FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

AMBIGUITY TOLERANCE AND ENGLISH FINAL EXAMINATION PERFORMANCE AMONG VIETNAMESE EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: Ambiguity is a common part of second and foreign language learning, particularly in listening and reading tasks where learners often encounter unfamiliar or partially comprehensible input. Despite its relevance to language processing, ambiguity tolerance has received relatively limited attention in IELTS-oriented assessment contexts, especially in Vietnamese EFL settings. The present study examined the relationship between ambiguity tolerance and English final examination performance among Vietnamese university students learning English as a foreign language. A total of 320 students participated in the study. Data were collected using an adapted 12-item ambiguity tolerance scale together with scores from an IELTS-oriented institutional final examination focusing on listening and reading skills. The scale demonstrated very strong reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .963$; McDonald's $\omega = .963$). Exploratory factor analysis supported a clear one-factor structure, accounting for approximately 71% of the variance. Spearman correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship between ambiguity tolerance and examination performance ($\rho = .354$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis further indicated that ambiguity tolerance remained a significant positive predictor even after several English-learning background variables had been controlled for. The findings suggest that students with higher ambiguity tolerance may cope more effectively with the uncertainty and incomplete understanding often involved in IELTS-oriented listening and reading tasks performed under time pressure.

KEY WORDS: Ambiguity tolerance; EFL learners; IELTS-oriented assessment; English examination performance; listening and reading comprehension.

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1. Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language often involves dealing with uncertainty. In fact, learners regularly encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, incomplete comprehension, unclear meanings, and multiple possible interpretations of linguistic input, especially during listening and reading activities (Field, 2008; Grabe, 2009). In this sense, ambiguity is not an occasional problem in language learning, but a normal part of the learning process (Ely, 1989; Brown, 2000). Recent research has also continued to highlight the broader cognitive and psychological dimensions of ambiguity tolerance (AT) in multilingual and second language contexts (Purpuri et al., 2024).

Within second language acquisition (SLA), AT generally refers to a learner's ability or willingness to cope with uncertain or incomplete situations without excessive frustration or anxiety (Budner, 1962; Ely, 1989). Previous studies have suggested that learners with higher AT may be more willing to continue working with unfamiliar input, make inferences from context, and tolerate temporary uncertainty during communication as well as comprehension tasks (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Ely, 1995). Learners with higher AT may also show greater persistence and engagement when dealing with unfamiliar or partially understood language input (Yu et al., 2022).

Because ambiguity is deeply embedded in language learning, researchers have examined its

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relationship with various aspects of second and foreign language learning, including language achievement, vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, writing performance, and language learning strategies. Findings have generally suggested a positive relationship between AT and language performance, although the strength and consistency of this relationship vary across contexts and language skills (Başöz, 2015; Chu et al., 2015). Some studies, however, have also reported mixed or weaker relationships depending on the specific language skill and learning context involved (Jowkar & Khajehie, 2017).

However, AT remains underexplored in IELTS-oriented assessment contexts, particularly those involving listening and reading tasks completed under time pressure. Such tasks often require learners to process partially understood input, infer meaning from context, and continue comprehension despite uncertainty (Field, 2008; Grabe, 2009). For this reason, learners' responses to uncertainty may become particularly important in comprehension-oriented assessment contexts. In addition, although previous research has frequently examined correlations between AT and language achievement, fewer studies have investigated whether AT remains a significant predictor of performance after controlling for learners' English-learning background variables (Alahdadi & Ghanizadeh, 2017; Başöz, 2015; Chu et al., 2015). Research on AT in Vietnamese EFL contexts appears also to be limited, with recent Vietnam-based studies mostly examining it as a part of wider communicative-disposition profiles, not as a direct predictor of language assessment performance (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2026).

To fill these gaps, this study aims to investigate the relationship between AT and performance on an IELTS-oriented English final examination among Vietnamese EFL university students. In accordance with this, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the psychometric properties of the AT scale in the present context?

RQ2. Is AT significantly associated with performance on an IELTS-oriented English final examination among Vietnamese EFL university students?

RQ3. To what extent does AT predict performance on an IELTS-oriented English final examination after controlling for selected English-learning background variables?

2. Literature review

2.1. Ambiguity and uncertainty in language learning

Ambiguity is a characteristic feature of human language and communication. In many cases, words, expressions or linguistic structures can have different meanings depending on the context, the speaker's intention or the interpretation (Winter-Froemel & Zirker, 2015). Especially in English, learners often encounter unknown words, implicit meanings, missing information and uncertainty in communicative and comprehension tasks (Nguyen, 2023). Consequently, ambiguity is often an unavoidable challenge in second and foreign language learning rather than an occasional problem.

This is often the case in listening and reading activities where learners have to process incoming language quickly and without interruption. Listening and reading comprehension are not only a matter of bottom-up decoding of linguistic forms but also a matter of top-down meaning construction from contextual and background knowledge (Schmitt, 2010). In particular, in listening tasks learners often interpret spoken input before they have fully understood each word or sentence, especially when time is limited (Field, 2008). Likewise, reading comprehension involves learners inferring meaning from context, tolerating unfamiliar vocabulary and continuing to build meaning despite partial understanding (Grabe, 2009). In many cases, comprehension is therefore achieved not through complete certainty, but through approximation, inferencing and contextual interpretation. Because of this, uncertainty has long been recognized as an important part of SLA. Learners do not always receive perfectly clear or fully comprehensible input, nor are they always able to interpret language immediately or accurately. Their responses to ambiguity may therefore influence how they engage with unfamiliar language, persist during comprehension difficulties, and manage temporary gaps in understanding.

2.2. Ambiguity tolerance as a learner variable

AT is usually understood in SLA as the learner's capability or willingness to deal with uncertain, incomplete or unclear situations without becoming overly frustrated or anxious (Budner, 1962; Ely, 1989). In language learning contexts, AT is often associated with the learner's readiness to continue engaging with unfamiliar input even when comprehension is only partial or unstable. Ely (1989, 1995) was one of the early scholars to emphasize the importance of AT for second language learning. The author suggests that learners having a high tolerance of ambiguity are more likely to take risks, to infer meaning from context and to continue interacting in the face of uncertainty, whereas those with a low tolerance of ambiguity are more readily discouraged by encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, unclear grammar or incomplete understanding.

AT has also been discussed within the broader literature on individual differences in SLA. Dörnyei (2005) notes that language learning is affected not only by cognitive ability but also psychological and affective learner characteristics. In this perspective, AT may influence learners' emotional and cognitive responses to uncertain or difficult-to-understand language input. More recently, the literature has further indicated that AT may be associated with persistence, engagement, adaptability, and resilience in the process of language learning (Alahdadi & Ghanizadeh, 2017; Purpuri et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2022).

2.3. Previous studies on AT in SLA/EFL

Research on AT in SLA and EFL contexts has generally indicated that learners with greater levels of AT tend to respond more positively to uncertain or partial language input. Chapelle and Roberts (1986) first associated AT with proficiency in English and Naiman et al. (1978) suggested tolerance of ambiguity as a trait commonly observed among successful language learners. More recent studies also kept showing mostly positive associations between AT and different facets of language learning. Particularly, AT has been associated with vocabulary knowledge (Başöz, 2015), language learning strategies (Chu et al., 2015), learner adaptability and language achievement (Alahdadi & Ghanizadeh, 2017), and English test performance (Lou et al., 2015). Research into productive skills has also suggested that learners with higher AT may be more willing to take risks and experiment with language use when performing writing tasks (Lee, 1999).

However, the findings of the studies have not always been fully consistent. Jowkar and Khajehie (2017), for instance, reported weaker and more context-dependent relations between AT and vocabulary knowledge. These findings suggest that the effect of AT might vary across learning contexts, language skills or assessment conditions. Interestingly, more recent studies have also started to establish a link between AT and more general psychological or affective aspects of language learning such as resilience, engagement and emotional responses to uncertainty (Purpuri et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2022). Despite increasing attention to AT in SLA and EFL research, relatively limited attention has been paid to AT within IELTS-oriented receptive-skill assessment contexts, particularly those involving listening and reading tasks completed under time pressure. In addition, fewer studies have examined whether AT remains a significant predictor of language performance after learners' English-learning background variables have been controlled for (Alahdadi & Ghanizadeh, 2017; Başöz, 2015; Chu et al., 2015). Research on AT in Vietnamese EFL contexts also remains relatively limited. These gaps provide the rationale for the present study.

2.4. Ambiguity in IELTS-oriented listening and reading contexts

Ambiguity may become particularly relevant in IELTS-oriented listening and reading tasks because learners are frequently required to process language under time pressure while dealing with incomplete or uncertain comprehension. In many cases, learners are unable to pause and analyze unknown vocabulary items or to check the suggested interpretations thoroughly before continuing to the next stage of the task. Especially in listening tasks, spoken input is transient and often processed on the fly. Thus, learners can miss some details, not recognize unknown words immediately, or have difficulty keeping up with the speed of incoming information (Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Nevertheless, they are expected to continue constructing meaning and answering comprehension questions. Similarly, IELTS-oriented reading tasks often include dense passages, unfamiliar vocabulary, implicit meanings, as well as inferencing under strict time constraints (Grabe, 2009).

Because of such characteristics, successful performance on comprehension tasks in accordance with the IELTS format may not only be a matter of linguistic knowledge itself but also a matter of how the learners react to uncertainty during processing. More tolerant learners of ambiguity may be more willing to keep engaging with a partially understood input, to infer meaning from context, and to avoid being too discouraged when exact comprehension is temporarily unavailable.

Previous research has generally indicated that AT might influence several aspects of language learning, such as vocabulary development, strategy use, and writing performance (Ely, 1989; Lee, 1999; Başöz, 2015; Chu et al., 2015). However, the results in different contexts have not always been consistent, and AT has received little attention in assessment contexts oriented to IELTS, particularly in Vietnamese EFL settings. Besides, most of the previous studies have focused on general language proficiency or productive language performance (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Lee, 1999; Lou et al., 2015), thus leaving AT in listening and reading assessment contexts, where learners are often required to process incomplete or uncertain linguistic input under time pressure, under-researched.

Therefore, the present study was conducted to investigate the relationship between AT and English final examination performance of Vietnamese EFL university students in an IELTS-oriented learning context.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between AT and English final examination performance among Vietnamese EFL university students. In addition to investigating the association between the two variables, the study also explored whether AT remained a significant predictor of examination performance after selected English-learning background variables had been taken into account.

3.2. Settings and Participants

The study was conducted at a private multidisciplinary university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where English proficiency is closely connected to students' academic progression and future employability. The university's General English Program (GEP) consists of seven sequential courses delivered over approximately one and a half years, totaling around 300 instructional hours. The program follows an IELTS-oriented approach, and students regularly engage with listening, reading, writing, and speaking tasks modeled on IELTS formats throughout the program. The present study focused on students enrolled in GEP7, the final course of the General English Program. Although students practiced all four language skills during the course, the institutional final examination focused specifically on listening and reading comprehension through IELTS-oriented task types.

A total of 320 Vietnamese university students participated in the study. Convenience sampling was adopted due to the accessibility of intact classes during the data collection period. Most participants were between 20 and 21 years old. In terms of English-learning experience, the majority reported studying English for between five and ten years. Most students also self-rated their English proficiency as average and reported relatively limited weekly self-study time outside the classroom.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Students were informed about the purpose of the study, and consent was obtained prior to data collection. Besides, all responses were treated confidentially and used solely for research purposes. Notably, the study received approval from the faculty administration before data collection was conducted.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Ambiguity tolerance scale

AT was measured using an adapted 12-item scale informed primarily by Ely's (1989, 1995) conceptualization of AT in second language learning. The scale was modified to better reflect the

present study's focus on English listening and reading comprehension within an IELTS-oriented assessment context. The items addressed learners' reactions to incomplete understanding, unfamiliar vocabulary, unclear grammar points, imperfect language production, as well as uncertain meaning during English learning activities. Several items also focused on learners' willingness to continue processing meaning despite partial comprehension or linguistic uncertainty. Although the scale primarily targeted AT, some items may also overlap with broader learner dispositions such as communication confidence or comfort with imperfect language use. Example items included: "*I stay patient when I do not fully understand an English text*" and "*I am comfortable guessing the meaning of words or sentences while reading*."

Participants responded to the items using a Likert-scale format indicating their level of agreement with each statement. Higher scores reflected higher levels of AT. In addition to the AT items, the questionnaire also collected several English-learning background variables, including years of English study, self-rated English proficiency, and weekly English self-study hours. The survey further included one exploratory item asking students whether they considered the ability to cope with ambiguity important in English learning.

3.3.2. English final examination

The outcome variable consisted of students' scores on an institutional English final examination administered as part of the university's General English Program. The examination was paper-based and followed IELTS-oriented listening and reading formats commonly used in the program.

The listening component included dialogue and monologue task types adapted from IELTS Sections 1-4. The reading component consisted of two IELTS-style reading passages. The entire examination lasted 60 minutes, and students were allowed to listen to the recordings twice during the listening section. Final examination scores were reported on a 10-point grading scale.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected during the regular academic semester. Students first completed the AT questionnaire during class time. Final examination scores were later obtained from the official course records after all examinations had been graded by the course instructors. Participation in the study was voluntary, and students were informed that the collected data would be used solely for research purposes. Questionnaire responses were collected anonymously, and participation did not affect students' course results in any way.

3.5. Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using Python in Google Colab. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize participant characteristics, AT levels, and examination performance. Reliability of the AT scale was examined using both Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega to provide a more comprehensive estimate of internal consistency (Dunn et al., 2014). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was also conducted to examine the underlying structure of the scale in the present context (Thompson, 2004). Preliminary screening showed that the data did not fully meet assumptions of normality in all cases. Therefore, Spearman's rho correlation was used to examine the relationship between AT and examination performance. Multiple regression analysis was then carried out to investigate whether AT remained a significant predictor of examination performance after selected English-learning background variables had been controlled for, including years of English study, self-rated English proficiency, and weekly self-study hours.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The study involved 320 Vietnamese university students learning English as a foreign language. Most participants were female (61.9%), and the majority were between 20 and 21 years old. Most students reported between five and ten years of English-learning experience and self-rated their English proficiency as average. In terms of self-study habits, the largest proportion indicated studying English

independently for fewer than three hours per week. The demographic and English-learning background characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Participant characteristics (N = 320)*

Variable	Category	n (%)
Gender	Female	198 (61.9)
	Male	121 (37.8)
English study years	1-5 years	65 (20.3)
	5-10 years	149 (46.6)
	Above 10 years	106 (33.1)
Self-rated proficiency	Below average	32 (10.0)
	Average	221 (69.1)
	Above average	67 (20.9)
Self-study hours/week	Below 3 hours	142 (44.4)
	3-6 hours	116 (36.3)
	Above 6 hours	62 (19.4)

4.1.1. Psychometric properties of the ambiguity tolerance scale

In general, the ambiguity tolerance scale demonstrated strong psychometric quality in the present study. As shown in Table 2, both Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega reached .963, indicating excellent internal consistency reliability. Besides, corrected item-total correlations ranged from .722 to .862, suggesting that all twelve items contributed meaningfully to the overall construct.

Table 2. *Reliability and factor structure of the ambiguity tolerance scale*

Indicator	Result	Indicator	Result
Sample size	320	Bartlett's test	$p < .001$
Cronbach's α	.963	Extracted factors	1
McDonald's ω	.963	Eigenvalue (Factor 1)	8.53
CITC range	.722–.862	Variance explained	71.1%
KMO	.957	Factor loading range	.736–.880

Exploratory factor analysis further supported the structure of the scale. More specifically, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was .957, while Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < .001$), indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis. Only one factor produced an eigenvalue greater than 1 (8.53), accounting for approximately 71.1% of the total variance. Taken together, these findings suggest that the ambiguity tolerance scale functioned as a strongly unidimensional measure in this context.

Item-level statistics are presented in Table 3. As can be seen, item means ranged from 3.76 to 4.52, indicating generally moderate to relatively high levels of AT among the participants. Besides, standard deviations (SD) ranged from 1.50 to 1.65, showing an acceptable degree of response variability across items.

Table 3. *Factor loadings and item statistics of the ambiguity tolerance scale*

Item	Loading	Mean	SD	CITC
AT1	.794	4.45	1.49	.779
AT2	.736	3.76	1.65	.722
AT3	.856	4.33	1.58	.839
AT4	.828	4.23	1.53	.811
AT5	.817	4.36	1.58	.800
AT6	.815	4.40	1.53	.798
AT7	.852	4.06	1.54	.834
AT8	.880	3.93	1.50	.862

AT9	.820	3.93	1.61	.805
AT10	.867	4.13	1.50	.848
AT11	.841	4.29	1.57	.821
AT12	.817	4.52	1.53	.800

In short, students demonstrated a moderate level of AT overall (M = 4.20, SD = 1.31). The distribution of the composite AT score was approximately normal, with skewness (-0.15) and kurtosis (-0.52).

4.1.2. Relationship between AT and examination performance

Next, Spearman correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship between AT and final examination scores ($\rho = .354$, $p < .001$). In other words, students with higher AT tended to achieve better results on the IELTS-oriented English final examination. Although the relationship was not exceptionally strong, the direction of the finding was consistent and statistically meaningful. This suggests that AT may play a role in how learners manage listening and reading tasks that involve incomplete comprehension, unfamiliar vocabulary, or uncertain contextual cues. Descriptive statistics and correlation results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis*

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2
1. Ambiguity tolerance	4.20	1.31	-0.15	-0.52	—	.354***
2. Final examination score	3.74	1.69	0.56	-0.21	.354***	—

Note. Spearman's rho correlation was used.

***p < .001.

The study also included a supplementary question asking students whether they considered the ability to cope with ambiguity important in English learning. Interestingly, while most participants viewed this ability as either "necessary" (41.6%) or "very necessary" (56.3%), this perception was not significantly associated with their measured ambiguity tolerance ($\rho = .071$, $p = .206$). In other words, recognizing the importance of ambiguity management did not necessarily mean that students themselves demonstrated higher AT.

4.3. The predictive role of ambiguity tolerance

To examine the predictive role of AT, the researcher conducted multiple regression analysis, using years of English study, self-rated English proficiency, self-study hours, and AT as predictors of final examination performance.

The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 315) = 18.98$, $p < .001$, explaining approximately 19.4% of the variance in examination scores ($R^2 = .194$). Among the predictors, AT emerged as the largest standardized coefficient in the present model ($\beta = .271$, $B = .350$, 95% CI [.212, .488], $p < .001$). It was followed by self-rated English proficiency ($\beta = .223$, $B = .611$, 95% CI [.325, .897], $p < .001$). By contrast, years of English study did not significantly predict examination scores ($\beta = .039$, $p = .454$). Also, self-study hours demonstrated a marginal positive relationship with performance ($\beta = .102$, $p = .063$), although the effect did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

More importantly, AT remained significant even after the background variables had been taken into account. This finding suggests that AT may contribute to examination performance beyond learners' general English-learning experience or self-perceived proficiency level. Table 5 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis predicting final examination performance.

Table 5. *Multiple regression predicting final examination performance*

Predictor	B	β	SE	t	p
Constant	0.392	—	0.420	0.933	.351
English study years	0.092	.039	0.122	0.750	.454
Self-rated proficiency	0.611	.223	0.146	4.199	< .001

Self-study hours	0.211	.102	0.113	1.863	.063
Ambiguity tolerance	0.350	.271	0.070	4.996	< .001

Model statistics: $R^2 = .194$, Adjusted $R^2 = .184$, $F(4, 315) = 18.98$, $p < .001$.

To recap, the findings indicate that students who are more tolerant of ambiguity may be better able to continue processing uncertain or partially understood linguistic input during IELTS-oriented listening and reading tasks, rather than disengaging when comprehension becomes difficult.

4.2. Discussion

The findings suggest that simply spending more years studying English does not necessarily lead to better examination performance. In the present study, years of English study did not significantly predict final examination scores. By contrast, students with higher self-rated English proficiency and higher levels of AT tended to achieve better results. More notably, AT emerged as the strongest predictor in the regression model. This suggests that the ability to deal with uncertainty may be of importance to IELTS-oriented listening and reading tests, in which learners are often required to continue processing partially understood input under time pressure (Field, 2008).

4.2.1. Psychometric quality and unidimensionality

The ambiguity tolerance scale demonstrated very strong psychometric quality in the present study. Both Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega reached .963, indicating excellent internal consistency reliability. Besides, the exploratory factor analysis supported a clear one-factor structure, with one factor accounting for more than 71% of the total variance. Such findings suggest that AT functioned as a relatively cohesive construct in the current context, and it is generally consistent with previous conceptualizations of AT in second language learning (Budner, 1962; Ely, 1995). At the same time, the very high reliability coefficients may also indicate a degree of item overlap. Future studies could therefore examine whether a shorter version of the scale might still retain adequate psychometric quality while reducing respondent burden.

4.2.2. The relationship between AT and examination performance

AT was moderately correlated with final examination performance ($\rho = .354$, $p < .001$). This finding is notably in line with earlier studies reporting positive associations between AT and language learning outcomes (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Lou et al., 2015). However, the present study extends this line of research into a Vietnamese EFL context shaped by IELTS-oriented assessment practices.

One possible explanation may lie in the nature of the examination itself. To be more specific, the listening and reading tasks required students to continue processing meaning even when comprehension was incomplete or uncertain. In this light, the examination reflected the kind of ambiguous linguistic input that AT theoretically concerns. Brown (2000) has argued that uncertainty is a normal part of language learning, particularly in receptive skill development. The present findings provide empirical support for this view within an assessment-oriented EFL setting.

Students with higher AT may have been more willing to continue processing information despite incomplete comprehension during the listening and reading tasks. This interpretation is also consistent with Ely's (1989) argument that learners with higher AT tend to rely more comfortably on inferencing and contextual guessing strategies during language learning.

Interestingly, students' beliefs about the importance of coping with ambiguity were not significantly associated with their measured AT. Most participants considered ambiguity management either necessary or very necessary in English learning, yet this awareness did not automatically translate into higher tolerance levels. This may reflect the difference between recognizing the importance of a learning behavior and actually being able to sustain it during real-time comprehension tasks. The finding also raises a broader pedagogical question discussed by Ely (1995): whether AT can be actively developed through instruction or whether it functions more as a relatively stable learner disposition.

4.2.3. Predictive role beyond background variables

AT remained a significant positive predictor of examination performance even after years of English study, self-rated proficiency, and self-study hours had been controlled for. In fact, AT emerged as the

strongest predictor in the present model. This suggests that AT may contribute something beyond general language-learning experience or self-perceived proficiency, particularly in comprehension-oriented assessment contexts. At the same time, AT explained only part of the variance in examination performance. Hence, other linguistic, cognitive, as well as contextual factors were likely involved as well. Nevertheless, the finding still highlights the potential importance of learners' psychological responses to uncertainty during their language processing.

The non-significant role of years of English study may not be particularly surprising. Accordingly, length of study does not necessarily reflect the quality of learning experiences or the extent to which learners are exposed to authentic and uncertain language input. Naiman et al. (1978), for example, observed that successful language learners were often characterized less by the duration of study and more by their willingness to take risks and tolerate uncertainty during communication. In many Vietnamese EFL classrooms, language learning is still commonly organized around explicit explanation, controlled practice, and accuracy-oriented instruction (Tran et al., 2022), conditions that may reduce learners' opportunities to engage with ambiguity in meaningful ways.

By contrast, self-rated English proficiency significantly predicted examination performance, although its predictive strength was still lower than that of AT. This means that, among the students who consider themselves to be at least somewhat capable, the capacity to endure incomplete understanding might still affect their success on listening and reading tasks geared towards IELTS. Başöz (2015) also found similar results, reporting positive correlations between AT and vocabulary knowledge among Turkish EFL learners. Briefly, these findings indicate that linguistic competence and psychological tolerance for uncertainty may develop interactively with each other, rather than independently.

4.2.4. Pedagogical implications, limitations, and future directions

The results of the present study suggest that AT may deserve more attention in IELTS-oriented English teaching, particularly in listening and reading teaching. This does not mean intentionally making learning confusing or too difficult. Instead, it might mean helping the learners become more comfortable with partial understanding and uncertainty in the course of comprehension tasks. In many examination contexts, students are often expected to keep processing meaning even when there are unfamiliar vocabulary or unclear information. Classroom practices that encourage inferencing, contextual guessing and tolerance for incomplete comprehension may be useful (Brown, 2000; Ely, 1995).

One possible implication is that IELTS-oriented instruction should perhaps move beyond an excessive focus on accuracy and complete understanding. To illustrate, in listening lessons, students may be encouraged to continue to follow the main ideas even when they may miss certain words or details. Moreover, it is useful for them to recognize discourse markers that signaling contrast or explanation, and use prediction before listening to lessen anxiety about unknown input. Regarding reading lessons, EFL teachers can design timed skimming and scanning activities where learners are not expected to grasp every word, but instead learn to identify textual clues, infer meaning from surrounding context, and also decide when unfamiliar vocabulary can reasonably be ignored. Such activities may help learners develop more flexible comprehension strategies under time pressure.

Additionally, teachers might model think-aloud strategies showing how experienced language users continue processing meaning despite uncertainty. For example, "I do not know this word, but the surrounding context suggests a negative meaning, so I will keep reading." That kind of practice may help learners develop greater confidence when dealing with uncertain linguistic input under time pressure.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. Above all, the participants were limited to only one university in Vietnam, which might limit the generalizability of the results. Besides, the outcome variable was based on an institutional final examination with IELTS-oriented formats rather than the official IELTS test. The findings should therefore be understood within

the context of a local university assessment setting. Third, the study focused only on listening and reading performance. AT may function differently in productive skills such as speaking and writing, where learners are required to respond more spontaneously and under greater communicative pressure. In addition, the study used a cross-sectional design, thus the findings are indicative of statistical relationships, not causal ones. In addition, some background variables were self-reported by students such as self-rated English proficiency and self-study hours. In future, studies may examine AT in relation to different language skills, learning environments, as well as assessment contexts. It would be of interest to examine how AT interacts with other learner variables such as resilience, engagement, or language learning anxiety (Kianinezhad, 2024; Yu et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

The present study investigated the relationship between AT and the performance of Vietnamese EFL university students on their English final examination in an IELTS-oriented learning context. It was found that generally, students with higher levels of AT tended to perform better on listening and reading tasks. The role of AT as a significant predictor of examination performance remained even after controlling for a number of English-learning background variables.

One thing the findings seem to suggest is that successful comprehension does not always require total understanding. Regarding IELTS-oriented listening and reading tasks especially, learners often need to keep processing meaning despite missing details, unknown vocabulary or uncertain interpretation. Some students seem more willing than others to stay engaged with the text or audio even when comprehension is partial, while others can become frustrated more quickly when meaning is unclear. In that sense, AT may be more closely connected to English learning than classrooms sometimes assume. While language instruction often emphasizes accuracy and full understanding, learners in real examination situations frequently have to work through uncertainty under time pressure. The present findings therefore suggest that helping learners become more comfortable with partial understanding may deserve greater attention in IELTS-oriented English teaching and assessment contexts.

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APPENDIX:

The adapted ambiguity tolerance scale

The following adapted scale was utilized to measure students' AT in English learning contexts. The items were adapted primarily from Ely (1995) and modified to fit the IELTS-oriented EFL learning context of the present study. Participants responded to each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

1. I stay patient when I do not fully understand an English text.
2. I feel comfortable when I do not understand everything my teacher says in English.
3. I accept not always being able to express my exact ideas in English writing.
4. I stay calm when I do not fully understand some grammar points.
5. I accept that my English pronunciation may not always be perfect.
6. I enjoy reading in English even if it takes time to understand.
7. I am comfortable with still finding grammar difficult to use in speaking or writing.
8. I feel comfortable even if I cannot express exactly what I want in English writing.
9. I do not mind when my teacher uses unfamiliar English words.
10. I feel comfortable speaking English even if my ideas are not expressed clearly.
11. I accept not always finding an exact English equivalent for a word or expression.
12. I am comfortable guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words or sentences while reading.

Mức độ chấp nhận sự mơ hồ và kết quả bài thi tiếng Anh cuối kỳ của sinh viên đại học học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ tại Việt Nam

Tóm tắt: Sự mơ hồ là một phần khá phổ biến trong quá trình học ngoại ngữ, đặc biệt là ở các nhiệm vụ nghe và đọc khi người học thường gặp phải ngữ liệu chưa quen thuộc hoặc chỉ hiểu được một phần nội dung. Tuy có liên quan trực tiếp đến quá trình xử lý ngôn ngữ, mức độ chấp nhận sự mơ hồ (ambiguity tolerance) vẫn chưa được quan tâm nhiều trong các bối cảnh đánh giá theo định hướng IELTS, nhất là trong môi trường dạy và học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ (EFL) tại Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu mối quan hệ giữa mức độ chấp nhận sự mơ hồ và kết quả bài thi tiếng Anh cuối kỳ của sinh viên đại học Việt Nam học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ. Có 320 sinh viên tham gia nghiên cứu. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua thang đo ambiguity tolerance gồm 12 mục đã được điều chỉnh, kết hợp với điểm số từ bài thi cuối kỳ theo định hướng IELTS của nhà trường, tập trung vào kỹ năng nghe và đọc. Kết quả cho thấy thang đo có độ tin cậy rất cao (Cronbach's $\alpha = .963$; McDonald's $\omega = .963$). Phân tích nhân tố khám phá (EFA) cũng cho thấy thang đo có cấu trúc một nhân tố khá rõ ràng, giải thích khoảng 71% phương sai của dữ liệu. Phân tích tương quan Spearman cho thấy tồn tại mối tương quan thuận ở mức trung bình giữa mức độ chấp nhận sự mơ hồ và kết quả bài thi ($\rho = .354$, $p < .001$). Kết quả phân tích hồi quy tiếp tục cho thấy ambiguity tolerance vẫn là một biến dự báo tích cực có ý nghĩa ngay cả khi đã kiểm soát một số biến nền liên quan đến việc học tiếng Anh. Nhìn chung, kết quả nghiên cứu gợi ý rằng những sinh viên có mức độ chấp nhận sự mơ hồ cao hơn có thể xử lý hiệu quả hơn những tình huống không chắc chắn và trạng thái hiểu chưa đầy đủ vốn thường xuất hiện trong các nhiệm vụ nghe và đọc theo định hướng IELTS dưới áp lực thời gian.

Từ khóa: Mức độ chấp nhận sự mơ hồ; người học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ; đánh giá theo định hướng IELTS; kết quả bài thi tiếng Anh; năng lực nghe hiểu và đọc hiểu.