Modality in an English Language Course Book

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Abstract

This paper examines how a widely used English language course book series deals with the issue of modality. After a review of the nature and range of modal expressions in English, attention is turned to some difficulties that may give rise to confusion among language learners. Brief details are given of the approach used to examine how modality features in the Headway series and in particular the treatment of this issue in the Upper intermediate materials (Soars, & Soars, 2005a; 2005b). Illustrative examples from the students' books are presented and discussed, and comments made about the advice given in the teacher's book. The paper concludes with a number of questions which teachers could ask themselves when using course books to teach modality, or any other category of English grammar, to their second language learners.

Keywords: modality, course book, English language, grammar

Introduction

The paper begins with a review of modality in English and a brief consideration of why it is important for second language users to be competent in this important, indeed inescapable, category of language. After a discussion of the various ways in which modality can be expressed in English, attention is focussed on why this is a challenging issue to teach to second language learners in terms of its grammatical, semantic and sociocultural complexity.

Whilst modality is covered in most, if not all, current English language course books, some questions need to be asked about the extent and type of explicit presentation, the grading and sequencing of modal expressions, and the extent of learning support provided. To examine the way in which these issues are currently addressed, it was decided to consider the coverage of modality in the *Headway* series, and in particular the upper intermediate materials (Soars, & Soars, 2005a, 2005b). The reason why *Headway* was chosen, among so many others readily available, is that it is very widely used in New Zealand and internationally, and is one with which the authors have worked on intensively. There is no implication that these course books are more or less useful, accurate or comprehensive than other similar series. The broad coverage of modality in the *Headway* series was initially analysed in terms of the content indicated in the 'maps' at the front of each of the books. Then at a deeper level, three units from the Upper-Intermediate materials were closely examined. Many, but by no means all, of the tasks and activities which focussed on modality at this level are discussed and evaluated in the substantive section of this paper.

The paper ends with a series of questions to prompt teachers' reflections on how they might address the treatment of modality – and perhaps other grammatical categories – in published course books.

Modality

Overview

Modality refers to indicative propositions such as “I married her”, imperative utterances like “Marry her!” or a subjunctive mood which is concerned with levels of speakers’ beliefs, wants or obligations – for example, “I wish to marry her”. It is with this latter that this paper is concerned– and specifically with the way it is expressed in terms of modality. There are generally (but not universally) considered to be three types of modality in English: *epistemic* modality is concerned with the speaker’s beliefs, and covers areas such as certainty, possibility, doubt and logical necessity – “He may be here tomorrow”; *optitative* modality refers to wishes and intentions to do something; – “He wants to be here tomorrow”; *deontic* modality refers to seeking or imposing obligation and permission – “You must be here tomorrow”. (Crowley, Lynch, Siegel, & Piau, 1995, pp. 217-218). Modality is a common feature of all languages, but the ways in which modality is encoded is language specific.

Modality in English

Modality is very frequently expressed in English by using one of a number of modal auxiliary verbs (Downing, & Locke, 1992, p. 384), but grammarians differ in the number of verbs that can properly be considered as modal auxiliaries. Palmer (1986, p. 33) regards nine as ‘core’, while Leech (1989) and Leech et al. (2001) identify eleven. Others (e.g., Swan, 1995; Parrott, 2000; Kennedy, 2000) add others. Kennedy (2000) uses the British National Corpus to map the following distribution – expressed in percentages – of modal verbs in spoken and written English:

Table 1: Distribution of Modal Verbs in Percentages – adapted from Kennedy (2003, p. 185)

will 22.9	*would* 19.9	*can* 18.3	*could* 11.6
may 7.8	*should* 7.6	*must* 4.9	*might* 4.2
shall 1.4	*used* to 0.8	*ought* to 0.4	*need* to 0.2
dare 0.1			

In addition to modal verbs, as Holmes (1988) and McCarthy (1992) point out, English frequently uses lexical modality. A very large number of open class words are inherently modal: these include verbs such as *allege* and *believe* (epistemic), *wish* and *desire* (optitative), *allow* and *beg* (deontic), and. Many nouns, adjectives and adverbs similarly are essentially modal in meaning – *intention, permission, probability*; *desirable, forbidden, probable*; *unwillingly, necessarily, probably*, etc. Lexical modality tends to be more salient in formal, academic prose. Holmes (1988) made the following calculation based on a limited corpus of spoken and written samples of language:

Table 2: Frequency of Modal Encoding in Percentages– adapted from Holmes (1988, p.27)

Class	*Spoken*	*Written*	*Total*
Modal verbs	42.4	36.8	40.2
Lexical verbs	31.5	35.9	33.3
Adverbials	21.5	12.8	18.1
Nouns	2.3	7.7	4.5
Adjectives	2.3	6.6	4.0
Total	100%	100%	100%

Frequency is one of the standard criteria (the others being utility and teachability/ learnability) for a linguistic item to be included in a syllabus. Thus, findings from such corpus studies should inform syllabus designers and course book writers when making decisions about grading and sequencing of both modal auxiliaries and lexical modality. There is actually very little research which might suggest which of these forms of modality can be most easily taught or learned, but the importance of second language learners acquiring an understanding, if not the use, of modality cannot be underestimated, as the following paragraphs will indicate.

Modality in speech is also realised through, or accompanied by, intonation, paralinguistic features and nonverbal features (Palmer, 1986; Holmes, 1983). For example, 'I might come' indicates some degree of uncertainty, whereas the same statement uttered with a prominent stress on *might* would imply even less certainty. Paralinguistically, the utterance might be made in a whisper or volubly, with a smile, or an intake of breath – any of which could add or detract from the strength of the modal intention of the speaker. Nonverbal gestures, such as a shoulder shrug, nose tap or raised eyebrow, may add yet another layer of meaning to the utterance. Of course, the extent of such modal use varies according to regional and sociocultural differences, as well as the speech repertoires of individuals.

Finally, it may be added that the communicative context influences the way modality is expressed: utterances that would be entirely correct in one setting, could be very inappropriate in another. "Would you be so kind as to pass me the salt" might, at a family meal in front of the television, be construed as sarcasm. This underlines the importance not only of appropriate modal expression, but also of accurate interpretation of the speaker's intention.

Teaching Modality to Second Language Learners

The Salience of Modality in Language

As may be evident from the above description (and indeed throughout this paper), modality is an extremely common feature of language, and second language learners and users need to be aware of its salience in English, how it is encoded in the linguistic system, and how to interpret the range of possible meanings. Not only does modality allow a fine degree of accuracy (or deliberate vagueness) in communication, it has considerable, pragmatic importance in polite interaction. Intercultural scenarios such as the following are not uncommon, and may unwittingly cause offence:

- Student to homestay mother: 'I want my breakfast now'.
- Customer pointing to an object in a shop: 'Give me one of those'.
- Learner to teacher: 'You must always correct my mistakes'.

There are a number of complex issues related to the form and use of modality which need to be taken into consideration in syllabus planning and classroom practice.

Linguistic Features

The grammatical features of modal auxiliaries differ from lexical verbs, for example:

- They are not inflected for the third person singular
- They always take the first position in a verb phrase
- They occur before the negative *not*
- They have a negative contraction
- They can be used in tag questions
- They precede the subject in yes-no questions

Further details can be found in many grammar reference books, such as Leech (1989), Leech, Cruikshank, & Ivanic (2001), Swan (1995) and – most comprehensively – in Quirk,

Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik (1985). These formal features of modal verbs may well cause confusion among language learners, not least the omission of the third person singular –s.

Semantic Ambiguity

In addition to formal complexity, modal verbs are marked by semantic ambiguity: there is no obvious one-to-one relationship between the modal auxiliary and its meaning. For example, the sentence "He may come to the party this evening" may be interpreted as either epistemic (indicating a degree of uncertainty) or deontic (expressing permission). Similarly, 'You shall see him' may be an instruction or a promise. Such ambiguity is, of course, usually resolved by contextual clues, as well as intonation patterns, paralinguistic features and / or nonverbal language. Students' attention needs to be drawn to these issues if they are to express, and understand, the implications of modal expression.

The Influence of the First Language

Second language learners are influenced by their first language; therefore, cross-linguistic issues need to be addressed. For example, Japanese does not use auxiliary verbs, and has fewer verbs directly expressing modality than English; modality in Japanese is frequently implicitly expressed through paralinguistic means, and the language "has an impressive inventory of devices for injecting vagueness and tentativeness into utterances" (Thompson, 1987, p. 306). Chinese also has relatively few modal expressions and speakers prefer to make requests directly, using basic action verbs that indicate the desired action (Gao, 1999, p. 74). This means that, to English speakers, Japanese may seem vague while Chinese speakers may appear to be too direct. Languages that have apparently similar modal verbs to English differ both in form and semantic value. In Italian, for example, verbs such as *potere* (can) and *dovere* (must) are inflected in the same way as lexical verbs in that language and

they have a more restricted semantic range, which means that they are less ambiguous than typical English modal verbs. Lexical modality in English, the central meaning of which is contained in the root word with a range of derivational suffixes, may be confusing to isolating languages, such as Thai, Chinese, and Malay, where the morphological structure of words does not change.

Cross Cultural Considerations

However, it is not only formal linguistic considerations that may give rise to misunderstanding or confusion: there is the issue of cultural distance between users of different languages. For example, sociocultural rules differ greatly as to the circumstances in which obligation is expected or imposed (Kwachka, & Basham, 1990). Hinkel (1995) reported a study carried out on several hundred Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, and Vietnamese students who had received extensive instruction in American university ESL programmes and who had relatively high English language proficiency (a mean TOEFL score of 583). When essays written by these students were compared to essays written by students who were first language users, there were considerable differences in the deontic modals used. The conclusion made was that the reasons for the divergence may lie in culturally bound understandings of the nature of obligation and necessity and implicit adherence to sociocultural norms and codes fundamental to Anglo-American, and Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist cultures.

The Study

The Role of Course Books

Course books may be more or less helpful for the teaching and learning of English as second language (Allwright, 1981; Brumfit, 1980; Hutchinson, & Torres, 1994; Crawford,

1995; Richards, 1998; Cortazzi, & Jin, 1999). However, they are very widely used – as Richards (1998, p. 127) points out:

> *In many parts of the world, much of the teaching of English goes on outside the state school sector in private language schools. Teachers in these schools may or may not be native speakers of English, but they often have little or no formal teacher training. The textbook and the teacher's manual are their primary teaching resource.*

Thus many teachers in New Zealand, as elsewhere, rely on course books to provide coherence to their lesson planning and useful language data and clear explanations – and often rely on them for both pedagogic and linguistic advice. Richards (1998, p. 130) goes on to say:

> *Many teacher's manuals for ESL course books are hence not only guides on how to use the book but also serve as teacher training manuals for inexperienced teachers, with detailed advice on such things as how to use small group teaching, approaches to grammar teaching in a communicative class, strategies for error correction.*

It is not the role of the course book to teach; that is the teacher's responsibility. However, it is incumbent upon course book writers to provide the teacher with accurate linguistic information and appropriately clear advice on the pedagogic application of that language data – and with this in mind, this paper focuses specifically on modality.

The Treatment of Modality in Course Books

Modality is dealt with in most, if not all, current English language course books, and it is useful to consider the range of modal expressions covered, the extent and type of explicit presentation, the grading and sequencing of modal expressions, and whether the material in the course book accurately reflects actual and authentic use. To examine the extent to which these issues are addressed, it was decided to consider the coverage of modality in the *Headway* series (Soars, & Soars, 1998, 2000a; 2000b; 2002; 2003; 2005a; 2005b). The reason

why this series was chosen, among so many others readily available, is that it is very widely used in New Zealand, and is one with which the authors have worked. There is no implication that these course books are more or less useful, accurate or comprehensive than other similar series. The *Headway* books were analysed in terms of the modal content indicated in the 'maps' at the front of each of the books. Then three units from the upper-intermediate books (Soars, & Soars, 2005a; 2005b) were more closely examined because they include topics and activities that would seem to lend themselves to modal use. No conclusions will be offered, but rather the intention of the study is to facilitate reflection on decisions made by the course book writers and designers so that lessons and units can be more appropriately planned and prepared to suit the needs of their particular learners.

The Treatment of Modality Across the *Headway* Series

Initially, attention was paid to the book maps at the front of each of the students' books in the *Headway* series with a view to considering the extent to which modality is covered across the five levels from beginner to upper intermediate. It needs to be recognised that these maps may not fully represent what is actually introduced, explained and/or practised in the individual units. Nevertheless, it is here that many classroom teachers would turn to preview what is covered in the particular course book. Although it was found that modality is not explicitly referred to in any of the *Headway* book maps, modal expressions are present in several of the example sentences of many units.

A case in point is the book map of the upper intermediate level materials (Soars, & Soars, 2005a; 2005b): only Unit 8 (subtitled *Modal auxiliary verbs & Exaggeration and understatement*) explicitly focusses on modal expressions but Units 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, and 11 have examples of modality in the example sentences. Since all of these units deal only with modal verbs, it would appear that the course book writers assume that modality is exclusively a

matter of modal auxiliaries. If this were the case, it would seem – in the light of the points made above – a very narrow view of this complex feature of English grammar. It may be thought, in the light of some current theories of learnability and second language acquisition, that not all ESL students may require instruction in the more complex features of modality, and indeed some modal forms and meanings may not be amenable to classroom instruction. Nevertheless, the lack of explicit attention to the various forms of lexical modality – which is certainly a teachable area of language – may be seen as a noteworthy limitation as regards upper intermediate students.

The Treatment of Modality in *Headway Upper Intermediate*

For this study, it was decided to look more closely at upper intermediate books because students at this level might be expected to understand and use a range of modal expressions – particularly those preparing to undertake academic study in tertiary institutions. As indicated above, a number of units feature the use of modal verbs. Additionally, the writing exercises at the end of units 4, 5, and 8 seem to lend them selves to modal use: Unit 4 includes note-taking and research and report writing; Unit 5 deals with formal and informal letters; and Unit 8 also contains letter-writing activities. Thus this study focussed on these three units to examine the extent and way that modal expressions are introduced, explained and practised. The analysis covered the material in the students' book – including the practice activities, written tasks, 'Stop and check' sections, progress tests, grammar sections and tape transcripts. The clarity, accuracy and extent of information and advice given about modality in the teacher's book were also considered. In the brief reports on the individual units that follow, only some of the activities that deal with modal expression will be discussed in any detail.

Unit 4: *It's a deal! Expressing quantity & Social expressions*

Following a reading text in the students' book entitled 'Three thousand years of world trade' (pp. 42-43), the following questions are posed to stimulate discussion:

- 1. Do you agree that people's tastes today are more homogenous? Why? Which products do you know of that are found in most parts of the world today?
- 2. What does your country export? What are the reasons for this?

Question 1 could possibly be discussed without using any modal expressions, but the discussion would be much more natural if the students were to incorporate some form of modality in their speech, particularly as the question is asking for opinions – statements of beliefs (epistemic modality) – and are not guided to do so. Similarly, the second question expects students to give reasons, and while perhaps not unavoidable, some degree of epistemic modality could be expected in natural responses. The teacher's book contains no advice here on how the teacher might deal with modal meaning and its use, whether pre-emptively or in reaction to student production. It needs to be borne in mind that in the first four units of the book, there has been no explicit revision of previously covered, or introduction to new, modal expressions – despite the high potential for their use in activities such as this. It is possible to argue that since some of the modal verbs have been introduced and practised in the lower level books in the series, students at this stage might be able produce modal expressions spontaneously and appropriately. However, it may also be felt that at least some form-focussed instruction might have been suggested in this *Headway* unit. Instead, the only advice given in the teacher's book (p. 44) is "These two questions could be discussed in small groups, or as a class. You decide." This may seem patronising to a trained ESL teacher, and unhelpful to one with little experience or linguistic knowledge.

On page 45, the students are told to work in groups on a ‘business maze’. The instructions are:

> ‘You have reached one of life’s crossroads! You’ve been made redundant, and some big decisions about your future have to be made. Read the problem on the card and talk together until you all agree on what to do next. Your teacher will give you your next card with more information and more decisions. Carry on talking until you get out of the maze. You might succeed, or you might fail!’

This is the first card in the business maze:

> *You were working as a chief in a large restaurant. You have been made redundant as the restaurant is being converted into a cinema. You have received $10,000 redundancy money. You have a family to support, and cannot survive for long without an income. You want to start a restaurant in your local town as you believe there is a need for one. It is going to require more than your $10,000, so what are you going to do?*
>
> *Approach the bank for extra funding to get your plans underway. Go to #8.*
>
> *Go into business with a partner. A friend of yours was also made redundant and received the same amount of money. Why not do it together? Go to #22.*

When they have completed the maze, the students are required to report back to the class what they might have done differently. In such a discussion, the frequent use of some form of modal expression is virtually unavoidable, yet – again – there is no reference to this either in the students’ materials or in the advice given in the teacher’s book.

On the same page, there are activities based on a topic entitled ‘An English restaurant in France? You must be joking!’ The students are asked to listen to the interviewer’s introduction, and answer these questions.

- a. Why might it not be wise to open an English restaurant in Lyon?
- b. What do the French think of English food?

The first of these questions is itself modal in form and it is unlikely that students would be able to satisfactorily answer this without using some modal expression. It might be thought that answers to these exercises would be better formulated if the students had been asked to 'notice' modal forms prior to doing this exercise, but there is no such suggestion in the teacher's book.

The listening task is followed by a discussion focussing on these questions

- What sort of businesses might succeed in your town?
- Do any of you want to start a business?

Here again, modal usage – whether of modal verbs or lexical modality – would be very likely in a discussion of these issues. There are also opportunities for students to be made aware of, and perhaps even use, appropriate paralinguistic and nonverbal means of expressing their opinions and aspirations.

In summary, in Unit 4, at no time was modality directly referred to, neither was the students' existing knowledge of modal expressions explicitly revised. In the first part of the unit, the course book writers provide several activities with high potential for modal use and yet there is no direct reference to this language category. In the activities towards the end of the unit, the use of modality is almost unavoidable. The teacher's book does not give any guidance on how issues relating to modality could be presented by the teacher, or how the teacher might scaffold the students' acquisition and use of modal expressions.

Unit 5: *Whatever will be, will be. Future forms & Telephone conversations*

Much modal use is focussed on beliefs, wishes and actions about or in the future, and it is therefore not surprising that this unit contains material in which modal expressions frequently occur. The unit begins with 'Test your grammar' (p. 47) and students are asked to

look at a series of cartoons about future activities and then to match a line of dialogue to each one:

- a I'll see you tomorrow. Bye!
- b The train to Dover leaves at ten past ten.
- c We're having a party next Saturday. Can you come?
- d Tomorrow's weather will be warm and sunny.
- e Where shall we go on holiday this year?
- f I'm going to lead an honest life from now on.
- g In a hundred years' time, we'll all be driving solar-powered cars.
- h The builders say they'll have finished by the end of the month.

They are then told to underline the future forms. Interestingly, the teacher's books suggests that the students should underline not only the 'future form' (which implies that that there is some grammatical marker for future time in English, which there is not) but also the lexical verb – for example: *f. I'm going to lead an honest life from now on* and *g. we'll all be driving solar powered cars*: this ambiguity might be confusing for students. The teacher's book points out that "will is used twice, once as an auxiliary verb to express future time, and once as a modal auxiliary to express willingness or intention". To the present authors, it seems rather that this form (in full or in contraction) occurs four times in these sentences, and at least one of these uses is as a prediction. This is the first (implicit) reference to the concept of modality in the teacher's book, but there is no other information about modal meaning or use at this stage.

The above tasks are followed by a 'practice bank' (p. 48), where students are told: 'Use each expression once to fill the gaps in the pairs of sentences'. The nine pairs include:

c. *are you going to do / will you do*

So you're going to America for a year! What ……. when you get there?

I’m sure you’ll pass your exams, but what …… if you fail them?

d. *’ll come* / *’m coming*

I _____ with you if you like.

I _____ with you whether you like it or not.

It is possible for either form in these two examples to be used by expert users of English – as well as teachers of this book. The teacher’s book gives answers to this task, but does not provide any reasons for the choice. Upper intermediate learners probably need more support than is provided in the materials to make sense of the distinctions (if that is what they are) in (c), and even more to understand the implied threat in the second statement in (d).

The heavy emphasis throughout this unit on future forms includes: a detailed ‘grammar box’ on page 49, which reviews the present simple and continuous; a follow-up gap-fill task requiring the identification of the present and future simple and continuous forms; a pair of question-and-answer task about future possibilities; a ‘language review’ in which seven forms are identified, explained and exemplified; a reference to the grammar reference section at the back of the student’s book; and a reading activity on prenuptial agreements with questions for discussion stimulated by the modal question, ‘What do you think?’.

Towards the end of Unit 5 (p. 55), there is an activity based on formal and informal letters, in which an example is given of a letter to the reservations manager of a hotel. Students have to discriminate between more or less formal expressions in bold font in the following:

Dear Jack/Sir or Madam

I am writing/This is just a note to confirm a reservation that was made/I asked you for this morning by telephone. The reservation, for a couple of/two nights is for me/myself, David Cook. I want/would like a room with a bathroom, from 12-14 July inclusive. I

will be attending/'m going to pop into the Trade Fair that is being held/ is going on in Bristol that week.….

Best wishes/Yours faithfully

David Cook

They are then asked to write an informal letter to a friend asking 'if he/she could put you up for a few nights'. It is likely that a formal letter would contain elements of lexical modality, but – as can be seen from the above – no attention is paid to this. In fact, the course book writers do not deal with modality in any manner in this activity, but rather students are asked to define what makes a letter formal in terms of (according to the teacher's book) where the address is situated, the use of titles and the avoidance of slang. The authenticity of the task is further undermined by the unlikelihood, these days, of writing such a letter to a hotel (rather than completing an online application) and – perhaps even more unlikely – in writing to a friend to ask to be put up.

In summary, Unit 5 contains many activities which involve the use of modal verbs, but – in our opinion – the materials do not address key issues with sufficient clarity, or fully assist the teacher to develop students' competence in their use of modal expressions of futurity. For example, the 'grammar review' referred to above, states that *will* and *going to* are used in prediction, decisions and intentions. It is not until the following, smaller section entitled "Other uses of will and shall" that modality is specifically referred to. The first example restates *will* as a predictor and the example sentence is grammatically identical to the previous example sentences. However, its inclusion in "Other uses" clearly suggests something different, which may confuse students (and, perhaps, less experienced teachers). There is then a specific mention of modality and the statement that *will* can be used to offer, show willingness, make a request, refusal, a promise or a prediction about the present. The stated uses of *shall* include: asking for instructions or a decision, offering to help, or making a

suggestion. None of these modal uses are exploited in the activities in the students' materials, nor are suggestions made in the teacher's book as to how they might be introduced, noticed, explained, practised or otherwise drawn to the students' attention.

Unit 8: *Famous for fifteen minutes – Modal auxiliary verbs & Exaggeration and understatement*

In this unit, modality is for the first time explicitly addressed, but – as its title suggests – the treatment is restricted to modal verbs. The unit begins with 'Test your grammar' (p. 77) and the following statement: 'All modal verbs can be used to express degrees of probability. Which of these sentences express probability? Put a /. Which don't? Put a *x*'

Example: She must be very rich. / (probability)

You must do your homework. *X*

The first sentence in the instruction might lead students to think that probability is the only notional category for which modal verbs are used. It is true that, later in the exercise, other uses of modality are mentioned and this could well be a very good opportunity to raise the students' consciousness about the broader categories of modality in English. The teacher's book (p. 75) says: "Modal verbs express five broad areas of meaning: probability, obligation, ability, permission and volition. Students at this level will be familiar with these concepts… Do not worry too much about the differences between *must*, *should*, and *will*." Apparently, the course book writers are unaware of the cross-cultural implications of studies such as that carried out by Hinkel (1995). On the same page, after providing a set of model answers which include the terms *willingness*, *obligation* and *volition*, the writers state: "When accepting descriptions of concepts from your students do not necessarily expect them to be expressed as in the answers above. It is sufficient for them to use whatever means they can to get the

meanings across, including L1." It might have been helpful for the writers to suggest what such 'means' might include.

A similar comment can be made about the task 'Other uses of modal verbs' on the following page, which follows a reading activity based on newspaper texts:

1. All of the comments below were made by people in the two newspaper stories.

Who do you think is speaking to who?

I'*ve had to* look after her since I was 14.

I *couldn't* believe my eyes.

She *won't* get up.

I *ought* to call the police. etc.

2. What concepts do the verbs in italics express?

Permission? Obligation/advice? Ability? Willingness/refusal?

On the next page, under the heading 'Grammar questions', the following tasks are set:

1. Which of these statements express the greatest degree of certainty? Which express less certainty? Which expresses the least?

- That*'ll / won't* be the postman.
- That *must / can't* be the postman.
- That *should* be the postman.
- That *could / couldn't* be the postman.
- That *may* be the postman.
- That *might* be the postman.

All of the above statements could be in answer to the question – *Who is that at the door?*

2. Change each one to answer the question – *who was that at the door?*

While there could well be a wide range of interpretations among expert users about the ranking of degrees of certainty, the first task could lend itself to some interesting discussion, and consciousness-raising, of epistemic modality. However the transformations required for the second task are unwieldy, implausible and perhaps nonsensical. The task may also lead students to believe that past-tense *forms* of modal verbs are directly related to past *time* – which, of course, is often not the case. Alternatively, it may be the course book writers' intention to elicit the use of the perfect form to express past time in other auxiliary verbs – for example, (a) 'That will have been the postman' and (b) 'That may have been the postman'. Yet again, there is a lack of clear explanation and appropriate guidance in the teacher's book as to how to scaffold the learners' understanding of this complex area.

The title of the activity 'Stress and intonation' on page 80 might lead one to think that the course book writers are finally taking account of these phonological features as they relate specifically to modal expression. Students are told to 'Work in pairs. Take it in turns to be A or B'.

- Student B should respond to A's remarks by using the words in brackets. Make changes where necessary and continue the conversations further.

  Example

  A I've never seen Tina eat meat.

  B I know. She must be a vegetarian.

  (must, vegetarian)

  A But I've seen her eat fish.

- 2 T8.3. Listen to the sample answers, paying particular attention to the stress and intonation. Are they the same as your replies?

However, this potentially valuable task is not fully exploited, as the students are not actually asked to focus on, or notice, the particular intonation patterns associated with modals such as “She must be a vegetarian’ in the example above. It might seem that the course book writers are unaware that phonology has a large part to play in modal expression, or else they do not think that this is an important matter to raise with students at this level. The teacher’s book (p. 78) does instruct teachers to “Encourage good stress and intonation at all stages” but no comment is made concerning the paralinguistic features of modality

There are many other tasks and activities in this unit which deal with modal verbs, but the only other example to be discussed here appears towards the end. On page 86, the students are told to ‘Read the fan letter written to an actor called Zubin Varla, who played the role of Judas Iscariot in Jesus Christ Superstar. What is the aim of each paragraph? Discuss possible endings for each one.’

> *I think Judas is an extremely difficult part because everyone knows he is a traitor, And they hate him. But you portrayed him in such a way, and with such passion, that I think we began to understand his confused feelings. The other members of the cast ….*

There is no suggestion in the teacher’s book that the students should be encouraged to use the core modals that they have been practising in previous tasks. Perhaps this is so obvious that it need not be stated – although elsewhere in the teacher’s book, specific mention is frequently made of the need to recycle language features in focus, for example on page 77: “This is the stage to push them to use the modals.” Moreover, despite the fact that the fan letter contains a great deal of lexical modality, there is no mention of this in either the students’ or teacher’s book. An implication to be drawn is that the course book writers appear to be unaware of the salience of lexical modality in English noted by Holmes (1983), or else do not consider it relevant to students at the upper intermediate level.

Some Implications of this Study

As a result of completing this study, we feel that there are a number of questions which teachers might wish to ask themselves about the treatment of modality in published course books like the *Headway* series. Among them:

- How many ways of expressing modality are treated?
- Is the sequencing of coverage across book levels appropriate?
- Is the relative frequency of different modal verbs in English usage accurately reflected?
- Is the formal complexity of modal verbs clearly explained?
- To what extent, and at which points, is lexical modality dealt with?
- How much attention is paid to intonation, paralinguistic features and nonverbal behaviour?
- To what extent is the use of modal forms necessary or likely in any given task?
- How much explicit form-focussed instruction do students need before or after the task?
- Do the exercises help students to clarify differences in use between alternative forms of modal expression?

This study has focussed on the issue of modality, but similar questions might be posed about any other grammatical category in published course materials. In reflecting on such questions, teachers will be aware that it is not the role of course books to *teach* the students to understand and use the language; that is the task of the teacher. Course books are intended to be used as resources to enable the teacher to more effectively bring about learning among their students, and (as teachers well know) every class is different, and attention needs to be paid to the educational, linguistic and sociocultural background of their students. It is not reasonable to expect published course books to do this; they can only provide the most general pedagogic guidance for the teacher to follow. The difficulty of doing so effectively is compounded by the wide range of teachers using the materials in many different contexts.

This study has suggested that there are areas of modality that may not be in the firm grasp of the particular course book writers. This should not be a matter of surprise. However, as Richards (1998, p. 131) has argued, “there is a general expectation among teachers that textbooks have been carefully developed through consultation with teachers and specialists and through field testing, and that the exercises and activities they contain will achieve what they set out to do”. Course book writers are not expert descriptive linguists, but usually very experienced teachers who have a professional, rather than an academic, grasp of English grammar – and they have to make difficult choices about which language elements to include in their books, and where to place them and to what extent and how they should be covered. Descriptive linguists (for example, Palmer, 1986) have written entire books on categories such as modality and still there is uncertainty, debate and controversy about their formal and semantic features. There is clearly a need for systematic research to investigate both teachers’ beliefs about their use of course books and the teaching of grammar, as well as the teachability and learnability of different features of modal expression. It is to be hoped that this study will help teachers to supplement their knowledge about modality, both through academic study and by observing how language is actually used in natural contexts – and also perhaps by closely examining the course books they use in a critical, but sympathetic, manner.

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