

تكرارات الأفعال المساعدة المكتوبة والمتحدثة المستخدمة من قبل طلاب اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية/
ثانية وفقاً لبيانات مدونة اللغة الإنكليزية الأمريكية المعاصرة

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Frequency of Spoken and Written Modal Verbs Used by ESL/ EFL Students

in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

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Abstract

Learning modal verbs is of vital importance in both written and spoken English, especially for those English learners who must use English as a second language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in their daily interactions. Modal verbs are essential but also very difficult. Due to the complexity of modal verbs in English, ESL and EFL students always have trouble in mastering them. Therefore, this corpus-based study was conducted to ascertain the most frequently used modal verbs according to the very recent data (from 1990 to 2019) of Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The current corpus-based study concentrates on the nine modal verbs *will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, and must* that are based on COCA. The corpus used in this study are divided into two genres: spoken and written. The written genre includes *academic, fiction, magazine, and newspapers*. The results showed significant differences in terms of frequency and distribution of modal verbs across spoken and written genres. These results can contribute to develop the methodology of presenting and teaching modal verbs to EFL and ESL learners. In addition, this information is very essential for materials designers and curriculum professionals.

Keywords: modal verbs, corpus study, spoken, written.

المستخلص

يعتبر تعلم الأفعال الناقصة ذو أهمية حيوية في كل من اللغة الإنكليزية المكتوبة والمنطوقة، خاصة بالنسبة لمتعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة ثانية (ESL) واللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) والذين هم بحاجة لاستعمال اللغة الإنكليزية في نشاطاتهم اليومية. إن الأفعال الناقصة تعتبر من الأفعال الضرورية جداً والصعبة في نفس الوقت. وبسبب صعوبة هذه الأفعال، يواجه طلبة اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية وكلغة ثانية مشكلة في استعمالاتها. لذلك، تم إجراء هذه الدراسة لمعرفة الأفعال الأكثر استخداماً وشيوعاً وفقاً لأحدث بيانات مدونة اللغة الإنكليزية الأمريكية المعاصرة (COCA) (من 1990 إلى

will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, (2019). ركزت الدراسة الحالية على الأفعال الرئيسية الناقصة might, and must

تم دراسة وتحليل الأفعال الناقصة في نوعين من النصوص: نصوص حوار كلامية ونصوص مكتوبة: يشمل نوع النصوص المكتوبة كل من النوع الأكاديمي، والنوع القصصي، والمجلات، والصحف. أظهرت النتائج وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية من حيث النسب وتوزيع الأفعال الناقصة في جميع الأنواع المختارة (المنطوقة والمكتوبة). يمكن أن تسهم هذه النتائج في تطوير منهج شرح وتعليم الأفعال الناقصة لمتعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية ومتعلمي الإنكليزية كلغة ثانية. اضافته

الى ذلك، فان هذه الدراسة مهمة لمصممي المناهج الدراسية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأفعال الناقصة، مدونة اللغة الامريكية المعاصرة، نصوص منطوقة، نصوص مكتوبة.

Introduction

Vocabulary is a fundamental and significant part of all comprehension when teaching and learning a second or a foreign language (Folse, 2010). In real-world, vocabulary is the backbone of any language since it is the most essential and basic way for communication with native speakers of a language. ESL and EFL language teachers and learners always ask a question of how to avoid mistaking vocabulary. Folse (2004), in his book *Vocabulary Myths*, showed the importance of learning vocabulary for ESL learners and explained why it is more important than learning grammar. The first myth illustrated the importance of vocabulary over grammar in acquiring a second language. His claims are supported by studies and research focused mainly on this aspect, like Nation & Coady, 1988; Laufer, 1992; Green & Meara, 1995. Therefore, effective applications for language pedagogy are required to improve teaching and learning vocabulary.

Thompson (2001) states it is difficult to think of writing any academic piece without using modal verbs. He considers the variety of ways that writers use modals in their thesis writing. Thompson (2001) found that in many theses, there are five common modals that are used in these academic writing: *may, can, would, could* and *will*.

For this reason, the main purpose of this study is to examine the use of modal verbs in the written versus spoken language. The study presents a comparative analysis of the written and spoken forms of the nine central modal verbs based (*will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, and must*) on Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

The current study presents and discusses the frequency of nine modal verbs in corpus linguistics. Research regarding modal verbs across COCA is limited therefore this study explores this system to answer the research questions.

Research Questions

The current study is intending to answer these two questions:

Q1/ What is the ranked frequency of the nine simple modals in COCA?

Q2/ Are there differences in the frequency of the nine modals in the spoken and the four written sections of COCA?

Literature Review

Why Vocabulary is Important!

Many ESL/EFL learners admit that vocabulary is their major problem after surpassing the initial steps of language acquisition (Halliday, 2004). Vocabulary knowledge is an essential element of effective reading instruction, and it is fundamental to develop reading (National Reading Panel, 2000). In learning a language, experts have recognized the importance of mastering the vocabulary of that language as a crucial step towards

understanding a given language (Alqahtani, 2015). Just like with the mother tongue, the way to learn the mother language involves the proper understanding of the vocabulary, the second language works.

Modal Verbs

In 1977, Lyons stated that modality is a burst of feelings and opinions of the speaker. It was identified by Palmer (1990) as a “grammatical system” which is implemented to expand our capability of expression. Mindt (1995) emphasized the importance of modal verbs and the lack in meaning that results without their use. However, the uncertainty regarding the modals semantic functions and the absence of luminous assurance concerning their system has induced ambiguous guidelines regarding the limits of defining modals.

Hoye (1997) announced that, in English, there are nine modal verbs that are considered as central modal auxiliary verbs and they are: *will, would, can, could, may, might, shall, should* and *must*. Coates (1983), Quirk et al. (1985) and Biber et al. (2002) all brace this concept. It is this semantic elaboration that poses a challenging situation which generates difficulty for the L2 speaker to differentiate between the deontic meaning and the epistemic meaning of the same verb (Kennedy, 2002).

Thompson (2002) clarified that the modal's semantic attributes contribute to the system's uniqueness. However, this constructs a schooling obstacle for EFL and ESL learners because of inadequate linguistic explanation. Additionally, there is a miniature group of marginal modals, *ought to, need to, used to and need* (Quirk et al. 1985), which operates as both modal and main verb. Kennedy (2002) noted that a narrow assortment of expressions known as semi-modals also exists. These verbs behave as modals and are namely: *(had) better, (have) got to, be about to, be going to and be supposed to*.

The impact of modal verbs and their function in language have been studied by many scholars. Torabiardakani, Khojasteh, and Shokrpour (2015) focused on nine modal auxiliaries, *can, could, must, should, may, might, shall, will, and would* that are utilized by EFL adult learners to investigate their semantic functions. According to their study, semantically accurate sentences and modals can be defined as sentences that report the precise meaning in accordance with the functions of the modals. Modal verbs are used in both speaking and writing to enhance interaction and they are used as methods of expressions related to many notions like *opinions, purposes, understanding, and obligations* (Torabiardakani et al., 2015).

Manaf (2007) highlighted the important role of modal verbs in most languages that are part of their grammar and semantics. English is of one of these languages since these verbs are highly significant for the semantics of communication. This significant role of modal auxiliary verbs in English, makes them considered as the most tricky and difficult grammatical components for ESL and EFL students. Sometimes English language learners face difficulty with the modals' forms as well as the semantic functions that make them difficult to teach by ESL teachers and comprehended by ESL learners (Palmer, 1990).

Why Modals are Important!

While some researchers have investigated the frequency of modals, such as Biber et al. (1999), other researchers like Quirk, et al. (1985), have focused on the semantic functions of modals (Coates, 1983). Modals can obtain different meanings according to their context of situation (Diniz 2009). Modal verbs are categorized in to three main groups:

1. Possibility/ ability/ permission (e.g., *could, can, might*).
2. Necessity/ obligation (e.g., *be supposed to, must, need to, should, ought to*).
3. Prediction/ volition (e.g., *be going to, will, would, shall*).

According to Quirk et al. (1985), *modality* can be defined as “the manner in which the meaning of a clause is qualified so as to reflect the speaker's judgment of the likelihood of the proposition of the sentence being true” (p. 219). Kennedy (2002) stated that modals involve a

special space in grammar, i.e., they constitute about 8 % of all verb forms. Verbs form 20 % of all the word tokens used in written texts. Modal auxiliary verbs have always played an important part of the syntax and semantics of English because they are not only auxiliaries, but they also appear to contribute to the semantics of communication (Manaf, 2007). The semantic characteristic of modal verbs makes the grammatical system unique. Quirk, et al. (1985), added that in addition to the function of modals to qualify the meaning of the sentence, modals reflect the writer's judgement of the likelihood of the proposition it expresses being true.

Gueron and Lecarme (2008), support the fact that grammar assigns enough space to modal verbs. Sentences that including modal verbs have a unique position within grammar and semantics. Biber et al. (1999) divided modal verbs into groups: central modals and semi-modals. The first group of modals contains *can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, and must*, while the second group include phrases that work like modals such as *need to, be supposed to* and *have to*.

Nine modals have been listed by Quirk et al. (1985), Hoyer (1997), and Biber et al. (2002) that have been considered the central modal verbs. These nine modal verbs are: *shall, should, will, would, may, might, can, could, and must*. In addition to these nine central modals, there is another group of 'marginal modals', which are *ought to, need to, used to and need* (Quirk et al., 1985), which sometimes can act like modals and in other times like main verbs. Furthermore, there is also a small group of verbs known as 'semi-modals', which also function like modals; specifically (*had*) *better, (have) got to, be about to, be going to* and *be supposed to* (Kennedy, 2002). The focus of the present study is limited to the central group of the nine modal verbs, which are *will, would, can, could, may, might, shall, should* and *must*.

Word Frequency

Kretzschmar and Schlesewsky (2015) said that word frequency is an important factor which determines how quickly readers and listeners access the meaning of a word and combine it with a sentence or text. Specifying word frequencies in any text gives a solid idea about the forms of word utilized and the affectional content of that text (Rajput, Grover, & Rathi, 2020). Repetition of vocabulary is very significant to ensure acquisition of new words (Mukundan & Anealka, 2007). According to Thornbury (2002), when a language learner reads, words stand a good chance of being remembered if they have been met at least seven times over spaced intervals. Romer (1996) believes that "frequencies are the keys to lead us to words or structures which are central in a language" (p. 186).

Therefore, word frequency help to decide what teaching materials should be included. Proper vocabulary use does not correspond only with evidenced use in class or a learning environment, but on its application on a day-to-day basis.

Corpus Linguistics

Corpus linguistics is a living extensive electronic data that embody the authentic and natural use and examples of language parts rather than the language that is used to explain a linguistic theory or concept (Meyer, 2002). Although the concept of corpus linguistics has been around for nearly a century, all the studies of languages before Chomskian linguistics were corpus-based (McEnery & Wilson, 2001). Corpus linguistics is used to assist linguistic studies since it contains both qualitative and quantitative data, which enables the researchers to analyse their data in more comprehensive and more accurate way (Oktavianti, & Fajria, 2021).

Corpus studies can aid the curriculum design in an EFL context because it can specify the closest illustration of actual language use (Oktavianti & Fajria 2021). Among various approaches that contribute to vocabulary acquisition, corpus is one of the latest and most

enlightening, for a corpus makes an easy and quick analysis of great amounts of linguistic data possible (Sinclair, 2003).

Corpus linguistics has a key implication in language pedagogy nevertheless enlightening researchers about the global behavior of vocabulary, idioms or expressions that can be implemented in changing language dictionaries and ESL/ EFL textbooks. In addition to informing researchers, corpus linguistics has valuable classroom applications for language pedagogy. Scholars may focus on the global behavior of a language, which is perceived as general corpus. On the other hand, if scholars emphasize selected vocabulary items that are used for specific purposes, this corpus is called specialized corpus (Tribble, 1990). Whether it is general or specialized corpus linguistics, both can help ESL and EFL learners learn a language and meet their needs. All that can be achieved by giving learners authentic models through inductive thinking strategies which will help developing their language comprehension that will be reflected in their reading and writing skills (Sun, 2007).

Corpus-based Research of Modal Verbs

Many studies have revealed that the language presented in textbooks is often based on inaccurate intuition about how people use language. For instance, Holmes (1988) compared ESL textbooks and corpus data to find many of these textbooks allocated an unjustifiably huge amount of consideration to modals at the expense of alternative linguistic strategies. Mukundan and Khojasteh (2001) agreed with Holmes' (1988) findings that many EFL textbooks fail to reflect the actual language use. Accordingly, Altenberg and Granger (2001) and Shirato and Stapleton (2007) emphasized the use of corpus-based findings to speed up the initial stage of the linguistic analysis.

The emphasis on modal auxiliary verbs has been portrayed in various corpus-based studies reviewed in the literature. Some researchers have investigated in the topic of distribution of modals (e.g. Mindt, 1995; Biber et al, 1999). Other experts in the field have centered their studies on the aspects of the semantic functions of modals (e.g. Quirk et al, 1985; Coates, 1983). Scholars, like Collins, 1991 and Biber et al. 1999, have considered the regional and historical variations in the use of modals. Kennedy (2002) concluded that verbs compose about 20 percent of all the word tokens used in English, while in written texts, modal verbs typically constitute about 8 percent of all verb forms.

Kennedy (2002) illustrated that 1,457,721 of the word tokens in the British National Corpus (1.45%) are identified as modal verbs. *Will, would, can, and could* represent 72.7% of all the modal verb tokens. Furthermore, it is indisputable that the most frequent modal, *will*, accounts for about 23% of all modal tokens in the corpus. Additionally, the results obtained display that modals appear in spoken texts at a higher frequency than they do in writing. In spoken texts, there are 215,485 modals for every 10 million words (Kennedy, 2002).

Romer (1996), conducted a comparative study of BNC using a German textbook series. The purpose of her analysis was to observe whether there are any differences between the English grammar (modals) educated at school and that utilized by the native speakers. Contradicting to way Kennedy (2002) conducted his study, she piloted her study exclusively on the 10-million-word spoken part of BNC with the bulletin being that modal auxiliaries arise more often in spoken than in written English. It should be noted that *will, would* and *can* were determined to be the most persistent modals succeeded by *could* in spoken English. Romer (1996) performed another investigation which helped her obtain details on the semantic variation of each modal auxiliary in BNC. From this study, it was found that the dynamic meaning of *can* (ability) is the most frequent semantic function utilized chased by its epistemic (possibility) and deontic (permission) meanings. Like the findings of Kennedy, she confirmed once more that the highest percentages of negations were demonstrated with *can* and *could*, and that the contracted forms (e.g., *can't*, 94.25%) are in all cases much more

common than in full forms (e.g., *cannot*, 5.75%). In affirming the results of the BNC and through textbook comparison, Romer (1996), studied modal auxiliaries' frequencies, different meanings and co-occurrences and it was clearly seen that there are huge discrepancies between the adoption of modal auxiliaries in authentic English and the English coached in German schools.

Grammatically, there appears to be a prevalence of cases of overusing modals of *will/'ll* and *can* as well as underused cases of *would/'d*, *could*, *should* and *might* as compared to BNC. Linguistically, the ability meaning of *can* and *could* has been overworked in textbooks. It is worth noting that in BNC, *could* generally expresses a possibility, not an ability. The most astonishing observation made by Romer (1996) must be that *shall*, with its prediction meaning, is never used in textbooks. On the contrary, it is one of the most important meanings in BNC. The bottom line of her research indicated that further corpus-driven work needs to be performed to facilitate the process of teaching and learning English which is closest to that of native speakers.

Methodology

The present study focuses on the operationalized modals although there are several kinds of modals (simple, marginal, auxiliary, etc.), the researchers focused only on nine central modals, namely *will*, *would*, *shall*, *should*, *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, and *must*. The COCA corpus (1990 to 2019) includes one billion words in approximately 500,000 texts. These texts are divided into many genres: TV/ Movies, blogs, web-gente, spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper and academic. The very recent data are from 1990 to 2019.

The first stage in this corpus study was to find out the frequency of the modal verbs. The researchers run a query from the search box to investigate the nine modal verbs within the spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper, and academic genres. These genres were selected because they are more related to teaching and learning than the other genres. Then the percentages for all the selected modal verbs across spoken and the four kinds of the written genres were calculated.

Results and Discussions

The results indicate that the nine modal verbs show diverse patterns of occurrence and distribution across genres.

1. Will

Figure (1) shows that the ranked frequency of the first modal verb *will* in the spoken COCA is 297.832; fiction 140.082; magazine 265.882; newspapers 312.980 and academic 174.946. Therefore, the highest frequency or use of the verb *will* is in the newspapers while the lowest use is in the fiction section.

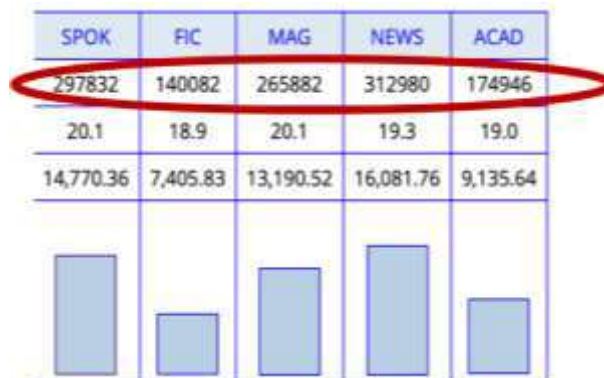


Figure (1). Frequency of “will” across genres.

2. Would

Would has 345.647 in the spoken COCA; fiction 366.737; magazine 231.640; newspapers 247.193 and academic 187.765. This means the highest use of this modal is in the fiction section while the lowest use is in the academic section.



Figure (2). Frequency of “would” across genres.

3. Shall

The third modal verb *shall* has 2.658 in the spoken COCA; fiction 7.647; magazine 2.597; newspapers 1.559 and; academic 6.893. The highest frequency of *shall* is in fiction and the lowest frequency is in newspapers.



Figure (3). Frequency of “shall” across genres.

4. Should

The fourth modal verb *should* shows 118.210 in the spoken section; fiction 74.660; magazine 88.431; newspapers 78.361 and academic 103.472. *Should* has the highest frequency in the spoken section compared with the fiction section that has the lowest frequency.



Figure (4). Frequency of “should” across genres.

5. Can

COCA reveals that the fifth modal verb *can* has 317.901 in the spoken section; fiction 177.369; magazine 330.158, newspapers 212.918 and academic 263.770. *Can* indicates that the highest frequency is in the magazines section and the lowest frequency is in the fiction section.



Figure (5). Frequency of “can” across genres.

6. Could

180.314 is the spoken section frequency of the sixth modal verb *could*; 333.337 is the fiction; 164.561 is the magazine; 152.751 is the newspapers frequencies and 112.055 is the academic. The fiction section of the verb *could* has the highest frequency while the academic section has the lowest frequency.



Figure (6). Frequency of “could” across genres.

7. May

May, the seventh modal verb, has 84.022 frequency in the spoken section; 28.150 in the fiction; 113.821 in the magazine; 94.871 in the newspapers and 181.799 in the academic. So, the highest frequency of *may* is in the academic section and the lowest frequency is in the fiction section.

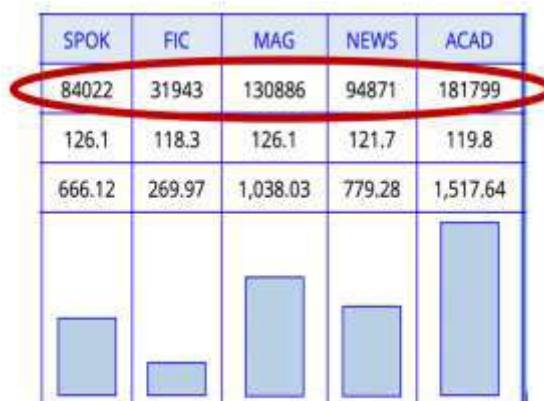


Figure (7). Frequency of “may” across genres.

8. Might

The eighth modal verb, *might*, signifies 58.331 frequency in the spoken COCA; 79.783 fiction; 66.342 magazines; 52.494 newspapers and 61.231 academic. Section with the highest frequency is fiction and the lowest frequency is ‘newspapers’.



Figure (8). Frequency of “might” across genres.

9. Must

The ninth and the last modal verb, *must*, has 26.173 in the spoken COCA; fiction 50.626; magazine 40.303; newspapers 35.907; academic 70.689 which means that the highest use of this modal is in the academic section while the lowest use is in the spoken section.



Figure (9). Frequency of “must” across genres.

Table (1) below provides the frequencies of all the nine modal verbs across the spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper and academic genres.

Table 1

The Frequencies of the Nine Modal Verbs in the Selected Genres

Modals	Spoken	Fiction	Magazine	Newspaper	Academic	Total of Written
will	297.832	140.082	265.882	312.980	174.946	993.890
would	345.647	366.737	231.640	247.193	187.765	1.033.335
shall	2.658	7.647	2.597	1.559	6.893	18.696
should	118.210	74.660	88.431	78.361	103.472	344.924
can	317.901	177.369	330.158	212.918	263.770	984.215
could	180.314	333.337	164.561	152.751	112.055	762.704
may	84.022	31.943	130.886	94.871	181.799	439.499
might	58.331	79.783	66.342	52.494	61.231	259.850
must	26.173	57.094	43.523	35.907	70.689	225.213
Total	1,431,088	1,268,652	1,324,002	1,189,034	1,162,620	4.944.308

This table shows that the highest ranked frequency of the modal verb *will* is in the written COCA, specifically in the newspaper section 271.069, while in the spoken COCA, it is 297.832. The ranked frequency of the modal verb *would* in the spoken COCA is 304,053 that is lower than the Fiction section 319.894 in the written part 1.033.335. *Shall* has a lower frequency in the spoken, 2.658, than in the fiction section 6.934 and the academic section 5,658 in the written COCA, 18.696. The highest frequency of the verb *should* is in the written COCA in total, 344.924, while the lowest frequency is in the spoken frequency, 118.210. The fifth modal verb *can* has 317.901 frequency in the spoken COCA that is lower than the frequency of the magazine section 330.158 in the written COCA, 984.215.

The modal verb *could* showed a lower frequency in the spoken part that is 180.314 than the fiction section 289,954 out of a total of 762.704 in the written part.

The academic 181.799, magazine 113.82, and newspaper 94.871 sections in the written part 439.499 of the modal verb *may* shows a higher frequency than the spoken part of the same verb 84.022. With the modal verb *might*, the three sections, academic 61.231, fiction 79.783, and magazine 66.342, out of 259.850 the written part in total show higher frequency than the spoken part 58.331 of the verb *might*. The highest frequency of the modal verb *must* is in the written part 225.213 comparing to the spoken part 26.173, where each of the four sections, academic 70.689, fiction 50.626, magazine 40.303, and newspapers 35.907, scored higher than the spoken part alone. Table (1) shows that the ranked frequency of the first modal verb *will* in the spoken COCA is 297.832; academic 174.946; fiction 140.082; magazine 265.882; and newspapers 312.980. This shows that the highest frequency or use of the verb *will* is in the newspapers while the lowest use is in the fiction section.

The Percentages of the Modal Verbs

Figure (10) represents the percentages of the nine modal verbs across *spoken, fiction, magazine, newspapers, and academic*. The chart pie shows that modal verbs are the most

frequent in the spoken genre (22%), followed by magazine (21%), newspapers (20 %), fiction (19), and finally academic (18%).

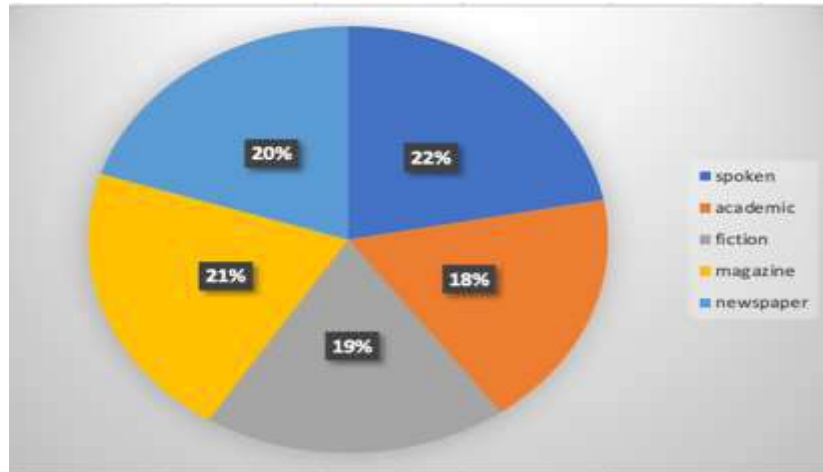


Figure (10). Percentages of modal verbs across COCA genres.

The results presented considerable and clear differences in terms of frequency and distribution of the nine modal verbs across spoken and written genres. The most obvious differences are found between spoken genre (22%), and academic genre (18%). That is to say, the highest frequency of the nine modal verbs occurred in spoken genre. This result supports the previous studies of Biber et al., 1999; Leech, Hundt, Mair, & Smith, 2009; Biber & Conrad, 2009).

Conclusions

Overall, the aim of the study, which was finding the frequencies and distribution of the modal verbs across different genres was achieved. Comparative analyses of spoken genre reflect different distribution and frequency compared to the written genre in terms of the nine modal verbs and vice versa.

In terms of pedagogical implications, the findings of the current study may play a significant role in assisting EFL/ESL teachers and researchers to decide which modal verbs should be highlighted over other in materials, and teaching. For example, modal verb *may* occurred 181.799 times in the Academic genre compared to the occurrence of only 84.022 in the Spoken genre. This difference might be because academic genre is a more formal genre that prefers to use hedging. The findings also should be taken into consideration by EFL/ESL materials writers to enhance the authenticity of the language input which can be advantageous for designing teaching materials.

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