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Modality: Less Can, more Can Do

by Gerard O'Hanlon (MA student, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick)

In this article, findings from personal research on modality in ELT coursebooks and its use in learner language will be discussed. It calls for a fresh look at modal meaning and highlights the need to emphasise lexical modality more. Also, it examines how findings from Corpus Linguistics can go a long way towards achieving these ends. The article finishes with six ways that online corpus resources can help teach modality.

There is no doubt modality plays an important role in coursebooks today and research from my dissertation shows pertinent findings in this area. First of all, modal verbs feature as the main grammar point in just under half of all units across four top-selling B1 titles (that's 27 out of a total of 61 units). Indeed, 12 of those 27 units actually feature two modal presentation segments. That's a lot of modality.

The usual functions feature: Can for ability, Will for prediction and Would for imaginary situations, among others. While teachers may be accustomed to seeing these units dotted across their coursebooks, they might still be surprised at the number of them.

A second finding of relevance relates to the CEFR (Common European Framework) 'Can-do' statements of the English Grammar Profile. According to the EGP (see Figure 1), the functions outlined above are attributable to A1/A2 learners in written contexts. Furthermore, a small spoken B1 learner corpus, gathered by this researcher, revealed something that many teachers will have observed in class and in their day-to-day life: people often choose to communicate such ideas through lexical devices (e.g. by using 'possibly' instead of the verb 'might' in language of probability).

The above findings provide much to ponder. Firstly, the English Profile (Figure 1) tells us that learners are using modal verbs at levels unconnected to those at which they are being taught in textbooks. Second, we see that even in 'pressure situations', such as speaking tests, learners at certain levels may eschew modal verbs, yet still try to retain a strong 'modal' meaning in their message (through adjectives or idiomatic phrases for example), even though this language is not being explicitly presented as such in course materials. Indeed, there were few instances of lexical modality being presented in coursebooks, even though a) this is commonly found in L1 corpora, as we shall see and b) the English Profile would show many such examples are already present in (written) samples at B1 level.

> **What is the EGP?**
>
> The Common European Framework of Reference (**CEFR**) *describes* what language learners **can do** at different levels (A1-C2) when carrying out different functions. However, it doesn't *itemise* which aspects of the target language (e.g. grammar or vocabulary) are needed for those functions.
>
> The **English Profile** addresses this by providing a precise description of the language items that learners use at each level. This information was gathered through, amongst other things, a vast learner corpus – 200,000 exam scripts, 140 first languages, 55 million words with data spanning 17 years.
>
> Check out the **English Profile** online. It gives a fascinating insight to what learners are really doing with their language and at what level.
>
> http://www.englishprofile.org/

Well defined: What the English Grammar Profile is all about

Pic by Author

Thornbury (2014) makes an astute point in claiming that coursebooks are the basis for most teachers' planning, the source of their activities as well as being their syllabus and methodology. It is therefore important for busy teachers to get better information on lexical modality as well as a better insight into modal meaning. It does occupy a large proportion of those B1 books after all.

What is modality anyway?

Imagine somebody asks you to a party. You can reply with a factual: 'yep' or 'nope'. Or you could use modality and hedge your message with something like: If I can, I will. I might…

Carter and McCarthy (2006) describe modality as 'referring to a speaker's point of view, to his/her attitude'. Other writers describe it in similar terms: Wilkins (1976) writes about speaker 'perceptions', Lewis (1993) talks about its 'subjectivity' while Collins (2009) refers to a 'non-factuality'.

If you focus on the meaning of any modal utterance, combinations of the above features are always present. It can be communicated through body language (a shrug), rising intonation, a modal verb or through lexical means – words and phrases involving verbs, adjectives, nouns and adverbs.

Modality is important for politeness and formality e.g. 'would you answer the door?' Modals are also used to communicate conditional and hypothetical meaning, two ideas which tap further into the 'modal definition' outlined above. Finally, modals often feature in idiomatic functional phrases - such as 'we could meet for a coffee' as a suggestion. Functions (such as suggestions) are the communicative bedrock of coursebooks.

All the above are vital notions whose meaning, contexts, genres, registers and frequencies need to be emphasized much more in materials - in a manner appropriate for teachers and learners of course. When a learner needs help with an utterance, a good question is 'what do you want to say?' By this, I don't refer to the structure, I refer to the idea behind it. Does the learner want to hedge their idea? Does he/she want to communicate hypothetical or formal notions? Does the

learner want to make a suggestion? These notions can often be expressed in the simplest of ways - by using lexical modality.

A modality without verbs?

In the 1980s, Holmes carried out a series of corpus-based studies analysing how native speakers use modality in everyday language. Her findings make for very important reading. In short, she demonstrated that modality doesn't always have to equal modal verbs.

As the table in Figure 2 shows, modal verbs are used 42.4% of the time to express 'epistemic' modality (i.e. notions of probability and certainty) in speech and 36.8% in writing. As can be seen, normal 'lexical' verbs and adverbs rank highly also. Noteworthy is the relative importance of modal nouns and adjectives in written work, something which should be of interest to those teaching exam classes, EAP or Business English.

Relative frequency (expressed as a percentage) of major grammatical classes used to express epistemic modality			
Grammatical class	Speech	Writing	Total Corpus
Modal verbs	42.4	36.8	40.2
Lexical verbs	31.5	35.9	33.3
Adverbial constructions	21.5	12.8	18.1
Nouns	2.3	7.7	4.5
Adjectives	2.3	6.6	4

Most frequent modal: Comparing the frequency of different ways of expressing modality (Holmes, 1982).

Pic by Author

Here are some examples of lexical modality: verbs such as appear or seem, adjectives such as apparent or evident and adverbs such as possibly or probably. Straightforward stuff perhaps but it would be of immense benefit for teachers and students alike to have more of this lexis supplied in materials alongside sections on modal verbs and their functions, with more information about their frequencies, modes (spoken/written) and contexts of use. Furthermore, lexical modal devices tend to cluster reiteratively, often in positive or negative contexts: he probably won't be able to do it being a case in point. An opinion with lots of modality and uncertainty.

To finish here, items like seem or probably may not be appropriate for academic discourse, but they would be most useful in informal spoken language and may just be that bit easier for learners to process than those dastardly modal verbs.

What can corpus linguistics bring to language teaching - and modality?

Corpus linguistics has influenced ELT in many ways. Research from this area tells us how people are using language in many contexts, from spoken learner interaction to written academic discourse. All the major dictionaries and grammars, and many vocabulary books, are now informed by findings from this area. Publishers like Cambridge or Macmillan even have their own learner corpora.

Major ELT publishers are increasingly referencing native and learner corpora as input material against which to measure and write new pedagogical materials. Yet, as studies by Meunier & Gouverneur (2009), Burton (2012), Römer (2004) and Shortall (2007) all show, much more can be done in terms of taking on board corpus research when writing general language coursebooks.

Using corpus resources in a modal lesson – Six ideas

This final section looks at some free online corpus-based resources. Some are accessible on a phone, most on a tablet, but some may need a projector or IWB for full class access. You could even take screenshots and print them out before class.

Imagine you're working on a B2-level coursebook lesson based around the notion of must for speculation and conclusion.

As a starting point, you may want to check if this grammar point matches the level of your group. If you go to the English Grammar Profile online, you can search out 'modality' and 'must' and you will see that this function is indeed a can-do statement at B2 (the EGP is an excellent resource for those working with assessing, testing and planning).

If the text you are using in class is available electronically, you can copy and paste it into the English Profile Text Inspector. This will classify each word by level, part of speech and function, so you can get a thorough idea of how difficult any text might be on many levels, as well as which words might be above or below your target level. Students can also use this autonomously with their own written work for analysis and correction.

In the lesson on modality itself, I would get the students to work together and search for words and phrases that communicate the idea of 'speculation'. No modal verbs allowed. A simple thesaurus will suffice but SKELL (Sketch Engine for language learning) will do a much better job. Based on vast online corpora, SKELL also allows students to see common collocations, words in context and word families, amongst many other features.

Focusing on verbs of speculation, student search SKELL. The teacher – acting as a moderator - elicits ideas and boards them. Examples might include 'I imagine' and 'I gather'. Students could explore these examples further by clicking on 'imagine' and 'gather' within SKELL and looking at them in context and discussing their register, patterns and common collocations, for example.

"Remember, I now have a board full of words and phrases with structures, collocates and patterns elicited earlier which communicate this modal notion more tangibly to learners."

An excellent resource for word patterns is Reverso (which permits access to COBUILD data). While verb and sentence patterns can be observed in dictionary entries, it is more explicit here and acts as a great aid to autonomous study.

The class now returns to the coursebook. They start an activity where students have to speculate about pictures:

What is this woman's job? (Intended answer: She must be a politician)

Remember, I now have a board full of words and phrases with structures, collocates and patterns elicited earlier which communicate this modal notion more tangibly to learners. The learners have searched, read, processed and suggested these words themselves, guided by the teacher - all tasks of immense benefit.

An example phrase here might be: I imagine she's a politician. Note that such phrases often have the advantage of translating back into various languages more precisely than modal verbs. You should encourage learners to expand their ideas across turns, to move things beyond the level of the sentence. How could students react/disagree/follow up on the idea? What kind of written or spoken discourse might their selected phrases be appropriate to?

Finally, if your class like to engage in discussion and reflection, you could discuss the idea of language choice with them. They are free to communicate their message by choosing the phrases they see fit to use, in this case modal verbs or lexical language – or even a shrug. They just need a little guidance from you.

The above ideas are just an introduction to the potential of these resources – and the potential of modality. I have no doubt every teacher reading this can offer a more creative and unique take on the ideas above.

Explore these resources as part of your planning, or as part of a professional development group. Search out YouTube tutorials on the above resources and don't be afraid to experiment in class. Make back-ups for recycling. Most importantly, share your ideas in the staffroom or on social media – use your creativity to work beyond the classroom. It will help you gain the recognition your ongoing work deserves.

Further Reading

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