

“Accept That You Should Change Your School’s Policy”: Pragmatic Strategies in EFL Written Communication

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Abstract

The present study seeks to focus on the pragmatic strategies used in EFL learners’ written discourse. To this end, two groups of EFL learners were asked to write on two face-threatening topics. The analysis revealed that EFL learners used epistemic modal markers as an attempt to fulfill a range of certain pragmatic functions. Nevertheless, lack of attention to pragmatic functions of epistemic modals caused pragmatic infelicities, in particular for the lower proficient group. Besides, the study shed some light on the forms and functions of hedging devices and the strategies EFL learners use to fulfill certain pragmatic goals. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of pragmatic knowledge and the sequential and developmental stages involved in the acquisition of L2 pragmatic norms.

Keywords: Epistemic modality, EFL, Pragmatics, Hedging, Pragmatic failure

1. Introduction

Writing to an authoritative figure or a person with high social status requires pragmatic knowledge which includes, among others, awareness of politeness strategies. Should this letter be written in a second language, the pragmatic competence will include “the critical language awareness of how discourse shapes and is shaped by power relations, identity, and ideologies in the target culture” (Chen, 2006, p.36).

Acquiring an effective knowledge of pragmatic aspects of the second language is now considered as a significant facet of the second language learning process (Haugh, 2007). In this regard, the importance of pragmatic knowledge in avoiding pragmatic failure in second language writing has long been highlighted by researchers working in the field (see, for example, Chen, 2010; Hinkel, 2009; Hyland, 1994; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Parvaresh et al., 2012). One important way to achieve pragmatic success in writing is the right manipulation and use of epistemic devices.

Modals are important features of second language writing because inappropriate use of modal markers can cause pragmatic infelicities that lead to failure in conveying the intended illocutionary force or politeness value (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). In this respect, the present study is a small step in this direction trying to analyze the pragmatic success and failure of EFL learners in using epistemic modal markers. In fact, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the pragmatic functions of the epistemic modal markers that EFL learners use in their formal and informal writing?
- 2) What are the pragmatic strategies that EFL learners use to achieve certain illocutionary goals?
- 3) What are the most common pragmatic errors in EFL learners’ writing?

2. Epistemic Modality and Hedging

Very few studies have addressed the use of modal markers in L1 or L2 writing, “with a likely exception of their uses as hedges, qualifiers, or markers of (un)certainty” (Hinkel, 2009, p. 672). Epistemic modals have a range of textual and pragmatic functions and are often employed to “mark evidentiality, possibility and likelihood, strategic vagueness, and politeness in discourse” (Hinkel, 2009, p. 672). However, the pragmatics of epistemic modality is often equated with what is frequently referred to in the literature as ‘hedging’ (Chen, 2010; Holmes, 1990; Milton & Hyland, 1999; Vázquez & Giner, 2008; Vold, 2006).

Hyland (1998a, p. 2) has emphasized the link between hedging and epistemic modality by stating that “the writer or speaker’s judgments about statements and their possible effects on interlocutors is the essence of hedging, and this clearly places epistemic modality at the center of our interest.” Furthermore, Hyland (1998b, p. 5) believes that “items are only hedges in their epistemic sense, and only when they express uncertainty.”

Linguistically speaking, hedges can take many forms of manifestation common among which

are epistemic modal auxiliaries. Hinkel (2009) notes that the uses of possibility and ability modals, such as *can*, *may*, *might*, *could*, and *to be able to* in written discourse, contribute to the broad range of syntactic and lexical means of hedging. Other common devices include words like *perhaps*, *I guess*, *may be*, *quite*, and *sort of*. “Prosody, tag questions, verbal fillers and hesitation markers also function as hedges when they are used to attenuate the strength of an utterance” (Hyland, 1998a, p.3).

Pragmatically speaking, hedges are used to serve a number of functions. They qualify the writer’s commitment to a proposition (Vande Kopple, 1985), mark arguments as provisional, tentative or indeterminate, signal uncertainty or reluctance to present propositional information categorically, show uncertainty about the truth of an assertion (Crismore et al., 1993), withhold commitment to propositions and open dialogue (Hyland, 2005) and mitigate the illocutionary force of an utterance for the sake of politeness (Holmes, 1990). In this respect, Brown and Levinson (1987) view hedges as features of negative politeness and consider them as devices that are used to “soften face-threatening acts of suggesting and criticizing by blurring the speaker’s intent” (p. 117).

Likewise, as Hinkel (2009) argues, the culturally-determined uses of modals as hedges and politeness devices are requisite in any act of writing because cases appear where the author and the reader may not share the same cultural or social norms and expectations. Therefore, the ability to pragmatically develop a correct piece of writing in L2 is important because of the differences in writing conventions of the writer’s L1 and L2. Markkanen and Schroeder (1997) propose that L2 writers need to become familiar with how to employ modals to project politeness in written discourse because being imprecise and appearing polite in formal writing is described by culturally and socially determined conventions.

Kasper and Schmidt (1996) believe that what is needed for pragmatic development is a pedagogy which focuses on the co-occurring features of context and relevant linguistic resources. In this regard, Hoyer (2005, p. 1484) notes that the invocation of the modal system (for example, the combination of the intensifier *absolutely* with the modal lexical verb *convinced* in *I am absolutely convinced*) is not simply an artifact of grammatical description but the result of a pragmatic requirement, where the modal expression clearly has a “rhetorical or argumentative function.” Hoyer (2005) emphasizes that the rhetorical functions of modal adverbs such as *obviously*, *certainly*, *really*, and *of course* (or their adjectival equivalents such as *it is obvious that*, *it is clear that* and so forth) is pragmatically motivated. This is because most of these adverbs in discourse, as Corum (1975) notes, are context sensitive and thoroughly pragmatic, and they occur “in precisely those areas where speakers have something to gain or lose by their addressee’s acceptance or rejection of what they are saying” (p. 134).

However, despite the importance of epistemic modals in L2 contexts, L2 learners often have difficulty interpreting and employing epistemic modal or hedges and thus experience pragmatic failure when writing in L2 (see, Chen, 2010). As Hyland (1998, p. 440) states, a successful piece of writing “involves relating illocutionary acts to perlocutionary effects.” To be more precise “a writer wants a message to be understood (an illocutionary effect or uptake)

and to be accepted (a hoped for perlocutionary effect).” To achieve this perlocutionary effect, therefore, epistemic modal markers must be used in such a way that pragmatic failure is prevented. Such failure in a piece of writing, especially that of letter writing, takes place when politeness strategies are not taken into consideration or when the illocutionary force of the utterances is not mitigated (Holmes, 1990). This can result in pragmatic failure and thus in miscommunication.

In this study, an attempt is made to analyze the pragmatic functions of epistemic modal markers in EFL writing, the pragmatic strategies EFL learners use, and the pragmatic errors that can lead to miscommunication.

3. The Present Study

3.1 Data collection

One hundred participants took part in the study. The participants were both male and female and their age range was between 20 and 29. In order to clarify the status of the participants in terms of their general English proficiency, the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery was administered to both undergraduate and post graduate participants. As claimed by the test developers, all the items in the test were carefully pre-tested and therefore enjoyed a high level of reliability. The test comprised questions about grammar, vocabulary, cloze and reading passages. Each test item was assigned one point and therefore the overall score of the test was 95. Based on the result of the study, those participants who scored 1 standard deviation above the mean were considered as the higher proficient participants and those who scored 2 standard deviations below the mean were considered as the lower proficient participants.

After dividing the participants, the main phase of data collection was undertaken. At this stage, each participant was asked to write two letters, one on Topic A and one on Topic B. These face-threatening topics are provided below:

Topic A: Your younger brother is studying in a primary school that, as part of its policy, offers only limited playtime. It is your belief that playtimes help children to be more creative and sociable. Write a letter to the principal of the school and try to stress the importance of playtimes. Try to politely disagree with his/her policy and to convince him/her that a change in their policy is necessary.

Topic B: You are of a strong opinion that love at first sight should not be the main reason for marriage. When you realize that a very close friend of yours, who lives in a different city, has fallen in love with a person she/he does not know very well and has decided to marry him/her, you decide to send him/her a letter and argue in support of your opinion. In your letter try to stress the reasons why he/she should think twice about his/her decision. Use any argumentation or additional information you deem right to sound more convincing.

3.2 Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data, all the sentences in the collected letters were carefully examined

and those that included any instances of epistemic and deontic modal expressions were extracted for further investigation. The pragmatic functions of all modal markers were carefully analyzed (see Hyland & Milton, 1997)

4. Results

4.1 Pragmatic Functions of Epistemic Modal Markers

Analysis of the data corpus revealed the following pragmatic functions for formal letters:

1. Expressing lack of full commitment
2. Expressing hypothetical future possibilities
3. Expressing lack of evidence
4. Mitigating the force of the utterance

These pragmatic functions will be discussed below:

A. *Expressing lack of full commitment*

Sometimes, epistemic modals are used to indicate that the writer is not fully committed to the truth of the statements s/he has expressed or is going to express. Consider the following example:

[1]

I have heard of you wisdom and I know that you will welcome any suggestion which **may** help.

In this example, extracted from a formal letter written by a female participant, the writer uses 'may' to indicate that the suggestion she is going to give can possibly influence the addressee's decision and that she is not fully committed to the fact that her suggestion will definitely be of any use to the reader. The writer strategically uses the epistemic marker 'may' to express her suggestion with caution and provide the reader with an opportunity to evaluate the situation before changing his mind. This function of epistemic modal markers alleviates the illocutionary force of the statement and makes the statement appear less direct, thus more polite and possibly more convincing. Another example is provided below:

[2]

As the headmaster, you **may** be forced by practical constraints of curriculum requirements, however, you **may** notice that there is a sever trade off in that.

B. *Expressing hypothetical future possibilities*

The analysis of the formal corpus revealed that epistemic modal markers were used, quite frequently, to refer to an action that was hypothetically assumed by the writer to take place in the future. In this function, all modal markers predicted an often negative action that would possibly take place in the future. Consider the following examples:

[5]

They **may** become shy and reluctant

[6]

They **maybe** become passive learners

As the examples cited above show, the writers used ‘may’ and ‘maybe’ to refer to the effect of the addressee’s decision on the future of the students. That is, if the school policy is not changed, there is the possibility that the students may turn into shy and passive human beings. These are only hypotheses that are strategically made by the addresser to make his/her statements appear more believable and convincing.

C. Expressing lack of evidence

The analysis of the data revealed that epistemic modal markers were often used to strategically compensate for the writer’s lack of evidence for the knowledge claim s/he has expressed. In other words, the writer used epistemic modals because s/he was either not sure or was reluctant to present his/her propositional information categorically (Lewin, 2005). Since the writer did not have enough confidence in the truth of the information, s/he presented his/her statements with doubt and hesitation so that, upon the reader’s disagreement, his/her face could be saved.

Consider this example:

[7]

Children need to get along with each other as this **may** help them to have a better social life

As example [7] shows, the writer provided the reader with the knowledge claim “children need to get along with each other because it helps them to have a better social life”, but since the writer did not have enough evidence or a reputable source for his claim, he used the epistemic modal marker ‘may’ to account for his lack of evidence. Here is another example:

[8]

This policy **might** be effective for adult students, but I **doubt**, it is useful for children.

D. Mitigating the illocutionary force

The last pragmatic function of epistemic modal markers in the formal corpus is the mitigation of the illocutionary force of the statements for the sake of politeness (Holmes, 1990). As Borwn and Levinson (1987) note, some communicative acts, such as requests and offers, can threaten the hearer’s negative face, positive face, or both, and therefore are referred to as face threatening acts (FTAs). In this study, the communicative act of requesting was an FTA because of not only the nature of the request, but also the difference between the social status of the writer and the reader. Therefore, the illocutionary force needed to be mitigated by the writer to save the face of both parties.

[9]

If it is possible for you, think about my suggestion, consider them as some **opinions** which **may** be helpful and then again, if **possible** change the school's schedule and try to have more playtimes.

[10]

I **think** it **might** be better for you, as the principal of this school, to think about changing your policy.

As the examples show, the writers used different epistemic modal markers to mitigate the illocutionary force of their statements so that they do not appear unduly authoritative and assertive.

It is also worthwhile to note that the functions found in our formal corpus could not easily be placed under one particular category because the pragmatic functions sometimes overlapped. Consider the following example:

[11]

I **believe** that (of course this is just my **idea**!) break time **may** have negative effect on the learning process.

The analysis of the informal corpus, in which the writer had to persuade the reader to think twice about his/her rather hasty decision to get married, also revealed several recurring pragmatic functions:

1. Expressing lack of commitment
2. Expressing opinion
3. Expressing hypothetical future or past possibilities

A. Expressing lack of commitment

Similar to the formal corpus, the informal corpus also included examples that conformed to the main pragmatic functions of epistemic modals and hedging devices, i.e. expressing lack of full commitment to the truth of statements. In this function, the sentences are modalized to show the writer's hesitation and uncertainty about the knowledge claim he makes. Our corpus revealed many examples of this function, two of which are provided below:

[12]

Love at first sight **might seem** like a romantic reason but it does not guarantee martial success.

[13]

I totally understand that you **may** feel lonely.

In both of the above-mentioned examples, the writers presented their statements with caution so as not to appear fully committed to the knowledge claim they are about to make.

B. Expression of opinion

The analysis of the informal corpus revealed several examples in which epistemic modal markers were used to express the writers' opinion. It is worth noting that opinions in the informal corpus were most frequently expressed by subordinate constructions. Here are two

examples:

[14]

I **think** Ehsan has behaved too hasty, don't you agree with me?

[15]

I **think** you love his being a musician.

C. Expressing hypothetical future or past possibility

The informal corpus also revealed several uses of epistemic modals that were used to form a future- or past-oriented hypothesis about the consequence of the addressee's decision. All the examples found in this corpus were cases of deductions, suppositions, and hypothesis made by the writer. Consider the following future-oriented hypothesis:

[16]

At first he **may** fall in love with everyone who seems lovely, but he **may** soon realize that she is not the one.

[17]

If you regret even a little one, you **may** regret in the future.

Example [17], for instance, is an attempt by the writer to predict a possible situation to which the reader is oblivious. The writer is using the epistemic auxiliary 'may' to draw the reader's attention to the neglected possibilities that if taken into consideration could lead to a better decision. Consider the following examples in which the hypothesis were made with a reference to an imaginary or probable past:

[18]

Maybe he has done something considerable which implies a personality you like.

[19]

Without her senseless hast, she **might have** reached a love that could help her be happy for the rest of her life.

This function is different from 'expression of opinions' in that in the former the writer considers another possible world within which the occurrence of that particular action could be possible. In the latter, however, the epistemic markers are used merely for expressing opinions. As a matter of fact, expressing hypothetical past or future has more common grounds with the function of 'expressing lack of commitment' because neither of them can be presented categorically as the writer is not absolutely certain about the hypothetical conjectures he is making. However, the two categories are different because hypothetical possibilities have reference to a possible future action or a possible occurrence of an action in the past to which the reader or the addressee is totally oblivious.

4.2 Pragmatic Strategies Used for Hedging

This study also revealed that in addition to epistemic modal markers that are used to hedge the statements, un-modalized sentences can be used to function both as a hedge and a booster. The analysis of the formal letters showed that in their argumentations, which primarily aimed at persuading the reader, higher proficient EFL learners gave a plethora of references to

different academic articles they claimed to have read, or to what they believed a psychologist would have said in this regard. For example, in the formal letters where they had to convince the principal of the school to increase the amount of playtime, frequent references were given to different pieces of research. Consider these examples:

[20]

Mag (2012) stresses the fact that playtime helps children relive various tensions that suffer in educational settings as well as at home. Besides, **Khale Shadooneh (2010)** asserts that playtime may be used as a genuine opportunity whereby children can be trained to take social roles and fulfill fancy responsibilities.

[21]

Recently, I have read an **article in a psychological journal** about the influence of playing not only on the process of growing up but also on the sociability of children of age 5-12. Here, below are some bits of its interesting argumentations.

[22]

According to my knowledge which is based on reading many **psychological books and articles**, increasing playtime in different countries has had a positive effect on primary school students' motivation and creativity.

It is also worth noting that giving citations and references to other academic figures have many different functions amongst which we can refer to attribution of information or activity to an author, exemplification, giving further sources, evaluation of other studies, establishing links between different source, and comparison of one's own findings or interpretation with other sources (see Petric, 2007).

Even so, the corpora under investigation revealed that giving reference to higher academic figures can pragmatically be used as a strategy to persuade the reader. In the above-mentioned examples, references to other academic figures or articles were used to give further credit to the writer's knowledge claims and arguments. Examples [21] and [22] were cases in which, by giving references to academic figures and articles, the authors advocated the positive effect of playtimes and left the addressee to evaluate the school's policy. Nevertheless, there were other cases of giving references which not only included references to academic figures but also uses of deontically modalized statements. Consider the following examples:

[23]

As far as I know studies and new researches have revealed that children **must** be given enough playtimes at school.

[24]

Honestly speaking, according to psychologists, playing is so **essential** for the mental and physical development of children.

In [23] and [24], the writer directly drew the reader's attention to the issue in question by using the deontic modals 'must' and 'essential' and presented his request in such a way so as to avoid the possibility of the reader's refusal. Thus, he resorted to other academic figures to mitigate the force of his statements by claiming that the deontically modalized request is

made by the authorial figure not the writer.

In contexts where the writer needed to make an attempt to persuade the reader, the writer often tended to benefit from giving references to claims made by others in order to a) give further credits to his/her knowledge claim, hence to *boost* the truth of his statements; and b) to save his face by making an academic figure the subject of his deontically modalized request and in this way *hedge* the statement by claiming that the illocutionary force is intended by someone other than the writer.

4.3 Pragmatic Strategies Used for Persuasion

The familiarity of the researcher with most of the participants revealed that none of the participants had the age or level of education they created in the letters. The formal corpus revealed that the L2 learners across both levels of proficiency often created an imaginary persona for themselves and developed their letters in accordance with the features of the persona they assumed they had. Consider the following examples:

[25]

As a **psychologist** I feel that I need to draw your attention to the fact that forbidding children from having playtime will doubtlessly lead to some psychological disorder.

[26]

As a **pre-school teacher**, I recommend you to change your policy at school, because as I explained for you in this letter playing has a lot of advantages for children's brain connections. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. If you need to contact me you can reach me at (001) 566-769356.

[27]

I have been a **pre-school** teacher for five years and **my few years of experience tell me** one thing that children need to play.

In the examples cited above, the writers made an attempt to create a condition within which their face-threatening requests would not be confronted with disagreement or opposition. By providing an authorial persona, the writers created a situation within which they would appear more assertive. This seems to give them the ability to directly mention their requests, and as a result highlight and boost the importance of their statements.

Another strategy frequently observed in both corpora was the recurrent combination of hedges and boosters. The analysis of the data showed that the writers often combined these two devices to a) modify the assertions that they make, b) to tone down uncertain or potentially risky claims, and c) to emphasize on what they believe to be correct (Hyland, 2000). The combination of the two strategies of hedging and boosting often tended to cluster together "modally harmonic combinations" (Lyons, 1977, p. 807). Consider the following example:

[28]

Although it **seems a tiny and simple** issue but at the same time it is **important** in long run.

As Hu and Cao (2011) note, hedges and boosters are, in a sense, two sides of the same coin because they allow the writer to adjust their uncertainty or certainty about a proposition. Differently put, in this adjustment, the writer makes a balance between the hedged and the boosted statements by withholding or strengthening the commitment to the position and by opening or closing the dialogue with the reader. In this skillful manipulation, the writer both presents his epistemic stance towards the knowledge claim he asserts by hedging the proposition and presents himself as a competent figure whose opinions is of importance. Additionally, this strategy made the statements appear more polite and indirect. Consider the following examples in which the hedged statements are in bold and the boosters are underlined:

[29]

In my opinion, playtimes have a great importance.

[30]

Our very personal experience **may** also be a significant proof in favor of playtime paramount importance.

[31]

I know that your policy is to persuade the students to study more and help them not to lose their concentration. This policy **might** be effective for adult students but I **doubt**, it is useful for children. I have some reasons for my **opinion**...

In example [31], for instance, the clause that follows the phrase '*I know*' is a booster whose illocutionary force is mitigated by means of the hedging devices in the second sentence. The modal auxiliary '*might*' and the modal verb '*doubt*' are used to hedge the strength of the clause following '*I know*'.

5. Discussion

It is clear that the use of epistemic modality to explicitly signal the writer's attitude is important in writing (Hyland, 1998). This highlights the important role of modal markers in argumentative writing and lends further validity to the importance of pragmatic functions of epistemic modals in developing a pragmatically successful piece of writing.

Examination of the formal letters, in particular those written by lower proficient learners, revealed that there were cases of pragmatic failure in which the writer failed to take into account the pragmatic strategies needed to deal with a face-threatening act such as requesting and persuading. Consider the following example:

[32]

Accept that free play should not be expected to have measurable outcomes.

Notwithstanding the fact that the nature of the topics called for the consideration of politeness strategies, some of the writers failed to take into account the social difference between the reader and the writer and used flat imperatives in their in their formal letters as in [32]. As Searle (1979) notes, requirements of politeness usually make the use of flat imperatives inappropriate in normal contexts and the speakers or the writers are; therefore, prone to find indirect means to reach their illocutionary goals. The use of flat imperatives in such formal

context can only be attributed to lack of pragmatic knowledge.

Such mistakes made by L2 writers point to a need for acquiring a working knowledge of pragmatic aspects of the second language. In this regard, Haugh (2007) believes that pragmatic knowledge is now seen as an important facet of the second language learning process. This is due to the fact that pragmatic knowledge can help learners avoid mistakes like the following:

[33]

I strongly disagree with each and every single opinion you stated on that matter.

Example [33], extracted from the formal letters of less proficient learners, also shows comparable pragmatic infelicities triggered by lack of epistemic knowledge which ultimately made the statement sound imposing and rather impolite. There were other examples of pragmatic failure caused by the writer's lack of attention to the formality requirements of the context. This caused the statements to sound rather informal and impolite because the writer failed to take into consideration the difference in the social status of the addressee (the principal of the school) and the addressor (sister or brother of a young boy in an elementary school). Consider other similar examples:

[34]

I can't figure out why you decided this change

[35]

According to above-mentioned reasons, I request you to be **more careful** about your students' playtimes.

[36]

Don't you think it's better to increase playtime for them?

The analysis of the pragmatic failure of the less proficient learners reveals that the process of developing L2 pragmatic knowledge is sequential. This means that, given the right amount of instruction, the lower proficient writers can steadily accumulate their pragmatic knowledge of how to use epistemic modal markers appropriately to develop pragmatically accurate pieces of writing.

The findings of the study support previous research in the field (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford 1993; Chen, 2010), which suggests the existence of a process through which learners move between different levels of language acquisition and cannot, pragmatically speaking, extend from one level to another before the basics of the first level are acquired.

Therefore, as Chen (2010) observes, the awareness of L2 learners' acquisitional processes cannot be overlooked and should be explicitly stressed by language teachers in real language classrooms. Therefore, in keeping with the importance of knowing the pragmatics of modal markers in developing an appropriate piece of writing, the findings of this study revealed that EFL learners need more assistance:

1) To be able to distinguish the social status of the audience and address the reader

accordingly.

- 2) To carefully select the correct epistemic device and place it in combination with their arguments to fulfill the rhetorical purpose of the intended speech act.
- 3) To be able to mitigate the illocutionary force of their FTA to actualize the intended action without pragmatic failures
- 4) To be aware of the pragmatic differences of the deontic modal auxiliaries *should* and *must* and the semi-modals *have to*, *got to*, *ought to*, *need to*, and the modal idiom *had better*.
- 5) To learn about the co-occurring devices also known as modal harmonic phrases.

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