

Modal auxiliaries in advanced learners' academic writing – A corpus study

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This study examines the use of modal auxiliaries as a discourse-pragmatic hedging strategy in the written academic texts produced by German advanced learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Despite their importance in the academic register, there is only little research on modal verbs used as hedging devices in academic learner writing. The study presents a comparative, qualitative and quantitative corpus analysis based on the *Corpus of Academic Learner English* (CALE; Callies & Zaytseva 2013) and a native speaker control corpus to examine how EFL learners use modal verbs as a hedging strategy and if there are differences in their use as compared to native speakers of English.

Hedging, i.e. “the expression of tentativeness and possibility in language use” (Hyland 1995: 33) is essential to academic writing. Hedges are understood as modifiers of a writer’s commitment to the truth-value of a proposition (Prince et al. 1982: 85) and enable the writer to present claims with caution and to soften categorical assertions (Hyland 1995: 33). Serving this function, in their epistemic usage, modal auxiliaries (e.g. *can*, *may*, and *might*) are an important means of hedging, as they qualify the meaning of a sentence and reflect the writer’s “judgement of the likelihood of the proposition it expresses being true” (Quirk et al. 1985).

The adequate use of hedging devices to express commitment and detachment to their propositions has been found to be problematic even for advanced learners who have a good command of grammar and lexis (e.g. Hyland 1995; Hyland & Milton 1997b).

Analysing modal verb uses among a continuum of probability ranging from certainty over probability to possibility (e.g. Holmes 1982, 1988; Hyland & Milton 1997b), depending on the degree of commitment they convey, this study sets out to find how EFL learners use modal auxiliaries in their academic texts as compared to the academic writing of native speakers.

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