

# Epistemic modal markers in L2 learners' persuasive letters

Tahmineh Tayebi

University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

**Email address:**

tayebi84@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** The present study sets out to focus on epistemic modal markers in EFL learners' formal and informal writing samples. To this end, and by means of a proficiency test, one hundred participants were divided into two groups of higher and lower proficient, and were subsequently asked to write one formal and one informal letter on the topics provided by the researcher. The quantitative analysis revealed some differences in the use of epistemic modal markers across the two proficiency levels. That is, while the learners in the higher proficient group used more epistemic markers in their formal letters, the lower proficient learners tended to deontically modalized their sentences. The quantitative analysis of the data in both formal and informal letters suggested that the level of directness corresponds not only with the formality requirements of the topic but also with the possessed pragmatic knowledge.

**Keywords:** Epistemic Modality, Pragmatic, EFL Learner, Modality

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## 1. Introduction

The complex structure of modality is corroborated by the extensive and growing body of literature that has built up over the past few decades [1-14]. The rather high number of categories, classifications and interpretations [1, 2, 6, 8, 15, 16] proposed to date have added to the complexity in question and thus have made it forbiddingly complex to pin down what modality precisely is. Yet, despite the high number of classifications expounded to date, two subcategories of modality, namely epistemic and deontic, are the most commonly cited ones in the literature. Epistemic modality, as the focus of this study, concerns the evaluation of the speakers of the possibility or necessity of an utterance. Concerning the different concepts that fall within the scope of epistemic modality, a scale of likelihood, or an estimation of probability, is proposed with 'possibility' and 'certainty' at its extreme ends and 'probability' in the middle [10, 17].

The theoretical complexity and the evasiveness of epistemic modality have also influenced second language learning contexts [18]. As [19] argue, the use of modal verbs is one of the most problematic and complex areas of English grammar. In this regard, the important role played by epistemic modal markers and their various pragmatic functions cannot be ignored. Even so, [10] has made it

manifestly clear, the literature on modality in general and on epistemic modality in particular has focused mainly on modal auxiliaries. This has led some scholars to equate "the study of modality with an analysis of the modals". Besides, the literature on modality in second language contexts is a tremendously under-explored area.

## 2. Some Notes on Modality

Modal markers can be realized in different ways, such as grammatically, lexically or even through paralinguistic features. Reference [12] notes that "modality is realized by linguistic items from a wide range of grammatical classes, covering not only modal auxiliaries and lexical verbs, but also nouns, adjectives, adverbs, idioms, particles, mood and prosody in speech." In this regard, [10] believes that most European languages have at least four major linguistic types that express epistemic modality:

- 1) modal adverbs: *maybe, probably, certainly*;
- 2) predicatively used modal adjectives: *it is possible/probable/likely/certain that*;
- 3) mental state predicates: *I think/believe*;
- 4) modal auxiliaries: *can, may, must*.

However, notwithstanding the fact that different means of expressing modality in human language have been recognized, scholars tend to focus mainly on modal

auxiliaries, thus ignoring the other ways through which epistemic modality can be expressed. Based on these rather narrow conceptualizations, modality is often *prototypically* assumed to be associated with modal auxiliaries, and therefore other types of modal markers that *do* express epistemic concepts but are not included under the rubrics of modal auxiliaries are neglected. In this connection, [10] is of the opinion that modal auxiliaries are “semantically and syntactically very hard to grasp” and that “an analysis of other epistemic expression types may help to improve our understanding of modals.”

Hypothetically speaking, to make the right modal choice, the EFL learner is confronted with two issues: a) the choice of the right modal marker that could fulfill the intended function; an issue that needs to be sought in the grammatical knowledge of EFL learners and b) the requirements of the context which call for broader pragmatic knowledge, in which case failure is not easily overlooked, leading to underestimation of the proficiency level of the learner.

Thus, in keeping with [20]'s observation that “even fairly advanced language learners' communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value”, the first aim of the present study is to clarify the relation between proficiency levels of learners and their choice of modal markers to see if higher proficiency in English provides EFL learners with enough pragmatic knowledge with regard to the appropriate use of epistemic modal markers.

The second aim of the study is to find out if EFL learners can pick out the correct modal marker concerning the formality level of the context and the social status of the addressee to whom they write. The present study is a small step in this direction trying to shed more light on the role of pragmatic knowledge of EFL learners in writing. In fact, the study is an attempt to investigate different types of epistemic devices and their frequency across different proficiency levels with a view to answering the following research question:

1. How different are the norms of epistemic modal expressions employed by EFL learners across different proficiency levels?
2. Are epistemic modal markers equally distributed across different rhetorical structures in EFL learners' formal and informal letters?
3. Does the difference in the social status of the addressee cause any difference in the type of epistemic modal markers used?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

To address the above-mentioned research questions, the present study benefited from the participation of two groups of EFL learners at the University of Isfahan:

- a) Fifty five intermediate senior students majoring in Translation Studies
- b) Forty five MA students majoring in Applied Linguistics and Translation Studies

The age range of the participants was between 20 and 29. As gender was not a moderating variable, both male and female participants took part in the study.

#### 3.2. Data Collection

The data collection was undertaken in two separate phases. The first stage concerned the description of the participants' characteristics in terms of their proficiency level. As the aim of the study was to observe and study the variation in the use of epistemic modal markers across different levels, a proficiency test was essential to provide a unifying basis for further investigations. Thus, a Michigan English Language Assessment Battery was administered to both groups of participants.

Accordingly, the participants were divided into higher and lower proficient. Based on the descriptive data in Table 1, those participants who scored 1 standard deviation above the mean and those who scored 2 standard deviations below the mean formed the lower and higher proficient groups, respectively.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the Michigan English Language Assessment

N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
100	24.00	92.00	69.5556	5.84362

Afterwards, the participants in both groups were asked to write two letters each on two face-threatening topics. The topics were formulated in such a way as to elicit letters in the rhetorical modes of argumentation and persuasion. The topics were given to the participants one week after the administration of the proficiency test. The participants were asked, as part of the instruction, not to write less than 300 words. This led to a corpus of about than 60,000 words including both types of formal and informal letters.

#### 3.3. Procedures

To make this investigation more manageable, the epistemic modal markers had to be confined to certain markers. Since there are different devices that both grammatically and lexically express modal concepts, attending to each and every one of these modal markers separately would not be feasible. Consequently, the following forms were selected [21, 10, 16]:

- 1 Grammatical modal markers also known as modal auxiliaries
- 2 Subordinate clauses (equals parentheticals)
- 3 Conditional if clauses
- 4 The residual subjective use of *were*
- 5 Imperatives and directives
- 6 Lexical modal markers including epistemic and deontic adverbs, adjective and nouns

- 7 Mental state predicates or modal verbs
- 8 Modal phrases also known as modal idioms

The modal markers in both types of letters were counted separately to obtain median frequency rates of use for both groups of high and low proficiency. The *Wordsmith Tools* was employed to generate the frequency counts. The frequency of occurrence of epistemic modal markers was then compared with the score and proficiency levels of the participants to find out how the epistemic modals were used in EFL learners' written discourse.

To address the second research question, almost similar to [22]'s categorization of letters to different sections of "salutations, openings, endings, signatures and discourse devices", all the letters were categorized into different sections of opening, main body and ending. Each section was put under scrutiny and was compared with the other sections in terms of the epistemic modal markers used. Sections such as salutation, signature and closing phrases were excluded from the study because they were irrelevant to the epistemic nature of the investigation.

In the qualitative phase of the data analysis, all the sentences in the collected letters were carefully examined and those sentences which contained any of the above-mentioned instances of modal expressions were extracted for further pragmatic investigation. Based on the third research question, which aimed at investigating the relationship between the social distance of the addressee and the modal markers used in the letters written by the addressor, all letters were carefully studied to spot the differences that contributed to success or failure of the writer in developing pragmatically correct letters in terms of the formality and informality requirement of each topic.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The General Frequency of Epistemic Modal Markers

The quantitative analysis of this study revealed some similarities between the proficiency levels under investigation. Regarding the first question, amongst all types of modal markers, both groups used different modal auxiliaries and semi-auxiliary verbs (e.g. *have to* and *need to*) very frequently. Unlike the findings of previous studies [23], the auxiliary '*can*' was the most frequently used modal marker in all four corpora under investigation. This could safely be attributed to the evasive and fuzzy nature of the modal in question that can at times have all three types of epistemic, deontic and dynamic readings.

In addition to the frequent occurrence of modal auxiliaries, almost other types of modal markers were found in both corpora except for the infinitival construction and residual subjective use of '*were*'. Mental state predicates, also known as modal verbs, were the second most frequently used modal markers. Modal adjectives and adverbs had similar frequencies, and modal nouns were among the least frequently used modals across both corpora, particularly in informal letters.

Likewise, the category of subordination was frequently observed across both types of corpora. Yet, because it is not accurate to assume that all subordinations necessarily involve modalization [16], mental state predicates such as *think*, *believe*, and *doubt*, which grammatically acted as the main verbs of the dependant clause and thus required a subordinate clause, were equated with subordinate constructions and were analyzed under the category of modal epistemic verbs.

However, there were differences between the two groups. For instance, the higher proficient learners used modal subordinations in both types of letters far more frequently than did the lower proficient learners. This, in particular, confirmed their higher proficiency in English as subordination is an advanced syntactic structure.

The other difference hinged upon the lower proficient learners' use of deontic modal markers, particularly deontic auxiliaries '*should*', '*must*' and '*have to*' in both formal and informal letters. Epistemic auxiliary '*may*' was used far more frequently by higher proficient learners than by lower ones. This was also the case for other modal expressions such as '*necessary*' and '*essential*', which were repeated across the lower proficient corpus more significantly than the higher proficient group. The following figures illustrate the epistemic and deontic markers used across both types of letters of both proficiency levels.

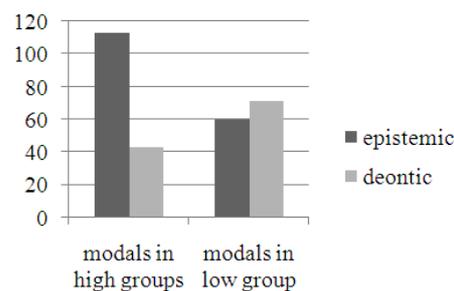


Figure 1. Deontic vs. epistemic modal choices in formal letters

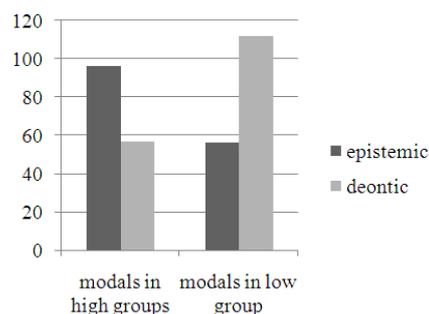


Figure 2. Deontic vs. epistemic modal choices in informal letters

As the figures show, the lower proficient learners used deontic markers in the formal letters far more frequently than the higher proficient group. The analysis revealed that the modal auxiliaries '*should*', '*must*' and '*have to*' were used significantly more often by the lower proficient learners. In contrast, the higher proficient learners used epistemic modal markers, particularly the modal auxiliary

'may', far more frequently in both types of letters, particularly in the formal ones.

#### 4.2. Epistemic Modal Markers across Different Subsections of Formal and Informal Letters

To answer the second research question, both types of letters across both proficiency levels were compared in terms of their rhetorical structures (opening, main body and ending). The evaluation of the rhetorical structure of each section helped clarify the pragmatic functions of epistemic modal markers. The frequency of epistemic modal markers per 100 words is presented in the following table.

**Table 2.** Frequency of epistemic modal markers per 100 words across different subsections of formal letters

Subsection	Formal letter Higher proficient	Formal letters lower Proficient
Opening	5.357	2.644
Body	0.826	0.440
Ending	2.190	1.658

As Table 2 shows, formal letters had more epistemic markers in their closing and opening sections than in their main body. It is also worth noting that the opening and closing sections of formal letters had more epistemic modal markers, most probably because these are the two sections where pragmatic issues play the most important role. Consider the following examples extracted from our formal corpus:

(1). I am writing to ask whether it is possible to reconsider your decision on how long they can play in the playground.

Another example extracted from an opening section is:

(2). and that he does not seem interested in his school or his lessons. I thought maybe it is due to your policy of offering limited playtime. I wanted to make a suggestion by saying that...

Epistemic modal makers in the opening sections of all formal letters across both proficiency levels served to:

- Mitigate the force of the utterance for the sake of politeness
- Express opinions, attitudes and suggestions
- Gradually prepare the reader for the main request or criticism

As one of the functions of epistemic modal markers is polite presentation of the requests and statements, it is not surprising to observe so many cases of epistemically modalized utterances in persuasive letters, particularly where the letters are about to end. This was more significantly found in formal letters where the difference in the social status of the writer and the reader caused the writer to take into consideration the politeness devices and as a consequence epistemic modals were amongst the most common means of expressing politeness. Here is a revealing example from the corpus:

(3). Therefore, I recommend that you consider the diverse opportunities that playtime give students in

facilitating their cognitive development. As the headmaster, you may be forced by practical constraints of curricular requirements to cut playtime, however, you may notice that there is a sever tradeoff in that. Still, I am positive that your knowledge and experience are surely invaluable assets which help you deal with this problem.

As the dataset shows, the main body of the formal letters had the least number of epistemic modal markers in comparison with the other two sections of opening and ending. The main bodies of the paragraphs included argumentations that most probably did not need to be modalized. The arguments were presented in the form of arguments that did not address any particular person.

The analysis of the epistemic modal markers in the informal letters of both proficiency levels revealed the following results:

**Table 3.** Frequency of epistemic modal markers per 100 words across different subsections of informal letters

Subsection	Informal letters higher proficient	Informal letters lower Proficient
Opening	0.766	0.660
Body	1.4	0.85
Ending	0.496	0.398

As Table 3 shows, unlike formal letters, informal letters did not have a significant number of modal devices used in the opening section. Instead, they included different types of informal greetings or a note on how the writer heard about the reader's decision. In such contexts, where there is no difference between the social status and social power of the addresser and the addressee, there seems to be less desire to save face [24]. For this reason, epistemic modalization of the utterances was not required.

However, in contrast to formal letters, the main body of informal letters included the most frequent use of epistemic modal markers. The analysis of the main body of informal letters showed that the writers had mainly sought to hypothesize about the possible consequences of the reader's action hoping to finally convince him or her to reconsider the issue in question. The majority of epistemic modal markers in the main body of the informal letters were used by the writer to present his/her arguments as hypothetical rather than polite.

The ending did not differ greatly from the opening sections of informal letters, most probably because the social status of the addressee and addressor were already minimized by their mutual intimacy as best friends. Thus, the need to sound more polite and consequently less committed to the truth of the argumentation did not arise.

#### 4.3. The Social Status of the Addressee and the Type of Modal Markers

The difference in the social status of the addressee and the addressor influenced the type of modal markers used in both types of letters. Different modal markers could be observed. However, the only point which could show the

effect of social distance on the choice of modal markers was the level of directness, abruptness and assertiveness that the writer used to make his or her statements sound more persuasive. Additionally, the syntactic structures that the writer used to mitigate his or her directness were of significance in contributing to the variation observed.

The analysis of different syntactic structures and various modal markers used in formal letters of both proficiency levels could be explained on a diagram in which the level of directness decreased from the most direct and the least polite form to structures that are the most indirect and the most polite type of expressions used. Between these two extreme ends of the diagram, there are other structures that are moderate in terms of both the level of politeness and the level of directness.

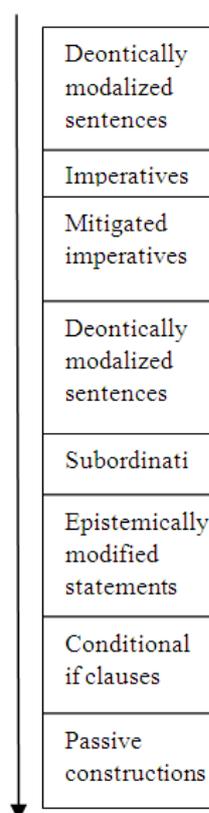


Figure 3. Diagram for Levels of Directness

As the diagram shows, deontically modalized statements that directly addressed the reader and included strong types of deontic modals such as “*must*”, “*have to*” and “*need to*” were considered as the most direct types of requests and were put on top end of the diagram. Here are two revealing example from our informal corpus:

(4). You must remember that this is only a poetic statement.

(5). You must know he can love his music the same way.

In this fashion, the requests formed by imperative structures and modified imperatives (modified by the adverb ‘*please*’) took the second and third place on the diagram, respectively. As [25] notes, requirements of politeness usually make the use of flat imperatives

inappropriate in normal conversation and speakers are therefore prone to use indirect means to fulfill their illocutionary goals. The imperatives were placed one level below the deontically modalized statements because they directly addressed the reader but did not highlight the importance of the actualization of the action in question. Consider the following examples from our formal and informal corpus respectively:

(6). Accept that free play should not be expected to have measurable outcomes.

(7). Don’t let your emotion affect making a right decision

An example of modified imperatives from the formal corpus is:

(8). Please reconsider all these matters and revise your school schedule.

Next on the diagram is another group of deontic modal markers that are less forceful in terms of their illocutionary force. This type of deontically modalized utterances included the modal auxiliary ‘*should*’ which were mostly treated as the expression of suggestion and opinion. Consider the following examples:

(9). The doctor stressed the importance of playtime and said that Ali’s study schedule should be changed.

(10). Children need to try to get along with each other as this may help them to have a better social life.

The diagram moves downward with the notion of subordination located somewhere in the middle. This structure made frequent use of different modal verbs such as *think*, *believe*, and *insist*. Two examples are provided below:

(11). I think it will be better for students to have more playtimes.

(12). I suggest you to offer the students more playtimes.

Next on the diagram is the category of epistemically modalized sentences in which the statements were modified and modalized by various types of devices like epistemic verbs, epistemic adjectives and adverbs. All of these devices rendered the statements least direct and most polite. Consider the number of epistemic modals used in one sentence in the following two examples:

(13). If it is possible for you, think about my suggestion, consider them as some opinions which may be helpful and then again, if possible change the school’s schedule and try to have more playtimes.

(14). I believe if you’re following the goal of training good citizens for this land, you may feel the urgent need to reconsider the issue and include it in your program.

The next category on the diagram is the conditional if clauses. These devices are usually used to present the information as a condition or a hypothesis. Conditional sentences have been assumed [26] to be a strong attractor of modality in terms of grammatical construction. Differently put, in conditional if clauses, one of the many modal auxiliaries has always been present. In this study, however, conditional clauses are assumed to be an indicator of politeness used by the addressor to make the request appear less assertive and more indirect. For example:

(15). I would be grateful if you could increase children's playtimes.

(16). With regard to these advantages, I would appreciate if you consider your policy about children's playtime.

The last category on the directness diagram was passive constructions, which did not have any of the features of the first four levels of directness. In fact, by using the passive construction, the writer neither addresses the reader nor does he consider him as a responsible agent for the actualization of the action in question. Differently put, the exact responsible agent that should actualize the requested action is not mentioned; rather the request is highlighted. Consider the following examples:

(17). I believe it is better if they were given more playtimes.

(18). I would like to ask if possible, a new schedule be planned.

It should be added that subordinations, epistemically modalized statements, conditional if clauses and passive constructions were observed more frequently in the formal corpus.

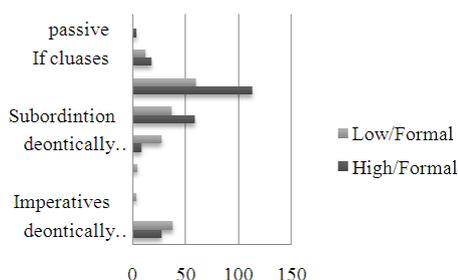


Figure 4. Level of Directness in Formal Letters

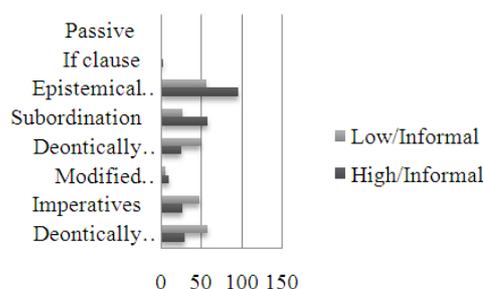


Figure 5. Level of Directness in Informal Letters

As the above figures show, less proficient learners used imperative constructions far more frequently in their formal letters, which can best be attributed to their lack of pragmatic knowledge.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

Writing to an authoritative figure or a person with a different and high social status requires pragmatic competence, including awareness of politeness strategies and ethics of writing. Should the letter be written in L2, the pragmatic competence will also include awareness and understanding of the socio-cultural norms and conventions of the target language, which, as [27] explains, includes

“the critical language awareness of how discourse shapes and is shaped by power relations, identity, and ideologies in the target culture.”

The present study was an attempt to shed light on the pragmatic knowledge of EFL learners with regard to the use of epistemic modal markers. The present study was also a step towards understanding the pragmatics of L2 writing by analyzing the learners' choice of epistemic modal markers in formal and informal argumentative letters.

The study revealed significant differences in the frequency and form of modal markers used across both proficiency levels (higher and lower) and letters (formal and informal). The analysis of the data brought to the open the role of pragmatic knowledge as it could, to a large extent, account for the various misunderstanding and miscommunication breakdowns that are frequently observed in EFL learners' communication be it written or spoken. The results of the present study, in line with [28], show that L2 learners need to be aware of the influential pragmatic functions that modal markers have in written discourses so as not to risk their own positive face, i.e. their wants to have their public self-image understood, liked and approved of, nor their addressee's negative face, i.e. their desire to be free from imposition and distraction, to have their territory respected and their freedom of action unimpeded.

Furthermore, it was revealed that lower proficient learners can increase their awareness of epistemic modal markers and their pragmatic knowledge to achieve pragmatic success in L2 writing. This gives importance to the sequential role of pragmatic acquisition. For example, the frequent use of subordinate or passive constructions, which are most commonly used by higher proficient learners, suggests that there is a potential sequence of learning. Similarly, some of the epistemic modal auxiliaries and modal adjectives were more frequently observed in the higher proficient writings, while the lower proficient learners used the deontic counterparts more frequently [29, 30, 23].

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