

# Exploration of Modals as a Hedging Device in the Academic Text Written by International Postgraduate Students: A Multiple Case Study

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## Abstract

This paper aims to investigate how international postgraduate students (IPS) use the possibility modals as a hedging device (i.e. can, could, may and might) in academic writing in comparison with native counterparts. Moreover, it explores factors which may cause differences between the two. For the investigation, native (NW) and non-native writers' (NNW) corpora were compiled. Moreover, a questionnaire survey was conducted to those IPSs. One of the major findings is that *can* was overused by the IPSs partly because of L1 transfer. Another finding is that the L1 background and learning experience might affect the use of the modals while proficiency did not seem to have a strong impact on it.

## Keywords

hedges, possibility modals, academic writing

## 1 Introduction and Literature review

Hedges, devices which “indicate the writer’s decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition” (Hyland, 2005, p.178), have been considered important in academic writing (Hyland, *ibid*) and well investigated in corpus studies. Generally, these studies showed that NNWs tended to underuse it compared with NWs and that their texts seemed more assertive than they should be.

When looking at a particular hedging device, however, the result seemed contradicting. For example, Chen (2010) demonstrated that Chinese writers used the possibility modals as hedges less frequently than NWs, whereas Hyland and Milton (1997) found the opposite tendency through the investigation of university students in Hong Kong. As shown in these studies, it is not certain whether NNWs tend to

overuse, underuse or appropriately use the possibility modals as hedges. Another issue is that it does not seem to be clear that what factors could affect NNWs’ use of the modals as hedges. Indeed, previous research suggested several potential factors such as L1 transfer, the learning experience and proficiency. However, some of them, for example the learning experience, have not been thoroughly examined thus far probably because of the nature of corpus studies: it appears to be difficult to trace individual writers’ learning experience because the data are too large.

Considering these issues, this paper aims to investigate texts written by NWs and NNWs, in order to examine the differences between them regarding the use of the possibility modals as hedges. It also explores factors which could cause the differences. By necessity of looking into individual writers’ characteristics, this paper conducts a case study with the limited number of participants.

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Participants

The participants were seven international students who were on the MA course at a university in the UK. All of them were chosen from Applied Linguistics or TESOL, so as to minimise the effect of disciplinary differences on the use of hedges (Hyland, 2005). Their L1 background was diverse: Italian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Turkish, Japanese, Spanish and Chinese. These L1 speakers were selected because speakers of the same L1 backgrounds were investigated in previous studies, meaning that it is possible to compare the result of the current study with those found previously and to identify similarities and differences.

### 2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The participants were asked to provide the assignment essays that they had written during the MA course. For the sake of comparison, NWs' essays were collected from the MICUSP, an online corpus which is compiled at the University of Michigan. From these essays, NWs', NNWs' and each participant's corpora were compiled. These corpora were analysed with AntConc (Anthony, 2014): the instances of each possibility modals in each corpus were counted and then normalised per 10,000 words. A questionnaire survey was also conducted to the participants, asking their L1 back ground, their writing score on the IELTS test and their learning experience of academic writing.

### 3 Results

Table 1: Comparison between NWs and NNWs regarding the use of the possibility modals

	<i>may</i>	<i>might</i>	<i>could</i>	<i>can</i>	Total
NW	15.55	4.63	8.58	24.27	53.07
NNW	17.05	6.70	9.57	43.01	76.56

Note: The numbers in the table were the normalised frequency per 10,000 words

Table 2: Comparison among NNWs regarding the use of the possibility modals

	<i>may</i>	<i>might</i>	<i>could</i>	<i>can</i>	Total
Spa	10.79	11.62	3.32	61.83	87.55
Jap	9.74	0.00	4.61	26.13	42.02
Vie	22.92	0.00	17.94	23.92	64.79
Chi	9.71	8.02	8.45	44.76	70.94
Ita	13.12	23.05	8.35	20.67	65.18
Tur	49.64	3.55	4.33	27.97	85.49
Ind	3.45	0.69	19.99	95.81	119.93

Note: The numbers in the table were the normalised frequency per 10,000 words

As shown in Table 1, NNWs used the possibility modals more frequently than NWs. In particular, they overused *can* compared with NWs. When looking at the comparison among NNWs, namely Table 2, we can see variations in the use of each possibility modal as well as the possibility modals in total. In other words, each participant had their own tendency to overuse and underused particular modals for hedging.

### 4 Discussions and Conclusions

The results demonstrated that NNWs used the possibility modals more frequently than NWs. This can be largely attributed to the overuse of *can*. The additional analysis of the instances of *can* referring to the context showed that the Spanish and Indonesian participants, who particularly overused *can*, did not seem to use it

appropriately: they used it even when presenting claims which were not supported by data or evidence. In other words, they used *can* in the context where more tentative expressions such as *may*, *might* or *could* would be preferred. The inappropriate use of *can* by Spanish writers was also reported in previous studies (e.g. Neff, Dafouz, Herrera, Martínez, and Rica, 2003), which might indicate that this tendency may be partly owing to her L1 transfer. The variations among NNWs regarding the use of each possibility modal could be partly explained from the perspective of learning experience. The Turkish participant, who used *may* more than the other possibility modals, reported in the questionnaire that he was instructed to use *may* when he learned how to use hedges in one of the academic writing lessons. On the other hand, the Japanese participant, who used the possibility modals less frequently than NWs, reported that he did not attend any academic writing lesson and did not feel the need to use those modals in academic writing. As for the analysis in terms of the participants' proficiency, it did not show a correlation between the frequency of the possibility modals and the participants' IELTS score, which might suggest that proficiency is not a strong factor affecting the use of the possibility modals.

These discussions, however, were on the basis of the data taken from the limited number of the participants, meaning that the generalisability of the results is limited. Therefore, a larger scale study would be necessary to confirm if the findings of the current study are generalisable.

### 5. References

#### References

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