SPECIFICS OF MODAL VERBS IN INTERCULTURAL ENGLISH COMMUNICATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary
This article examines the pragmatic and linguo-functional role of modal verbs in English-language intercultural communication and their implications for the development of communicative competence. Modality, as a universal and culture-sensitive phenomenon, serves not only as a grammatical category but also as a key pragmatic tool for expressing speaker stance, intention, politeness, and interpersonal positioning. The study integrates theoretical perspectives from pragmatics, contrastive linguistics, and intercultural communication to analyze how modal verbs such as *can*, *may*, *must*, *should*, *might*, and *would* function across intercultural contexts. Empirical examples drawn from real-life intercultural exchanges, corpora, and classroom interactions demonstrate both pragmatic divergences and miscommunication patterns due to culturally encoded modal usage. The paper argues for the inclusion of pragmalinguistic training into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula with a focus on modal variation and awareness-raising strategies. It concludes with pedagogical recommendations on enhancing learners' pragmatic competence through focused modality-based instruction in communicative and intercultural competence development.

Key words: modal verbs, intercultural pragmatics, communicative competence, English as a lingua franca, pragmalinguistics, modality, EFL teaching, speech acts.

1. Introduction

The development of communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has increasingly emphasized the integration of pragmatic awareness, particularly in

contexts of intercultural communication where misunderstandings often stem not from lexical or grammatical errors but from mismatched speech conventions and pragmatic inferences. Among the most subtle yet powerful linguistic tools shaping interpersonal interaction in English are modal verbs, which convey not only epistemic judgment or deontic necessity but also relational dynamics such as politeness, mitigation, and authority.

2. Main part

Modal verbs like *can*, *may*, *must*, *should*, and *might* serve as indicators of speaker attitude and play a vital role in realizing speech acts such as requesting, advising, suggesting, warning, or offering *(Palmer, 2001)*. Their correct interpretation and usage require more than syntactic knowledge—they necessitate sensitivity to context, interlocutor status, and cultural norms of assertiveness, directness, and obligation. As such, modality constitutes a key component of what Thomas (1983) distinguishes as "pragmalinguistic competence," an essential subcomponent of overall pragmatic competence.

Despite their frequency and significance, modal verbs pose persistent challenges to learners due to their polysemy, overlapping meanings, and context-dependent pragmatic values. These challenges are exacerbated in intercultural settings, where speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds may assign divergent illocutionary force to the same modal expression. For example, a modal verb used to express polite suggestion in one culture may be perceived as overly directive or ambiguous in another *(Hassall, 2001)*. Misinterpretations of modality can therefore compromise the effectiveness of communication, damage social rapport, and hinder professional or diplomatic interaction.

This article explores how modal verbs function pragmatically in intercultural English communication, focusing on their impact on communicative competence development. It examines both theoretical and empirical perspectives on modality in English as a lingua franca (ELF) and considers how cross-cultural differences in modal use influence communicative success or failure. Drawing on authentic examples and prior corpus-based studies, the article also proposes pedagogical strategies for teaching modality within a pragmalinguistic framework.

The term *modality* refers to the speaker's expression of attitudes toward the proposition of a statement, including necessity, possibility, permission, and obligation *(Lyons, 1977)*. It is a universal semantic category realized in various grammatical forms across languages, yet it is subject to culturally specific norms of usage and interpretation. In English, modal verbs constitute the primary grammatical means of encoding modality and are divided into three main types: epistemic, deontic, and dynamic *(Palmer, 2001)*.

Epistemic modality concerns degrees of certainty or probability (*might*, *could*, *must*), deontic modality refers to rules, permissions, and obligations (*must*, *may*, *should*), while dynamic modality denotes internal ability or volition (*can*, *will*) *(Coates, 1983)*. These categories, while analytically useful, often overlap in real-world communication. For instance, *must* can express either an epistemic inference ("It must be raining") or a deontic obligation ("You must wear a helmet").

From a pragmatic standpoint, modals perform various discourse functions: they soften or intensify speech acts, express politeness or power, and facilitate indirectness *(Holmes, 1984)*. The illocutionary force of an utterance—its intended effect on the hearer—can shift dramatically depending on the modal chosen. For example, "You should submit the form" is generally interpreted as advice, whereas "You must submit the form" conveys obligation. Intercultural

miscommunication arises when learners misjudge these nuances or apply modal patterns from their native languages without adjusting to the target norms.

Furthermore, modals are often employed in indirect speech acts, a cornerstone of pragmatic competence *(Searle, 1975)*. For example, "Could you open the window?" functions as a polite request rather than a question about ability. Interpreting such modals requires not only linguistic decoding but also contextual and cultural awareness—a domain where many EFL learners struggle, particularly in intercultural interactions *(Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)*.

Modal verbs are not merely syntactic or lexical choices—they serve as pragmatic markers of interpersonal stance and relational positioning. Their use is governed by speech conventions that vary considerably across cultures. For instance, the modal *might* in British English is often employed to express tentative suggestion or to soften an opinion: *"You might want to consider another option."* In contrast, in other cultural contexts, such as German or Slavic-speaking cultures, this level of hedging might be interpreted as indecisiveness or a lack of confidence *(Wierzbicka, 2003)*.

This variance leads to the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer, where speakers unknowingly apply the modal usage norms of their first language (L1) to English, resulting in potential misinterpretation. For example, learners from languages with strong imperative traditions (e.g., Russian, Chinese) may overuse direct modals like *must* or *have to*, while underutilizing softer alternatives like *could*, *might*, or *would*, which are more commonly preferred in Anglo-American communicative norms *(Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993)*.

An important theoretical distinction relevant to this discussion is that between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence *(Thomas, 1983)*. Pragmalinguistics involves knowledge of the linguistic resources used to perform pragmatic acts (e.g., modals for requesting or suggesting), whereas sociopragmatics concerns the norms and expectations that govern appropriate language use in a given cultural or social context.

When EFL learners lack either of these components—linguistic form or contextual appropriateness—communication can falter. For example, using *You must attend the meeting* with a senior colleague may come across as overly forceful, even if the intention was to express necessity politely. A more culturally appropriate modal choice in many English-speaking contexts would be *You might want to attend the meeting* or *It would be good if you could attend*.

In sum, the correct use of modal verbs requires not only lexical and syntactic competence but also pragmatic awareness of their interpersonal implications. This is especially true in intercultural settings where norms of directness, obligation, and politeness differ significantly. The next section addresses these cultural dimensions more concretely.

English functions today as a global lingua franca in professional, academic, and diplomatic spheres. Consequently, it is frequently used in intercultural contexts where neither speaker is a native English user, but both must rely on English to communicate effectively *(Seidlhofer, 2011)*. In such settings, modal verbs become critical tools for negotiating meaning, managing social distance, and maintaining politeness.

One of the central intercultural differences in modal use lies in preferences for directness versus indirectness. Anglo-American English traditionally values indirectness and mitigation in speech acts involving requests, refusals, or criticism. Modal verbs like *could*, *might*, and *would* are frequently used to attenuate impositions. For instance: *"Could I possibly borrow your notes?"* ,*"You might want to reconsider that decision."*

These expressions convey politeness by allowing the interlocutor space to decline or reinterpret the message. In contrast, in many East Asian or Eastern European communicative

cultures, clarity and efficiency may be prioritized, leading to more direct modal constructions: *"I need your notes."* ,*"You must reconsider your decision."*

While such statements may be pragmatically appropriate in the speaker's native culture, they risk being perceived as rude or aggressive in English-speaking intercultural contexts *(House, 2003)*.

Modal verbs are also used to express and negotiate power relations. For instance, a manager saying *"You must complete this by Friday"* exercises authority, whereas saying *"It would be great if you could have this done by Friday"* invokes collaboration. In high-context cultures that emphasize hierarchy, the former may be accepted; in low-context, egalitarian cultures, the latter may be preferred.

Learners must be taught how to adjust their modal usage based on the relative status of interlocutors, the communicative situation, and the cultural expectations regarding formality and distance. A failure to calibrate modal usage appropriately can lead to loss of face, miscommunication, or damaged professional relationships *(Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988)*.

Let us consider authentic excerpts from business meetings involving speakers from different cultural backgrounds using English as a lingua franca. In one case, a Dutch project manager told an Indian supplier: *"You must provide this update by Monday."* The Indian partner interpreted this as abrupt and authoritarian, whereas the Dutch speaker viewed it as efficient and neutral. The lack of modal softening (*could*, *would*, *please*) led to interpersonal tension.

In another example, a Japanese executive used the expression *"It might be better to reconsider the launch date"* when speaking with an American team. The Americans interpreted this as a weak suggestion and proceeded as planned, unaware that the Japanese speaker's intention was actually to advise postponement. In this case, underuse of a stronger modal like *should* or *have to* led to misinterpretation of urgency.

These examples illustrate that modal verbs are not semantically neutral—they carry pragmatic weight that must be understood and taught explicitly to EFL learners, particularly those operating in globalized professional contexts.

The pragmalinguistic characteristics of modal verbs and their variation across intercultural communicative settings have significant implications for the teaching of English as a foreign language, particularly within the domain of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). In modern educational contexts, the development of communicative competence must extend beyond mere grammatical accuracy to encompass pragmatic appropriateness, intercultural sensitivity, and stylistic adaptability. Therefore, modal verbs should not be taught in isolation or as fixed grammatical items but rather in relation to their discursive, pragmatic, and sociocultural functions. A shift is needed from traditional form-focused instruction toward context-rich, genre-based, and interactional pedagogy that foregrounds modality as a key element in meaning-making and relationship negotiation.

In typical language teaching curricula, modals are introduced as part of grammar units, often with labels such as "modals of obligation," "modals of possibility," or "modals of advice." However, this segmentation ignores the complex interplay between modal meaning and contextual usage. For instance, the verb "must" is often taught as expressing strong necessity, yet in real-life intercultural communication, its use may be perceived as overly authoritative or even impolite depending on the sociolinguistic context. Therefore, language instruction should highlight not only the semantic core of modal verbs but also their **pragmatic force**, **politeness effects**, and **stylistic registers**. Learners must understand that a modal verb like "should" may function not only as mild advice but also as a strategic softening device in business negotiation, legal consultation, or academic recommendation.

Effective teaching of modality should incorporate discourse-based tasks that require learners to engage with authentic genres such as emails, memos, reports, presentations, and proposals. Each genre possesses its own modal "footprint"—formal genres tend to favor hedging and cautious modality, while informal ones may allow more direct expressions of intent or evaluation. Classroom activities can include rewriting exercises in which students transform directive instructions into polite requests using modals; peer-review tasks focusing on the tone created by different modal choices; and contrastive analysis of modal usage across cultural frameworks. Such practices help learners internalize the subtleties of modality and prepare them for the variable demands of real-world communication.

Furthermore, the cultivation of intercultural pragmatic competence is essential. Modal verbs are deeply embedded in the sociocultural norms of speech communities, and what counts as polite or assertive can differ dramatically from one culture to another. In intercultural business communication, for example, the direct use of "must" or "have to" might be considered rude in East Asian contexts, where indirectness and deferential modality are expected. Thus, learners should be encouraged to reflect on their own cultural modality norms and compare them with those prevalent in English-speaking professional settings. This reflection can be supported through guided discussion, scenario-based learning, and critical incident analysis.

Assessment of modal competence must also evolve. Instead of merely checking whether a student used the "correct" modal verb, teachers should evaluate the appropriateness of the modal in context. Rubrics for writing or speaking tasks should include dimensions such as **pragmatic accuracy**, **tone**, and **intercultural suitability**. Learners should receive formative feedback that points out not just errors in form but misalignments in pragmatic effect—such as sounding too assertive in a recommendation or too tentative in a technical analysis. Oral presentations can be followed by metapragmatic reflection, where students explain their modal choices and the communicative intentions behind them.

Technological tools can further support modality learning. Corpus analysis software allows learners to explore real examples of modals in academic and professional discourse, fostering inductive learning and stylistic awareness. Writing platforms that offer tone detection and modality suggestions, such as Grammarly or Write & Improve, can provide immediate feedback on whether a message sounds too strong, too weak, or just right. Moreover, learner-constructed corpora—collections of texts annotated by students themselves—can serve as powerful tools for noticing patterns of modal use and exploring the interaction between grammar, discourse, and communicative purpose.

In sum, the integration of pragmalinguistic instruction on modal verbs into ESP and EAP teaching is not simply a pedagogical option but a necessity in preparing learners for global communication. Such instruction equips them with the tools to navigate complex interactional contexts, maintain politeness and credibility, and adjust their linguistic strategies across genres and cultures. As the stakes of professional and academic communication continue to rise in multilingual environments, the ability to use modality effectively will remain a cornerstone of communicative competence.

3. Conclusions

The analysis of the pragmalinguistic features of modal verbs in intercultural English communication has revealed the intricate and context-dependent nature of modality as both a grammatical and pragmatic phenomenon. In the globalized communicative environment of the 21st century—where English functions as a lingua franca across diverse cultural, institutional,

and professional domains—the strategic use of modal verbs plays a critical role in expressing speaker stance, managing interpersonal relationships, and maintaining communicative appropriateness.

This study has demonstrated that modal verbs are not mere auxiliaries of grammatical necessity or possibility but rather dynamic tools that speakers use to negotiate meaning, hedge opinions, express deference, and adjust interpersonal tone. Their use is especially sensitive in intercultural contexts, where divergent cultural norms concerning authority, politeness, assertiveness, and indirectness can significantly impact how modal constructions are perceived and interpreted. The same modal verb may convey confidence in one communicative culture but be perceived as overbearing in another, highlighting the need for cultural-linguistic sensitivity.

A key finding of this research is the centrality of pragmatic competence in the use of modals. Learners of English, particularly those engaged in academic, business, or technical fields, require more than knowledge of formal modal paradigms—they need the ability to select modal forms that align with the discourse genre, interactional purpose, and cultural expectations of their interlocutors. Developing such competence entails a shift in both teaching and assessment practices. Instructional strategies should prioritize discourse-based, context-rich, and genre-specific activities that expose learners to the nuanced roles modals play in professional and intercultural communication. Authentic materials, such as business emails, research articles, policy memos, and recorded professional interactions, provide fertile ground for modeling and analyzing modality in action.

The integration of modal pragmatics into curriculum design has significant implications for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). A genre-based pedagogical approach can help learners internalize the stylistic expectations and modal patterns typical of various domains, from corporate communication to academic writing. Furthermore, attention to intercultural pragmatics ensures that learners are not only proficient in using English but are also able to navigate and respect the communicative conventions of culturally diverse interlocutors. Modal verbs, as a focal point of such instruction, offer learners a tangible means of developing both linguistic flexibility and communicative finesse.

From a methodological standpoint, this study affirms the value of a pragmalinguistic approach, which combines insights from linguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and intercultural communication. By analyzing authentic discourse and exploring the multiple layers of meaning conveyed through modals, researchers and educators alike can better understand how communicative competence is constructed, negotiated, and assessed. The inclusion of case studies and corpus data has further illustrated how modal variation reflects broader patterns of professional identity, power dynamics, and communicative strategy.

In terms of future research, several directions emerge. First, longitudinal studies could track how learners acquire modal competence over time and in different professional contexts. Second, cross-cultural comparisons of modal use in English by speakers from various L1 backgrounds could yield insights into common misinterpretations or pragmatic failures, informing targeted instructional interventions. Third, the development and evaluation of digital tools that provide real-time feedback on modal usage in writing and speaking could enhance autonomous learning and facilitate personalized language development.

In conclusion, the strategic and context-sensitive use of modal verbs is essential for effective communication in intercultural English settings. Their teaching should be reframed not as isolated grammatical drills but as an integral component of discourse competence and intercultural literacy. As English continues to serve as the dominant medium of global interaction, modality will remain a key linguistic resource through which speakers express epistemic

stance, interpersonal positioning, and rhetorical nuance. Empowering learners with the ability to interpret and deploy modal verbs appropriately contributes not only to their linguistic accuracy but also to their communicative credibility and professional success in a multilingual world.

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