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Modal Verbs and International Graduate Students: A Lesson in Choices

■ In recent years, researchers in the TESOL field have emphasized the need to develop more sociopolitically aware approaches to English language teaching (ELT). As a result, some ESL teacher-researchers, such as Morgan (1998, 2002, 2004) and Benesch (2001), have begun demonstrating how Freirean (1970) critical pedagogy can be applied to ELT contexts. Nonetheless, despite this growing interest in the sociopolitics of language classrooms, some practical questions remain unexplored, including the potential for explicit grammar instruction in the context of critical approaches. In this paper, it is argued that explicit form focus can be successfully conjoined with critical attitudes about language and pedagogy. Specifically, through the exploration of a university-level ESL lesson, it is demonstrated how the presentation of a particular linguistic area (modals and modality) in the context of a complex, “real-life” situation can help students understand the interconnected nature of language, interpersonal power, and institutional ideology.

Introduction

In the two decades since the publication of Krashen and Terrell’s (1983) *The Natural Approach*, explicit form focus seems to have reestablished itself as one of the leading paradigms in TESOL.¹ Although studies that emphasize the importance of form vary in

scope and methodology—from discussions of ESL students’ linguistic needs in academic contexts (Scarcella, 1996, 2002), to discourse analyses of nonnative writing (Schleppegrell, 2002), to examinations of the interaction between focus on form and communicative activities (Lightbown, 1998)—at least one underlying assumption seems consistent: Linguistic form cannot be ignored. During the same period, the field has experienced another change: a growing awareness of the implicit sociopolitical dimensions of English language teaching (ELT). While studies in this vein are also divergent in terms of scope and methodology—from Phillipson’s (1992) broad-stroke overview of the role of ELT in furthering Anglo-American economic interests abroad, to Ramanathan’s (2002) examination of the sociopolitical dimensions of teacher training, to Johnston’s (2002) multifaceted look at the place of values in language classrooms—they seem to share their own underlying assumption about the interconnectedness of language development, language teaching, and a complex web of social, cultural, and political phenomena.

Entering TESOL in the second half of the 1990s—after the fiercest of the grammar/nogrammar debates, and well into the post-structuralist academic age, which has brought about an increased awareness of sociopolitical issues across the humanities—I was influenced by both trends. Like many TESOL professionals these days, I believe that explicit form focus, and metalinguistic awareness in general, can help students succeed as language learners. At the same time, however, I am convinced that the sociopolitical issues surrounding sites of language acquisition are inseparably linked to language learning itself, and that pedagogy should openly address such concerns. Thus, my challenge, as a language instructor who values both form focus and sociopolitical awareness, has been to develop classroom practices that allow me to conjoin these seemingly divergent concerns. In a general sense, the question I’ve asked myself is: How can I incorporate explicit grammar instruction into a pedagogic

approach that openly acknowledges and responds to the sociopolitical nature of language and language education? In this paper, by exploring a lesson carried out in an American academic context, I will offer one classroom-based answer.

Sociopolitics and Pedagogical Grammar

The view that education is necessarily political is articulated in the writings of critical pedagogues such as Freire (1970) and Giroux (1983), who perceive institutional learning as social and cultural reproduction. In language learning circles, this idea has been slow to take ground, perhaps because of misconceptions about the term “political.” Pennycook (1989) offers a contextually appropriate definition of the word: “We must see the political as involving all relationships within a society, as concerned with all the fundamental inequalities, particularly those based in race, class, and gender differences” (p. 590). Using this definition, Pennycook goes on to claim that second language learning, as a site of education, is uniquely “political,” because it is “bound up in the contentious issues of bilingualism, minority education, and internationalism” (p. 591). Benson comes to a similar conclusion, noting that language instruction is “premised upon inequalities between learner and target language communities” (1997, p. 27). In her examination of the English-only issue in the context of adult ESL education, Auerbach (2000) argues that excluding students’ native languages in the classroom is not only a pedagogical choice, but also a political one: “Although they [beliefs regarding first language inclusion/exclusion in the ESL classroom] may appear to be informed by apolitical professional considerations, they are grounded in invisible but powerful ideological assumptions which need to be reexamined and problematized” (p. 178).

Teacher-researchers in the field of TESOL have worked to translate such theoretical attitudes into classroom practice. Benesch (2001), in her work as an instructor of linked

courses at an American university, performs what she calls “rights analysis” in her classes, or an assessment of students’ place in the community. The notion of “rights analysis” is based on the assumption that students, and especially ESL students, have subordinate roles in the university power structure, and that an institution’s pedagogic practices, such as the extensive use of lecturing, which Benesch perceives as a “means of institutional and cultural control” (p. 116), compel students to accept their conventional roles. In her classrooms, Benesch implements pedagogic choices that help students apprehend their own situations, and then, working within a Freirean model of critical pedagogy, she tries to empower students so that they can increase their influence on the political structures surrounding them. Similarly, in his work as an ESL instructor for adult immigrants in Canada, Morgan (1998, 2002, 2004) structures his lessons around issues that directly affect students’ lives, such as the situation of immigrants in the Canadian job market, the effects of community policing in Chinese immigrant neighborhoods, and the possible economic implications of a “yes” vote on the 1995 referendum for Quebec sovereignty. As is the case with Benesch, Morgan’s premise in bringing such issues into the classroom seems to be that his students, as nonnative speakers and immigrants, are inherently disempowered in the Canadian context (i.e., they are subject to the inherent “inequalities between learner and target language communities” of which Benson speaks). Morgan describes his goals in helping his students “speak” on important issues as such: “When small victories and dissenting voices are discerned...alternative and sustainable ways of community life have the real possibility of developing” (1998, p. 126).

However, while such studies indicate that there is a growing interest in the sociopolitics of ESL classrooms, there has been limited attention paid to the role of grammar instruction in the context of critical pedagogy approaches. Canagarajah (2002) offers one perspective in his discussion on the place of

form in L2 writing instruction. He acknowledges the fact that many English language learners want explicit grammar instruction, and he says that educators should respect this attitude, because “there is some truth to the claim that getting students to focus only on ideas and neglecting the place of established codes and conventions may lead to their further marginalization” (p. 47). He then goes on to advocate a mode of grammar instruction that moves away from the prevailing focus on “errors” and “standardized norms,” in favor of “choice,” “linguistic diversity,” and “negotiation.” He also highlights students’ individual differences and encourages teachers to “develop the independence of writers for marshaling the resources of the language according to their needs and values” (p.52). Somewhat related positions can be found in de Silva Joyce and Burns (1999), who, within a framework of functional linguistics, advocate a “less judgmental” approach to language teaching that emphasizes grammatical “language variation” and “choice”: “In the end, it is the language user’s choice what language they will use. The aim of functional approaches to language is to make language users more conscious of the choices they make and provide them with a wider range of choices” (p. 18). Such views might also be linked to the more overtly political approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Kress outlines the notion of linguistic choice in CDA as such: “‘Choice’ is the category that captures and reflects, on the one hand, degrees of power and control at issue in an interaction, and on the other, the potential degrees and characteristics of real—not determinate—action which are available to participants in linguistic interactions” (1991, p. 88).

Morgan offers at least one perspective on how such attitudes might shape classroom practice (1998, 2002, 2004). As mentioned, Morgan structures lessons around themes that are relevant to students’ realities, and he often employs dialogic, Freirean strategies, such as problem posing (Freire, 1970; see Schleppegrell, 1997, for a TESOL-related discussion). Additionally, when describing how

he carries out different stages of lessons, he often includes “Teacher’s Notes,” in which he mentions ideas for grammar instruction. In writing about his Gulf War lesson, for example, Morgan draws on the idea of “meaning potential” and Hallidayan “register” to suggest how teachers can help students focus on the way different question forms can reflect more negative or positive attitudes toward subjects; similarly, in the lesson about community policing, Morgan recommends that teachers devote some time to grammatical, functional, and notional items such as making suggestions, interrupting politely, and expressing opinions. Beyond these more peripheral recommendations, in at least two instances, linguistic form plays a central role in Morgan’s lessons. During a lesson called “Isolation,” which explores the situations of immigrants whose family members still live in the home country—as do the husbands of many of Morgan’s adult Chinese learners—intonation practice is incorporated into role plays, such that the students grow to appreciate how widely divergent meanings can be conveyed through intonation. Similarly, in a lesson with Chinese immigrants about the 1995 Quebec referendum—and some of its similarities to the issue of Hong Kong’s 1997 return to Chinese governance—Morgan helps students gain a deeper understanding of the English modal system and its resources for expressing feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about the future (Morgan, 2004).

Nonetheless, Morgan’s work seems to be the exception in its inclusion of classroom-based models for incorporating explicit grammar instruction into more sociopolitically aware approaches to TESOL. Thus, from my perspective, as an English language instructor, the practical, pedagogic question remains: How might explicit grammar instruction be incorporated into critical classroom practices?

ESL for International Graduate Students

The lesson I will describe here was carried out at a large public university in a course

titled "Academic English for International/ESL Graduate Students." The course, which introduces graduate students to academic English in the American context through a series of writing and speaking tasks, as well as a general grammar review, is offered during the fall academic quarter to international students who score below 70% on a written placement exam. There are usually several sections of the course, some of which are taught by full- and part-time ESL lecturers, and others by graduate students in Applied Linguistics. Most groups have between 15 and 18 learners; my particular class had 17 students, most of whom had recently arrived in the US, although at least a few students had been in the country for some period of months, or even years. The majority of students were Ph.D. candidates, though some were pursuing master's degrees, and two were undergraduates involved in a study abroad program. In all, the students represented 10 academic disciplines and three continents.

I was the sole class instructor, but my official capacity was as a Teaching Assistant (TA), because I was a graduate student in Applied Linguistics at the time. Therefore, I did not design the course syllabus, although I did contribute to the creation of writing assignments and testing materials, and I had complete freedom in designing my own lessons—which were expected to cover the specific grammar points and writing tasks outlined in the syllabus. The lesson I will describe was part of a larger action research study I carried out during that fall quarter with the goal of developing innovative lessons that incorporate explicit grammar instruction into critical ESL pedagogy. The data for the overall study included my own lesson plans and class materials, my entries in a reflective journal, and videotape of my teaching; also, at three points during the quarter, I asked students to respond to open-ended essay prompts that elicited their views on issues such as grammar instruction and their views on some of the lessons I carried out.

I chose to use action research for the study because it is a methodology that allows

teacher-researchers to propose new directions for classroom practice. Nunan describes the approach as representing "a particular attitude on the part of the practitioner, an attitude in which the practitioner is engaged in critical reflection on ideas, the informed application and experimentation of ideas in practice, and the critical evaluation of the outcomes of such application" (1990, p. 63). I would also note that in critical ESL pedagogy there may be a particularly strong need for practical, classroom-based perspectives, because much work in the area deals with highly theoretical issues, which can strike practicing teachers as irrelevant to their challenges. Indeed, critical concerns are related to everyday classroom events, but unless researchers are able to frame the discussion in a way that is meaningful to instructors, it is difficult to see how such insights are going to effect real changes in the lives of students.

Modals and Interpersonal Power

As I was preparing my lesson on modal verbs, one of my primary goals was to move away from the highly complex treatment of modality that I had encountered in ESL pedagogic materials through the years. Such approaches usually presented modals in terms of their multiple functions—in expressing possibility, probability, obligation, and ability, among others—and then set up example sentences in which students were asked to determine which function was being displayed. Although such descriptions struck me as grammatically accurate—indeed, modal verbs do serve multiple purposes—I found the typologies cumbersome, and I was never convinced that they actually helped students come to terms with the difficult area of modality. Through the years, my students had often confirmed this suspicion, as they asked about the semantic function of modals in particular contexts. For example, is "It *could* rain tomorrow" an example of a modal that expresses moderate possibility or low probability? Perhaps both. I had, however, found the use of hierarchies of probability

modals very useful (for a good example, see Lane & Lange, 1999, p. 60), because they help students appreciate the relative semantic value of each verb. Nonetheless, many of the cloze exercises I had seen did not capitalize on this range of meaning variation, because they would give blanks that were meant to have only one or two possible answers, when, in fact—from my point of view as a native speaker, and from my students' points of view as nonnative speakers—multiple modal verbs could be used.

One theoretical perspective that offers a discourse-based understanding of modals is Hallidayan Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL). In the SFL paradigm, grammatical forms are directly linked to their situational meanings, such that language is analyzed in terms of three interrelated categories: field (what is happening where language is being used), tenor (what are the relationships between the interlocutors), and mode (what is being achieved through the use of language) (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Thus, in the case of modals and modality, an SFL approach can emphasize how such verbs are used to negotiate and establish power relations between individuals (Hasan & Perrett, 1994). For example, if one speaker chooses to say to another, “You *must* do it like this ...,” this indicates a certain (hierarchical) interpersonal dynamic; comparatively, the utterances “You *should* do it like this...” or “You *could* do it like this...” or even the highly modulated “One way you *could* do that *might* be to...” reveal still different shades of interpersonal relation. Simply put: “Power is closely linked to the right to tell others what they must do and what they can do” (Hasan & Perrett, 1994, p. 217). For an ESL teacher, then, this suggests that treating modals as an abstract system of interrelated semantic and grammatical categories may not be the most effective approach (Lock, 1996), because so much of how modals are used to create meaning has to do with who is using them and in what situation. Thus, finding the appropriate context for a given group of learners becomes imperative.

In my case, I wanted to make a lesson on modals relevant to the everyday linguistic and social needs of international graduate students. I thought of at least two discourse contexts in which modals and modality would be extremely important in the daily experience of a graduate student: as hedges in research reporting and as qualification markers in interactions with professors and other “superiors.” I decided to use the latter context, because I knew most of my students had just arrived in the US, so they would undoubtedly be having difficulties negotiating power relations in a new academic culture—a challenge that I felt sure would be heightened by the fact that some of their American professors would be wearing denim and insisting that the students call them by their first names.

The Modalities of Graduate Student-Professor Interactions: A Lesson

After I realized that the site of graduate student-professor interactions would provide an appropriate context for exploring modality, I began looking for a text that would establish a situation and give us an opportunity to examine modal usage. Around the same time, I had written an email to a scholar in the TESOL field, requesting advice for my research project. Because I had never met the researcher, I used the linguistic resource of modality to establish that the researcher had more status than I, and that I would be highly appreciative of any help. The email, with some omissions, and with italicized modal verbs, was the following:

Dear Prof....,

I'm a graduate student in Applied Linguistics at the University of.... I got your email address from my professor and advisor,..., because she said you *might* be able to point me toward some useful readings. I'm sure you're very busy, but perhaps *you'll* find time to offer some advice.

As...*might* have told you, we read some chapters of your book in one of her classes, and several of us reacted enthusi-

astically. I *could* say a lot about the book, but I *ll* just mention that I found it very exciting to read about your classroom work, because it's very similar to what I've been trying to do in my own classrooms, instinctively, since I got into EFL six years ago. But I never *had to* articulate a framework for some of my own teaching practices, and your book has offered an inspiring model.

My research project is to take one aspect of critical ESL that seems underexplored—or that *might* even be overlooked: the place of grammar and form in the “critical” classroom. My motivation is partly philosophical—I believe that form and grammar definitely *should* have a place in the ESL classroom—but also practical—in my life as a teacher, I know I *ll* be expected to teach form, but I *would* like to be able to do it without abandoning the aspects of critical pedagogy that seem important to me. Your book is, in my estimation, exceptional on this point, because you often mention formal language points that *could* be taught. But other than that, I find that critical ESL writers either don't mention form at all, or they problematize the whole notion of “correct” grammar and errors. So I *d* like to examine these various appearances (or lack of appearances) of form in critical ESL, and analyze them (or try to account for the absence). Moreover, though, I *d* like to propose that form does not, inherently, contradict the tenets of critical approaches, if it is dealt with appropriately—which means, for me, that it *must* be taught in a highly contextualized fashion (like in your lessons), and that it *must* be presented as directly linked to meaning and social settings (and Halliday's grammar theories are helping me here).

But what I *d* like to find in my research is more critical ESL work that does—or does not—deal with the issue of form in the classroom, so I *can* explore some of the attitudes that are out there. So I'm hoping that perhaps you *could* point me towards

some readings that you think *might* offer some various perspectives on the subject. Recent critical work that deals with real classrooms, like yours, *would* be great, or something more traditional *could* be helpful too. Any possible reading avenues you *could* suggest would be appreciated.

I apologize for the length of this e-mail. I know you *must* be very busy, so, of course, please respond at your leisure.

Thank you in advance,
Jason

The text includes 23 modal verbs and several expressions of modality; nonetheless, based on my reading, there does not seem to be an excessive or distracting use of modality. In most cases—especially in the first and last paragraphs, in which I address my interlocutor directly (the middle paragraph is mostly devoted to a discussion of my own research)—modal verbs are used to “soften” the force of my request for help (“you *might* be able to point me toward some useful readings”; “any possible reading avenues you *could* suggest would be appreciated”; and “I know you *must* be very busy”). In other instances, modals qualify my own, lower-status perspectives (“My research project is to take one aspect of critical ESL that seems underexplored—or that *might* even be overlooked”), establish my position as an outsider to professor-professor interactions (“As...*might* have told you, we read some chapters of your book in one of her classes”), or emphasize the depth of my own convictions, especially on the points where my opinions intersect with the researcher's (“grammar definitely *should* have a place in the ESL classroom” and “it *must* be taught in a highly contextualized fashion (like in your lessons)”).

In more traditional grammatical analyses, a modal usage such as “you *might* be able to point me toward some useful readings” would presumably be analyzed as a modal of “possibility.” However, even though this “possibility” meaning may be present at some level in my use of the verb in the text, it is quite clear that I am not trying to convey a sense of probabil-

ity or possibility; I am quite *sure* that the researcher can give me useful advice, but I use “might” to soften the request because of our relative positions of power. Similarly, the usage “I *could* say a lot about the book” is an example of a modal of “ability,” but, in my reading, I am not trying to show that I would be able to say a lot about the book (cf. “I *could* mow the lawn this afternoon if I had more time”); rather I am trying to make clear that there are many wonderful comments to be made about the professor’s book. It was exactly these shades of modality that I wanted to help my students appreciate.

Before I presented the email text to the class, I established the topic and let students express some of their own perceptions about the nature of graduate student-professor relations in the American academic context. This was only about a month into the fall quarter, so I knew the students had not had a chance to develop nuanced perspectives on the issue, but I posed the following questions for pair discussion: What have you noticed about the relationship between graduate students and professors in the US? How are they the same or different from the relationships between graduate students and professors in your home country? I asked them to consider their views in terms of issues such as formality, approachability, and language. Students had plenty to say, and impressions varied: Several students seemed to think that student-professor relations in the US were more relaxed than those in their home countries—although some also noted that they had only been undergraduates in their home countries, so it was hard to make a direct comparison to their current experiences as graduate students. The impression that relations in the US were more relaxed was based on various observations—students called their professors by their first names, students were allowed to ask questions when they wanted, and at least two students had been invited over to professors’ houses for department social gatherings (we noted that this was also a function of department size). A student from Mexico—one of the undergraduates—said that he felt as if his

American professors were more distant toward him than instructors he had worked with at his home university; a student from Spain, who had spent time teaching at a Mexican college, confirmed this difference between the countries. In all, a range of views was shared during the whole-group discussion, and the activity allowed students to bring their own knowledge of the world to the classroom, which is a central element of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970).

After clarifying a few vocabulary items (TESOL, ESL/EFL, form/grammar, pedagogy), I gave the students a copy of my email message (in which the modal verbs were not underlined) and asked them to read it, thinking about two questions: 1) How formal is the writing style? 2) What linguistic elements show that I am a graduate student and the correspondent is a professor? After students had read the text and discussed these questions in pairs, we had a short group discussion: The general consensus was that the email had elements of both more-formal language (“Dear Prof...” and “Thank you in advance”) and less-formal language (contracted forms, several uses of the first-person pronoun, and no traditional salutation such as “Sincerely”); students were less sure about the second question (What linguistic elements show that I am a graduate student and the correspondent is a professor?), but they did pick up on the fact that the email was peppered with praise for the professor’s research.

At this point in the lesson, having established the text’s overall style (semiformal) and my self-positioning (professionally lower-status), I wanted to draw attention to the role of modals in constructing these textual meanings. After I quickly elicited several modal verbs and wrote them on the board—to refresh the memory of students who might not have studied grammar in a while—I asked the students to find all the modal verbs in the first paragraph of the message, and then to think about why I chose that particular modal in each case instead of a different modal. Those modals were the following:

Dear Prof....,

I'm a graduate student in applied linguistics at the University of...I got your email address from my professor and advisor...because she said you *might* be able to point me toward some useful readings. I'm sure you're very busy, but perhaps *you'll* find time to offer some advice.

As...*might* have told you, we read some chapters of your book in one of her classes, and several of us reacted enthusiastically. I *could* say a lot about the book, but *I'll* just mention that I found it very exciting to read about your classroom work, because it's very similar to what I've been trying to do in my own classrooms, instinctively, since I got into EFL six years ago. But I never *had* to articulate a framework for some of my own teaching practices, and your book has offered an inspiring model.

The second half of the task—the *why*—was more difficult for the students, but after some time, and with some guidance, they began exchanging the modals with other modals we had put on the board and started grappling with the different shades of meaning expressed through the linguistic choices. For example, they could see clear differences between “she said you *might* be able to point me toward some useful readings,” “she said you *will* be able to point me toward some useful readings,” and “she said you *should* be able to point me toward some useful readings”; but, on the other hand, many of them thought that “she said you *might* be able to point me toward some useful readings” and “she said you *may* be able to point me toward some useful readings” were very similar.² Although my students were fairly advanced, and presumably they had all studied modal verbs at some point in their careers as English learners, this activity was still useful for them, because they remained unclear about some of the subtle differences in meaning; furthermore, these sorts of discussions brought out one of the key points I wanted students to realize about modals (and grammar in gener-

al, in terms of the whole academic quarter)—that often there are several grammatically “correct” linguistic choices (“correct” in terms of grammaticality), but that the discourse context and the nature of the interpersonal relationship between interlocutors help determine a writer or speaker’s choice about the “appropriate” linguistic form. This last point is crucial—that each interlocutor makes his or her own “choices” about “appropriate” forms—because my intent in using my own email text was not to hold it up as an ideal model; rather I wanted us to isolate some features in an authentic text that express modality, analyze those features as discrete linguistic choices, and then explore how other grammatically “correct” linguistic choices might or might not have changed the text’s overall meaning and potential effectiveness. This approach can be linked to Canagarajah’s (2002) and de Silva Joyce and Burns’s (1999) positions that ESL instructors should focus on “diversity” and “negotiation” rather than “errors” and “standardized norms.” Also, in addition to “choices” about which verb to use, within the semantic notion of modality, speakers/writers can choose among various linguistic resources in addition to the modal verbs. For example, my statement in the email “I’m sure you must be very busy” is also a shade of modality, which might have been expressed differently—“I know you must be very busy” or more colloquially “I know you’ve got plenty to do.”

After we had worked with several modals in the email message, we checked a few cloze exercises from the textbook (Lane & Lange’s *Writing Clearly*, 1999) that the students had done for homework. I included this more traditional type of grammar practice, because I wanted to make sure students were comfortable with some of the technical aspects of modal usage that, unfortunately, do not involve much choice, such as some difficult past forms (cf. the different past forms of “I *can* swim quite well” and “I *can* tell you if you really want to know”) and the confusing interplay between simple future tense and the *will* modal (cf. “I *will* go there

tomorrow” and “[*knock knock*] That *will* be my brother at the door”).

Finally, to give the students a chance to practice using modality in simulated professor-student interactions, I set up a role play. Using an idea from a workshop I once attended with Yasuko Shiozawa,³ I put the students in pairs and asked them to imagine that one was the professor and the other the student. The “student” had gone to the “professor” to discuss a grade that he or she believed was unfair; to appeal to the professor—and to negotiate a highly uncomfortable situation, especially for a graduate student—the “student” would have to make careful linguistic choices, some of which would involve modality and modal verbs. As the students carried out the role plays, I circulated and listened; indeed, they were using modals just as a native speaker would in such a situation: for example, “I wanted to know if you *could* possibly look at my test again.”; “Do you think you *might* have been a little too hard?”; “*May* I write the paper again, then?” After a time, I asked them to change roles, and, accordingly, their uses of modals shifted: The “students,” who had been using “might” and “may,” were now the “professors,” saying “you should have,” “you ought to have,” or perhaps more generously, “you could have.” In all, I took this as a sign that students had gained a richer sense of the role of modals in negotiating interpersonal situations in an academic context.

A Problem

However, on later reflection, one classroom event began to take on more meaning for me. A Japanese student in the “student” role was telling his partner that she “should have” given him a better grade, and that she “ought to,” or even “must,” start grading differently. Because I knew the student’s style and could read his facial expressions quite easily, it was clear to me that he was being humorous, so I laughed when I heard him, and I made no effort to “correct” him, because it seemed that he understood the implications

of the linguistic choices he was making; indeed, he was employing the resources of modality to achieve an ironic effect. Also, at first, it struck me as a perfect example of linguistic “choice”: A student was negotiating grammar according to his individual needs; my job, as the teacher, was not to tell him which grammatical choices to make, but rather to help him appreciate both the “internal” (structural) and “external” (social-semiotic) dimensions of a specific set of linguistic recourses—modals and modality, in this case—and to give him a situation in which he might explore the possibilities. Later, however, I came to see the situation differently.

As noted, my intention with the email text was not to present it as a model but rather to use it as an authentic site of discourse through which we could explore modality; indeed, by helping students insert different “correct” modal verbs in the text, I tried to make clear that such alternative strategies might have been employed by another student writing a similar email—in all, my text was simply one graduate student’s way of negotiating the situation. Nonetheless, given that my students were new to the American academic culture, and that they may have indeed been struggling in their interactions with professors—and certainly negotiating a situation such as our role play would have been extremely challenging—how could they not take a native-speaker peer’s text as an exemplary model? Furthermore, if they wanted to succeed in their new academic-professional environment, why shouldn’t they?

This problem is central in the question of how we deal with grammar. Critical writers, such as Canagarajah (2002), advocate “linguistic diversity” precisely because they want teachers to move away from the promotion of “standardized norms”—and indeed, if this view is understood in its larger political and institutional context, it represents a move away from social and cultural reproduction. In my academic setting, it seems that the primary cultural construct was graduate student-professor power dynamics: who has “the right to tell others what they must do

and what they can do,” as Hasan and Perret (1994, p. 217) put it. Thus, from a critical pedagogy perspective, by teaching students to make the kinds of “lower-status” linguistics choices that I made in my own professor-graduate student interaction (“you *might* be able to point me toward some useful readings,” “any possible reading avenues you *could* suggest would be appreciated,” and “I know you *must* be very busy”), I might have been encouraging them to respect the hierarchy of American academia; I might have been, indeed, reproducing a certain social reality. On the other hand, by working to help students understand the system of modality and by demonstrating the role of choice inherent in the system—which was my intent—I was giving students the linguistic awareness necessary to negotiate their new reality according to their own needs and orientations; as Gee puts it, “meta-knowledge can be a form of power and liberation” (1990, p. 154). Nonetheless, in a real classroom, with real students who have real needs, such as my international graduate students, it is difficult to see the divide between these highly theoretical positions and to claim that any particular pedagogic choice unquestionably promotes one approach or the other. In short, my Japanese student’s ironic use of modality was humorous precisely because he knew he would never use such language in a real-life interaction with a professor—and for this reason, his partner and I both understood the joke. Thus, in this light, the notion of linguistic “choice” begins to seem more nebulous. Are there really grammatical choices in conventionalized interactions such as those in the graduate student-professor situation I used for the role play? And if there are grammatical choices, are they directly related to the construction of the graduate student-professor relationship itself?

One Solution

For me, questions such as this get at one of the fundamental challenges for language teachers: negotiating the tension between

students’ individual positionings and the inherently constraining nature of the social and linguistic systems of real-world situations. An answer I’ve found for myself is based on the following considerations: Graduate student-professor relations do operate according to certain cultural norms, as reflected in my email text (and in the success of my Japanese student’s joke), but these norms also involve a great deal of variation, from person to person, from department to department, from institution to institution—and they are constantly changing, both synchronically and diachronically. Thus, since it is unforeseeable what situations students will find themselves in, it only makes sense for an instructor to teach Gee’s (1990) “meta-knowledge,” so that students can make “correct” choices in multiple situations. In the case of my modality lesson, I did not encourage my students to resist the conventional graduate student-professor relationship in their own lives (nor would I want to do so, even though it might have been a more “critical” approach, in some sense); however, by helping students gain a more nuanced understanding of English modality, I tried to give them access to the linguistic system through which they might resist convention, if their own situations (and personalities) call for it. In my experience, it is worth noting that my initial email to the TESOL researcher was effective, and that future emails have involved less “lower-status” modality on my part, because our mode of interaction has changed; thus, both “lower status” and “(more) equal status” grammar resources have been useful to me in this relationship.

Implications

My particular approach to the area of modality with international graduate students should be understood as one of many possibilities. One of the challenges of taking the sort of more contextualized and sociopolitically aware approach to grammar I’m advocating is that individual lessons cannot be transferred easily

to other teaching situations, because students' local needs often vary. Furthermore, since teachers are always struggling to fit some particular body of language practice into a limited time frame, taking a more time-consuming, social-semiotic approach to grammar involves making difficult choices; in my case, because I chose to devote my own lesson on modality to the site of graduate student-professor interactions, I was not able to spend much time talking about the role of modals as hedges in research reporting—an area of usage that is highly relevant to international graduate students' needs. Nonetheless, all instances of curriculum, syllabus, and lesson design—like all instances of language use—involve choices, and in my view, exploring one linguistic area thoroughly may be more beneficial to advanced students than an abstracted overview of a particular grammatical category. Additionally, from a critical perspective, if students do not have the chance to see how linguistic choices reflect real-world expressions of power and status, their ability to function successfully in their particular social-professional-academic milieus will be greatly hampered. Such, then, is the challenge for language instructors: designing pedagogic approaches that help students understand how language—and their own sentence-level grammatical choices, in some cases—can reveal, construct, and change the world around them.

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Endnotes

¹ It would be difficult to assess objectively the exact status of any particular perspective in the field; nonetheless, my own impression—which is, admittedly, informed by my professional background, my experience as a graduate student at a particular institution, and my exposure to certain areas of the TESOL community (through select professional journals and conferences)—is that explicit form focus is one of the dominant approaches in American ESL contexts at the postsecondary level.

² My own native speaker intuition on this point—the relative meanings of *might* and *may*—has always differed from the position held by many textbooks (and, as a result, many students of English). To me, in contexts such as the one given here, the meaning seems the same (although *might* does seem more appropriate, because it suggests a future possibility); nonetheless, many textbooks insist that “*may*” suggests more “probability” than “*might*.”

³ For a look at Shiozawa and her colleagues' innovative approach to classroom role plays and interactive theater, see Hirano, Shiozawa, Saeki, & Yoshida (2000).

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