

An Investigation into Turkish EFL Learners' Ambiguity Tolerance

Gülşah ÖZ*

Makale Bilgisi

Makalenin Türü: Araştırma Makalesi
Makalenin Geliş Tarihi: 20.5.2022
Makalenin Kabul Tarihi: 18.6.2022
DOI: 10.54970/turkuaz.1119010

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore Turkish EFL learners' ambiguity tolerance at a state university, Turkey. In line with this main aim, to find out if there is any significant difference between Turkish male and female learners in their ambiguity tolerance of learning English is also another purpose of the study. Within this purpose, Ely's (1995) Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) was administered to 89 (52 female and 37 male) prep class students from Department of English Language Teaching and English Language Literature at a state university of Turkey. The data were collected during the academic year of 2018-2019. The findings of the study revealed that the participants' ambiguity tolerance levels were low. There was not any statistically significant difference in students' ambiguity tolerance of learning English regarding their gender. Based on the findings, implications and recommendations were also presented for teachers and researchers in the field of English language teaching.

Keywords: ambiguity tolerance, gender, foreign language learning, Turkish EFL learners

İngilizceyi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenen Türk Öğrencilerin Belirsizlik Toleransına İlişkin Bir Araştırma

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Türkiye bağlamında İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen hazırlık okulu öğrencilerinin belirsizlik toleransını ölçmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, İngilizce öğrenmeye ilişkin belirsizlik toleranslarında Türk erkek ve kız öğrenciler arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark olup olmadığını incelemek araştırmanın amaçları arasındadır. Bu amaçla, Türkiye'de bir devlet üniversitesinde İngiliz Dili Eğitimi ve İngiliz Dili Edebiyatı bölümlerinde okuyan 89 (52 kız ve 37 erkek) hazırlık sınıfı öğrencisine Ely'nin (1995) İkinci Dilde Belirsizlik Toleransı Ölçeği (SLTAS) uygulanmıştır. Araştırmanın bulguları, katılımcıların düşük düzeyde belirsizlik toleransına sahip olduklarını ortaya koymuştur. Cinsiyet etkisine gelince, İngilizce öğrenmeye ilişkin belirsizlik

* Araştırma Görevlisi, Aksaray Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi, Aksaray/TÜRKİYE. E-posta: gulsahoz@aksaray.edu.tr ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8626-4274

toleranslarında erkek ve kız öğrenciler arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark görülmemiştir. Elde edilen bulgular ışığında İngilizce öğretmenleri ve araştırmacılar için de bazı çıkarımlar ve önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: belirsizlik toleransı, cinsiyet, yabancı dil öğrenimi, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrenciler

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language learning is a complex and dynamic process that comprises of ambiguous situations. Learners face new stimuli that can be sometimes not easy to understand or interpret and it can take time to take the input and process it in mind. In that sense, the learner's approach to the new stimuli and his/her tolerance to accept that information is very crucial. Ambiguity Tolerance (AT) as a psychological concept can enhance or impede the language learning process of learners and needs to be investigated with different ages of learners at different context.

It is well known that the concept of AT was coined by Frenkel-Brunswik (1949) in order to explain the term of authoritarianism, prejudice, mental rigidity, and an individual's resistance to stimuli, early selection and use of one solution in the face of ambiguity in the field of psychology. In other words, the researcher advocated that ambiguity tolerance/ intolerance refers to a person's behavioral features in the face of ambiguous situations as a personal trait. Brown (2000) defines the term of AT as "the degree to which you are cognitively willing to tolerate ideas and propositions that run counter to your own belief system or structure of knowledge" (p.119). In language learning context, Ellis (1994) defines AT as "an ability to deal with ambiguous new stimuli without frustration and without appeal to authority". Within this concern, Ely (1989) maintains, foreign language learning comprises of variety of ambiguity ranging from vocabulary items, grammar concepts or sociocultural issues in the target language. If learners do not tolerate these ambiguous stimuli reasonably, they may get confused or stressed due to trouble experiences with the target language (White, 1999). Therefore, such intolerance can impede learners' performance while learning a foreign language (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern & Todesco, 1978; Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; White, 1999; Karman, 2011). In the related literature, there are several studies conducted about the effect of AT on language learning (Chapelle, 1983; Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Kazamia, 1999; Erten & Topkaya, 2009; Seidi, 2018; Asmalı, 2019). According to Erten and Topkaya (2009), for example, there is a strong relationship between students' perceived success at reading skills in a foreign language and AT indicating that the more tolerance the learners show in the face of ambiguity, the more success they got in reading.

Learners show differences in some of their abilities based on their different levels of ambiguity tolerance in the context of foreign language learning. To illustrate, learners with high level of tolerance of ambiguity tend to take more risks (Rubin, 1975; Ely, 1989; Oxford, 1999), be more creative (Tegano, 1995) or more open-minded (Furnham, 1995). In addition, these learners are described as good language learners by Rubin (1975). The researcher implies that learners who are more tolerant are willing to guess or use whatever knowledge that they know in target language in order to communicate. On the other hand, Ehrman (1993) implies that AT is closely related to 'ego boundary' by categorizing it into two types of ego boundary. According to the researcher, more tolerant learners have 'thin ego boundary'; that is, such learners rely on receptive strategies towards outside influences, they can both tolerate and embrace ambiguity,

they have a tendency to perform better in speaking skills; furthermore, the openness and flexibility of these learners to new stimuli and their creativity in the process of language learning are high. On contrast, learners with low ambiguity tolerance need more assistance and encouragement to deal with the difficulties while learning a foreign language (Yin, 2005; Atamanova & Bogomaz, 2014). In this regard, Li and He (2016) advocated that the investigation of ambiguity tolerance is significant because this concept can enhance or impede learners' language achievement, their use of strategies and even their agency. In other words, knowing how tolerant the learners are or how their psychological concept work would give benefits to the language learning and teaching process since the teachers would have the chance of organizing and changing their ways of teaching according to the students' psychological barriers (Erten & Topkaya, 2009). That is why it is necessary for teachers to pay attention to their students' ambiguity tolerance for a fruitful language learning process (Ely, 1989; Ehrman, 1993). Keeping this in mind, this study is intended to investigate Turkish EFL learners' ambiguity tolerance. In addition, whether there exist any significant differences among the participants' ambiguity tolerance levels regarding gender. The following research questions are posed: (1) To what extent tolerance of ambiguity do Turkish EFL learners possess? (2) Is gender a factor on ambiguity tolerance levels of Turkish EFL learners?

METHODS

Participants

A sample of 89 (52 female and 37 male) Turkish preparatory school students majoring in English Language Teaching Department and English Language Literature Department in a state university in Turkey were selected to take part in this study. The average age of the participants was 19 years old. Preparatory school students majoring English were selected as the participants of this study because they were at the beginning of university education and having the knowledge of their ambiguity tolerance would be beneficial for both the students and the instructors, which would enhance the language learning process and make progress in English.

Instruments

Within the purpose of this quantitative descriptive study, Ely's (1995) Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) was used, and the data were collected during the academic year 2018-2019. The request for permission to use the data instrument was emailed to the researcher. The SLTAS aims to evaluate EFL learners' ambiguity tolerance including 12 statements related to the ambiguities that a learner may come across while learning English. The original of the questionnaire was used with anchors being at *strongly agree=4*, *agree=3*, *disagree=2*, *strongly disagree=1*. However, in this study, a new anchor (*undecided=3*) was added not to force the participants to choose either positive or negative one as in Erten and Topkaya, (2009)'s research, and the Cronbach alpha value of the modified version of the scale was determined as .75 (Erten & Topkaya, 2009). That is why, the responses to this questionnaire are rated on five-point Likert scale, the scoring of which range from 5 indicating strongly agree to 1 indicating strongly disagree (*strongly agree=5*, *agree=4*, *undecided=3*, *disagree=2*, *strongly disagree=1*), which means that the higher the score is, the less tolerant the participant is in learning English.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Descriptive Analysis of the Ambiguity Tolerance

To investigate the students' ambiguity tolerance levels, descriptive statistics were employed (see Table 1). As Erten and Topkaya (2009) utilized in their research, in the scoring of the responses taken from the students and evaluation their ambiguity tolerance levels, the anchor for *undecided*=3 was accepted as the borderline of tolerance. Thus, the values above this borderline represent lower levels of ambiguity tolerance while those below mean higher levels of ambiguity tolerance in the current study. Table 1 indicates the participants' ambiguity tolerance mean scores and standard deviations.

Table 1.
Mean and Standard Deviations of Ambiguity Tolerance

Ambiguity Tolerance	Mean	SD
Item 1	3,45	1,18
Item 2	3,31	1,26
Item 3	3,97	1,01
Item 4	3,56	1,15
Item 5	3,77	1,10
Item 6	2,76	1,22
Item 7	3,63	1,12
Item 8	3,68	1,16
Item 9	2,89	1,21
Item 10	3,89	1,26
Item 11	3,82	1,05
Item 12	2,85	1,20
Total	3,46	1,16

As indicated in Table 1, average ambiguity tolerance score among Turkish EFL learners had a mean of ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.16$). As explained before, the higher score indicates lower level of ambiguity tolerance. The average point in the scoring of the questionnaire is 3.00. Based on the average ambiguity tolerance of the participants ($M = 3.46$), it can be concluded that their tolerance of ambiguity was low in learning English.

Descriptive Analysis of the Ambiguity Tolerance by Gender

Whether gender is a factor on ambiguity tolerance was investigated and the results were descriptively analyzed (see Table 2). Table 2 demonstrates the distribution of gender in terms of ambiguity tolerance, along with the mean and standard deviation values. The findings of the study revealed no statistically significant difference between male and female Turkish preparatory school students in respect to their levels of ambiguity tolerance.

Table 2.
T-test for Gender Differences in Ambiguity Tolerance

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Ambiguity Tolerance	F	52	42,69	6,60	1,76	,082
	M	37	39,64	8,88		

Descriptive Analysis of the Ambiguity Tolerance by Items

In order to better understand the ambiguity tolerance of Turkish preparatory school students, the mean scores of ambiguity tolerance reflected in each item were analyzed and to figure out the gender effect, an independent sample t-test was employed for every singular item on the questionnaire. The statistical findings are presented in Table 3. According to Table 3, only in item 2 a statistically significant difference was determined among learners in their ambiguity tolerance regarding gender ($p = .01$ (2-tailed i.e., ambiguity tolerance of male ($M = 2.89$) exceeded female's ambiguity tolerance ($M = 3.61$)).

Table 3.

T-test for Gender Differences in Ambiguity Tolerance by Items

Items	Female		Male		t	Sig. (2 tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
Item 1	3.52	1.18	3.36	1.19	.64	.51
Item 2	3.61	1.10	2.89	1.36	2.65	.01*
Item 3	3.96	1.11	4.00	0.84	-.17	.86
Item 4	3.75	1.11	3.29	1.17	1.84	.06
Item 5	3.96	1.00	3.51	1.19	1.86	.06
Item 6	2.59	1.08	3.00	1.37	-1.47	.14
Item 7	3.80	0.98	3.40	1.27	1.58	.11
Item 8	3.75	1.16	3.59	1.16	.61	.53
Item 9	2.94	1.19	2.82	1.24	.42	.67
Item 10	4.11	1.14	3.59	1.36	1.89	.06
Item 11	3.80	0.99	3.83	1.14	-.13	.89
Item 12	3.00	1.15	2.64	1.25	1.36	.17

M: Mean SD: Standard Deviation * Significant at $p < .05$

Discussion

The present study investigated the ambiguity tolerance of Turkish preparatory school students and whether the level of ambiguity tolerance showed any statistically significant difference between male and female learners. In the light of the findings, it can be inferred that Turkish preparatory school students have low level of ambiguity tolerance in learning English. Similarly, Li and He (2016) found with Chinese EFL learners that the participants' ambiguity tolerance levels are low in learning English, along with the mean score ($M = 33.39$). In Turkish context, Erten and Topkaya (2009) also provided similar results stressing the participants' lower level of ambiguity tolerance while learning foreign language. These results indicate that these learners whose level of tolerance of ambiguity is low avoid from taking risks (Rubin, 1975; Ely, 1989; Oxford, 1999). Furthermore, Ehrman (1993) maintained that the learners with low level of tolerance in the face of ambiguity have 'thick ego boundary'. In other words, these learners like the participants in the current study tend to separate themselves from outside, dislike open-ended tasks and seek a sense of order. In addition, their openness to outside influences such as learning new languages or cultures, their flexibility, and adaptability are low. Moreover, they tend to prefer clear categories and task accomplishment motivates them in contrast to the learners with higher ambiguity tolerance. Therefore, these learners need more assistance and encouragement to deal with the difficulties in foreign language learning (Yin, 2005; Atamanova & Bogomaz, 2014) and teachers should take into consideration their students' ambiguity tolerance to enhance their students' performance in foreign language learning (Ely, 1989; Ehrman, 1993). In this sense, it can be stated

that the students might have had low level of ambiguity tolerance in the process of learning English due to their lack of flexibility and adaptability or their avoidance of taking risks in the face of ambiguities related to the language learning.

As for gender effect on ambiguity tolerance of Turkish preparatory school students, no statistically significant difference was determined among the students in their levels of ambiguity tolerance. This is in line with the results of the studies by Senfeld (1996) and Kamran and Maftoon (2012); however, contrasts some other researchers' findings (Brougher, 1984; Erten & Topkaya, 2009). Moreover, to better understand gender effect on ambiguity tolerance, an independent sample t-test was employed for every singular item on the questionnaire. The findings indicated that female learners are less tolerant when they have difficulty in comprehending every utterance of the teacher in English. In this sense, Erten and Topkaya (2009)' research findings about the gender role on ambiguity tolerance were the fact that female learners appeared to be less tolerant of ambiguity than male peers while learning English. That is why the female students might show less tolerance than male when they had difficulty in comprehending every speech of their instructors'.

This research suggests that Turkish preparatory school students need to raise their awareness of their tolerance in the face of ambiguous situations in learning English, and English language teachers also need to pay attention to their students' ambiguity tolerance level. Considering the significance of the concept of ambiguity tolerance in foreign language learning as a personal variable, teachers might try to eliminate the complex or ambiguous situations by organizing their lessons accordingly or changing their strategy of instructions in English language teaching regarding both their students' tolerance of ambiguity and teaching context. For further studies, it can be noted that more research by applying both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools need to be conducted on this concept from different dimensions of foreign language learning in different context with the aim of providing a fruitful language learning journey for students.

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