

Challenges of Modality in Written Texts by Yoruba-English Bilingual Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper investigates the challenges associated with the use of modality in the written English of Yoruba-English bilingual secondary school students in Ekiti State, Nigeria. As a complex linguistic feature, modality presents significant difficulties for second language (L2) learners, particularly in contexts where the first language (L1) and L2 have different modal systems. Through document analysis of student writing samples and a comprehensive review of relevant literature, this study identifies common errors in the use of epistemic and deontic modality, examines the influence of Yoruba (L1) on students' use of English (L2) modality, and explores pedagogical factors contributing to these challenges. The findings suggest that L1 interference, coupled with inadequate instructional practices and insufficient exposure to authentic English texts, contributes significantly to students' difficulties with modality. The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations for a more explicit and contrastive approach to teaching modality in Nigerian secondary schools, aiming to improve students' grammatical accuracy and communicative competence in English. This study contributes to the broader understanding of second language acquisition in multilingual African contexts and has important implications for English language pedagogy in Nigeria.

Keywords: modality, bilingualism, second language acquisition, language interference, error analysis

1. Introduction

English continues to hold a dominant position in Nigeria as the official language of government, education, and commerce. Consequently, proficiency in English, particularly in writing, is a critical determinant of academic and professional success (Aduwa-Ogiegbaen & Iyamu, 2006:1). However, for the majority of Nigerian students, English is a second language (L2), learned in an environment where indigenous languages, such as Yoruba, serve as the first language (L1). This bilingual context presents both opportunities and challenges for language acquisition. While bilingualism has been shown to have cognitive benefits, the linguistic distance between a student's L1 and L2 can lead to significant learning hurdles, a phenomenon known as language interference or negative transfer (Odlin, 1989:1).

One of the most complex and challenging areas of English grammar for L2 learners is modality. Modality refers to the linguistic expression of a speaker's or writer's attitude towards the truth or reality of a proposition, encompassing concepts such as possibility, necessity, obligation, and permission (Palmer, 2001:1). The subtle semantic distinctions and complex syntactic forms associated with English modal verbs (e.g., *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *should*, *will*, *would*) make them a persistent source of error for learners from various linguistic backgrounds (Hyland, 1998:1). Research in second language acquisition has consistently demonstrated that modal verbs represent one of the most problematic areas of English grammar for non-native speakers, with learners often struggling to distinguish between the subtle meanings conveyed by different modals and to use them appropriately in different communicative contexts (Chen, 2010:1).

In the context of Ekiti State, a predominantly Yoruba-speaking region in southwestern Nigeria, secondary school students face the dual task of mastering the standard curriculum while navigating the complexities of English grammar (Adedeji, 2024:8). The challenges they encounter in using modality in their written work have not been extensively studied, representing a significant gap in the literature on Nigerian English and second language acquisition. This paper aims to address this gap by providing a detailed analysis of the modality-related challenges faced by Yoruba-English bilingual students in Ekiti State, examining both the linguistic sources of these difficulties and the pedagogical factors that contribute to them.

1.1 Research Objectives

This study has the following objectives:

- i. to identify and categorize the common errors related to modality in the written English of Yoruba-English bilingual secondary school students in Ekiti State.
- ii. to analyze the potential influence of Yoruba (L1) on the students' use of English (L2) modality, considering the structural and semantic differences between the two modal systems.
- iii. to explore the pedagogical factors that may contribute to these challenges, including teacher competence, instructional methods, and curriculum design.

- iv. to propose evidence-based recommendations for improving the teaching and learning of modality in Nigerian secondary schools, with particular attention to the needs of bilingual learners.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This research is significant for several reasons. Theoretically, it contributes to the fields of second language acquisition and contact linguistics by providing empirical data on the acquisition of a complex grammatical feature in a specific bilingual context. The study addresses an important gap in the literature, as most research on modality acquisition has focused on learners of European languages or learners in developed countries, with relatively little attention paid to African contexts or to the specific challenges faced by speakers of Niger-Congo languages learning English. Practically, the findings of this study can inform the development of more effective pedagogical materials and teaching strategies for English language instruction in Nigeria. By shedding light on the specific difficulties students face, this paper aims to equip educators with the knowledge needed to better support their students' linguistic development and enhance their overall academic achievement. Furthermore, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how cross-linguistic influence operates in multilingual contexts and provides insights that may be applicable to other bilingual populations in Nigeria and beyond.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 Modality in English: Definition and Theoretical Foundations

Modality is a fundamental aspect of human language, allowing speakers to express their judgments, attitudes, and assessments of reality. In English, modality is primarily realized through a closed class of modal auxiliary verbs, but it can also be expressed through a variety of other linguistic resources, including modal adverbs (*perhaps, certainly, possibly*), adjectives (*possible, necessary, likely*), and lexical verbs (*believe, think, seem*) (Bybee & Fleischman, 1995:1). The concept of modality has its roots in modal logic, a branch of philosophy concerned with the expression of possibility and necessity (Nuyts, 2008:1).

Linguists typically distinguish between two main types of modality: epistemic and deontic, though some scholars recognize additional categories such as dynamic modality.

Epistemic modality expresses the speaker's degree of certainty or belief in the truth of a proposition. It is concerned with knowledge and belief, ranging on a scale from possibility (*It may rain*) to probability (*It probably will rain*) to necessity (*It must be raining*). Epistemic modals are speaker-oriented, reflecting the speaker's assessment of the likelihood or certainty of an event or state (Fintel, 2006:1).

Deontic modality expresses notions of obligation, permission, and prohibition. It is concerned with directing or influencing behavior, as in *You must finish your homework* (obligation) or *You may leave now* (permission). Deontic modals are addressee-oriented, reflecting the speaker's judgment about what is required, permitted, or forbidden (Palmer, 2001:1).

Dynamic modality expresses ability or volition, as in *He can swim* (ability) or *I will help you* (volition) (Coates, 1983:1).

The complexity of the English modal system lies not only in the number of modal verbs but also in their polysemy (having multiple meanings) and the subtle semantic and pragmatic distinctions between them. For example, *may* can express both epistemic possibility (*It may rain tomorrow*) and deontic permission (*You may leave now*), and the choice between *may* and *might* often depends on the degree of certainty or politeness the speaker wishes to convey. This polysemy and the subtle distinctions between modals create significant challenges for L2 learners, who must develop a nuanced understanding of the semantic and pragmatic properties of each modal.

1.3.2 Second Language Acquisition of Modality

The acquisition of modality is a well-documented area of difficulty for L2 learners of English. Research has shown that learners often struggle with the polysemy of modal verbs, the distinction between epistemic and deontic meanings, and the appropriate use of modals in different pragmatic contexts (Gabrys-Barker, 2005:1). Common errors include the overgeneralization of certain modals (e.g., using *can* for permission in all situations), the avoidance of others, and the use of incorrect syntactic forms (e.g., *He must to go*) (Koffi, 2023:1).

Studies have also found that proficiency level plays a significant role in the acquisition of modality. Lower-level learners tend to rely on a limited range of modals and use them primarily for their deontic meanings, while higher-level learners demonstrate a greater range and more nuanced understanding of epistemic modality (Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig, 2000:1). A corpus-driven study by Chen (2010:1) found that the epistemic modality most commonly used by L2 writers is the modal verb *may*, followed by the adjectives *possible*, *sure*, *certain*, and the modal *might*. This suggests that while L2 learners may develop some ability to use epistemic modals, their use is often limited to a small set of high-frequency forms.

The developmental trajectory of modality acquisition in L2 English has been documented in several longitudinal studies. Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury (2000:1) found that learners' use of modality becomes more sophisticated over time, with increased use of epistemic modality and greater accuracy in the distinction between epistemic and deontic meanings as proficiency increases. However, even advanced learners may continue to experience difficulties with the pragmatic aspects of modality, such as the appropriate level of politeness or certainty to express in different contexts.

1.3.3 Bilingualism and Language Interference in Nigeria

Nigeria is a multilingual nation with over 500 indigenous languages. English, the official language, coexists with these languages, creating a complex linguistic environment. For many Nigerians, bilingualism is a daily reality, and the interaction between their L1 and English often leads to linguistic phenomena such as code-switching, code-mixing, and language transfer (Akinede & Adegbite, 1999:1). The concept of bilingualism itself is complex, and scholars

have distinguished between different types of bilingualism based on factors such as the order of acquisition (simultaneous vs. sequential), the level of proficiency in each language, and the context in which each language is used (Grosjean, 2010:1).

Language transfer, or interference, occurs when a learner's L1 knowledge influences their L2 production. This influence can be positive, facilitating learning when the L1 and L2 share similar structures, or negative, leading to errors when the structures differ. In the case of Yoruba and English, the two languages belong to different language families (Niger-Congo and Indo-European, respectively) and have significant structural differences, creating the potential for negative transfer in areas such as phonology, syntax, and semantics (Lado, 1957:1).

The concept of cross-linguistic influence (CLI) has been developed to describe the ways in which a learner's knowledge of one language affects their learning and use of another language. Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008:1) define CLI as "the influence of a person's knowledge of one language on that person's knowledge or use of another language." CLI can be bidirectional, affecting both the L1 and the L2, and can operate at multiple levels of linguistic organization, from phonology to syntax to pragmatics.

1.3.4 The Yoruba Modal System and Structural Differences with English

The Yoruba language expresses modality through a system of pre-verbal markers that are functionally similar to English modal verbs. However, the semantic and syntactic properties of these markers differ significantly from their English counterparts. The primary modal markers in Yoruba include:

- *lé* (can/may): expresses ability and permission
- *gbódò* (must/should): expresses obligation and necessity
- *ní láti* (have to): expresses necessity
- *ṣe* (can): expresses ability
- *máa* (will): expresses future intention

One key structural difference between Yoruba and English modality, according to Adedeji (2024) is that Yoruba modal markers are pre-verbal and do not inflect for tense or agreement, whereas English modal verbs are auxiliary verbs that precede the main verb and have specific syntactic properties (e.g., they do not take the infinitive marker *to* and do not inflect for person or number in the present tense). Additionally, Yoruba modal markers often have broader semantic ranges than their English counterparts. For example, the Yoruba marker *lé* can express both ability and permission, similar to the English *can*, but its range of meanings does not perfectly align with either English modal. Similarly, obligation and necessity are expressed through markers such as *ní láti* and *gbódò*, which have their own unique semantic nuances and cannot be directly mapped onto English modals.

These structural and semantic differences are a likely source of difficulty for Yoruba-speaking learners of English. When learning English modality, Yoruba speakers may attempt to map their L1 modal system onto the L2, resulting in errors. For example, they may overgeneralize the use of *can* to express both ability and permission, or they may struggle to understand the

distinction between epistemic and deontic modality, which may not be as clearly marked in Yoruba (Adedeji, 2024:32).

1.3.5 English Language Teaching in Nigeria: Challenges and Context

The teaching of English in Nigerian secondary schools faces numerous challenges. As documented by Murana (2021:1), many schools lack adequate resources and qualified teachers, leading to a reliance on rote memorization and grammar drills rather than communicative language teaching approaches. The challenges identified include poor quality of students admitted to secondary school, incompetent teachers of English, poor methodology, lack of motivation among students, overcrowded classes, lack of English specialists, and the interference of the mother tongue (Murana, 2021:1).

In Ekiti State specifically, the educational landscape is shaped by the predominantly Yoruba-speaking population and the challenges common to many Nigerian states. The influence of language on student participation in science lessons has been documented (Adedeji, 2024:1), suggesting that language-related factors have broader implications for student learning across the curriculum. The Department of Arts and Language Education at Ekiti State University plays a role in teacher training, but the quality and effectiveness of teacher preparation programs vary considerably.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive approach, using error analysis as the primary analytical framework. Error analysis, as pioneered by Corder (1967:1), is a systematic method for identifying, describing, and explaining the errors made by L2 learners. It provides valuable insights into the learning process and the sources of learner difficulties. The error analysis framework distinguishes between interlingual errors (those resulting from L1 interference) and intralingual errors (those resulting from overgeneralization, incomplete learning, or other developmental factors).

2.1 Data Collection and Participants

The data for this study consist of 50 expository essays written by senior secondary school (SS2) students from two public schools in Ado-Ekiti, the capital of Ekiti State. The students, all of whom are native Yoruba speakers with English as their L2, were asked to write on the topic "The Role of Youth in National Development." This topic was chosen to elicit a range of opinions and arguments, providing opportunities for the students to use various modal expressions in both epistemic and deontic contexts. The essays were collected as part of the students' regular classwork to ensure a naturalistic writing context, without artificial constraints or excessive time pressure.

The participants represent a typical population of secondary school students in Ekiti State, with varying levels of English proficiency. The use of a naturalistic writing task ensures that the data reflect students' actual writing abilities and the errors they naturally produce, rather than errors that might occur in a more artificial or controlled setting.

2.2 Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis of the collected essays followed a multi-stage process:

- i. **Identification:** All instances of modal verbs and other modal expressions were identified and highlighted in the essays. This included not only modal auxiliaries but also modal adverbs, adjectives, and other forms of modality expression.
- ii. **Classification:** The identified modal expressions were classified as either correct or erroneous. Errors were further classified based on whether they represented a deviation from standard English grammar and usage.
- iii. **Description:** The errors were described and categorized based on their linguistic nature (e.g., omission, addition, substitution, ordering) and their semantic type (e.g., epistemic, deontic, dynamic). This allowed for a detailed characterization of the types of errors students made.
- iv. **Explanation:** An attempt was made to explain the source of the errors, considering both L1 interference (interlingual errors) and developmental factors (intralingual errors). This involved comparing the students' errors with the structure and use of modality in Yoruba, as well as considering common developmental patterns in L2 acquisition.

3. Results

The analysis of the student essays revealed several recurring patterns of difficulty in the use of modality. These challenges can be broadly categorized into errors of form, errors of meaning, and the influence of the Yoruba L1.

3.1 Common Modality Errors in Student Writing

The most frequent errors observed in the students' writing involved the incorrect use of modal verbs. These errors often demonstrated a misunderstanding of the semantic and pragmatic distinctions between different modals. The following table presents a categorization of the types of errors found:

Table 1: Categorization of Modal Verb Errors in Student Writing

Error Type	Frequency	Description	Example from Student Writing	Corrected Version
Substitution	28	Using an incorrect modal verb for the intended meaning	"Students <i>can</i> read their books to pass exams."	"Students <i>must</i> read their books to pass exams."
Omission	18	Leaving out a necessary modal verb	"The government <i>do</i> something about it."	"The government <i>should</i> do something about it."

Error Type	Frequency	Description	Example from Student Writing	Corrected Version
Redundancy	15	Adding an unnecessary element, often the infinitive marker 'to'	"We <i>must to</i> respect our elders."	"We <i>must</i> respect our elders."
Tense/Form	12	Incorrectly marking a modal for tense or agreement	"He <i>cans</i> solve the problem."	"He <i>can</i> solve the problem."
Semantic Confusion	22	Confusion between epistemic and deontic meanings	"A good citizen <i>may</i> obey the laws."	"A good citizen <i>must</i> obey the laws."

One of the most prominent issues was the confusion between epistemic and deontic modality. Students frequently used modals of possibility, such as *may* or *can*, to express obligation or necessity. For instance, one student wrote, "A good citizen *may* obey the laws of the country," where *must* or *should* would be more appropriate to convey the intended sense of obligation. This suggests that while students may have a general understanding of modality, they lack the fine-grained knowledge required to select the appropriate modal for a specific communicative purpose.

The high frequency of substitution errors (28 instances) indicates that students have some awareness that a modal verb is needed but lack the knowledge to select the correct one. The omission errors (18 instances) suggest that students sometimes fail to recognize the need for a modal expression entirely, possibly because the concept of expressing obligation, possibility, or permission is not as salient in their L1 or because they have not internalized the grammatical rules governing modal use in English.

The redundancy errors, particularly those involving the addition of *to* after a modal verb, are particularly interesting from the perspective of L1 interference. This pattern suggests that students may be influenced by the syntactic structure of Yoruba, where a modal marker may be followed by a verb form that resembles the infinitive in some respects.

4. Discussion

Many of the observed errors can be traced back to the influence of the students' L1, Yoruba. The structural differences between the Yoruba and English modal systems appear to be a significant source of negative transfer. For example, in Yoruba, the modal marker *lé* can express both ability and permission, similar to the English *can*. However, students often overgeneralize this, using *can* in contexts where *may* would be more formal or appropriate for seeking permission (e.g., "Can I go out, sir?" instead of "May I go out, sir?").

The tendency to add the infinitive marker *to* after a modal verb (e.g., "will *to go*") may be influenced by the syntactic structure of Yoruba, where a pre-verbal modal marker is followed

by a verb form. The direct translation of this L1 structure into English results in a grammatically incorrect sentence. This type of error highlights the challenge of moving beyond literal, word-for-word translation to a deeper understanding of the target language's grammatical rules.

Additionally, the broader semantic range of Yoruba modal markers compared to English modals may contribute to students' difficulties. For example, the Yoruba *lé* encompasses both ability and permission, whereas English distinguishes between *can* (ability/informal permission) and *may* (formal permission/epistemic possibility). Students learning English must learn to make distinctions that are not made in their L1, a process that takes time and explicit instruction.

The prevalence of these errors also points to potential shortcomings in the teaching of English grammar in Nigerian secondary schools. As noted by Murana (2021:1), many schools lack adequate resources and qualified teachers, leading to a reliance on rote memorization and grammar drills rather than communicative language teaching approaches. The abstract and complex nature of modality requires explicit instruction that goes beyond simple definitions and focuses on the use of modals in context.

Several pedagogical factors appear to contribute to students' difficulties with modality:

- i. **Insufficient explicit instruction:** Teachers may not allocate sufficient time to teaching modality, or they may present modals in isolation without adequate contextualization.
- ii. **Lack of contrastive analysis:** Teachers may not highlight the differences between the Yoruba and English modal systems, missing an opportunity to help students become aware of potential areas of negative transfer.
- iii. **Limited exposure to authentic input:** Students may have limited exposure to authentic English texts in which modals are used in context, making it difficult for them to develop an intuitive understanding of modal use.
- iv. **Teacher competence:** Some teachers may themselves have incomplete knowledge of the English modal system or may struggle to explain the subtle distinctions between modals in a way that is accessible to students.

Without such instruction, students are left to rely on their L1 knowledge and incomplete L2 input, which often leads to the fossilization of errors and the development of interlanguage forms that persist even as students' overall proficiency increases.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1 **Explicit and Contrastive Instruction:** Teachers should explicitly teach the different meanings and uses of English modal verbs. A contrastive approach, where the English modal system is compared and contrasted with the Yoruba modal system, can help students become more aware of the potential areas of negative transfer. For example, teachers could explicitly point out that while Yoruba *lé* covers both ability and permission, English distinguishes between *can* (informal) and *may* (formal) for permission.
- 2 **Contextualized Learning:** Modality should be taught in meaningful contexts, using authentic materials such as newspaper articles, stories, and dialogues. This will help

students see how modals are used in real-world communication and develop a better understanding of their pragmatic functions. For example, students could analyze the use of modals in news articles or advertisements, identifying whether each modal expresses epistemic or deontic meaning.

- 3 **Teacher Training and Professional Development:** There is a need for enhanced teacher training programs that focus on the teaching of English grammar. These programs should provide teachers with a solid understanding of the English modal system and effective strategies for teaching it to L2 learners. In-service training programs could help teachers who are already in the classroom to update their knowledge and skills.
- 4 **Curriculum and Materials Development:** Curriculum designers and textbook authors should ensure that modality is given adequate attention. Materials should include a variety of exercises and activities that target both the form and meaning of modal expressions. Materials should also be designed with an awareness of the specific challenges faced by Yoruba-speaking learners.
- 5 **Error Correction and Feedback:** Teachers should provide explicit, corrective feedback on students' use of modals, helping them to understand not just what is incorrect but why. This feedback should be provided in a supportive manner that encourages students to take risks and experiment with modal expressions.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the challenges that Yoruba-English bilingual secondary school students in Ekiti State face in their use of modality in written English. The findings indicate that these challenges are multifaceted, stemming from the inherent complexity of the English modal system, the influence of L1 interference, and pedagogical factors. The errors observed in the students' writing are not random but systematic, reflecting a developing interlanguage system that is shaped by both the L1 and the L2.

The specific patterns of error identified in this study—including the confusion between epistemic and deontic modality, the overgeneralization of certain modals, and the addition of the infinitive marker *to* after modals—provide evidence of how cross-linguistic influence operates in the acquisition of a complex grammatical feature. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the specific linguistic properties of both the L1 and L2 when analyzing L2 errors and developing pedagogical interventions.

Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders in the Nigerian education system. By adopting more effective teaching strategies, providing better training for teachers, and developing more appropriate instructional materials, it is possible to help students overcome their difficulties with modality and become more confident and competent writers of English. The recommendations proposed in this paper—including explicit and contrastive instruction, contextualized learning, enhanced teacher training, and improved curriculum materials—are designed to address the specific needs of Yoruba-English bilingual learners while also contributing to the broader improvement of English language teaching in Nigeria.

This study contributes to the understanding of cross-linguistic influence in second language acquisition by providing detailed evidence of how structural differences between the L1 and L2 can lead to specific patterns of error. The findings support the hypothesis that learners do not simply acquire the L2 system in isolation but rather that their L1 knowledge continues to influence their L2 production, even at higher levels of proficiency. The study also highlights the importance of considering the specific linguistic properties of both the L1 and L2 when analyzing L2 errors and developing pedagogical interventions.

The challenges faced by Yoruba-English bilingual students in mastering modality underscore the need for a pedagogical shift. Instruction should move away from a sole focus on grammatical form and towards an approach that integrates form, meaning, and use. Teachers need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to teach complex grammatical features like modality in a way that is both engaging and effective.

Further research, including larger-scale studies and longitudinal investigations, is needed to build on the findings of this study and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the acquisition of modality in the Nigerian context. Such research would contribute not only to our understanding of second language acquisition in African contexts but also to the development of more effective and culturally responsive approaches to English language teaching in Nigeria and beyond.

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