

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

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Abstract

This study was designed to investigate EFL task-based writing of Korean university students who differed in the degree of tolerance of ambiguity. With this goal, the present study attempted to explore whether or not a low degree of tolerance of ambiguity interferes with the performance of task-based writing and how a low degree of tolerance of ambiguity is related to the 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 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 in an analytic scoring system, HTA and LTA groups' scorings on the components of organization and vocabulary were different. Finally, this study suggests that tolerance of ambiguity should be considered as an important factor for the 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.

. BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PROBLEMS

One of the most difficult challenges facing foreign language teachers is responding to individual differences among students. Many teachers plan lessons very carefully, providing a variety of activities for their classes, but all the students do not respond in the same way. Although the same material may be taught in 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 of the reason or the different results. But it is not the only factor that explains the diverse results of the achievement test.

The reason for the difference in scores has motivated researches that examine individual learners. Some studies have looked for the reason from learning styles (Ash, 1986; Ehrman & Oxford, 1988; Dunn & Price, 1981; Hunt, 1981; Reid, 1987), cultural differences (Nelson, 1995), gender differences (Oxford, 1993), and tolerance of ambiguity (Ely, 1995). Specifically, tolerance of ambiguity has been shown to affect the performance of students in learning foreign language 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 (1975) considers intolerance of ambiguity as a tendency to perceive or interpret information marked by vague, incomplete, fragmented, multiple, probable, unstructured, uncertain, inconsistent, contrary, contradictory, or unclear meanings as actual or potential sources of psychological discomfort or threat. Ellis (1994) says tolerance of ambiguity is an ability to deal with ambiguous new stimuli without frustration and without appeal to authority. It allows for indeterminacy rather than rigid categorization. The state of uncertainty is commonly experienced by EFL learners, and it is a feeling that may inhibit students' risk taking and interfere with their acquisition of new learning strategies (Ely, 1995).

In an EFL situation, communicative language teaching is considered as one of the most important factors and task-based learning is considered as the most essential component in communicative language teaching. The important criteria of a task design are information gap and uncertainty (Littlejohn & Hicks, 1987; Morrow, 1981).

There were some studies investigating 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. But most studies report there are correlations between the tolerance of ambiguity and foreign language teaching. Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, & Todesco (1978) found tolerance of ambiguity was significantly related to listening comprehension scores but not to imitation test scores. McLain (1993) found that individuals who were more tolerant of ambiguity were also 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.

Therefore, the first objective of the present study is to investigate whether the degree of tolerance of ambiguity influences the EFL task-based writing. In addition, since this study was conducted in university general English classes where students' writing proficiencies were mixed, the second objective of this study is to examine the influence of tolerance of ambiguity on students with low, intermediate, and high degree of writing proficiency. Finally, among the five types of assessment components, such as content, organization, structure, vocabulary, and mechanics, this study examined the components that are affected by the tolerance of ambiguity.

The following specific research questions were investigated:

1. Is there any significant difference in scores between the output of the high tolerance of ambiguity (HTA) group and that of the low tolerance of ambiguity (LTA) group ?
2. If so, how is the difference related to the students' writing proficiency and which components of assessment are influenced most by the degree of tolerance of ambiguity?

. Method

This chapter describes participants, instrumentation, writing assessment, materials, procedures of this study.

1. Participants

The sample consisted of 93 undergraduate students in Seoul National University, Korea. They were enrolled in the spring semester of 1999. As no placement test was administered to them, they differed in their English writing proficiency. In this study, a task-based writing project was given to the participants. Those who completed the task were included as the participants. Their English proficiencies were compared.

As a composition is the integration of organization, grammar, and vocabulary etc., the initial similarities of HTA and LTA were established by comparing the student's score on a model TEPS grammar test, that of the Korean Scholastic Aptitude Test that they had taken as an entrance examination in November '98, and that of a brief summary writing at the beginning of the semester. As the descriptive statistics for these measures is summarized in Table 1, there were no significant English proficiency differences between LTA and HTA.

TABLE 1
Means and Standards of HTA and LTA

Variable	LTA (n=53)		HTA (n=42)		p
	M	SD	M	SD	
TEPS	40.3/50	13.31	39.2/50	12.21	.71
KSAT	46.5/50	4.68	44.9/50	3.34	.97
Summary	81.6/100	12.01	78.3/100	14.52	.40

In addition, the participants are assumed to be homogeneous in the sense that 1) officially most of them started their English learning in the first year of their middle school, 2) most of them have learned English with the same kind of textbooks, which had been written under the guidance of the National Curriculum before they entered college, 3) they have rarely had opportunities to be exposed to natural English outside the classrooms. Even in the classrooms they seldom have access to the English language in natural contexts.

2. Instrumentation

To measure the degree of the tolerance of ambiguity, several indicators were considered.

1) Measuring Tolerance of Ambiguity

The first step in trying to decide the influence of tolerance/intolerance of ambiguity is to develop a means of measuring the construct. Some researchers have used the scale of Budner (1962), a later one revised by Norton (1975) or Ely's (1995) new version. But they have too small or too limited items of question to decide the degree of tolerance. In this study an adapted scale of the University of Houston (1999) was used as an instrument of deciding the degree of tolerance of ambiguity.

In this study a 30-item scale was developed which repeatedly ask some questions in a little different way to increase the reliability of each item. The adapted version of TA scale was used as a tolerance of ambiguity scale for the participants.

2) Degree of Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA)

The degree of tolerance of ambiguity (TA) was divided into two levels: high tolerance of ambiguity (HTA) and low tolerance of ambiguity (LTA). High tolerance of ambiguity was defined as a score of 1.5 or above on the TA Scale, and low tolerance of ambiguity was defined as a score of -1.5 or below on the same scale.

In this study the participants with mid-range scores (whose scores separate the second and third quartiles) were excluded from the participant pool. This step allowed for more differentiation in the low tolerance of ambiguity group (LTA) and the high tolerance of unambiguity (HTA) group. However, the major type of the participants was LTA (82%).

3. Writing Assessment

There are two major scoring schemes in use for evaluating compositions: holistic scoring and analytic scoring (Cohen, 1995). Holistic scoring calls for the evaluator to rate overall writing proficiency on a single rating scale. But one score does not provide enough information to the rater or the score users. Analytic scoring breaks the performance down into component parts for rating on multiple scales. In this rating system raters can rate more easily because there is an explicit set of analytic scales. On the other hand, there is no assurance that analytic scales will be used according to the given criteria; rating on one scale may influence rating on another. Moreover writing is more than the sum of its parts (Cohen, 1995). Therefore in this study both scoring systems were applied for the assessment of the subjects' outputs.

4. Materials

This section covers the definition of a task in communicative language teaching and a writing task chosen for this study.

1) The Definition of a Task

According to Nunan (1989: 6), "a task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form." The most important purpose of a task-based teaching is to provide opportunities for communication to take place in the classroom (Littlejohn & Hicks, 1987).

Johnson and Morrow (1981) list five basic features of communication which we thus expect to be considered in the design of a language task.

First, sentences occur not in isolation but in the context of a discourse. Second, the main purpose of communication is to bridge an information gap. Third, as the result of

the above-mentioned information gap criterion, interlocutors are always in a state of uncertainty as to how exactly the discourse will proceed. Fourth, interlocutors have a purpose in communicating each other. This means that what decides an utterance is dependent on its location within the discourse, the social roles, topic and setting, and what the interlocutor intends to get out of his/her encounter. Fifth, communications mean interlocutors to attend to many factors at the same time.

From the learner's viewpoint, a task is an activity which requires learners to do their own performances free from strict regulations. Their tasks are not to be pre-determined. So it is deeply related to the tolerance of ambiguity. Tolerance of ambiguity is one of the most important factors in task-based activities.

2) Writing Materials

According to the Johnson and Morrow's criteria, many writing textbooks were considered to choose as a task-based writing. Considering the level of the participants, one of the tasks in Hamp-Lyons and Heasley's (1993) 'Study Writing' was chosen (see Appendix). Nunan (1989) had suggested them as a typical type of task.

5. Procedures and Research Design

The participants in this study consisted of 53 members of an LTA (low tolerance of ambiguity) group and 42 members of an HTA (high tolerance of ambiguity) group. A task-based writing material was given to the participants. They were guided by the teacher according to the procedures presented in the teaching material. After 45 minutes pre-writing activities the participants were given the main assignment as homework. The final drafts were collected on April, 1999. The researcher collected, analyzed, and scored their works. The participants received the teacher's score chart and comments.

In this study we have two independent variables: proficiency level (low, intermediate, high) and the degree of tolerance of ambiguity (HTA, LTA) and one dependent variable, the score of the writing task.

In examining the influence of the two independent variables on the score of the writing task, two-way ANOVA was conducted through SPSS, Version 7.5.

. RESULTS

The data were subjected to two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) in order to test the first two research questions of this study: 1) Does the tolerance of ambiguity have an effect on the EFL college students' writing proficiency? and 2) Which writing proficiency group (high, intermediate, low) was influenced most by the tolerance of ambiguity?

The means and standard deviations of the scores of the LTA and HTA groups are presented in Table 2. The means and standard deviations of LTA and HTA scores

suggest strong main effects for both independent variables (proficiency level and the degree of tolerance of ambiguity). Compared with LTA's total writing scores (M=65.83), HTA's total score (M=70.85) was significantly different ($p<.05$).

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations of the Writing Task

Level	LTA							HTA						
	n	Con	Org	Str	Voc	Mec	Total	n	Con	Org	Str	Voc	Mec	Total
Low	19	13.64	9.09	14.09	9.09	3.09	49.12	12	12.50	11.00	18.30	14.00	3.40	57.2
		3.23	3.02	3.75	3.02	.70	3.63		4.86	3.94	4.72	3.16	.69	4.21
Inter	16	21.75	15.70	21.25	16.00	3.30	64.13	18	18.44	14.38	28.44	13.69	3.31	78.32
		4.94	2.52	3.93	3.47	1.26	3.82		4.37	4.79	6.76	4.88	.48	5.23
High	18	26.85	11.62	15.00	13.59	2.74	83.60	12	28.50	17.00	18.50	16.70	4.40	95.04
		2.82	3.89	5.37	3.98	1.06	4.38		2.42	2.58	2.42	2.50	.97	2.69
Total	53						65.83	42						70.85
							3.98							4.32

* Maximum total score: Content=30, Organization= 20, Structure= 25 Vocabulary= 20, Mechanics= 5

Table 3 shows the result of 3 (proficiency levels)×2 (the degree of TA) ANOVA for the dependent variable, holistic writing score. The two-way ANOVA score of $F=234.1$, $df=1$, for the independent variable (TA), significant at the $p<.05$ level, confirms the difference between the score of LTA and HTA groups. Thus, in answer to the first research question, the result suggests that tolerance of ambiguity does influence EFL college students' writing ability.

TABLE 3
Skeletal Source Table for the 3×2 ANOVA:
Dependent Variable, Writing Total Score

		Dependent Variable Writing Total Score	
Source of Variation	df	F	p
Main Effect			
I. Levels	1	23.69	.000
II. Degree of Tolerance of Ambiguity	2	234.10	.000
Interaction Effects			
I×II	2	8.10	.001
Simple Effects By Level			
1.Low(LTAvs.HTA)	1	15.90	.001
2. Inter.(LTAvs.HTA)	1	.145	.706
3.High(LTAvs.HTA)	1	.009	.924

Table 3 also shows the result of interaction effects of the two independent variables:

proficiency level and the degree of ambiguity. A significant interaction between the two factors, $F=8.10$, $p=.001$, indicates that all of the three HTA groups (low, intermediate, high) have significantly different scores from those of LTA groups.

In order to test whether the score of each proficiency group is statistically significant or not, the simple effects test was conducted. The results of the simple effects test show that while there are statistically significant differences between the LTA and HTA scores on the low proficiency group, there is no statistically significant difference between the HTA and LTA of the intermediate proficiency group and the high proficiency group (See Table 2). The results suggest that although the high proficiency group and the intermediate group gained scores in HTA group, the difference was not statistically meaningful. The results also indicate that although students in the high proficiency group and the intermediate group benefited from their temperament, the benefit was less than the low proficiency group.

The last research question of the present study was: "Which component of the assessment was affected by the TA. In order to answer the research question, separate analyses of variance were performed on each of the five dependent variables: scores for content, organization, structure, vocabulary, and mechanics. Table 4 presents the results of 3×2 ANOVA for the dependent variables: content. The main effect for the independent variable, TA, $F=16.707$, $p>.05$, indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in scores for content. It suggests that HTA students did not get significantly better score than LTA students in content.

TABLE 4
Skeletal Source Table for the 3×2 ANOVA:
Dependent Variable, Content

Variable	Dependent Variable		
Sources of Variance	df	F	P
Main Effects			
1. Levels	2	1110.777	.000
2. TA	2	16.707	.157
Interaction Effects			
Level x TA	2	3.240	.044

Table 5 shows the results of 3×2 ANOVA for the dependent variable, organization. The main effect shows the strong effect of TA on students' organization in writing is statistically significant.

TABLE 5
Skeletal Source Table for the 3×2 ANOVA:
Dependent Variable, Organization

Variable	Dependent Variable		
Sources of Variance	df	F	P
Main Effects			
1.Levels	2	108.609	.000
2. TA	1	4.876	.030
Interaction Effects			
Level x TA	2	2.911	.060

The results 3×2 ANOVA for the dependent variable, the score of vocabulary are shown in Table 6. The main effect for the independent variable TA, $F=1.249$, $p<.05$, also shows no significant effect of the TA on students' ability to structure in writing.

TABLE 6
Skeletal Source Table for the 3×2 ANOVA:
Dependent Variable, Structure

Variable	Dependent Variable		
Sources of Variance	df	F	P
Main Effects			
1.Levels	2	6.588	.002
2. TA	1	1.249	.267
Interaction Effects			
Level x TA	2	4.312	.016

The results 3×2 ANOVA for the dependent variable, vocabulary are shown in Table 7. The main effect for the independent variable TA, $F=9.344$, $p<.05$, also shows the strong effect of the TA on students' score of vocabulary in writing.

TABLE 7
Skeletal Source Table for the 3×2 ANOVA:
Dependent Variable, Vocabulary

Variable	Dependent Variable		
Sources of Variance	df	F	P
Main Effects			
1.Levels	2	14.887	.000
2. TA	1	9.344	.003
Interaction Effects			
Level x TA	2	4.088	.020

Table 8 shows the results of 3×2 ANOVA for the dependent variable, the score of mechanics. The result shows that the independent variable TA does not have significant effect on students' score of mechanics.

TABLE 8
Skeletal Source Table for the 3×2 ANOVA:
Dependent Variable, Mechanics

Variable	Dependent Variable		
Sources of Variance	df	F	P
Main Effects			
1. Levels	2	1.521	.224
2. TA	1	7.384	.008
Interaction Effects			
Level × TA	2	3.525	.034

. DISCUSSION

Researches in the L1 and L2 writing fields have shown that tolerance of ambiguity (TA) should be considered as an important factor in EFL classes (Chapelle, 1983; Ely, 1986, 1989, 1995). Although some studies have claimed that the positive effect of tolerance of ambiguity and EFL, there have been relatively few studies to investigate the effect of TA on students' writing proficiency in an ongoing EFL college writing classroom situation.

The results of this study provides the support for the educational effect of TA on EFL college writing classes. The results of this study show that the high tolerance of ambiguity group (HTA) and the low tolerance of ambiguity group (LTA) have significantly different scores when they perform a task-based writing. HTA got better scores than LTA. They showed significant differences in a holistic assessment though their general English proficiency was not different.

The results of this study also demonstrate that although LTA group and HTA group have significant difference in their holistic scores, the difference resulted mainly from that of the low proficiency group. The results of this study clearly demonstrate that the effects of TA are sharply different to the learners according to the proficiency level. Though many L1 and L2 writers have demonstrated that the awareness of temperament type can be helpful to teach EFL writers, no study has tried to investigate the interaction of TA and proficiency level. The students in the low proficient group exhibited sharp differences according to their TA. The HTA group in low proficient group might not be aware how to perform a task successfully prior to specific directions or might not utilize those directions actively even though they might be aware of the directions. Whereas, the HTA students in the intermediate and the high proficiency group did not show significant differences between HTA and LTA. Low proficient students who do not like indeterminacy did not perform well in writing a task-based free writing which needs the student's own independent process. In other words, intermediate and high proficiency groups utilized the uncertainty rather than set strict directions regardless of their tendency of TA. The finding may explain the reason why the amount of information that can be included in the directions given to the low proficiency group should be relatively more than that given to the intermediate or high proficiency group. From these findings, it can be claimed that detailed instructions which

can diminish the indeterminacy of performing a task can be very helpful for less able writers, though it still helps more able writers in enhancing their writing ability.

Another finding of this study was that while low proficient HTA and LTA students show differences in their holistic scores, their analytic scores show that the HTA and LTA group have significant differences in their scores of organization and vocabulary. The organization item in the analytic scoring system includes the organization of paragraphs, the use of clear topic and summary sentences, and the degree of easiness to follow. The low proficiency LTA students had lower scores in organization: paragraph building and clear expression of topic or key sentences. The vocabulary item had two scoring scales. One is breadth: how many new items of word or idioms he/she used. The other is correctness: whether the use of the vocabulary is correct. Most low proficient LTA students used less new words than HTA. It seems that they tried to avoid risks and sacrificed new words for correct use. They had fewer new words but they used them relatively correctly.

This finding suggests that many LTA students in the low proficiency group might not be aware how to perform a task successfully prior to specific directions or might not utilize those directions actively even though they might be aware of them, whereas the HTA and LTA students in the intermediate and the high proficiency group might already know how to perform an independent task effectively. This may explain the reason why the amount of information that can be included in the direction should be raised for the low proficient students.

This study has been focused on the negative aspects of disliking uncertainty, of tolerance of ambiguity, in L2 task-based writing. If Intolerance of ambiguity can have a harmful effect on low proficient LTA students, does it follow that it is helpful for students to be very tolerant of ambiguity? Though this study shows that HTA have higher scores in both holistic and analytic scores, it is not proved that high tolerance of ambiguity can have positive effects on the high or intermediate proficient groups.

. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of tolerance of ambiguity on a task-based writing ability of EFL university students. It also aimed to obtain answers for the differential effect of the tolerance of ambiguity on the students according to their proficiency level. The findings of this study showed that the participants, divided by the degree of tolerance of ambiguity, show significantly different scores of a task-based writing. This study also demonstrated that the degree of TA has much influence on the performance of a task-based free writing. The amount of difference made by the low proficient group was found to be much greater than that made by the intermediate and the high proficiency writing group. The study revealed that the students' writing proficiency was the most important factor of the effect of TA. These findings suggest that for low proficient LTA students, some different approaches are needed to have them perform their writing tasks more successfully which will help them improve their writing proficiency.

Given that one of the most important goals of teaching writing is to help the

students develop as strategic and independent writers, several suggestions for EFL writing teachers can be made on the basis of the findings of this study. First, from these findings, it can be claimed that detailed instructions which can diminish the indeterminacy of a task can be very helpful for less able LTA writers. In addition, more advanced writers find detailed instructions enhancing their writing skills, as well. More importantly, teachers should be instructed on the value and usefulness of indeterminacy in L2 writing. Second, LTA writers, particularly less proficient writers should be given intensive and direct instruction on paragraph building and organization of the writing. And they should be taught how to retrieve their vocabulary from their vocabulary store more easily. In conclusion, the results of the study suggest that in a foreign language writing pedagogy, more detailed directions would benefit the low proficient LTA students. At the same time, students should be taught to utilize the indeterminacy for their free writing.

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Appendix

Writing Task

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There are basically two ways of organizing a description of a place. One way is to describe it as if it was being seen from the air (a bird's eye view). The other is to describe it from the point of view of a journey through it (a pedestrian's view). The description may need to be very detailed as, for example, when a novelist is describing a scene; or it can be rather general, as when a student is describing a geographical area as background to an agricultural experiment; or it can be very technical, as when an entomologist is describing the marking on a rare butterfly.

Task 1

Read this text, which describes a geographical area of East Africa, and then, working with another student:

- a) decide whether it is written from a bird's eye view or from a pedestrian's view;
- b) draw an outline map of the area to accompany the text;
- c) decide what changes you would need to make in the text if you rewrote it from the other point of view.

As the Rift Valley sweeps northwards out of Kenya and into Ethiopia, it forms the spectacular Lake Turkana basin. The long, shallow waters of the lake, which stretches 155 miles north to south and up to 35 miles east to west, sparkle green in the tropical sun: someone called it the Jade Sea, a very apt name. At the south a barrier of small volcanic hills prevents the lake spreading further down into the arid lands of northern Kenya. From the west side rises the Rift Valley wall, a range of mountains with some peaks of more than 5000 feet. This is the land of the Turkana people, a tall, elegant pastoralist tribe. Beyond are the mountains and forests of Uganda. Pouring its silt-laden waters into the north end of the lake is the River Omo, a huge river that drains the Ethiopian Highlands to the north, and meanders tortuously as it nears its end at the border with Kenya where it reaches the Jade Sea. Where the river reaches the lake the sudden barrier to its progress forces it to dump its burden of silt, so creating an enormous delta.

Task 2

The following text describes the same area as in Task 1, but in a different period of time and from a different point of view. Read the text and draw an outline map to accompany it. When you have completed your outline map, compare it with a map drawn by other student.

Suppose now, we are back on the eastern shores of Lake Turkana 2 1/2 million years ago. Standing by the shore we would be aware of crocodiles basking in the tropical heat on sand-spits pointing finger-like into the shallow water. A little more than five miles away to the east savanna-covered hills rise up from the lake basin, sliced here and there by forest-filled valleys. At one point the hills are breached by what is obviously a large river that has snaked its way down from the Ethiopian mountains. Where the river reaches the flood-plain of the lake it shatters into delta of countless streams, some small, some large, but each fringed by a line of trees and bushes.

As we walk up one of the stream beds—dry now because there has been no rain for months—we might hear the rustle of a pig in search of roots and vegetation in the undergrowth. As the tree-cover thickens we catch a glimpse of a colobus monkey retreating through the tree top. Lower down, mangobeys feed on the ripening figs. In the seclusion of the surrounding bushes small groups of impala and water-buck move cautiously. From the top of a tree we could see out into the open, where herds of gazelle graze.

After going about a mile up the stream we come across a scene that is strangely familiar. Before us is a group of eight creatures—definitely human-like, but definitely not truly human—some on the stream bed and some on its sandy bank.

Task 3

Choose your own map and describe the place intended to be part of a letter to a guest planning to visit the place in the map.

(Adapted from Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 1987, pp.10-11)