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“A Terrible Beauty Is Born”: Opportunities
and New Perspectives for Online Teaching and Assessment

“Nasce una terribile bellezza”: opportunità
e nuove prospettive per la didattica e la valutazione online

Edited by

Franca Poppi and Josef Schmied

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Students' Voices from the Pandemic

The Use of Modal and Semi-Modal Verbs for Expressing Subjectivity in a Local Academic Learner Corpus

Emanuela Tenca

Università degli Studi di Verona

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents the results of a small-scale study on learner output obtained through an asynchronous writing activity completed in a Moodle forum during an English course targeting students of Primary Teacher Education at the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia (Italy) in spring 2020. The activity encouraged learners' expression about topics relevant to their disciplinary and professional domain, thus enhancing their engagement in the learning process. The analysis focuses on the use of modal and semi-modal verbs, and it aims at contributing to research into modality in learners' academic writing. Indeed, the insights obtained by examining material created by learners during the pandemic can help develop resources and strategies to be incorporated in a more conscious, organic, and learner-centred manner into the design of future courses. The corpus (27,430 tokens) was investigated using Sketch Engine, and the results show the students' preference for modals and semi-modals expressing obligation. This may be determined by the topic and by the students' background, as they integrate their personal perspective as insiders into their contributions, hence demonstrating their strong commitment towards the profession for which they are training.

Keywords: Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT); learner corpora; modality; Moodle; writing skills.

1. INTRODUCTION AND AIM OF THE STUDY

The first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 forced teachers and students at all education levels to rush from face-to-face to remote learning. Contents typically designed for delivery in the physical classroom had to be immediately adapted to an online context, and teachers reacted by resorting to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020; Murphy 2020). This approach, however, was primarily centred on short-term outcomes to be achieved in the digital learning context, with the attendant risk of marginalising learners' needs in the long run (Xiao 2021). Researchers and educators are now aware of these limitations, and they are devising strategies to support students in achieving academic success in the “new normal” (Callo and Yazon 2020; Hew *et al.* 2020; Xiao 2021).

Although digital technologies were introduced into the foreign language classroom long before the outbreak of the pandemic, the world of language education has not been immune to the negative effects of ERT. Language instructors can now take advantage of the lessons learnt during the pandemic by rediscovering the pedagogical potential of the technologies already available before March 2020, and which became a *sine qua non* for teaching and learning during the most traumatic phase of the global health crisis.

A well-known example of these technologies is Moodle, an open-source Learning Management System (LMS) first developed in 2001. Its design is based on the principles of social constructivism (Palincsar 1998; Powell and Kalina 2009), which means that it is centred on learners and their ability to actively build up knowledge (Helling and Petter 2012; Smith Nash and Rice 2018). In Moodle, learners are offered two types of tools, *resources* and *activities*: the former are files or links giving access to digital learning contents, while the latter are interactive items which allow students to carry out a variety of tasks (Cole and Foster 2007; Badia, Martín, and Gómez 2019). *Activities* are fundamental for knowledge development, as they “provide affordances for learner-learner or teacher-learner interaction as well as for manipulation and transformation of content” (Blin and Munro 2008, 483). Therefore, if adopted skilfully by instructors, *activities* can help students build agency and investment (Norton 2013) in their learning.

The present study draws on the experience with Moodle during a 32-hour course of English targeting 141 fourth year students who were attending the Single-cycle Master's Degree programme in Primary

Teacher Education at the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia (Italy) in spring 2020. In particular, this essay illustrates the results of a small-scale study focusing on learner output obtained by means of an asynchronous writing activity carried out in a forum, a tool which can be used by both teachers and students for sharing ideas and making announcements (Badia, Martín, and Gómez 2019). In this forum, the students were asked to give their opinions about the personal qualities, knowledge, and skills that primary school teachers should possess, and to describe their typical working day. This was the first writing activity conducted during the course, and the purpose was to assist the learners in expressing their opinion about topics to which they could immediately relate, thus enhancing their engagement in the learning process. The students had completed another 32-hour course in their third year, which aimed at improving their linguistic skills at a B2 level, and which covered grammar topics such as present and past tenses, future forms, articles, modals, and conditionals. Hence, the students were expected to demonstrate confidence in applying in their writing the grammar points studied and practised in their third year.

The texts posted by the students in the forum were collected after the end of the course in order to compile a local academic learner corpus (Gilquin 2015) which will be described in section 3. This material gave the opportunity to look closely at the students' emergent language especially in terms of patterns in learner discourse representing the use of modality. In point of fact, the use of Modal Devices (MDs) is one of the ways in which writers construct stance (Neff *et al.* 2003), defined as "a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field" (Du Bois 2007, 163).

English learners' use of MDs has been addressed in several studies, especially in the domain of academic writing and with a focus on epistemic stance (McEnery and Kifile 2002; Neff *et al.* 2003; Oh 2007; Chen, H. 2010; Chen, Z. 2012; Kim and Suh 2014). These studies have highlighted learners' tendency to adopt a limited number of MDs compared to native speakers (NSs). Different interpretations of learners' overreliance on certain MDs have been put forward: this might depend on their cultural background (Hinkel 1995), on the topic (Hinkel 2009), or on language proficiency (Hu and Li 2015). Recently, Pemberton (2020), who examines both epistemic and deontic modality, has shown an even more limited use of MDs in learners' academic writing compared

to previous research; the author argues that the frequency of MDs is not impacted by cultural factors, but varies according to the topic. The final recommendation is therefore to teach learners “the roles of the different types of MDs as well as the subtleties of semantic distinction between modals” and to design curricula “based on the MDs in NS corpora in order to give a realistic interpretation of their importance” (Pemberton 2020, 69).

Building on these premises, the present work aims at contributing to research into modality in learners’ academic writing by focusing on the use of modal and semi-modal verbs in the data collected from a Moodle forum. The analysis is informed by the following research questions:

1. How are modals and semi-modals distributed in the small-scale learner corpus?
2. In which contexts do the students adopt them?
3. To what extent does the students’ use of these verbs reflect NS use?

The article begins by briefly introducing the concept of modality (section 2); then, it illustrates how the small-scale corpus was built, along with the methods applied for investigating it (section 3); next, it reports on the findings of the analysis (section 4); finally, the results are discussed, and some concluding remarks are offered (section 5).

2. MODALITY

Modality is an area of language which presents learners of English with many challenges especially when developing their argumentation in written academic texts; it is a multi-faceted concept which is hard to capture in one single definition, and which over time has lent itself to a variety of interpretations.

Halliday defines modality as “the speaker’s judgment of the probabilities, or the obligations, involved in what he is saying” ([1985] 1994, 75). Similarly, Bybee and Fleischman argue that modality

covers a broad range of semantic nuances – jussive, desiderative, intentive, hypothetical, potential, obligative, dubitative hortatory, exclamative, etc. – whose common denominator is the addition of a supplement or overlay of meaning to the most neutral semantic value of the proposition of an utterance, namely factual and declarative. (1995, 2)

Palmer observes that modality is “generally, but not always, marked within the verbal complex”, and therefore “it is closely associated with

tense and aspect”, although it differs from them as it is “concerned with the status of the proposition that describes the event” (2001, 1) and not with the time (tense) or the nature (aspect) of that event.

Building on von Wright (1951), Palmer (2003) discusses three types of modality, epistemic, deontic, and dynamic. Epistemic modality expresses “the speaker’s attitude to the status of the proposition” (Palmer 2003, 7), while deontic and dynamic modality are both “directive”, that is, they imply the meaning of “getting things done” (*ibid.*). However, in the context of deontic modality “the event is controlled by circumstances external to the subject of the sentence” (*ibid.*). Accordingly, deontic modals “are prototypically performative in the sense that it is the speaker who gives permission or lays obligation” (*ibid.*, 14). Dynamic modality implies that “the control is internal to the subject” (*ibid.*, 7). Some modals can take on both meanings: for example, *can* may be used deontically when “the ability comes from the permission given (externally)”, or dynamically when “the ability comes from the subject’s own (internal) ability” (*ibid.*).

Biber *et al.*’s (1999) discussion of modal and semi-modal verbs relies on findings from the Longman Spoken and Written English (LSWE) Corpus, a 40-million-word corpus of British and American English comprising four core registers: conversation, fiction, news, and academic prose. In particular, they identify nine central modal verbs (*can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, and must*), four semi-modal verbs (*need to, ought to, dare to, used to*), and a few fixed idiomatic phrases such as *have to, be going to, be supposed to, and used to*. Depending on their main meaning, Biber *et al.* (*ibid.*) classify these verb phrases into three areas:

1. permission, possibility, and ability: *can, could, may, and might*;
2. obligation and necessity: *must, should, had better, have (got) to, need to, ought to, be supposed to*;
3. volition and prediction: *will, would, shall, be going to*¹.

Moreover, each modal can convey either an intrinsic (deontic) or an extrinsic (epistemic) meaning:

[i]ntrinsic modality refers to actions and events that humans (or other agents) directly control: meanings relating to permission, obligation, or volition (or intention). Extrinsic modality refers to the logical status of events or states, usually relating to assessments of likelihood: possibility, necessity, or prediction. (Biber *et al.* 1999, 485)

¹ *Used to* is not included in the categorisation as it expresses past time.

As can be seen, the way in which Biber *et al.* (1999) articulate the meanings of modal verbs overlaps significantly with Palmer's (2001; 2003) theorisation: although dynamic modality is not explicitly mentioned, the meaning of ability is considered in their discussion of *can* and *could* (Biber *et al.* 1999).

3. CORPUS AND METHODS

This study was conducted using a small-scale local academic learner corpus (Gilquin 2015) compiled by collecting the written work submitted by 139 students² in a Moodle forum titled “Teachers are...”. The students, who were recruited by convenience sampling, were attending the fourth year in the Single-cycle Master's Degree Programme in Primary Teacher Education at the University of Modena e Reggio Emilia in the academic year 2019/20. All the students were Italian native speakers.

The writing activity on which this study is based was assigned at the beginning of the spring term 2020, and it built upon and extended the language competence acquired by the participants in their third year, so as to hone their skills at a B2 level³. It is to be noted, however, that the students could not be considered a homogenous group from the standpoint of their language proficiency, as some of them still had to sit the third-year examination. However, all the students had already passed a B1 test at the end of their second year.

The activity was designed bearing in mind the students' disciplinary and professional domain and aimed at promoting a reflection on the teaching profession at the pre-primary and primary school level. Hence, the small-scale corpus belongs to the framework of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) (Granger and Paquot 2013). In this writing activity, the students were asked to discuss their perceptions of the teaching profession in a short text (120-150 words). In order to complete the task successfully, the students had to cover the following points:

² As stated in the introduction, the course targeted a cohort of 141 students. However, two students did not complete the activity described here.

³ The grammar points included in the fourth-year syllabus were the passive voice, infinitives and gerunds, relative clauses, reported speech, and causative verbs.

1. teachers' qualities and attitudes;
2. teachers' knowledge and skills;
3. a typical day at work.

As for the type of register or formality level to be adopted, the students were not supplied with any explicit instructions. The assumption was, however, that the forum would have invited an informal or semi-formal style, since the readers of the posts were known to their writers, and they were all members of the same peer group.

It is important to stress that successfully completing this and other similar activities proposed during the term⁴ was a requirement for the students in order to be admitted to the final examination after the end of the course. This rule was established since attendance to the traditional lessons in the classroom is usually compulsory; moreover, the integration of asynchronous activities in the learning design was meant to make up for the absence of face-to-face discussions in the physical classroom. The forum analysed in this study was therefore part of the efforts to balance the constraints of online teaching and learning with the course objectives, namely the consolidation of writing skills at a B2 level, combined with the study of resources and techniques to teach English to young and very young learners.

The lessons in the classroom, which typically consist of teacher-fronted sessions, class discussions, and group work, were replaced by video clips posted weekly on the course page in Moodle. Considering the lack of real time interaction in this asynchronous modality, completing writing exercises in Moodle offered a way to increase the level of participation in the course and promote students' engagement (Zyad 2016): the students received the instructor's feedback on their work, which combined language correction and brief comments on content, but they also had the opportunity to read each other's contribution, if they wished⁵.

⁴ The asynchronous activities to be completed in Moodle included, overall, five assignments, two forums, and one workshop. Whilst the first activity was a general discussion of teachers' work, the others invited students to analyze methods for teaching English at pre-primary and primary school, or to devise possible materials and activities for their pupils.

⁵ This is possible for contributions shared in the Moodle forums, unless the instructor restricts students' access to the posts written by others; workshops are activities for peer assessment where each participant is expected to read and evaluate one or more of their peers' pieces of writing for successfully completing the task; conversely, work completed as a Moodle assignment is usually accessible only to the instructor.

This activity was selected for the present analysis⁶ because the corresponding learner output seemed particularly appropriate for an investigation of modality to express subjectivity, even though the students had not been requested in the instructions to concentrate on applying modals and semi-modals: the contents submitted report personal opinions about the teaching profession, highlighting ideas related to the participants' personal experience, commitment, desires, and future expectations⁷, and these are frequently conveyed by means of the modal and semi-modal verbs that the students had learnt in their third year, as emerging from the findings presented below.

The posts were collected manually from the forum, hiding the personal information about their authors, and assigning to each piece of writing an alphanumeric code combining a progressive number from 001 to 139 and the letter F or M to indicate the writer's gender. The posts were then saved as a .txt file which was uploaded to the online software Sketch Engine for text analysis, where a corpus called "TeachersAre" (TA) was built.

The students' emergent language in the data set was then examined to identify patterns in learner discourse representing the use of modality. To this end, some of the tools available in Sketch Engine were applied, firstly the frequency wordlist, which gave quantitative information about the corpus, secondly the concordance lines for examining the context in which the modals and semi-modals were used, and finally the function for annotating nodes, in order to tag modals and semi-modals depending on their deontic, dynamic, or epistemic meaning; the verbs which were open to more than one interpretation were tagged as "ambiguous". The co-text around the annotated verbs was analyzed qualitatively through the lenses of Biber *et al.* (1999) and Palmer (2001; 2003), in order to deepen our understanding of the meanings that learners attribute to these verbs, and to draw some conclusions about their adherence to, or departure from, the conventions of academic writing.

⁶ The other asynchronous writing tasks in Moodle invited students to analyse methods for teaching English at pre-primary and primary school, or to devise possible materials and activities for their pupils.

⁷ Interestingly, the students did not discuss in their writing the challenges of teaching and learning during pandemic times. The reason for this may be that the activity was implemented at the beginning of the first lockdown, when the implications of ERT were still unknown. The students focused instead on their experience in the pre-Covid era.

Biber *et al.*'s (1999) categorisation of modal verbs, informed by Palmer's (2001; 2003) definition of epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality, offers a useful framework for the present study, as it provides a detailed account of modal and semi-modal verbs, based on evidence from the LSWE Corpus. The fact that Biber *et al.* (*ibid.*) use examples from a corpus encompassing a significant portion of texts from conversation and academic discourse can help draw some conclusions regarding the style adopted by the students in this research project; the assumption is that the students' use of modals in their written contribution may be affected, at least to some extent, by the features of academic discourse. However, the context in which the students are writing their assignments, i.e. an online forum, may prompt them to adopt a more conversational tone. As indicated earlier in this section, the style which the learners were expected to follow had not been specified before writing; this may represent a limitation to the present study, as discussed in the final section of this essay.

4. RESULTS

From a quantitative point of view, the TA corpus totals 27,430 tokens, according to a word count run in Sketch Engine; when excluding non-words, 24,091 items can be retrieved, while the number of unique items including non-words is 2,731.

In order to map the distribution of modals and semi-modals in the corpus, the frequency wordlist was examined. *Table 1* reports the verbs indicated by Biber *et al.* (1999), along with their frequency.

The qualitative analysis of the verbs is presented in the following three sub-sections; each sub-section is dedicated to one of the areas of meaning identified by Biber *et al.* (1999), reviewed in section 2 above. For each area of meaning, only the most frequently occurring verbs will be explored.

It is important to stress that the examples drawn from the corpus to support the analysis contain, in some cases, linguistic errors: these are reported as they were submitted, and their investigation is outside the scope of this study.

Table 1. – Modal and semi-modal verbs in the TA corpus and their frequency.

MODAL/SEMI-MODAL VERBS	FREQUENCY
Have to	236
Should	180
Must	134
Can	111
Need to	56
Will	39
Would	20
Could	21
May	11
Be going to	11
Might	6
Supposed to be	4
Ought to	3

4.1. *Obligation and necessity*

The most frequent MD in the TA corpus is *have to*. The fact that it is more frequent than *should* and *must* contrasts with the findings of Biber *et al.* (1999) which indicate that in academic registers there is a preference for modal verbs⁸; instead, in conversation, semi-modals occur five times as much as modals⁹. The incidence of *need to* is not as significant as that of the other verbs, while *ought to* and *be supposed to* represent a very small portion of the entire corpus, and for this reason they are not examined here.

According to Biber *et al.* (1999), modal and semi-modal verbs indicating obligation and necessity are not as frequent in academic prose as those expressing other meanings¹⁰; the considerable use of *have to*,

⁸ Both *must* and *should* account for 1,200 occurrences per million words in the academic texts collected in the LSWE Corpus, while *have to* only for 400 occurrences (Biber *et al.* 1999).

⁹ *Have to* is the most frequent verb in conversation (1,800 occurrences per million words) in the LSWE Corpus, and it is the only semi-modal present across all registers, albeit with a relatively low incidence in the academic ones (400 occurrences) (Biber *et al.* 1999).

¹⁰ In the LSWE Corpus, modals expressing permission, possibility, and ability have the highest incidence across academic registers with 7,200 occurrences per million

should, and *must* seems to be correlated with the topic on which the students were asked to reflect, and it offers insights into how they perceive their profession, that is, in terms of their personal obligation to their pupils. Indeed, a close reading of the concordance lines reveals that the epistemic meaning of necessity is missing, as these modals and semi-modals always express the deontic meaning of obligation. Two examples are provided below.

- (1) In primary school, teachers **have to** organize learning and making it accessible for every student in their classroom. (007F)
- (2) A good teacher **must** create a positive relationship with pupils but also with parents, educator or other people who “live” in the school. (007F)

In the examples, the modal verbs convey deontic meanings connected with some of the tasks which the teachers are expected to fulfil. The tasks are expressed by the main verbs *organize* (1) and *create* (2), which are dynamic, and the agents are teachers, who are referred to by means of the third person plural in (1) and singular in (2).

The fact that the main verbs in (1) and (2) are dynamic is in line with Biber *et al.* (1999), who observe that modals with a deontic meaning tend to accompany main verbs which are dynamic. However, in the corpus we can find several patterns including a stative main verb, as in the following excerpt (3) describing the ideal attitude characterizing teachers.

- (3) As a gardener does with his plants, a teacher **should** know his pupils and he **should** know the methods to let them grow in the best way. (082F)

The examples discussed above reflect a general trend in the corpus, i.e. the use of *teacher*, in its singular or plural form, as the most frequent agent in combination with semi-modals and modals of obligation: it occurs 84 times with *have to*, 100 with *should*, 73 with *must*, and 23 with *need to*. In several cases, this agent is expressed by means of the pronouns *they*, *she*, and *he*. Their distribution is reported in *Table 2*.

On the other hand, the patterns including the pronouns *you* and *we* followed by a modal or semi-modal account for fewer cases (*Tab. 3*).

words; modals indicating volition and prediction amount to 3,800 occurrences, while modals related to obligation and necessity to 3,000 (Biber *et al.* 1999).

Table 2. – Patterns including the pronouns ‘they’, ‘she’, and ‘he’ followed by obligation modals.

THEY + MODAL	FREQUENCY	SHE + MODAL	FREQUENCY	HE + MODAL	FREQUENCY
They have to	39	She has to	20	He has to	11
They should	12	She should	21	He should	10
They must	12	She must	18	He must	5
They need to	8	She needs to	2	He needs to	0
TOTAL	71		61		26

Table 3. – Patterns including the pronouns ‘you’ and ‘we’ followed by obligation modals.

YOU + MODAL	FREQUENCY	WE + MODAL	FREQUENCY
You have to	30	We have to	8
You should	4	We should	0
You must	3	We must	4
You need to	6	We need to	2
TOTAL	43		14

The adoption of the pronouns *you* and *we* marks the more informal style of some of the students, as exemplified by the following excerpts describing the requirements for becoming a teacher, in terms of qualifications, skills, and personal qualities.

- (4) As I’ve already said, today **we have to** attend university to become teachers and I guess this is quite fair because **we need to** develop certain skills about how to deal with children (with their way of learning and thinking), with their issues, and this is not always predictable (like most people think) [...]. (041F)
- (5) [...] to be a teacher **you have to** consider some elements: **you have to** know very well the subject you’re teaching, some teaching techniques to be more effective, **you have to** be patient, flexible, and well organized. (057F)

The student in (4) opted for the pronoun *we* consistently in her piece of writing to indicate teachers as a category of people; the overall tone is informal given the presence of the pronoun *I* and the lexical items *guess* and *quite fair*. In (5), instead, the student uses the pronoun *you*, which lends an interactive style to her writing.

4.2. *Permission, possibility, ability*

All the modals expressing permission, possibility, and ability are present in the small-scale corpus, but their incidence varies markedly. *Can* is one of the most frequent modal verbs overall, and this is in line with its wide distribution in the LSWE Corpus (Biber *et al.* 1999)¹¹. Conversely, the incidence of *could* is fairly low; similarly, *may* and *might* represent only a small portion of the small-scale corpus. The distribution of *could* and *might* in the academic registers in the LSWE Corpus is not very significant either, while *may* is the second most frequently occurring modal overall (*ibid.*)¹²; in contrast, *may* occurs rather infrequently in conversation in the LSWE Corpus¹³. As for the meanings of these modals in academic texts, Biber *et al.* (*ibid.*) state that *can* expresses both ability and logical possibility, while *could*, *may*, and *might* express logical possibility in almost all cases.

The few instances of *may* in the small-scale corpus could be correlated with the students' tendency to write using informal language deviating from the conventions of academic writing. This hypothesis may be supported by the numerous occurrences of *can*, which will be investigated in depth below. For example, excerpts (6) and (7) show patterns in which the modal is used for describing aspects of primary school teachers' daily practices.

- (6) During the class, teachers **can** also use some techniques to catch kid's attention, like questions, positive reinforcements, routines and games. (118F)
- (7) [...] in school we **can** bring our experiences, our life and on the other hand in our life everything we learn at school is absolutely necessary. (099F)

In both examples, *can* seems to be used epistemically, that is, to mark logical possibility rather than ability or permission; the writers are in fact describing what can ideally happen in the primary school classroom.

¹¹ In the LSWE Corpus, *can* is the most frequent modal verb indicating permission, possibility, and ability both in conversation (4,000 occurrences per million words) and in academic texts (3,000 occurrences) (Biber *et al.* 1999).

¹² *May* has 2,800 occurrences per million words in the academic texts collected in the LSWE Corpus, while it only accounts for 200 occurrences in conversation (Biber *et al.* 1999).

¹³ There are up to 200 instances of *may* per million words in the LSWE Corpus (Biber *et al.* 1999).

The meaning of possibility is the most frequently expressed by *can* in the corpus, as it accounts for 63 instances. However, in these excerpts the modal may also be understood as marking ability, as the authors of the posts may be referring, at least theoretically, to what teachers are actually prepared to do in their classes. In this sense, it is important to note that the ambiguity of *can* is underlined by Biber *et al.* (1999) as well. In our corpus, 26 instances of ambiguous cases of *can* were mapped, while 19 instances were marked as expressing ability, and 3 permission.

A further similarity can be observed between (6) and (7), as the agent is the same, *teachers*, despite being expressed differently: in (6) the plural noun is used, so the overall tone is more neutral than in (7), where the first-person plural pronoun *we* is adopted, thus conveying a higher level of engagement towards the topic. Since the intended readers of the post in Moodle are (future) teachers themselves, the pronoun is to be interpreted as receiver-including. Additionally, it may be hypothesised that the students who opt for *we* in their writing see themselves already as teachers. However, in the small-scale corpus there is a preference to refer to teachers using the third person singular or plural rather than the pronouns *we* or *you* (Tab. 4).

Table 4. – *Subjects of verb phrases including 'can'.*

SUBJECT + CAN	FREQUENCY
Teacher/s can	14
They can	12
She can	8
He can	6
TOTAL	40
We	10
You can	3

The modal *can* is used in the TA corpus not only to present aspects of teachers' practices in class, but also to mention personal qualities which are vital in their work. Two of these qualities, empathy and patience, are topicalised in (8), and their significance is attested by their presence in the keyword list generated using the English Web 2020 (enTenTen20)¹⁴

¹⁴ The English Web 2020 (enTenTen20) was selected considering its size (36 billion words), and because it is made up of web-based texts only (Sketch Engine 2022), so the

as a reference corpus. The noun *empathy* and the adjective *empathic* rank fifth and sixth respectively, *empathetic* ranks tenth, while the noun *patience* thirty-eighth.

- (8) First of all, empathy and patience are extremely important. Those **can** be innate but it is essential to improve them during the experiences with pupils as well. (185F)

In the examples considered so far, *can* is used in contexts dealing with primary school teachers' activities and qualities, and the students' perception of them. Further reading of the concordance lines reveals ways in which *can* is combined with lexical verbs expressing epistemic stance such as *see*, *say*, and *consider*, as in (9), (10), and (11).

- (9) Then, as far as **I can see**, teacher should be a confidence-builder: confidence is essential for learning, this is why teachers shouldn't just focus on knowledge, but also, and I'd say, above all on emotions which encourage learning [...]. (041F)
- (10) So **we can say** that a teacher is a master, a friend, a psychologist, a counselor, a trainer and last but not least a real example of life for the younger generation. (034F)
- (11) The typical day of a teacher starts with an early riser [...]. It gives [...] the opportunity to say hello to every child and have a word before class. It **can not be considered** an insignificant moment because every pupil deserves personal attention. (026F)

The adoption of the first person singular in (9) stresses the student's commitment to the idea expressed, while in (10) the student is reaching out to her readers by means of the receiver-including *we*. Instead, in (11) the student adopts the passive voice, a construction that confers impersonality and objectivity to her text.

Before concluding this review of modals expressing permission, possibility, and ability, some remarks about the use of *could* in the small-scale corpus will be made, in order to compare it with *can*. A close reading of the concordance lines shows that *could* mainly expresses logical possibility: it is used 18 times with an epistemic meaning, and only 3 times with a dynamic meaning. As exemplified in (12) below, the modal occurs when a teacher's daily routine is described.

channel of communication is the same as the one adopted for the task in Moodle. The keyword list was obtained by setting the default value "1" in the advanced section of the tool in Sketch Engine (Lexical Computing Ltd. 2015).

- (12) A teacher's typical day includes lessons at school, revision of children's homework and planning times; in particular, lessons **could** be divided in different moments: firstly the teacher **could** explain the topic of the class and the learning intentions, then she understands what kids already know about it. (117F)

In these excerpts, *could* is used in the same context in which *can* tends to occur so frequently, as pointed out when analysing (6) and (7) above. The way in which *could* is adopted in (12) is worth considering because it is combined with *be divided* and *explain* to indicate how a teacher may decide to organize a lesson, but not with the main verbs *include* at the beginning of the excerpt and *understand* at the end: the use of the present simple might indicate that the student is presenting these two pieces of information (one referring to a typical day at school and the other to teachers' ability to understand their pupils) not as theoretical possibilities but as concrete facts.

4.3. *Volition and prediction*

The meanings of volition and prediction are the least represented in the small-scale corpus: *will* and *would* are much less frequent than *should*, *must*, and *can*, the semi-modal *be going to* accounts for just few instances, and *shall* is not present. It is interesting to note how *will* and *would* occur relatively frequently in academic texts according to Biber *et al.* (1999)¹⁵: we hypothesize that this difference between the small-scale corpus and the LSWE Corpus relates to the specific topic on which the students had to focus, and on the particular manner in which they perceive the teaching profession, namely as insiders. Moreover, the academic prose in the LSWE Corpus encompasses much longer texts¹⁶ than those in our small-scale corpus, where *will* and *would* “are used for predictions of events or states not involving personal agency” (*ibid.*, 496). The following analysis will concentrate on *will* and *would*, while *be going to* will not be considered given its very low incidence.

By examining the context in which *will* is used, it can be stated that the modal exclusively expresses prediction, except for one ambiguous case reported in (13): here the modal may be interpreted as conveying

¹⁵ *Will* occurs 2,200 times per million words, and *would* 1,400 (Biber *et al.* 1999).

¹⁶ The average word count per academic text in the LSWE Corpus is around 35,000 (Biber *et al.* 1999).

“personal volition (and prediction of one’s own future actions)” rather than “logical (extrinsic) prediction” (Biber *et al.* 1999, 496).

- (13) The typical day of a teacher starts with a list about what **will** he do, and must try to reach a goal. (075F)

It is worth noticing that the topic of (13) is the same as the one characterising excerpts (6) and (7) in the previous section, which exemplified how *can* is often adopted to discuss teachers’ day-to-day activities in terms of logical possibility. The preference is therefore to frame these actions in terms of logical possibility rather than logical prediction or personal volition. The fact that personal volition is underrepresented in the corpus is in line with Biber *et al.* (1999), who claim that this meaning is rarely attested in academic registers.

The analysis in the previous section also highlighted that a frequent agent of the modal *can* is the noun *teacher* (singular or plural) or pronouns referring to it. As for the agent of *will*, the modal is accompanied by words related to teachers in 14 cases, but in 16 cases the agent is related to pupils or ideas connected with them, such as *students* and *children*. The context in which this pattern occurs is presented in (14), where the writer mentions the positive outcomes of teachers’ actions, thus linking teachers and their students in a beneficial cause-effect relationship.

- (14) The main goal to reach is to make children feel good, so they **will** be able to acquire the necessary competence for their growth. (039F)

The modal *would* is slightly less frequent than *will*, and compared with the other modals and semi-modals, its significance seems to be limited, as already stated. Like *will*, *would* is adopted in contexts where events or states are predicted, with the exception of the following two instances in (15) and (16) where the students express ideas linked to desires and wishes.

- (15) One day [...], my university tutor, said to me the best words to describe a good teacher and she said “Be the teacher, who you’d like for your son”. Since that day I understand who I’d like to become. (045F)

- (16) I have good memories of my first teacher and I **would** that my students had the same memories of me. (046F)

As can be observed, in (16) there is no main verb, but it can be assumed that *like* is missing, so the pattern is the same as in (15). It is also interesting to notice that in both excerpts the students adopt an informal,

interactive style, supported by the pronouns *I* and *you*, and by contracted forms as well.

A further interesting aspect that emerges when looking closely at the concordance lines is that *would* is used epistemically to express author's stance seven times in the corpus, as in (17) and (18).

- (17) If I had to imagine a teacher's typical day, I **would** say that the teacher should dedicate a large amount of time to the class scheduling, useful both to him or her and to pupils. (103F)
- (18) I think it **would** be great if teachers could create some funny games in which students are forced to speak. (010F)

In (17), *would* is followed by the lexical verb *say*; other lexical verbs which occur in the corpus in similar patterns are *consider* and *end*; instead, in (18) *would* is used in a pattern including *be* and the positively connoted adjective *great* which marks' the student's attitude towards the contents of the proposition.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results surveyed in the previous section seem to confirm previous literature on modality in English learners' academic writing (Hinkel 1995; McEnery and Kifle 2002; Neff *et al.* 2003; Oh 2007; Hinkel 2009; Chen, H. 2010; Chen, Z. 2012; Kim and Suh 2014). In point of fact, the participants in the study relied predominantly on a limited number of modals and semi-modals. This preference may be influenced by their general language proficiency in English (Hu and Li 2015), or by their limited familiarity with the conventions of academic discourse (Pemberton 2020). This assumption is supported by evidence of informal language in the work that was submitted, exemplified by contractions, colloquial lexis, and the pronoun *you* for reader engagement. However, these findings may also be related to the students' decision to opt for an informal style, which indeed would be considered appropriate when writing for an online forum. In this sense, the learner output examined in this essay intersects academic discourse and the language of more informal types of register.

In this respect, a word of caution needs to be expressed about a limitation of the present study mentioned in section 3, namely the lack of guidelines in the activity "Teachers are..." as regards the level of

formality expected in the students' writing. Explicit instructions should have been supplied in order to assist the learners in completing the assignment. However, the students' general preference for the informal style emerging from the corpus may have been due to the particular tool adopted to carry out the asynchronous activity. Thus, the forum, which is specifically designed for learner-to-learner interaction, may represent an important factor shaping the writing choices made by the learners, who thus show awareness of the audience of peers who are going to read their online contents. In this sense, Moodle discussions taking place in Moodle forums may constitute a particular sub-genre characterized by unique conventions departing from the features of other academic genres. To confirm or reject this hypothesis, more research is needed for example by building and investigating larger learner corpora, or by conducting longitudinal studies to investigate how this type of texts may be evolving in post-pandemic times.

As for the prevalence of modals in the semantic area of obligation, this does not seem motivated by the students' competence in English, which varied across the group, as stated in section 3, but it is arguably determined by the topic and, most importantly, by the writers' background: in fact, the participants integrate their personal perspective as insiders into their contributions, and their reliance on *have to*, *should*, and *must* expresses high levels of commitment towards their disciplinary and professional domain.

Overall, since the research presented in this article focuses on the material collected from only one of the activities proposed during the spring term 2020, it is not possible to make any generalization about the use of modals and semi-modals in the learners' output. The contents submitted in the other Moodle activities should be examined in the future, also taking into account the incidence of other MDs, such as reporting verbs, boosters, and hedges. Additionally, in order to determine the possible influence of the participants' L1 on the choice of modals and semi-modals, contrastive analysis with a data set of texts written in Italian would be recommended.

A final limitation related to the learning design of the activity "Teachers are..." should be underlined here, namely, the fact that the potential of the forum was not fully exploited from a socio-constructivist point of view (Palincsar 1998; Powell and Kalina 2009). The students received the instructor's feedback on their work, but interactivity was not optimal, since the task did not explicitly require them to comment on each other's work. Consequently, the asynchronous conversation

unfolded exclusively between the learners and the instructor, which meant that the students were only offered a limited opportunity for co-constructing knowledge with their peers while participating in this remote learning experience at the beginning of the pandemic.

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