

## **A Study of EFL Students' Perspective on Ambiguity Tolerance**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research aims to investigate the EFL students' perspective on ambiguity tolerance. The researcher used a descriptive qualitative approach for this research. To collect the data, the researcher used the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) as the instrument. This research involved 30 students of the 5th semester of Tidar University Magelang as the participant. The result shows that the participants have low ambiguity tolerance in the term reading and listening and more tolerance in speaking and writing.

**Keywords;** *Ambiguity Tolerance, EFL Students, Language Learning, Perspective.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this era, English has become the language that has the fastest growing language in the world. English also occupies a commercial language status because English can connect the people from the East, West, North, until the South. This language is also used worldwide and almost in all fields (Rao, 2019). Therefore, English is used as an international language now. In the Indonesian context, English was used as a foreign language (EFL), not as a second language (SFL) like in Malaysia, Singapore, India, etc. Su (2008) in (Kung, 2018) stated that English has different prestige status from another foreign language.

Shu Dingfang (1994) in (Si, 2019) argue that foreign language and second language can be distinguished according to the language environment, language input and affective factors that affect the learning process and so on. Therefore, EFL is using in context to teach English in the monolingual group in their own country. Meanwhile, ESL uses in teaching English in multilingual groups in a country where English is as dominant as the mother tongue.

In the process of learning foreign language, the students will face ambiguity or ambiguous situations. Many ambiguous situations are encountered in language learning. It is because both cultural knowledge and linguistic input often have uncertain conditions (Alahdadi & Ghanizadeh, 2017). That is why the students must have ambiguity tolerance to deals with it.

Merrotsy (2013) in (Furnham & Marks, 2013) said that by Frenkel-Brunswik (1948) was the first who develop the concept of ambiguity tolerance, and it has attracted many researchers to carry out similar research over the last 60 years. In considering ambiguity

tolerance, we will inevitably face the problem of whether to consider personality style or cognitive style variables (M Ely, 1989).

Ambiguity tolerance or also referred to as cognitive flexibility, ego boundarie, or language ego (Nosratinia et al., 2013), has many definitions. Ambiguity was usually appeared in unfamiliar situations, or in a complex, unstructured, and contradicted situations (Genç, 2016). Budner (1962) in (Weissenstein et al., 2014) defines ambiguity tolerance as the person's tendency to receive ambiguous situations in the situation that they want. Ehrman (1993), as cited in (Vahedi & Fatemi, 2016), defines ambiguity tolerance as the individual's ability to accept the new or unfamiliar informations and hold the incomplete informations. It can help the learners to deal with second language learning ambiguous situations.

While Chappelle and Roberts (1986), as cited in (Kocaman & Pamukoglu, 2018), said that ambiguity tolerance is the ability of an individual to handle and manage the stress experienced due to ambiguity or unclear interpretation of all stimuli. It includes the tolerance for grammatical, lexical, and phonological ambiguities (Ely, 1995) in (Kimura, 2016).

Moreover, Ely (1989) in (Başöz, 2015) defines ambiguity tolerance as the tolerance of uncertainties. In language learning, tolerance can be translated as the ability of the person to deal with new unclear stimuli without feeling frustrated and stress. Hence, high ambiguity tolerance will bring many benefits, which helps the students become more confident in their social interaction. The people with high ambiguity tolerance will still be comfortable maintaining a conversation even if there are foreign words that they do not understand.

On the other hand, based on (Brown, 2000), too much tolerance of ambiguity is terrible and can be detrimental. One of the destructive effects is that it can make people "wishy-washy" or inconsistent. Excessive ambiguity tolerance can also have the effect of preventing or hampering a good idea from arising. As an example in linguistic rules, people with extreme tolerance for ambiguity may not integrate it effectively into the whole system. On the contrary, they might gulp down the meaningless information and learn it by rote.

Ehrman (1993; 1999) in (Erten & Topkaya, 2009) saying that there are three different levels of ambiguity tolerances: entering, proper ambiguity tolerance, and accommodation. At the first level of ambiguity tolerance, tolerance will allow the learners to accept the linguistic input. At this level, the students who have an ambiguity tolerance can receive and interpret the new pieces of information even though there are many elements in the knowledge that they do not know. At the second level, the students can hold the incomplete information or contradict without either rejecting it. At this level, the students have been able to handle conflicting or incomplete information. The last stage at this level is taken constructivist psychology (Piaget, 1967), and at this level, the students can involve themselves in adaption according to new material.

In line with the explanation above, Furnham (1994) in (J.-M. Dewaele & Li, 2013) points out that ambiguity tolerance investigation can be used in various psychology study branches. Furthermore, according to Kamran (2009), as cited in (Chiang, 2016), in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) tolerance of ambiguity has a significant impact on the students' ability to master it.

This research aimed to analyze the EFL students' perspective on ambiguity tolerance. The study focused on how much ambiguity tolerance that students have. The researcher is interested in the topic "ambiguity tolerance" because the researcher wants to know more about how much students have an ambiguity tolerance in learning English as their foreign language.

## METHOD

This research applied a qualitative study. According to McMillan and Schumacher (1993), as cited in (Astalin, 2013), qualitative research is an inductive process that organized the data into categories and identifies the relationships between them. While Aspers and Corte (2019) in (Kalman, 2020) defines that qualitative research as a process that is carried out repeatedly and it leads to improving the researcher's understanding about the phenomenon that happens under the study by making new significant differences so that the result from the researchers are getting closer to it.

Fraenkel & Wallen (2009) in (Sulistiyo et al., 2019), state that a qualitative study is a study that used to examine the appropriateness of relationships, phenomena, activities, or situations in a specific place. It is conducted in natural settings, an exploratory study of lifelike experiences and everyday life (Magilvy & Eileen, 2009). Moreover, qualitative research data were analyzed using words instead of using numbers (Jackson, 2008) cited in (Ngozwana, 2018). Mason (2002) in (Astalin, 2013) added that a qualitative research approach must have several provisions such as; this is based on the position of objective reality, it is based on the flexible research methods, and it must be sensitive to social context, and it is based on analytical methods.

The design used in this research is descriptive. According to (Nassaji, 2015), the goal of a descriptive study is that researchers can be able to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics completely. Therefore, the result will explain in the form of a description. This research will explain about the EFL students' perspective on ambiguity tolerance. The research was carried out at Tidar University Magelang. 30 students of 5th semester of English Department were used as the participants. The data were collected through Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) taken from Ely, C.M. (1995) in (Reid, 1995). This questionnaire is the only one designed to measure ambiguity tolerance in the context of language learning (Karbalaee & Corresponding, 2012). This questionnaire consists of 12 questions that used to measure the EFL students' perspective of ambiguity tolerance in all aspects of language learning. The researcher collects the data through some procedures. The first, the researcher creates a questionnaire in Google form. Then, the researcher distributes and gives the questionnaire to the participants. After that, the researcher analyzes the data. This research applied a qualitative study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To determine the participants' perspective of ambiguity tolerance, descriptive statistics were used in this research. The data were collected through the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) questionnaire with ranges from 1 to 5. The description of questionnaire ranges will be shown below:

- 1 : strongly agree
- 2 : agree
- 3 : undecided
- 4 : disagree
- 5 : strongly disagree

Therefore, the higher score of ambiguity tolerance means that the participants were more intolerant regarding English Language ambiguities. At the same time, the lower score of ambiguity tolerance means that the learner is more tolerant in accepting the ambiguity. The participants' mean scores and standard deviation from the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale are presented in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Ambiguity Tolerance scores from SLTAS

No	Items	N	Mean	Sd
1.	When I'm reading something in English, I feel impatient when I don't totally understand the meaning.	30	2,47	1,33
2.	It bothers me that I don't understand everything the teacher says in English.	30	2,2	1.56
3.	When I write English compositions, I don't like it when I can't express my ideas exactly.	30	2,47	1.43
4.	It is frustrating that sometimes I don't understand completely some English grammar.	30	2,43	1.50
5.	I don't like the feeling that my English pronunciation is not quite correct.	30	2,83	1.31
6.	I don't enjoy reading something in English that takes a while to figure out completely.	30	2,63	1,09
7.	It bothers me that even though I study English grammar, some of it is hard to use in speaking and writing.	30	2,33	1.53
8.	When I'm writing in English, I don't like the fact that I can't say exactly what I want.	30	2,87	1.52
9.	It bothers me when the teacher uses an English word I don't know	30	1,97	1.57
10.	When I'm speaking in English, I feel uncomfortable if I can't communicate my ideas clearly.	30	2,57	1.23
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.	30	2,33	1.29
12.	One thing I don't like about reading in English is having to guess what the meaning is.	30	2,07	1.41
TOTAL AMBIGUITY TOLERANCE SCORE		30	2,43	.15

Based on the data obtained, the students of the English Department at Tidar University have low ambiguity tolerance. From the table 1 above, it shows that the tolerance level for the participants' ambiguity is slightly below the midpoint ( $M = 2.43$ ). This score indicates that the participants generally do not show their high tolerance for ambiguity. However, the item-by-item analysis of the SLTAS in Table 1 shows a variable value between 1.97 and 2.87. Therefore, we can conclude that the participants have different levels of acceptance of ambiguity tolerance. As can be seen in Table 1. The participants got the lowest scores for questions number 9 (It bothers me when the teacher uses an English word I don't know). This question is related to listening skill. They also got the lowest score for question number 12 (One thing I don't like about reading in English is having to guess what the meaning is.). It is related to reading skill. Both questions were focused on ambiguity tolerance related to listening and reading skills or it is called as the receptive skills and it means that the 5th-semester students of Tidar University students are less tolerant of ambiguities structures in what they read or they listen to.

By having tolerance of ambiguity in reading and listening skills, it can help the students to be more confident in listening and reading activities. In addition, this tolerance makes the students better in understanding reading a book because they are able to accept the incomplete or contradict information. They can also more easily interpret someone's sentences, even that sentence is confusing and there is an incomplete information. In contrast, the participants got the highest scores on questions number 5 (I don't like the feeling that my English pronunciation is not quite correct.) and 8 (When I'm writing in English, I don't like the fact that I can't say exactly what I want.). These two questions were related to productive skills, they are speaking and writing skills. It indicates that the participants are less or intolerant of ambiguous structures when trying to produce an outcome in the target language

(English). Therefore, they are not very tolerant of the ambiguous language items they encounter.

The low level of ambiguity in speaking and writing have bad impact for the students. It makes them feel less confident to convey their ideas in public. It can even makes them anxious to speak in front of a crowd. Their public speaking also become less because of their low level of ambiguity in speaking. Moreover, they find it difficult to express their ideas both in written and orally. People with a low level of ambiguity tolerance tend to be stressed, react prematurely, and avoid ambiguous stimuli. It can make them become less confident too. This statement was in line with Oxford and Ehrman (1992) in (J. Dewaele & Ip, 2013) that students who have a lower tolerance for ambiguity often experience a decrease in risk-taking ability taking intelligent risks adequately, for example in guessing based on background knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

This study aims to investigate the 5th semester of Tidar University Magelang students' perspective on ambiguity tolerance. As a result obtained, the students tend to have low level on ambiguity tolerance. The students scored in SLATS are various. The students' lowest scores were in reading and listening skills. It indicates that the students are more tolerant of ambiguity in what they read or they hear.

In contrast, the students' highest scores were related to writing and speaking skills. It means that the students have less or intolerance when they write or speak. Therefore, they need further practice to overcome this. A teachers can give them such as the strategies on writing and speaking exercises to makes them be able to produce better language. As for the recommendations for the next studies, it would be better if the research strengthened by various variable such as the students' anxiety levels or the study of ambiguity tolerance in more specific language skills.

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