The Use of Corpora in Improving Modal Verb Treatment in English as Foreign Language Textbooks

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Abstract : This study aims to demonstrate how native and learner corpora can be used to enhance modal verb treatment in EFL textbooks in mainland China. It contributes to a corpus-informed and learner-centered design of grammar presentation in EFL textbooks that enhances the authenticity and appropriateness of textbook language for target learners. The linguistic focus is will, would, can, could, may, might, shall, should, must. The native corpus is the spoken component of BNC2014 (hereafter BNCS2014). The spoken part is chosen because pedagogical purpose of the textbooks is communication-oriented. Using the standard query option of CQPweb, 5% of each of the nine modals was sampled from BNCS2014. The learner corpus is the POS-tagged Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners (TECCL). All the essays under the 'secondary school' section were selected. A series of five secondary coursebooks comprise the textbook corpus. All the data in both the learner and the textbook corpora are retrieved through the concordance functions of WordSmith Tools (version, 5.0). Data analysis was divided into two parts. The first part compared the patterns of modal verbs in the textbook corpus and BNC2014 with respect to distributional features, semantic functions, and co-occurring constructions to examine whether the textbooks reflect the authentic use of English. Secondly, the learner corpus was analyzed in terms of the use (distributional features, semantic functions, and co-occurring constructions) and the misuse (syntactic errors, e.g., she can sings*.) of the nine modal verbs to uncover potential difficulties that confront learners. The analysis of distribution indicates several discrepancies between the textbook corpus and BNCS2014. The first four most frequent modal verbs in BNCS2014 are can, would, will, could, while can, will, should, could are the top four in the textbooks. Most strikingly, there is an unusually high proportion of can (41.1%) in the textbooks. The results on different meanings shows that will, would and must are the most problematic. For example, for will, the textbooks contain 20% more occurrences of 'volition' and 20% less of 'prediction' than those in BNCS2014. Regarding co-occurring structures, the textbooks over-represented the structure 'modal +do' across the nine modal verbs. Another major finding is that the structure of 'modal +have done' that frequently co-occur with could, would, should, and must is underused in textbooks. Besides, these four modal verbs are the most difficult for learners, as the error analysis shows. This study demonstrates how the synergy of native and learner corpora can be harnessed to improve EFL textbook presentation of modal verbs in a way that textbooks can provide not only authentic language used in natural discourse but also appropriate design tailed for the needs of target learners.