The effect of proficiency on the expression of subjectivity in L2 spoken English: The case of ’I + verb’ construction

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The expression of subjectivity is an important component of pragmatic ability as it is closely related to how speakers communicate politeness (e.g. boosting or downplaying one’s involvement) or their stance in an interaction (Reilly et al., 2005). The paper investigates the expression of speaker’s subjective involvement in the ’I + verb’ construction in spoken production of L2 English by speakers of different levels of English proficiency. In particular, it focuses on two prominent lexical categories of verbs that occur in this construction – emotive (e.g. love, need, wish) and cognitive/epistemic (e.g. believe, think, suppose) verbs.

The study used the Trinity Lancaster Corpus (TLC) of spoken L2 production based on examinations of spoken English conducted by Trinity College London (a major examination board). L1 Spanish and Italian speakers aged over 20 years (to control for the effect of cognitive maturity on expressions of subjectivity) were selected from the TLC to represent three proficiency levels of the Common European Framework of Reference: B1 (183 speakers), B2 (170 speakers) and C1/C2 (102 speakers). All speakers participated in two interactive speaking tasks (conversations) which together lasted approximately 10 minutes. All ’I + verb’ constructions in speakers’ production were identified and the verbs in these constructions were categorised as emotive, cognitive or other (e.g. material, auxiliary) verbs (e.g. Biber et al. 1999; Scheibman, 2002). The ANOVA was used to compare the frequency of each verb category across the three proficiency bands.

The findings showed a very clear and statistically significant trend in the use of ’I+ verb’ construction. With the increase in proficiency the frequency of emotive verbs decreased while the frequency of the epistemic verbs increased considerably. The study contributes to a larger discussion of the effect of lexico-grammatical competence on the development of pragmatic competence (e.g. Schauer, 2013; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Keywords: learner corpora, spoken language, verb use, subjectivity.