The acquisition of verb complementation in Swedish as a foreign language.

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Verb complementation is a major challenge for second language learners (see for instance Bourke 2007). L2 learners have to acquire which type of complement (finite or non-finite) can be combined with each Complement-taking Predicate (CTP). When a CTP can take more than one type of complement, L2 learners must also understand the meaning differences between the complement types involved, which is highly dependent on the semantics of the matrix verb. The combinations that L2 learners produce can be influenced by various factors, such as input frequencies of the constructions in question and L1 transfer.

In the current study I analyzed the use of CTP’s with finite and non-finite complements from a usage-based constructionist approach. The investigated data consists of written input and output of 20 native Dutch speaking learners of Swedish as a Foreign Language in Belgium. I compared written input to the written assignments they produced during the same period as well as the results of a small-scale elicitation task based on picture stories. During data analysis, the focus was on CTP’s that take an infinitival complement, such as ‘han glömde att borsta tänderna’ (He forgot to brush his teeth). Special attention was paid to CTP’s that differ between L1 and L2 with regard to the complement type they take.

It will be shown that, in the beginning stages of language development, item-specific constructional knowledge seems to play an important role in developing more item-general constructional knowledge. Highly frequent CTP’s in the input can more easily become path-breaking verbs, paving the way towards item-general constructional knowledge for the learners. In case a clear path-breaking predicate is missing, L2 learners tend to rely on L1 transfer of complement types more often.


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