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Modality in Language: Distinctions from Other Verbal Components and Pedagogical Implications

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ABSTRACT

Modality plays a vital role in language as it expresses possibility, necessity, and other attitudinal aspects of communication. This article explores the distinctive nature of modality in relation to other verbal elements such as tense, aspect, and mood, highlighting its subjectivity, flexibility, and pragmatic significance. It further examines the challenges and opportunities that modality presents in the context of language teaching, particularly for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). By integrating insights from linguistic theory and pedagogical practice, the article demonstrates the relevance of modality to the development of communicative competence and intercultural awareness.

KEY WORDS: Modality, Pragmatics, Communicative Competence, EFL Learners, Language Teaching

1. Introduction

Not only is language a method for transmitting information but also a medium through which speakers negotiate judgments, attitudes, and levels of certainty. Halliday (1978), in his functional model, argues that "language is a resource for making meaning in social interaction" (p. 39), highlighting its intersubjective nature. Similarly, Lyons (1977) emphasizes that language goes beyond transmitting facts, functioning instead as a tool for expressing interpersonal meanings. Of the many devices that fulfil this role, modality stands at the forefront.

Palmer (2001) defines modality as "the grammaticalization of speakers' attitudes and opinions" (p. 1), stressing its central role in allowing individuals to express stance. Likewise, Huddleston and Pullum (2002) note that modality introduces a subjective dimension into speech by indicating how strongly a proposition is held to be true or desirable. For example, the difference between *"He is at home"* and *"He might be at home"* is epistemic rather than grammatical, as the latter signals a degree of doubt on the part of the speaker. These variations demonstrate how modality enables speakers and writers to convey not only what they know but also what they believe, doubt, or infer.

Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994) further argue that, unlike tense, which situates an event in time, or aspect, which highlights the internal temporal structure of an action, modality extends beyond structural features to capture the pragmatic and subjective quality of meaning. They show that modality is deeply tied to interpersonal and cultural factors, shaping how speakers evaluate reality and interact with others. Indeed, as they observe, modality functions as a bridge between communicative function and linguistic form,

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embodying the intersection of grammar, semantics, and pragmatics (Bybee et al., 1994).

From a pedagogical perspective, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) highlight the difficulty of teaching modality because modal expressions are polysemous and context-dependent. A single form such as *must* may convey obligation (*"You must wear a seatbelt"*) or strong inference (*"He must be tired"*), which can easily mislead learners. Holmes (1995) and Hinkel (1999) add that cultural variation in the use of modality—for instance, in expressing politeness or authority—further complicates its acquisition.

Against this background, the present article seeks to explore the unique characteristics of modality, its distinction from other verbal categories, and its pedagogical value for teaching and learning. By integrating insights from both linguistics and applied pedagogy, the study underlines how a deeper understanding of modality contributes not only to linguistic analysis but also to communicative competence and intercultural awareness.

2. The Concept of Modality

Linguistically, Lyons (1977) defines modality as "the expression of the speaker's opinion or attitude towards the proposition that the sentence expresses, or the situation that the proposition describes" (p. 452). Similarly, Palmer (2001) characterizes it as "the grammaticalization of speakers' attitudes and opinion" (p. 1), which encompasses notions such as possibility, necessity, ability, permission, and obligation. In contrast to simple statements of fact, modality signals what can be, what ought to be, or what is preferable, thereby conveying the speaker's evaluation of reality. As such, modality forms a key point of contact between semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (use).

Scholars have identified several categories of modality. Kratzer (1991) and Palmer (2001) distinguish between:

- **Epistemic modality** — which indicates the degree of certainty or belief the speaker attaches to a proposition. For example, *"He must be at home now"* conveys strong inference and high certainty, while *"He might be at home now"* expresses weaker possibility.
- **Deontic modality** — which expresses obligation, permission, or necessity grounded in social norms or authority (e.g., *"You must submit your assignment by Friday"*; *"You may leave early today"*).
- **Dynamic modality** — which reflects ability, willingness, or internal capacity (e.g., *"She can swim excellently"*; *"He will help you with the project"*).

Modal meaning is not confined to modal verbs alone. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) explain that it can be conveyed through a wide range of linguistic resources, including:

- **Modal verbs** (must, should, can, might)
- **Modal adverbs** (possibly, certainly, perhaps)
- **Modal adjectives** (likely, necessary, possible)
- **Nominal expressions** (e.g., *the possibility that…*, *the necessity of…*)
- **Intonation and discourse markers**, which can also signal modal force in speech (e.g., rising intonation to convey uncertainty).

Nuyts (2001) demonstrates that modality varies widely across languages in its form and degree of grammaticalization. He shows, for instance, that French *devoir* can express both obligation (*"Tu dois finir ce travail"* — "You must finish this work") and likelihood (*"Il doit être malade"* — "He must be sick"), much like English *must*. Similarly, in Arabic, *yajibu* encodes necessity while *mumkin* conveys possibility. According to Nuyts (2001, p. 25), "languages may lexicalize, morphologize, or grammaticalize modality in strikingly different ways," which makes it a particularly rich area for cross-linguistic study.

These disparities confirm modality's universality as a linguistic concept, but also reveal the challenges faced by second-language learners, who must not only acquire the forms but also understand their subtle semantic and pragmatic functions (Hinkel, 1999).

In brief, Huddleston and Pullum (2002) and Bybee et al. (1994) argue that modality allows speakers to guide interpretation in terms of degrees of certainty, likelihood, obligation, or capability. The richness and variability of modality across languages make it one of the most dynamic areas of meaning and grammar, justifying its central importance in both theoretical linguistics and language teaching.

3. Comparing Modality with Tense, Aspect, and Mood

3.1. Tense and Modality

Comrie (1985) defines tense as "the grammaticalized expression of location in time" (p. 9), situating an event in the past, present, or future. For instance, *"He left yesterday"* positions the event in the past, while *"He will leave tomorrow"* places it in the future. Palmer (2001), however, emphasizes that modality operates differently: it "indicates the status of the proposition in terms of necessity, possibility, or probability" (p. 8), without directly referencing time. Thus, sentences like *"He might leave tomorrow"* express uncertainty regarding a future event, while *"He must have left already"* conveys inference about a past event. As Palmer notes, modality complements tense but introduces a subjective layer of evaluation.

3.2. Aspect and Modality

Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994) describe aspect as "the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (p. 54), focusing on whether an action is completed, ongoing, repetitive, or habitual. For example, *"He was reading"* illustrates progressive aspect, while *"He has read the book"* shows perfect aspect. Unlike aspect, modality does not specify temporal unfolding but instead encodes the speaker's stance. Consider *"He must have been reading when I called"*: here, the modal *must* expresses inference, while the aspect *have been reading* conveys an ongoing past activity. As Bybee et al. (1994) explain, this illustrates how modality and aspect intersect, but remain conceptually distinct in function.

3.3. Mood and Modality

Givón (1994) defines mood as "a set of grammatical devices that express the speaker's attitude toward the reality of the proposition" (p. 262), typically marked through contrasts such as indicative (*"He is here"*), imperative (*"Be here!"*), and subjunctive (*"If he were here…"*). Halliday (1978), however, argues that modality goes beyond grammatical mood, functioning as "the area of meaning that lies between yes and no" (p. 116), where possibility, necessity, and probability are negotiated. For instance, English *may* can signal possibility (*"He may be late"*), politeness (*"May I come in?"*), or

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counterfactuality (*"He may have won if he had tried"*), extending far beyond the traditional mood system.

Taken together, these contrasts show that while tense situates events temporally, aspect describes their internal temporal structure, and mood provides grammatical framing, modality introduces subjectivity, evaluation, and social stance into discourse. Narrog (2012) underscores this point, noting that "modality constitutes an independent dimension of meaning, though it frequently overlaps with tense, aspect, and mood" (p. 22). Such overlaps often explain why learners confuse modality with tense or mood, particularly in constructions that combine categories, such as *"He could have gone."*

4. The Flexible and Subjective Nature of Modality

One of the defining characteristics of modality is its flexibility and subjectivity. Lyons (1977) explains that modality is "exceptionally context-dependent, speaker-dependent, and communicatively oriented" (p. 797), in contrast to tense and aspect, which generally follow more fixed grammatical patterns. This suggests that modality, while grammatical, is also deeply pragmatic, since its meaning often depends on speaker intent and discourse context.

As Palmer (2001) observes, modal verbs are inherently polysemous, and their interpretation shifts according to context. For example, *must* may signal obligation (*"You must wear a helmet"*) or strong inference (*"She must be home now"*), while *may* can indicate either permission (*"You may leave early"*) or possibility (*"It may rain later"*). This semantic versatility arises because modal expressions are not tied to a single fixed meaning but instead "vary their force depending on the discourse situation" (Palmer, 2001, p. 9).

The subjective nature of modality has also been emphasized by Nuyts (2001), who argues that epistemic modality records the speaker's "degree of commitment to the truth of a proposition" (p. 25). Thus, the contrast between *"It must be true"* and *"It could be true"* reflects not objective reality but the speaker's personal stance toward that reality. Halliday (1978) reinforces this interpersonal dimension, describing modality as "a resource for negotiating meaning between participants" (p. 116), one that encodes social roles and relationships in communication.

Such flexibility varies across cultures and languages, further contributing to ambiguity. For instance, in English, the indirect form *"Could you open the window?"* functions as a polite request, whereas in other languages direct imperatives may not be perceived as impolite. In Japanese, modality is often marked by sentence-final particles, which encode both certainty and politeness rather than relying primarily on modal verbs. According to Hinkel (1999), these cross-linguistic differences demonstrate that modality is shaped not only by grammar but also by "cultural conventions of communication" (p. 152).

For second-language learners, these pragmatic subtleties present significant challenges. Holmes (1995) points out that EFL learners often overuse direct modals, creating an impression of abruptness, while Nuyts (2001) notes that learners may rely excessively on hedging expressions (*may, might, possibly*), which can sound unnatural in certain contexts. Errors of this type result in unintended pragmatic effects — for instance, overusing *must* in situations where *should* or *have to* would be more natural can make a learner sound overly authoritative.

In sum, modality is dynamic and subjective, operating at the intersection of grammar, meaning, discourse, and culture. Its mastery requires not only knowledge of forms but also awareness of their interpersonal and cultural implications. As Halliday (1978) and Palmer (2001) both highlight, becoming proficient in modality entails developing pragmatic competence, an area where learners must go beyond structural rules to grasp the subtleties of communicative appropriateness.

5. The Pragmatic Functions of Modality

In communication, modality plays a crucial role in shaping pragmatic meaning, enabling speakers to manage interpersonal relations and convey attitudes that extend beyond propositional content. Rather than functioning merely as grammatical markers, modal forms operate as strategic resources for negotiating politeness, credibility, and social interaction.

One major pragmatic function of modality is softening requests. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that "indirectness is a major strategy for mitigating face-threatening acts" (p. 129), and modal expressions often serve this purpose. For example, *"Could you help me with this?"* or *"Might I borrow your notes?"* are considerably less imposing than the direct imperative *"Help me with this."* By embedding obligation within modalized forms, speakers save face for both themselves and their interlocutors.

Another central role is hedging — the use of modality to express doubt, downplay commitment, or allow alternative interpretations. Hyland (1998) defines hedging as "the linguistic means by which writers present a proposition as an opinion rather than a fact" (p. 5), making it an essential tool in academic discourse. Phrases such as *"It might rain later"* or *"This may suggest a possible solution"* illustrate how modality tempers assertions. For instance, in research writing, scholars are more likely to state *"The results may show a correlation"* rather than the categorical *"The results show a correlation."*

A further pragmatic function of modality is inference and assumption. Levinson (1983) notes that "modality provides the inferential link between utterances and context" (p. 101), allowing interlocutors to draw conclusions indirectly. Thus, a sentence like *"He must be working"* conveys inference based on reasoning rather than direct perception, demonstrating how modal forms enrich communicative subtlety.

Cross-cultural research further demonstrates the pragmatic weight of modality. Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that while English speakers frequently rely on modalized forms (*could, might, would*) to soften requests, speakers of other languages may employ direct imperatives without impoliteness. In Russian or Arabic, for example, direct commands are often pragmatically neutral in contexts where English would prefer mitigation. Similarly, Japanese encodes modality in sentence-final particles (e.g., *-kamo shirenai* "might," *-deshou* "probably"), which simultaneously convey degrees of certainty and politeness. Hinkel (1999) argues that such differences reveal modality to be "a phenomenon both linguistic and cultural, varying according to communicative conventions" (p. 153).

Finally, modality can signal power relations. Fairclough (1989) explains that "modal verbs are a site of ideological struggle" (p. 126), as their choice reflects varying degrees of authority, solidarity, or deference. Compare *"You must come to the meeting"* (a directive grounded in authority) with *"You should come to the meeting"* (a softer advisory stance). The selection of modal form therefore indexes not only semantic force but also interpersonal positioning

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within discourse.

In sum, modality serves as a pragmatic resource for politeness, hedging, inference, and power negotiation. Its effective use depends on both linguistic knowledge and cultural competence, making it a vital area of inquiry for linguists and language educators alike.

6. Modality in Language Teaching and Learning

For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), modality is especially challenging because of its semantic subtlety, pragmatic sensitivity, and cross-cultural variability. Unlike tense or aspect, which generally follow more regular grammatical patterns, modality involves context-dependent hierarchies of meaning that vary across languages and cultures.

6.1. Understanding Subtle Differences

One long-standing issue concerns the distinction between semantically close modals**.** Swan (2005) observes that learners often confuse pairs such as *can/could*, *may/might*, or *must/have to*. For instance, an EFL learner might say *"He can be at school now"* in an attempt to express epistemic possibility, where native usage would prefer *may* or *might*. Such errors highlight what Swan (2005, p. 91) calls "the difficulty of grasping both semantic precision and pragmatic appropriateness in modal choice."

Compounding this challenge is the polysemy of modals. As Palmer (2001) notes, a single modal can encode multiple meanings depending on context: *could* may express past ability (*"I could swim when I was a child"*), a polite request (*"Could you open the window?"*), or a hypothetical possibility (*"We could go to the park"*). Learners without explicit instruction often overgeneralize one sense and overlook others, leading to pragmatic misfires in communication.

6.2. Cultural Considerations

The use of modality also varies significantly across cultures, affecting politeness strategies and social interaction. Holmes (1995) shows that what counts as polite in English — for example, the indirect request *"Could you pass the salt?"* — may be considered unnecessary in other languages, where direct imperatives are not impolite. Hinkel (1999) similarly documents cases where learners transfer norms from their first language, producing utterances in English that may sound either too blunt or excessively formal.

Moreover, modality can signal power relations. As Fairclough (1989) argues, the choice between *must* and *should* reflects different interpersonal stances: *must* projects authority and obligation, while *should* frames advice more softly. An EFL learner who consistently relies on *must* may unintentionally project an authoritarian tone, highlighting the need to teach not only forms but also the social meanings embedded in modal choices.

6.3. Teaching Strategies

To overcome these challenges, instruction should move beyond grammar drills to adopt contextualized and communicative approaches**.** Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) stress the importance of "explicitly drawing learners' attention to both semantic distinctions and pragmatic functions of modals" (p. 179). Effective strategies include:

- **Contextualized practice** through role-plays and simulations of authentic situations (e.g., making polite requests, giving advice).
- **Exposure to authentic input** in films, television, and podcasts, where learners can observe both semantic and pragmatic uses of modality.
- **Explicit instruction** on subtle contrasts (*may* vs. *might*, *must* vs. *have to*), accompanied by discussion of their social meanings.
- **Corpus-based learning**, where learners explore frequency and usage patterns in authentic texts (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1999).
- **Task-based learning**, requiring learners to negotiate rules, obligations, and possibilities collaboratively in group tasks.

Such approaches equip learners not only with formal knowledge of modal verbs but also with pragmatic competence and intercultural awareness**,** both of which are essential for effective communication in global contexts.

7. Conclusion

The present discussion has sought to highlight the distinctive and multifaceted nature of modality in language and to demonstrate why it is fundamentally different from tense, aspect, and mood. Whereas these categories primarily encode temporal and structural information, modality introduces what Lyons (1977) calls "a subjective and interpersonal dimension to meaning" (p. 452), allowing speakers to express attitudes, degrees of certainty, or obligation, and to negotiate meaning in interaction.

From a theoretical perspective, modality occupies what Palmer (2001) describes as "the interface of semantics, pragmatics, and discourse" (p. 4), making it a particularly rich field of study. Its polysemy and context-dependence illustrate how language reflects not only cognition and inference but also social stance and interpersonal relations. Nuyts (2001) further argues that modality "represents one of the clearest windows into the speaker's evaluation of reality" (p. 27), while its cross-linguistic diversity underscores both its universality and its cultural specificity.

Pedagogically, modality poses challenges but also significant opportunities. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) note that learners often struggle with the "overlapping and shifting meanings of modal verbs" (p. 183), which require not only grammatical instruction but also explicit attention to pragmatic use and intercultural values. As Holmes (1995) emphasizes, successful teaching of modality involves moving beyond abstract grammar rules to contextualized practice, intercultural awareness, and the cultivation of pragmatic competence. Approaches such as the use of authentic materials, communicative tasks, and corpus-based resources can help learners develop both structural accuracy and sensitivity to subtle shades of meaning.

Looking ahead, several promising directions for modality research can be identified. Cross-linguistic studies, as Nuyts (2001) suggests, can illuminate how cultural norms shape modal usage, while corpus and computational approaches (Biber et al., 1999) can reveal how modals function across registers, genres, and varieties of English. In applied linguistics, classroom-based investigations are needed to assess which pedagogical methods most effectively foster learners' mastery of both the grammatical and pragmatic dimensions of modality.

In conclusion, modality is not a marginal category but, as Halliday (1978) aptly observes, "a central resource for negotiating meaning in

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social interaction" (p. 116). A deeper understanding of modality therefore enriches both linguistic theory and language pedagogy, offering valuable insights into the interplay between language, thought, and culture.

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