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Ambiguity Tolerance of Croatian Management Students in Language Learning

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Abstract
The aim of this study is to explore the degree of tolerance of ambiguity Croatian students of management demonstrate when learning Business English. A proper use of language is not only important for managers' development but also for a good organizational communication.

A total of 203 undergraduate students participated in this study. The concept of tolerance of ambiguity is introduced and its relevance to language learning is discussed. Qualitative analysis of research data indicates that students do not show the same tolerance in all skills. Participants on average have low tolerance for ambiguity in the process of learning, with female students reporting less tolerance than male students. They are particularly intolerant of ambiguities stemming from communicating their ideas in English.

Keywords: ambiguity tolerance, Business English as a foreign language, gender differences
1 Introduction

Language learning is not an easy task. The learner has to develop appropriate language skills such as writing, reading, listening and talking in order to acquire foreign language. Some students have great difficulty in carrying on even a simple conversation in English or any other writing or listening task.

In almost every task all learners, including management students participating in our research, have to deal with uncertainties. The relevance of ambiguity in management is inherently related to judgment, which could itself be described as the decision making in the face of ambiguity. A feature that helps learners to overcome these uncertainties is tolerance of ambiguity.

This paper presents the degree of tolerance of ambiguity Croatian EFL (English as a foreign language) learners show when learning Business English and how their tolerance of ambiguity defers concerning the different learning situations.

In order to understand what tolerance of ambiguity is we should interpret the meaning of ambiguity and meaning of tolerance. McLain (1993) claims that ambiguous means not having sufficient information about a context. Budner (1962) defines ambiguous stimuli or "ambiguous situations", as those that are not adequately structured or categorized by the perceiver because they lack sufficient cues. He classifies ambiguous situations in three types:
1. new situations,
2. complex situations,
3. contradictory situations.

Norton (1975) adds new situations to those causing ambiguity such as multiple meanings, vagueness, incompleteness or fragmentation, a probability, unstructured, lack of information, uncertainty, inconsistencies and contradictions. McLain (2008) defines ambiguity as the perception of inadequate information arising from certain characteristics of a situation. In a situation that demands evaluation or choice, the perception of ambiguity is threatening and presents a cognitive challenge in the form of desired, but absent or inaccessible information. Pich (2002) believes that probabilities of future situational states can hardly be estimated and it may not even be possible to envision their underlying conditions, placing ambiguity in a realm of information paucity which is beyond risk for uncertainty.

Related to concept of ambiguity is tolerance. According to McLain (1993) tolerance suggests ‘begrudging acceptance’ whereas intolerance suggests ‘rejection’ and adds that tolerance ‘extends along a continuum from rejection to attraction’.

According to some authors tolerance of ambiguity can be a reflection of our personality (Ely, 1989; Ehrman, 1996). Budner (1962) believes that intolerance of ambiguous situations is usually perceived as sources of threats.

If an individual interprets ambiguous situations as ‘sources of threat’ (Budner 1962), then this individual is characterized as intolerant of ambiguity and this state is called intolerance of ambiguity. On the other hand, when ambiguous situations are assessed by the individual as ‘desirable’, then he/she is tolerant of ambiguity and this state is called tolerance of ambiguity. Intolerance of ambiguity has its formal origins in the work of Frenkel-Brunswik (1948). The
concept was defined by case-study material gathered from interviews, which presented the characteristics of people at the two extremes of the continuum. Behavioural dispositions relating to ambiguity intolerance included (Furnham and Ribchester, 1995) the acceptance of attitudinal statements representing a rigid, black-white view of life, seeking for certainty, remaining closed to familiar characteristics of certain stimuli, and resistance to the reversal of fluctuating stimuli. With regard to problem solving, these authors indicate that people with low tolerance levels tend to dichotomize problems rigidly into fixed categories, to select solutions at an early stage and to maintain one solution in a perceptually ambiguous situation; as a consequence, they tend to adopt a premature closure.

Ambiguous situations are also common in language learning for example in situations when student faces new lexical and grammatical structures and lack of crucial elements to complete the certain task.

Individuals display varying levels of intolerance or tolerance of ambiguity or ambiguous situations. It is suggested that moderate levels of tolerance of ambiguity are recommended for optimum results in language learning (Ely 1989). High tolerance may cause unquestioning acceptance and cognitive passivity. For example student who is not stimulated by the doubt created by language forms may not be interested in resolving this vagueness and thus discover the correct form. On the other hand low tolerance may impede language learning since students who do not confront their intolerance of ambiguity are bound to face problems that will hinder their language learning processes. Since these extreme results of tolerance of ambiguity both implicate possible negative outcome, midpoint tolerance seems to be satisfactory.

In fact Ely (1989) suggests that ambiguity in language learning is materialized as uncertainty. The pervasive character of uncertainty affects language learning positively or negatively. Ely (1995: 88) specifies three cases where tolerance of ambiguity has a negative impact on language learning:

1. learning individual linguistic elements (phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, etc.).
2. practicing language learning skills.
3. adopting those skills as permanent strategies.

The tolerance of ambiguity as a positive feature for language learning is seen in the area of practicing language learning skills. Ely (1989) takes an example from learning strategies such as guessing for meaning in oral or written form. As he mentions this skill involves risk taking and learners who are impeded by uncertainty underlying guessing produced by the fact that they do not know the meaning of a word, are no able to internalize and master the skill.

2 The Study

The researches regarding ambiguity tolerance in language learning are scarce in the world and to the best of our knowledge no researches were found investigating ambiguity tolerance of Croatian management students in Business English learning.
The study was carried out in order to answer the following research questions:

1. How are Croatian management students tolerant towards the ambiguity entitled in language learning?
2. Are females and males different in terms of their tolerance of ambiguity?

2.1 Subjects

A total of 203 students participated in the study. They were undergraduate students from the University of Pula, studying management. Hundred and five were females and 98 males.

2.2 Research instrument and procedure

The data for this study were collected through the modified Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (Ely, 1995). It has 12 statements each accompanied with a five-point Likert-type scale of agreement. The scale spans from 12 points which represents a high tolerance of ambiguity, to 60 points, which represents a low tolerance of ambiguity.

The questionnaire was administered during class time in the presence of the teacher in charge of the group and a researcher. The objectives of the project were explained and students were asked to participate on a voluntary basis. The relevance of sincere answers was stressed which remained confidential at all times.

Statistical analysis was performed with SPSS 13.0.

2.3 Results and discussion

Flawed or incomplete data appeared in less than three percent of the questionnaires. The reliability obtained with this sample is quite high: Cronbach’s alpha is .837 (12 items, n: 203).

Each statement from the questionnaire describes intolerance of ambiguity in some language learning context. Disagreeing with an item is a sign of tolerance, while agreeing means the opposite. The higher the score, the more intolerant learners are of foreign language ambiguities. Before interpreting the results the borders which indicate the low or high level of tolerance were set. In this research the mean of 3.00 is the borderline, so values above this borderline indicate lower levels of tolerance while those below suggest more tolerance depending on their distance to the above mentioned mean score.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Ambiguity Tolerance Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>s.d.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>When I'm reading something in English, I feel impatient when I don't totally understand the meaning.</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I don't enjoy reading something in English that takes a while to figure out completely.</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>One thing I don't like about reading in English is having to guess what the meaning is.</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>When I write English compositions, I don't like it when I can't express my ideas exactly.</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>When I'm writing in English, I don't like the fact that I can't say exactly what I want.</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>When I'm speaking in English, I feel uncomfortable if I can't communicate my idea clearly.</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>It is frustrating that sometimes I don't understand completely some English grammar</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>It bothers me that even though I study English grammar some of it is hard to use in speaking and writing</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>It bothers me that I don't understand everything the teacher says in English.</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>It bothers me when the teacher uses an English word I don't know</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I don't like the feeling that my English pronunciation is not quite correct</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>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</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The average mean and standard deviation of the items

According to the results presented in the Table 1 we may conclude that, in general, our participants reported low level of ambiguity tolerance in a process of language learning. They reported a level of ambiguity that is a little above the mid point (mean = 3.13).

Our results are similar with the results of Kazamia (1999) found with Greek civil servants. The authorss pointed out low degree of tolerance of ambiguity Greek civil servants demonstrate in learning English as a foreign language. This was also congruent with what Eriyen and Topkaya (2009) found with Turkish foreign language students in reading classes.
A preliminary analysis of the scores indicates that scores vary between 2.40 and 3.35. As no scores are found ranging between 4 and 5 we can state that there are no language learning situations described in the ambiguity tolerance items that are dealt with high intolerance.

In the items regarding writing Item 5 *When I'm writing in English, I don't like the fact that I can't say exactly what I want* (3.25) and speaking Item 6 *When I'm speaking in English, I feel uncomfortable if I can't communicate my idea clearly* (3.35), scores are higher than 3.2. Those scores can be regarded as the highest intolerance of ambiguity our students reported in the instrument. The common factor in these items is that they refer to the communication of ideas on the part of students. It is evident that our students cannot tolerate the fact that they are not able to express their ideas with clarity and exactness when speaking or writing English. The similar results were obtained in the study conducted by Fuqiang (2006) where Chinese college students reported the highest intolerance regarding speaking and writing situations.

The highest tolerance of ambiguity is noted in Item 9 *It bothers me that I don't understand everything the teacher says in English* (2.40) and Item 10 *It bothers me when the teacher uses an English word I don't know* (2.50). The students participated in our research are willing to tolerant the fact that they don't understand everything when teacher speaks in English and when he/she uses the unknown English word while teaching. We may presume that the reasons for those results are different English background and level of knowledge of our participants. That's why during the first year of studying, teachers tend not only to explain unknown words in English but also to translate them in Croatian language.

Kazamia (1999) reported the similar results. She concluded that Greek civil servants welcome some unknown words in their communication with their instructor, but are less tolerant when they failed to understand the majority of teacher's talk.

One of our research questions is to identify gender difference (if any), that's why an independent sample t-test was conducted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguity score</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>4.098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Gender differences in tolerance of ambiguity

The result of t-test (table 2) indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the ambiguity tolerance score associated with gender differences. Female students present lower level of ambiguity tolerance than their male peers. According to the presented results we may conclude that female students do not take things for granted and study more to see the details. They are less willing to take a risk and they perceive new and complex situations as a source of threat. On the other hand, male students are more tolerant of ambiguity. They do not find lack of information and knowledge frustrating and they are more oriented on the wider context of situation.

The similar results are found in the research presented by Erten and Topkaya (2009). In their study Turkish female students reported less tolerance than male students in language learning.
3 Conclusion

Ambiguity tolerance is an important issue in personality development and education. According to Sakamoto (2007) in language learning and in management, levels of tolerance of ambiguity are correlated with creativity, risk aversion, lifestyle, orientation towards diversity (cross-cultural communication, intercultural competence) and leadership style.

Croatian management students studying English, as well as being future entrepreneurs, are the future professionals in management, economics and business generally. The workplace that demands the knowledge and use of Business English, disclosed in relevant professional organizations statements, indicate that those future professionals should be able to deal with diverse and unstructured problems in unfamiliar settings.

According to the results of our research our participants have low tolerance of ambiguity in the process of language learning. The ambiguity tolerance varies depending on skills and language learning situations involved. We may state that our management students cannot tolerate the ambiguities produced by their failure to express adequately their ideas in writing and speaking. Significant differences were also found between male and female students, where female students presented lower tolerance of ambiguity than their male peers. Yet, more research is needed to understand the nature and place of ambiguity tolerance in the process of learning a foreign language.
Literature:


Kazamia V, (1999): How tolerant are Greek EFL learners of foreign language ambiguities, Greek State Scholarship Foundation.


