

Use of Modal Verbs in English Writing by EFL Learners

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Modal verbs are frequently used in every day communication. In previous studies, modal verbs were studied from different perspectives, such as the formal linguistics, semantics or pragmatics (Thomas, 1983; Leech 1983, 2003; Jacqueline & Kenneth, 1997; Rappen, 2002; Neil, 2009; Peters, 2013). Halliday (1994) proposed that VALUE is an important factor to represent the variability in modality. Halliday and Hasan (1989) divided modal verbs in terms of their pragmatic values. High value modals include *must, ought to, need, and have to*; intermediate value modals include *will, would, shall, should*; and low value modals include *may, might, can, could*. Different groups of modality are related with different politeness degree of the speech. Modal verbs of high value indicate an impolite speech, which is liable to cause the reader/listener's disfavor, whereas low value modals suggest a most polite use of language. In L2 learning, modal verbs appear as a challenge for learners for its various communication values and functions. With the development of computer technology and corpus linguistics, studies on modal uses by L2 learners can be based on corpus data analysis.

The present study attempts to explore the different uses of modal verbs by English L2 learners and native speakers. It compares two writing corpora, a Hong Kong University Students Writing Corpus and the British University Students Writing Part of LOCNESS (Granger, 1995). The following research questions are raised in the study: 1) Do English learners prefer to use modal verbs of high value? 2) Do English learners use more modal verbs than the native speakers? 3) Are there any different or similar tendencies in terms of modal verbs use between English learners and native speakers? Concordancer in Concapp V4 has been used to search for the modal verbs, and their frequencies were compared for different research questions.

For research question 1, it was found that among the four modals with high value, learners used "*need*" and "*have to*" twice of their British counterparts, and "*must*" 1.5 times of the native speakers. As for the intermediate and low value modals, learners used more intermediate modals than native speakers do, for example, "*should*" was used three times by learners. In addition, British students tended to use "*would*" and "*could*" much more frequently than their non-native counterparts.

For research question 2, it was found that for the overall frequency of all the modal verbs, learners used more modals (1.5 times) than the native speakers. And for research question 3, it was revealed that first, there was a similar tendency between the two groups---both English learners and native speakers tend to use "*can*" and "*will*" as the most frequent modals, and both of them used "*might*" "*ought to*" and "*shall*" less frequently. There was a significant difference between learners and native speakers in terms of the use of "*could*". British students used "*could*" frequently, whereas learners seldom used this word.

This paper then explored the reasons for the modal use differences between L2 learners and native speakers. First, Learners tended to use high value modals which indicated an absence of reader/audience awareness. It seemed that learners were not well informed of the pragmatic meaning of modal verbs.

Second, learners used not only more high value modals, but also more low value modals than native speakers. In brief, learners overused modal verbs in their writings. This suggested that in most cases, learners used modals only to express the possibility or necessity of certain propositions, with no concern about the pragmatic functions of modal verbs. For the overuse of modals, we can explain the phenomenon in the following aspects:

- 1) Concerning its semantic and syntactic features, modal verbs do not need inflections to indicate tense, person, voice etc. In other words, it is a simple form to be adopted by learners. And there is no complex syntactic rule for modals. As such, L2 learners prefer to use modal verbs even when it is not necessary.
- 2) Modals have a wide range of communication functions. Take "can" as the example. "Can" indicates different functions in multiple contexts. That is the reason why both non-natives and natives used "can" most frequently among all the modals. For natives, they used "can" frequently to fit different types of contexts, whereas the overuse of modals by learners suggested that learners did not understand the minute differences among modals, and they used one to fit all contexts.
- 3) Learners and natives have similar preference for modals use. They preferred to use "can, will and should/would", and used "might, ought to, shall" as the least frequent ones. "might" is called the mildest modal to show the highest degree of politeness (Leech, 1983). At the same time, the highest degree of politeness indicates the biggest distance between interlocutors. In daily writing and conversation, "Might" is used less frequently than other modals. When "might" is used to indicate possibilities, it shows the least possibility, which reflects uncertainty in writing and speaking. As such, it was used least by both learners and natives.

Another post hoc finding is that "could" was used distinctively by learners and natives. Among all the modals, "could" was used less frequently by learners than most of other modals, whereas natives used "could" more frequently than other modal verbs. "Could" indicates not only past tense, but politeness or uncertainty. "Could" goes between "might" and "can" when pragmatic connotations are concerned. Although natives have no difficulty to distinguish the three modals "might, could, can", it is a challenge for learners to use this modal verb properly.

This study suggested that learners need to be informed of the following two types of information about modal verbs: a) the pragmatic connotations of modals; b) the detailed differences between different modal verbs and the context differences. The lack of the above information results in a poor performance in modal verbs use by L2 learners. A series of L2 teaching suggestions have been proposed for the instruction and acquisition of English modal verbs.