The Use of English Epistemic Modality Among ESL Learners

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Introduction

The acquisition of expressions of epistemic modality or the probability system seems to be a problem to second language learners of English. While expressing basic propositions is not too difficult, second language learners of English appear to have trouble in suggesting or giving personal opinions as to the expected probability of an event. This is not to be totally unexpected since even very advanced learners of English send mixed signals by using inappropriate modals (Altman, 1982).

The inability to use epistemic modality appropriately is especially felt to be a handicap among college students in countries such as Malaysia which still relies heavily on the use of English in educational and other domains. Sargunan and Nambiar (1994) point out the inability of law undergraduates in the University of Malaya to use modals effectively. Govindasamy (1989) reports that Malay students from the faculties of Law and Humanities at the International

presentation of propositional content in texts produced by ESL learners. While an examination of first language interference would be outside the scope of this paper, it will examine how teaching approaches may either accentuate or alleviate ESL learners' problem of denoting appropriate degree of certainty of the occurrence of an event.

There is an important feature of the English probability system that warrants an elaborate discussion before a description of the study proper can be instituted. That feature is the hierarchical order or the scale of probability of the system.

The Scale of Probability

A speaker may be uncertain about the truth of the prepositional content in a text he has constructed and this uncertainty may be expressed in a number of ways: use of adverbs such as *often*, *seldom*, etc; use of factive verbs as opposed to nonfactive verbs, e.g. *know* versus *think*; and modal auxiliaries. Of the three, the earliest to emerge is the use of modal auxiliaries (Wilcox, 1991; O'Neill & Atance, 2000). Some use of modals is easily observable during the period of emerging literacy among second language learners who depend on this grammatical feature to distinguish the real world from the merely possible. Later, acquisition helps these language users to express the degree of certainty of an event taking place though the actual realization of the event is not known to them. It also dawns on them that the semantic value of one epistemic modal differs from the other. If their values differ, does this instinctively allow them to assume that the modals do fall into a hierarchical order, the top member indicating high probability while those down the scale indicating lower probabilities? If they do acquire the system in its entirety, this grammatical system must be considered explicit and in that case, no further teaching is really required.

This study is built around the proposition that there is a scale of probabilities in the use of modals among native English speakers and that non-native speakers have to acquire the system in its entirety if they want to use it correctly. In other words, the modals' value can be placed in a cline with the highest member indicating high probability and the lowest indicating low certainty of an event taking place. The relational value of each of the members of this system must be in the consciousness of learners if they intend to use the members to indicate the appropriate probability of an event.

There will always be some doubt in the minds of practitioners as to whether there is such a difference in semantic value between members in the system. Language users need to go no further than an examination of the top two members in the scale - SHOULD and MUST Both these auxiliaries express a high degree of certainty and are at times used interchangeably, e.g.

i.   It is six, he must be home now.
ii.   It is six, he should be home now.

The semantic values of MUST and SHOULD in the above examples seem equivalent, hence the casual inference that they are always interchangeable. However, at most other times SHOULD cannot be replaced by MUST and vice-versa. This implies that they are not equivalents. The pair of sentences that follow illustrates this:

•   You know Prof. Fen, you must live in Oxford.
•   You know Prof. Fen, you should live in Oxford (not acceptable usage). (Riviere, 1981).

With MUST, inference is possible from cause to consequence or from consequence to cause whereas with SHOULD, inference can work only from cause to consequence, as in:

You live in Oxford, you should know Prof. Fen then.
(You live in Oxford, you must know Prof. Fen then.)

The communicative use of SHOULD is affected by the inferred position - when the inferred position is the cause, SHOULD is not used. MUST, on the other hand is not affected by the inferred position.

The above discussion while establishing the non-equivalence of SHOULD and MUST does not in any way contribute to its relational meaning expressed in a hierarchical order of certainty. The explanations posited by Palmer (1965) and Huffman (1989) for the following statements enlighten this issue:

i.   John is a brilliant student, he should pass his exam easily.
ii.   John is a brilliant student, he must pass his exam easily (not acceptable usage).

While the use of SHOULD is acceptable, MUST is considered not appropriate. Palmer (1965) posits prescriptively that MUST cannot express the probability of an event because the time of the event is posterior to the time of speaking. In other words MUST is impossible when the time is in future tense. Not only is the explanation very prescriptive in nature but also disregards current linguistic contention that English has no future tense (Dragga, 1986). Huffman (1989) offers a more plausible explanation. He posits that speakers of a language "reach into the past, take a past tense form and bring it forward in time, with a corresponding decrease in probability" (p. 5). In doing so, the "top member of the scale is lost" (p. 6) because in its downward movement, the highest member (which represents a sort of 'inescapable' degree of certainty) becomes incompatible with the movement. Hence, MUST which is the top member when the time is anterior or simultaneous with the time of speaking, meets its demise when the time is posterior to the time of speaking.

The fact that MUST is not used when time referred to is posterior to the time of speaking in a circuitous fashion helps to establish that it is the top member of the epistemic modals. This is followed by other members such as SHALL/SHOULD, MAY/MIGHT and CAN/COULD in that order. The order I have suggested leads to another controversy in the linguistic field - are there other models of probability? Among the various other models, two models representing traditional/generative grammar and cognitive grammar respectively are presented below:

Probability	Cognitive Grammar (Hubbard, 1984)	Traditional/Generative (Celce-Mercia/ Larsen Freeman, 1983)
High	must	will
	should	must
	will	should
	can/may	may
Low	could/might	could/might

With the exception of WILL, there is a little difference in both these models. In fact some linguists do not include WILL and WOULD in their

scale of probabilities because they need not express modal function; they mark futurity and hypothetical event as well. Placing them alongside the rest of the modals in a scale of probabilities could result in ambiguities (Palmer, 1977).

A more comprehensive model than either the traditional/generative or the cognitive framework is Huffman's (1989) scale of probability, based on William Diver's initial work. A part of the model showing the modal-time interlock is reproduced below:

Probability	Past (Column 2)	Non-Past (Column 3)	
High 100% 98%	did	do	did
75%	must should	must shall	should
50%	might	may	might
Low 25%	could	can	could

(Huffman, 1989·7)

Huffman's model seems to provide a visual display of modals' behaviour when they are reutilised in a differing temporal framework. Past tense modals from column 2 (should, might and could) are reutilised in the non-past situation (column 3) with a corresponding lowered degree of reality of probability for an event. For example, the author of the excerpt below suggests an even lower degree of probability of economic effects with his use of the past form "could" instead of "can":

Although high petroleum prices so far have not had a large impact in Asia
and in fact have brought benefits to its oil-exporting nations – sustained
high prices could trim growth in some countries.

Asiaweek, December 15, 2000: 20

The Huffman scale is interlocked with time and is thus able to offer explana-
tions that are not possible with the earlier described models. Thus, Huffman's
model has been used as a standard to measure the adequate/inadequate knowl-
edge of ESL writers' probability system in this study.

The Design Of The Study

This is a quasi-product study as described by Bridwell (1980). The study en-
tailed the following procedures:

i.   subjects were asked to compose on a given topic;
ii.   the essays were analyzed for the probability system used by the subjects.

When the subjects were given the writing task, it was ensured that they
were not subjected to any time pressure. On the average, the subjects took
about 2 hours to complete the assignment.

Two raters examined the essays for the use of the probability system.
The learners' use of the linguistic signals (must, shall/should, may/might, can/
could, will/would) was examined to see if they facilitated the communication
of the intended message. If their use of the signals facilitated the communica-
tion of the message they were categorized as indicating 'relevant message',
and if they did not, then they were placed in the 'confused message' column.
A chi-square test was done to ascertain significant differences between the
intermediate proficiency group (Group 1) and the advanced group (Group 2)
for each modal (signal). A test was also done to ascertain inter-group differ-
ences on the aggregate score (of all signals).

The Subjects

The sample consisted of 29 college students from the International Islamic
University of Malaysia (IIUM). They were all first year students whose mother
tongue was Malay. They have had some measure of exposure to the English
language in the schools where English is taught as a compulsory subject and in

the one year pre-matriculation class (which is in fact an immersion course in English). English is taught via the communicative approach in the school system and via a structural syllabus in the pre-matriculation immersion program.

All first year students are placed in either the intermediate or the advanced English language courses based on their scores on a placement test. Of the sample, 9 subjects (Group 2), having higher proficiency scores were enrolled in the advanced English language course at the English Department, IIUM. The remaining 20 students (Group 1) with lower proficiency scores were pursuing the intermediate English language course.

The Findings

The results (Table 1) indicate that the use of the probability system is at best sporadic. The 29 subjects in the study seem to send as many irrelevant messages as relevant messages indicating that they do not have a real understanding of the system.

Table 1: Relevant/ irrelevant messages

Relevant Message	Irrelevant Message
117	118

It is to be noted that while a few modals are used time and again, other epistemic modals are rarely used. This indicates that not only do learners have a limited understanding of the use of some signals but also that they do not have a grasp of the relational value of the members in the system as shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Subjects' use of modals in written communication

Modals	Proportion of use (%)
Will	55.0
Can	21.0
Must	17.5
Would	7.5
Could	7.0
Might	3.5
Should	3.0
May	1.5
Shall	0.5
	100

Tukey Grouping
Alpha = 0.05 df = 8 MSE = 116.9; Critical
Value of Studentized Range = 5.767; Minimum
Significant Difference = 44.091

The above results indicate that ESL learners have not acquired the entire system satisfactorily from the exposure they had received thus far. The tendency to overuse just one or two members of the system such as 'will' and 'can' testify to this deficiency in their acquisition. The following extract from a composition written by a subject from the high proficiency group reveals such an overuse of 'will'·

If the class is based on communicative methodology, i.e., student centered, the opportunity for correction *will* be more as the students are free and have more chance to talk much. Therefore, they make more errors and thus the opportunity for providing feedback *will* be more. In addition, the correction of fluency errors *will* be more than the errors of accuracy. Whereas in the case of traditional methodology, that is, teacher centered, the opportunity for correction *will* be less as the students are not so free to talk and controlled by the teacher, therefore, the opportunity for providing feedback *will* be less. Moreover, as the traditional methodology focuses on accuracy, the correction of accuracy errors *will* be more than fluency errors.

This poverty of use becomes more apparent when it is compared to the use of the system by native speakers. The researcher analysed the frequency of use of each of the epistemic modals in expository texts written by native speakers of English. Table 3 shows the data gathered from 10 articles (written by 10 different authors) that appeared in the *World Executive Digest* issues (January – June, 1999):

Table 3: Native speakers' use of modals in written communication

Signal	Proportion of use (%)
can/ could	38.2
must	18.7
shall/should	16.4
will/would	16.0
may/might	10.7
	100

Compared to the ESL learners, native speakers seem to be using all the members of the system in a more equitable manner. In other words, they use the lower probability indicators (can, could, may, might) as often (49.9%) as the higher probability indicators (will, would, must shall, should) (51.1%). On the other hand, ESL learners exploit the higher indicators more often (82.5%) than the lower indicators (17.5%). (see Table 2)

To the question of whether there are significant differences in the use of the system between higher and lower proficiency ESL learners, the results of the study indicate negatively. There seems to be no significant differences in the use of modals between subjects of both groups. The higher proficiency students seem to indicate a lack of understanding of the English probability system just as well as the lower proficiency students as can be seen in Table 4:

Table 4: Subjects' use of MUST, SHALL, SHOULD,MAY, MIGHT, CAN and COULD

Subjects' Use of	Proficiency level	Relevant message	Confused message	Chi-sq	Significance +
Must	Low	9	25	0.32	P<0.05
	High	0	1		
Shall	Low	1	1	#DIV/01	P<0.05
	High	0	0		
Should	Low	3	0	2.67	P<0.05
	High	0	3		
May	Low	1	1	1.0	P<0.05
	High	1	1		
Might	Low	0	1	1.22	P<0.05
	High	6	1		
Can	Low	23	4	0.081	P<0.05
	High	14	1		
Could	Low	1	4	0.11	P<0.05
	High	4	5		

+Inter-group difference is not significant for all the categories

The results of the analysis as seen from Table 4 indicate that there is no significant difference in the usage of modals between subjects in the low proficiency group and the high proficiency group. Though the latter subjects have purportedly displayed a higher level of proficiency in the placement test, their usage of modals seems to indicate a lack of understanding of the English probability system. It is also indicates that their subconscious acquisition (as claimed by Krashen, 1992) of the system has not taken place. Two reasons can be postulated to explain this phenomenon:

i.   there may not have been enough comprehensible input; or
ii.   input has not transformed into intake.

The latter seems to support Schmidt's (1990) contention that awareness is an important component in the learning experience. Carrell (1988) suggests

that information can only be processed if there is an existing schema to organize new information. If the instructors have not adequately prepared L2 learners for such a schema, then the learners may fall back on their native language (Geithin, 1990).

A careful study of the Malay language shows that it can function adequately by relying on just a few members of the probability system. The Malay word 'akan' appears to be the most used word to indicate probability Given the scenario, the native language schema of the learners may be inadequate to organize the English probability system. In fact the word 'akan' is roughly equivalent to the modal 'will' in the English language, hence 'will' is the most frequently used modal (see Table 2) among all the subjects.

Table 5 provides an illustration of this phenomenon.

Table 5 Subjects' use of WILL

	Relevant Message	Confused Message
Low proficiency group (n= 20)	33	37
High proficiency group (n=9)	11	29

ChiSq 3.31   p<0.05
Inter-group difference is not significant

On observing the frequency of use of 'will", one would be tempted to believe that 'would' too would be used as frequently. This is not the case as Table 6 shows:

Table 6:Subjects' use of WOULD

	Relevant Message	Confused Message
Low proficiency group (n= 20)	2	1
High proficiency group (n=9)	8	4

ChiSq 0.469   p<0.05
Inter-group difference is not significant

The low frequency of the use of 'would', a distal/past form of 'will', further adds to a conjecture that second language learners do not use the epistemic modals systematically. The analysis indicates that their usage of the modals is at best random.

On incidental finding from the study is that subjects from the low proficiency group display a greater tendency to avoid using modals. On an average, their use of modals is 7.35 per essay as compared to 9.1 for the high proficiency subjects. The analysis also shows that lower proficiency subjects have contributed less to the 'confused messages' column on account of omission. The higher proficiency subjects seemed to be greater risk-takers and have therefore signalled more 'confused messages' The researcher expected this difference in exploitation to show in multiple range analysis. However, data analyzed using Tukey multiple range test to find overall difference between the two groups merely confirm earlier findings. There is no significant difference between the two groups (p=0.08):

Table 7: Use of modality by both groups

	Mean Relevant Message	Mean Confused Message
Low proficiency group (n= 20)	10.20 + 3.87	10.89 + 4.98
High proficiency group (n=9)	2.67 + 0.96	2.11 + 0.63

(df = 1, 16; f = 3.59; p = 0.08) Tukey multiple

The above analyses allow two conjectures to be made which need to be more rigorously tested by other replicative studies. They are:

i.   ESL learners appear to be very confused over the usage of modals; they do not show any evidence of knowing the relative semantic values of the modals, and their use is largely guided by a 'feel' This is indicated by the absence of any communicative strategy when modals are used and it is true of both the higher and lower proficiency groups.

ii.   As a result of the above, less proficient ESL learners appear to refrain from making use of modals as often as possible when contexts demand their use. Pica (1983) found this true of learners who have little instruction in grammar. They use the production strategy of omission (Terrell, 1991). Learners appear to be more concerned about not making a mistake than being more precise.

Some possible explanations for this malaise include:

i.   Existing ESL grammar textbooks, which being largely modelled on structural or generative framework, have presented most lexical items as categorical and discrete items devoid of relational meanings. It is therefore not surprising that students have learnt each modal as discrete and categorical. When it comes to using the modals, an arbitrary means is employed because all the modals seem to be somewhat fulfilling similar functions. Without acquiring the relational meanings, users are disabled from utilizing them for indicating precision of meaning.

ii.   In countries like Malaysia where English is taught as a second language, the desired form of grammatical knowledge is such that it could operate subconsciously; the pedagogy merely facilitates the process by which learners abstract the grammatical system. However, merely presenting samples of language and assuming that learners would have abstracted the relevant grammatical features seems presumptuous because there is little evidence for such a claim as the present study reveals.

iii.   ESL classes are very often taught by non-native speakers of the language in many countries; the linguistic competence of a large percentage of these teachers is in general limited. As a result, learners' acquisition will be based on samples of language that are deviant in some respects (Prabhu, 1987). Another important corollary of this deficiency is that teachers

doggedly adhere to textbooks and syllabus that which, to begin with, may not be up to the mark, as described in (i) above.

iv.   Textbooks as well as dictionaries give a whole array of meanings for each modal without any recourse to establishing a core meaning. This polysemous approach may be at the heart of the problem, making second language learning arduous.

The explanation in (iv) leads to a controversy over which is the better approach. Some linguists (such as Ehrman, 1966; Bolinger, 1977) have investigated whether there is basic meaning to modals and have eventually given up the strong assumption of semantic invariance. On the other hand, other linguists such as Leech (1969) have in general operated with categories they have assumed to be discrete. So traditional categories such as 'permission', 'possibility', 'ability' and logical categories such as 'epistemic', 'deontic' and 'dynamic' came to be realized. There are still other linguists, like Palmer (1979) who believe that there is a "continua with extremes that are clearly distinct, but with considerable indeterminacy in the middle" (Palmer, 1979, p. 172). This principle is clearly delineated in Reid (1991):

> "innovative use of a word for a new kind of message does not necessarily call for its analytical partitioning into two separate signs with different meanings. For so long as there exists some connection between the original meaning and the novel message - no matter how tenuous - it is presumably strong enough to have inspired the initial innovation. . the need for partitioning comes about late, when the innovation settles into an expressive niche in the new semantic field, gradually becoming specialized in response to a new set of value relationship" (p. 146).

Assigning several meanings to a word which does not offer a specialized expressive unit for each of the meanings clearly confounds second language learners. For example, Huddleston (1971) gives six distinct meanings of MAY. The question is should learners be saddled with learning each of these meanings. Perkins (1982) suggests that the polysemy of modals is a function of the contexts in which they occur. He cites examples (from Palmer, 1974, p. 115) that illustrate this:

a.   He <u>can</u> lift a hundredweight. (ability)
b.   I <u>can</u> see the moon. (sensation)

c.   He can tell awful lies. (characteristic)

In the above examples CAN is regarded as having three different mean-
ings or uses. Perkins says that when AT TIMES is added to (a) and (b) they too
can support a 'characteristic' interpretation. It would appear that this sense
(characteristic) is due to the co-occurrence of CAN and AT TIMES. Thus,
Perkins contends that Palmer is in fact describing the meaning of sentences
rather that the meaning of CAN

The alternative could be an approach as suggested by Reid (1991): give
leeway to meaning of the lexical item so that systemic unity is retained. Perkins
(1982) seems to operate on this principle too when he suggests developing a
core-meaning for each of the modals. However, the core meanings he sug-
gests are very vague as the following illustrate:

CAN   · does not preclude the event occurring
MAY   . does not preclude the event occurring
SHALL   . disposed towards the event occurring
MUST   · entails the occurrence of the event

Second language learners would be ill disposed to acquiring this set of
meanings because of its ambiguity. The ambiguity is to some extent removed
when these modals are relationally defined (Reid, 1991) in a hierarchical order
and presented thus:

		CAN	Low Probability
Grammatical		MAY	
System		SHALL	
(Probability)		MUST	High Probability

The core meanings of CAN, MAY, SHALL and MUST can be superim-
posed onto Huffman's (1989) model, thus:

		Non-Past	
High	100%	Do	Did
Probability	99%	Must	-
	75%	Shall ⟶	should
	50%	May ⟶	might
	25%	Can ⟶	could
Low			
Probability	1%		

{adapted from the Huffman model (1989:7) using only the non-past}

Learners are not only able to perceive the modal meanings in a relational context, they are also able to see the distal forms (SHOULD, MIGHT, and COULD) and how these forms derive their semantic value from their right-ward and downward movement. At the minimum this model has placed the seven modals in a proper perspective for the learners.

Implication for instruction

Whatever approach an ESL teacher adopts, he has to give grammar instruction the needed priority. Grammar instruction should ideally adhere to these principles:

i.   Grammatical input must be rough-tuned to natural sequences of acquisition; otherwise it impedes rather than promotes language acquisition (Pienemann, 1988).

ii. Show how a system (e.g. the English probability system) works: help identify a system; provide explanation and provide exercise for analysis (Bialystok, 1990; Reid, 1991). By doing so, learners acquire the system – not only knowing meaning-form relationships but also using them appropriately to convey intended messages.

Thus far I have ignored the proficiency level of students – beginning, intermediate or advanced learners – who will be predisposed to learning this aspect of grammar. At this stage, we have to turn to what the language acqui-

sition experts have mustered this far. Most of them agree that modals should
be introduced later than other grammatical systems (Krashen, 1982, 1992;
Brown, et al 1983) even for native speakers. L1 learners go through the fol-
lowing process before they formally learn modality in schools:

HOME   LOWER PRIMARY   UPPER PRIMARY

Caretakers'   Some measure of   Formal instruction on
language (home)   comprehensible input   modalities
                        in school

In the case of L2 learners, the process is further delayed:

HOME   PRIMARY   LOWER SECONDARY   UPPER SECONDARY
                                              (10th   12th Grade)

None   Limited   Some measure of   Exposure via class-
            exposure   comprehensible input room activities

                                              (Govindasamy, 1984)

By looking at the pace of development and exposure to modals in L2
(Malaysian) classrooms, it would be premature to introduce the system before
upper secondary levels i.e. at the 10th year of schooling. The stage should be
set such that ESL learners are systematically sensitised to temporal features of
the English language first before focusing attention on modals. This is be-
cause the semantic values of modals are invariably tied to temporal features as
perceived from the Huffman model. The input via the communication sylla-
bus in the lower secondary years (Govindasamy, 1984) may have helped these
learners to have an interim system (Ellis, 1984) or unanalysable knowledge.
When learners reach Form Four (upper secondary school) they are introduced
to expository writing and the learning of the probability system comes in very
useful and provides ample opportunities for students to apply what they have
learnt. The need to use the system coincides with the teaching of the gram-
matical system in this instance. In the present organization of the English
language syllabus, studies of modalities are introduced in the primary school
when the maturational level of students is not predisposed to learning the sys-
tem in all its complexity and again, there is no instrumental need for them to
know the system in its entirety.

Conclusion

The study has shown that there are implicit grammatical features that continue to elude ESL learners. Hence, there is a role for teachers to intercede and teach them. As explained earlier, a mastery of the English temporal system and the less complex means of indicating probability ought to precede the introduction of the more complex probability system (Huffman's model) to ESL learners. This would allow for the 'readiness' that is essential for acquiring the system. Combining this readiness with a meaning-copious functional approach to teaching selected grammatical structures could benefit ESL learners greatly Over a period of time learners would be able to independently examine their own writing for clarity of message.

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