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The relationships between ambiguity tolerance, learning strategies, and learning Chinese as a second language



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ABSTRACT

The present study explored the relationships among ambiguity tolerance, language learning strategies, and L2 proficiency in the context of learning Chinese as a second language (CSL) in Taiwan. The three dimensions are inextricably linked to one another. Although a statistical relationship between ambiguity tolerance and overall strategy use could not be established, high ambiguity tolerance was identified to be a significant predictor of L2 competence and the use of L2-oriented learning strategies with less reliance on L1. It can be also argued that such L2-oriented learning strategies constitute the foundation for success in L2 learning. Successful CSL learners tended to employ strategies that focus on the understanding of overall meaning in communication, use Chinese in a natural and authentic context, and excel at monitoring their study and progress. Findings showed that language teachers should assist students with low ambiguity tolerance to cope with L2 ambiguity and further encourage them to take advantage of opportunities to use L2-oriented strategies, especially in a second language setting. An awareness of ambiguity tolerance and language learning strategies should be developed and taken into account by language instructors when designing course materials and classroom activities.

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1. Introduction

Which individual differences can facilitate or hinder the second or foreign language (L2 or FL) learning process has been one of the central issues in research on L2 and FL learning. By identifying L2 learner differences and exploring their influence on L2 attainment, language teachers can design effective course materials and class activities that enhance students' learning advantages or compensate for their learning disadvantages. Among the aspects proposed and investigated in this study, tolerance of ambiguity is argued to have a direct impact on success in L2 learning as well as other aspects of learner differences, e.g., learning strategies (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Ely, 1989; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993).

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Previous studies have reported a positive correlation between ambiguity tolerance (AT) and L2 performance (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Naiman, Fröhlich, & Stern, 1975) and many more studies have investigated the relationship between learning strategies and success in learning an L2 (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Vandergrift, 2003; Wen & Johnson, 1997; Wong & Nunan, 2011. Please see Section 2 for a detailed review.) The common goal of both trends of research is to provide pedagogical implications for enabling L2 students to learn effectively and independently. The research reported here incorporated all three dimensions into the investigation and explored the probable relationships among them with a focus on learning Chinese as a second language in Taiwan.

The past decade has seen a surge of people learning Chinese as a second/foreign language (CSL/CFL) around the world, but CSL/CFL research is still in an incipient stage compared with research on learning English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL). To better understand the learning process of CSL/CFL students, more research needs to be conducted on the learning styles and strategies of these learners. Despite the importance of ambiguity tolerance to L2 learning, its impact on learning Chinese as a second/foreign language has still not been investigated and is thus not fully understood by CSL/CFL researchers and teachers. An understanding of this issue may not only raise teachers' awareness of their students' learning styles but also assist them in designing appropriate and effective course materials and classroom activities. Due to a gap in the literature, more studies comparing how ambiguity tolerance affects the acquisition of language need to be conducted and will have important implications for research on second language acquisition (SLA) in general.

2. Literature review

2.1. Ambiguity tolerance

In psychology, ambiguity refers to uncertain situations with inexact and obscure cues. Based on the nature of cues or information available in a context, Budner (1962) classified ambiguous situations into three types: new (i.e. no familiar cues), complex (i.e. too many cues), and contradictory (i.e. conflicting cues) situations. People with low tolerance of ambiguity view these situations as sources of psychological discomfort, uneasiness, or menace (Norton, 1975), whereas high tolerance of ambiguity predisposes individuals to take risks and readily accept change (McLain, 1993).

Many psychologists have assumed that cognitive styles such as tolerance of ambiguity are a generalized personality trait that remains relatively stable across domains and contexts. This assumption was challenged by Endler (1973), Ely (1986, 1988), and Mischel (1981), who argued that personality variables should be operationalized with respect to specific domains and contexts. For example, Ely's (1988) study of L2 learners indicated that students who are more willing to take risks perform better in activities involving relatively free language use, yet they tend to feel more uncomfortable in activities such as highly-structured grammar practice as such activities offer less ambiguity. Durrheim and Foster (1997) agree that tolerance of ambiguity should not be construed as a stable generalized trait. Instead, they believe it varies from one domain to another. The level of ambiguity tolerance in one context does not entail the same level of ambiguity tolerance in another context.

Ely (1989) was the first scholar that extended this content-specific view of cognitive variables to the study of ambiguity tolerance in the specific domain of second language learning. L2 learning or acquisition is a quintessential context where ambiguity is featured. L2 learners are often barraged with new, vague, incomplete, or unclear clues about the target language during the learning process. According to Ely (1995), ambiguity in the context of L2 learning can be detected in three aspects of the process: 1) "learning individual linguistic elements (phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, etc.);" 2) "practicing language learning skills"; and 3) "adopting those skills as permanent strategies" (p. 88).

As ambiguity is ubiquitous and unavoidable in L2 learning, it is important to understand how it affects the learning process and outcome and how learners react to it. Many studies indicate that there is a positive correlation between ambiguity tolerance and L2 performance. Ambiguity tolerance (AT) can be construed as "a person's ability to function rationally and calmly in a situation in which interpretation of all stimuli is not clear" (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986, p. 30). Based on a listening task, Naiman et al.'s (1975) research found that ambiguity tolerance was a significant predictor of success in learning French as a second language in a Toronto high school. The more tolerant the students were of ambiguity, the higher their scores on listening tasks. Similar results have been obtained in studies on ESL and EFL learning (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Kamran & Maftoon, 2012; Zarei, 2012).

Despite the reported positive relationship between ambiguity tolerance and L2 proficiency, it has been argued that excessive tolerance to ambiguity might lead to indiscriminate acceptance and early pidginization or fossilization in L2 learning (Ely, 1995; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993). Ely (1995) asserted that "[t]he ideal case, of course, is that of the learner who is neither inhibited by low tolerance of ambiguity nor oblivious to linguistic subtleties" (p. 93). The stance that a moderate level of ambiguity tolerance is more beneficial to L2 learning than high or low ambiguity tolerance was confirmed by El-Koumy (2000). Using the MAT-50 (Norton, 1975) as a measurement of ambiguity tolerance, El-Koumy classified the subjects, 150 EFL students, into three groups: high-AT, middle-AT, and low-AT. The middle-AT group attained significantly higher scores on the reading comprehension subtest of TOEFL than both high- and low-AT groups.

In view of the controversy over the relationship between ambiguity tolerance level and L2 proficiency, the present study aimed to explore this issue in the context of learning Chinese as a second language. One of the research goals was to determine whether high-AT and middle-AT CSL students differed significantly in their Chinese proficiency.

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