

Saudi Tertiary Level Students' Cognition of Modal Auxiliaries Expressing Epistemic Possibility in English

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Abstract

The importance of studying modality as a tool that speakers use to convey their attitudes and evaluations is well documented. However, research on learners' cognition of modality is at its beginning. This paper concentrates on the cognition of possibility in epistemic modal auxiliaries. It relies on what it calls utterance completion test to study the cognition of epistemic modality by 29 Saudi students and by 3 native speakers – one British and two Canadians. The data analysis shows that while the native speakers' cognition is largely in line with linguists' descriptions, the Saudi students' cognition conforms very less to the linguists' descriptions. It reveals that students tend to confuse epistemic modality with deontic modality, and within epistemic modality itself, they confuse possibility with necessity. Saudi students also have difficulties with past epistemic possibility and they confuse the present perfect with the past proposition residue carried by modals. The study attributes this confusion to L1 transfer and lack of familiarity with some pragmatic aspects related to the target language culture. To help learners develop their cognition of modality, the study recommends that grammar textbooks and grammar teachers focus in the first place on the semantic subtleties of modal auxiliaries, without ignoring the pragmatic dimension that accompanies the utterances in which they occur. The study does not question by any means teaching language in context to develop speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills.

Key words: cognition, epistemic modality, language acquisition, meaning cognition, semantics

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