Modality in course books: Room for change?

GERARD O'HANLON

What teachers need to know…

- Some modal verbs are (a lot) more frequent than others

- Modality has three broad, clear meanings

- Modal verbs: *Form – Function* - proceed with caution…

- Modality doesn't necessarily mean the 'core verbs'

- Lexical modality is used a lot (authentic/learner language)

What is a corpus anyway?

- A large collection of written text or transcribed speech

- Stored electronically (online)

- Analysed/processed using software (online)

- Basis for linguistic analysis and description

What is the English Profile?

- Cambridge Learner Corpus
- 55.5 Million words (written)
- 266,600 exam scripts
- 143 different first language backgrounds
- Covers 1993-2012

(O'Keeffe and Mark 2017)

Over to you…

- How do you feel about teaching the modals?

- How do your learners feel about them?

Why modality?

Can be difficult to grasp

Frustrated at grammar explanations and materials

- Confusing
- Vague
- Ambiguous

- Overly form-focused

A recent class…

- ► B2 (Higher Intermediate)

- ► Modals

- ► Functions – advice, ability, prohibition & obligation

- ► In the same section

Sample Exercise

Select the correct option:

- You _mustn't/can't_ drive when you're tired. It's dangerous.

- Answer?

- Headache for the teacher
- Panic stations for students

Problem area

► "The modals…constitute one of the grammatical problem areas in teaching English as a foreign language" (Römer 2004)

► For learners?

► For teachers?

► For materials writers?

► Syllabus designers?

Definitions

Modality vs the modal verbs

Modality

- Modality is concerned with the opinion and attitude of the speaker

(Palmer 1990)

- Modality is used to say whether something is real or true, or whether it is the subject of speculation rather than definite knowledge

(Carter and McCarthy 2006)

Modality concerns….

- Opinion
- Attitude
- Point of view
- Real or true
- Speculation

= Speaker's choice

- (Palmer 1990; Carter and McCarthy 2006)

The modal verbs

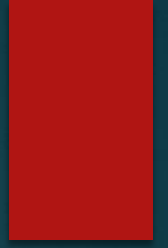- How course books deal with the _core_ _modal verbs_ in functional contexts

Example

Rules in the present

In Britain…

- You *can't* buy cigarettes until you are 16
- You *mustn't* use a mobile phone while driving

(From *New Headway Intermediate, 2009*)

What are the 'core' modals anyway?

- Can
- Could
- May
- Might
- Must
- Need

- Ought to
- Shall
- Should
- Will
- Would
- (used to)

How frequent are the core modals?

Can you name:

- The three most frequent modals?

- The three least frequent modals?

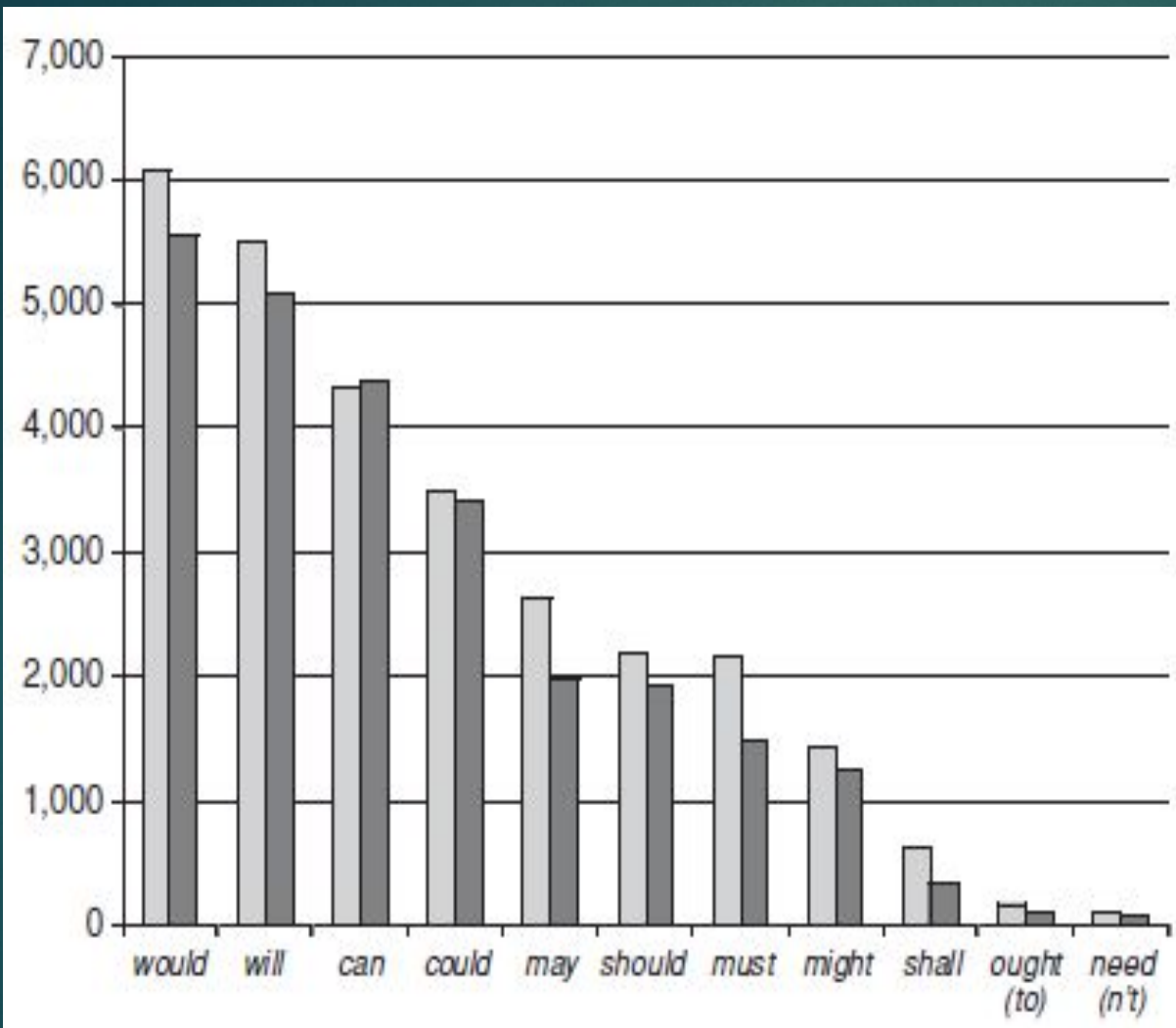# Three *most* frequent

- Would

- Will

- Can

(Leech et al 2009)

Three *least* frequent

- Shall

- Ought to

- Need

(Leech et al 2009)

Written and spoken corpus data from British and US English

Light grey bars: 1961

Dark grey bars: 1991

(Leech et al 2009)

Some points to consider…

Decline

- In the use of the core modal verbs

Ascendency

- Semi-modals (have to, be going to)

- *I'd rather, you'd better, I gotta, I'm gonna, I wanna…*

- (Note: Core modals still dominate frequencies)

(Leech et al 2009)

Points to consider…

- Language is dynamic (grammar syllabus not set in stone)

- Modal chart demonstrates the importance of 'checking in' with research

- Research can help continually update, balance and improve content

- Inform your teaching

The 3 modal meanings

One

Meanings to do with:

certainty, probability and possibility

(Books = speculation, deduction…)

- I *might* see you later (possibility)

- That *must* have been terrible! (deduction)

Two

These express degrees of *obligation*

Whether something is *necessary, desirable, permitted, forbidden*

(Books = Rules/permission)

- You *can* go now (giving permission)

- You *can't* park here (forbidden)

Three

- The third meaning refers to notions of *ability (possibility)* and *willingness*

(Books = Ability) – Willingness (?)

- She *can* speak three languages (ability)

- The car *won't* start (willingness)

Remember…

Anything that communicates a notion of…

1) Certainty/possibility/probability….

2) Necessity/obligation/permission…

3) Ability/willingness…

…counts as (lexical) modality

USE SYNONYMY!

Remember…my recent class?

- B2 (Higher Intermediate)

- Modals

- Bunched functions: <u>advice, ability, prohibition & obligation</u>

Alternatives to modal verbs

Advice:

- If you visit my country, try the local cuisine

Ability:

- I speak 3 languages

Prohibition:

- No smoking

Obligation:

- Clean your room!

Careful…

Form and function:

This relationship is not exclusive

Form to function

Form = Must

Functions (meaning):

- Obligation (She said you must do it at once!)

- Suggestion/recommendation (You really must check out that new movie)

- Deduction (He must be the new teacher)

Function to form

Function = _Suggestion_

- You gotta see the new Ryan Gosling movie!

- Why don't you go see his new movie?

- You must see his new movie!
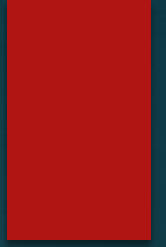
Teaching modality - Tips (1)

► Untangle the functions in the course materials

► Supply a context/theme

► Establish a function (e.g. advice)

► (Elicit/provide) alternative language (synonymy) – helps learners process it

► Introduce modal – form/phonological features

► Adapt exercises (less: right/wrong – more: what works here?)

Functions of *Would*

A Case study

Would (B1 course books)

► Function: Past habits

► 'My Dad *would* always drive me to school'

Would (2 types)

1) Hypothetical 70.5% (*conditionals, indirect language…*)

2) Temporal 29.5%

(*past habits* = roughly 20%)

Past habits *would* is:

- Lower in speech
- Higher in writing (narrative/fiction/media)

- EGP = B2 (written)
- Common in B1 Books

(Collins 2009; Carter and McCarthy 2006; O'Keeffe and Mark 2017)

Some food for thought...

- What weight/balance do I give *past habits would* in class?

- Writing - Emphasise qualities:

Tendency to occur more in written, narrative genres

Less common in speech

- *Used to* and *would* together?

Different contextual and grammatical qualities

Different frequencies

Would - Spoken Learner Corpus

Interviews: 4
8 Learners
38 Minutes 18 seconds total
586 word types
3928 word tokens

Would – hypothetical/conditional

Sample interview questions:

- What advice *would* you give to somebody travelling to Dublin?

- If you hadn't come to Dublin, where *would* you have gone?

Difficulties with conditionals

- 2nd and 3rd Conditional, EGP – B1 (Written)

- This is not the case with spoken learner language

Confusing future real and future unreal

- Future real (1st)
- Future unreal (2nd)

- *If I are a judge I punish this person…*

- *If I am the owner of the company…*

Confusing future unreal and past unreal

Future unreal (2nd)

Past Unreal (3rd)

- *If I don't come to Dublin maybe I should go…to England*

- *If I hadn't come to Dublin I think I did go to Edinburgh*

- *If…I don't come to Dublin I…go to…*

Implications

- Difficulties in real time spoken production due to:

Complex structural variables (3rd conditional – form & function)

- Spoken/written – obviously require different approaches

(Spoken grammar)

- Allow for/respect spoken processing time
- Chunking language (functions – advice: if I were you…)
- Alternative structures? (why don't you?)

Sample of learner language (B1)

- Yes er aliens visit er us in this time again I think I believe it and er maybe we can contact er in the future time with alien

Features of modality in spoken learner language

- Yes er aliens (will?) visit er us in this time again <u>I think</u> <u>I believe </u>it and er <u>maybe</u> we <u>can</u> contact er in the future time with alien

- Possible avoidance of *will*

(compensates with phrase 'in the future time')

- Lexical modality

I think, I believe, maybe

- Modal grouping

<u>Perhaps</u> you <u>might</u> also like…

I'll probably go

Lexical modality – Spoken Learner corpus B1

Lexical modal	Quantity
Think	68
Maybe	20
Opinion	9
Possible	9
Important	6
Know	5
Believe	3
Impossible	1

Modals and semi-modals
Spoken learner corpus B1

Modal Verb	Result
Will	33
Can	28
Have to	15
Want	8
Would	6
Need	4
Could	3
Must	3
Should	2
Mustn't	1
Can't	1

Tips (2)

► Better 'weighting' of modal verbs in materials/lessons (27 of 61)

► Better contexts for their use (e.g. *would* past habits: written work?)

► Lexical modality – Teach alongside the modals (synonymy)

► Modal grouping – notice, highlight, produce

► Spoken mode vs written mode

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Thank you!

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Final thoughts…

- Speakers do not confine themselves to modal verbs

- Many course books devote an unjustifiably large amount of attention to *modal verbs*

- Textbooks should present learners with alternative lexical devices

- These should be selected from frequently occurring contexts

Doubt and uncertainty in ESL textbooks

- Speakers do not confine themselves to modal verbs

- Many course books devote an unjustifiably large amount of attention to modal verbs

- Textbooks should present learners with alternative lexical devices

- These should be selected from frequently occurring contexts

(Holmes 1988)

'Corpus-informed'

- Language corpora can afford considerable benefits for language teaching

- Uses *real data* in grammar reference books

- *Authentic language* is always the right language for the purposes of learning the language

(Carter & McCarthy 2006)

Waters (2009) *Advances in materials design*

Two perspectives:

1) design should reflect advances in academic research

concerns language, language learning and education

2) the needs of end users of teaching materials

prompted by authors' and publishers' readings of audience feedback

- Concludes the relationship should be 'dialectical'

In summary: FCP

- Frequent, common and preferred patterns

(Carter & McCarthy 2006)

However…

- the pedagogic process should be informed by the corpus, not driven or controlled by it

(Carter & McCarthy 2006)

Alternative forms of modality (i.e. *not* the core modals)

1) Semi-modals: *had better, would rather, be to, have got to*

2) Lexico-modals: *expressions with BE: be going to, be about to…*
+ *have to, need to, want to*

3) Catenative verbs: *appear to, seemed to…*

Alternative forms of modality (i.e. *not* the core modals)

4) Adverbs: *probably, presumably…*

5) Nouns: *assumption, doubt, fear, hope…*

6) Adjectives: *certain, apparent, likely…*

(Quirk et al 1985; Holmes 1988; Collins 2009)