

FEBRUARY 2012

TESOL HOME

Convention

Jobs

Book Store

TESOL Community



# AL Forum

The Newsletter of the Applied Linguists Interest Section



## ARTICLES

### HELP IN WRITING FROM SOURCES: EFFECTIVE USE OF MODALS AS REPORTING EXPRESSIONS

*Susan Olmstead-Wang, University of Alabama, Birmingham, USA*

When learning to write from academic sources, developing writers need to know how to identify, select, and use appropriate reporting verbs. In addition, they need to employ modals and other hedging strategies to create precise statements about degree of certainty. Learning to notice and identify modal and hedging phrases helps student writers understand author stance and degree of certainty in the sources they are reading and from which they will draw situating literature for their own writing. Writers need to select modals and hedging phrases with educated awareness of genre and audience expectations and to be aware of rhetorical purposes and of the strength of claim established by use of the modals they choose. Understanding the limits and strengths of one's research findings and using appropriate modals to convey precise statements of degree of certainty are central to academic writing tasks.



Basic writing challenges include understanding source material and reflecting it accurately, without plagiarizing. For advanced writers of science texts or research journal articles, an additional challenge is to use the correct modal types and verbs for each of four specific sections: Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion (IMRD). Introduction sections often call for modal + reporting verbs to set up the research question or the problem to be solved. Methods sections have past tense verbs in passive voice and limited use of modals. Some Methods sections call for definitions which may be stated with present tense *to be* verbs (*is, are*). Results sections in hypothesis-testing studies often use past tense to report data while those in descriptive studies use present tense (Zeiger, 2000, p. 166). Discussion sections use a variety of modals in order to state the implications or importance of the study findings.

In addition to being aware of the full range of English modals, writers in specific fields or subfields need to notice and employ the modals and reporting verbs preferred by their communities of practice. The relationship of source literature to the current study includes demonstrating how the new study or material may be based on, but branch away from, the source material and positioning the writer's evaluation of its claims. Conveying precise degree of certainty about the claims of the new material may vary

## In This Issue

- LEADERSHIP UPDATES
- ARTICLES
- ABOUT THIS COMMUNITY

## Tools

- SEARCH BACK ISSUES
- FORWARD TO A FRIEND
- PRINT ISSUE
- RSS FEED

## Submissions, please

We are seeking submissions of work produced by graduate students for our next issue of *AL Forum*. For details, please see the About This Community section. E-mail [Olga](#) or [Jana](#) with questions.

## Welcome, Dr Hinkel!

We welcome Eli Hinkel as our new chair-elect. Dr. Hinkel teaches ESL and applied linguistics and has published extensively on L2 grammar, writing, and culture. Congratulations, Dr. Hinkel!

over the course of the writing and drafting process as writers complete experiments and develop clearer statements of their findings.

### DEVELOPING STRATEGIC MODAL USE THROUGH EXPLICIT NOTICING AND TRACKING

There are many ways to approach the study of modals including explicit teaching of various reporting verbs plus modal auxiliaries and careful thought about the intended “scale of likelihood for truth and falsehood” ranging from impossibility to possibility to certainty (Leech & Svartvik, 1994, p. 397) or from weaker to stronger degrees of probability (Swales & Feak, 2009, p. 126). In addition, explicit instruction about types of auxiliary verbs and some special past tense forms of modals (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 138) can engage adult learners’ fully developed metacognitive skills and motivations.

Students can also benefit from guided practice in noticing and performing modals suitable to the target genre or text type. Student writers can develop customized charts to help them track the degree of certainty implied in various combinations of reporting verbs + modals. For example, writers can pair the phrases *indicates that* and *may indicate that* and note that the first signals more certainty than the second. Writers can organize their explicit and implicit knowledge of field-specific, high-frequency verbs and modal pairs into lists or charts that show varying degrees of claim strength. Reading both broadly and narrowly, students can build up lists of key modal words and phrases for use in their writing.

International students writing in English will face the difficulty of using features from different grammar categories across languages. They may benefit from noticing and tracking some similarities or differences in the functions of auxiliaries and other features between their L1 and English. Because so much of my practice involves reviewing the writing of Mandarin speakers, I encourage writers to notice specific differences in modal use, especially where structures are not fully parallel between English and Mandarin (e.g., verbal aspect).

### GUIDED FEEDBACK TO FOCUS ACCURATE MODAL USE

In addition to explicit teaching of modals, guided feedback over the drafting process will help advanced student writers position statements within the correct sections of their IMRD formats and articulate the right degrees of certainty as their experiments, literature search, writing process, and authorial voice all develop simultaneously. The following three samples show an early draft of a nursing dissertation in which the writer works at placing the right material into the right section (here I, M, and R) and at developing precision in degree of certainty. Note that the writer’s internal citations are retained and that no claim is made here as to how accurately the writer reflected or summarized the source material. (Samples are used with permission, emphasis is added, and reviewer’s comments to the writer are in square brackets.)

#### Introduction Section Draft

“Growing evidence shows that today’s student nurses will enter a profession demanding increased levels of preparedness, which they may or may not be able to meet (Katz, Peifer, & Armstrong, 2010).”

“While faculty may utilize a particular evaluation tool or rubric to appraise a student’s performance, faculty critique specific areas of the student’s behaviors or skills based upon personal values or standards that perhaps may produce variation in how each faculty ultimately grade the student.”

[note the softener “perhaps”; you may gain confidence of claim over the drafting process]

#### Methods Section Draft

“When a topic is understudied or nonexistent in the literature, performing qualitative studies to establish basic groundwork knowledge is essential to

lay a foundation for further research (Polit & Beck, 2008). Descriptions of nursing faculty's cognitive processes when evaluating a student's performance **must** precede any attempts to determine concepts and theory development (Brink & Wood, 1998) and/or the development of a performance measurement tool. Research **must** add to the general knowledge base on a subject before further active investigations begin."

[compare strength of **is** and **must**]

"By thoroughly understanding what mental methods faculty use and what cognitive mechanisms they employ, we **can** better **understand** the situation when evaluating a student."

"By having faculty think aloud, insight into what cognitive procedures they utilize when formulating a decision on how the student has performed **can be gained**."

[track development of strength of this claim through the drafting process]

### Research Design Section Draft

"Incorporating two videos **will** provide two different situations for evaluation and **will** allow for completion within a reasonable timeframe of one hour per faculty member."

[modal will change (strengthen) once the research design is approved/implemented]

"A cognitive walkthrough **will potentially reveal** specific mental steps and techniques used by the faculty in evaluating each student (ref)."

[ **will+potentially** ⇒ consider using **should reveal**]

"Recurrent themes and categories **should emerge** providing data for the researcher to begin making inferences upon the data."

[**will** is stronger than **should provide**;this is a reasonable expectation for qualitative approach]

### CONCLUSION

By combining explicit training about modals with careful review of developing drafts, writing teachers and coaches can help developing writers hone their awareness and use of modal auxiliaries so that they succeed in situating their research questions and studies within the existing literature and in conveying the desired degree of certainty. Clear function knowledge and skill in using modal auxiliaries will help writers neither overstate nor understate the significance of their findings.

### REFERENCES

- Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1994). *A communicative grammar of English* (2nd ed.). London: Longman.
- Swales, J., & Feak, C. (2009). *Academic writing for graduate students* (2nd ed.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Zeiger, M. (2000). *Essentials of writing biomedical research papers*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

---

*Susan Olmstead-Wang teaches linguistics courses for the English as an International Language master's degree and dissertation writing courses at the University of Alabama, Birmingham. She has authored numerous articles and several book chapters on Mandarin-English code-switching and English for medical purposes. She enjoys conducting workshops in English language research article writing and English as a medium of instruction in medical universities in Chinese-speaking environments.*