# An Analysis of Tolerance of Ambiguity in Second Language Learning

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In the second language learning, English learners have to face many unavoidable psychological problems, especially the tolerance of ambiguity which plays a vital role in the final result of learning. Traditionally, ambiguity, which means more than two kinds of understandings, is regarded to hindering a learner from making progress. However, based on the cognitive theory, the paper points out that language learning is a moving process from states of doubt and ambiguity to certainty and the tolerance of ambiguity is just the sign of language learning development. The paper also tries to analyze the causes of tolerance of ambiguity from cognitive learning style, learners' strategies, and self-concern factors. According to the English teaching conditions in China, the balance of tolerance of ambiguity is proposed in order to gain the ideal learning.

*Keywords:* ambiguity, tolerance, second language learning

## Introduction

"Ambiguity" is a term denoting a feeling that for most people is not particularly pleasant, and it plays a very important role in second language learning. It is found that many of the college students sometimes feel puzzled and at a loss in the process of learning English because they have to cope with more linguistic knowledge and a large vocabulary than they do at high middle school. At the same time, after six years' learning English for all kinds of tests, and for the final purpose of passing college entrance examination, students have established an examination-oriented standard, which hinders them from making further progress in their second language learning. Why do they encounter such problems? How to solve them? What are the psychological processes when coming across ambiguity? What are the typical factors influencing tolerance of ambiguity of Chinese college students? In what way does tolerance/intolerance of ambiguity influence second language learning? Therefore, it is necessary to make still further research on the domain of analysis of tolerance of ambiguity and find the proper treating ways.

## Defining Tolerance of Ambiguity

Traditionally, "ambiguity" in language is referred to such a linguistic phenomenon in which a phrase or a sentence has two or more definite meanings or readings. There is the distinction between lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity, which are cause by the meaning of words and in the structure and by different grammatical structure one phrase or sentence could possess. Basically, most of people considered it hinders the

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learners from mastering the target language. And both the learner and teacher should try their best to avoid these kinds of conditions and develop a strong intolerance of ambiguity during their learning.

In the light of affective-based methods, Curran's Community Counseling, Lozanov's Suggestopedia, Asher's Total Physical Response, and Terrell's Natural Approach, we are provided with a new understanding of "tolerance/intolerance of ambiguity". Their theories supply the theoretical basis of the study of the relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and second language learning. Here, "Ambiguity"—is a cover term, including all kinds of uncertainty of meaning, kinds of complexity, novelty, unexpectedness, or a lack of clear-cut solutions.

With the development of psychology, we are provided an understanding about "tolerance/intolerance of ambiguity". The construct of intolerance of ambiguity has been defined by Budner (1962) as "the tendency to perceive ambiguous [novel, complex, or insoluble] situations as sources of threat" (p. 29). A more extensive description is provided by Norton (1975) who conceived of 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" (p. 608). Therefore, tolerance of ambiguity in this thesis means a language learner is cognitively willing to tolerate ideas and propositions that run counter to his or her own belief system or structure of knowledge.

## Effects of Tolerance of Ambiguity on SLA

Piaget (1958) claimed that cognition develops as a process of moving from states of doubt and ambiguity (equilibrium) to certainty and then back to further doubt that, in time, also resolved. The cognitive development is a process of progressively moving from states of disequilibrium to equilibrium and those periods of disequilibrium mark virtually all-cognitive development (p. 114). And so the cycle continues. According to the notion of Piagetian equilibration (1958), an assumption of cycle of Tolerance of Ambiguity is made out (Figure 1).
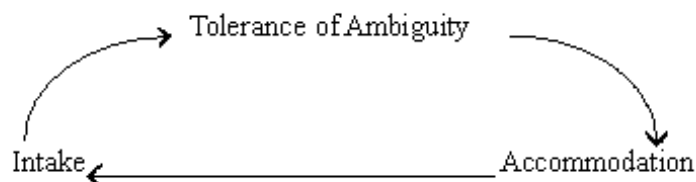


*Figure 1.* An assumption of cycle of Tolerance of Ambiguity in cognitive learning.

Just like the graph showing, as an affective element, tolerance of ambiguity is involved in the learning progress actively from three levels and plays different roles in each different level.

**Intake Phase**

With tolerance of ambiguity, second language learners should permit information to enter their conceptual schema without linking it to other knowledge. Later, those ambiguities and uncertainties will be resolved.

**Tolerance of Ambiguity Proper**

After the second language learner has accomplished the intake successfully, it is necessary for the learner to deal with contradictions and incomplete information or incomplete constructs at an equal level of abstraction or concreteness.

**Accommodation**

The learner will reconstruct cognitive schemata such as making discriminations, setting priorities among competing concepts, and developing hierarchies of information in terms of level of abstraction. These activities usually entail integration of the new information with existing schemata to change the latter and make something new, which do not exist.

They are summarized as follows:

Table 1

*Three Levels Involve in Tolerance of Ambiguity*

| Intake | let it in |
|---|---|
| Tolerance of Ambiguity Proper | accepting contradictions and incomplete information |
| Accommodation | making distinctions, setting priorities, restructuring cognitive schemata |

Now, most of the college students had been educated with everything being rehearsed, drilled, and explained under safe condition. They may worry that grammatical or pronunciation errors. Thus, they prefer to remain silent. Such is not constructive because language students must learn to cope with ambiguity because ambiguity is an inescapable part in language learning. In fact, such behavior has been shown to inhibit true language learning. Therefore, a successful language learner must tolerate such ambiguous items in their cognitive structure and wait for a chance to resolve them in future in order to complete accommodation.

## Apprehensive Variables Influencing Tolerance of Ambiguity

Of the many causes of Tolerance of Ambiguity, we here focus on three main areas: cognitive learning style, language learning strategies, and learners' personality factors.

## Cognitive Learning Style

Learning style refers to an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred ways of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills. Reid (1987) divided cognitive learning styles into two categories: Field-Independent and Field-Dependent learning style (p. 87).

The Field-Independent (FI) students are likely to be intolerant of the ambiguities and uncertainties. Chapelle and Green (1992) explained that in the field of language learning, this analytic style could manifest itself by an ability to analyze the linguistic material, identify its components, and then, perhaps, explore relationships between these components (p. 34). They tried to separate the essential from the inessential, which involves an ability to focus on the data. They have the ability to avoid "junky" data. Intolerance of ambiguity has its advantages, for example, certain intolerance at an optimal level enables one to guard against the wishy-washiness, to reject entirely contradictory material, and to deal with the reality of the system that one has built. But their disadvantage of learning is that the input processing is slow. To be brief, the FI individual benefits from the way he or she processes information but is seen to avoid situations in which language is actually going to be used for uncertainties.

Field-Dependent (FD) learner shows a tendency to be "dependent" on the total field so that the parts embedded within the field are not easily perceived, though that total field is perceived more clearly as a unified whole, according to Chapelle and Roberts (1986). Though coming across ambiguities in learning, learners could still learn more effectively in context, holistically, intuitively, and are especially sensitive to human

relationships and interactions (seeing the "forest" instead of the "trees"). They are relatively "open-minded" in accepting ideologies and events and facts that contradict their own views; they are more content than others to entertain and even internalize contradictory propositions. The learners are thought to be sociable, person-oriented, and warm. To the extent, language development is aided by high-quality interaction, such as receiving good quality, relevant input, and having opportunities to use language to express meanings. As a result, their interlanguage systems could be stretched by the demands to communicate, although there are still a lot of ambiguities in the learning. This raises the possibility that such greater exposure could overcome the problem of a lack of an analytic and complete understanding.

## Learner Language Strategies Element

### The L1-L2 Connection

Some college students, who are not so tolerant of ambiguities, depend on their native language for help to understand the second language. The meaning of the target language is made clear by translating it into the students' native language. In the process of learning second language, college students just try to find the equivalents in the native language. Thus, ambiguities appear in second language learning with the first language interference.

Others, who are more tolerant of ambiguities, advocate that second language learning should be taught in a natural approach. That is to say, the interlanguage is "created" by the learner independently of the first language influences. The focus of the teaching is on the presentation of capturing students' interests and emphasizing the comprehension of the communication such as talking about ideas, performing tasks, and solving problems. It will ignore students' errors and make no corrections in order to arouse learner monitor of the language. In such situation, college students tend to become an active speaker, but with illogical and confusing and broken grammars.

### The Monitor Theory

According to Krashen's Monitor Theory (1982), language learning (explicit) treats language learning as a conscious process, language acquisition (implicit) as more subconscious (p. 15). (i) Monitor over-users are constantly checking their output with their conscious knowledge of the second language. As a result, such performers may speak hesitantly, often self-correct in the middle of utterances, and are so concerned with correctness that they cannot speak with any real fluency. (ii) Monitor under-users prefer not to use their conscious knowledge, even when conditions allow. Under-users are typically uninfluenced by error correction, can self-correct only by using a "feel" for correctness (e.g., "it sounds right"), and rely completely on the acquired system. (iii) The optimal Monitor users use the Monitor when it is appropriate and when it does not interfere with communication. Many optimal users will not use grammar in ordinary conversation, where it might interfere. Students are better off as learners if they have a better tolerance of ambiguity.

### The Form/Meaning Dilemma

In the past, language learning emphasizes the conscious control of structure and includes translation in both direction from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1. The educational setting in which teachers overtly emphasize on the memorization of grammatical rules and vocabulary exactly. Since the form is overly emphasized, students just want to make sure the grammar is correct and communication is ignored. Thus, they will demonstrate a low learning competence.

However, communicative and meaning teaching attaches more importance to the learners' understanding of the structure of the foreign language than to the facility in using that structure. MacDonald (1970) pointed out that under a generous tolerance of ambiguity, the proper degree of cognitive control over the structure of the language will develop automatically (p. 791). Tolerance of ambiguity is the key to meaningful and further achievements. But this will also lead to another extreme that students lose the consciousness of the language and just speak broken English—even Pidgin and Creole language.

## Learner Personality Factors

### The Self-Esteem Factor

Self-esteem is normally assumed to exert an influence on tolerance of ambiguity. Brown (1987) suggests that "a person with high self-esteem is able to reach out beyond himself more freely, to be less inhibited, and because of his ego strength, to make the necessary mistakes involved in language learning with less threat to his ego" (p. 352).

### Anxiety of Negative Self-Evaluation

College students experience more of such apprehension because they cannot represent themselves in a new language as sufficiently as they can in their native language. Unlike children, who only focus on the purpose of communication, adults are involved rather in linguistic form (Frenkel-Brunwisk, 1951, p. 143). Thus, they perceive themselves as less worthy than are others and perceive their communication as less effective. As a result, this increased self-focus leads to reduced attention to the audience and the environment, resulting in poor speech performance.

### Inhibition of Examination-Oriented Motivation

In China, English teaching and learning has long been orientated towards academic achievements. Chinese college students have been accustomed to coping with a series of English examinations, such as National College Entrance Exam, CET4/6 (College English Test Band 4/6), etc. Guided by this tendency, students are easily apt to focusing on the examination knacks and skills. In these kinds of examinations, the answer is an absolute one. No ambiguity exists under these conditions. Thus, students cultivated an idea that language could be learned just as mathematics: One needs to recite certain structures, rules, and vocabulary of the target language.

## Suggestions on Teaching

The most important way we can use the results of a tolerance of ambiguity instrument is to help our students by administering a tolerance of ambiguity in three aspects.

### Acquiring a Good Command of Grammatical Competence

Students are permitted to know what the grammar is and what function it is in a context. The ideal forum for this with individual students can engage the student in a receptive or productive language use activity, and then, as the learner faces problems, discuss with the learner what is going on in his or her mind. Our real goal in this work is to have the students move from feeling embarrassed or unhappy at linguistic ambiguity to seeing him or her as a linguistic researcher or problems solver. If working individually with students is impossible, whole group and small-group activities can also be helpful, although it is not always easy to elicit truthful responses about inner feeling from students in front of their peers.

**Getting Familiar With the English Culture**

Teachers can select some reading materials from newspapers; magazines, the Internet, or other sources in order to make student familiar with the English culture. During the classroom activities the learners interpret foreign attitudes, norms, values, and beliefs from their own cultural perspectives, solve problems in accordance with their perception of the target culture, and do things in a certain cultural context. Therefore, they subjectively "experienced personal involvement in the interaction of two cultures" (Mclain, 1993, p. 185), which cultivates their cultural awareness and competence.

**Empowering College Students' Communication Abilities**

Canale and Swain (1980) state learners should realize that a moment of linguistic ambiguity is a key that can unlock a particular aspect of language. Instance of ambiguity can be used for progress in L2 acquisition. Students have to bear in mind that sometimes they seem to make no progress at all or even seem to regress in their ability to cope with learning the language is just the transition stage and the first step in the acquisition of new skills.

## Conclusion

On the whole, it is important for teachers to realize tolerance of ambiguity plays a key role in the second language learning and the limits of current research on the field. Classroom teachers are in the best position to observe these variables and, by themselves or in partnership with researchers, become more careful, systematic observers of classroom phenomena, and stimulate fresh, creative thought. Besides, it is certain that there are many other factors operating in the minds and hearts of our students that have not been investigated. It is important, therefore, that previous researches should not constrain or restrict teachers' consideration and investigation of individual differences. In this way, our field will make more rapid progress toward the goal of having teachers and students understand L2 learning.

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