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THE USE OF MODALS IN MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS' WRITING

UMI KALTHOM ABDUL MANAF

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THE USE OF MODALS IN MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS' WRITING

By

UMI KALTHOM ABDUL MANAF

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

October 2007

UPM

DEDICATION

To Zainal and Nadiah, you are the wind beneath my wings
To my late abah and mak
This one's for you

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia
in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

THE USE OF MODALS IN MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS' WRITING

By

UMI KALTHOM ABDUL MANAF

October 2007

Chairman : Associate Professor Malachi Edwin Vethamani, PhD

Faculty : Educational Studies

This research investigated Malaysian ESL learners' use of modals in two written tasks, which were obtained from the EMAS Corpus. The aim of the study was to investigate: (1) the distribution of modals used in the students' writing, (2) the functions depicted by the modals used, (3) if the modals used were accurate syntactically and semantically, (4) if students were using other alternatives in instances where modals were absent or inappropriately used, and (5) if students' mastery of the use of modals and the functions in their writing reflect their ability in using modals taught to them according to those stipulated in the KBSR/KBSM syllabus (MoE, 2003). This was addressed in six research questions. The research design comprised a qualitative technique through discourse analysis supplemented with some descriptive statistics derived from a concordancer. The concordancer identified modals used by the students at all the three different levels. The research findings showed that the modals *can, could* and their negated forms were the modals that were most frequently used by these students. Two modals that were not stipulated in the KBSR/KBSM syllabus, *would* and *shall*, were also found in the essays. The syllabus also indicated varied meanings to the modals, but it was found

that students repetitively used only a few of the same modals for these various functions. It was also found that students at the lower level were less competent in using past form modals as compared to those at the higher level. The findings also showed that students' difficulties in constructing modal structures can be grouped into two categories: (1) modals with inaccurate verb form and (2) modals with no verb but replaced with other words/adjectives. The modals used were found to be reflective of students' knowledge. Students were uncertain about which modals to use to express modality in their sentences and this could be seen in the inaccuracies at the syntactic and semantic levels. Malaysian English also emerged in the students' writing. It was also found that ESL learners had adopted ways to overcome their inadequacy in the use of modals and modality of the English language by using simplification features and compensation strategies.

It was concluded that there were some inadequacies in the syllabus that could have led to the problems encountered by ESL students. In order to circumvent the problematic grammatical items identified in the study, and to further improve the teaching and learning of modal auxiliary among ESL learners, several recommendations are proposed. Among them is reviewing the syllabus so that the contents of textbooks will be in line with the recommended textbooks used by students and incorporating some pedagogical aspects that will help students in acquiring and using modal verbs appropriately.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

THE USE OF MODALS IN MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS' WRITING

Oleh

UMI KALTHOM ABDUL MANAF

Oktober 2007

Pengerusi : Profesor Madya Malachi Edwin Vethamani, PhD

Fakulti : Pengajian Pendidikan

Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji penggunaan modus dalam penulisan pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua di sekolah rendah dan menengah di Malaysia. Data untuk kajian ini diperoleh daripada Korpus EMAS (Arshad Abd. Samad, et al., 2002). Kajian ini dijalankan untuk meneliti: (1) agihan modus yang digunakan dalam penulisan pelajar, (2) fungsi yang digambarkan oleh modus yang digunakan, (3) sama ada modus yang digunakan tepat dari segi sintaksis dan semantik, (4) sama ada pelajar menggunakan pilihan lain dalam keadaan modus tidak digunakan atau tidak digunakan dengan betul, dan (5) sama ada penguasaan pelajar menggunakan modus dan fungsinya dalam penulisan mereka mencerminkan keupayaan mereka dalam menggunakan modus yang diajarkan kepada mereka sebagaimana yang telah ditetapkan dalam sukatan pelajaran KBSR/KBSM (MoE, 2003). Perkara-perkara ini telah ditangani dengan enam soalan kajian. Reka bentuk penyelidikan ini bersifat kualitatif dan dilaksanakan melalui analisis wacana yang diperkukuhkan dengan penjelasan statistik yang diperoleh daripada penggunaan konkordans. Penggunaan konkordans telah mengenalpasti modus yang digunakan oleh pelajar pada tiga tahap. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa modus *can* dan

could dan bentuk negatifnya merupakan bentuk modus yang paling banyak digunakan oleh pelajar. Namun demikian, dua modus yang tidak digariskan dalam sukatan pelajaran KBSR/KBSM, iaitu *would* dan *shall* juga ditemui dalam esei pelajar. Sukatan pelajaran tersebut juga menunjukkan variasi makna modus tersebut tetapi pelajar didapati hanya menggunakan beberapa modus yang sama berulang kali untuk pelbagai fungsi ini. Kajian juga mendapati bahawa pelajar di peringkat yang lebih rendah tidak begitu cekap di dalam menggunakan modus kala lampau berbanding pelajar peringkat yang lebih tinggi. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan masalah yang dihadapi pelajar dalam membentuk struktur modus boleh dibahagikan kepada dua kategori: (1) modus dengan bentuk kata kerja yang tidak tepat dan (2) modus tanpa kata kerja tetapi digantikan dengan kata/adjektif lain. Kajian mendapati modus yang digunakan oleh pelajar mencerminkan pengetahuan pelajar. Pelajar yang kurang yakin tentang modus yang patut digunakan untuk menjelaskan modus di dalam ayat dapat dilihat daripada ketidaktepatan ayat mereka di peringkat sintaksis dan semantik. Penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia juga jelas kelihatan dalam penulisan pelajar. Kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua telah menggunakan ciri pemudahan dan strategi pampasan untuk menangani masalah ketidakupayaan mereka dalam menggunakan modus dan modaliti bahasa Inggeris.

Sebagai kesimpulan, terdapat beberapa kelemahan dalam sukatan pelajaran yang telah menyebabkan masalah yang dihadapi oleh pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Untuk menyelesaikan item tatabahasa yang dikenalpasti mendatangkan masalah dalam kajian ini, dan untuk terus memperbaiki pengajaran dan pembelajaran kata kerja modus dalam kalangan pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai

bahasa kedua, beberapa cadangan dikemukakan. Antaranya mengkaji semula sukatan pelajaran agar kandungan buku teks sejajar dengan buku teks yang dicadangkan penggunaanya kepada pelajar. Beberapa aspek pedagogi yang dapat membantu pelajar memperoleh dan menggunakan kata kerja modus dengan baik juga patut ditambah.

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I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 29 October 2007 to conduct the final examination of Umi Kalthom Abdul Manaf on her Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled "The Use of Modals in Malaysian ESL Learners' Writing" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1981 and Universiti Putra Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

Fauziah Hassan, PhD
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

Mohd Faiz S. Abdullah, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

Mardziah Hayati Abdullah, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

Ronald Carter, PhD
Professor
Department of English Studies
University of Nottingham
(External Examiner)

_____
HASANAH MOHD GHAZALI, PhD
Professor and Deputy Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 1 April 2008

This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

Malachi Edwin Vethamani, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

Shameem Rafik Khan, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

Arshad Abd. Samad, PhD
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

Nor Hayati Alwi, PhD
Lecturer
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

_____
AINI DERIS, PhD
Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 10 April 2008

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

_____.
UMI KALTHOM ABDUL MANAF

Date:

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The study started with this simple question: What is a modal and what does it do? Further readings into the subject revealed complexities of varying degrees which could not be unraveled without a deeper analysis. Modals are not only auxiliaries in the prescriptive grammarian sense but they also appear to contribute to the semantics of communication. Since communication is an integral part of the society, and the most important means of human communication is language, the mechanics of language has to be understood in terms of how it facilitates communication. This includes the knowledge of grammar as without it communication will fail as structure will be lacking. Swan (1996: xxiii) defines grammar as the rules that say how words at the sentential level combine, arrange and change to produce different meanings. Grammar, as prescribed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE, 1991) is a set of rules which speakers of a language use to make meaning. Modals, the focus of this study, are part of grammar and their expressions have always formed an important part of the grammar and semantics of all languages, including English.

In fact, Hemeren's (1978) attempt at describing the meanings of the English modal auxiliaries in as simple as possible a manner faced difficulty, as there are varied ways in describing modals and modality. Thompson (2002), however, sees modals as a complex entity and that it is not easy to package the complexity into meaningful

chunks of information to be presented to students. If this were possible, that is reducing the complexity of the modals, this would make learning modals less problematic to second language learners of English.

In language learning, Ferris (2002) states that verb forms related to modals are problematic to both first (L1) and second language (L2) speakers. L1 speakers also make grammatical errors. If L1 speakers make errors, L2 speakers are even more capable of making the same errors and more in areas of formation of the verb phrases, passive and conditional forms, misuse of modals, gerunds, infinitives and other grammatical items. The need to recognise the errors in written discourse, as well as to have a certain amount of knowledge on how to correct those errors before imparting the knowledge to students, is important to educators (Ferris, 2002).

Weaver (1996) in his study of errors made by student writers who are L1 speakers of English highlights issues such as punctuation of sentences, clauses, pronoun references and other grammatical items made by L1 users of English in their written work. Thus, it is possible for L2 speakers to make similar errors, as well as other grammatical errors. Ferris (2002), also states that it is crucial for an ESL learner to know why the error is made and for an ESL teacher to know how to correct it. This is where explicit and implicit knowledge are required in grammar learning, which has always been a challenging task for ESL learners, and in this study, the Malaysian ESL learners.

The Malaysian English language curriculum prioritises the use of the Standard British English model but an infusion of some localised words could still be observed

in Malaysian English (Wong, 1991). Wong also states that interferences and over-generalisation are two factors that could affect the learning of the second language. Earlier learning of any kind will transfer to a later learning situation that is of particular significance in language learning (Tongue, 1979). Malaysia, a multi-racial country, with three main races, has witnessed language use with simplification features from interferences of the Malay, Chinese, and Indian speech communities that have marked the informal Malaysian English.

Modals and ESL Learning

It is a challenging task for teachers of ESL learners to impart knowledge on modal auxiliaries and for the learners to be able to learn and use the knowledge in their written work. DeCarrico (1986) and Hinkel (1995), in their respective studies, stress that L2 learners use modals differently from L1 learners. They found that L2 learners use modal verbs more in context as opposed to L1 learners. The current study, which focuses on how Malaysian ESL learners' use modals in their written work, will contribute to the data on how Malaysian L2 learners use modal verbs.

For English language learners to be proficient and able to perform language tasks, they need to know the prescriptive and descriptive rules of the English language. Language functions and forms need to be clarified for one to be proficient, and ESL students need different kinds of grammatical knowledge at different stages in their language development (Chitravelu et al., 1995). The knowledge of certain grammatical rules needs to be comprehended to enable one to perform certain language tasks. As one progresses, one needs to know certain grammatical terms like what constitutes a sentence, subject-verb agreement, and others, enough to make

one understand and able to discuss with the teacher about errors that have been made, and as modal auxiliary is one aspect of grammar, the rules need to be clarified for ESL learners to be able to use it well (Levinson, 1983). Kasper (1979), in his study, shows that German students of English are also unsure of certain grammatical aspects of English, especially in understanding the pragmatic category of modals and modality in accounting for the differential contextual implications. The problem could be similar to those faced by Malaysian ESL learners.

One of the most discussed issues for the past thirty years has been the question of the extent to which grammar should be made explicit to language learners (Halliday, 1973), and in language teaching, it has been intensely debated whether explicit grammar instruction has a role in second or foreign language classrooms (Ratnawati, 1996). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983) insist that a good knowledge of English grammar is vital for effective teaching to ESL/English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. However, there is a degree of uncertainty as to what to teach and what not to. To enable learners to effectively acquire all four skills in learning the second language, educators have to be confident and know what and how much knowledge to impart to these learners so that ultimately they become proficient speakers of the target language.

The Malaysian ESL teachers, according to Hawanum (2004), being L2 speakers themselves, are often not certain as to how to go about teaching grammar to their students. They are not sure how much detail should go into explaining grammatical items. When the Malaysian New English Language Curriculum, based on a communicative model of language teaching learning, was implemented in 1988, the