

Thai EFL Learners' Repertoire of English Modality in Academic and Electronic Bulletin Board Writing

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Abstract

Modality is central to language use, allowing expression of, for example, doubt, certainty and vagueness. It has been reported, however, that the use of modality is limited among L2 learners of English, one possible reason being that classroom activities do not encourage them to express themselves in this way. This study aimed to compare student use of modality in online bulletin boards and in academic essays. The findings reveal that students use more modal markers in online bulletin board writing than in academic writing.

Introduction

In everyday conversation, we do not normally express our opinions or meanings straightforwardly. For reasons such as tact and politeness, we convey our meanings indirectly, even intentionally unclearly. This aspect of language can be reflected in the use of modality. In *The Oxford English Grammar*, Greenbaum (1996) explains that modality is a semantic category that deals with two types of judgments: epistemic and deontic.

Epistemic modality signals the speaker's or writer's judgment referring to the factuality of what is said or the truth of a proposition. Hence, epistemic modal devices, which are realized by the use of modal verbs (e.g. *MAY*, as in '*that may be wrong*', or *WILL*, as in '*she will be there*'), and modal adverbs (e.g. *PROBABLY* as in '*that is probably right*') are ones which allow speakers to express the possibility, probability and certainty of meanings in their utterances. Deontic modal devices, on the other hand, have to do with some kind of human control over the situation or the proposition, mainly to convey the speaker's obligation or suggestion and are realized basically by the use of modal verbs (e.g. *SHOULD*, as in '*the university should provide more funds*', or *MUST*, as in '*I must go now*'). In systemic functional linguistics, modal devices can come in forms other than modal auxiliaries and modal adverbs (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). For example, some lexical realizations, such as *IN MY OPINION* and *IN MY VIEW*, or mental clauses, such as *I THINK*, *I GUESS*, and *I FEEL*, are also viewed as functioning to express the speakers' degree of commitment towards the truth of the utterances by generally saying that what follows in the propositional utterances is only true based on the speakers' perspectives. Aijmer (1996) argues that *I THINK* has been grammaticalized as a discourse marker or modal particle. It is used to signal the attitude or certainty of speakers or writers towards the content of the proposition.

Both epistemic and deontic modal devices allow speakers to express appropriately the meanings of possibility, prediction, obligation, suggestion, modesty, confidence and lack of confidence in their utterances. However, according to Hyland & Milton (1997: 183), non-native speakers use fewer modal devices compared to native speakers. They note "The ability to express doubt and certainty appropriately in English is a complex task for language learners, but one which is critical to successful academic writing". Other researchers (e.g. Karkkainen, 1992; Gibbons & Markwick-Smith, 1992) also found underuse of modality among non-native English learners.

Online bulletin board writing is interpersonal by nature as it shares some features that are typical of speech (Crystal, 2006); hence, the writing is informal and more carefree. In other words, it is similar to the genre of personal letters, which is condensed with first- and second-person pronouns, while academic writing is more informational and less personally involved (Biber, 1988). As modality is said to be found more in informal contexts than formal ones (Holmes, 1983), it is interesting to find out whether online bulletin board writing would allow language learners to exercise their repertoire of modality in English more than formal academic writing. This is the issue addressed in this study.

Purpose

The aim of this research is to find out whether students use more modal devices in electronic bulletin boards than in academic essays. If this is the case, the use of online bulletin boards as a communicative writing activity would appear to provide learners with an opportunity to exercise their repertoire of modality in English. The findings of this research are expected to raise awareness of this area of learners' command of modality.

Methodology

Subjects

The participants were Thai second-year undergraduate students majoring in English at Kasetsart University in Bangkok from two sections of a writing class (Writing II). Prior to this course, they had gone through basic courses such as English Foundation III and Writing I. Most of them had had little experience writing formal academic essays and, even though all of them had a basic background in composition writing from high school, they were, in effect, making the transition from secondary to tertiary education level and were still limited in academic discourse competence. Outside the classroom, they had access to the internet in many campus areas: at the faculty, there were two spots for using the internet; in addition, the university provided access via a home wired-internet connection and at the university IT center.

The two parallel sections utilized in this study were taught by different teachers but used the same course material, criteria for assessment and course syllabus. Both classes met twice a week for one and a half hours in a regular classroom. The sample subjects comprised a population of 39 students, with 35 females and 4 males.

Instrument

This was the subjects' written work. Each subject wrote three responses to bulletin board topics and three academic essays (see Procedures, below, for details).

Procedures

Since the subjects varied in their computer skills, they were initially given a training session on how to participate in online bulletin board discussion on the course website. Then, in their writing course, they were asked to write in response to three discussion topics on an online bulletin board; they were also asked to submit three academic writing samples on topics similar to the ones online. Both the bulletin board writing and the academic writing activities were done outside the classroom.

Topics on the online bulletin board were posted once every four weeks, at about the same time as when parallel topics in academic writing were assigned. In this way, the subjects could decide based on their own freewill which task they wanted to perform first. The

following topics were adjusted from the students' coursebook, *Introduction to Academic Writing* (Oshima & Hogue, 1997).

Topics assigned in academic writing

1. Write about the most frightening movie or TV program you have ever seen.
2. Write about the changes that a modern invention (e.g. mobile phone, automobile or other technological devices) has already caused or will cause in the future.
3. People's personalities are reflected in their hairstyles and clothing. Do you agree or disagree?

Topics posted for online bulletin board writing

1. Write about the most frightening experience you have ever had.
2. Write about the effect that the internet has already caused or will cause you in the future.
3. People's personalities are reflected in the way they live their lives. Do you agree or disagree?

With regard to the number of words in the two corpora, the subjects were told to write approximately 500 words for each academic essay, resulting in a total of about 1,500 words for each subject for the three topics. In the parallel online writing, the subjects were divided into eight groups of four or five members and, in each group, they were told to post five messages on each discussion topic during the four-week period, with approximately 100 words in each posting. This resulted in a total word length of about 1,500 words for each person on the three online topics.

Data analysis

After collecting the two types of writing, the bulletin board writing (BB corpus) and the academic writing (ACAD corpus), I examined the two corpora and tagged all the modal devices. The corpora were roughly equal in size with approximately 60,000 words in each. After the modal devices were annotated, a computer concordancing program (ConcGram Concordancer) was used to count the frequency of modal items.

Findings

Tables 1-4 present the learners' use of modal devices in the bulletin board and academic writing tasks, with the area of focus divided into four: *modal auxiliaries*, *adverbs*, *lexical verbs* and *parenthetical elements*. Modal auxiliaries are sometimes distinguished in form between central and semi modal verbs (e.g. Perkins, 1983). Central modal verbs include *SHALL*, *SHOULD*, *WILL*, *WOULD*, *CAN*, *COULD*, *MAY*, *MIGHT* and *MUST* while semi modals include *HAVE TO*, *NEED TO*, *OUGHT TO*, *HAD BETTER* and *BE SUPPOSED TO*. These semi modal verbs can sometimes be used semantically like central modal verbs.

Will / Would

Table 1, below, shows that *WILL* was used more than twice as much in the bulletin board writing tasks as in the academic writing tasks, being found 404 times in the bulletin board writing and only 192 times in the academic writing. This may be because the use of *WILL* in bulletin board writing also functions to imply volitional or intentional meaning of the speaker such as in '*I'll be back.*', '*I will come back soon.*' or '*I'll talk about ...*'. This finding corresponds with that of Biber et al. (2002), who found that *WILL* occurs more than twice as often in conversational settings as in academic settings. Meanwhile, *WOULD* was used more frequently in the subjects' academic writing (72 occurrences) than in their

bulletin board writing (64 occurrences), but the difference in terms of frequency between the two genres was not of much significance.

Table 1: Frequencies of modal auxiliaries

Modal auxiliaries	ACAD	BB
<i>Central modal verbs</i>		
will	192	404
would	72	64
can	537	510
could	128	59
may	64	76
might	33	33
shall	0	2
should	66	100
must	46	42
<i>Semi modal verbs</i>		
have to	118	169
need to	15	20
be supposed to	0	2
had better	0	2
ought to	0	1
Total	1,271	1,484

Can / Could

CAN was by far the most frequently used modal verb and there was no significant difference in its use between the two modes of writing. *COULD* was found around twice as much in the academic writing (128 occurrences) compared to the bulletin board writing (59 occurrences). Though the subjects may have realized that *COULD* is a more formal and tentative form of *CAN*, it was found that most cases of *COULD* were simply used as a past form of *CAN* in conveying past achievement rather than as a marker of tentativeness, as in ‘At last, they could do that within 3.50 mins.’

May / Might

MAY was used slightly more in the bulletin board writing (76 occurrences) than in the academic writing (64 occurrences) while, coincidentally, *MIGHT* was used equally in the two writing modes. Findings from both corpora also show that the subjects used *MAY* more frequently than *MIGHT*, both in the academic and the bulletin board writing tasks. This is not the case in L1 writing, where *MAY* is used much more than *MIGHT* in academic genres whereas, in conversation, *MIGHT* is used much more than *MAY* (Biber et al., 1999).

Shall / Should / Must

SHALL was not found at all in the subjects’ academic writing and was found only twice in their bulletin board writing; one of these occurrences was in the regular formulaic form of persuasive tag ‘*shall we?*’ and the other was in the strong sense of *WILL* probability (e.g. ‘*I shall write about negative ones soon*’). This seems to suggest that *SHALL* is marginal in the repertoire of many learners’ modality, which is not at all surprising given that it has become relatively rare in English (Biber et al., 1999). *SHOULD* was used more in the subjects’ bulletin board writing (100 occurrences) than in their academic writing (66

occurrences). This may be because *SHOULD* conveys deontic meaning by giving personal advice or suggestions; in conveying deontic meaning, speakers or writers tend to be more self-engaged. The result seems to suggest that bulletin boards allow learners to express themselves through advice-giving in this way more often than in academic writing. However, this does not seem to be the case with *MUST*, which was found slightly more in the academic writing (46 occurrences) than in the bulletin board writing (42 occurrences).

Have to / Need to / Be supposed to / Had better / Ought to

While similar in meaning to *MUST*, *HAVE TO* was used much more frequently in both corpora, being used 169 times in the subjects' bulletin board writing and 118 times in their academic writing. This finding is similar to that of Biber et al. (1999), who reported that *HAVE TO* was found more frequently in speech while *MUST* was more common in academic genres. *NEED TO* was also found more in the bulletin board writing than in the academic writing, though with a smaller range in frequency. Similar to *SHALL*, the semi modals *BE SUPPOSED TO*, *HAD BETTER* and *OUGHT TO* were not found at all in academic writing; in the bulletin board writing, *BE SUPPOSED TO* and *HAD BETTER* were found only twice each while *OUGHT TO* was found only once.

Table 2: Frequencies of adverbs

Adverbs	ACAD	BB
really	43	111
actually	9	44
truly	3	10
in fact	3	11
indeed	13	1
in reality	0	3
maybe	30	63
probably	18	10
possibly	3	2
perhaps	2	4
of course	1	12
surely	6	5
for sure	2	5
Total	133	281

Really / Actually / Truly / In fact / Indeed / In reality

Table 2 shows that, except for *INDEED*, all the epistemic adverbs conveying actuality were found more in the subjects' bulletin board writing than in their academic writing. This finding for *INDEED* corresponds with the L1 data given by Biber et al. (1999), where it was found more in academic writing than in conversational contexts.

Maybe / Probably / Possibly / Perhaps

MAYBE was used more frequently than other epistemic modal adverbs in both genres. This is not the case in L1 writing, where native speakers tend to use *MAYBE* less than *PROBABLY* in academic genres (Biber et al., 1999). While *MAYBE* is mostly used in sentence medial position, particularly in front of the main verb, both corpora also show occurrences of *MAYBE* in sentence initial position (10 times in the academic writing and 18 times in the bulletin board writing). *POSSIBLY* and *PERHAPS* were used much less frequently than *MAYBE* and *PROBABLY*.

Of course / Surely / For sure

According to Holmes (1988) and Carter & McCarthy (2006), the use of adverbs such as *OF COURSE*, *SURELY* and *FOR SURE* is more common in spoken contexts than in academic writing. In the present data, this seems to be the case for *OF COURSE* and *FOR SURE* while there is no significant difference in the use of *SURELY* between the two writing modes.

Table 3: Frequencies of lexical verbs

Lexical verbs	ACAD	BB
I think	27	372
I believe	6	30
I guess	4	21
I feel	0	10
Total	37	433

As shown in Table 3, learners rely more on lexical patterns through the primary clause structure of '1st person pron. + mental verbs' when writing online than offline, with *I THINK* being used the most (372 times in the bulletin board writing and only 27 times in the academic writing). It is also interesting to note that learners used *I THINK* in this function more than alternatives such as *I GUESS*, *I BELIEVE* and *I FEEL*. The idea of using one form rather than many others seems to correspond with what Thomas (1983: 103) says: "L2 learners select one from many options of modal verbs and stick with it for their uses in all contexts". Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991: 26) agree, saying that "Learners will use only those aspects in which they have the most confidence".

Table 4: Frequencies of parenthetical elements

Parenthetical elements	ACAD	BB
For me,	10	44
To me,	2	25
In my view,	4	37
In my opinion,	6	34
*In my point of view,	0	5
*In my idea,	0	2
*In my eyes,	0	2
TOTAL	22	149

*These parenthetical elements are very unlikely to be used by native speakers.

It is clear from Table 4 that these parenthetical adverbial phrases were used much more in the subjects' bulletin board writing than in their academic writing, with *FOR ME*, *TO ME*, *IN MY VIEW* and *IN MY OPINION* being used the most. These phrases are used more often in speech than in writing. This repeats the pattern observed above, namely that online writing shares expressions commonly found in speech. According to Swan (2005), parenthetical elements such as *IN MY OPINION* and *IN MY VIEW* make opinions and statements sound less dogmatic and suggest some degree of commitment to the truth value of the utterance by opening a chance for disagreement, as the proposition is only based on the individual speaker's viewpoint.

Since these parenthetical elements remain unchanged throughout the subjects' writing and all of them are put in the sentence initial position, they can be used as memorized chunks and they can play an important role in L2 language use. As Ellis (1994: 88) puts it, "The development of target-like L2 ability, then, requires the memorization of a large set of formulaic chunks and patterns".

Discussion

While modal auxiliaries are central to the concept of modality in English, other 'metaphorical realizations of modality', such as some adverbs, adverbial phrases and lexical verbs, can also function semantically like modal auxiliaries (for the concept of metaphorical expansion of modality, see Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 613-625). While many epistemic modal auxiliaries were used more in the subjects' bulletin board writing than in their academic writing, others were not. The frequencies of epistemic modal auxiliaries in the two writing modes varied greatly. However, almost all deontic modal auxiliaries were found more in the bulletin board writing than in the academic writing. This suggests that online bulletin boards allow learners to express their opinions through advice-giving more than academic writing.

Students should realize that there are many adverbs which can be used to convey degree of probability, so that they do not have to rely on only a few limited items and use them over and over again, which would make their writing sound redundant and lexically limited. For example, while the subjects used *MAYBE* much more than *PROBABLY*, English native speakers tend to use them with similar frequencies; in fact, according to Biber et al. (1999), *PROBABLY* is found even slightly more than *MAYBE* in both British and American conversation and academic prose.

Similarly, the overwhelming use of *I THINK* suggests that Thai learners rely too much on a single lexical form while, in fact, there are many other items that can be used interchangeably to convey similar modal meaning. There seems to be an attempt, though, for learners to use various phrases such as *IN MY EYES* and *TO ME*, *IN MY VIEW* and *IN MY POINT OF VIEW*, some of which are rarely (if ever) used by English native speakers. The latter would, for instance, almost certainly use *FROM MY POINT OF VIEW* instead of *IN MY POINT OF VIEW*; however, *FROM MY POINT OF VIEW* cannot always be used in all cases where *IN MY OPINION* is used (for explanation of the use of *IN MY OPINION* and *FROM MY POINT OF VIEW*, see Swan, 2005: 434). Additionally, *MAYBE*, which is an epistemic modal adverb, has often been confused with the use of epistemic modal *MAY* plus copula 'be'. For example, '*That may be true*' is sometimes written, incorrectly, by learners as '*That maybe true*' while, just as erroneously, a sentence such as '*Maybe that is true*' is written as '*May be that is true*'. To improve the pragmatic competence in conveying doubt and certainty in English, what matters is not only the quantity and variety but also the ability to use these modal devices correctly and appropriately in different genres.

Learners should also be aware of the possibility that some modal devices can be used in a variety of positions in a sentence and that their different syntactic positions can convey different meanings. For example, *I THINK*, when used in initial position, conveys a stronger claim than when it is used in medial or final positions, which tend to show speakers' doubt or uncertainty (Holmes, 1995). To interpret the present data, it seems that many students are unaware of this nuance as *I THINK* was almost invariably used in initial position. Since learners have some difficulties using modality appropriately in English,

before being introduced to online bulletin board writing activities, they should be advised of a wide range of modal devices in English and given enough practice to become familiar with these linguistic devices.

Conclusion

This study provides a preliminary view of Thai learners' command of modality in two written genres: academic essays and online bulletin board writing. Its findings show that writing modes have a significant impact on learners' use of modality. In academic writing, learners tend to be more formal and less involved than in online bulletin board writing. Therefore, bulletin board writing can be used as a communicative activity as it plays a significant role in giving learners a chance to practise using modal features that are common in speech. The activity can help develop learners' ability to express themselves more subtly, showing various levels of confidence or tentativeness through their utterances. These linguistic features play a part in pragmatic competence and are, thus, important in everyday communication. As a result, the findings of this study clearly have implications for ELT, particularly for Thai learners. However, I am aware that simply counting modal items, regardless of their functions or how they are used in context, may not provide us with a comprehensive insight into learners' command of modality. A more in-depth study needs to be done at the micro pragmatic levels. This preliminary study can only attempt to answer the question in a very limited way; ultimately, the paper's more important task is to open up more pressing questions regarding the use of modality by non-native learners of English.

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