A Corpus-Based Analysis of Japanese Learners' English Modal Auxiliary Verb Usage in Writing

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Abstract : For non-native English speakers, using English modal auxiliary verbs appropriately can be among the most challenging tasks. This research sought to identify differences in modal verb usage between Japanese non-native English speakers (JNNS) and native speakers (NS) from two different perspectives: frequency of use and distribution of verb phrase structures (VPS) where modal verbs occur. This study can contribute to the identification of JNNSs' interlanguage with regard to modal verbs; the main aim is to make a suggestion for the improvement of teaching materials as well as to help language teachers to be able to teach modal verbs in a way that is helpful for learners. To address the primary question in this study, usage of nine central modals ('can', 'could', 'may', 'might', 'shall', 'should', 'will', 'would', and 'must') by JNNS was compared with that by NSs in the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE). This corpus is one of the largest freely-available corpora focusing on Asian English learners' language use. The ICNALE corpus consists of four modules: 'Spoken Monologue', 'Spoken Dialogue', 'Written Essays', and 'Edited Essays'. Among these, this research adopted the 'Written Essays' module only, which is the set of 200-300 word essays and contains approximately 1.3 million words in total. Frequency analysis revealed gaps as well as similarities in frequency order. Specifically, both JNNSs and NSs used 'can' with the most frequency, followed by 'should' and 'will'; however, usage of all the other modals except for 'shall' was not identical to each other. A log-likelihood test uncovered JNNSs' overuse of 'can' and 'must' as well as their underuse of 'will' and 'would'. VPS analysis revealed that JNNSs used modal verbs in a relatively narrow range of VPSs as compared to NSs. Results showed that JNNSs used most of the modals with bare infinitives or the passive voice only whereas NSs used the modals in a wide range of VPSs including the progressive construction and the perfect aspect, both of which were the structures where JNNSs rarely used the modals. Results of frequency analysis suggest that language teachers or teaching materials should explain other modality items so that learners can avoid relying heavily on certain modals and have a wide range of lexical items to reflect their feelings more accurately. Besides, the underused modals should be more stressed in the classroom because they are members of epistemic modals, which allow us to not only interject our views into propositions but also build a relationship with readers. As for VPSs, teaching materials should present more examples of the modals occurring in a wide range of VPSs to help learners to be able to express their opinions from a variety of viewpoints.

Keywords : corpus linguistics, Japanese learners of English, modal auxiliary verbs, International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English

Conference Title : ICALLE 2020 : International Conference on Applied Linguistics and Language Education

Conference Location : Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Conference Dates : December 17-18, 2020