

Article

# Effect of Modal Verbs on Students' Writing in the Colleges of Education

Samuel Nartey<sup>1,\*</sup>, Isaac Anobi Asare<sup>1</sup>, Patrick Zodzenu<sup>2</sup>, Reena Efua Ametorwo<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Mt. Mary College of Education, Somanya, Ghana

<sup>2</sup>Department of Languages, Peki College of Education, Peki, Ghana

Correspondence: Samuel Nartey (samnartus7@yahoo.com/snartey@mmce.edu.gh)

**Abstract:** The study adopted a mixed-method research approach. The population size of this study constitutes the last batch of Diploma in Basic Education (DBE) and the current first-year students of the new programme (Bachelor in Basic Education) of Mount Mary College of Education. Purposive and random sampling techniques were used to select seven hundred and seventy-nine (779) respondents for the study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select final year Diploma in Basic Education (DBE), made up of 312 and first-batch first-year students of the new programme (Bachelor in Basic Education) of Mount Mary College of Education, made up of 467 were used for data collection. A simple random technique was used to select 15 long essays from the final year Diploma in Basic Education while 30 assignments were selected from the first batch Bachelor in Basic Education students. Documents and interview guides were used for data collection. With an interpretative lens, the data were analysed in themes. The challenges in writing are the substitution of one modal verb for another, forceful insertions of modal verbs and improper modal forms. There was also proof that students were found to have used modal verbs in sentences that lacked the corresponding relationship with other clausal elements, making such constructions grammatically and pragmatically non-harmonious. It is recommended that there is a need to have a run-on design of the curricula by making sure that, a gradual introduction of modal verbs begins from the basic and low-grade level of the educational system to the highest. As these learners move up, they will correctly apply the verbs, changing from the core meaning of the modals to more complex uses. This concerted effort though will not be a panacea to the modal verbs challenge; it could mitigate the problem to a large extent.

**Keywords:** Modal, Verbs, Students, Writing, Colleges of Education

## How to cite this paper:

Nartey, S., Asare, I. A., Zodzenu, P., & Ametorwo, R. E. (2022). Effect of Modal Verbs on Students' Writing in the Colleges of Education. *Universal Journal of Literature and Linguistics*, 2(1), 33–46. Retrieved from <https://www.scipublications.com/journal/index.php/ujll/article/view/746>

Received: March 17, 2022

Accepted: June 21, 2022

Published: October 23, 2022



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

A study remarked that the application of modal verbs is a grey area to both acquiring and learning English either as first or second language respectively, as well as other English language learning groups [1]. Modal verbs have complex grammatical structure with varied functions. There's no definite definition or any acceptable one in linguistics, hence the attempt to label the same item with different names such as modal verbs, modal words, auxiliary modals, or defective verbs. The above explanation agreed with earlier scholars that modal verbs indicate the expression of how individuals process their thought and perception. The teaching and use of modals is actually an area of grammar both instructors and learners need to consider very closely to reduce the challenges posed. Often time, there are some language elements that instructors assume learners could read around themselves therefore pushing these tasks the back burner, with the thinking that, learners find their usage easy. Such neglect and inattention are what create problems years later in students' academic life as they climb higher [2].

Modal verbs are categorized under defective verbs since they lack certain characteristics that usually are assigned to lexical verbs. Even though modal verbs in old English usage were not used as defective, they are now used as such in most varieties of English as part of the auxiliary verb groups. The defect identified here is a result of the absence of infinitive form, future, participle, imperative and gerund/progressive. Further, the defective form is discussed because the preterit (past tense) as it is employed today in modern English use and discourse is quite different from the etymological use. For example, the use of *could* as in “I could assist you with your load”, carries a different meaning. In the above clause, the speaker’s use of the preterit modal could be of more politeness marker than the usual mere past tense marker as a statement that has been made in the past. Even so, this explanation will be possible if and only if the context of the situation is well-created in order to determine the above meaning. Aside modal verbs being classified generally as defective verbs, other names assigned to them are modal auxiliaries, and modal words. Even though there are different realizations for the term modal verbs as mentioned above, the linguistic functions they play in varieties of English do not carry much difference because the names are just alternative denotations usage for sake of convenience [3].

The argument here is not necessarily on African writers researching on modal verbs. The discussion is rather on the number of studies carried out on African students whose medium of instruction is English. Whether such studies are carried out by African scholars or foreign ones, what is needed is the output of work that will reflect how modal verbs are employed by second-language speakers and the effect they have on language. The researcher believes that the purpose of any research may be varied and range from finding the cause to proposing solutions. So generally speaking, it is the intent one has and may include exploring, explaining, developing and examining.

The current four-year Bachelor of Education Programme has not provided topics on modal verbs in the curriculum. At present, two curricula are run in the colleges concurrently. One curriculum was designed by the University of Cape Coast while another was prepared by four universities namely: The University of Education-Winneba, the University of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, and the University of Development Studies. There was nowhere in both documents where the topic of modal verbs can be traced. For instance, reference can be made from the course manual prepared from the curriculum by the four universities in collaboration with Transforming-Teacher Education and Learning (T-TEL), a United Kingdom-based education agency. The document did not cater for the teaching of modal verbs as a topic (Four-Year B.ED. Course Manual, Ministry of Education –Ghana, 2018)

The purpose of this study is to explore the choices of modal verbs that students make in their texts and the extent to which these verbs affect their writing and the meaning the verb constructions convey in English. This study seeks to unravel some of the basic difficulties students face in Mount Mary College of Education and the finding could be used to reduce these challenges. This study could challenge teachers of English to reflect on our methods and strategies for handling modal verbs as a sensitive topic. The study was guided by this research question - What is the effect of modal verbs on students writing?

### ***1.1. The effect of modal verbs on students’ writings***

The choices students make for modal verbs have an effect on the clauses as well as the meaning these verbs convey. Effects such as multiplicity of meaning, negation effect and social-cultural background were reviewed.

#### **1.1.1. Multiplicity of meaning**

Modal verbs and their pragmatic values in students’ writings are a result of choices students make in varied contexts. The effect of modal verbs on students’ writing is a result

of the multiplicity of meanings the verbs are used to express in different circumstances [4]. Sometimes, some students get confused and apply the modals which give different intentions and meanings. It is this problem that makes some students who are not well conversant with the proper use of modals abandon the entire idea. Researchers gave some exercises on modal verbs to test the knowledge of 13 ESL students in Korea on degrees of certainty, they were not sure which modals were correct except in their level of degree. According to the study, none of the students was able to say that the modals express similar notions with varying degrees but rather mixed the answers with epistemic and deontic knowledge [5].

### 1.1.2. Negation effect

One other effect of modal verbs is in the construction of verbs which have negation. The effect of negation in EFL students' writings among some Arabic speakers. In handling fourth-year college students, she said the negation in modal verb phrases is another complex thing which students struggle with in their essays. The complexity is a result of the opposite meaning of the modal verbs. Another one is the generalization of the modal conventions, instead of considering each case on its own merit [6]. The challenge was not only in negation but the entire modal system. First of all, the students had difficulty in the meaning of modal verbs conveyed, then, they also have challenges in their proper use. Reading some of their essays made it difficult to follow the real meanings and the imports. The difficulty was attributed to the absence of modal verbs system in the Arabic language [7]. The negation effect is realized in incongruous meaning.

### 1.1.3. Socio-cultural effect

The milieu in which language is learnt has a great impact on learners. Language affinity has an influence on one another. While some languages have similar concepts others have not. All these elements come together to ease language learning. Research on cross-examination of three different students' writings in SAT, TOEFL AND MELAB of undergraduate students in American universities reported that the effect on the modality was very high in all the test items administered. The study also concluded that the learners might have gained some experiences as a result of their interaction and relationship with native users of English. At least there was a positive effect on the use of modal verbs because the foreign language students found themselves in a natural environment [8]. The effect of modal verb uses in two separate examinations, an expository essay and an argumentative essay topic among ESL students [4]. The students were given some prompts as to how to use the modal verbs. The aim of the test was to check which of the two tests would the students employ the modals more effectively than the other and which one would score higher. At the back of the mind of the assessors, they expected the students to have used more epistemic modal verbs in the argumentative essay than in the expository essay. The analysis of the two tests showed that, in both cases, the effect was not felt in terms of their use. The effect on the student's essays was because the student's aim was only on classroom activities which were purely linguistic in nature without being exposed to real language use and the experiences that accompanied them [9].

More recently, Educational Testing Services (ETS) reported the effect of modal verbs used by applicants in TOEFL examination papers. In all, there were 2000 students involving European L2 speakers of French, Spanish, Germans and East Asians (Chinese, Koreans and Japanese) [10]. In the analysis, it was revealed that the Caucasians' knowledge of the modal use in English has a higher positive impact than the Asian speakers". The French students could easily use the modal 'could, may, will, might and would' effectively in both the epistemic and the deontic sense. See the illustration below:

- The game is over. The teams could be heading toward a penalty shootout.
- The weather is hot. The rain might be coming soon.

- The demonstrators always insisted on their right since the beginning of this dispensation. They would always resort to the mobilization of professional groups.
- All essays must be ready at six.
- The essays must be the same looking at the content and the style.

In (1) and (2), the French students were able to identify that both are of epistemic usage but with varying level of degree of knowledge. They were able to understand that, the (3) was the past form of the modal 'will' and was used in the core sense of the modal. With 'must', the students made a distinction between the (4) as deontic expression against the epistemic expression in (5). The Germans and the Spanish had some difficulty with (4) and (5) with exception of a few of them who made the difference during a discussion session. The Asian texts generally showed low scores which Hamp-Lyons and Mathias attributed to the difference in linguistic background with the Asian. It was suggested that the impact on the modal verb use experienced by the Europeans was higher because of language affinity traceable among them [10].

A researcher conducted a study to elicit the effect of modal use in a standardized test among native speakers of English and Chinese and Spanish speakers, he identified divergent features in the texts of the students. The essays were written on the topics 'Space exploration and farming'. The essays written by Chinese students revealed a good number of the verb 'be' with almost insignificant use of modal verbs [11]. There were also patches of some prepositional elements and passive voice constructions. In some instances, the modal verbs were just absent. The Spanish speakers' writings were full of modal adjectives such as, possible, probably, necessary, and essential than found in the Chinese and native speakers on the topic 'Space exploration'. The effect of modal verbs on the topic 'farming' did not see much of the modal adjectives or the modal verbs. The native speakers largely avoided modal verb use on the topic of space exploration, with more proper adjectives, passives and the verb 'be' in their texts. One significant distinction in the texts of native speakers against non-natives, especially, Chinese speakers is that the native speakers' awareness of tentative statements against factual ones was the result of less use of the modal verbs in the above topic. It was, therefore, suggested that the awareness coupled with the topic could generate a better understanding of modality in students' writings. Where the topic is alien together with students' lack of skills in modality, then the effect will most often turn out to be more negative than positive [11]. This implies that modal verbs' effect on students' writing, particularly, ESL and EFL were as a result of linguistic and socio-cultural background, lack of proper or enough feedback, lack of exposure and experiences, assessors and instructors' inadequate knowledge of both content and students, background. Measures to tackle the challenges associated with the use of modal verbs were suggested and are going to be discussed in the next section.

### ***1.2. Measures to address the negative effect on the modal verbs in students' essays***

Some examinations on the effect of L2 writings in Chinese, Korean and Japanese showed that either the students' texts were affected by their L1 knowledge and the function and the meaning of modal verbs in their respective languages [12]. In the end, the use of modal verbs with regard to possibility, necessity or ability was fused together in the texts, giving the impression of the student's inability to recognize the proper place of the modal verbs [12]. One measure to address the effect of modal verbs was that, first of all, teachers have to have a good understanding of the complex nature of these verbs. If this is done, then teachers will be in a better position to explain the hidden meaning of modal verbs in different use [13]. In addition, students need to be engaged constantly both in written and oral use of modal verbs. Feedback student assignments for instance have to be written comments and the correct use attached to their works. This is important

because it was realized that, in most cases, the feedback was discovered to non-verbal types. And so students most often repeated the same errors in their writing.

The personal experiences and the socio-cultural background of the students had a greater effect on their writings [12]. TOEFL is an example of a test item given to students to test their knowledge of modal verbs but such a test is culturally different from students' background [12]. A study revealed that of the seven topics essays given to the students of Asian and Hispanic backgrounds, five of the topics were ethnic bias toward these students who already have different modal systems in their respective languages. So, students with already lower linguistic skills in English are probably going to be affected by such tests, hence the effect on their performance in their essays. There should be clear-cut modal verbs teaching in relation to the socio-cultural background of learners. This is not to say learners have to be taught in violation of language rules and conventions, rather, students be asked about their views on related issues that have happened in their communities and discussed accordingly. These events will bring out the realities in life and subsequently, some modal verbs could be mapped in to explain the different contexts in which these modal verbs are applied. The problem is that, when textbooks written by native speakers are the main sources of modal verb practices, the pragmatic effect will be missing, leaving learners with artificial uses or a culturally bias use [14].

Many second language users have difficulty that engulfed their writing in their bid to use modal verbs to express modality [4]. She observed that little is known of the criteria and the quality of the raters themselves. According to the author, the negative effect found mostly in students' texts could be the fact that the assessors and raters have not provided enough feedback to the students involved. The assessors too have less knowledge of these categories of students and the modal system in their language; whether some of these languages have modal verbs system or not. When the assessors have a vast idea about these students' plight, it is only then that the skewing of these test items will improve, with students equally performing better. The above assertion confirmed the effect of modal verb usage among Arabic speakers in English because modal verbs are non-existent in their language [4]. The authors were of the view that, in order to reduce the effect of modal verbs in students' writings, assessors must be familiar with the student's background so that the necessary input is made on the marked scripts. After that, scripts should be returned to the students so that they know where they have fallen short and the corrections available to them. Just giving scores out to students without seeing what went wrong is a disservice to students' improvement [4]. Some examinations on the effect of L2 writings of Chinese, Korean and Japanese. His result showed that either the students' texts were affected by their L1 knowledge and the function and the meaning of modal verbs in their respective languages [12]. In the end, the use of modal verbs with regard to possibility, necessity or ability was fused together in the texts, giving the impression of the student's inability to recognize the proper place of the modal verbs. The personal experiences and the socio-cultural background of the students had a greater effect on their writing. What was discovered was that most students were seen giving mere information with regard to the modal verbs instead of using them to suit the various contexts as found in the essays [12]. There were other defects as in the form of wrong wording, and the substitution of one modal verb with another, leading to misinformation of the content and detail of the topic. Some of the challenges these students face to the biases that were associated with the test items administered to the students [14]. The authors said the level of composition difficulty coupled with cultural bias made students achieve little in such assignments. TOEFL is an example of a test item given to students to test their knowledge of modal verbs but such a test is culturally different from students' background.

A researcher expressed his disappointment in students' scripts when he realized some ESL students were applying inflexion in the third person singular in the present tense to the modal verb 'can' [15]. The frustration emanated from the fact that after he took his students through the rules of modal verb usage, a few of them still had that

challenge. He observed that the confusion came from some periphrastic modal verbs' concord. Some of the periphrastic modals do agree in person and in number and that is where the students got it wrong. Periphrastic modal verbs such as: 'have to', 'need to' and 'want to' work like normal lexical verbs. See the example below:

- He has to take his studies seriously.
- He had to take his studies seriously which he didn't.
- We have to take our studies seriously.

The same cannot be said of 'got to or ought to'. These modals behave like the main modal verbs. In that regard, Freeman believed that, instead fusing the modal verbs as some linguistics do, there should be clear distinction of the classification of the modals and treat them separately. In doing so, students will be taken through the syntactic structure of all categorizations of modal verbs and their functions. With this suggestion, students will be able to identify pure modal verbs from other categories and how these non-pure modal verbs behave [15].

Investigating the uses and functions of modal verbs like 'can', 'could', 'may', and 'should' in academic writings of Eskimo and Athabaskan learners, indicated that the first-year undergraduate students' writings consistently "extended the functions of modals to encode their own cultural values [16]." Further, the studies also indicated that "the problem students in dealing with university culture is determining the extent to which their assumptions and experiences are sufficiently different from those of SAE culture", where SAE stand for Standard Average European. The scholars believed that where there is the issue of ethnic minority in the case of the Eskimo and the Athabaskan learners, the responsibility will rest on the instructor of English to consider the kind of instructions in academic writings and the type of standard demands that could be of great value in their socio-cultural and pragmatic angles [16].

With the findings available so far, it has become necessary to set up L1 and L2 writings on the same pedestal with regard to topics or different topics which will demand different rates at which modal verbs could be utilized. Another proposition was that it would be prudent if the entire idea of academic writing was broadened with more refined topics by developing clear and accommodating prompts. With the notion of broadening, the idea was to reach out to both native and non-native speakers' uses of modal verbs of possibility, ability, obligation or necessity in all sorts of essays without skewing topics and prompts in favour of any group. Similar studies on measures to curb the negative and biased effects on modal verbs used in students' writings including compositions and other academic discourses in their examinations were carried out [17] They reported that many issues were the cause of such writing inappropriate. They argued that with a number of empirical studies on the uses and functions of modal verbs, much of the semantic values of these verbs are known today in literature and the impact should be giving positive signs irrespective of the background of the learner, especially, in the second and third bracket learners. They also asserted:

*"A brief overview of modal verb classifications, the impact of language change on their meanings and uses, and their pragmatic properties and functions in written discourse seem instrumental for an examination of the contextual roles the modals play in NS and NNs academic writing".*

## 2. Materials and methods

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. The population size of this study constitutes the last batch of Diploma in Basic Education (DBE) and the current first-year students of the new programme (Bachelor in Basic Education) of Mount Mary College of Education. Purposive and random sampling techniques were used to select seven

hundred and seventy-nine (779) respondents for the study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select final year Diploma in Basic Education (DBE), made up of 312 and first-batch first-year students of the new programme (Bachelor in Basic Education) of Mount Mary College of Education, made up of 467 were used for data collection. A simple random technique was used to select 15 long essays from the final year Diploma in Basic Education while 30 assignments were selected from the first batch Bachelor in Basic Education students. The choice of these numbers was to enable the researchers to have enough time to analyse the texts. Documents and interview guides were used for data collection. The interview section included five students. The researchers purposively selected the students because they were already on vacation and therefore, the random sampling technique was not suitable. Students whose phone details were with the researchers were contacted for a scheduled interview. With an interpretative lens, the data were analysed in themes.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. *The effect of wrong choices of modal verbs in Students' Writing*

The second research question sought to unravel the sort of effect that students' choice of modal verbs had on their writing. In analyzing the data, various themes emerged which were further corroborated by the theoretical framework adopted by this research. The themes for discussion in this section are as follows: non-harmony, and improper hedging.

##### 3.1.1. Non – harmonious use of modal verbs in students' texts

The theme to be considered is non-harmonious constructions of modal verbs in students' texts. A careful look at how some students used some modal verbs indicated a departure from the meaning of the verbs, making certain constructions difficult to meet the syntactic structure of these verbs. Once there is a lack of a proper link between the modal and other elements of the sentence, it will affect negatively the meaning. Syntactically, some of the modal verbs as identified in students' essays do not have any corresponding meaning, a situation of non-harmonic use of modal verbs [18]. The modal that constituted non-harmony included 'can', 'may', 'could' and 'should'.

**Table 1. Non – harmonious use of modal verbs in students' Long Essays**

| Kinds of modal verbs | Total freq. | Non-harmonious |
|----------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Can                  | 364         | 56             |
| Could                | 157         | 31             |
| Will                 | 228         | 40             |
| Would                | 104         | 15             |
| May                  | 98          | 30             |
| Might                | 15          | 7              |
| Should               | 189         | 35             |
| Must                 | 72          | 13             |
| To be able/to        | 56          | 9              |
| Used to              | 15          | 3              |
| Need/to              | 46          | 6              |
| Want to              | 16          | 2              |
| Have to              | 9           | 2              |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>1369</b> | <b>249</b>     |

**Table 2. Theme 1- Non-harmonious use of modal verbs in students' assignments**

| Kinds of modal verbs | Total freq. | Non-harmonious |
|----------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Can                  | 71          | 19             |
| Could                | 34          | 4              |
| Will                 | 169         | 27             |
| Would                | 148         | 16             |
| Want to              | 46          | 4              |
| Need/to              | 26          | 1              |
| To be able to        | 39          | 1              |
| Have to              | 9           | 1              |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>542</b>  | <b>73</b>      |

Looking at the two tables above, it could be seen that “**can**” was the verb that was used more in a non-harmonic manner in LEs and “**will**” in ASS. While the non – harmonious “can” occurred 56 times out of the total of 364 in LEs, “will” was found non-harmonious 27 times out of 169 in ASS.

### 3.1.1.1. Non- harmonious ‘Can’

The modal ‘can’ was found to have been used in such a way that it had no corresponding meaning in the students’ writing. This constituted a non-harmonious use of the modal verb [18]. Example 24 is an extract from the long essays examined which elaborates on this use of ‘can’ in students’ work.

*“As much as one can read, the ability to write cannot be left out or ignored and when written record cannot be read then there is no record. If I cannot spell a word, it makes (sic) my handwriting untidy so that no one will know”.*

In the first sentence, **can** have been used on three different occasions. Two instances of the modal **can** be in the negative. The contrast the writer was drawing in the text is making it difficult to bring out any effective meaning. The student was not able to show internal clausal cohesion in the sentence. In the first place, the writer was talking about two different activities which are not simultaneous. Reading and writing are two different activities and skills that are developed separately even though the acquisition of one may help develop the other. However, it is not automatic that anyone who acquires reading skills develops writing skills as well. The last part of the sentence, that is, the subordinate clause says for example, “when a written record cannot be read then there is no record” is not making any meaningful contribution to readers’ understanding. The meaning one draws from that clause is that the inability of an individual to read a written material makes that material not exist at all, an assertion that creates a lot of confusion in our mind. It is a bit weird to say that when one cannot read a material that material ceases to exist. So, putting the pieces of information provided in the sentence makes it difficult to see the statement as harmonious. Whenever a sentence lacks harmony in its syntactic structure, the meaning will be affected. In the second sentence, the student was not communicating with readers. There is a gross violation of any proper syntactic arrangement that could provide any meaningful information to readers. For the writer to indicate that the inability of pupils to spell words was what made handwriting untidy is difficult to understand. The researcher thinks the sentence is not interactive enough for readers to get the import of the statement. In fact, as far as the researcher is concerned, it is even difficult to restructure the second sentence to affect meaning. It would have been better if that sentence was struck out entirely.

### 3.1.1.2. Non-harmonious 'May'

Example 25:

*"People with poor spelling, pronunciation or grammar may intentionally use poor handwriting in an effort to hide these facts".*

First of all, in the above construction, there was an intrusion of **may** which made the sentence non-harmonic. The use of **may** together with 'intentionally' does not bring the meaning the sentence intended to convey. **May** as a modal is highly tentative in any interaction except when its preterit form – **might** is used to further reduce the tentativeness of **may**. So, to use **may**, and the writer still held the view that the notion expressed is intentional, makes it difficult to derive the true meaning during the interaction. Assuming it is a hedging strategy that the writer employed, then the modal **could** be appropriate. Even with that, hedging may not be needed here because these were the findings that were available to the student. If the student did not want to be assertive with the findings, he could rather employ the modal **will** to convey that message. The use of **will** in this instance will not be considered as future time but rather used to imply a strong assumption the writer wished to put across about the attitude of pupils. One other way the student could have made the meaning clearer was to avoid the use of any modal entirely.

### 3.1.1.3. Non-harmonious 'Could'

Example 26:

As reviewed earlier, this modal is the most used verb in terms of hedging. Unfortunately, writers 'over-dependence on the modal derails the real meaning of their written interaction. When such situations occur, the harmony that is supposed to be seen in sentences becomes something else. Two of such non-harmonious instances are used to illustrate our point in example 26:

*"From Table 3, five pupils (sic) who represent ten percent (10%) of the total number of pupils who participated in the test could identify and write correctly. Ten pupils who also represent thirty percent (30%) could identify and write out correctly ascenders and descenders".*

The observation here is that the student was engaging readers by presenting figures in terms of percentages to them. These findings were not tentative but real figures. The introduction of a hedging device **could** be a non-harmonious clausal element that was not needed. The statement was supposed to be straight forward without any circumnavigation. In employing **could** therefore in the above sentences, the meaning readers could derive is that the pupils only have the ability but did not actually do the activity of identification and writing.

### 3.1.1.4. Non-harmonious 'Should'

Example 27:

*"English spelling (sic) are full of contradictions and exceptions that it is sometimes difficult to apply logic when you are unsure how a word should be spelt".*

"When you are unsure who a word should be spelled". The relative pronoun 'who' is pointing to the fact that an individual is to be spelt rather than the individual spelling the word.

### 3.1.2. Improper hedging in students' writing

One effect that was found in the modal use in students' texts was hedging. Sadly, it was discovered that, in an attempt to employ modal verbs as a way of hedging, students ended up using the verbs as hedging devices improperly. The tables below showed the distribution of the verbs.

**Table 3. Improper hedging of modal verbs in students' Long Essays**

| Kinds of modal verbs | Total Freq. | Improper hedging |
|----------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Can                  | 364         | 33               |
| Could                | 157         | 14               |
| Will                 | 228         | 7                |
| Would                | 104         | 2                |
| May                  | 98          | 3                |
| Might                | 15          | 2                |
| Should               | 189         | 5                |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>1155</b> | <b>66</b>        |

**Table 4. Improper hedging of modal verbs in students' assignments**

| Kinds of modal verbs | Total freq. | Improper hedging |
|----------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Can                  | 71          | 7                |
| Could                | 34          | -                |
| Will                 | 169         | 4                |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>274</b>  | <b>11</b>        |

Hedging is one of the most useful rhetorical resources to minimize harsh criticism and also to make one work less too assertive, especially, in the soft disciplines (humanities). In the course of employing this device, students were found to have abused it, either by wrongly inserting a modal or substituting it. Some of the modal verbs used as hedging devices were reducing some fact-finding to tentativeness, therefore making the meaning thwarted. The figures in the tables showed that students were found to have used "can" more often in both LEs and ASS. "Can" was hedged 33 times as against "could" (14) times in LEs. In ASS, while "can" was used 7 times out of the total frequency of 71, "will" was hedged 4 times out of the total frequency of 169. Though "could" occurred 34 times, there was no indication of this modal verb being hedged. Consider the examples below for illustrations.

#### 3.2.1.1. Improper hedging of 'Can'

The students' use of 'can' reveals improper hedging in their writing. In sentences that students are expected to hedge, they chose the modal 'can' which is not one to be used when hedging. Example 26 is one such use of 'can' in the students' text where hedging was supposed to have been employed. Even though scholars agreed that both 'can' and 'could' are used in hedging, the former is seen as informal while the latter is accepted as formal in academic writing [19, 20].

Example 26:

*"Upon all the strengths of action research, it has some weaknesses. One of which is that the research cannot be generalized".*

Though the syntactic nature of the sentence is deficient, the discussion on the theme of hedging can still be analyzed. The student was asserting that action research cannot be generalized by his/her use of the dynamic modality **can**. The text did not state any

authority that pointed out that research action is always area-specific. Even if out of the plethora of action research conducted many have shown to be geographically related, the assertion could be toned down by applying the appropriate hedging device. If it is found out later that there are exceptions to the claim, the writer would have escaped from that assertive stance. In the situation where the writer used the modal **could** for instance, then any future critique could spare him/her.

### 3.2.1.2. Improper Hedging of 'Could'

Example 28:

*"Smaller class size creates the more intimate setting and therefore can increase teacher-student bonding which has been shown to have a positive effect on student's success".*

*"For instance, the child who sees his or her father going to work late could also learn the habit. Moreover, it could be due to lack of parental supervision, domestic violence, poverty, and different attitudes towards education".*

The first sentence was brought in to help understand the subsequent one which is the focus of discussion. According to the student, the findings stated in the second sentence were from [21, 22]. If the hedging in the text is from the authorities, then the sentence or part of it must be in quotation and the discussion will absolve the student from any criticism. But in this case, those were the student's own constructions without quotation marks in the text. Since the student was stating the finding of some authority, the hedging here could have been shelved by using a verb in its lexical form.

### 3.2.1.3. Improper Hedging of 'Will'

Example 29:

*"The result of the study will be beneficial to pupils especially Azza M/A Basic two pupils since it is going [...]". The above sentence was found under the sub-heading 'The significance of the study'."*

A similar report that, aside from the modal '**will**' use of futuristic events and intentions, the verb has different semantic values in certain contextual underpinnings [23]. For example, '**will**' could be used for volition, power, habit, conditions and epistemic purposes.

The modal verb '**will**' in the sentence appeared to be used more as a modal of power than epistemic as the content of the sentence was signaling. The degree to which the result in the student's study was going to be beneficial to pupils was more of tentativeness than that of assertion. The significance of any study could be premised on assumption and not reality because at that point the study has not been carried out yet. It is a hopeful benefit that is anticipated. Even if pupils were going to benefit, it will depend on the success of the study itself. Further, not all pupils will benefit but some will do. Pragmatically, the student was engaging readers and needed to do so in a way to communicate better through the employment of the modal '**could**' instead of '**will**'.

### 3.2.1.4. Improper Hedging of 'Should'

Example 30:

*"Based on the above report, it can be ascertained that both parents have a vital role to play in solving handwriting problems of children. That is, parents should reinforce*

*what has been done by teachers at school so as to help improve pupil's poor handwriting and in general academic performance".*

The modal apart from it being used as a formal obligation, **should** is used more conditionally in epistemic modality. One observation the researcher has made from students' texts was that it was used more as an objective modal than a subjective one. In the first sentence, for instance, the writer made it clear about the roles to be played by parents in solving their children's problems. The meaning that could be derived from the sentence is that the parents were supposed to complement the work teachers have been doing in the school system. This then presupposed that the duty of teaching handwriting mainly rested with the teachers and therefore their roles were not to be shifted to parents. Nevertheless, parents as shareholders in the formal training of their children have some part to play in shaping them. The effect that was brought on the sentence through the use of **should** be to suggest that, the parents were obliged to perform that role or to play a major role in training pupils in the classroom. If it was understood that parents' role was just complementary, then the hedging devices which could be suitable will either be '**ought to**' or '**need to**' which are both semi-modals. The use of the two modal verbs will reduce the focus on the parents as major players in relation to school activities or the curriculum in general.

#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The challenges in writing are the substitution of one modal verb for another, forceful insertions of modal verbs and improper modal forms. There was also proof that students were found to have used modal verbs in sentences that lacked the corresponding relationship with other clausal elements, making such constructions grammatically and pragmatically non-harmonious. It is recommended that there is a need to have a run-on design of the curricula by making sure that, a gradual introduction of modal verbs begins from the basic and low-grade level of the educational system to the highest. As these learners move up, they will correctly apply the verbs, changing from the core meaning of the modals to more complex uses. This concerted effort though will not be a panacea to the modal verbs challenge; it could mitigate the problem to a large extent.

#### 5. Pedagogical implication

This study looked at the use of modal verbs in the writing of students of Mount Mary College of Education and highlighted a good number of weaknesses in their texts. The study pointed out that students were not very conversant with choices of modal verbs in relation to context and the appropriate application of these verbs. This has some pedagogical implications for curriculum writers and implementers/ instructors. Though the modal verbs are few, their contextual meaning as against their core meaning should not be taken for granted. He also suggested that ESL teachers need to understand modal verbs well so they can impact this knowledge to students. The impression is created as if it is the students who are not up to the task but sometimes, the teachers themselves are challenged in this aspect of language [13]. Taking the long essays as examples, those teachers who supervised the work could have pointed out some of the inappropriate use to students. Unfortunately, the texts were left with all those modal verb challenges. Two things come in mind, either teachers were not prudent enough to check out the inappropriateness or they lack the knowledge. Since the matter of modal verbs is a complex one, instructors need regular in-service training so as to be current with new trend as far as the use of these verbs is concerned. The implication is that, once the teachers are conversant with the uses of modal verbs, it will go a long way to impact on their teaching. More often, after certification, most teachers do not upgrade themselves to be abreast with current ideas and practices. It was through this project that the researcher

was able to discover the complex nature of modal verbs. This means that henceforth, there will be different approaches as to how the researcher will approach these verbs.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, SN, IA, PZ, and REA; methodology SN, IA, PZ, and REA; validation; formal analysis SN, IA, PZ, and REA; investigation SN, IA, PZ, and REA; resources SN, IA, PZ, and REA; data curation SN, IA, PZ, and REA; writing—original draft preparation SN, IA, PZ, and REA; writing—review and editing SN, IA, PZ, and REA; visualization, SN, IA, PZ, and REA; supervision SN, IA, PZ, and REA; project administration SN, IA, PZ, and REA; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** “This research received no external funding”

**Data Availability Statement:** Data is available on request from the corresponding author.

**Acknowledgements:** We acknowledge the selected speeches used in this study.

**Conflicts of Interest:** “The author declares no conflict of interest.” “No funders had any role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results”.

## References

- [1] Ferris, D. R. (2002). *Treatment of errors in second language student writing*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan.
- [2] Fazira, A. K. (2010). What modal verbs are: Modal verbs, modal words and auxiliary modals. *International Multidisciplinary Journal*.
- [3] Baerman, M., Greville, G. C., & Dunstan B. (2010). Defective paradigms: Missing forms and what they tell us. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 163. Oxford: Oxford University Press and British Academy.
- [4] Hamp-Lyons, L. (1991). Pre-text: Task-related influences on the writer. In: Hamp-Lyons, L. (Ed.), *Assessing second language writing in academic contexts* (pp. 87–107). Ablex, Norwood, NJ.
- [5] Hamp-Lyons, L., Mathias, S., (1994). Examining expert judgments of task difficulty on essay tests. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 3, 49–68.
- [6] Cristina, (2011). *Modal verbs: Problems and solutions for teachers and students* Retrieved July, 21st.2021 from my2languages. Blog spot.com/ 2021/07/modal-verbs-problems...
- [7] Saeed, A. T. (2009). Arab EFL Learners' acquisition of modals". *Research in Language Journal*. Retrieved July, 20th.2021 from [www.degruyter.com/view/j/rela.2009.7.issue--1/v10015-009](http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/rela.2009.7.issue--1/v10015-009).
- [8] Carlson, S., Bridgeman, B., Camp, R., & Waanders, J., (1985). *Relationship of admission test scores to writing performance of native and non-native speakers of English*. Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ.
- [9] Yimwilai, S. (2015). An Integrated Approach to Teaching Literature in an EFL Classroom. *English Language Teaching*, 8(2), 14-21.
- [10] Leech, G., Hundt, M., Hair, C., & Smith, N. (2009). *Change in contemporary English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Carlson, D. (1988). Politicizing Tudor Court Literature: Gaguin's Embassy and Henry VII's Humanists' Response. *Studies in Philology*, 85(3), 279-304.
- [12] Hinkel, E. (2009). The effect of essay topics on modal verb uses in L1 and L2 academic writing. *Journal of Pragmatics*, Elsevier.
- [13] Thompson, M. (2002). Modals in English language teaching. Retrieved April 28, 2013, from <http://www.telusplanet.net/linguisticsissues/modalsinteaching.html>
- [14] Pomplun, M., Wright, D., Oleka, N., & Sudlow, M., (1992). *An analysis of English composition test essay prompts for differential difficulty*. College Entrance Examination Board, New York.
- [15] Freeman, M., D., & Celece Murcia, M. (1999). *The grammar book*. Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- [16] Basham, C., & Kwachka, P. (1991). Reading the world differently: a cross-cultural approach to writing assessment. In: Hamp-Lyons, L. (Ed.), *Assessing second language writing in academic contexts* (pp.37–49). Ablex, Norwood, NJ.
- [17] Traugott, E., & Nuvts, J. (2006). Historical aspects of modality. In: Frawley, W. (Ed.), *The expression of Modality*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, pp. 107–139.
- [18] Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics*. Vols. 1 & 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [19] Hyland, K. (2007). English for professional academic purposes: writing for scholarly publication. In D. Belcher (Eds.), *Teaching language purposefully: English for specific purposes in theory and practice*, (pp. 1–27). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- [20] Salager-Meyer, F. (2011). Scientific discourse and contrastive linguistics: *Hedging*. *European Science Editing*, 37(2), 35-37.
- [21] Gomaa, Y. (2019). “A Corpus-Based Pragmatic Analysis of Hedging in Linguistics Master Theses Abstracts Written by Saudi Students. 8(1), 9-81.

- [22] Casas-Pedrosa, A. V., Domínguez, J. F., & Sintes, A. A. (2013). Introduction: the use of corpora for language teaching and learning. *Research in Corpus Linguistics*, 1-5.
- [23] Palmer, F. (2001). *Mood and modality (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.