L2 Learner Corpus Analysis of Modal Expressions in Written Text

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I. Introduction

Since the early seventies, a number of studies have analyzed both the written and spoken grammatical features used by second language learners. Many questions remain, especially in regard to what ways learners select and use certain grammatical units in their communicative purposes, despite the detailed theoretical explanations. This has caused controversial issues related to the use of second language. One of the most common phenomena of these arguments is the linguistic application of epistemic modality.

Who's been killing the members of a prestigious law firm? It may be a dissatisfied client, or it might even be the head of the firm. It couldn't be that cute new law school graduate, or could it? You won't be able to guess. "You'd Better Not Look" will keep you in the dark until the very end. (Fuchs & Bonner, 2000, p.226)
This passage describes predictions of what is possible even probable. It is hard to imagine how a reader could grab the meaning of the passage without an understanding of such grammatical concepts as the linguistic realization of epistemic modality.

Epistemic modality is related to the assurance of logical necessity or possibility by the speaker. Watts (1984) mentioned that modal qualification depends on the speaker's knowledge and assessment of the world in which a person is situated when addressing his or her audience. Logically consistent grammatical competence requires that some parts of natural language should be specific and clear and other parts need not be. More specifically, marginal lines should be decided, but this often disputed. Therefore, adequate explanations for questionable linguistic phenomena should be given. Linguists should prepare beyond sentences and texts when investigating sentences used in context.

The interpretations of modality and its usage are considered complicated and sophisticated by most of second language learners since they have a tendency to rely on the definitions provided by dictionaries mostly from intensive reading activities (Mackay, 1980). Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) has been defined as a serial linguistic performance and language use of second language learners by Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993, p. 3). They identified five pragmatic related areas which second language learners might be engaged in: (i) pragmatic comprehension; (ii) production of linguistic action; (iii) development of pragmatic competence; (iv) pragmatic transfer; and (v) communicative effect. It is suggested that teachers share the information and work collaboratively in order to improve learners’ sense of the various types of modality used in both written and spoken text. According to Homes (1988), despite teachers’ careful awareness of modal verbs, only a limited range of modal lexical items has been represented in teaching materials. The necessity for addressing how actual language should be embodied in various contexts does exist in terms of learning and teaching modal verbs.