hesitate, and at last, become less interested in the class.

Norton defines the tendency to perceive or interpret information that is vague, incomplete, fragmented, multiple, probable, unstructured, uncertain, inconsistent, contrary, contradictory, or unclear as actual or potential sources of psychological discomfort or threat as actual or potential sources of psychological discomfort or threat (1975). Ellis (1994) says tolerance of ambiguity can deal with ambiguous new stimuli without frustration and appeal to authority, and it allows for indeterminacy rather than rigid categorization. EFL learners commonly experience a state of uncertainty, and it is a feeling that may inhibit students' risk-taking and interfere with their acquisition of new learning strategies.

In an EFL situation, communicative language teaching is considered one of the most important factors, and task-based learning is considered the most essential component in communicative language teaching. The important criteria of a task design are information gap and uncertainty (Littlejohn & Hicks, 1987).

Some studies investigated the relationship between tolerance of Ambiguity and foreign language teaching. The results obtained by previous studies are inconsistent.

Chapelle and Roberts (1986) report low correlations between tolerance of ambiguity and L2 proficiency. However, most studies report there are correlations between the tolerance of ambiguity and foreign language teaching.

McLain (1993: 189) found that individuals who were more tolerant of ambiguity were more willing to take risks and more receptive to change. Many studies have shown that tolerance of ambiguity could influence students' performance in ESL or EFL classes. However, no research has been conducted that relates to task-based writing in an ongoing EFL classroom.

### **2.1.1. The Concept of Ambiguity Tolerance (AT)**

Throughout the literature, the concept of ambiguity has been described in a variety of ways. It relates to "future uncertainty," according to Johnson (2001:141). It is defined as a 'felt inadequacy of knowledge on a particular stimulus or context,' according to McLain (1993: 183). 'Too little, too much, or seemingly contradicting information is another way to explain ambiguity (Norton, 1975: 607). Kazamina (1999:33) suggests that ambiguity is characterized by newness, complication, insolubility, and shortage of structure. Therefore, an ambiguous situation is characterized by a lack of adequate cues, resulting in an individual's poor rearrangement or categorizing (Budner, 1962: 33). Budner (1962: 29) categorizes ambiguous situations into three basic types: new, complex, and contradictory. On the other hand, the concept of tolerance implies 'begrudging acceptance' while intolerance signifies 'rejection.' To put it another way, tolerance comprises a range of reactions ranging from rejection to desire (McLain, 1993: 183). Therefore, tolerance refers to accepting ambiguous situations, while intolerance entails recognizing uncertainties as impending sources of uneasiness and threat (Norton, 1975: 619). Then, tolerance of ambiguity is how individuals deal with ambiguity when they run into some unknown, complicated, or conflicting cues (Furnham, 1994).

A person with a low ambiguity tolerance avoids ambiguous stimuli, whereas a person with a high ambiguity tolerance finds ambiguous stimuli intriguing (Furnham, 1994:

728). When ambiguity-tolerant students are provided opportunities for experiences, risks, and interactions, they learn the most efficiently. On the other hand, Ambiguity-intolerant students thrive in environments that are more strict, predictable, and structured.

### **2.1.2. Ambiguity tolerance and foreign language learning:**

Else Frenkel-Brunswik (1949) addressed intolerance of ambiguity in her attempt to understand the nature of authoritarianism, which is closely associated with the emergence of ambiguity tolerance as a scientific concept. She concluded that ambiguity tolerance or intolerance as a personality trait could predict one's behavior in unclear situations. In other words, this parameter "generalizes to the various aspects of emotional and cognitive functioning of the individual, characterizing cognitive style, belief and attitude systems, interpersonal and social functioning and problem-solving behavior" (Furnham & Marks, 2013:717).

As Furnham and Marks (2013) pointed out, another terminological challenge is the attempt to discern between ambiguity and uncertainty. When it comes to the phenomenon in issue, most scholars consider ambiguity tolerance and uncertainty tolerance synonymous. However, according to Krohne (Krohne 1989, 1993), ambiguity refers to stimuli, whereas uncertainty refers to one's mental state in response to that experience. According to Grenier et al. (2005), the time-related style of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty differs (present-oriented and future-oriented traits, respectively). It was also discovered that these ideas have various study foci; for example, tolerance of ambiguity is relevant for cognitive and experimental literature, whereas tolerance of uncertainty is employed in the clinical literature (Furnham & Marks, 2013: 717). In addition, Kornilova and Kornilov (2010) suggested distinguishing between tolerance for uncertainty and intolerance. The former is defined as "readiness to make decisions and act in uncertain situations, openness to new ideas, changing stimuli, and changing thinking strategies."

In contrast, the latter is defined as "readiness to make decisions and act in uncertain situations, openness to new ideas, changing stimuli, and changing thinking strategies." "Willingness to seek clarity in the universe (including the world of ideas), rejection of uncertainty in judgments, rigidity, and rationality (as aimed toward getting the most information necessary to conclude)," the latter was defined. It is worth noting that their understanding of uncertainty tolerance is comparable to that of ambiguity tolerance because the two notions share essential characteristics such as openness, novelty, change, and taking risks. Learning a new language is similar to exploring a terra incognita. Foreign language learners constantly encounter various ambiguous stimuli ranging from confusing sounds to exact meaning of vocabulary items or idioms, grammar aspects, or sociocultural issues of the language being acquired (Ely, 1989: 444). However, if this ambiguity is not tolerated reasonably, language learners may get confused and stressed and feel uncomfortable when having trouble with this language (White, 1999: 457). As a result, ambiguity tolerance can be regarded as a factor impeding or facilitating foreign language learning (Kamran, 2011: 20\_33). Therefore, low ambiguity-tolerant students need more support from their teachers to cope with their difficulties in foreign language learning.

Ellis (1994: 445) refers to this construct in the language learning context as "an ability to deal with ambiguous new stimuli without frustration and appeals to authority." According to Brown (2000:225), ambiguity tolerance can be viewed as "the cognitive

willingness to accept ideas and propositions that contradict your belief system or knowledge organization."It is well-recognized that moderate ambiguity tolerance helps language learners to achieve more success in language acquisition (Ely, 1986:437).

### **2.1.3. Ambiguity Tolerance (AT) and Language Learning**

Due to the prevalence of unclear situations in language learning, learning a new language is analogous to exploring an uncharted place. As Ely (1989) points out, ambiguity is conceptualized through uncertainty, which has been observed in various language learning situations. When language learners face new lexical and grammatical structures, they frequently encounter a lack of information, various interpretations, and ambiguity (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Grace, 1998). Learners are expected to cope with language forms and text structures to correctly interpret texts and compensate for the absence of critical aspects. Furthermore, they are continually confronted with various confusing and perplexing sounds, which they believe they have mispronounced (Ely, 1989). The presence of ambiguity influences language learning in either a positive or bad way. Tolerance of ambiguity is a skill that requires dealing with ambiguous new stimuli without becoming irritated or seeking to assist you (Ellis, 1994). Learning linguistic aspects, practicing language learning methods, and adopting those skills as constant strategies are three contexts in which ambiguity tolerance has a negative impact on language learning, according to Ely (1995).

### **2.1.4. How tolerant should learners be of ambiguity?**

Ambiguity is an unavoidable aspect of learning a new language, and people's levels of ambiguity vary. As reviewed above, research indicates that AT is related to achievement in language learning. However, concerns have also been expressed regarding over-tolerance. This is because such high levels of tolerance may result in unquestioned acceptance (Ely, 1995; Kazamina, 1999). Ely maintains that the lack of sensitivity to ambiguous linguistic data may cause early pidginization or fossilization in language development. The question then becomes, "what level of ambiguity is ideal for success in language learning?" It is generally suggested that a moderate tolerance of ambiguity should be beneficial for effective language learning. Ely claims, "the ideal case, of course, is that of the learner who is neither inhibited by low tolerance of ambiguity nor oblivious to linguistics subtleties" (Ely, 1995; Kazamina, 1999).

However, Kazamina (1999) purports that this midpoint has not yet been fully defined. El-Koumy (2000) illustrated that moderately tolerant students were more successful than both high-tolerance and low-tolerance students to elucidate this midpoint. His findings are illustrative of what degree of tolerance is suitable for language learning and reading comprehension. More research is needed, however, to fully comprehend the nature of AT and its role in the process of reading in a foreign language.

## **2.2. Previous Studies**

### **2.2.1. Eui-Kap Lee (2003)**

#### **The Effects of Tolerance of Ambiguity on EFL Task-Based Writing**

This study aimed to look at the EFL task-based writing of Korean university students with varying levels of ambiguity tolerance. With this in mind, the current study intended to determine whether or not a low level of ambiguity tolerance interferes with task-based writing performance and how a low level of ambiguity tolerance is associated with task-based writing proficiency. Results showed that the degree of tolerance of Ambiguity affected the writing performance. In a holistic scoring system, the high tolerance of ambiguity (HTA) group achieved a better score than the low tolerance of

ambiguity group (LTA), and the influence of tolerance of ambiguity varied with L2 proficiency. The results also indicated that HTA and LTA groups' scorings on the components of organization and vocabulary in an analytic scoring system were different. Finally, this study suggests that tolerance of ambiguity should be considered an important factor for low proficient students in foreign language writing and that explicit and direct directions should be included to diminish the uncertainty in an EFL task-based writing class.

### **2.2.2. Atamanovaa and Bogomazb (2014)**

#### **Ambiguity Tolerance as a Psychological Factor of Foreign Language Communicative Competence Development**

This study aimed to see a link between engineering students' ambiguity tolerance and their communication skills in English as a second language. According to the study's findings, this potential personal component impacts students' qualitative communicative skill growth. In addition, it was discovered that several other elements of the student's potential, such as dedication, challenge, tenacity, present orientation, and self-worth, could contribute to the process under investigation.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Study design**

This study is a quantitative descriptive study. The quantitative study is a research method that deals with quantifying and analyzing variables to get results. It involves numerical data utilization and analysis using specific statistical techniques to answer questions such as: who, how much, what, where, when, how many, and how. Expanding on this definition describes quantitative research methods as explaining an issue or phenomenon through gathering data in numerical form and analyzing with the aid of mathematical methods, in particular statistics (Aliaga and Gunderson, 2002:5). The goal of descriptive research is to describe phenomena and their features. This study is more interested in what happened than how or why it happened. As a result, data is frequently collected through observation and survey methods (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007:86).

### **3.2. Population and Sample**

Fourth-stage university students from the Department of English, College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, are chosen as the population of the present study. The total population is (105) students, (and 53) responded to the questionnaires as a randomly selected sample.

### **3.3. Instrument**

The data are intended to be collected through the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) modified by Erten and Topkaya (2009).

The 5-point Likert scale (always, sometimes, neutral, rarely, never) is used for rating the responses.

### **3.4. Face Validity**

Validity is the degree to which the results can be accurately interpreted and effectively generalized (Brown and Rodgers, 2004: 241). The observational checklist is given to the jury members listed in Table (1) to assure its face validity, and the jury members agree on the entire checklist component as valid.

#### **Table (1)**

**The Academic Ranks, Names, Fields, and Locations of the Jury Members**

N	Academic Rank	Name.	Fields	College.
1.	Prof. Dr.	Shatha Kathem Alsaadi	EFL	College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad.
2.	Asst. Prof. Dr.	Ban Jafar	EFL	College of Education for Women University of Baghdad
3.	Asst. Prof. Dr.	Hanan Dhia Alsalihi	EFL	College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad.
4.	Asst. Prof.	Maysaa Rashed	EFL	College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad
5.	Asst. Prof.	Narmeen Mahmood	EFL	College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad
6.	Inst. Dr	Sawsan Saud Aziz	EFL	College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad

**3.5. Reliability**

Reliability is the degree of accuracy with which a given test or a set of scores measures whatever it is measuring (Verma & Beard, 1981:86). The internal reliability is represented by the Alpha-Cronbach reliability coefficient (0.72), which is considered acceptable

**3.6. Statistical tools**

The SPSS program is used to find out the reliability factor and the weighting means and frequencies of the items.

**4. Results and their discussions, Conclusions, Recommendations, and Suggestions**

**4.1. Results and their discussions**

The weighting means and percentages of the items are used to explore the EFL student-teachers' perceptions of Ambiguity Tolerance. Table (2) shows that the highest items weighting means and percentages are the item number (11) "I do not like the fact that sometimes I cannot find English words that mean the same as some words in my language" with weighting means (3.83) respectively. The percentages are. (76.6) and this item is the strongest item among the scale items. The second highest item is item number (1). When I am reading something in English, I feel impatient when I do not understand the meaning) with weighting means (3.86) and percentage (73.6) and it is a moderate item

the lowest items weighting means. Percentages are the item number (7) "It bothers me that even though I study English grammar, some of it is hard to use in speaking and writing" with weighting means (3.09) respectively, and the percentages are. (61.8) and this item is the lowest item among the scale's items. The second-lowest item is item number (12) "One thing I do not like about reading in English is having to guess what the meaning is." with weighting means (3.28) and percentages (65.6), and it is a moderate item. As a result, students' perceptions of Ambiguity of Tolerance are moderated.



**Table (2)**

**The alternatives' frequencies of the items, weighting means, percentages, and the item strength**

N	Items	Alternatives' Frequencies					Weighting Means	Percentages	Item Strength
		Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Neutral (3)	Sometimes (4)	Always (5)			
1.	11	4	5	7	17	20	3.83	76.6	strong
2.	1	3	1	16	23	10	3.68	73.6	moderate
3.	5	5	3	17	9	19	3.64	72.8	moderate
4.	4	4	8	12	16	13	3.5	70	moderate
5.	9	6	7	12	12	16	3.47	69.4	moderate
6.	2	5	5	18	13	12	3.41	68.2	moderate
7.	3	6	8	14	10	15	3.38	67.6	moderate
8.	8	7	5	14	15	12	3.38	67.6	moderate
9.	10	8	7	14	7	17	3.34	66.8	moderate
10.	6	12	2	10	15	14	3.32	66.4	moderate
11.	12	6	8	17	9	13	3.28	65.6	moderate
12.	7	10	11	9	10	13	3.09	61.8	moderate

#### **4.2. Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the EFL university students' perception of the tolerance of Ambiguity .The results show that the students' perception of Ambiguity of Tolerance is moderated. However, item number one is strong in AT

#### **4.3. Recommendations**

1. The teachers should give attention to the effect of tolerance of ambiguity on the students of English foreign language.
2. Design activities that help the students to minimize the degree of Tolerance ambiguity.

#### **4.4. Suggestions**

1. Studying the effect of Tolerance ambiguity on the teachers of the English foreign language in secondary schools
2. Studying the role of some activities in limiting the effect of Tolerance ambiguity on the students.

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