Certainty adverbs in spoken learner language: the role of tasks and proficiency.

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Abstract

Our research examined the use of stance adverbs of certainty *actually*, *really* and *obviously* across B1, B2 and C1 levels in the *Trinity Lancaster Corpus* (TLC). Particularly, we examined the occurrence of these adverbs in the subset of Spanish L1 speakers from Mexico and Spain. *Really*, *actually* and *obviously* were found to display a distinctive frequency of use across different proficiency levels and the different speaking tasks analysed. Dialogic tasks favoured a more frequent use of *really* and *actually*, while *obviously* was hardly used. Qualitative analyses of the pragmatic functions of *really* and *actually* revealed that there is an increase in the use of meanings to express hedging in *really* and factualness in *actually* across the proficiency levels. Our research confirms the finding in Gablasova et al. (2017) that the type of speaking task conditions speakers' repertoire of linguistic devices, although we argue that this conditioning operates on different levels.

Keywords: learner language, learner corpora, adverbs, certainty, stance, task effect

1. Introduction

The expression of stance is one of the most important, if not the most important, communicative function in instructed SLA. It is so critical that, in the European context, the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFRL) has outlined a list of can-do statements which include stance-related aspects that learners are supposed to display when speaking. The expression of stance, however, manifests itself differently across levels.

The illustrative scale in the CEFRL for overall spoken interaction (Council of Europe 2001: 73) states that intermediate B1 learners "[c]an enter unprepared into conversation on familiar topics, express personal opinions and exchange information on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life". B2 learners "[c]an highlight the personal significance of events and experiences, and account for and sustain views clearly by providing relevant explanations and arguments". Advanced C1 learners, in turn, can, according to the CEFR, "express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly". As we can see, these statements offer various descriptions of how speakers may express how they feel and think, as well as the perspective(s) that they may take towards a proposition (Biber 2006). It is implied someway that more proficient speakers will display sensitivity towards the interplay between different topics and speaking/writing tasks. Nonetheless, research in this area is not abundant (Gablasova et al. 2017),

Previous research on stance linguistic devices has focused predominantly on written registers (Alonso-Almeida 2012; Biber 2006; Peacock 2015), particularly on English for Academic Purposes (Biber & Staples 2014), and has shown that (a) the expression of stance is more prevalent in personal than in academic registers (Biber & Finegan 1988,1989; Hunston 1994; Biber 2006; Biber et al. 1999), and (b) that L2 writers tend to use more certainty makers (*really* or *obviously*) while L1 writers tend to express more doubt-related meanings (Hyland & Milton 1997; Hyland 2002; Schleppegrell 2004; Zhang & Sabet 2014; Bartley & Hidalgo Tenorio 2016; Çakır 2016) using a narrower range of adverbs. Liu & Ren (2012) looked at academic writing of Chinese learners of English and found that the use of stance adverbs was low when compared to native speakers´ and these adverbs tended to occur in clause positions different from those in the writing of English native speakers. In spoken communication, Biber & Staples (2014) found that *actually* occurred over 1000 times per million words and *obviously* 350 times per million words in spoken communication in the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English. For these authors, "the expression of stance is a central component of spoken discourse in English" (p. 272). However, research has shown that speakers of different L1s display distinctive patterns of frequency of use, which supports the notion that L1 is a strong predictor of interlanguage development and use (Pérez-Paredes & Sánchez-Tornel, 2014; Pérez-Paredes & Mark forthcoming).

For the researcher, however, analysing *stance* involves making decisions in terms of the ultimate focus of the enquiry as a broad range of different meanings is covered by the term (Biber & Finegan 1988; Biber 2006; Biber et al. 1999): certainty, possibility, imprecision, generalization, limitation, actuality, or commitment towards the

truthfulness of propositions all fall under this broad-coverage term. In this paper, we will focus on a set of adverbs (*really*, *actually* and *obviously*) that express certainty-related meaning following the analytical framework in Biber (2006). As in Gablasova et al. (2017), we will examine the effect of different speaking tasks on L2 speakers' use of certainty adverbs. These authors concluded that there was a significant difference between the monologic prepared tasks and every other task and between the dialogic general topic and the dialogic pre-selected topic ($p < .05$). Our research will contribute to the understanding of how different speaking tasks create the conditions for the use of certainty adverbs across different levels of proficiency and tasks. Our research questions are the following:

(1) Does the frequency of use of *really*, *actually* and *obviously* increase across B1, B2 and C1 CEFR levels?
(2) Do different speaking tasks display more frequent uses of these adverbs?
(3) Do speakers with the same L1 but from different geographical and cultural backgrounds show similar patterns of increase/decrease of use of *really*, *actually* and *obviously*?

2. Research methodology

2.1 The Trinity Lancaster Corpus

We used an *ad-hoc* distribution of the TLC (2.7 M/words) made available for research purposes during 2017. The TLC contains spoken data from L2 learners/speakers of English at different proficiency levels, including B1, B2 and C1. In this research, we examined the data contributed by 259 Speakers of English whose L1 is Spanish from both Mexico and Spain, and who were above 16 years when they were interviewed. Table 1 offers a breakdown of the number of speakers aged 16 and above per proficiency level and country of origin. In brackets, we provide the total number of speakers in this distribution of the TLC per proficiency level and country; in bold, the actual number of speakers included in our analysis.

	B1	B2	C1
Mexico	**57** (100)	**36** (70)	**39** (60)
Spain	**42** (100)	**61** (100)	**24** (60)

Table 1. Number of speakers from Mexico and Spain at different levels of proficiency.

In terms of tasks, we focused our attention on both monologic and dialogic speaking tasks. Table 2 offers a breakdown of the tasks analysed and the number of speakers in each of them.

	B1		B2		C1	
Mexico	Conversation **n=57**	Discussion **n=57**	Conversation **n=36**	Discussion **n=36**	Conversation **n=39**	Discussion **n=39**
	~~Presentation~~	~~Interactive task~~	~~Presentation~~	Interactive task **n=36**	Presentation **n=39**	Interactive task **n=39**
Spain	Conversation **n=42**	Discussion **n=42**	Conversation **n=61**	Discussion **n=61**	Conversation **n=24**	Discussion **n=24**
	~~Presentation~~	~~Interactive~~	~~Presentatio~~	Interactive	Presentatio	Interactive

		~~task~~	~~n~~	task **n=61**	n **n=24**	Task **n=24**

Table 2. Number of speakers from Mexico and Spain per type of task at different levels of proficiency in our subcorpus.

Only two of the dialogic tasks (conversation and discussion) are found across the three competence levels (B1, B2, C1). The interactive task was found in B2 and C1 speakers, while the presentation task was only found in C1 interviews.

2.2 Corpus query, data extraction and quantitative data analysis

We searched for all occurrences of the adverbs *actually*, *really* and *obviously* on a subcorpus (848,146 words) of the TLC with examinees´ language whose L1 is Spanish and their country is either Mexico or Spain and aged 16 or above. The contributions of the examiners were not included in our analysis. All hits were exported to an excel file where every concordance line was analysed. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate raw and normalized frequencies of use. Nonparametric Kruskall-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests were used to determine if there are statistically significant differences between two or more groups of an independent variable on a continuous or ordinal dependent variable. In our case, this independent variable was the frequency of the adverbs *actually*, *really* and *obviously* across three proficiency levels and speaking tasks. We used this test after checking that the requirements were met[1].

2.3 Qualitative data analysis

[1] https://statistics.laerd.com/premium/spss/kwht/kruskal-wallis-test-in-spss-3.php

A sample of 150 concordance lines were analysed qualitatively by the researchers to determine the pragmatic functions and position at the clause or phrase level. A sample of these uses was generated by the sample option in Sketch Engine. All in all, we examined 25 concordance lines of the adverbs *actually* and *really* across all 3 proficiency levels (B1, B2, C1) in the two L1 groups analysed. Given the extremely low use of *obviously* across the data, we decided to exclude this adverb from the qualitative analysis. We used the analysis framework in Pérez-Paredes & Mark (forthcoming) to categorise the pragmatic functions of the adverbs *actually* and *really*.

For the analysis and annotation of *actually*, we used Pérez-Paredes & Mark (forthcoming), who drew on Waters (2008). They examined seven different functions that express disagreement, elaboration or clarification, change of topic, expression of unexpectedness, factualness, emphasis or minimisation of the impact of their statement. For the analysis of *really*, Pérez-Paredes & Mark (forthcoming) drew on Myers (2010). They categorised the uses of *really* into seven different functions that express emphasis and degree, sceptical responses, doubt or surprise, factually true meanings, softening a negative response, concessive meanings and, finally, ambiguous meanings difficult to categorise. The position of *actually* and *really* was categorised in relation to its position in the clause or phrase: clause initial, clause final, phrase level and ambiguous, in cases of extreme disfluency.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 3 offers the mean frequency and standard deviation of the adverbs *actually*, *really* and *obviously* by L1 Spanish B1, B2 and C1 learners in the TLC L1 Spanish subcorpus (candidate speech).

	Presentation			**Discussion**		
	Actually	*Really*	*Obviously*	*Actually*	*Really*	*Obviously*
B1	-	-	-	*M*= .26 *SD*= .708	*M*= 1.07 *SD*= 2.032	*M*= .07 *SD*= .258
B2	-	-	-	*M*= .32 *SD*= .785	*M*= 1.78 *SD*= 2.333	*M*= .14 *SD*= .500
C1	*M*= .35 *SD*= .936	*M*= 1.32 *SD*= 2.442	*M*= .11 *SD*= .444	*M*= .78 *SD*= 1.276	*M*= 2.90 *SD*= 3.156	*M*= .24 *SD*= .640

	Interactive task			**Conversation**		
	Actually	*Really*	*Obviously*	*Actually*	*Really*	*Obviously*
B1	-	-	-	*M*= .29 *SD*= 1.189	*M*= .91 *SD*= 1.499	*M*= .06 *SD*= .240
B2	*M*= .14 *SD*= .456	*M*= 1.77 *SD*= 1.874	*M*= .07 *SD*= .297	*M*= .28 *SD*= .657	*M*= 1.88 *SD*= 2.627	*M*= .12 *SD*= .484
C1	*M*= .44 *SD*= .912	*M*= 2.38 *SD*= 2.196	*M*= .03 *SD*= .177	*M*= .78 *SD*= 1.699	*M*= 3.57 *SD*= 4.328	*M*= .13 *SD*= .381

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the use of *actually*, *really* and *obviously* in presentation, discussion, interaction and conversation tasks at B1, B2 and C1 levels by L1 Spanish learners.

The most frequently used adverb, regardless of the level or the task, is *really*, then followed by *actually* and *obviously*. *Really* is the only adverb that shows a frequency mean higher than 1 across all the tasks and levels, but for conversation at B1 level (*M*= .91). In our subcorpus, *really* is found 2,681 times per million words, while it appears

1,745 times per million words across the entire TLC (candidate-only speech, four speaking tasks analysed in this research for speakers >16 years). When compared with other candidates' L1, we find remarkable differences across levels, possibly due to the extremely small size of the subcorpora involved:

	Chinese L1 Speakers	Hindi L1 Speakers	Italian L1 Speakers	Spanish L1 Speakers
B1	2897/M (54 occurrences)	636/M (1 occurrence)	758/M (47 occurrences)	2161/M (256 occurrences)
B2	2356/M (44 occurrences)	3460/M (11 occurrences)	1781/M (227 occurrences)	2391/M (418 occurrences)
C1	2903/M (127 occurrences)	No occurrences found	2618/M (312 occurrences)	3241/M (649 occurrences)

Table 4. Normalized frequency per million words of *really* across L1s and levels.

As can be seen in Table 4, normalized frequencies of use are, on the one hand, higher for Spanish speakers but for B1 level and, on the other, *really* is not even used at the C1 by Hindi speakers. These frequencies are higher than the 1,263 occurrences per million words in the BNC Spoken component[2], but much lower than the figure of 4,245 occurrences per million words in the more recent BNC 2014 spoken corpus. This may suggest that the use of *really* is becoming more frequent in contemporary British spoken English. Outside the Spanish L1 data, it is in the Italian group where we find a more balanced number of total words and occurrences of *really*, and where we can observe an incremental pattern of use from B1 to C1 speakers. Speakers of Spanish as an L1 display a higher frequency of use as shown in Table 5:

	Conversation	Discussion	Interactive task	Presentation
B1	2326/M	2028/M		
B2	2693/M	2196/M	2228/M	
C1	3892/M	3680/M	3544/M	1977/M

[2] BNC Spoken context-governed texts (6,902,759 words).

Table 5. Normalized frequency per million words of *really* across Spanish as L1 speakers, tasks and levels.

The increase in frequency use is found across the conversation, discussion and interactive tasks and the incremental pattern remains constant at the B1-B2 and the B2-C1 levels. The normalized frequency in the presentation for C1 speakers is the lowest of all tasks and levels in Table 5. A cross-sectional analysis of the use of *really* in each of the tasks shows (Tables 3 and 5) that there is an increase in the mean use of this adverb per proficiency level. Figure 1 shows a breakdown of the mean frequencies of use per speaker across levels and dialogic task type:

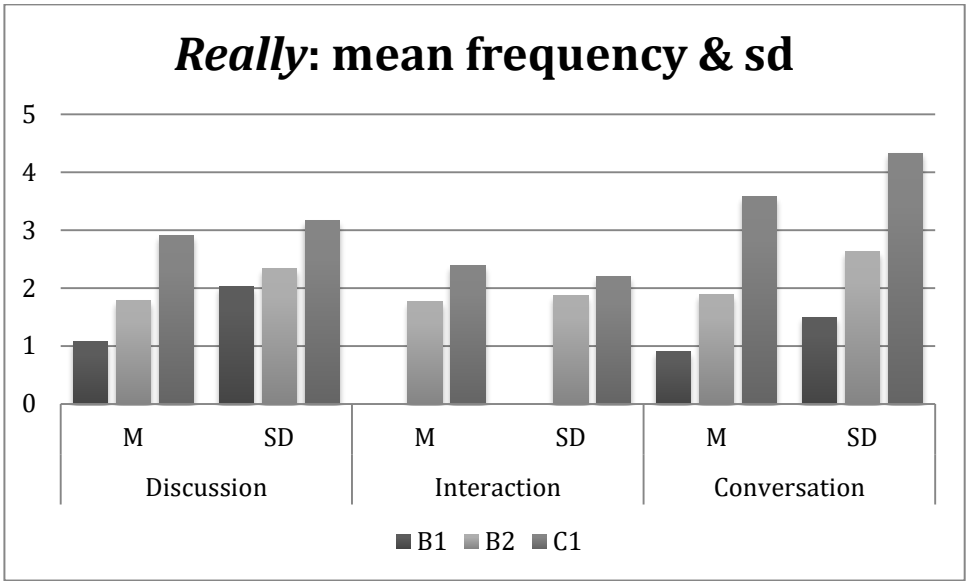

Figure 1. Mean frequency and standard deviation of *really* in the corpus.

If the distinction between monologic and dialogic tasks is considered, the results show that the mean of use of *really* is higher in the dialogic tasks than in the monologic task. For instance, at C1 level the mean of use in the presentation task (*M*= 1.32) is lower

than in the dialogic tasks, interactive (*M*=2.38), discussion (*M*= 2.90) and conversation (*M*=3.57). Within the dialogic tasks, the adverb is more frequently used on average per speaker in conversation than in discussion at B2 and C1 levels, whereas the opposite is the case at B1 level.

The second most frequently used adverb is *actually*, although its mean of use is consistently below 1 across levels and tasks. *Actually* is found 573 times per million words in our subcorpus and 549 times per million words across the entire TLC (candidate-only speech, four speaking tasks analysed in this research for speakers >16 years). As with *really*, the mean of use of this adverb increases with level in most tasks, as can be seen in Table 3. If we compare frequencies of use with other candidates' L1, we find remarkable differences across levels and L1s:

	Chinese L1 Speakers	Hindi L1 Speakers	Italian L1 Speakers	Spanish L1 Speakers
B1	322/M (6 occurrences)	1348/M (2 occurrences)	65/M (4 occurrences)	574/M (68 occurrences)
B2	764/M (24 occurrences)	No occurrences found	126/M (16 occurrences)	355/M (62 occurrences)
C1	2126/M (93 occurrences)	24,141/M (78 occurrences)	411/M (49 occurrences)	764/M (153 occurrences)

Table 6. Normalized frequency per million words of *actually* across L1s, tasks and levels.

Normalized frequencies of use are lower than those of *really*, and *actually* is not even used by B2 Hindi speakers. Speakers of Spanish as an L1 display a lower frequency of use (Table 6) than Hindi at B1 level, Chinese at B2 and Chinese at C1. In general, some of the normalized frequencies in Table 6 seem to be profoundly affected by the extremely small size of some of the data. In particular, the Hindi L1 corpus ranges from

1,484 words for B1 to 3,231 words for C1. Table 7 offers a breakdown of the normalized frequency of *actually* across tasks and levels in the L1 Spanish subcorpus:

	Conversation	Discussion	Interactive task	Presentation
B1	802/M	189/M	0/M	
B2	543/M	166/M	17/M	
C1	474/M	250/M	120/M	140/M

Table 7. Normalized frequency per million words of *actually* across Spanish as L1 speakers, tasks and levels.

While the discussion and interactive tasks show an incremental pattern of frequency, in the conversation tasks the pattern in reversed. This cannot be possibly attributed to the size of the different components of the corpus (B1, B2, C1) as the Spanish corpus is arguably the largest dataset in the TLC corpora used in our research. Figure 2 shows a breakdown of different corpus sizes across levels in L1 Spanish, Italian, Hindi and Chinese.

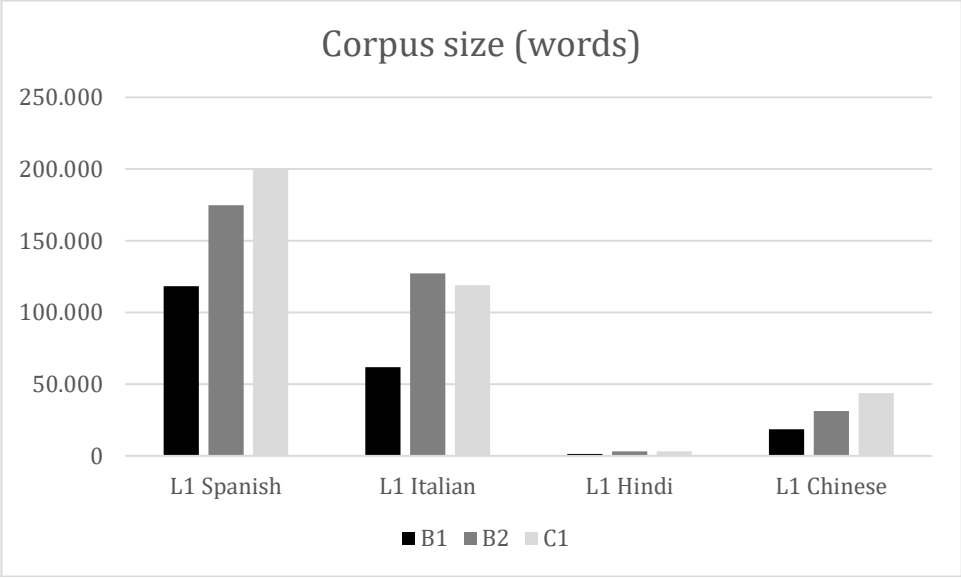

Figure 2. Corpus size across levels and different L1s.

On the contrary, it can be argued that the small sizes of the L1 Hindi and Chinese corpora may present somewhat biased results in terms of the frequencies in this case of *actually*. In the BNC spoken component, *actually* occurred 171 times per million words[3], while this number drastically increases up to 1,534 in the BNC 2O14 spoken edition. As we saw with *really*, the frequency of use of *actually* is on the up in contemporary British English. Figure 3 shows the frequency mean and standard deviation of this adverb across competence levels and dialogic tasks.

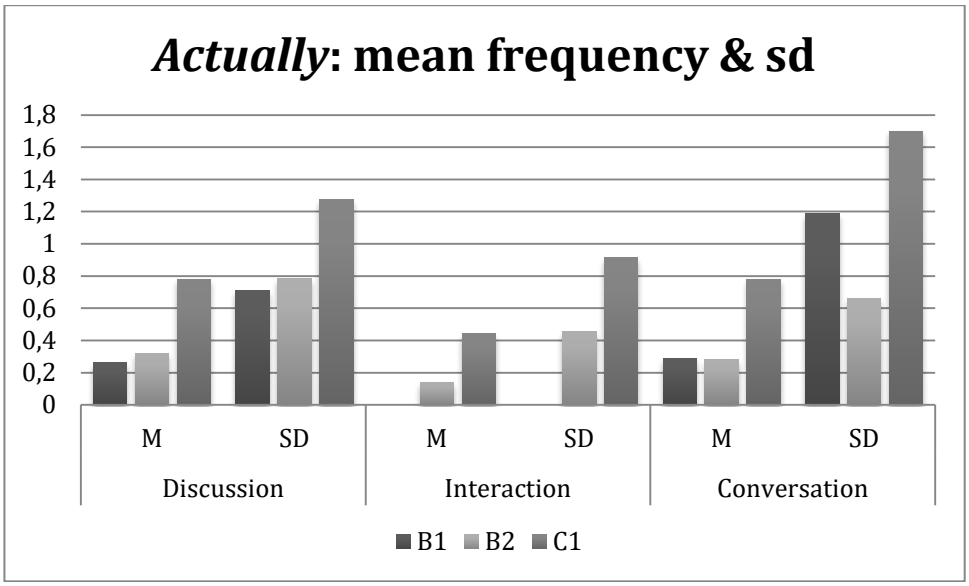

Figure 3. Mean frequency and standard deviation of *actually* in the L1 Spanish corpus.

As can be seen, the frequency per speaker mean at B1 and B2 is similar (*M*= .29; *M*= .28, for B1 and B2 levels, respectively), and then drastically increases at C1 level (*M*=

[3] BNC Spoken context-governed texts (6,902,759 words).

.78). Also, we find that *actually* is less frequently used in monologic than in dialogic tasks. This is found in its use at C1 level (*M*= .35) in the presentation task, in the discussion and conversation tasks (*M*= .78), and in the interactive task (*M*= .44). The only exception to this increasing-frequency pattern is found in the means of use of *actually* in the conversation task. The fact that only 63 speakers are found in the C1 data may have influenced a lower average use (Table 7).

The least frequently used adverb is *obviously*. Its mean frequency is never above 1, the highest mean of use being found at C1 level in the discussion task (M= .24). In our subcorpus, *obviously* is found 132 times per million words, while it appears 55 times per million words across the entire TLC (candidate-only speech, four speaking tasks analysed in this research for speakers >16 years). This adverb is also more frequently used in dialogic tasks than in monologic tasks, as can be seen in the results in those levels in which both types of tasks are included in the exam. Although an increase in the mean of use per level is found in the discussion and conversation tasks, this is not so for the interaction task, where a decrease is found between B2 and C1 levels (*M*= 07; *M*= .03; at B2 and C1 levels, respectively). In British English, *obviously* is found 346 per million words in the BNC Spoken[4] and 489 times per million words in the BNC 2014 spoken corpus.

3.2 Inferential statistics

[4] BNC Spoken context-governed texts (6,902,759 words).

The adverbs *actually*, *really* and *obviously* were analysed across the four tasks in the TLC L1 Spanish subcorpus (B1, B2, C1 levels and candidate speech). The results are provided in the following sections.

3.2.1 Levels B1/B2

After conducting Mann-Whitney tests, differences in frequency of use were only found in the adverb *really* in the discussion task (*U*= 3640.500, *z*= -3.130, *p*= .002) and the conversation task (*U*= 3603.000, *z*= -3.224, *p*= .001), although in both cases there were small effect sizes (*r*= -.22, *r*= -.23). In both cases, the means of use of the adverbs per task was higher in the B2 level, as can be seen in Table 8.

	B1 level	B2 level
Really discussion	*M*= 1.07, *SD*= 2.032	*M*= 1.78; *SD*= 2.333
Really conversation	*M*= .91; *SD*= 1.499	*M*= 1.88; *SD*= 2.627

Table 8. Means and standard deviations for the use of *really* in the discussion and conversation tasks at B1 and B2 levels.

3.2.2 Levels B2/C1

The data available in the corpus made it only possible to compare the use of the three above mentioned adverbs in the interactive, the discussion and the conversation tasks. Differences were found in the use of *really* in the three tasks, namely discussion (*U*= 2321.000, *z*= -2.626, *p*= .009, *r*= -.21), interaction (*U*= 2512.000, *z*= -1.937, *p*= .05, *r*= -.15) and conversation (*U*= 2222.500, *z*= -2.978, *p*= .003, *r*= -.23). In the case of *actually*, differences were only found in the discussion (*U*= 2527.000, *z*= -2.336, *p*= .019, *r*= -.18) and interaction (*U*= 2638, *z*= -2.060, *p*= .039, *r*= -.16) tasks. As can be seen, all effect sizes were small. A look at the means shows that learners at C1 level used more of these adverbs per task than their counterparts at B2 level, but for the use

of *actually* in the discussion task, which shows a statistically significant decrease in use per task from B2 to C1 level as seen in Table 9:

	B2	C1
Really discussion	*M*= 1.78; *SD*= 2.333	*M*= 2.90; *SD*= 3.156
Really interaction	*M*= 1.77; SD= 1.874	*M*= 2.38; *SD*= 2.196
Really conversation	*M*= 1.88; *SD*= 2.627	*M*= 3.57; *SD*= 4.328
Actually discussion	*M*= 1.78; *SD*= 2.333	*M*= .78; *SD*= 1.276
Actually interaction	*M*= .14; *SD*= .456	*M*= .44; *SD*= .912

Table 9. Means and standard deviations for the use of really and actually in the discussion and conversation tasks at B2 and C1 levels.

3.2.3 Levels B1/C1

Mann-Whitney tests revealed differences in the use of *actually* in the discussion (*U*= 2467.000, *z*= -2.938; *p*= .003, *r*= -.23) and conversation (*U*= 2593.000, *z*= -2.667, *p*= .008, *r*= -.21) tasks and in the use of *really* in the discussion (*U*= 1695, *z*= -5.155, *p*= .000, *r*= -.40) and conversation (*U*= 1562.500, *z*= -5.614, *p*= .000, *r*= -.44) tasks. As can be seen in the data, the effect size of the use of *really* in the discussion and the conversation tasks is medium, whereas the effect size for the use of *actually* in both tasks is small. In all the cases, as seen in Table 10, the mean of use of each adverb per task is higher at CEFR C1 level than at CEFR B1 level.

	B1	C1
Actually discussion	*M*= .26; *SD*= .708	*M*= .78; *SD*= 1.276
Actually conversation	*M*= .29; *SD*= 1.189	*M*= .78; *SD*= 1.699
Really discussion	*M*= 1.07, *SD*= 2.032	*M*= 2.90; *SD*= 3.156
Really conversation	*M*= .91; *SD*= 1.499	*M*= 3.57; *SD*= 4.328

Table 10. Means and standard deviations for the use of actually and really in the discussion and conversation tasks at B1 and C1 levels.

3.2.4 Summary of findings

Table 11 shows the levels and tasks where significant differences in the use of adverbs were found:

	Really - discussion task	*Really* – conversation task	*Really* – interactive task	*Actually* - discussion task	*Actually* - conversation task	*Actually* – interactive task
B1-B2	✓	✓				
B2-C1	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
B1 – C1	✓	✓		✓	✓	

Table 11. An overview of the adverbs and tasks which show statistically significant differences.

3.2.5 Looking at L1 nationalities: Spanish and Mexican students compared

Since the group of L1 Spanish learners was composed of Mexican and Spanish learners of English, further analyses were conducted to probe into differences in the frequency of use of these two learner groups at the different levels. The results of the Mann-Whitney tests revealed that there are differences in the use of the adverb *actually* (*U*= 971.000, *z*= -2.387, *p*= .017, *r*= -.23) and *obviously* (U= 997.500, *z*= -3.181, *p*= .001, *r*= -.32) in the discussion task at B1 level, with a small effect size in the former and medium to large effect size in the latter. The comparison of the means of use of the adverbs at this level by these learner groups (Table 12) reveals that Mexican students use the adverb *actually* more often than Spanish students in the discussion task, whereas the difference in the use of *obviously* stems from the fact that Mexican students do not use this adverb in this task at all.

	Mexican learners	Spanish learners
Actually – discussion task	*M*= .37; *SD*= .816	*M*= .12, *SD*= .504
Obviously –discussion task	*M*= .00, *SD*= .00	*M*= .17, *SD*= .377

Table 12. differences in the use of adverbs between Mexican and Spanish learners at B1 level.

Differences are also found in the use of the adverb *actually* in the discussion (*U*= 805.500, *z*= -2.994, *p*= .003, *r*= -.30) and in the conversation (*U*= 813.500, *z*= -3.019, *p*= .003, *r*= -.31) tasks, both with a medium effect size, at B2 level. The data in Table 13 shows that the means of use of the adverb in both tasks is higher in the production by Mexican learners.

	Mexican learners	Spanish learners
Actually – discussion task	*M*= .61, SD= 1.128	*M*= .15, *SD*= .401
Actually – conversation task	*M*= .56, SD= .939	*M*= .11; *SD*= .321

Table 13. Differences in the use of adverbs between Mexican and Spanish learners at B2 level.

However, no differences were found at the C1 level in the use of the adverbs by Mexican and Spanish learners of English in any of the speaking tasks.

3.3 Functions and position

3.3.1 Really

The analysis of 25 concordance lines per level revealed that the range of functions does not increase with proficiency, the data in Table 14 showing a decreasing pattern as there are 4, 3 and 2 functions at CEFR B1, B2 and C1 levels (plus the ambiguous function, which is present at the three levels analysed).

		Levels		
Function		**B1 %**	**B2 %**	**C1 %**
1	Booster, emphatic, degree	76	68	68
2	Sceptical response	0	0	0
3	Doubt, surprise	4	0	0
4	Factually true, actually	4	12	0
5	Softening a negative / Hedging	8	16	24

6	Concessive	0	0	0
7	Ambiguous	8	4	8

Table 14. Functions of *really* in a sample of concordance lines across the B1, B2 and C1 levels.

Still, the most frequently used function across the three levels is 'booster, emphatic, degree', which is used in similar proportions across the levels, although with a lower percentage at CEFR B2 and C1 levels (76%, 68% and 68%, respectively). An increase is seen, however, in the percentage of use of two functions, namely, 'softening a negative / hedging' (8%, 16% and 24%, respectively) and 'factually true, actually' (4% and 13%, but without any occurrence in the randomized concordance lines at CEFR C1 level). Cases in which the use of the adverb was considered ambiguous are found in the concordance lines for the three levels, the percentage being lower at B2 level (8%, 4%, 8%, respectively). Two functions of the adverb, 'sceptical response' and 'concessive', were not used at all by learners at any of the CEFR levels explored.

If the position of the adverb is analysed (see Figure 4), learners at CEFR C1 level use the adverb in phrasal and clausal position in similar proportions (48% vs. 52%), whereas a bigger difference in the proportion is seen in CEFR B2 (40% vs. 60%), and B1 learners (56% vs. 44%). A clear trend is seen in the increase of percentage of mid-clause position from CEFR B1 to C1 levels (32%, 40% and 48%, respectively).

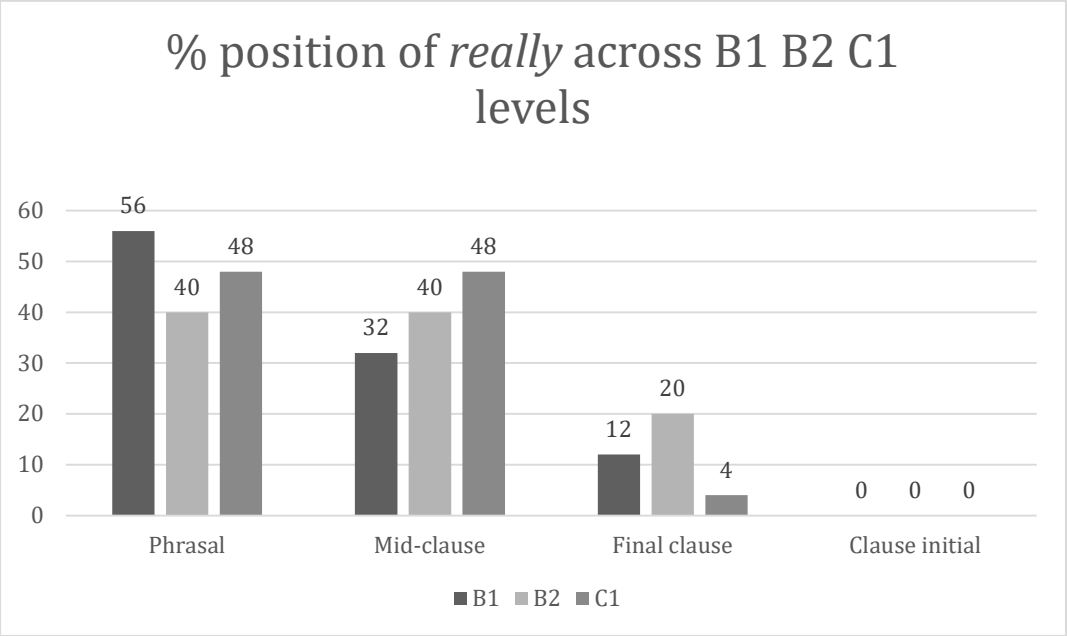

Figure 4. Position percentages of *really* in a sample of concordance lines across the B1, B2 and C1 levels.

3.3.2 *Actually*

After an analysis of 25 randomized concordance lines per level, it was found that as speakers had more linguistic competence, the range of functions presented a different distribution. B1 speakers relied heavily on the use of *actually* to express emphasis (64%) and factualness (12%). In 12% of the lines examined, it was misused as a false friend. B2 speakers, however, displayed a wider range of functions such as emphasis (40%), elaboration/clarification (36%) and factualness (20%). C1 speakers used *actually* less often to express emphasis (20%) and more to express factualness (44%) and to elaborate/clarify discourse (28%). Table 15 offers the breakdown of all the functions across the three levels.

		Levels		
Function		B1 %	B2 %	C1 %
1	Disagreement	4	0	0
2	Elaboration/clarificatio	0	36	28

	n			
3	Slight change of topic	0	4	0
4	Unexpectedness	8	0	4
5	Factualness	12	20	44
6	Emphasis	64	40	20
7	Minimiser	0	0	0
8	False friend	12	0	4

Table 15. Functions of *actually* in a sample of concordance lines across the B1, B2 and C1 levels.

In terms of position, it was found that more advanced speakers (C1) tended to display a balance between phrasal and clausal positions, while B1 speakers, and particularly B2 speakers, tended to rely on clause initial positions in 64% and 84 % of the concordance lines examined. Figure 5 shows the position of really across the three levels in our subcorpus:

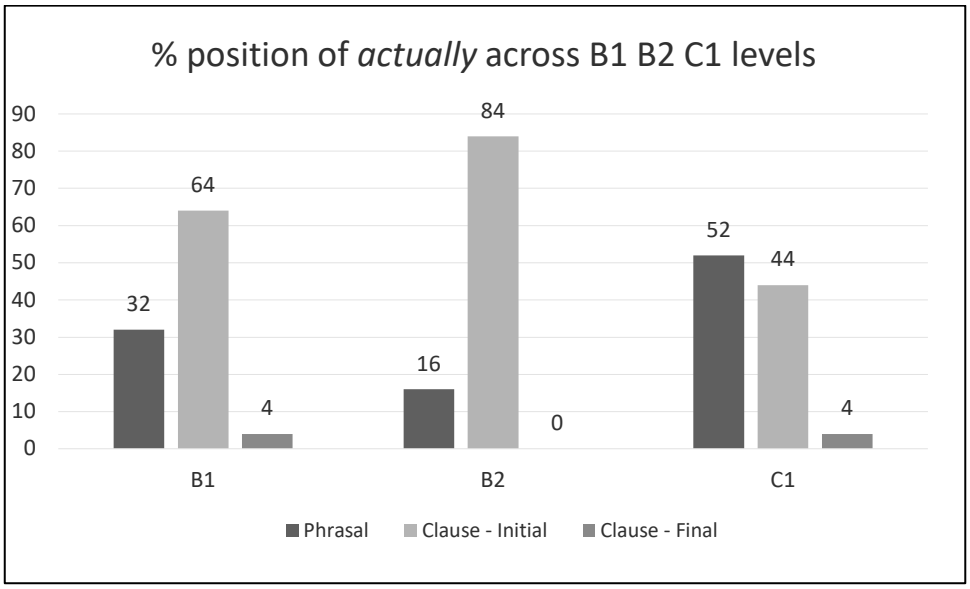

Figure 5. Position percentages of *actually* in a sample of concordance lines across the B1, B2 and C1 levels.

4. Discussion

This study adopted the theoretical framework of stance developed by Biber et al. (1999) and Biber (2006). From the range of structural categories that express stance, namely, modal verbs, stance complement clauses and stance adverbs, we explored the frequency of use and the usage of three adverbs of the latter category in Biber (2006: 100): *really*, *actually* and *obviously*. Our aim was to explore the extent to which these adverbs are used across different proficiency levels, and whether different speaking tasks may favour their use in a group of speakers whose L1 is Spanish. Our results show that *really*, *actually* and *obviously* display a particularly different frequency of use across different proficiency levels and the different speaking tasks analysed in the sub-corpus of Spanish L1 learners in the TLC. Qualitative analyses of the pragmatic functions of *really* and *actually* reveal that there is an increase in the use of meanings to express hedging in *really* and factualness in *actually* across the proficiency levels.

While *really* was used on average at least once by every speaker across the board (ranging from *M*=.91 B1/conversation to *M*=3.57 C1/Conversation), *obviously* was hardly used by these learners at all. *Actually* was used more frequently, but it displayed a much lower frequency mean than *really*. Our findings suggest that, generally, as proficiency level increases, so does the average frequency of use of *really* and *actually* (see Figures 1 and 2). However, Mann-Whitney tests showed that the frequency increase was only significant in some tasks and proficiency levels for some of the adverbs analysed. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss some of these findings more in detail.

4.1 Frequency of use increase and tasks (RQ 1 & 2)

The adverb *really* displayed a wider range of significantly different frequencies of use. *Really* is the fourth most frequent adverb node form (POS RR tag) in the entire TLC corpus after *okay*, *so* and *well*, and the fifth most frequent RR node in our subcorpus. At the B1/B2 levels, significant differences (Tables 5 and 8) in frequency of use were found in the discussion (p= .002) and the conversation tasks (p= .001). At the B2/C1 levels, significant differences (Tables 5 and 9) were found in the discussion (p= .009), interaction (p= .05) and conversation tasks (p= .003). As expected, at the B1/C1 levels, significant differences in frequency of use (Tables 5 and 10) were also found in the discussion (p= .001) and the conversation (p= .001) tasks. The larger effect sizes (classified as medium) were found at the B1/C1 gap for the adverb *actually*. These findings suggest that it is at the advanced levels of proficiency where L1 Spanish speakers of EFL use certainty adverbs more frequently, approaching native speaker frequencies as per BNC 2014, as seen in the previous section. This finding complements previous research reported by Gablasova, Brezina & McEnery (2017) that lower-level learners prefer cognitive verbs and adverbials over modal verbs. In the cases of *really* and *actually*, we found that even the same group of L1 speakers may adopt different approaches to frequency of use that do not necessarily imply an incremental curve of use. *Actually*, in particular, presents further challenges to learners and researchers alike as adverbials, and in our case adverbs, do not only convey epistemic information explicitly (Gablasova et al. 2017). If that was the case, *really* and *actually* would not compete for some of the factualness-related meanings or the more advanced

learners would reflect the range of meanings expressed by native speakers (Waters 2008) more faithfully.

Our findings suggest that dialogic tasks favour the use of *really* and that, as proficiency level increases, so does its use. The use of the adverb *actually*, however, paints a somewhat dissimilar picture. Differences were only found at the B2/C1 levels (Tables 7 and 9), where C1 speakers in the interactive task made a significantly more frequent use of this adverb (p= .019) than during the discussion. No significant differences were found between B1/B2 and B2/C1 speakers during the discussion and the conversation tasks. Given the data availability for B1 groups, the interactive task could not, unfortunately, be contrasted for B1. We claim that the use of *actually* is, to a greater extent, more task-independent than that of *really*. This finding sheds further light on previous claims (Gablasova et al. 2017: 630) that learners' "production shows sensitivity to different interactional requirements". We suggest that learners´ sensitivity may operate across two different scales: on a broader, large scale, where an extensive range of linguistic features and devices are considered, research seems to suggest that there is a task effect on the frequency of use of linguistic devices. On a smaller, micro level, when individual features are identified and fully explored, the resulting picture tends to be more difficult to interpret. This is confirmed by research on use of adverbs (Pérez-Paredes & Mark forthcoming) that has found that task sensitivity works differently across groups of non-native speakers in the *LINDSEI* corpus (Brand & Kämmerer 2006) and British speakers in the extended-*LOCNEC* (Aguado-Jiménez et al. 2012). When the frequency of use of *really* across the set topic, free discussion and picture description tasks was examined, Pérez-Paredes & Mark (forthcoming) found

that in the German and British groups, the speaking task had an impact on frequency. In the German group (n=50), a significant main effect for task type [F (2, 98) = 9.397, *p* = .001, partial eta 2 = .161] was found. Post hoc Bonferroni pairwise comparisons revealed that there was a significant difference between the picture description task and the set topic (*p*= .001) and between the picture description and the free discussion (*p*= .001). In the British speakers group (n=78), a significant difference between the picture description task and the set topic (*p*= .001) and the picture description and the free discussion (*p*= .001) was found. However, under the same interview conditions, this was not the case in the Spanish and Chinese groups of speakers. These findings seem to suggest that task effects are mediated by speakers´L1.

Even for C1 speakers, the means of use of *obviously* were extraordinarily low: 0.11 in the presentation, 0.24 in the discussion, 0.3 in the interaction and 0.13 in the conversation task. The proficiency increase effect is not found for *obviously* across the three levels and it is interesting to note that two speakers, ME 43_S and SP_107_S, are responsible for 4 of the 6 occurrences of this adverb in the discussion task at the C1 level. In other words, only 4 speakers out of 63 used this adverb at the C1 level in any of the four speaking tasks analysed, or, put it differently, 93.7% of the C1 learners did not use *obviously* during their exam. This lack of interest in *obviously* may stem either from a lack of awareness of its potential delexicalised meanings (Aijmer 2008) or from the fact that many of these uses are found in conversations with close friends (Aijmer 2008), and the interview format of the TLC or the *LINDSEI* do not seem to favour the use of less epistemic meanings.

Our results show that dialogic tasks seem to be adequate to explore the natural emergence (Alexopoulou et al. 2017) of the adverb *really* for the creation of meaning. Our findings, however, suggest that the proficiency effect works somewhat differently across levels and adverbs. While the use of *really* is more likely to increase along with the proficiency level, despite their widespread use in L1 speech (Aijmer 1986), the frequencies of *actually* and *obviously* suggest that, generally, the learners in our subcorpus do not necessarily find more opportunities to use them across all tasks. This can be explained by Buysse´s (2011) finding that advanced learners of EFL in informal interviews tended to neglect the use of markers with an involvement function and preferred the use of units with an operative function such as *so* or *well*. Some of the stance-related meanings of *actually* and *obviously* could have been seen by the learners in our data as already fulfilled by *really* or other devices, and, certainly, the lower use of these two adverbs do not seem to be linked to proficiency issues as both adverbs are classified by the English Grammar Profile as A2 target forms, (can use a limited range of adverbs to express stance in the case of *actually*) or B1 (Can use an increasing range of adverbs 'completely', 'obviously', 'clearly', 'actually', 'luckily', 'honestly', 'sadly', 'basically', 'obviously', 'hopefully' to indicate an attitude or viewpoint, in the case of *obviously*). The fact that the L1 Spanish learners in our subcorpus used *really* more frequently than other L1 speakers suggests that an L1 effect is someway in place (Mukherjee, 2009) although further research should be necessary to test this claim.

4.2 Functions across proficiency levels: the emergence of hedging & non-epistemic meanings in the higher proficiency group (RQ 1 & 2)

In terms of the function of the adverbs, *really* was used by learners across the three levels in a very similar way, predominantly as an emphatic device:

B1 it's *really* cool but it's *really* expensive (2_6_ME_63). Conversation

B2 I'm mm actually *really* worried about pollution mm erm because when you (8_ME_32). Conversation

C1 I *really* love reading in English (ME_30). Presentation

The percentage of emphatic uses ranges from 76 % at B1 to 68 % at B2 and at C1. However, in C1 speakers we find 24% of uses of hedging meanings:

C1 if they don't *really* care about what others no might think or what (2_ME_27). Interactive task

C1 I don't *really* know why but I I guess (SP_36). Discussion task

C1 I'm not *really* sure what I would do (SP_5). Discussion task

Hedging meanings appeared in 8% of the concordances in B1 and in 16% in B2. These findings suggest that, as learners become more proficient, they tend to rely on uses which are not exclusively epistemic and which refer to other areas such as affective meaning (Aijmer 2008). These results support Pérez-Paredes et al.´s (2011) finding that, under exact interview conditions, the use of adverbial hedges in advanced EFL learners and British native speakers differ, among others, in the preference of British speakers to

use attitude and style stance adverbs. Advanced learners in Pérez-Paredes et al. (2011), however, prefer to use epistemic meanings such as likelihood and imprecision. In other words, speakers with a higher proficiency level tend to display adverb-related meanings that go beyond core epistemic values and may display more complex and nuanced stance meanings (Biber & Finegan 1988). In the case of *actually*, as proficiency level increased, learners in our data displayed more factualness meanings (44% in C1):

> C1 street art I like it a lot yeah I *actually* paint and draw a lot of things yeah and I like it mm (2_ME_8_S). Conversation;

as well as elaboration/clarification functions (36% in B2 and 28% in C1):

> B2 yeah er I erm er *actually* erm some days in during the summer I go to to work (2_8_SP_2_S). Conversation.

Interestingly, more B1 learners used *actually* as a false friend (*actualmente*) in 12% of the lines.

4.3 Same L1, different varieties (RQ 3)

Our research explores for the first time, to the best of our knowledge, the frequency of use of *really*, *actually* and *obviously* in two populations of Spanish L1 speakers of English. Differences in the frequencies of use were found at the B1 and B2 levels in the discussion tasks as Mexican learners used *actually* significantly more frequently than

European Spanish speakers (*p*= .017), whereas European Spanish speakers used *obviously* in this task more frequently (Mexican learners did not use it at all) (*p*= .001). At the B2 level, this difference was also significant in the conversation and discussion task (*p*= .003, in both cases), with the Mexican learners using *actually* more frequently. These results seem to suggest that Mexican speakers use *actually* more frequently in lower levels of proficiency than European L1 speakers of Spanish. However, this finding is not totally corroborated by the data in the *Cambridge Learner Corpus* (CLC) where we find an extremely low use of this adverb. At the B2 levels, both Latin American and European L1 speakers of Spanish yielded exactly the same average use (0.011/M words). At the B1 and C1 levels, however, we find almost imperceptible differences: 0.010/M vs. 0.008/M words and 0.018/M vs. 0.014/M words, respectively, in Latin American and European L1 speakers of Spanish. More research is needed here in order to fully address usages on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

5. Conclusion

The picture that emerges from this research is one where learners, as their communicative competence increases, use *really* and *actually* more frequently, at least in dialogic discourse. Similarly, we found that, across the proficiency levels, their uses tended to be more sophisticated. The expression of opinion, emotion or personals significance in learner speech is so important that the available descriptors for overall spoken interaction (Council of Europe 2001: 74) (where the dialogic tasks analysed here would be included) and for overall spoken production (Council of Europe 2001: 58) (where the monologic task would be found) specify that students at the levels analysed

are able to express them (with varying degrees) using the linguistic resources at their disposal. However, learners´ use of adverbs (Philip 2008) is taken for granted and, particularly, their pragmatic functions (Bardovi-Harlig 2013) are not part of the core L2 curriculum and pedagogy (Romero-Trillo 2002). For instance, while the descriptors for conversation or informal discussion (within spoken interaction) include descriptors such as "Can convey degrees of emotion and highlight the personal significance of events and experiences" (Conversation, B2 level) (Council of Europe, 2001: 76), research has found that adverbs other than intensifiers are rarer in learner language than in native speaker language (Pérez-Paredes 2010; Pérez-Paredes et al. 2011; Pérez-Paredes & Sánchez-Tornel 2014).

Likewise, the descriptors for addressing audiences (within spoken production), state that students "can depart spontaneously from a prepared text and follow up interesting points raised by members of the audience, often showing remarkable fluency and easy of expression" (Addressing audiences, B2+ level) (Council of Europe 2001: 60). Although adverb use is just one of the different resources to express stance (Biber et al. 1999; Biber 2006), the analysis of these commonly used adverbs provides a first step to the understanding of their use regarding the learners' preference of use of some of their nuances, to the detriment of some others, as well as their distribution in the utterance. The differences found in the use of the adverbs in learner groups who share the same L1, but have a different cultural and geographical background (Mexico and Spain) also point to the influence that the different varieties of English (American English vs. British English) may have on learners. We claim that for the two L1 Spanish groups analysed, the use of *actually* and *obviously* remains a huge challenge at the B1 and B2

levels, which contradicts the descriptions of these adverbs as A2 and B1 items in the English Profile.

We need to acknowledge that our research presents different limitations. One is the small pool of learners that contributed each of the different tasks (Table 2). Second, the nature of our qualitative analysis calls for further scrutiny and replication from other researchers using the same corpus or different corpora. However, we would like to stress that one of the big contributions of the TLC is that it certainly provides opportunities for both flexible and enhanced comparability across tasks (Pérez-Paredes 2010) and proficiency levels. The lack of data for presentation at CEFR B1 and B2 levels, as well as for interaction at CEFR B1, prevents an analysis of the adverbs preferred by learners when presenting at the lower levels. Further analyses with oral data from corpora which include this type of tasks at this level would be necessary to fully explore the patterns of use of these adverbs in these tasks.

We have shown that the analysis of the use of the adverbs *really*, *actually* and *obviously* across different tasks, therefore, contributes to our understanding of the linguistic resources employed by Spanish L1 learners to convey stance and certainty-related meanings in spoken communication. Further analyses with comparative native oral corpora may also reveal "positive usage features" (Hawkins & Filipović 2012: 19), i.e., positive linguistic features that match the frequency of use by native speakers of English, as well as an in depth understanding of how adverbs contribute to overall meaning making in spoken discourse (Pérez-Paredes & Sánchez-Tornel 2014, 2015).

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