This paper traces changes in how L2 speakers, over time, put to use the expression ‘I don’t know’ (L2 English) and ‘je ne sais pas’ (L2 French). It adds to a growing body of L2 research that traces change in the interactional use of linguistic items over time, while also scrutinizing change in people’s methods for accomplishing actions in talk-in-interaction.

We follow two L2 speakers over several months, respectively years, in their social interactions within the classroom and ‘in the wild’, i.e. outside of the classroom, respectively. The out-of-classroom data stems from dinner table conversations in French between an au-pair and her host-family over a period of 9 months. The classroom data come from an audio-visual database of 4,000 hrs of English classroom interaction over 5 years.

The different empirical contexts allow us to scrutinize differences and convergences between classroom learning and learning in the wild. Findings indicate that, while the different affordances of classroom interaction vs. ordinary conversation shape the process and the speed of learning, the overall developmental trajectories of the focal construction are context-independent and similar for French and English: the semiotic inventory for use develops from singular uses of ‘I don’t know’/’je ne sais pas’ to complement-taking constructions (‘I don’t know how you say that’), and then further to the routinization (grammaticization) as a discourse-marker-like devices. We show that the learning of these constructions follows usage-based predictions about exemplar-based L2 learning and that the grammar of these constructions is locally lexical. We also document that the learning of these constructions is closely linked with particular aspects of a developing interactional competence, in particular doing word searches, expressing disagreement, and managing preference structure. As such, this paper proposes a way forward for carrying out longitudinal research in the interface between L2 construction learning and L2 interactional competence.

Keywords: conversation analysis, usage based linguistics., negation constructions.