

A discourse approach to teaching modal verbs of deduction

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Background

Despite the current emphasis on Communicative Language Teaching, many recently published ELT course books present grammatical structures as examples of English usage. Widdowson defines usage as the ability 'to manifest our knowledge of the language system of English' (1978, p.3). However, as he points out, 'we are not commonly called upon simply to manifest our knowledge in this way in the normal circumstances of daily life' (ibid). What we are called upon to produce are 'instances of use' (ibid).

As a teacher of EFL and EAP I have often found that although students can readily do the gap-fill type exercises that practise grammatical structures as usage, they do not often reproduce these when engaged in spoken communication or in Widdowson's term, language use. Perhaps this is not true of all grammatical structures but I find it so with modal verbs. In ELT course books modal verbs are typically introduced at intermediate/upper intermediate level and are usually described as ways of talking about certainty, obligation, deduction, etc. For example, the modal verbs must, can't, might and could are sometimes described as modals of deduction.

Problem

Whilst not suggesting that presenting, practising and producing examples of usage is unnecessary for language learners, I would argue that to develop a fuller understanding of modal verbs and to provide an opportunity for students to use them communicatively beyond the gap-fill, a different methodology is required.

Modality forms part of what Halliday has called the 'interpersonal metafunction'. Coffin et al. describe this metafunction as the way we 'engage interpersonally and express points of view' (2009, p.226). The choices language speakers make help to construct interpersonal relations. Viewed in this way the choice of the modal must over may is not only about degrees of certainty, but also about how a speaker wants to convey interpersonal relations. The problem with teaching modal verbs as usage, often in isolated sentences, is the inability to show how a speaker is engaging interpersonally and expressing points of view. I have provided my own example based on similar exercises found in published ELT course books and grammar practice books to illustrate this:

Complete the sentence using can't, must, might or could

1 I'm sure she's at home. She _____ be at home.

By simply filling the gap in the sentence the student has only displayed knowledge of English usage. The student has been given no opportunity to develop awareness of or show their understanding of how 'the speaker' of this sentence is using modality interpersonally. To increase awareness of how modality functions interpersonally, students need to study modal verbs as they occur in discourse.

Discourse

Discourse has been described as 'the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used' (McCarthy, 1991, p.5). To show this relationship I have transcribed a recording from my own data:

Paul, John

P: Hey, look at that. What is it?

J: I think it's a racing car.

P: Yeah, it could be. Who do you think it's by?

J: Mmm, it might be a Ferrari, it looks like one. There's some information there. What does it say?

P: Err ... yes, you're right, it's by Ferrari.

J: It's in great condition. It says here it was built in 1930. It's over 70 years old.

P: It's amazing.

J: I read somewhere that all Italian racing cars were red.

P: You're probably right.

Of course, the transcript alone doesn't show the relationship between language and context so some background information is required. The dialogue is between two friends at a museum – a public place. They are looking at an exhibit and making deductions about it based on what they see in front of them along with their 'world knowledge'; to make these deductions they use the modal verbs could and might.

What I'm trying to show is that the modal verbs in this dialogue occur due to the relationship between language and context: the two being interdependent. John and Paul's use of the modal verbs could and might (along with other modals such as the lexical verbs think and believe, the adverbs perhaps and probably, and the conversation fillers Err and Mmm) help to express their points of view whilst maintaining interpersonal relations. To see how this works we can remove these modal constructs, compare it to the original and think about how interpersonal relations are affected.

Teaching Method

I want to draw on McCarthy and Carter's 'Three I's' Methodology for studying modal verbs which takes account of their interpersonal function and the study of discourse. The Three I's stands for Illustration, Interaction and Induction (1995, p.217). They explain as follows:

'Illustration means wherever possible examining real data which is presented in terms of choices of forms relative to context and use. Interaction means that learners are introduced to discourse-sensitive activities which focus on interpersonal uses of language and the negotiation of meanings, and which are designed to raise conscious awareness of these interactive properties through observation and class discussion. Induction takes the conscious-raising a stage further by encouraging learners to draw conclusions about the interpersonal functions of different lexical-grammatical options, and to develop a capacity for noticing such features as they move through the different stages and cycles of language learning'.

For the Illustration phase a transcript such as the one I have reproduced above (along with the actual recording) can be used. The recording can be played to the students whilst they read through the dialogue. As I mentioned earlier, modal verbs are commonly introduced to students at intermediate/upper intermediate level. At these levels of proficiency students have sufficient metalanguage to be able to engage in both the Interaction and Induction phase of the methodology. During the Interaction phase a typical lesson will have students discussing certain features of context, such as where the dialogue takes place, who is involved in the dialogue, what relationship the speakers have, what the speakers are talking about, why they are talking, etc. During the Induction phase students can speculate on the speakers' choice of language based on their previous discussion of the context. It is during the Induction phase that the relationship between discourse and context is made.

An example

Illustration – students listen to and read the dialogue between John and Paul. During this phase they can make notes/underline anything that takes their interest; this can be discussed after the listening.

Interaction – in pairs/groups students discuss features of the context, e.g. John and Paul are friends, they have relatively equal status, they are visiting a museum, a museum is a public place, they are probably aware of other people in the museum, they might have some 'world knowledge' of the exhibition, they might have very limited knowledge of the exhibition, they are chatting to share ideas, they are maintaining social relations through their chat, etc. This information can be given as feedback and written up on a white board/projector.

Induction - students are encouraged to think about the speakers' choices of language, e.g. why the speakers use conversation fillers (Err, Mmm), modal adverbs

(perhaps, probably) modal and lexical verbs (think, believe, could, might) and the purpose of asking each other questions. Again this feeds back to the class and discussion helps raise students' awareness of the interpersonal function different choices of language have.

Following on

It is true that language students do not come to class to become discourse analysts and students need a practise activity to follow on from Illustration, Interaction and Induction. Typical course book activities for further practice present students with pictures and instructions such as 'Work in pairs and discuss what you think these pictures are'. I see two problems with this: firstly, I would argue, from experience, that examples of usage are not simply transferred to practice activities of this kind, and secondly, my experience with this activity has revealed a tendency for students to treat it as a guessing game, resulting in a different kind of grammatical structure being used and involving different interpersonal skills. For example, students commonly use declarative statements such as It's a ... or I think it's a ... or hedge their statements with a modal adverb Maybe it's a ...

A follow up activity which I have used draws on the ideas of Bilbrough in his book Dialogue Activities (2007). The classroom becomes a museum. Objects and pictures are distributed around the classroom for students to walk around and look at. The objects and pictures need to be suitably ambiguous to provide an element of uncertainty as to what they are/represent: I use objects I've collected on my travels. The students then pair up: it's helpful if they can create new personas; I do this by asking 'What's your name? Where are you from? How do you know this person you are with? etc' as this provides an element of improvisation to the activity. The students then walk around 'the museum' looking at and discussing the exhibits.

By creating a context the improvised dialogues yield a surprising amount of modality. Of course, for a truly authentic communicative activity, the class could visit a real museum.

Language use

The dialogue I have used in this article comes from my own recording of two speakers discussing museum exhibits. I am not suggesting that teachers need to record and transcribe language use for all classroom activities, but language does need to be presented to students within the context in which it occurs if they are to gain a fuller understanding of language use. By providing contextual information I have indicated that the speakers' choices of modality help to convey interpersonal relations as well as signalling degrees of certainty. Language use requires the study of language within its context, i.e. discourse. When discussing discourse, students can be asked to think about who the speakers/writers are, where they are, what they are talking/writing about, why they are talking/writing, or more specifically with

spoken language how they are talking, e.g. by thinking about prosodic features and dysfluencies.

Whilst my example looks at modal verbs of deduction I have used a similar approach to other areas of language use, both spoken and written. I have found it particularly useful with the passive, past perfect, past continuous and verbs for reported speech where practising usage does not necessarily transfer to use. When searching for classroom resources, I find it helpful to not only think about what grammatical structures are being used, but why they are being used in the particular context and how they shape discourse.

References

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