Recognising audio-recorded emotions in English as a first and a foreign language

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This presentation focuses on individual differences in the vocal Emotion Recognition Ability (ERA) of 452 participants. The sample consisted of 205 first (L1) and 247 foreign language (LX) users of English from all over the world. Recognising emotions can be particularly challenging in LX contexts (Pavlenko 2005, Dewaele 2013). Depending on their linguistic and cultural profile, individuals may interpret the input very differently, and LX learners and users have been found to perform significantly worse than native control groups (Rintell 1984). However, a previous study using the audio-visual stimuli used in the present study showed that ERA scores of L1 and (fairly advanced) English LX users were very similar, and that higher levels of linguistic proficiency was linked to better ERA in both groups (Lorette & Dewaele 2015).

In the present study we investigate the effect of three independent variables, namely L1 versus LX status, proficiency in the LX, and cultural background on vocal ERA. We used an online survey, where participants had to identify a basic emotion (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust) portrayed by a native English-speaking actress in six short audio clips.

Participants filled out a lexical recognition test (Lemhöfer & Broersma 2012) to gauge their English proficiency.

English L1 users did significantly better than LX users on ERA. Participants (both English L1 and LX) with higher proficiency scores had significantly higher ERA scores. A significant effect of L1 culture was found on ERA scores, with Asian LX users scoring significantly lower, possibly because of differences in affective socialization in East and West.

The most original finding of the present study is thus that without visual input, LX users experience more difficulty in recognizing emotions in an LX.

Keywords: culture, vocal emotion recognition, L1 versus LX users, proficiency.