

Difficulties ITAs Face When Interpreting Students' E-Mails

Caroline F. Rosen, Ph.D.

Olena Stetsenko, Ph.D.

University of Minnesota-Center for
Teaching and Learning

TESOL 2007: Seattle Washington

Objectives of Study

- To identify specific difficulties International Teaching Assistants experience when trying to decipher emotional tone in students' e-mail messages
- To compare differences in interpretation between native and nonnative Teaching Assistants in determining emotional tone
- To use this information for future ITA training

Previous Studies

- Kruger and Epley (2005), “Egocentrism Over E-Mail: Can We Communicate as Well as We Think?”
- Newton (1990), “Overconfidence in the Communication of Intent: Heard and Unheard Melodies.”
- Hypothesis: Egocentrism influences both writers’ and readers’ confidence in their ability to communicate and perceive intent accurately.

Method

- A sample of 115 native-English speakers and 118 non-native English speakers participated in reading 20 short e-mail messages.
- All participants were Teaching Assistants from various departments at a large Midwestern university.

Demographics

For the native English speaking group:
93 Females; 22 Males

For the non-native English speaking
group:
63 Females; 55 Males

Demographics

- Non-native Teaching Assistants Language Backgrounds:

Chinese (N=49)

Farsi (N=2)

Korean (N=40)

Thai (N=2)

Russian (N=7)

Lao (N=2)

Japanese (N=6)

Cambodian (N=1)

Italian (N=5)

Malagasy (N=1)

Spanish (N=3)

French (N=1)

Method (Continued)

- Undergraduate students volunteered to write simulated e-mail messages and to indicate which emotional tone they were trying to communicate in each one.
- Criteria for writing these messages:
 - 1) No emoticons
 - 2) Idioms and slang allowed
 - 3) Greeting and signing off all uniform so that only body of message would be considered

Method (Continued)

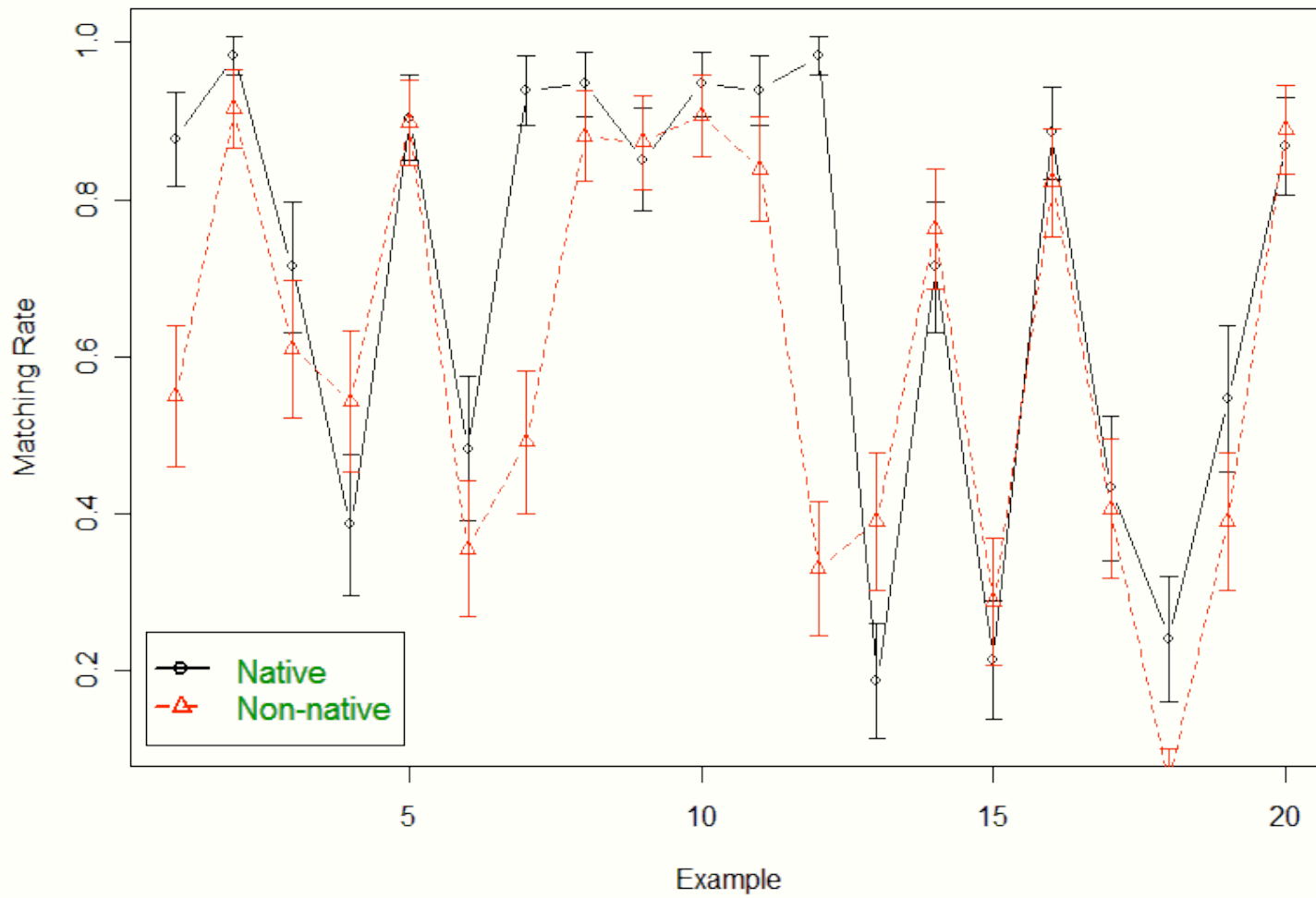
All participants who read the e-mail messages indicated:

- 1) whether they perceived the emotional tone of the message to be mostly positive, negative or neutral
- 2) if they perceived a particular emotional tone that a student was feeling, to indicate specifically what they thought it was
- 3) to indicate how confident they were of their perceptions from 0-25%, 26-50%, 51-75% and 76-100%

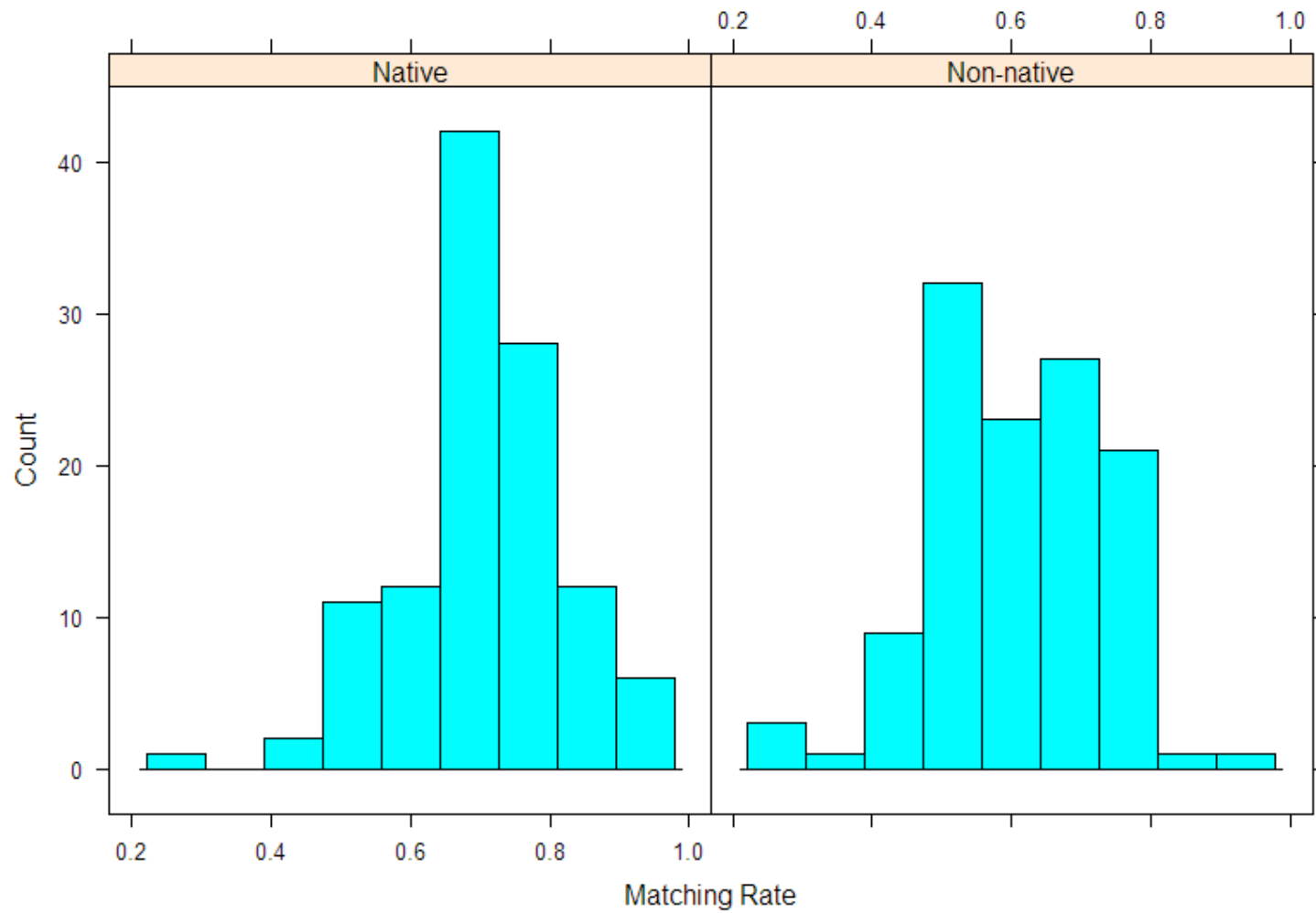
Analysis

- To analyze the data, both native and non-native speakers' answers were matched with what the undergraduate students' emotional intentions were.
- To see if any of the e-mail examples would elicit highly discrepant scores chosen by native and non-native speakers
- Overall to see if there were any significant differences in the ways that native and nonnative-English speakers perceptions matched the undergraduates' intentions, and if confidence levels significantly affected such matching.

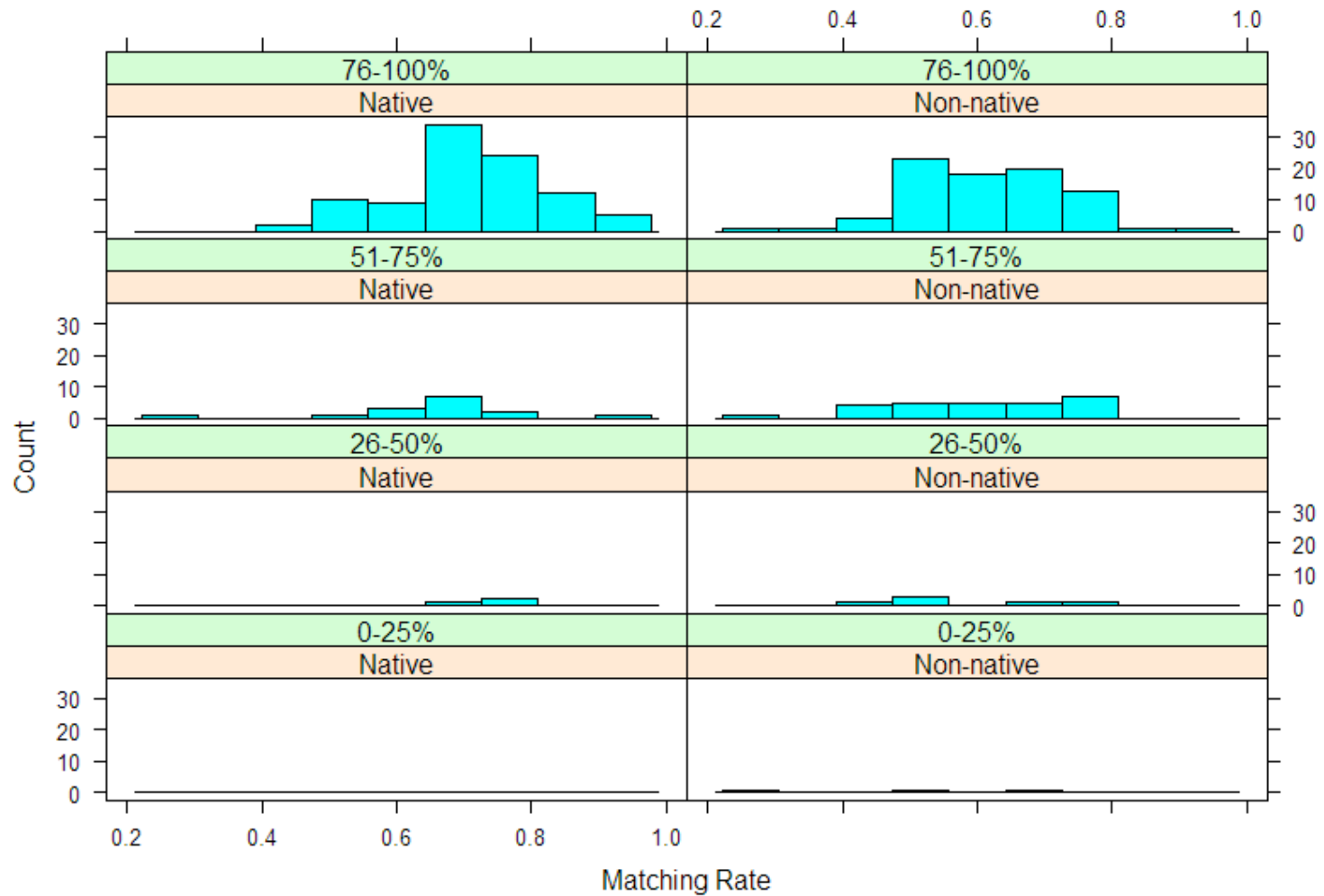
Comparison of matching rates between native and non-native English speakers for each of the 20 examples



**Comparison of the overall matching rates
between native and non-native English speakers**



Comparison of the overall matching rates between native and non-native English speakers stratified by confidence levels



Results

- It appears that Examples 1, 7, 12, 13, and 18 had significant differences between the matching rates of native and non-native English speakers
- However, there was no significant difference in the overall matching rates between the two groups, nor was there a significant difference between the two groups in the matching rates between both groups who indicated strong confidence in their responses (76-100%)

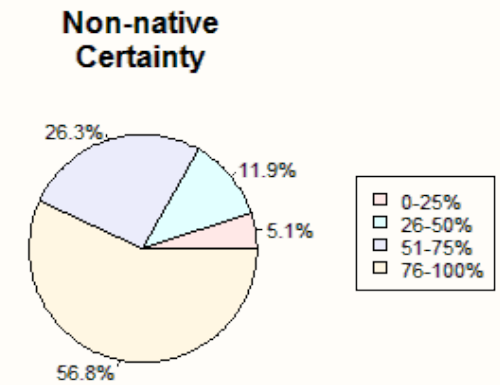
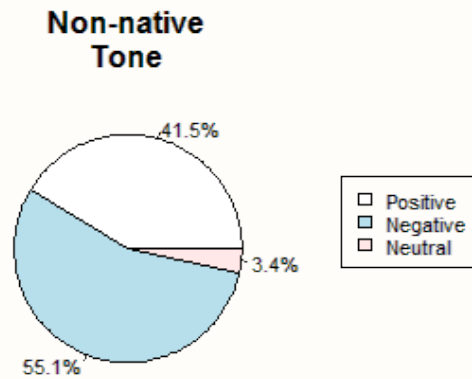
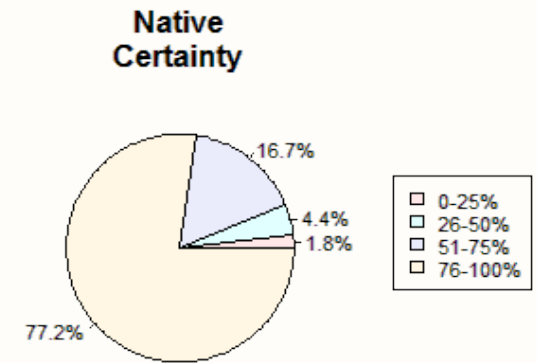
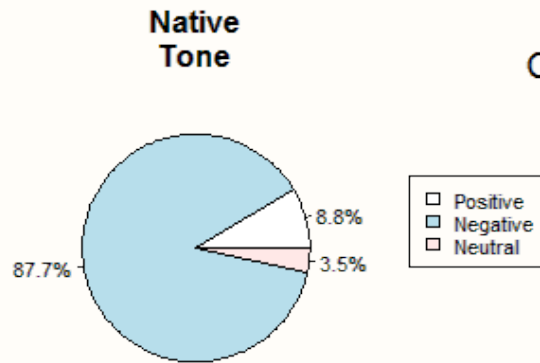
Example 1

Dear Instructor:

I am writing to you to express how impressed I was about how well you followed the syllabus this semester. I especially enjoyed the days when we strayed from the syllabus for an additional assignment or a pop quiz! Those were definitely days I was thankful to be in your class. In closing, I think I speak for the rest of the class when I say we would like more random days when, gee, the schedule is actually followed. Thanks a lot!!

Signed,
Student

EXAMPLE 1
Code: Negative: Sarcastic



Matching Rate(Std Err): $R_{\text{Native}} = 0.877(0.031)$, $R_{\text{Non-native}} = 0.551(0.046)$, Significantly different

Results

For Example 1, the top three emotional tones detected by native English speakers were:

- 1) Sarcastic (88 times)
- 2) Angry (9 times)
- 3) Frustrated (6 times) [1 left blank]

The top three emotional tones detected by non-native English speakers were:

- 1) Happy (23 times)
- 2) Thankful (19 times)
- 3) Sarcastic (16 times) [6 left blank]

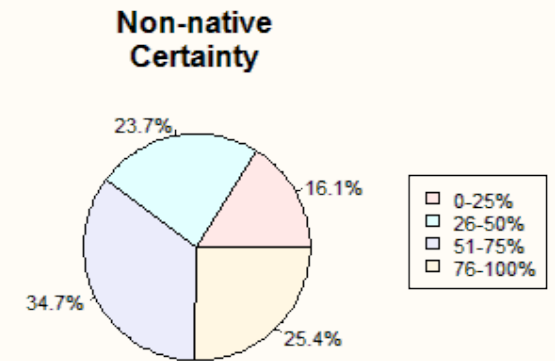
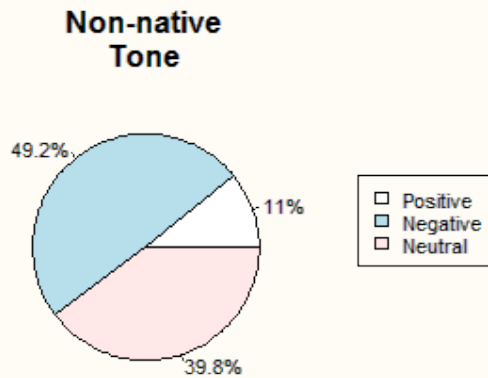
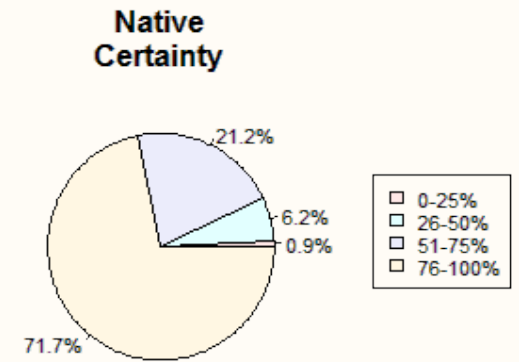
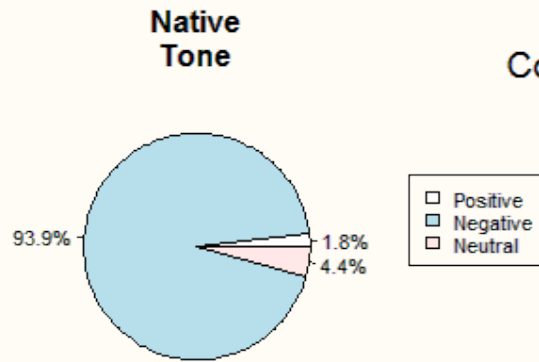
Example 7

Dear Instructor:

This is a follow-up message from our meeting last week. I will study the handouts more to improve my grades in your class. Personally, I feel that this is the pot calling the kettle black, as these study sheets leave much to be desired.

Signed,
Student

EXAMPLE 7
Code: Negative: Dissatisfied



Matching Rate(Std Err): $R_{\text{Native}} = 0.939(0.022)$, $R_{\text{Non-native}} = 0.492(0.046)$, Significantly different

Results

For Example 7 , the top three emotional tones detected by native English speakers were:

- 1) Angry (34 times)
- 2) Critical (13 times)
- 3) Frustrated (11 times) [3 left blank]

The top three emotional tones detected by non-native English speakers were:

- 1) Unhappy (15 times)
- 2) Dissatisfied (9 times)
- 3) Disappointed (6 times) [41 left blank]

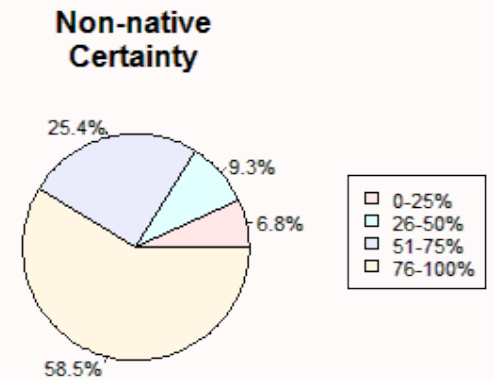
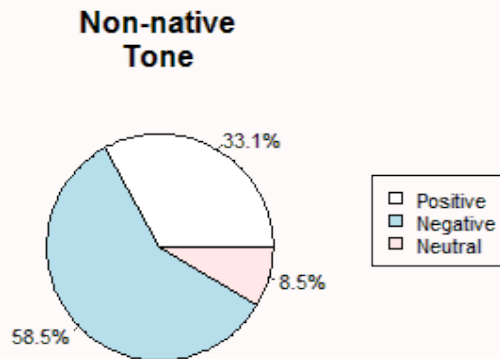
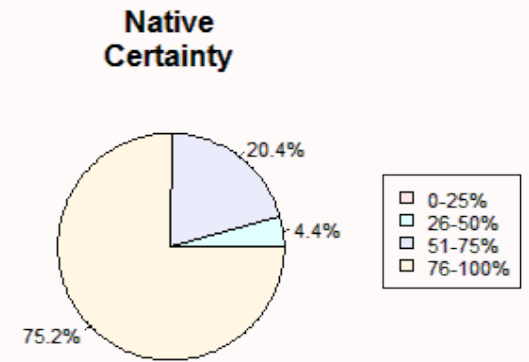
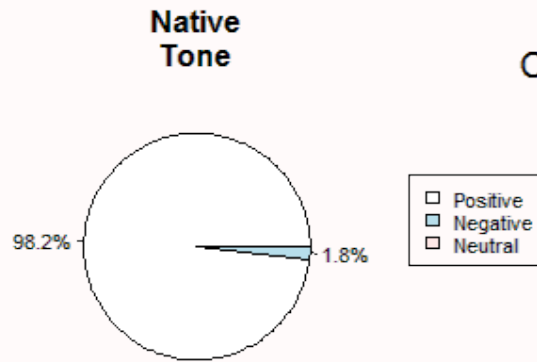
Example 12

Dear Instructor:

Usually I don't write to say something like this. But I just wanted to tell you that today's class was out of this world, especially when you were explaining the difficult problems. You rule!

Signed,
Student

EXAMPLE 12
Code: Positive: Impressed



Matching Rate(Std Err): $R_{\text{Native}} = 0.982(0.012)$, $R_{\text{Non-native}} = 0.331(0.043)$, Significantly different

Results

For Example 12, the top three emotional tones detected by native English speakers were:

- 1) Happy (56 times)
- 2) Excited (17 times)
- 3) Appreciative (11 times) [1 left blank]

The top three emotional tones detected by non-native English speakers were:

- 1) Angry (27 times)
- 2) Unhappy (17 times)
- 3) Happy (13 times) [10 left blank]

Example 13

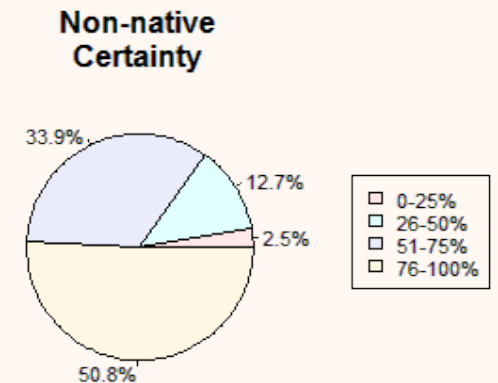
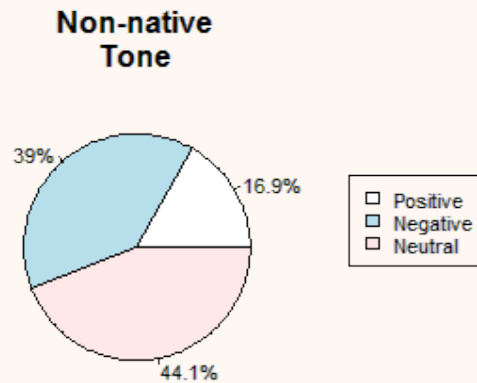
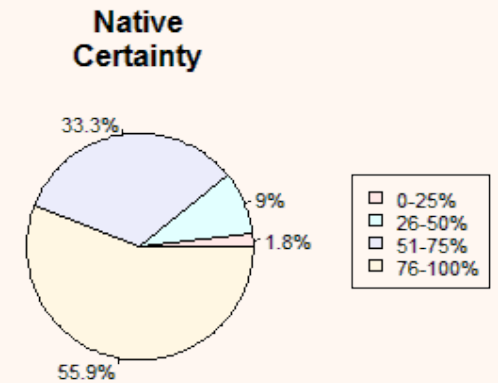
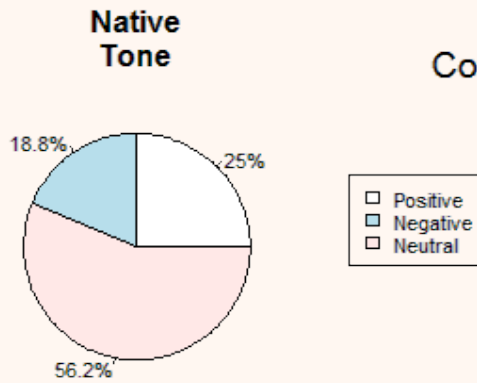
Dear Instructor:

You are a very good teacher. You speak clearly and I know I should understand what you say in class every day. The problem is that I still don't understand what you mean sometimes during the class. I would raise my hand and let you know...but it happens too often in class and I do not want to disturb the other students. I want to understand the concepts better. It seems no matter how hard I listen, I don't seem to hear you clearly.

I want to pass your class. What should I do to hear you better?

Signed,
Student

EXAMPLE 13
Code: Negative: Embarrassed



Matching Rate(Std Err): $R_{\text{Native}} = 0.188(0.037)$, $R_{\text{Non-native}} = 0.39(0.045)$, Significantly different

Results

For Example 13, the top three emotional tones detected by native English speakers were:

- 1) Concerned (23 times)
- 2) Asking for help (12 times)
- 3) Nervous (11 times) [38 left blank]

The top three emotional tones detected by non-native English speakers were:

- 1) Sad (23 times)
- 2) Worried (13 times)
- 3) Frustrated (9 times) [33 left blank]

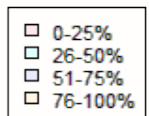
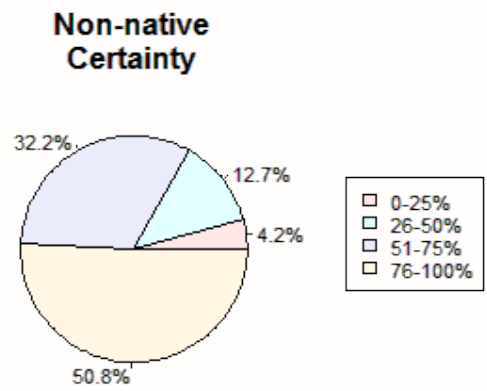
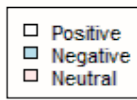
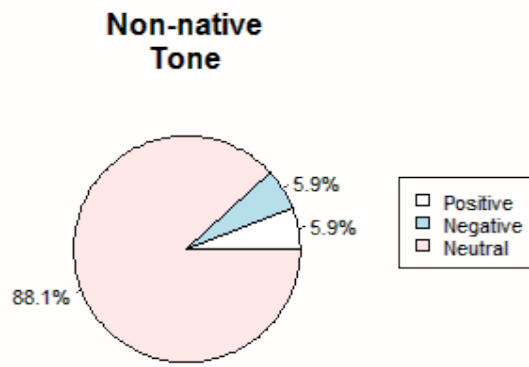
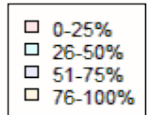
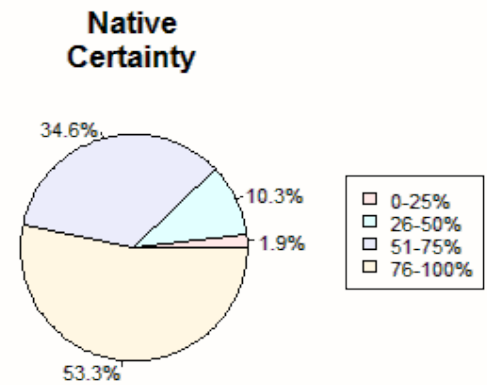
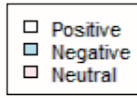
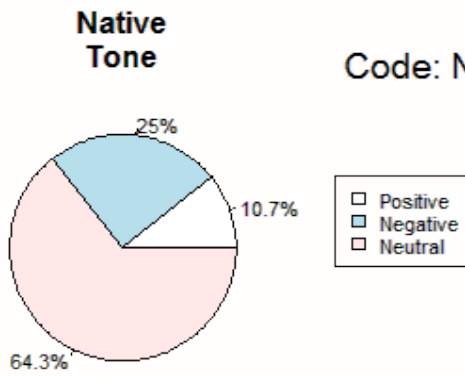
Example 18

Dear Instructor:

I'm going out of town next week and want to know if anything important is going to be happening in your class. At first I thought I wouldn't go, but then I decided I'm not going to pass up a trip to New York City.

Signed,
Student

EXAMPLE 18
Code: Negative: Disdainful toward class



Matching Rate(Std Err): $R_{\text{Native}} = 0.25(0.041)$, $R_{\text{Non-native}} = 0.059(0.022)$, Significantly different

Results

For Example 18, the top three emotional tones detected by native English speakers were:

1) Thoughtless (10 times)

2) Happy (9 times)

3) Rude (9 times) [45 left blank]

The top three emotional tones detected by non-native English speakers were:

1) Happy (6 times)

2) Concern (5 times)

3) Informing (4 times) [69 left blank]

Conclusions

- Overall, no significant differences between native and non-native English speakers in matching rates of e-mails' emotional tones; only in a few cases were there specific significant differences.
- For non-significant results, larger numbers of participants needed to re-examine results
- Participants oftentimes did not specify the emotional tone they believed the student was feeling; rather, they specified their reaction to it (e.g., rude, disrespectful, inappropriate).

Implications and Future Research

- The results indicate that in certain cases, emotional tone is an issue that needs to be dealt with when discussing e-mail messaging for TA training.
- More research is needed to develop categories of e-mail messages that are commonly written by students, especially ones that can be easily misunderstood by readers.

One More Example

Dear Instructor:

I am having so much fun in your class! I really enjoy my time there. Even though my grades are not very good, the important thing is that I enjoy your lectures so much and I have lots of fun in your class. I am sure that I want to get better grades soon. It is important to enjoy the class more so.

Also. I have open time this coming Friday night. Can you meet me for coffee so you can help me study more for your class? I hope so!

Thank you for helping me to laugh in class and enjoy myself. I did not expect this in college!

Let me know about Friday night. Okay? Hope to hear from you soon! Sorry I am not doing too well in your class yet. Oh well.

Signed,
Student

Thank you!

