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L2 learners' phonemic sensitivity: MMN & L2 proficiency

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Abstract

This study examined the acquisition of Korean stop sounds /t/(), /t/() and /th/() by Chinese learners of Korean using ERP focusing on the role of L2 proficiency. A total of 28 learners (16 advanced and 11 intermediate) and 18 native controls participated in the experiment with four conditions: (i) standard /ta/ vs. deviant /tha/, (ii) standard /ta/ vs. deviant /t/, (iii) standard /tha/ vs. deviant /ta/, and (iv) standard /ta/ vs. deviant /ta/. The results of the AX discrimination task found no significant differences between groups showing high accuracy rates from 73% to 84%. However, their brain responses were different: P3 was found only for the intermediate group in condition (iii) although MMN was elicited in both groups in the other three conditions. The results indicate that learners sensitivity to the differences of stop sounds develops as their general proficiency improves. Still, their sensitivity is weaker than native speakers.