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Putting Feelings into Words: Do Moroccan Learners of English Describe Others’ Emotions as Native Speakers?

Abstract:
Emotions are expressed and conceptualized differently across cultures (Pavlenko, 2005). Considering the languages investigated in this study, differences in the conceptualization of emotions between English and Moroccan Arabic would likely be greater since both varieties belong to distinct cultural dimensions (individualism and collectivism). Differences in the way emotions are conceptualized in these varieties, therefore, would pose problems for Moroccan learners of English, because they are required to make finer-grained distinction in using L2 emotion terms that may not exist in their L1. Nevertheless, it is predicted that emotion description would not be as difficult for advanced learners as intermediate learners. Rather, advanced learners would approximate native speakers in describing emotions of others since the range of situations and contexts in which English emotions are used require a higher proficiency level of English. To verify this hypothesis, 60 native speakers of English, 60 advanced learners, and 60 intermediate learners were asked to watch a short film and describe how actors felt at some suggested scenes by using one emotion word. The results revealed that advanced learners of English had rich emotion vocabularies and many of their lexical choices approximated those of native speakers. They, however, did not manage to provide the same emotion terms for some scenes as native speakers. On the other hand, intermediate learners quite managed to provide emotion terms as native speakers, but they differed from native speakers in many of their lexical choices. Based on these findings, some pedagogical implications are suggested.