

## A Corpus-Based Study of Modal Verbs Use in English Writing by EFL Learners

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### Abstract

Based on the comparison between Chinese University Students Writing Corpus and LOCNESS, this study attempts to explore the use of modal verbs in English writing by Chinese EFL learners. The results show that EFL learners preferred to use modal verbs of high value which indicates a high degree of impoliteness. In addition, as compared with native speakers' use, learners overused all types of modal verbs. They used less modal verbs of low value which are with a variety of semantic connotations and appropriate politeness degree. This study reveals that generally, EFL learners are lack of the pragmatic knowledge of modal verbs, and it is hard for them to distinguish the differences between different modal verbs. A series of modal verbs instruction suggestions are proposed as well.

**Key words:** Modal verbs; Corpus-based study; Pragmatic value

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### INTRODUCTION

Modal verbs are frequently used in every day communication. They have simple forms, but a wide variety of semantic connotations and communicative functions. In previous studies, modal verbs were studied from different perspectives. From the perspective of formal linguistics, researchers focused on the relationship

among tense, voice and modality of modal verbs (Clinque, 1999). From the perspective of semantics (Thomas, 1983; Leech, 1983), researchers focused on the relationship between contexts and modal verbs. Recently, SLA researchers and corpus linguists (Millar, 2009; Collins et al., 2014; Maria, 2007) paid their attention to the use of modal verbs by learners and native speakers. With the development of computer technology and corpus linguistics, studies on modal uses by L2 learners can be based on corpus data analysis. This present study attempts to explore the use of modal verbs in English writing by EFL learners based on the corpus data comparison.

### 1. MODAL VERBS

Modal verbs have simple forms, but a wide variety of semantic connotations and communicative functions. These functions can generally be related to a scale ranging from possibility (“*may*”) to necessity (“*must*”).

At the onset, we need to distinguish the true modal verbs from the words with modal usage (e.g. *have to*, *ought to*) (Leech, 1983). The true modal verbs include *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *shall* and *should*. Lyons (1977), from the perspective of speakers, divided the modality into two types: epistemic and deontic modality. By considering the special features of “*can*” and “*will*”, Palmer (1990) proposed the third type of modality: dynamic modality. Epistemic modality refers to the general possibility or necessity. Take the following sentence as an example.

e.g. i) *It may rain tomorrow.*

“*May*” indicates possibility, and the sentence can be replaced by “it is possible that it will rain tomorrow.” However, epistemic modals do not necessarily require inference, reasoning, or evidence. One effect of using an epistemic modal (as opposed to not using one) is a general weakening of the speaker’s commitment to the truth of the sentence containing the modal. However, it is

disputed whether the function of modals is to indicate this weakening of commitment, or whether the weakening is a by-product of some other aspect of the modal's meaning.

In contrast, deontic modality is concerned with possibility and necessity in terms of freedom to act (including ability, permission, and duty). English examples include She can go (ability), You may go (permission), You should go(request), and You must go (command). In English as in many other languages, some of the same words are used for deontic modality as for epistemic modality, and the meaning is distinguished from context: He must be there by now(epistemic) versus He must be there tomorrow at noon (deontic).

Root modals can be used to express the possibility and necessity as well. The possibility, different from the general possibility, is based on certain conditions (e.g. ability or with permission). The most common root modals are deontic and dynamic modals. Deontic modals refers to the possibility with permission or obligation. For example, in the following two sentences:

e.g. ii) *You may have the last slice of pizza.* (*may* refers to the possibility with permission);

iii) *He must report on time to the courthouse.* (*must* refers to the possibility with obligation).

The modals for desire can be used to express certain non-unique meaning. For example: *will* can be used to emphasis the desire in the following sentence:

e.g. iv) *Jack will use coloured paper for his handouts.*

Deontic modal verbs are further divided into direct and indirect modal verbs. Direct modal verbs are used to describe the features of subjects. For example,

e.g. v) *Staff may park their cars in the area overnight.*

“*may*” is used here to entitle the feature to the subject “*staff*” who have the right to park overnight. However, when a modal verb is used as indirect demotic, it refers to permission or obligation, rather than entitling the feature to the subject. Take an example:

e.g. vi) *Cars may be parked in the area overnight.*

The subject “*cars*” does not get the right of parking overnight, whereas the car owner gets the right.

The same modal verbs can be used with different modality types in different conditions. From the pragmatic perspective, 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 as follows.

High value modals: *must, ought to, need, and have to;*

Intermediate value modals: *will, would, shall, should;*

Low value modals: *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 (Leech, 1983), 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. Studies on Chinese EFL learning of modal verbs (Zhou, 2006; Jiang, 2006) found that in essay writing, L2 learners tended to use modal verbs of high value which showed a violation of politeness principles. Wang (2005) compared Chinese Learners' Corpora (CLEC) and Lancaster/Oslo/Bergan (LOB) found that Chinese EFL learners used more modal verbs than native speakers, whereas there were no significant differences in terms of their modal verbs preference.

The previous corpus-based studies provide some findings about the use of modal verbs by L2 learners. However, there are certain limitations about those studies. In Wang (2005), the two corpora were not balanced, in that one is the collection of essays written by Chinese university students, and LOB is the collection of published texts in Britain. It is evident that the two corpora are not comparable which cannot reflect the differences among the two groups. Given this limitation, the present study attempts to adopt two comparable corpora for detailed comparison.

## 2. THE PRESENT STUDY

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 Chinese University Students Writing Corpus (105,178 words) and the British University Students Writing Part of LOCNESS (110,829 words) (Granger, 1995). The following research questions are raised in the study: i) Do EFL learners prefer to use modal verbs of high value? ii) Do English learners use more modal verbs than the native speakers? iii) 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, we used the concordance in Concapp V4 to find the modal verbs of high, intermediate and low values in the two corpora. The results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Frequency Comparison among High, Intermediate, and Low Modal Verbs**

Modal verbs	Frequency in learners' corpus (per million words)	Frequency in native's corpus (per million words)
(High) must	1,050	760
(High) ought to	95	73

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Continued

Modal verbs	Frequency in learners' corpus (per million words)	Frequency in native's corpus (per million words)
(High) need	1,877	836
(High) have to	1,308	470
Total	4,330	2,139
(Intermediate) will	3,967	3,669
(Intermediate) would	1,883	3,783
(Intermediate) shall	95	41
(Intermediate) should	3,833	1,076
Total	9,778	8,569
(Low) may	3,727	930
(Low) might	251	220
(Low) can	11,440	6,459
(Low) could	651	1,557
Total	16,069	9,166

It was found that the modal verbs of high value used by learners were twice of those used by native speakers. Specifically, 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 and 3, we used concordance in Concapp V4 to search for all the modal verbs in the corpora, and then list the modal verbs by means of its standard frequency (Table 2). This is the way to reveal that the preference of modal verbs use by EFL learners and native speakers.

**Table 2**  
**Frequency Sequence Comparison Between Two Corpora**

Modal verbs	Frequency in learners' corpus (per million words)	Modal verbs	Frequency in native's corpus (per million words)
Can	11,440	Can	6,459
Will	3,967	Would	3,783
Should	3,833	Will	3,669
May	3,727	Could	1,557
Would	1,883	Should	1,076
Need	1,877	May	930
Have to	1,308	Need	836
Must	1,050	Must	760
Could	651	Have to	470
Might	251	Might	220
Ought to	95	Ought to	73
Shall	95	Shall	41
Total frequency	30,177	Total frequency	19,874

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. Thirdly, generally EFL learners used more modal verbs than their British counterparts did.

## DISCUSSION

The present study revealed that first, learners prefer to use more modals of high and intermediate values than native

speakers. We will explore the reasons for the differences between L2 learners and native speakers. First, learners tended to use high value modals which indicated an absence of reader/audience awareness. It is possible that learners were not well informed of the politeness degree of modal verbs. For modal verbs, the higher values the modals have, the more impoliteness they indicate. In other words, learners were not well informed of the pragmatic meaning of modal verbs. Words have two types of meanings: semantic and pragmatic meaning (Leech, 1983). While semantics is concerned only with the exact, literal meaning of the words and their interrelations, pragmatic use focuses on the inferred meaning that the speakers and listeners perceive. For modal verbs which have simple forms but complicated functions, it is crucial for learners to distinguish the pragmatic meaning from the semantic meaning. Knowing the context and the pragmatic use of modals verbs can be helpful to avoid the inappropriate use 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:

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 modal verbs. As such, L2 learners prefer to use modal verbs even when it is not necessary.

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 subtle differences among modals, and they used one to fit all contexts.

In addition, this study found that 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.

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## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

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The present study found that learners overused or misused some modal verbs as compared to what native speaker do. In L2 teaching, the lack of the related information about modal verbs results in this poor performance by L2 learners. This study suggested that learners need to be informed of the following two types of information about modal verbs: i). the pragmatic connotations of modal verbs. In L2 teaching, both semantic and pragmatic features of modal verbs need to be instructed. For example, to provide a variety of contexts for different modal uses can help learners apply modal verbs appropriately, and the appropriate use of modal verbs by L2 learners lays the foundation for fluent and natural communication. To inform learners of the politeness principle in modal verbs use is crucial. Knowing the value differences among modal verbs, learners will be aware of underlying politeness of every modal verb. ii). differences among modal verbs with similar meaning or of the same modal verb. In L2 teaching, modal verbs may not be taught independent of context. In addition, modal verbs with similar meaning may be classified into a same group and the comparison among modal verbs may lead learners to pay attention to the subtle differences of those words. This is of significance for the appropriate use of modal verbs by EFL learners.

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