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An Investigation of Learners' Use of CAN and COULD in an English Language Classroom



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Abstract

CAN and COULD have multiple uses and multiple interpretations, which can be difficult for learners of English to understand. For example, the difference of *Can you help me?* and *Could you help me?* may go unnoticed to an English language learner, but a native speaker of English would recognise a difference in politeness. The current paper reports on an investigation of learners' use of the modal auxiliaries CAN and COULD, including their negative counterparts (*cannot/can't* and *could not/couldn't*), in an English Proficiency Program (EPP) classroom at a New Zealand University. Through first examining the learners' use of CAN and COULD in spoken and written contexts, comparisons are made to their use in the *British National Corpus*, which results in the identification of areas in which learners' use could be strengthened.

Keywords: language acquisition; English modal auxiliaries; corpus analysis

Introduction

CAN and COULD have a wide range of uses, which are not always addressed and can cause English language learners difficulty. Studies of modal auxiliaries usually employ three to four main categories of meaning for CAN and COULD. These categories include "ability" (*I could run fast*), "possibility" (*It cannot break*), "permission" (*You can submit it late*) and sometimes "epistemic" (*He couldn't have been tired*). As a result, these are the meanings commonly referred to in English language coursebooks and focused on in a classroom environment. However, in this paper, I show how the uses of CAN and COULD expand beyond the above, revealing levels of complexity that English language learners should be made aware of, with the purpose of improving their English proficiency.

The complexity of modal auxiliaries

Borrowing from Perkins (1983, p. 6), modal auxiliaries aid us in our communication by allowing us to talk about "things being otherwise." Perkins (ibid.) elaborates on "things being otherwise" by stating, "it would appear that such notions [necessity, possibility and impossibility] are conceptually grounded

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in the fact that human beings often think and behave as though things might be, or might have been, other than they actually are, or were." One function of modal auxiliaries is as a grammatical tool we choose to use, or not use, to mark, or not mark, modality, and signal with our language that our viewpoint is being expressed, which is not necessarily reality, but "conceivably real" as Hoyer (1997, p. 40) puts it. Palmer (1986, p. 84) complements the above by stating, "Hearers do not expect the truth, or what is known to be true, but only what the speaker believes to be true." Though expression of our viewpoints is one reason to use modality, there are many more. Perkins (1983, p. 19) attributes using modality to further reasons such as "uncertainty, tact, or politeness." Stubbs (1996, p. 202) encapsulates the idea of modality in the following passage:

When we speak or write, we are often vague, indirect and unclear about just what we are committed to. This might appear, superficially, to be an inadequacy of human language: but only to those who hold a rather crude view of the purposes of communication. Vagueness and indirection have many uses. Politeness is one obvious reason for deviating from superficially clear or rational behaviour, and claiming precision is done appropriately only in certain situations.

What Stubbs does not include in his explanation is the role of the hearer or reader and how modality is understood. Because modality is "vague, indirect and unclear," this leaves room for multiple interpretations.

In English, we strategically take advantage of modal auxiliaries to express ourselves, as they operate on many levels. The excerpt below, taken from a newspaper, is an example of this:

- 1 A spokesman for the Civil Aviation Authority said: "We can confirm the centre is under offer, but that's as much as we **can** say at this stage." (BNC, *World affairs material*, 1985-1994)

This type of utterance is a standard response. Though, taking into consideration the usual usage categories presented for CAN of "ability," "permission," "possibility" and "epistemic," we see that it is difficult to assign this "can" to one of these usage categories. Upon closer analysis, we can interpret that it is not the case that the Civil Aviation Authority is not capable of saying anything further ("ability"), or that it is not possible ("possibility"), or that they are not allowed ("permission"); it is more likely the case that the organisation chooses not to say anything further; it is their own "volition" (see Usage categories) preventing them. Yet they choose "can" to convey this to the public in an evasive way. To anyone studying language, the use of evasive language is not a new finding. The pedagogical issue underlying this research is, what are the complexities of the modal auxiliaries CAN and COULD as found in the British National Corpus, and how do we help make learners of English aware of these complexities, including the use of evasive language?

Previous corpus-based studies

For the investigation of CAN and COULD, many studies carried out have been corpus-based, reporting on usage categories as well as frequencies (e.g. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Coates, 1983; Collins, 2009).

Coates (1983) uses two corpora in her study, the first a written component, the Lancaster corpus, which contains one million written words, and the second, containing both spoken and written materials, is from the corpus of the Survey of English Usage (Survey) which contained 725,000 words when she undertook her research. Her analysis included CAN and COULD for which she provides overall

frequencies and meaning frequency findings, along with example instances. She employs the meaning categories “ability,” “possibility” and “permission” in her analysis of CAN and COULD, with the addition of “epistemic” for COULD only.

Biber *et al.* (1999) compiled the Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus (LSWE) comprised of 40,025,700 words made up of both American and British English, providing overall frequencies per million and meaning frequencies per million for CAN and COULD, and having a focus on how these are used in various registers (conversation, fiction, news, and academic). Biber *et al.* (ibid.) use the following categories of use for CAN and COULD: “intrinsic-permission,” “extrinsic-possibility” and “ability.”

Collins' (2009) work includes an analysis of CAN and COULD and uses the following corpora: *International Corpus of English* (“ICE-GB”), the Australian component of the *International Corpus of English* (“ICE-AUS”), and a corpus of American English (“C-US”). His study is by far the most thorough to date, as he analysed each of his tokens, a total of 46,121. Collins provides overall frequencies, detailed meaning percentages, figures for spoken and written registers, as well as example instances, using the categories “dynamic,” “deontic” and “epistemic” for both CAN and COULD in his analysis.

The importance of carrying out a corpus-based study is that it allows for a study of real language examples as opposed to invented examples (e.g. Biber & Finegan, 1991; Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1998). Specifically relevant to modal auxiliaries, Coates (1983, p. 21) states:

It is only corpus analysis that can bring to light the fact that classic examples like *You must be back by 10 o'clock* (Leech, 1971, , p. 71), *You may go* (Palmer, 1974, p. 118), *He can speak English* (Quirk, 1972, p. 97), occur relatively infrequently in actual language (both written and spoken)...

Following on from the above studies, some studies have had a pedagogical focus as well as being corpus-based (Mukundan & Khojasteh, 2011; Römer, 2004a, 2004b; Klages & Römer, 2002). With a focus on English central modals, these aforementioned studies compared English language coursebooks to the British National Corpus, with each study finding that there were differences between central modal frequencies found in learner coursebooks compared to English language corpora.

Corpus investigations of uses are beneficial, as they can identify those which are most frequent. In her comparison of an English coursebook series to an English language corpus, Römer (2004a) discusses the importance of frequencies and the effect they can have on decisions on what to include in teaching materials. An investigation as such can lead to insights that are useful for pedagogical purposes; however, gaps remain in understanding what is taking place in the classroom.

In an effort to find out how English language learners were using CAN and COULD, the current project moved into a classroom to observe a “real life entity that operates in a specific time and place” (van Lier, 2005, p. 205). Nesselhauf (2004, p. 126) affirms that the best way to identify language learners’ areas of difficulties “is to analyse the language produced by a certain group of learners and compare it with the language produced by native speakers.” Applying this quote to this study, with a focus on spoken and written contexts, the learners’ overall frequencies and usage frequencies of CAN and COULD were compared to the uses found in the British National Corpus (Davies, 2004), henceforth, BNC. This offered an opportunity to examine the range of English language that learners use, specifically focusing on CAN and COULD. The differences found formed insights into the usage

category “epistemic possibility,” as well as identified additional categories of use (see Usage Categories). In an effort to help learners become aware of these multiple uses of CAN and COULD and avoid miscommunication, this paper concludes with pedagogical recommendations for strengthening learners' proficiency of these modal auxiliaries.

The Study

Participants

The learners in this study were in the highest level of the English Proficiency Program and the majority moved on to university studies at the conclusion of the course. There were 15 learners in the class with a variety of nationalities present, including Papua New Guinea, Myanmar, China, Iran, Japan and Brazil.

Data

I collected audio, video and written materials. Audio recorders were placed on student tables where students sat in groups of three to four and these recorders were moved among different groups and pairs throughout the collection process. The instructor wore an audio recorder around her neck and also a video recorder was placed at the back of the room, so as not to be intrusive to the students. The video data helped to be able to better keep track of what was happening in the classroom and identify who was speaking on the audio recordings. Classroom materials were collected over a twelve-week course, with collection occurring during eight classes, on rotational days, and for a four-hour duration per day. Collection times included the official class period, as well as during learners' half hour break while in the classroom conversing. Table 1 below shows the variety of spoken and written data collected.

Table 1 *Learner spoken and written data collected*

Spoken interactions	Written materials
learners in class (instructor led)	learner argument essays
learner pair work	learner graph essays
learner group work	
learner presentations	
learner informal conversations during class break	

Looking closer at Table 1, spoken interactions included the learners in class (led by the instructor) and inclusive of one-on-one interactions with the instructor, learner pair work, learner group work (with groups of three to four), learner presentations, as well as learner informal conversations during the class' half hour break. Written materials included an argument essay, in which learners themselves determined the topic of their argument, and a graph essay comparing New Zealand's population in 1991 and 2006; for both essays, I collected the students' first drafts.

Because my data set is from limited periods of time in one classroom, it does not have an equal amount of tokens from each spoken interaction (e.g., pair work, student work) and written essays. However, in an effort to create balance in my data set, I transcribed a variety of speaking scenarios and all essay written materials, as outlined in Table 1. I collected and transcribed as much data as possible to provide a snapshot of the studied modal auxiliaries in this classroom. According to Biber (1993, p. 249),

“frequency counts for common linguistic features are relatively stable across 1,000 word samples.” I believe my frequency findings are stable, with the learner data consisting of 38,983 words (spoken – 19,029 and written – 19,954).

Recorded data was transcribed and entered into WordSmith Tools 6.0 (Scott, 2012), along with the learners’ written work. This provided a data set to analyse overall frequencies and usage frequencies for the selected modal auxiliaries in this study.

This study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature, with frequency counts being the quantitative part and the examination of the studied linguistic feature in context being the qualitative part. This study examines both the overall frequencies of the studied modal auxiliaries, and most importantly, their usage frequencies. Obtaining usage frequencies required careful examination of the modal auxiliaries in their surrounding contexts. Studying CAN and COULD with a corpus-based approach, and within the classroom, allowed insight that would have been otherwise impossible.

Usage Categories

An investigation of these modal auxiliaries in the BNC is part of a larger study (Whitty, 2017). There were several reasons for choosing to use the BNC as the resource for general English. One was that my classroom study took place within New Zealand, and New Zealand English is more closely related to British English than to American English. Also, the integrity of the BNC was a strong factor as it has been referred to as a “finite, balanced, sampled corpus” (Leech, Rayson, & Wilson, 2001, p. 1) and “exceptional in that it is fairly “balanced” yet very large” (Biber *et al.*, 1999, p. 27).

Through an investigation of CAN and COULD, including their negative counterparts (*cannot/can’t* and *could not/couldn’t*), in addition to the traditional categories of use found (“ability, “possibility,” “permission” and “epistemic”), further categories of use which have previously not been recognised, or treated as a main category of use, were identified. These categories are: “directives,” “phrase” and “volition.”

In the current paper, the usage categories which were not used at all by the learners in this study, or were used inaccurately, are considered: “epistemic possibility,” “directives,” “phrase” and “volition.” These usage categories are described here with example instances from the BNC, while the frequencies of the usage categories found in the classroom are reported in the Findings section below.

“Epistemic possibility”

“Epistemic possibility” is a speaker’s, or writer’s, level of certainty towards a situation. Holmes (1983, p. 102) discusses three categories of epistemic certainty (“certain,” “probable,” and “possible”), of which for *can* and *could*, “epistemic possibility” conveys a level of certainty of “possible,” in that, “the speaker asserts that the proposition [...] is possibly true.” The linguistic substitution check, or paraphrase, that can be used for this category is: *it is possible that...* The instance below from the BNC is an example of “epistemic possibility.”

- 2 The fall of Terry Venables as chief executive at Spurs will not have missed his attention - and it **could** strengthen the Liverpool manager's bid to persuade 2m defender Neil Ruddock to come to Anfield. (BNC, *Liverpool Daily Post and Echo*, 1985-1994)

Instance 2 is an example of “epistemic possibility” with a level of certainty of “possible.” The following linguistic substitution check can be applied: *and it is possible that it will strengthen the*

Liverpool manager's bid to persuade 2m defender Neil Rudock to come to Anfield.

“Directives”

In the analysis of modals in the BNC, instances were found where the modals were performing “directives,” functioning as requests and suggestions. In his work, Searle (1979, p. 14) uses the verbs “ask, order, command, request” as example directive verbs. However, directives do not always contain directive verbs, and utterances doing this kind of work often contain modal verbs. Instances 3 and 4 are examples of “directives,” with 3 functioning as a request, and 4 functioning as a suggestion.

3 **Could** you bring me a drink please Susan? (BNC, conversation, 1992)

4 ...maybe that's something you **could** look at. (BNC, meeting, 1994)

In instance 3, it is not simply the case that the speaker is enquiring about the possibility of the situation, but rather is requesting a drink; “could” is used to create an indirect speech act and “soften’ directives or make them more polite” (Kennedy, 2003, p. 318). According to Searle (1979, p. 13) “the illocutionary point of these [directives] consists in the fact that they are attempts [...] by the speaker to get the hearer to do something.” The linguistic substitution check that can be applied to “directives” is: *I want you to*. Applying this substitution check to instance 3, the message communicated is *I want you to bring me a drink*, and in 4, *I want you to look at x*.

“Phrase”

Similar to “directives,” “phrases” are not performing a traditional modal role. These instances seem to have different meanings from each other altogether; yet, because they are being used in the same manner, used together with a meaning of their own, these were classified together within the same usage category. Sometimes referred to as idioms or “idiomatic expressions,” this study uses the term “phrase” which comes from Sinclair (2006, p. xviii) who describes “phrases” as “groups of words which are used together with little variation and which have a meaning of their own.” “Phrases” have the following features:

- a. The modal auxiliary + verb create a new meaning (for example, “can’t say” = *don’t know*).
- b. The verb meaning does not occur without the relevant modal (for example, the meaning *don’t think* from “can’t see” is not conveyed with “see” only; see example 5 below).

An example of a “phrase” from the BNC is:

- 5 Speaker A: I said I **can’t** see it coming off.
 Speaker B: I think it's bloody
 Speaker A: I must be honest.
 Speaker B: peculiar innit?
 Speaker A: Who wants to do that travelling every day anyway?
 (BNC, conversation, 1992)

Looking at “can’t see” above, the new meaning created by this is something to the effect of, *I don’t think it will happen*. Using “see” without *can’t* would change the message to the speaker or writer physically seeing or understanding, which would change it to a more “modal” meaning.

“Volition”

In the data, there are instances that are focused on volition; hence, the speaker or writer is stating what he or she wants. Though it is common for linguists to include a “volition” category connected to modal auxiliary meanings, it is usually in association with *will*, *would* and *shall*, not CAN and COULD as found in this study. Instances of volition convey the message *want to*, as in the following example, which is also a form of social hedging. Speaker A is a young girl and Speaker B is an adult male.

6 Speaker A: Hold me up.

Speaker B: Oh no I can't Katie, I **can't**, you're too heavy. Up you get, ooh you're a big lump now, you are getting a big girl. (BNC, conversation, 1992)

In 6 the young girl is requesting to be picked up and the speaker says, “I can't, you're too heavy” followed immediately by “up you get.” The “up you get” is the speaker picking the girl up, which is audible on the recording. This “can't” is volitional in the sense that the speaker doesn't really want to pick the girl up; it is not a question of the speaker's “ability” or “external possibility” constraints. The linguistic substitution check for this instance is: *I don't want to [pick you up]*. By using the form “can't,” the speaker saves himself from a face-threatening act of saying *I don't want to*. Fraser (1980, p. 342) refers to this as “conversational mitigation” and describes it as an “attempt at reducing the harshness or hostility of the force of one's actions.” This instance and usage category demonstrates a way in which speakers and writers use modals to their advantage to indicate what they would or would not like without outwardly saying it.

Findings

In this section, reported are the overall frequencies of occurrence in the learner data for CAN and COULD, compared with the BNC. The frequency of occurrence is the number of times the word occurs in the data set. Later, the usage categories are compared to the learner data set based on their frequencies of use.

Frequencies of occurrence

Table 2 and Table 3 show the overall frequencies of occurrence for spoken and written CAN and COULD, respectively, by the learners in the observed classroom, as compared to the BNC. Frequencies are shown in raw form and in per 10,000 words form, as the latter assists in making comparisons since the corpora data sets are different sizes. Log-likelihood is used to determine if the differences between frequencies are significant and is calculated from raw frequency figures.

In Table 2, the frequencies per 10,000 words are reported. These show us that, for example, though the raw frequency for written CAN in the BNC is 205,813, compared to in the learners' data which is 52, these numbers in per 10,000 form are quite comparable, 24 and 26 respectively. The log-likelihood values help to compare the learners' use of CAN to the BNC, in the relevant contexts, by determining if the differences between the learner frequencies and BNC frequencies are significant. For example, the learners' written raw frequency (52) is compared to the BNC's written raw frequency (205,813), resulting in a log-likelihood of 0.41, which is not significant.

Table 2 Overall frequencies of CAN in learner classroom data – comparison to BNC

	Spoken (raw)	Spoken (per 10,000)	Written (raw)	Written (per 10,000)
CAN (learners)	220	116	52	26
CAN (BNC)	49,828	50	205,813	24
compared to BNC	LL=118.75, p<0.0001		LL=0.41, N.S.	
BNC Spoken - 9,963,663				
BNC Written - 86,299,736				
Classroom Learners Spoken – 19,029				
Classroom Learners Written – 19,954				

Comparing the learners' use of written CAN to the BNC, no significant difference was found. However, in comparing the learners' use of spoken CAN to the BNC, the learners used CAN more than twice than speakers in the BNC, and this difference was statistically significant. One reason for the higher frequency use of spoken CAN may be that the learners use only CAN (and not COULD) in the usage category "directives." Examples from the learner's spoken classroom data are:

- 7 **Can** I see what you're reading?
- 8 **Can** you go back to your first side, the quest-, the topic again?
- 9 ...that is another option, we **can** pick three options and narrow it down.

The learners avoidance of COULD in this context could come across as less polite; this is discussed in the Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations section below. Table 3 shows spoken and written COULD used by learners, compared to the BNC.

Table 3 Overall frequencies of COULD in learner classroom data – comparison to BNC

	Spoken (raw)	Spoken (per 10,000)	Written (raw)	Written (per 10,000)
COULD (Learners)	4	2	31	16
COULD (BNC)	20,116	20	138,163	16
compared to BNC	LL=50.68, p<0.0001		LL=0.01, N.S.	
See Table 2 for overall frequency counts.				

Comparing the learners' written use of COULD to the BNC figures, there is no significant difference. The significant difference comes from the comparison of the frequency of the learners' spoken COULD, which is much less than the BNC, at a significance of p<0.0001. This may be connected to issue above of the learners relying on CAN for spoken "directives," rather than using COULD. In the student spoken classroom data, 10% of the instances use CAN for a "directive," while there are zero instances of COULD used for a directive. Again, the pedagogical implication of this is discussed below.

Frequencies of use

This section offers a comparison of the learners' usage categories for CAN and COULD to those found in the BNC. This is done by comparing usage frequencies from the data, as well as determining appropriate and inappropriate uses of CAN and COULD by the learners.

Having outlined the relevant usage categories above (see Usage Categories), Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the category frequency percentages for CAN and COULD from the learners' classroom data compared to the BNC. Note that only spoken CAN and written COULD are considered due to these modals in these contexts having the most noticeable differences, which have pedagogical implications.

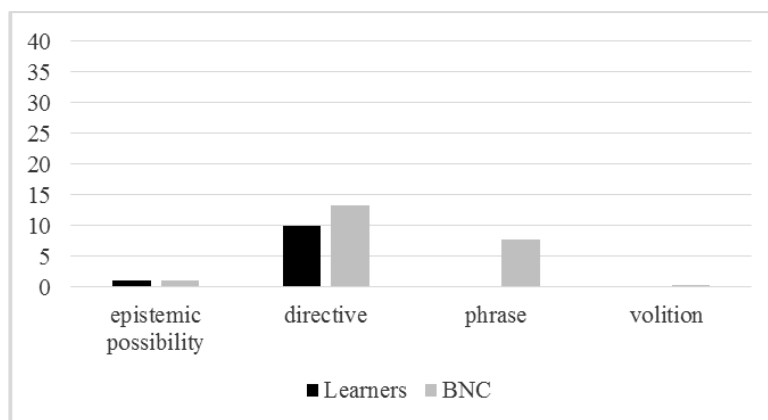


Figure 1 Percentage of category use, a comparison of learner data and BNC for spoken CAN

Figure 1 shows a similar use of the categories “epistemic possibility” and “directive” between the learners in the classroom compared to the BNC. However, “volition” is used slightly in the BNC and not at all by the learners, and an even greater difference can be seen in the use of “phrase” which is absent from the learners' data, yet used by speakers in the BNC at a frequency of eight percent. As this absence of “phrase” and “volition” is also found in COULD, see Figure 2 below, I will discuss these implications and recommendations together in the next section.

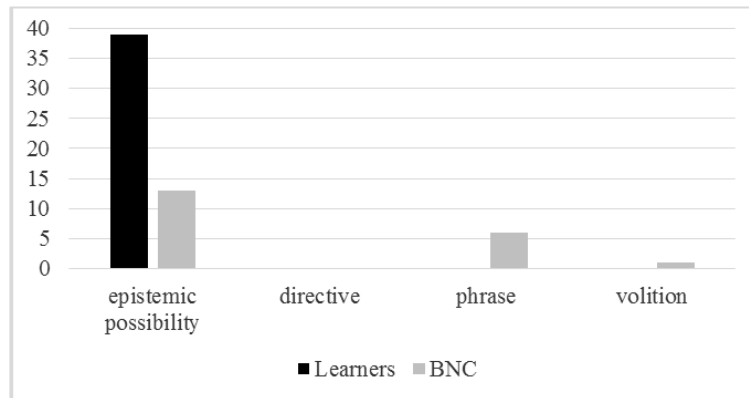


Figure 2 Percentage of category use, a comparison of learner data and BNC for written COULD

When comparing the percentages of category use for COULD, Figure 2 shows the learners' use of COULD is missing entirely for “directive,” “phrase” and “volition.” This is most likely due to the context of their essays which does not demand these uses. However, Figure 2 also shows that for the category “epistemic possibility,” COULD is used at a much higher frequency by learners when compared to the BNC. The learners using written COULD at a high frequency is not unexpected as in academic writing, the learners would be expected to use more hedging. However, as evidenced with comparison to the BNC, the learners in this classroom are using “epistemic possibility” at a much higher frequency, and in instances where hedging may not be appropriate. One example is:

- 10 There are two possible reasons which could cause this change. The first **could** be the shift of their identities. (Classroom written data, learner)

In 10, the first instance of “could” falls into the “epistemic possibility” category; yet, the second, when stating the first possible cause, does not need to be hedged and actually obscures the writer’s meaning. A further insight to the way these modal auxiliaries are being used in the classroom was to examine when they were used appropriately and inappropriately by the learners, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 *Appropriate and inappropriate use of CAN and COULD in the classroom*

Modal auxiliary	Appropriate use	Inappropriate use
CAN (spoken)	99	1
CAN (written)	43	9
COULD (spoken)	4	0
COULD (written)	21	10

While the inappropriate (high) use of COULD in writing corresponds to Figure 2 above in the usage category “epistemic possibility,” another feature of learners’ use that stands out in Table 4 is the inappropriate use of CAN in writing. All nine instances of inappropriate use of *can* in writing are cases where learners are expressing a hypothetical situation and COULD would have been a better choice. Instance 11 is an example of this:

- 11 If there would be any further research about this, there **can** be a new category for New Zealanders separated from “Other” category, and that **can** change the whole figures again. (Learner written data)

Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

Taking into account the above findings in usage categories and frequencies, the discussion below on pedagogical implications and recommendations includes the:

- explicit instruction of “epistemic possibility”
- inclusion of “directives” as a main category of use
- low frequency use of spoken COULD
- high frequency use of written COULD in “epistemic possibility”
- absence of the usage categories “phrase” and “volition”
- inappropriate use of written CAN.

Explicit instruction of “epistemic possibility”

Conveying “epistemic possibility” appropriately in writing was difficult for the learners of the class investigated; therefore, having a base knowledge of what “epistemic possibility” conveys and the nuances it contains may be helpful. Perkins (1983, p. 10) discusses the term “epistemic” coming from Greek “episteme,” meaning knowledge. He says:

To know (KNOW is a factive predicate) that a proposition is true presupposes that it actually *is* true; whereas, say, to be certain (CERTAIN is a non-factive predicate) that a proposition is true does not presuppose that it is true.

This is the distinguishing factor between statements of what are believed to be fact and “epistemic” modality, and also what makes “epistemic” modality so complex for learners. If one were to say *He is in the room* or *I am certain he is in the room*, adding “certain” to the statements means that it may not

actually be accurate and that it is only a conjecture of the speaker. Yet, at the outset, as a language learner, if one were to hear or see the word “certain” in an utterance, it would be understandable why a learner may think that this holds a stronger truth value; yet it does just the opposite, it conveys a “(lack of) commitment to the truth of the proposition being expressed” (Palmer, 1986, p. 51).

Raising learners’ awareness of how “epistemic possibility” modal auxiliaries are used and the meaning messages they convey may help strengthen their writing and speaking in relevant contexts. Though Kennedy (2003, p. 186) does not emphasise it in his work, he paraphrases “You *must* be joking” with “I am almost certain you are joking.” The addition of “almost” to this paraphrase would be beneficial to include when explaining the idea of being “certain” in epistemic modality.

Inclusion of “directives” as a main category of use

Many linguists (Biber *et al.*, 1999; Coates, 1983; Mindt, 1995; Römer, 2004a) do not have a separate category for “directives” in their studies. Though Collins (2009) and Facchinetti (2002) recognise these types of speech acts by using the category “dynamic implication” to describe “the formulation of an indirect speech act” (Collins, 2009, p. 104), their category is subsumed into other larger meaning categories and not featured as a prominent meaning/usage for CAN or COULD, as has been done in this study.

The modal auxiliaries CAN and COULD used with a “directive” meaning helps to convey the message that a speaker wants the hearer to do something, and needs to be recognised from the hearer’s perspective, or the learner’s perspective. Conversely, learners who want their hearers to do something need to learn appropriate ways to ask. Signalling these types of instances to learners helps learners to recognise them and also gives them a better perspective of the complexity of modals, making it clear that a request such as, “Can you pass the salt, please?” (Palmer, 1990, p. 86), at the dinner table, is not actually a question of “ability.” It is agreed amongst linguists (e.g. Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004; Kennedy, 2003; Paltridge, 2000) that these types of speech acts and indirect requests are often difficult for English language learners to interpret and respond to; therefore, drawing attention to “directives” as a meaning category for CAN and COULD, along with explicit instruction in the classroom would benefit learners.

Low frequency use of spoken COULD

One reason for the learners using COULD so infrequently in speaking may be that they don’t use COULD at all to make requests or suggestions. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 145) discuss in their work using the “historical past tense forms” to “soften requests.” Accordingly, replacing *can* by using the historical past tense *could* can help soften requests.

All of the “directive” instances found in the data using CAN are learner-learner interactions, as opposed to learner-instructor interactions. This could be the reason why learners are using “can” instead of the softer *could*. However, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 145) assert that “Many ESL/EFL students, even at an advanced level, do not recognise that they are often perceived by native speakers of English as being abrupt and aggressive with their requests, given the social circumstances.” While the interactions using “directives” in the classroom were learner-learner interactions only, being non-native speakers of English, this “abrupt[ness] and aggressive[ness]” is most likely not noticeable, but may be to a native or native-like speaker of English. Raising awareness for the learners about the difference between CAN and COULD would help them to be better prepared to navigate various social settings, and help soften, for example, *Can I see what you’re reading?* (Learner spoken data) to *Could I see what you’re reading?*

One idea to help raise awareness comes from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, who refer to an activity in Ur (2009, p. 138) titled “Being polite.” In this activity a less-polite dialogue is presented, and then discussed with the class how it could be more polite.

- A: Hey, you! Open this door!
 B: It's locked. Want me to get the key?
 A: Yeah. Get it. Fast.

My own suggestion is to provide problematic settings to the learners, such as:

You are having dinner at a restaurant with your friend. You ordered dinner 40 minutes ago and it has still not arrived and the server has not offered any reason why it is taking so long. How do you approach the server or manager to find out where your meals are?

This problematic setting would help learners to think about what modal auxiliaries they would employ to ask about their meals, and also consider who they are addressing and where “softer” requests may be appropriate.

High frequency use of written COULD in “epistemic possibility”

The high frequency found for COULD in the written learner data and for the usage category “epistemic possibility” are connected. Dissimilar to the findings in this study, Hyland and Milton (1997) found in their study that learners were not hedging enough with epistemic markers. In either case, the suggestions made by them could be applied to the learners in this classroom: using “explicit instruction” to “identify particular items as conveying certainty, probability, possibility and approximation,” asking learners to “discuss the epistemic effects of removing items from a text or of replacing them with the items from other categories” and “rewriting exercises which involve replacing certainty forms with hedges” (ibid., p. 201). Raising learner awareness of how to use COULD, and other modal auxiliaries (e.g. *must*, *may*) could help strengthen learners' academic writing.

Absence of the usage categories “phrase” and “volition”

There can be implications for the absence of the “phrase” and “volition” categories in the classroom data. First, if categories have not been previously identified in the literature, such as “directives,” “phrase” or “volition,” then these may not be on the radar of instructors to draw attention to when possible. Second, when these categories are not used in the classroom by either the learners or instructor, as with “phrase” and “volition,” there is no opportunity to raise learners' awareness. Explicitly incorporating these into the classroom would be beneficial as it would draw attention to the complexities of the modal auxiliaries and the many hats they wear.

“Phrase”

“Phrase” was a category that was found in spoken and written CAN and COULD in the BNC, yet zero instances were present in the classroom data sets. The relevance of drawing attention to these “phrases” becomes clear when examining the difference between instance pair a / b.

- a But he **can't** wait much longer. If you don't accept by the end of the month then he'll advertise. (modal auxiliary) (BNC)
- b I think it's special to have the largest number of bells of all churches in Oxford. I **can't** wait to hear them. (“phrase”=*I am excited to*) (BNC)

Boers and Lindstromberg (2008, p. 4) state that, “a significant proportion of FLT [Foreign Language Teaching] theoreticians see learning vocabulary, in the expanded sense of words and *phrases* [emphasis added], as being the key to attaining a high level of proficiency.” Along with leading to a higher level of proficiency, this awareness could help avoid potential confusion for learners interpreting, for example, “can’t wait” as a modal meaning when the speaker or writer intends it as a “phrase,” and vice versa.

“Volition”

Similar to “phrase,” “volition” was not used in the classroom but was found in spoken and written CAN and COULD in the BNC. Knowing how to express different, more tactful ways of saying in English what we want and don’t want is a skill where using CAN or COULD can be useful. Using examples from real language use, such as the excerpt below from a conversation in the BNC (see Instance 6), could aid in explaining the difference to learners.

Speaker A: Hold me up.

Speaker B: Oh no I can't Katie, I **can't**, you're too heavy. Up you get, ooh you're a big lump now, you are getting a big girl. (BNC, conversation, 1992)

In the example above, it is not the case that the subject is not capable of holding the young girl up, or circumstances exist that make it impossible or that he is not permitted to, it is that he does not want to. Contextual support for him not wanting to is that he thinks “you’re too heavy.” Similar instances to the above could be a good segue into other reasons CAN and COULD are used for “volition,” such as politeness. For example, *I **can't** help you move house*. Learners could be asked to reflect on how they may or may not use these in their own communication. The additional usage categories found in the BNC draws attention to the issue that if these additional categories have not been identified by previous linguists, then there is a very small chance they will be considered by instructors in the classroom.

Inappropriate use of written CAN

With a focus on academic writing, discussing the various uses of written COULD, including “epistemic possibility,” as described above, as well as and communicating hypothetical situations, would be valuable for learners. In each of the cases where CAN was used inappropriately, COULD would have been a better choice. For example, *If there would be any further research about this, there **could** be a new category for New Zealanders separated from “Other” category, and that **could** change the whole figures again*. Helping learners to recognise this would help them to use hypothetical “could,” which could improve their writing, and may carry over to their spoken use of hypothetical “could” as well.

Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to identify the ways CAN and COULD are used by English language learners in a classroom and to compare how they are used by native and native-like speakers of English, as represented by the BNC. It is not the recommendation of this study that the classroom environment should match the BNC, but to show how by looking closer into an English language classroom, it is possible to learn more about learners’ use of a grammatical point, such as the English modal auxiliaries CAN and COULD. Combined with an examination of these items in a native corpus, we can assist learners with their use of these items. If addressed, the salient differences, described above, could help learners not only perform better in areas of academic writing, for example, their use of written COULD, but also contribute to improving social skills, for example, using CAN and COULD appropriately for

“directives” as well as employing them to communicate “volition.” It is the hope of this study that these in-class and corpus-based findings and pedagogical recommendations will inform classroom instructors.

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