

ESL LEARNERS' USE OF ENGLISH MODALS IN NARRATIVE COMPOSITIONS: SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC ACCURACY

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Abstract: This study investigated use of modals in two written tasks by Form 4 Malaysian secondary school ESL learners. The aim was to investigate the use of English modals at the syntactic and semantic levels from data made available by the EMAS Corpus. The research design comprised a qualitative technique through discourse analysis supplemented with some descriptive statistics derived from a concordancer. The concordancer identified modals used by the students at the form 4 level. The research findings showed that two modals not stipulated in the syllabus, *would* and *shall*, were also found in the narrative compositions. The secondary school English language syllabus indicated varied meanings to the modals, but it was found that students repetitively used only a few of the same modals for these various functions. It was concluded that there were some inadequacies in the syllabus that led to the problems encountered by ESL students. In order to circumvent the problematic items identified in the study, and to further improve the teaching and learning of modal auxiliaries among ESL learners, several recommendations are proposed.

Key words: modals, ESL learner, corpus, discourse analysis

One of the main problems in learning and teaching English as a second language is the complexity of the English modal auxiliary system. In the standard formal English the same modals express different notions, ranging from probability through permission to obligation. Modals are not only auxiliaries in the grammatical sense but they also appear to contribute to the semantics of communication. Since communication is an integral part of the society, and the most important means of human communication is language, the mechanics of language has to be understood in terms of how it facilitates communication. This includes the knowledge of grammar as without it communication will fail as structure will be lacking.

Thompson (2002) sees modals as a complex entity and that it is not easy to package the complexity into meaningful chunks of information to be presented to students. If this were possible, that is reducing the complexity of the modals, this would make learning modals less problematic to second language learners of English.

In language learning, Ferris (2002) states that verb forms related to modals are problematic to both first (L1) and second language (L2) speakers. L1 speakers also make grammatical errors. If L1 speakers make errors, L2 speakers are even more capable of making the same errors and more in areas of formation of the verb phrases, passive and conditional forms, misuse of modals, gerunds, infinitives and other grammatical items. The need to recognise the errors in written discourse, as well as to have a certain amount of knowledge on how to correct those errors before imparting the knowledge to students, is important to educators (Ferris, 2002).

According to Hawanum (2004), the Malaysian ESL teachers, being L2 speakers themselves, are often not certain as to how to go about teaching grammar to their students. They are not sure how much detail should go into explaining grammatical items. When the Malaysian New English Language Curriculum, based on a communicative model of language teaching learning, was implemented in 1988, the teaching of grammar emerged as problematic (Pillay and North, 1997). Having students of mixed abilities and mixed interests in a classroom has resulted in difficulties for some language teachers (Vethamani, 2001). Teachers are unclear of the role of grammar in the new curriculum and are uncertain how grammar should be integrated into the lesson plan.

One of the problematic grammatical items faced by Malaysian ESL learners is in the correct use of modals (Hughes and Heah, 1993). Rosli and Malachi (1989) in their error analysis of Form Four English composition found that students in both urban and rural areas have problems using verb forms and this includes the

modal auxiliary since a modal is formed with a verb phrase. Wong (1983: 136) also agrees with the fact that the modal auxiliary system of standard formal English is extremely complex, with the same modals sometimes being used to express different notions like that of probability, possibility and certainty, and of inclination, ability, permission and obligation. This results in confusion for ESL learners, and teachers need to be careful when teaching this part of grammatical item to the students.

The teaching of English language has always been a concern in Malaysia and often highlighted in the media. Several approaches have been proposed in the teaching of the grammar of the second and foreign language, especially in the teaching of modals. Byrd (2004) discusses the teaching and learning of modals from the “easy item” to the more “difficult” ones. However, she discusses that there is a problem in deciding what is difficult and what is easy and to whom it is difficult or easy also needs to be considered.

The modals, can, could, will, should, may, might, must, need to and have to listed by the Curriculum Development Center (CDC) of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE) for the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum, are used across a wide semantic field. These few modals are used to serve multi-functionally across the notional categories in the system (de Silva, 1981). Malaysian ESL students would use these modals in so many ways with various meanings possibly leading to incoherence. Hence, with these few modals listed by the syllabus, the study seeks to investigate the use of modals by Malaysian ESL learners.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of English modals at the syntactic and semantic levels from data made available by the EMAS Corpus. The focus of this study has been narrowed down to examining the use of modals in two written tasks of ESL learners from Form 4.

Modals and Modality

Modality can be expressed by modals and modals are part of the grammatical item that is intricate for an ESL learner to comprehend. The learning of grammar of the English language is perceived by Quirk and Stein (1990) as complicated to a second language learner since it involves learning several systems of grammar, where it is seen by Greenbaum (1991) as a set of rules that allows us to combine words in our language into larger units. Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad (1982), on the other hand, see grammar as the mechanism according to which language

works when it is used to communicate with other people, and that the mechanism is the set of rules which allows us to put words together in certain ways. Thus, in order to communicate with people and getting our messages across, grammar rules (and the focus of this study is the modal verbs) need to be acquired to enable us to put words together in meaningful ways.

The study of modality in the English language remains one of the most pervasive and intriguing areas of philosophical and linguistic inquiry (Hoye, 1997). He states that modal auxiliary verbs in general are used not to express statements of fact but events or actions which exist only as conceptions of the mind and which may or may not happen in the future. Thus, learning how to use the modal auxiliary system is part of the complex mechanism in the English language, and Reppen et al. (2002) state that part of the difficulty of English modal verbs for linguists and language learner is that although the modals are few, they have similar core meanings. Thompson (2002) and other linguists agree that learning modals can be confusing due to the meanings that each modal is depicted. Thus, ESL teachers need to really understand modal verbs so that they are able to impart the knowledge adequately to ESL learners and avoid confusion and misunderstanding throughout the process of learning modal verbs.

Modals and Pedagogical Aspects

Research on modal auxiliary verbs have focused on ways that affect the meaning of a clause or sentence that they appear in. Thompson (2002) states that modal auxiliary verbs give various meanings to a sentence depending on how they are used. Leech (1971) and Quirk et al. (1985) agree in studying modal verbs by listing and giving each modal the meanings it may have; while Coates (1983) and Palmer (1990) list modality as semantic concepts where each modal may have a list of meanings.

Palmer (1990) sees meanings expressed by modal verbs in English represent modality and that there are two most semantically fundamental kinds of modality (epistemic and deontic), which are very different from one another. He argues that modality is a semantic term, and later describes it as a grammatical category, similar to aspect, tense, number, and gender (Palmer, 1986).

Hoye (1997) seems to identify modals as a device used in expressions relating to forming opinions, perceptions or intentions but also congruous with the traditional concept of modality, which describes the act of indicating possibility, neces-

sity, probability and the related notions of obligation, possibility and volition. He expresses that the modal auxiliary in general does not show statements of fact but events or actions which exist only as conceptions of the mind and which may or not eventuate in the future. Lyons (1977), on the other hand, states modality as the grammatical system of the language that deals with possibility or probability, necessity or contingency, rather than merely truth or falsity and that there is no general agreement on how to define mood and modality. Modality in grammar, however, is normally related to modal auxiliary verbs. The systematic approach stresses that modal auxiliary verbs are not the only modality features and that there are many more. Coates (1983: 4) analyses the semantic characteristics of modal auxiliaries as having the following characteristics:

- (1) direct negation (can't, mustn't),
- (2) inversion without do (can I, must I),
- (3) 'code' (John can swim and so can Bill),
- (4) emphasis (Ann could solve the problem),
- (5) no -s form for third person singular (*cans, *musts),
- (6) no non-finite forms (*to can, *musting),
- (7) no co-occurrence (*may will).

The first four characteristics describe modal auxiliaries, whereas the next three describe the main verbs. There is no clear distinct line that could explain modals and that the definition has a continuous graded degree of membership. This was addressed by Coates, who refers to Zadeh's (1965) "fuzzy sets theory", to mean a class in which the transition from membership to non-membership is gradual rather than abrupt" (Zadeh, 1972: 4 cited in Coates, 1983: 13).

Modals and the English Language

With the rather comprehensive content of modality in linguistics, it is only expected for the number of its manifestations in language to be equally comprehensive (Hemeren, 1978: 10). Thus, the list of the most common lexical ways of expressing modality according to Hemeren (1978: 10-11) is as follows:

- (1) Nouns such as *chance, hope, presumption and expectation; intention and determination*
- (2) Adjectives such as *conceivable, possible, likely and obvious; appropriate and necessary*. In other adjectives such as *sure, surprise, able and willing* and finally *doubtful and certain*.

- (3) Adverbs such as *hardly* and *perhaps*; *evidently*, *assuredly*, *fortunately*, *regrettably*, *surprisingly*, and *strangely*.
- (4) Verbs: Main verbs such as *doubt*, *think*, *believe* and *predict*; *suggest*, *want*, *prefer*, *desire*, *permit* and *forbid*. Modal verbs such as *shall*, *should*, *will*, *would*, *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must* and *ought*, which students are more familiar.

Some of the modals may be combined in the same sentence and may not occur individually as in the sentence, "Perhaps he might have built it" (Hemeren, 1978: 11) with the word *perhaps* and *might* reinforcing each other, or the modals appear in a sentence with no equivalent meaning as in "Certainly, he might have built it," which Lyons (1977: 807-8) calls modally harmonic and non-harmonic. These varied ways of showing modality can be difficult for ESL learners and this is one of the complications mentioned by Celcie-Murcie and Larsen Freeman (1983), Thompson (2002) and other linguists.

The intricacies of the varied meanings of modals make them one of the most complex areas of English grammar teaching and learning.

METHOD

Discourse analysis which was employed helped the researchers to answer the research questions posted in this study. The research was designed to investigate Malaysian ESL learners' use of modals in the written compositions using data from the EMAS Corpus (Arshad et al., 2000). The data in the EMAS Corpus consists of written and spoken data from students of three different levels: Primary 5, Form 1 and Form 4 in the Malaysian school system. The data comprised the "Picture-Based" and "The Happiest Day of My Life" narrative compositions. For the purpose of this study, data from Form 4 students was used.

Biber et al. (1998: 5) suggest that corpus-based approaches allow researchers to identify and analyse complex association patterns: the systematic ways in which linguistic features are used in association with other linguistic and non-linguistic features. Such approaches are also applicable to educational linguistics, which are helpful in designing effective materials and activities for classroom and workplace training, thus aiding students with the language that is used in different target settings.

This is a corpus-based study with data from the EMAS Corpus. Corpus-based studies generally comprise qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative

analysis aims at a detailed description of the phenomenon under study while the quantification techniques give a precise picture of absolute and relative (in)frequency of occurrence of the particular phenomenon (de Monnik, 2005). The use of the concordancing programme helped to generate statistical description that aided the analysis. Descriptive statistics enabled the researchers to summarise the most vital properties of the observed data, where the abstracted data can be used in inferential statistics which answers questions or formulated as hypothesis (Oakes, 1998).

The EMAS Corpus

The data used in this study was obtained from the EMAS (The English Language of Malaysian School Students) Corpus. The EMAS Corpus was developed by seven researchers from the Faculty of Educational Studies in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The data in the EMAS Corpus consists of Malaysian students' written and spoken work; thus, it was thought to be appropriate for the researchers to use the corpus to investigate how Malaysian ESL learners used modals in their written work. The main purpose of the EMAS Corpus was to establish baseline data of the English language proficiency of Malaysian students in both written and spoken forms as well as to examine developmental patterns through the data obtained.

Sampling of the Sub-Corpus

It is sometimes not practical to study the entire corpus (Oakes, 1998). Therefore, a sub-corpus was compiled for the purpose of the study and the written tasks selected for the sub-corpus was based on purposive sampling. For this study, the purpose was to discover, understand and gain insight as to how students used modals in their written work.

The size of the sample of the sub-corpus was decided based on a table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) which was adapted by Powell (1991:80). Therefore, for this study 84 "The Happiest Day of My Life" compositions and 126 "Picture-Based" compositions, giving a total of 210 narrative compositions, were selected and analyzed. Students from 7 schools wrote the "The Happiest Day of My Life" composition, while students from 9 schools wrote the "Picture-Based", thus there

were more compositions in the “Picture-Based” composition in comparison to those in “The Happiest Day of My Life” compositions.

Three independent raters were appointed for data analysis to aid in the analysis during the preliminary study. For the actual study, however, only one independent rater was used to reconfirm the analysis carried out as well as to cross-check. The independent rater was then briefed on the categories used to synchronise analysis, thus allowing the researchers to answer the research questions.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is used to analyse the data so that language characteristics that extend across clause boundaries can be focused (Biber, et al., 1998). The method of discourse analysis was used to analyse sentences in the two written tasks. In this study, the use of modals in students written work needed to be analysed since it was a means of communication where modals were used to refer to a stance and the writer’s attitude. The written work of the students was examined with the inter-rater, leading to a more sensitive, penetrating analysis that a discourse analysis will allow.

An independent rater read the texts through discourse analysis. It is important to understand the modals and the functions they depicted in the students’ writing. Also the discourse analysis employed in this study would show if there were repetitive use of modals by these students.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Syntactic Analysis of Students’ Use of Modals

Syntax deals with how sentences, which consists of words, phrases and clauses are constructed, and users of human language employ a striking variety of possible arrangements of the elements in sentences with rules that govern the arrangement (Van Valin, 2001; Biber et al., 2002; Carter and McCarthy, 2006). It is emphasized that in order to study syntax, various aspects need to be understood: namely, how sentences are formed and how they are understood in particular languages and in a language generally (Stockwell, 1977). A well-formed sentence is usually seen as grammatical and is in accord to the rules and principles of the syn-

tax of a particular language, whereas an ungrammatical sentence or ill-formed sentence violates one or more syntactic rules or principles (Van Valin, 2001).

The concept of structure is fundamental to the study of syntax (Burton-Roberts, 1986), and since the focus of this study was on the English modal system, this section focused its discussion on the grammatical accuracies and inaccuracies in the sentences constructed with modals by the subjects, specifically how modals were used by Malaysian ESL learners in their written work. Their uses in terms of the five modal structures in order of preference, follows the framework provided by Mindt (1995), as follows:

- (a) Modal + bare infinitive (eg. We will miss you)
- (b) Modal + passive infinitive (eg. It will be published)
- (c) Modal + progressive infinitive (eg. You'll not be seeing him anymore)
- (d) Modal + perfect infinitive (eg. The total population will have increased)
- (e) Modal + perfect passive infinitive (eg. No harm will have been done)

Together with the independent rater, all sentences with modals were examined. A sentence with a modal that is followed by an inaccurate verb form is considered as syntactically inaccurate; for example, "I was terrified what would happened for her" (SMTA-P-F4—01.12). This sentence is considered as inaccurate because of the verb form "happened" which syntactically should be "happen" following modal "would". Most of the occurrences of the modals in the study were followed by the infinitive construction: modal and a bare infinitive; thus it was easier to identify verb forms that were incorrect.

Distribution of Syntactically Accurate and Inaccurate Modals

Table 1 shows the frequency counts of syntactically accurate and inaccurate modals used in the narrative compositions. The bold items are modals which are not in the syllabus.

Table 1. Distribution of Syntactically Accurate and Inaccurate Modals

Modals	Accurate Syntactically	Inaccurate Syntactically
Could/couldn't	113	8
Will/won't	103	13
Can/can't	79	9

Would/wouldn't	44	2
Must/must not	18	2
May/may not	9	-
Have to/had to	9	-
Should/shouldn't	7	2
Might/mightn't	2	1
Shall/shan't	1	2
Total	386	40

386 of the total modals identified were syntactically accurate and only 40 were not, which is less than 10 per cent. The figures are highly encouraging; however, when we look at the individual modals, only four were highly used. A total of 113 counts of the modal “could” was found to be syntactically accurate and 8 which were not. This is followed by “will” with 103 syntactically accurate modal verb phrases and 13 inaccurate ones. The third most common modal “can” showed 79 syntactically accurate modal structures and 9 inaccurate ones. The number of inaccurate modal verb phrases for each modal appears to be quite small compared to the accurate ones. This indicates that: (1) students are better able to use these modals, and (2) these three modals are the ones which the students prefer to use, avoiding all others or possibly perceiving others as unnecessary and redundant. The rest of the modals show similar distribution of syntactically accurate and inaccurate modal verb phrases, that is, very few inaccurate modal verb phrases were found in the narrative compositions. The following analysis is categorized according to syntactically accurate and inaccurate modals.

Syntactically Accurate Modal Verb Phrases

Two examples of syntactically accurate modal verb phrases are given below.

1. “I think, anybody who is already in this Animal Kingdom don't have to go to Africa anymore” (SMTA-H-F4-06.38)
2. “When we arrived at Florida, we have to stay a night in hotel” (SMTA-H-F4-06.18)

The semi-modal ‘have to/had to’ was found to be syntactically accurate although the number of occurrences is rather low, with only 9 instances identified in the compositions. Sentence (2) on the other hand was considered to be accurate by virtue of the definition in this study even though there is an inconsistency in the verb forms in the sentence. The verb ‘arrived’ is in the past tense form, while the modal used ‘have to’ is in the present tense form. The sentences above are accu-

rately constructed with appropriate verb forms that appeared with the modals. The examples above are indication of students' knowledge and their competence in constructing accurate modal structure in their writing.

Syntactically Inaccurate Modal Verb Phrase

Two examples of syntactically inaccurate modal verb phrase are given below.

- 3. "I crossed my fingers hoping something lucky will happened"* (SMART-H-f4-02.39).
- 4. "He will by my side wherever I when*. I treated him well too" (SMPM-H-f4-03.9) (modal + base infinitive)

The error that was identified in the first sentence was with the verb form. The same error was identified in some other sentences. In example (4) the modal will appeared without a verb form (will by my side) and also another possible spelling error that appeared in the sentence ('went' instead of 'when'). There were also other similar errors identified in the narrative compositions made by the students.

To sum up, it was found that the inaccurate modal structures could be categorized into:

- (a) Modal + wrong verb forms: non-infinitives
- (b) Modal + a non-verb word/lack of verb/non-English word

Each of the categories could be seen in the examples mentioned in the previous sections and Table 2 shows the frequencies of the inaccurate modal structures at syntactic level.

Table 2. Frequency Counts of Inaccurate Modal Structure

Categories/Level	Form 4
a. Modal + wrong verb form	37
b. Modal + a non-verb word/lack of verb/non-English word	5

It is seen that the most inaccurate modal structure is in the verb form that appeared with the modals. The frequency count showed that the errors identified in the sentences with relation to the verb form is high at 37 instances. The other inaccurate modal structures were minimal. The sentences below show some examples of the inaccurate modal structures.

- (a) Modal + wrong verb form

- (i) “That the moment they can’t forgot from their mind” (SRFL-P-s5-03.12)
- (ii) “I think to the boys and imagined what would happened if they were not there” (SMART-P-f4-07.25)
- (b) Modal + a non-verb word/lack of verb/non-English word
 - (i) “They were proud that Aminah can healthy again” (SMMA-P-f1-03.19)
 - (ii) “The day where there will no criminal act and evil doing” (SMART-H-f4-03.6)

The Malaysian ESL learners were able to use modals in a more syntactically accurate manner. Previous studies using the EMAS Corpus data has shown language development.

Students’ Ability to Convey Meaning Accurately in their Use of Modals

The meaning denoted by the modals used in the students’ written work varies. In prescriptive English, the modals are used to express notions of probability, possibility, certainty, permission, obligation, compulsion, inclination and ability (Wong, 1982). Sentences with modals in the narrative compositions were examined for accuracy and inaccuracy of use at the semantic level. For the purpose of this study, “semantically accurate” was used to refer to sentences with modals that denote their respective meaning appropriately, keeping in mind that different modal may have the same meaning and the same modals may have different meaning depending on the writer’s stance. The semantics of modals is an endless source of confusion to learners because (Lapaire and Rotge, 1991: 6):

- (a) Different modal auxiliaries are said to have the same meaning, that is, the function, for example, “May/Can I ring again”, where both may and can are used to ask for permission.
- (b) The same modal auxiliary may have different meanings depending on the variables as in context, stress and intonation patterns; for example the modal must to express self-admonishment, enthusiastic advice, resentment, exasperation and logical necessity or inferences.

Thus, an ESL learner could be confused with the ambiguities and uncertainties involved in the learning of modals. Furthermore, mistakes can be made by interpreting the writers’ meanings incorrectly even though the sentences are gram-

matical (Hughes and Heah, 1993). An example cited from the data “That night in the hotel, I wouldn’t close my eyes because I was so excited to go to the place of my dream, Disneyland”. The placement of the modal was correct but the student (SMTA-H-F4-06.21) used an inappropriate modal, “wouldn’t” to indicate the inability to close the eyes due to excitement. The correct modal should be “could” as in “That night in the hotel, I couldn’t close my eyes because I was so excited to go to the place of my dream, Disneyland”. Then again, one can argue the sentence could also mean that the writer did not want to close his/her eyes due to the excitement. This would mean that the sentence is semantically correct but not accurate, as would typically be interpreted in this utterance.

Another example of a sentence that used an inappropriate modal is: “On the day of departure, I wouldn’t wait to be in Disneyland” (SMTA-H-F4-06.12). The appropriate modal for this sentence is “couldn’t wait” (“I couldn’t wait to be in Disneyland”) instead of “wouldn’t wait” to correctly indicate the eagerness of the writer to be in Disneyland. “Couldn’t wait” is also an idiomatic expression that has the meaning of looking forward to something. Semantically, the verb wait collocates with could and not would.

The section below presents the findings and discussion from the analysis of the modals used in sentences found in the narrative compositions.

Distribution of Semantically Accurate and Inaccurate Modals Used

The following data shows that how much the students were competent in modals use. This is shown in their ability in producing semantically accurate modals. Table 3 presents the results.

Table 3. Distribution of Semantically Accurate and Inaccurate Modals Used

Modal	Semantically Accurate	Semantically Inaccurate
Can/ Can’t	86	4
Could/ Could not	119	3
Will/ Won’t	114	2
Would/ Would not	48	1
May	8	1
Might	3	Nil
Must	19	1
Shall	2	1

Should/ Should not	8	1
Need to	Nil	Nil
Have to	9	1
Total	416	15

Note: Bold item is not part of the syllabus and not taught to the students

The table shows that 10 different modals were used by students, and a total of 416 instances of these modals were used semantically accurate compared to only 15 inaccurate ones. The modal “could” and its negated form were found to have the highest number of semantically accurate modal occurrences with 119 counts. A few examples are shown below taken from a composition written by a student coded SMTA-P-f4-02.39/40:

5. “I know that I could drown at that moment. The current was getting stronger and I could feel it pulling me”

This is an example of a sentence with modals that are syntactically and semantically accurate indicating student’s ability in using the appropriate modals to denote the intended function of modality, which is ability. The story written by the same student continued with sentences which showed more of the semantically accurate use of modals as seen below:

6. “I could feel the current pulling me further down the river. In a blink of an eye, darkness surrounded me. I couldn’t do anything but allowing myself to be drifted away...”

It is apparent that the composition must have been written by a competent writer.

One of the inaccurate sentences was reproduced in (7):

7. “One day when I’m back from school, I’m receive a inform from my servant that I have a some surprise thing it almost can get me smile and laugh always*” (SMIS-H-f4-04.11)*

This sentence is ill-formed and should be written as “One day when I came back from school, I was informed by the servant that there was a surprise for me that could make me smile and laugh always”. There were several misapplications of grammar in this sentence but they did not render the sentence to overall incomprehensible.

Most of the sentences that used the modal “will” showed a high frequency of accuracies at the semantic level with 114 instances, and only two instances of semantically inaccurate use of the modal, which means that students were definitely able to use this modal in their sentences.

The negated forms of “can” and “could” were also accurately used semantically with 86 instances of the modal can’t/cannot, 119 instances of the modal couldn’t/could not, while the modal would/wouldn’t was identified with 48 instances. According to Adrian and Jagjeet (1993), a choice between using “will” or “would” confuses ESL learners, who are usually uncertain as to which modal to use and the function each depicts. Further, Lock (1996: 200), states that “would” properly belongs alongside “will” as a modal expressing a high likelihood in predictions, but “would” is used only in predictions based upon unreal conditions. However, since “would” is not taught to the students, it is understood that they may use the modal inaccurately and this is shown with the one instance of the modal would that was used semantically inaccurate. However, students seemed to be able to use both modals well since the number of semantically accurate uses was very high, with only one instance of inaccuracy identified in the negated “would” used semantically inaccurate, reproduced below:

8. “That night in the hotel, I wouldn’t close my eyes because I was so excited to go the place of my dream, Disneyland” (SMTA-H-f4-06.21)

The modal “would not” in this sentence is used semantically inaccurate since what the writer is trying to say is that he/she was not able to sleep due to the excitement of going to Disneyland. The modal could be changed to ‘couldn’t close my eyes’ instead since it idiomatically means that he/she could not sleep.

The findings from the analysis revealed that students were competent in producing sentences that were used semantically accurate with the modals of ability, “can” and “could”, more than the other modals.

According to this study, semantically-accurate sentences with modals are defined as sentences that convey the accurate meaning according to the functions of the modals used. Discourse analysis was used to examine the sentences and the findings highlighted the level of education as influencing students’ production of semantically-accurate sentences with modals. The modal “could”, for instance, was shown to be more semantically accurate. The pattern is the same with the other modals but the most semantically-accurate sentences were those with the modal “can”, “could”, “will” and “would”.

The modals “will” and “would” do not appear as a pair in the syllabus and “would” is not stipulated in the KBSM Curriculum Specifications for English. “Shall” is also not part of the syllabus. However, the findings revealed the presence of these two modals in the students’ narrative compositions in well-formed sentences. This is an indication that the students were not only able to use modals taught to them, but also those not taught to them. Other modals like “may”, “might”, “should”, “have to” and “need to” were rarely used by the students, which was implied by the low frequency counts.

Again, the modals of ability were found to be used semantically accurate by these students. Without any doubt, the Malaysian ESL learners used the modals of ability frequently as compared to the other modals. This finding is similar to that of Botley (2005) where over-generalisation does occur in language learning and the data from this study suggested that the pattern that emerged during the analysis indicates that Malaysian ESL learners over-use modals of ability.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to identify the modals used by Malaysian ESL learners in two written narrative compositions (“Picture-based” and “The Happiest Day of My Life”) compiled in the EMAS Corpus. The constructs under this study were concerns on how well modal verbs are used in their writing.

Throughout the findings the following major conclusions became apparent. The conclusions are basically connected to how Malaysian ESL learners use modal auxiliary in their writing. They are:

- (1) The students were aware that a modal should appear with a verb and that a modal is a helping or an auxiliary verb.
- (2) Semantically, students had problems with using the appropriate modals. The choice of modals used were inaccurate leading to wrongly conveyed meaning. This may result in miscommunication. Most of the errors identified in the narrative compositions were with the verb form that follows the modal. A previous study showed that most Malaysian ESL learners are able to use appropriate verb forms on their own but when a modal is present, meaning becomes indefinite in some sentences and the verb form tends to be incorrect.

- (3) Students were able to use modals that are not stipulated in the syllabus (would and shall), thus indicating learning of modal auxiliary does not only happen in the classrooms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are proposed in reference to the learning and teaching of modal verbs:

- (1) In order to enhance understanding teachers must consider teaching modals in a structured way. The findings have shown that modals are acquired by students not only in the classroom but also elsewhere. However, it was found that the modals of ability were used the most by the students.
- (2) Meaning must be clear when modals are taught so that usage will be clear. Therefore, any ambiguity to the meaning presented by each modal must be explicitly explained to the students so that they can comprehend and be able to use modals accurately.
- (3) Explicit teaching of the five different structures mentioned earlier is important so that students are able to see the different verb forms used in the five different structures so that they have a better understanding and are able to apply the knowledge in their writing, even though the other structures were rarely used.
- (4) The modals would and shall must be incorporated into the syllabus since the usage was found in the students' writing. These modals were also identified in textbooks used by the students with explanation of usage, thus, it should be part of the syllabus since other grammatical items also require the use of would (conditional structures, for example) in the structures.

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