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Culture and Academic Writing: Korean EFL Leaners' Use of Modal Verbs in Written Academic Discourse

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Beyond lexical and syntactical complexities, the pragmatic meanings of English modal verbs in discourse can be recognizably difficult (Coates 1983, Hinkel, 2001). The use of modal verbs is further complicated by the fact that a choice of a modal verb does not always permit a single pragmatic interpretation. Although the previous studies have contributed to an understanding of the rhetorical functions common to L2 writing can be achieved (Hinkel, 1995c, 199b, Hyland 1998, Maynard 1993), most of them have focused on the frequency count of modal verbs used in L2 writing. This study has thus two phases of empirical research with one sample group of 50 Korean EFL students enrolled at a MA programme in a single university: The first phase is a corpus-based analysis of two different students' academic essay samples: the corpus of the target group was taken from the Korean EFL university students (113,459 tokens) and the reference corpus was constructed from 50 L1 writers' academic essay samples extracted from a corpus of British Academic Written English (BAWE)(124,589 tokens). Secondly, a series of recall interviews with 15 Korean MA students out of the sample group were undertaken to shed light on the corpus data. The ultimate goal of this study is to examine specific patterns in their use of modal verbs and diagnose problematic areas of Korean EFL learners in written academic discourse. It thus compares and contrasts the frequency rate of a range of modal verbs classified in the there groups of modal verbs from Hinkel (2001)'s taxonomy. A detailed contextual analysis identifies the functions that the writers use modal verbs to perform in terms of epistemic and root meanings. The recall interviews were designed to provide richer and supportive data by seeking their thought patterns and thus explore how far their L1 transfer or developmental factors can affect the learners' choice of modal verbs. The results from the yield several important data. first, a range of modal verbs including semi-modals occur more frequently in the Korean student corpus than in L1 students' corpus. Although there are differences in the frequency rate among the different semantic classes, this does correspond to the results from several other studies (Hinkel 1995, 1999) which revealed that the overall frequency of a list of modals expressing either possibility and ability or obligation and necessity in Korean, Japanese and Korean texts contained significantly was higher than are native speaker student ones.

A more in-depth analysis are conducted to examine what features the Korean learners' use of modal verbs across the different pragmatic and semantic classes and in what ways they differ from those used by native speaker students. First, *can* is most frequently used by the Korean sample students writing the academic essays in English. The majority of *can* were used as deontic that entails the meanings of root possibility, and only 1.5% of the total encompasses epistemic meaning. The

following examples extracted from the Korean student corpus showed the usage of *can* in the two different ways of root (1) and epistemic (2):

(1) There are several ways we ***can*** teach students to teach language function and form (post 7).

(2) I hope it ***can*** be useful for students to take classes, especially in case of English and Math, according to their proficiency (post 11).

Despite over 90 % of modal *can* expressing root possibility meaning in the Korean student corpus, it is interesting to note that many of the Korean students used *can* attempting to express epistemic meaning for logical possibility as a hedging in their texts. Such attempts were revealed in the findings from the think-aloud protocols from the Korean students. 11 participants agreed that can is one of the most frequently used modal verbs in their essays to indicate the extent of the writer's assertion in their claim. Each participant writing (1) (2) respectively commented,

"I use *can* most frequently when writing academic essays to express a degree of uncertainty. I think that *can* is an appropriate verb not to show the statement too strong and instead open the other possibility against the statement that I made in my essays. "

The second notable finding is that the majority of modal verb *could* was employed in the Korean student samples to express root possibility, accounting 76.7 %, only 15% of the total entails epistemic meaning which deals with the degree of speaker commitment to the truth of the proposition. This contrasts with the findings from the native speaker samples: over 70% of the total works for the writer's possibility and probability marker as an epistemic device. This contrastive coverage underlies several assumptions. First, the Korean sample students may seem to conceptualize *could* only as a past form of *can* in their mind, and thus do not use *could* frequently except for conditional tense. This is shown in the following excerpt from the Korean student's samples,

(3) This process seemed to help reduce the fear of converse with foreigners. Furthermore, I ***could*** improve my reading and writing abilities because I read much more materials and wrote in English, compared to the classes in Korea (post 11)

This is also supported by the data from the interview protocols,

"I do not use *could* because the linguistic form of *could* as past form of *can* is quite complex with tense agreement in conditional sentence (participant 5).

Another assumption is that their lower preference for using *could* than *can* as a hedging device may be related to its pragmatic function of expressing their uncertainty concerning the factuality of their statements or indicating deference to their readers. The two participants commented,

"Both *can* and *could* express possibility by indicating the degree of the certainty. I know *could* express a lower degree of possibility and probability than *can,* and thus I avoid using *could* because *could* is likely to downgrade confidence and clarity to the propositions that I made in my essay"

This is in line with the total percentage of *could, may,* and *might,* working for probability and possibility marker in Hyland and Milton (1997)'s category, takes a lower proportion in the Korean student samples than the native student samples: % in the Korean and % in the native student samples respectively. This partly underlies the way in which Korean students tend to show more assertive and direct tone in their essays (Park 2001). This is again supported by the findings from the think-aloud protocols,

(4) I do not use *may* and *might* which deliver a degree of uncertainty because I tried to make my suggestions strong and assertive, although this differs in my Korean academic writing. In particular, *might* is likely to downgrade my confidence to the prepositions and make my assertions hesitant and unclear. I believe that the prepositions should be expressed clearly in English, so I do not have to consider making my claims politely and indirectly in English writing as I do in Korean writing. (Translated from participant 4).

From a sociopragmatic perspective, this does not support the hypothesis that the cultural transfer does seem to play in the use of epistemic modal verbs expressing a degree of uncertainty and doubt as hedging devices (discussed in Back 2011a). This is based on the assumption that indicating a degree of uncertainty and doubt as hedged expressions in Korean is also conventionalized in academic discourse as an indirectness and face-saving strategy. One possible explanation might be the effect of their over-generalization of the explicitness and directness of English writings in terms of the degree of certainty with which the writers make assertion. This indicates again that they over-generlaise modal verb *can* as a possibility marker with imperfect understanding of the usage of *can* in dichotomy between root and epistemic possibility.

The third notable findings revealed that Korean student samples tend to show an over-reliance on *should*, accounting for over 50% of the total. This shows a greater imbalance in the use of obligation and necessity modal verbs than the native student samples, although *should* takes also a highest proportion in the native student samples. Few of modal verb *ought to* occurred in both samples. Also, Korean student samples showed an overuse of modal verbs which entail obligation and necessity meanings. This underlies two possible explanations: first, the sample students seem to signal a more assertive and authoritative tone to the propositions expressed by using such modal verbs that entails a degree of obligation and authority than the native speakers of English (Palmer 1986, Lyon 1977). This is not again culturally preferred way, which corresponds to the justification for the underuse of *could, may, and might* in the Korean student samples as discussed above.

A more detailed investigation for another plausible explanation yielded the different pragmatic functions of these modals with respect to root/ epistemic categorization in the two different samples. The proportion of *should* takes 50.77% of the total modal verbs listed above, but majority of it was

used as a root modal that entails the meanings of obligation and only 2.5 % of the total were epsitemically used. This contrastive coverage in the function of modal verbs is in line with *must*: the 86.3% in the Korean student samples entails root meanings expressing obligation and necessity, but only 1.25% of total expresses epistemic necessity. However, the majority of *must* 68.9% in the native student samples functions as hedging device with epistemic necessity. The following examples extracted from both Korean and native student samples show the two different ways of the two student samples:

(5) Additionally, it is hard for them to control the use of internet by themselves. Thus, young students ***should*** use internet with great cautions to prevent any harmful effects. (KS post 6s)

(6) Most students ***must*** be responsible for their own learning deciding what they will study, planning a schedule according to that and ticking what they did and did not. (KS post 20s)

The results first indicate that the Korean samples contained a higher frequency rate of *will* than Native student samples, and *will* also takes a highest proportion, taking over 60 % of the total. In a detailed observation into root-epistemic distinction, *will* that belongs to the group of 'certainty' in Hyland and Milton (1997)'s category of epistemic modality occurs more than two times more frequently in the Korean student samples than in native student samples. Relatively, the total percentage of epistemic modal *would*, working for probability marker in Hyland and Milton (1997)'s category, takes a lower proportion in the Korean student samples than the native student samples. Korean student samples contained a lower frequency rate *would* expressing epistemic meaning than native student ones. This contrastive findings partly underly the way in which Korean students tend to show more assertive tone in their essays (Park, 2001). The Korean students' strong preference for *will* as a certainty marker and avoidance of *would* with degree of tentativeness thus can be explained by a failure of socioprgmatic transfer from L1 to L2. This in lie with the reasons behind the underuse of *could, may, and might* as possibility marker and the overuse of *should, have to*, and *must.* The think-aloud protocols again support this,

"I prefer using *will* in my essays, I feel that will indicates a degree of certainty, and strong assurance, so I use it to make my claims assertive in English essays. However, I am not sure will express what extent of assurance and certainty to the propositions, and often hesitant about using *will* "(Participant 11).

"I rarely use *would* because I think it downgrade the confidence about my claims to the propositions. It makes my argument too vague and unclear and thus I consciously try not to use *would* if possible".

Although they may believe that presenting the claims to the propositions in English academic writing should be explicit and assertive, they seems to have fear of 'bringing about a distortion of the truth' by using *will* as certainty marker (Leech 1983:148). They does not seem to be confident about using appropriate modal verbs. Together with failure in sociopragmatic transfer with 7 students

who may perceive an awareness of epistemic usage of *will* as certainty marker in presenting their argument, there was also another reason behind their preferred choice of *will*: six students reported that *will* mainly function as a modal verb simply expressing the writer' will and intention as well as futurity in academic writing, and they are less likely to make errors when using *will* than *would.* Participants 5 commented,

"I simply often use *will* because I tried to use more simple tense such as present or future. Actually, I unconsciously use *will* because I do not need to think about grammatical complexity when I make if-clause".

Here, their lack of linguistic knowledge of the epistemic usage of *will* is also behind their choice of *will* as modal verb in their academic writing. This is in line with the another reason for Korean students' avoidance of using *would* indicting predictive and hypothetical meanings in their essays,

"I am very hesitant about using *would* because I am not always confident about using an appropriate form of *would* particularly *w*hen it is used to express hypothetical meanings in if conditional clauses".

Although Korean students would not seem to use '*would*' a great deal in their essays, a detailed observation into the uses and functions of *would* yielded an ninterrestin finding. *Would* was frequently employed to politeness device, such as *I would like to,* in the Korean student samples, whil*e* such w*ould* construction rarely occur in the native student samples. In terms of patterns, specific to the Korean student samples, several excerpts are given as the followings,

(7) First of all, ***I would like to*** define the educational term 'CALL' before discussing its impacts. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is succinctly defined as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning". (Levy 1997) (post35)

\(8) Even if homework has both advantage and disadvantage, ***I would like to*** put an emphasis on its bright side. Giving homework to their students is more important for English teachers who teach English as second or foreign language (post17)

(9) Thinking about Korean, ***I would like to*** talk about universe language awareness, not just about English one this time. I could find that there are hundreds of words that express one color 'yellow'. (post19).

As in the example, Korean sample students seemed to make a claim in less direct and aggressive tone in an attempt to express a level of politeness. In particular, in(8) and (9), point-of-view distancing functions as saving the writer's face when the reader would not agree with the writer' assertion (see Back 2011). Although such face-saving strategies may be universal, and thus occur often in both English and Korean, this can be partly explained by the culture-specific transfer from L1 to L2: such face-saving devices are often employed to express the writer's respect toward the reader in Korean, which is more common in spoken than written discourse (Koo 2004)[1]. Also, their

lack of register awareness for written academic English may also be another reason. The think-aloud protocols may confirm these assumptions, as Participant A and C commented,

(10) I found out I often use `I would like to' to be more polite and modest when expressing my opinions, although I avoid such devices when writing English writings(Translated from participant 8). I think I do not need to use such devices in English academic writing.

(11) As I usually make my claims rather indirect and less authoritative in Korean academic writing, but I habitually use such devices to express my personal opinions in English writings.

Although the pragmatic function of *would* as face-saving strategies can be accounted for culture-related reasons in communication, it should be noted that they have an over-generalized understanding of cross-cultural differences in rhetorical traditions between English and Korean writings, regardless of the genre-specific variations and differences.

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1) see Back 2011