

Iraqi EFL University Students' Ambiguity Tolerance and Performance in Receptive Skills: A Correlational Study

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Abstract

Uncertainty, gaps in knowledge, unpredictable outcomes, and fuzziness usually abound throughout language learning which, therefore, involves a great deal of ambiguity. The present study is conducted to investigate the correlation of EFL learners' ambiguity tolerance with their performance in receptive skills. It aims at finding out:

- **1.** Iraqi EFL students' level of ambiguity tolerance and performance in receptive skills.
- **2.** the correlations between Iraqi EFL students' ambiguity tolerance and performance in receptive skills.
- **3.** the extent to which ambiguity tolerance contribute to EFL students' performance in receptive skills.

A random sample of 375 students from English language departments is selected. Two instruments are employed which are ambiguity tolerance questionnaire, and a receptive skills test. Results show that students have a low level of ambiguity tolerance, and performance in receptive skills with positive significant correlations between EFL learners' ambiguity tolerance with their performance in receptive skills.

تحمل الغموض والاداء في المهارات الاستقبالية لدى طلبة الجامعة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الانجليزية لغة اجنبية : دراسة ارتباطية

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المستخلص

عادة ما تكثر حالات عدم اليقين، والفجوات في المعرفة، والنتائج غير المتوقعة، والغموض في جميع أنحاء تعلم اللغة، مما ينطوي بالتالي على قدر كبير من الغموض.

أجريت هذه الدراسة لمعرفة العلاقة بين تحمل الغموض لدى الطلبة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية وأدائهم في المهارات الاستقبالية. وتهدف لايجاد:

- 1. مستوى تحمل الغموض لدى الطلبة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية وأدائهم في المهارات الاستقبالية.
- الارتباط بين تحمل الغموض لدى الطلبة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية وأدائهم في المهارات الاستقبالية.
- ٣ إلى أي مدى يسهم تحمل الغموض لدى الطلبة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الانكليزية
 لغة اجنبية في مستوى الاداء في المهارات الاستقبالية.

تم اختيار عينة عشوائية ومكونة من ٣٧٥ طالباً وطالبة من أقسام اللغة الانجليزية. تم استخدام أداتين هما استبيان تحمل الغموض، واختبار مهارات الاستقبالية. أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب لديهم مستوى منخفض من تحمل الغموض والأداء في المهارات الاستقبالية فضلا عن وجود ارتباطات إيجابية هامة بين تحمل الغموض والاداء في المهارات الاستقبالية لدى الطلبة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية.

I Introduction The Problem

It is urged that the process of learning a language is fraught with uncertainty, and is often filled with doubt. If this ambiguity is not accepted in a way that is beneficial, language learners may get disoriented, stressed out, and uncomfortable when faced with challenges in this language (White, 1999). As a result, ambiguity tolerance may be viewed as either a barrier to or enabler of learning a foreign language (Kamran, 2011). Such tolerance can be translated into the language learning context as "an ability to deal with ambiguous new stimuli without frustration or without appeals to authority. allows for indeterminate rather than rigid It categorization" (Ellis, 1994).

When students have access to intense input sessions, learning receptive skills; listening and reading, can help them produce language more effectively. In order to respond in a substantive and meaningful way, listening is the most important aspect of communication. Listening is a crucial part of language learning, especially when learning a language is intended for communicative purposes, since it helps language learners learn pronunciation, word stress, vocabulary, and syntax, and it is only through listening that messages which are conveyed only through tone of voice, pitch, and accent can be understood (Renukadevi, 2014).

With respect to reading, according to Hung and Ngan (2015), it is a fundamental ability that may help students become more proficient in their target language by enhancing their vocabulary, fluency, speaking, and writing. Reading is an integral aspect of the learning process, wherein readers strive to comprehend the texts they are perusing through the acts of interpreting, synthesizing, analyzing, and selecting the essential information (Wiyasa, 2015).

Numerous studies indicate that Iraqi EFL university students frequently experience some challenges while learning the language, which results in low EFL proficiency and typically subpar performance in receptive skills. As for listening, students face certain challenges due to a variety of variables, including their

limited exposure to the target language, the less emphasis placed on paying attention to instructions in terms of the syllabus, the absence of a classroom atmosphere when it comes to technology tools that improve learning and the number of students. (Dhumad& Kamil, 2022).

When it comes to reading, the majority of Iraqi EFL students don't have a high level of reading comprehension due to different possible reasons among which are difficulties processing text effectively, poor word recognition, decoding skills, and a lack of language proficiency (Al-Saadi, 2019).

The problem of the current study is reflected in attempting to understand how university students' tolerance for ambiguity relate to their ability to listen and read. Accordingly, the following questions are addressed by this study:

- 1. Is there any significant relationship between university students' ambiguity tolerance and their receptive skills.
- 2. Does ambiguity tolerance contribute to student mastery of receptive skills?

1.2 Aims

The current study aims at:

- **1.** finding out EFL students' level of ambiguity tolerance and performance in receptive skills.
- **2.** finding out the correlation between Iraqi EFL students' ambiguity tolerance with their performance in receptive skills.

1.3 Limits

This study is limited to:

- Iraqi EFL third year university students at the colleges of education during the academic year 2022/2023.
- finding out the correlation of each of students' ambiguity tolerance with their performance in receptive language skills.

1.4 The Value

This study is hoped to be of value to:

1. EFL learners to be aware of how their ambiguity tolerance may be correlated with their receptive skills, which may be helpful to

improve their performance in listening and reading and support them to achieve their goals in learning English.

- 2. EFL teachers to highlight the role of the ambiguity tolerance which is highly related to educational settings and should be stimulated and embedded on their previous arrangement. Teachers' attention may also be attracted to help students promote their mastery of listening and reading due to their significance in language learning.
- **3**. Educators and researchers who may benefit from the findings of this study as a reference for results, conclusions, recommendations, and further studies of the variables involved in this study from different perspectives.
- 4. Curriculum and syllabus designers who may reconsider the course components to include learning opportunities and activities that may promote students' performance in receptive skills and their level of the ambiguity tolerance covered in this study.

II Literature Review Ambiguity Tolerance

According to McLain (2008), ambiguity can be described as the sense of incomplete information brought on by particular situational factors. The perception of ambiguity is dangerous in situations that call for judgment or decision-making and poses an intellectual obstacle in the form of wanted but unavailable or inaccessible information. It could be that one is not capable of imagining the underlying conditions of future situational states, casting ambiguity in a world of information scarcity that is beyond danger or uncertainty (Ellsberg, 1961; Pich et al., 2002). As a result, the fundamental idea behind "ambiguity" is the perception of a lack of knowledge that is necessary to comprehend a situation and arrive at decisions that will have predictable results. Thus, ambiguity acts as an obstacle to prediction and decision-making. An individual's level of willingness to accept the cognitive difficulty brought on by ambiguity might be described as ambiguity tolerance (Arquero & Tejero, 2009).

Sources of Ambiguity in Language

Ambiguity can come from both missing information and communication issues. Lack of observational abilities, generalization, or omitting crucial information are only a few possible causes of missing knowledge. Another factor is the inability of the writer and the reader to communicate as a result of writing errors (Kadlub, 2017).

Ambiguity can occur when:

- 1. Numerous interpretations are attributed to individual words. For example, "the mean's punch was impressive". Ambiguity arises due to the potential for the word "punch" to be understood either as a beverage or as a physical act.
- 2. Lexemes exhibiting this characteristic are referred to as homonyms and can be further categorized as homophones, where the lexemes' forms have identical sounds but may have distinct spellings. For instance, homographs like "minute," which are spelled similarly but pronounced differently, and phonetically rendered words like "draft and draft," which are pronounced as /dra: ft/.
- 3. The application of several syntactic structures to a statement can also lead to ambiguity. As an illustration, 'The strike was called by radical lecturers and students'. The possibility of giving a single grammatical string of words the identity of two or more syntactic structures gives rise to the ambiguity in this phrase. Finding out if the adjective "radical" changes the nominal phrase "lecturers and students" is important. If it does, then both of the students who called for the strike are considered radical, although it is unclear what their political stance was. The primary concern at hand pertains to the extent or range of the adjective 'radical'. The scope is a significant cause of ambiguity, encompassing not only adjectives but also conjunctions such as 'and', 'or', and quantifiers like 'every', 'all', and 'some'. (Igiri, 2017).

Ambiguity Tolerance and English Language Learning Learning situations constantly offer several opportunities for ambiguity, both negative and positive. According to Budner's

concept (1962) in (Papikyan, 2006), the lack of sufficient cues prevents the ambiguous situation from being properly structured or classified. He asserted that situations that are unclear are "characterized by novelty, complexity, or insolubility" (p. 30). Three similar instances were noted by him:

- 1) situations that are brand-new and don't offer any familiar prompts;
- 2) situations that require consideration and processing due to their complexity and abundance of cues;
- 3) situations that are insoluble because they have a lot of incongruent components, many cues, and diverse structures.

When learning a foreign language, learners frequently become perplexed by circumstances involving a new language system and cultural issues specific to the target language community (Ely, 1989, 1995; White, 1999; Atamanova & Bogomaz, 2011a; Kamran, 2011; Kurniasari and Indriani, 2021). EFL students frequently face unclear situations when learning a foreign language. "An ability to deal with ambiguous new stimuli without frustration or appeals to authority" is how Ellis (1994) describes this construct in the context of language learning. The term "ambiguity" in language relates to vagueness and conditions that are unclear or imprecise; it also describes tolerance issues related to "handling" novel circumstances (Kocaman and Pamukoglu, 2018). "The degree to which you are cognitively willing to tolerate ideas and propositions that run counter to your belief system or structure of knowledge" is how Brown (2000) defines ambiguity tolerance.

Ambiguity tolerance can either hinder or facilitate the process of learning a foreign language (Salikhova et al., 2019). Ely (1995) suggests three circumstances in which ambiguity tolerance is detrimental to language acquisition:

- 1. Acquiring certain language components, such as those that are phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, etc.
- **2**. Engaging in the development of language acquisition abilities
- **3**. Incorporating those skills as persistent methods.

Ambiguity Tolerance and Receptive Skills

It has been suggested that learners' ability to tolerate ambiguity has a significant impact on their listening comprehension. This suggests that the way language learners respond to unclear situations when learning a foreign language may have a direct bearing on their ability to comprehend spoken language (Afshar and Khassemi 2019). Students with a high tolerance for ambiguity, for instance, may have developed strategies to deal with situations when they are unable to fully understand the information they are presented with (Ying, 2000).

The connection between listening comprehension and ambiguity tolerance has been the subject of several recent studies. Ying (2000) discovered that participants with higher levels of ambiguity tolerance typically outperformed their counterparts in terms of listening comprehension and major idea grasping. Comparably, the results of other studies (Dewaele & Shan Ip, 2013; Elkhafaifi, 2005) show a negative correlation between the achievement of foreign languages in general and listening comprehension skills in particular when it comes to ambiguous situations.

Students struggle with reading comprehension due to limited knowledge about the subject (Alderson, 2000; Carrell, 1987; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983) and cultural norms (Lustig & Koester, 1993). This can cause ambiguity and increase cognitive load, potentially negatively affecting comprehension (Alptekin, 2006; Erten and Razı, 2009in press), as they must find ways to complete tasks without missing important parts (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

According to Qing-fei and Fan-mao's (2016) research, there are considerable connections between reading comprehension, anxiety, and ambiguity tolerance, with students with higher ambiguity tolerance performing better. Additionally, Kamran & Maftoon (2012) show a statistically significant correlation between the reading comprehension scores of EFL learners and their ability to tolerate ambiguity.

Receptive skills

Receptive skills is a term used to refer to the two language skills of listening and reading (Niknahad & Mohamadi, 2021). The process

of listening comprehension involves the listener receiving information and engaging in a step-by-step process to interpret the auditory input. This activity requires the listener to integrate their background knowledge with the information presented in the listening text (Tabeei et al., 2013). According to Zare-ee (2007), reading is a receptive "psycholinguistic process" that starts with a writer's linguistic surface representation and ends with meaning that the reader creates. The majority of foreign language learners begin their process of learning a new language by observing, reading, and accumulating linguistic experience (Yasir and Abbas, 2022).

Listening Skill

Listening can be defined as the act of actively responding to or receiving purposeful auditory stimuli. Observing closely what others are saying that has started to include the mental aspect indicates the emergence of mental activity, albeit not to the same extent as listening practices. For the purpose of gathering information, recording material, and deciphering the meanings of communications that are not expressed by the individual who speaks through spoken language or exams, listening is the process of paying attention, comprehending, appreciating, and interpreting oral symbols (Sirait, 2019).

Reading Skill

Reading is a challenging mental ability that necessitates fusing what is written with what the reader or listener already understands to build a cohesive mental image. Furthermore, reading is a linguistic ability that involves the act of diminishing ambiguity in the interpretation of a written text. It is an intricate cognitive process of deciphering symbols to create or deduce significance. Reading is a complex process that encompasses various elements such as word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation. Reading is a complex ability that encompasses various aspects of language, including phonology (the system of sounds in a language), semantics (meaning), syntax (grammar), and discourse (cohesive sentences). In order to get significance from written material, one must possess the capacity to (a) precisely recognise individual

words in written form, (b) read text with ease and fluidity, and (c) rapidly absorb the content of what is being read. Fluency plays a crucial role in filling the gap between recognising words and understanding their meaning (Thambirajah, 2011).

III Methodology and Procedures Population and Sample

The term "population" refers to a group of people who share a particular trait (Creswell, (2012) as cited by Al saadi & Alwey, (2023)). The population of this study includes students at the departments of English at the colleges of education.

The sample is a subset of the target population that the researcher intends to analyze in order to draw conclusions about the target population as a whole (Fraenkel et al, (2009) as cited by Abed & Abbas, 2022). Only (375) 3rd year students who are randomly selected from the English Departments in the Colleges of Education of Baghdad, Tikrit, and Wasit Universities are included in the sample of the study.

Instruments

- 1. **Foreign Language Ambiguity Tolerance Scale (FLAT).** Ely (1995) created a questionnaire to measure participants' levels of ambiguity tolerance. It comprises 12 items designed to gauge EFL students' ambiguity tolerance in various language acquisition domains (Kurniasari, 2021).
- 2. For the purpose of assessing students' performance in listening and reading skills, a two-part test is developed by the researcher. The first part of the test is devoted to assess students' performance in listening comprehension. It has 25 brief conversations, each of which is followed by a multiple-choice question. On their exam sheets, the students must listen to the conversations and select the proper response from four options.

The second part of the test is devised to measure students' comprehension in reading and understanding passages. It includes four questions. Question one is formed of a passage which is followed by a question and two branches. The first one includes 7

multiple-choice items, while the second consists of 3 completion items. Question two includes a passage followed by a true\false question of 5 items. Question three takes the form of a cloze test with 5 blanks to be filled. Finally, question four is of matching type with 5 items.

Face Validity:

McNamara (2000) states that face validity of a test or an instrument is "the extent to which it meets the expectations of those involved in its use", i.e., instrument makers, administrators, teachers, and candidates (p. 138). (17) TEFL and educational psychology experts make up the jury (Appendix D). They have, however, given their approval of the appropriateness of the items for the topic and sample concerned with some recommendations.

Construct Validity

It contains logical and empirical analyses. It is concerned with the theoretical construct or trait being determined (Westen & Rosenthal, 2003). To achieve the construct validity of ambiguity tolerance scale, its psychometrics are examined by two indicators:

- 1. Discrimination Power of Items
- 2. Item Total Correlation

In addition to the above mentioned two indicators, coefficient of ease, difficulty, effectiveness of distracters have been used to achieve the construct validity of the receptive skills test items.

Reliability

It assesses a study's dependability, accuracy, consistency, and reproducibility, among other things (Chakrabartty, (2013) as cited by Khalil & Saalh, (2023). To achieve this, three method are employed which are Test- Retest method, Alpha Cronbach Formula, and Kuder – Richardson Formulas 20.

For the purpose of extracting reliability of ambiguity tolerance scale in this way, the scale is applied for a second time to the pilot sample, which consists of (50) students, with a time interval of (14) days from the first application. Pearson correlation coefficient is employed to find the differences between the scores of the first and second application and the correlation coefficient is found (0.90) for

ambiguity tolerance scale. This value indicates the stability of the individuals' answers to the measure over time.

An Alpha Cronbach coefficient of (0.65-0.80) is often considered adequate for a measure used in human dimension research (Vaske et al., 2016). Accordingly, the two scales of the study are found to be of high internal consistency with r- values of (0.89, 0.88), respectively, all of which indicate good reliability.

Kuder-Richardson Formula 20, often abbreviated KR-20, is used to measure the internal consistency reliability of a test in which each question only has two answers: right or wrong. To extract the reliability of the test, the equation is applied to the scores of the sample (375) students, and after applying the equation, the reliability values is 0.88, as shown in Table (13), 0.89 and 0.90 respectively.

IV Results and Conclusions

Results Related to the First Aim

As for EFL students' level of ambiguity tolerance, the statistics yield that the mean score of the sample is (28,507) with a standard deviation of (6,307) while the hypothetical mean is (36). Applying t- test for one independent sample reveals a calculated t- value (23.007), which is higher than the tabulated one (1.96) at a level of significance (0.05) and degree of freedom (374). The results indicate a statistically significant difference in favor of the hypothetical mean score. Accordingly, the sample has a low level of ambiguity tolerance. Table (14) indicates that.

Table (14)
Mean, Standard Deviation, and the T-Value of the Ambiguity
Tolerance Scale

Variable	Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation	Hypothetical	T-Value		C::e:
			Deviation	mean	Calculated	Tabulated	Significance (0.05)
Ambiguity Tolerance	375	28,507	6,307	36	23,007	1,96	significant in favor of the hypothetical mean

This result can be attributed to the fact that learning a foreign language is full of uncertainty and there is a considerable amount of ambiguity in learning a foreign language. Foreign language learners encounter numerous ambiguous stimuli, including confusing sounds. vocabulary meanings, grammar, sociocultural issues. (Ely,1989). If these ambiguities are not tolerated appropriately, learners may become confused, stressed, and uncomfortable. (White,1999). This can negatively impact language learning, risk-taking, and the manipulation of appropriate strategies. (Seidi, 2018). Therefore, ambiguity tolerance can be a factor influencing or facilitating foreign language learning (Kamran, 2011).

The results of the research also show that the mean score of the sample on the test is (19,965) with a standard deviation of (7,207), while the hypothetical mean is (25). T-test for one independent sample is used and shows a t-value (13.528) which is higher than the tabulated one (1.96) at a level of significance (0.05) and degree of freedom (374) which indicates that there is a statistical significance difference in favor of the hypothetical mean score and that the sample has a low level in receptive skills. Table (15) makes this clear.

Table (15)
Mean, Standard Deviation, and T-Value of the Receptive Skills
Test

Variabl	Sampl	Mean	Standar	Hypothetic	T-Value		
e	e		d Deviatio n	al mean	Calculate d	Tabulate d	Significanc e (0.05)
Receptiv e Skills	275	19.96 5	7.207	25	13,528	1,96	significant in favor of the hypothetical mean

It is worth mentioning that the results related to students' performance in receptive skills are achieved according to their

scores in the receptive skills test which includes two parts; listening and reading. As illustrated in the table (16) below:

Tablet (16)
Mean, Standard Deviation and T-Value for Listening and
Reading Skills

	Sample	Mean	Standard	Hypothetical	T-Value		
Receptive Skills			Deviation	mean	Calculated	Tabulated	Significance (0.05)
Listening Skill	375	9,269	3,310	12,5	18,900	1,96	significant in favor of the hypothetical mean
Reading Skill	375	10,696	4,901	12,5	7,128	1,96	significant in favor of the hypothetical mean

For the listening skill, the mean of the sample's responses is (9,269), with a standard deviation of (3,310), and the hypothetical mean is (12.5). The calculated T-value (18,900) is statistically significant and in favor of the hypothetical mean, as it is higher than the tabulated value of (1.96) at a level of significance (0.05) and degree of freedom (374). This indicates that the study sample has achieved a low level in listening skill.

With regard to reading skill, the sample's responses mean is (10,696) with a standard deviation of (4.901) and hypothetical mean (12.5). The calculated T-value (7,128) is statistically significant in favour of hypothetical mean as it is higher than the tabulated value (1.96). Thus, the study sample has a low level in reading skill because the hypothetical mean is higher than the mean of the sample and the difference is significant and in favor of the hypothetical mean.

Results Related to the Second Aim

Employing Pearson coefficient reveals the results shown in table (18).

Table (18)
The Correlation between Ambiguity Tolerance and Receptive
Skills

Variable	Sample	Correlation Coefficient Value between Ambiguity Tolerance and Receptive Skills	T-Value		Significance (0.05)
Listening Skill	375	0,635	15,875	1,96	Significant
Reading Skill	375	0,547	12,721	1,96	Significant
Receptive Skills	375	0,664	17,026	1,96	Significant

As illustrated in the table, the value of the correlation coefficient between ambiguity tolerance and listening skill is (0.635) and the significance of the correlation coefficient (15,875), which is higher than the tabulated value (1.96) at a level of significance (0.05) and degree of freedom (373) indicating that the correlation between ambiguity tolerance and performance in listening skill is a statistically significant one.

While the value of the correlation coefficient between ambiguity tolerance and reading skill is (0.547). T-test is used to indicate the correlation coefficient value (12,721), which is higher than the tabulated value. This means that there is a statistically significant correlation between ambiguity tolerance and performance in reading skill is a positive, statistically significant one.

It is indicated that the value of the correlation coefficient between ambiguity tolerance and receptive skills is (0.664). T-test is used to determine the significance of the correlation coefficient. The calculated t-value (17,026) is higher than the tabulated value (1.96) at the level of significance (0.05) and a degree of freedom (373). This result indicates that there is statistically significant correlation between ambiguity tolerance and receptive skills. That

is, the higher the tolerance of ambiguity of students, the better their receptive skills are.

The result makes sense due to the fact that as language learning context in general, and the activity of listening and reading in a foreign language in particular, are abundant with novelty and ambiguous clues, it is expected that when ambiguity is tolerated reasonably, language learning and also listening and reading comprehension be enhanced (Brown, 2000; Ely, 1989; White, 1999). The findings of this study are in line with those of Behresi et al (2016) which indicates that there is a positive significant correlation between tolerance of ambiguity and listening comprehension.

Concerning reading comprehension, as an EFL learner who is involved in reading, deals with unknown words, structures, and grammar, when such ambiguity is tolerated, the reader is predicted to achieve a better comprehension of the reading text, which interprets and confirms the finding of the current study. It is worth mentioning that, finding of the current study is in harmony with that of Seidi (2018) which uncovered that high ambiguity tolerant learners performed much better than low and average ones and of Qing-fei and Fan-mao (2016) which indicates that ambiguity tolerance, and overall reading comprehension are significantly correlated to one another and ambiguity tolerance is positively related to their performance.

Conclusions

The following conclusions have been made after taking into account the results achieved in the current study.

- 1. EFL university students have a low level of ambiguity tolerance.
- **2.** EFL university students have a low level in the receptive skills performance.
- **3.** There is a positive statistically significant correlation between ambiguity tolerance and the students' level in receptive skills on. This is applicable to both listening and reading.

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