

# HOW TOLERANT ARE GREEK EFL LEARNERS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE AMBIGUITIES?

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## Abstract

This study is part of a larger research project that was conducted at the National Center of Public Administration of Greece. The aim of this paper is to identify and assess the degree of tolerance of ambiguity Greek civil servants demonstrate when learning English as a foreign language. The concept of tolerance of ambiguity is introduced and its relevance to language learning is discussed. Qualitative analysis of research data indicates that Greek adult learners do not show the same tolerance in all skills, and are particularly intolerant of ambiguities stemming from communicating their ideas in English.

## 1. Introduction

Language learning is an extremely demanding task.<sup>1</sup> Learners are overwhelmed with new information that must be processed, assimilated and related to existing knowledge. Unfortunately, this is not an easy task. The structure, the lexical items, the phonological and phonetic elements of any two languages do not relate one-to-one. Whether learning takes place in the classroom or in naturalistic settings, whether language learning is geared towards communicative use or not, the learner has to deal with uncertainties stemming partly from this lack of total correspondence between any two languages. A feature that helps learners to overcome uncertainties inherent in language learning is tolerance of ambiguity. This paper will present the degree of tolerance of ambiguity Greek civil servants show when learning English.

## 2. Definition

In our attempt to define tolerance of ambiguity we are faced with a double task; to designate what tolerance is and to interpret the meaning of ambiguity. McLain (1993: 184) postulates that tolerance suggests 'begrudging acceptance' whereas 'intolerance suggests rejection' and adds that tolerance 'extends along a continuum from rejection to attraction'. This seems rather vague and it reflects the elusive character inherent not only in the term 'tolerance' but of 'ambiguity'. Defining ambiguity is also complex since various nuances are interwoven in the term. McLain (1993) suggests that ambiguity signifies perceived insufficiency of information regarding a particular stimulus or context. Budner (1962) defines ambiguous stimuli or 'ambiguous situations' according to his terminology, as those that are not adequately structured or categorized by the perceiver because they lack sufficient cues. He further classifies ambiguous situations in three cases: (1) those that are completely new and as a result of this they do not present any known cues; (2) those that are complex and have a great number of cues that must be taken into account and (3) those situations that exhibit contradictory elements, where different cues suggest different structures. Norton (1975) adds one more situation to those causing ambiguity: the unstructured situations where the cues provided cannot be interpreted. In short, ambiguous situations may be marked by novelty, complexity, insolubility and lack of structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Particular thanks are due to Peter Howarth for his comments on the draft of this paper. The research has been funded by a scholarship from the Greek State Scholarships Foundation (I.K.Y.).

What is of importance, though, is the way an individual reacts to an ambiguous stimulus, how he/she interprets it, how he/she psychologically copes with it. If ambiguous situations are interpreted by an individual as 'sources of threat' (Budner 1962: 29), 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' (ibid.), then he/she is tolerant of ambiguity and this state is called tolerance of ambiguity.

Ehrman (1993, 1994, 1996, 1999) gives another perspective on tolerance of ambiguity. She has devised a tolerance of ambiguity construct which is separated into three levels: the first level called intake; the second level named tolerance of ambiguity proper and the third level termed accommodation. At the intake level the learner admits new information into his/her mind. In the tolerance of ambiguity proper, which is the second level, it is assumed that intake has happened and at this stage the individual has to deal with contradictory elements, incomplete information or incomplete systems. The third level is described as accommodation - borrowing this term from Piaget (1967) - and it is at this level where discriminations of the new data are made, priorities are set and ultimately integration of new information with existing structures occurs in order to alter the latter and create new cognitive schemata that did not exist before.

It may be concluded then that tolerance of ambiguity is a feature closely related to one's personality or one's cognitive style (Ely 1989).

### **3. Implications for language learning**

If people exhibiting intolerance of ambiguity regard ambiguous stimuli as possible sources of threat, because these stimuli are new, complex or insoluble, then these people are reluctant to accept new stimuli, analyze intricate data or deal with cases that contain contradictory elements. Or to put it in another way, ambiguity tolerant people who are eager to deal with new, complex and insoluble situations are more receptive to change, more willing to take risks (McLain 1993). Ehrman (1996: 177) asserts that 'effective language learning is very much a process of reinterpreting one's view of reality using alternative perspectives'. If an individual is not receptive to new situations which can serve as 'his/her alternative perspectives' to reinterpret his/her reality, then how will he master a foreign language? To put it more simply, if an individual is reluctant to accept that a word in the target language may carry more than one denotation or that he does not need to know the meaning of every single word of a text in order to comprehend a passage, then his/her language learning process will be 'seriously hampered' (Ely 1995: 88).

In fact Ely (1989) suggests that ambiguity in language learning is materialized as uncertainty. He explains this by saying that language learning is 'fraught with uncertainty' and examples of the causes of this may be the fact that rarely do learners know the exact meaning of a new lexical item or feel that they have pronounced a sound with total accuracy or have fully comprehended the temporal reference of a grammatical tense. The pervasive character of uncertainty, or, to put it differently, ambiguity, 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).

It is not difficult to visualize instances where intolerance of ambiguity impedes the learning of individual linguistic elements. When a learner fails to grasp new sounds in order to pronounce new words he/she may experience such discomfort that he/she may give up attempts to master the new L2 sounds and resort to L1-like sounds in order to utter the specific word.

In the area of practising language learning skills, we can take an example from a learning strategy such as guessing for meaning, be this in oral form, talking with native speakers or in written form such as skimming in a passage. This skill involves risk taking and learners who are impeded by the uncertainty underlying guessing produced by the fact that they do not know the meaning of a word or of a number of lexical items, are not able to internalize and master the skill. As Ely (1995: 89) puts it:

...the students' acceptance and absorption of the new skill is being hampered by task-related uncertainty that acts as an unseen, subconscious source of resistance. That is, the students' reaction to ambiguity inherent in the prediction task may be making some of them reluctant or unable to internalize the skill.

This explanation sheds light on the third area, that of adopting language learning skills as permanent strategies. If a learner has experienced discomfort in using a specific strategy in class, as in the case of guessing for meaning, then he/she will be very reluctant to incorporate this into his repertoire of permanent learning strategies which are activated when the context requires such a skill. This seriously obstructs learners from becoming more independent in their learning processes and ultimately directing their own learning. By rejecting a learning strategy because of past discomfort, a learner narrows down his/her chances to act independently. Even students who seemed comfortable at using a particular skill in class may show reluctance to employ it in naturalistic settings because they are no longer under the teacher's guidance. It is expected then that uncertainty may heighten especially in naturalistic settings.

It has been indicated that tolerance of ambiguity is a positive feature for language learning. But how tolerant should learners be? Researchers state that although tolerance of ambiguity is significant for language learning processes, high tolerance can lead to language problems such as unquestioning acceptance and cognitive passivity. More specifically, a 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 forms. Additionally, this lack of sensitivity to L2 data may result in early and permanent pidginization or fossilization of incorrect pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and pragmatic use. On the other hand, as has already been pointed out, learners who believe that there is a one-to-one correspondence between mother tongue and target language and do not confront their intolerance of ambiguity are bound to face problems that will hinder their language learning processes.

It is suggested that moderate levels of tolerance of ambiguity are recommended for optimum results in language learning. Since high tolerance may cause cognitive passivity and low tolerance may impede language learning, mid point tolerance seems to be satisfactory. (Ely 1995, Ehrman 1996). Unfortunately nobody up to now has operationalized this mid-point tolerance of ambiguity. Consequently, it is very difficult to indicate the desired level of tolerance of ambiguity. Despite this lack of quantification, it is believed that it is worth investigating this phenomenon because one may be able to detect tendencies and patterns among language learners and synthesize a profile for their way of coping with language learning ambiguities.

#### **4. Research questions**

The main aim of this study is to examine how tolerance of ambiguity is exhibited in Greek civil servants when learning English as a foreign language. For this reason the following research questions were posed:

- Do Greek civil servants tolerate ambiguity when mastering English?
- To what degree are they tolerant or intolerant towards the ambiguities entailed in language learning?
- Are there any areas where learners demonstrate more/less tolerance?
- Is there any pattern of tolerance of ambiguity in their language learning processes?

#### **5. The research setting**

Research was conducted in the Foreign Languages Section of The National Centre for Public Administration of Greece - Institute of Training, which is the training branch of the Ministry of Interior, Public Administration and Decentralisation of Greece. It offers training to people working in the civil service sector, in areas which are considered necessary and important for the improvement and upgrading of services provided by civil servants.

The Foreign Languages Section offers training courses in languages other than Greek. Because of the particular interest of this research in English language, reference will only be made to English classes. Courses of English usually run for two semesters from October to January and from February to June; they involve 7 hours of tuition per week. They are offered at 6 levels, where students are placed according to their proficiency in English; the starting level is the pre-intermediate level while the highest level is post proficiency, which is almost equivalent to Cambridge Proficiency in English (CPE) level. Learners of foreign languages attend classes absolutely free and during their spare time.

#### **6. Research participants**

The subjects who participated in the study are all Greek working in the Greek civil service. They attend their English classes twice per week for 3 and a half hours of tuition per session, which are always in the afternoon or in the evening. The sample consists of 323 people, which represents 54.65 % of the total population of learners attending classes of English during spring semester 1998. Of these 39.6% are male and 58.8% female (1.5% did not report their sex). This sample was drawn from six language course levels. The mean age is 38.5 (s.d. = 7), 63.8% are university graduates, 11.8% are technological institute graduates (this corresponds to former HND graduates in Great Britain) and 23.5% high school graduates. Most of the students (88.2%) had studied English in the past whereas only 11.1% had never had any formal instruction in English before. Additionally 30.3% reported that they had studied another foreign language apart from English in the past and the remaining 65% reported no foreign language study.

#### **7. Data collection and data analysis procedures**

Research was conducted in May 1998. Data collection was undertaken by structured questionnaire. Participants were asked to fill in a biographical form and two more instruments, the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (Ely 1995) and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning version 7.0 (Oxford 1990). In this particular paper reference will only be made to the instrument selected for assessing tolerance of ambiguity, namely the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale

(SLTAS; Ely 1995). Data were collected during class time by the students' instructors and attempts were made to collect data from the majority of classes.

The results to be reported stem from a qualitative analysis of data; therefore only descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) will be mentioned.

## 8. Instrumentation

The SLTAS questionnaire was selected because it is the only one specially designed for language learning. It has 12 items and the responses are in Likert-scale format with a set of four responses. The questionnaire is originally written in English but in this research a Greek translation used. The Cronbach alpha internal consistency reliability for SLTAS is .84 and the standardized item alpha is .84.

## 9. Results and discussion

Before reporting the results, it is necessary to explain the terms adopted to refer to different scores. When employing 'Tola score', reference is made to the score produced after having calculated the scores of all items included in the SLTAS. This score shows the general tolerance/intolerance learners show and it may range from 12 to 48. The higher the score, the more intolerant learners are of foreign language ambiguities. On the other hand, when using 'Tola item score', reference is made to the score of individual items of the SLTAS. This score indicates learners' tolerance/intolerance in the specific situation described in the Tola item. It can range from 1 to 4 and in this case too, the higher the score, the more intolerant learners are. For reasons of coherence, results will be reported and discussed in the same section.

Table 1. scores of Tola items

Tola Item	Tola Item	Number (N)	Score (mean)	s.d.
1	When I'm reading something in English, I feel impatient when I don't totally understand the meaning	322	2.78	0.73
2	It bothers me that I don't understand everything the teacher says in English	322	2.79	0.73
3	When I write English compositions, I don't like it when I can't express my ideas exactly	323	3.23	0.64
4	It is frustrating that sometimes I don't understand completely some English grammar	321	2.47	0.75
5	I don't like the feeling that my English pronunciation is not quite correct	321	2.71	0.78
6	I don't enjoy reading something in English that takes a while to figure out completely	323	2.50	0.73
7	It bothers me that even though I study English grammar some of it is hard to use in speaking and writing	322	2.89	0.66
8	When I'm writing in English, I don't like the fact that I can't say exactly what I want	323	3.06	0.60
9	It bothers me when the teacher uses an English word I don't know	322	2.11	0.68
10	When I'm speaking in English, I feel uncomfortable if I can't communicate my idea clearly	323	3.04	0.65
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	322	2.70	0.71
12	One thing I don't like about reading in English is having to guess what the meaning is.	323	2.38	0.74

The results obtained indicate that the Tola score is 32.68 (s.d. = 5.06, N = 315). This score may be located a little above the mid-point of the scoring continuum 12-48 and indicates that learners are not placed towards either the low end or the high end of the continuum. This signifies that Greek civil servants do not exhibit high tolerance that would lead them to accepting new language elements unquestioningly and on the other hand they do not present high intolerance that would impede their language learning processes. However, it is believed that careful qualitative analysis of individual Tola items will shed some light into the area.

Table 1 presents the scores of all the Tola items included in the scale. A preliminary analysis of the scores of all Tola items indicates that scores vary between 2.11 and 3.23. As no scores are found ranging between 1 and 2 we can state that there are no language learning situations described in Tola items that are dealt with high tolerance. In other words, all Tola items cause some form of response from learners that varies in tolerance/intolerance between 2.11 and 3.23. Additionally some patterns can be detected. More specifically, Tola items with the highest scores have some common characteristics, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Tola items belonging to Set 1

Tola Item	Tola Item	Number (N)	Score (mean)	s.d.
3	When I write English compositions, I don't like it when I can't express my ideas exactly	323	3.23	0.64
8	When I'm writing in English, I don't like the fact that I can't say exactly what I want	323	3.06	0.60
10	When I'm speaking in English, I feel uncomfortable if I can't communicate my idea clearly	323	3.04	0.65

In this set of Tola items, all the scores are placed higher than 3.0 and can be regarded as high. Especially the score of Tola 3 is very high indicating high levels of intolerance. Similarly, Tola 8 and Tola 10 indicate intolerance. The common factor in all these items is that they all refer to the communication of ideas on the part of learners. It is evident that Greek civil servants cannot tolerate the fact that they are not able to express their ideas with clarity and exactness when speaking or writing English. The significance of this point may be supported by the fact that all the remaining Tola items of the scale have a score below 3.0.

This finding may be explained by a situation called language shock. This situation is mostly experienced by second language learners, but it will be shown that it bears some similarities to situations experienced by foreign language learners too. When individuals learn a second language, they come in contact with another culture. Arnold & Brown (1999) mention that second language learners experience emotional difficulties that are produced by the confrontation between the culture of the target language and their own culture. Successful language learning involves incorporating, at least partly, some aspects of the target culture in learners' way of thinking and of experiencing reality. Stengal (1939, cited in Arnold & Brown 1999: 21) describes language shock '...as the situation when adult learners fear that their words in the target language do not reflect their ideas adequately, perhaps making them appear ridiculous or infantile. Not controlling the language properly, they lose a source of narcissistic gratification which they might otherwise receive when using their own language.'

If we compare this state with the situations described in the Tola items of Set1, we will find some common elements. Language shock influences language learning when adults are involved and the participants of this research are all adults. Furthermore, the cause of language shock is learners' 'fear' that they cannot verbalize their thoughts in the desired way. In the present study, learners dislike the fact that they are not able to express their ideas with exactness. Of course, we must be cautious as to the extent of application of language shock to Greek civil servants because this situation is primarily experienced by second language learners and the subjects of this study are foreign language learners. It is possible, that in foreign language learning, learners' reactions are not of the same intensity as in second language learning, but as we see, feelings of discomfort produced by learners' inability to express their ideas adequately are evident in the research sample.

However, it may be concluded is that the intolerance shown by the subjects in Set1 is so high that it could create problems in the language learning processes of Greek civil servants.

Another set of Tola items presenting some pattern is cited in Table 3.

Table 3. Tola items belonging to Set 2

Tola Item	Tola Item	Number (N)	Score (mean)	s.d.
12	One thing I don't like about reading in English is having to guess what the meaning is.	323	2.38	0.74
6	I don't enjoy reading something in English that takes a while to figure out completely	323	2.50	0.73
1	When I'm reading something in English, I feel impatient when I don't totally understand the meaning	322	2.78	0.73

The items in Table 3 show a moderate level of tolerance of learners when reading English. The score of Tola 12 especially shows that the participants of this research are willing to tolerate the uncertainty entailed in guessing. This finding is supported by the other two items, Tola 6 and Tola 1, despite the fact that the score of each Tola item is slightly differentiated from each other. It may be concluded that feelings of discomfort produced by the use of the technique of inferencing do not impede their processes of reading texts. Furthermore, this finding may be contrasted with the finding presented in Table 2. In Set 1, learners exhibited intolerance associated with the skills of speaking and writing, whereas in Set 2, participants reveal tolerance related to reading. Birckbichler & Omaggio (1978) suggest that learners may exhibit tolerance of ambiguity in one skill and present intolerance in another. For example, an individual may tolerate ambiguity while reading, but gets frustrated by unknown elements in a listening task. Similarly, it can be said that tolerance of ambiguity of Greek adults is closely associated to the skills being practised.

It is also interesting to investigate the Tola items shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Tola items belonging to Set 3

Tola Item	Tola Item	Number (N)	Score (mean)	s.d.
9	It bothers me when the teacher uses an English word I don't know	322	2.11	0.68
2	It bothers me that I don't understand everything the teacher says in English	322	2.79	0.73

Tola 9 is the item with the lowest score of all. This implies that individuals are willing to tolerate, more than any other situation described in the instrument, the fact that they are not able to understand some lexical items pronounced by their instructors. However, the score of Tola 2 indicates that they do not seem to tolerate with the same intensity the gaps produced by their inability to comprehend all teacher's sayings. This means that Greek civil servants welcome some unknown words in their communication with their instructor, but are not that tolerant when they fail to understand the majority of teachers' talk.

Another set may be formed by Tola item 4 and Tola item 7, as indicated in Table 5.

Table 5. Tola items belonging to Set 4

Tola Item	Tola Item	Number (N)	Score (mean)	s.d.
4	It is frustrating that sometimes I don't understand completely some English grammar	321	2.47	0.75
7	It bothers me that even though I study English grammar some of it is hard to use in speaking and writing	322	2.89	0.66

Although learners tolerate moderately ambiguities arising from grammatical elements (Tola 4), their tolerance decreases when they fail to apply grammar in speaking and writing. Chapelle (1983) states that tolerance of ambiguity is an important factor in the acquisition of grammar. The results of her survey indicate that 'ambiguity tolerance was found to be a significant predictor of end-of semester performance on the grammar' (p. 94).

In the present situation the degree of intolerance of Tola 7 not does not reach such high levels that could cause problems. Yet, it is important to note that Greek civil servants cannot easily accept the uncertainties produced by their use of grammar.

Reference should also be made to the skills mentioned in Tola 7. Speaking and writing are involved in this item. This point becomes more significant if we remember that the same skills were involved in Set 1 where low tolerance was observed. Consequently, we can conclude that the tolerance of ambiguity of Greek civil servants tends to decrease when these learners have to confront ambiguities in speaking and writing.

The remaining Tola items cannot be grouped and will be treated separately.

Tola Item	Tola Item	Number (N)	Score (mean)	s.d.
5	I don't like the feeling that my English pronunciation is not quite correct	321	2.71	0.78

The score of Tola 5 indicates that Greek learners can deal with ambiguities produced by mispronounced words. They show similar tolerance in the lack of one-to-one semantic correspondence between English and Greek in Tola 11 cited below:

Tola Item	Tola Item	Number (N)	Score (mean)	s.d.
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	322	2.70	0.71

## 9. Conclusions

With regard to the questions posed earlier, qualitative analysis of data indicates that Greek civil servants tolerate ambiguity when learning English as a foreign language. Unfortunately exact quantification cannot be made, but the degree of tolerance of ambiguity exhibited is such that would neither cause problems in their language learning nor unquestioning acceptance and unawareness of the linguistic subtleties of the target language. This is supported by the finding that no Tola item scores were detected that would indicate very high tolerance of ambiguity. However, tolerance of ambiguity varies, depending on skills and language learning situations. On the other hand, learners cannot tolerate the ambiguities produced by their failure to express adequately their ideas in writing and speaking. This situation triggers a considerable amount of intolerance that might impede their progress in these skills.

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