

Learning On-Line about Modality in Written and Oral English

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Abstract

Modality has recently become a subject of interest within the domain of English for specific purposes. Although the syntax of English modal verbs is relatively simple, the use of heterosemic modal auxiliaries (will, must, may, etc) is a complex and often difficult-to-learn notion that requires specific and long-term attention to master. This study examines the portrayal of modality in the on-line platforms created to accompany respectively the textbooks English for Careers:Technology, vol 2 (EFCT) and Minimum Competence in Scientific English and English (MCSE).

Sections from both on-line platforms were examined for types of activities and frequency of modal auxiliaries. The technical aspects of both platforms were compared, the frequency of modal verb tokens counted and compared with those found in other corpora. Finally, the contrasting approaches towards teaching modality are discussed.

Both websites rely heavily upon users inserting a missing word via diverse techniques and integrate oral documents, but do not contain images to aid learning. Despite the initial similarities between the two platforms, several major differences were found including use of oral documents, navigational tags, feedback, attention to grammar, and the approaches to teaching modality.

EFCT modality tasks may be helpful for students who need to practice differentiating between specific expressions, such as must and have to. MCSE appears to be more useful for acquiring a global vision of modality that includes modal auxiliaries as well as adjectives and adverbs. Given other corpora, certain students may need more practice with the modal verbs could and may. Furthermore, the websites are aptly titled supplementary materials, as neither offers declarative knowledge about the system of modality or its rhetorical uses.