Catch a Tiger by the Toe: Modal Hedges in EFL Argumentative Paragraphs[*]

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Abstract

Writing argumentative paragraphs is challenging even in one's first language (L1) since in order to fulfil their goals writers need to carefully choose among the available metadiscursive tools and skilfully balance their use. Writing in a foreign language (L2) is even more challenging because language learners are usually familiar only with a limited number of metadiscursive markers and functions. Therefore, when unsure, these novice L2 writers tend to fall back to old habits and transfer structures from L1 into their L2 texts. However, structures that are acceptable and may even be the norm in L1 may not be appropriate to use in L2. Consequently, the learners may fail to persuade their readers or to communicate their intended message successfully. Since learners with different language backgrounds may have different problems when writing in L2, each group should be studied closely and their specific challenges should be identified and dealt with when teaching academic writing. The aim of this study is to contribute to this specific area of research by, first, identifying and analysing the number and functions of the modal hedges that native speakers of Turkish learning English employ in their L2 argumentative paragraphs and then, to identify the modals whose employment results in a weaker/abrupt and/or inappropriate argumentation. To fulfil these goals argumentative paragraphs written in English by native speakers (NS) of Turkish with pre-intermediate level of proficiency were collected and the modal hedges in these paragraphs were identified and analysed. The findings of the study show that modal hedges in English are a group of markers particularly problematic for second language learners as they are multifunctional, multilayered and culture dependent, and that some of the inappropriate uses or overuses of modals in L2 can stem from the employed teaching materials and/or lack of proper training related to this domain. The results emphasize once again how vital it is to find a place for the metadiscourse markers in the foreign language writing curricula as well as in the paragraph assessment rubrics used in the institutions.

Keywords

Metadiscourse • Modal hedges • Argumentative paragraphs • EFL • Academic writing • Native speakers of Turkish writing in English

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Writing successful persuasive arguments in one's first language (L1) is one of the most crucial and, at the same time, most challenging tasks in academic writing (Wingate, 2012). To accomplish this task writers need to choose, develop and defend a position, to successfully appeal to the readers' logic and passions, to predict in advance and respond appropriately to readers' reactions, and to skilfully align or distance themselves from cited sources (Lee & Deakin, 2016). These writing skills are mainly demonstrated when writing argumentative paragraphs which are an important type of written discourse most commonly taught and required in academic settings (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Hatipoğlu & Algı, 2017; Hyland, 1990, 2009; Wingate, 2012).

Writing argumentative texts in a foreign language (L2) is even more challenging because language learners usually know a limited number of metadiscourse markers and functions. When they are uncertain, novice L2 writers tend to fall back to old habits and transfer structures from L1 into their L2 texts. However, structures that are expected and acceptable, and are even the norms in L1 may not be appropriate to use in L2.

One specific group of metadiscourse markers that many non-native speakers (NNS) of English find hard to learn and use are the modal auxiliaries. These devices are polysemous and multifunctional, and do not lend themselves easily to classification (Aijmer, 2017, 2018; Hinkel, 2009; Verhulst & Heyvaert, 2015). Scrutiny of some of the more widely used sources shows that many of the 'classic' reference grammar books unfortunately either do not deal with or lack clear guidelines about the use of modals as hedges in specific contexts. What is more, the L2 pedagogical materials employed to teach academic writing frequently fall short of accurately representing the usage of metadiscourse devices in English (Algı, 2012; Hyland & Milton, 1997). As a result, L2 writers often struggle to appropriately express their doubts or to balance their degree of certainty. The issue is complicated further by the fact that L2 learners with different first languages and various educational opportunities experience diverse problems when using modal hedges because they are culture, contexts and topic dependent (Hinkel, 2002, 2009; Kang, 2017; Kwachka & Basham, 1990). Therefore, each L2 learner group should be studied closely and their specific problems should be identified and dealt with when teaching academic writing.

Using these statements as a spring board, the current study examines the frequency, categories and patterns of use of modal hedges by NS of Turkish writing argumentative paragraphs in English and aims to uncover the types of problems they experience in order to suggest a number of pedagogical methods for teaching modal hedges to NS of Turkish. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be useful for foreign language teaching material writers, language teachers as well as assessment experts and curriculum developers.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Metadiscourse is an elusive term which is difficult to define and categorize. It was initially presented and described as the group of signposts that help readers notice, interpret, evaluate and react to the propositional material presented to them in the texts (Kopple, 1985). Later, it changed direction and scope, and was characterized as "the cover term for self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community" (Hyland, 2005b, p. 37). Based on this framing of the term, Hyland (2005b; 2010) has developed a taxonomy dividing metadiscourse into *interactive* and *interactional*. Within the first group of markers, he puts the tools that organize a discourse in a way that ensures the readers are well-guided through the text (e.g., transitions, frame markers, evidential and code glosses) while the latter group includes hedges, boosters, attitude and engagement markers, and self-mentions. These are the expressions that involve the reader in the text and allow the writers to socially engage with them. The hedges (i.e., the linguistic tools used to convey tentativeness to reflect uncertainty, Hyland, 1998a, 1998b) within this second group and particularly its sub-category of modal verbs as used by L2 writers are the focus of this article.

Research on modal use by NNS is becoming more popular and this interest is motivated mainly by two interrelated factors: (i) the "frequency, prominence, and complexity" (Hinkel, 2009, p. 670) of modals in English" and (ii) the fact that they are stumbling blocks for many NNS (Biber et al., 2002; Holmes, 1982; Verhulst & Heyvaert, 2015) since their use is culture, context, topic and discourse dependent (Hinkel, 1995, 2002; Kwachka & Basham, 1990). To make matters worse, there is no agreement on how modals should be classified and/or which modals are preferred in specific usage contexts. The more traditional grammar books classify them into central/principle/core modal verbs and marginal/semi- modals (e.g., *need to, ought to*). The central modals, also called modal auxiliaries, express modality and usually include *must* as well as *can, may, shall, will* and their past/secondary forms (i.e., *could, might, should, would*) (Leech, 2005). In contrast, researchers focusing on semantics divide them into deontic and epistemic modals. That is, into modalities that are performative and include an element of will and/or an action by the speakers or their interlocutors; and those that are agent oriented and express "speaker stance" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 485) and his/her believe and knowledge in relation to a proposition (Palmer, 1986:96). Still another classification arranges modals into obligation/necessity and ability/possibility categories depending on the "logical and a practical (or pragmatic) element" in their meaning (Biber et al., 1999; Leech, 2005, p. 88). Since this classification, according to Biber et al. (1999), shows the clearest contrast in meaning between the groups of modals, it has been adopted and used in many studies examining the pragmatic meanings and functions of modals in NS

texts. More recently, researchers started to make use of these categories to compare and contrast the employment of modals in L1 and L2 wiring.

Earliest studies comparing L1 and L2 texts focused more on the effect of topic and culture on the use of modals and showed that "a preponderance of modal verb uses can be culture- and topic-dependent" (Hinkel, 2009, p. 670; also Hinkel, 1995, 2002). One such group of studies were the ones conducted by Basham and Kwachka (1989; 1991), and Kwachka and Basham (1990). These two researchers examined the use of modals such as *can, could, may* and *should* in the essays of students coming from the Yup'ik or Inupiaq Alaska Eskimo communities, and first-year university students with different backgrounds. The results of the four-year long project demonstrated how Eskimo students consistently "extended the standard functions of modals to encode their own cultural values" (Basham & Kwachka, 1991, p. 44) clearly exhibiting the effect of culture on the use of some of the grammatical structures. In the same vein, Hinkel (2009) studied the modals in 718 essays written on five topics (i.e., parents, grades, major, manner, wealth) by NS of English and NS of Chinese, Japanese and Korean who were very advanced speakers of English. The analysis showed that the frequency rates of obligation and necessity modals were more topic dependent than the ones of possibility and ability, and that topics which necessitate more reliance on personal experiences and socio-cultural background knowledge on the part of the students lead to bigger disparities in the use of modals between L1 and L2 writers.

Later studies in the field focused on the use of modals in the texts of more and less successful L2 writers (Kang, 2017; Lee & Deakin, 2016) and found that essays graded higher usually included a bigger number of epistemic markers. That is, the students who were able to reduce the imposition on the reader and successfully decreased the writer's responsibility by displaying uncertainty or hesitation were perceived as being able to complete the given task better.

A more recent trend in metadiscourse research focuses on decoding how L2 learners of English translate modals from their native tongues into English and vice versa (Aijmer, 2018; Axelsson, 2013). Such studies aim to uncover how different modals and their sometimes multiple functions are mapped and connected in the mother and target languages of the students. By doing this, researchers aim to identify the misconceptions and challenges that L2 learners face and the possible linguistic and non-linguistic factors aiding and/or hindering the learning and utilization of modals in L2. What these studies show is that systematic examination of the forms, functions and contexts of use of modals are needed in the foreign language classes since many of the seemingly unimportant meaning/ function nuances of modals might lead to vague or inappropriate statements violating the conventions of the specific genre (Aijmer, 2018).

In the Turkish context, as far as the authors are aware, no study has so far focused particularly on the use of modals in English essays written by NS of Turkish. There

are also only a few studies that investigated the uses of hedges in Turkish and English texts written by NS of Turkish. One such study was conducted by Can (2006) who worked with monolingual NS of American English (MAS), NS of Turkish (MTS), and English-Turkish bilingual NS of Turkish who were asked to write essays both in Turkish (TBT) and English (TBE). When Can's (2006) findings related to the use of hedges are examined, it looks as if they cannot be explained with either L1 influence or cultural norms. Among the four groups, the biggest number of hedges (which included modals such as *may, might, can* and *could*) were used in the MTS (i.e., essays in Turkish written by monolingual NS of Turkish), then in TBE (i.e., essays in English written by Turkish-English bilinguals), MAS and TBT. That is, differently from the expectations related to English speaking cultures (e.g., Galtung, 1981), where the use of hedges is prevalent and particularly necessary (Myers, 1989), MAS in Can's (2006) study opted for more assertive claims and/or reinforced the truth value of their propositions.

Another comparative study was carried out by Bayyurt (2010) whose participants were freshman year students in the Foreign Language Teaching Departments of two universities in Istanbul. The informants were asked first to write an essay in Turkish and two weeks later they wrote an essay on the same topic in English. Bayyurt (2010) reported that the writers in her study employed boosters with similar frequencies in both their English and Turkish texts but utilized hedges 1.6 times more in their English essays. She also found that the most frequently employed hedges in both corpora were the epistemic hedges (i.e., modals like *can*) and the direct and indirect personal markers. Based on her results, Bayyurt (2010) emphasized that L2 writers should be specifically taught the functions of metadiscourse markers in English and that they should be made aware of the problems that might arise unless their accounts convey the appropriate degree of doubt and certainty.

Interesting results were reported by Akbas and Hardman (2018) in their recent comparative study of the discussion sections of dissertations written by NS of Turkish in Turkish (T1), NS of British English in English (EL1) and NS of Turkish in English (EL2). Among those three groups, EL2 members were the ones who used the highest number of hedges and T1 utilized the highest number of boosters. The behaviour of EL1 writers were somewhat parallel to EL2. The comparison of the uses of the hedge sub-categories revealed even more intriguing results. T1 group's preferred hedges were modals and they rarely employed any of the other three categories (i.e., full verbs, adverbs and adjectives, and multi-word constructions). EL2 group members used full verbs the most but they also benefited from modals as well as adverbs and adjectives while EL1's first choice as downtowners were adverbs and adjectives. The findings of this study showed once again that there are language variations in the certainty with which arguments are expressed. Turkish, it seems, similarly to German and Czech (Bloor & Bloor, 1991) favours a more direct style where writers appear to

be more committed to their propositions. English, on the other hand, endorses a more cautious style that enables writers to shield themselves from potential attacks.

Methodology

Research Context

The data for this study were collected during the Summer school offered by the Department of Basic English (DBE) of Middle East Technical University (METU). METU is a highly competitive state university, where the medium of instruction is English. Before being allowed to progress to their respective undergraduate programs, all students admitted to METU have to sit the METU English Proficiency Test (EPE). The students are considered successful if they score at least 65 out of 100 which is equivalent to 6.5 on the IELTS exam, 79 on TOELF IBT and B1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (Hatipoğlu, 2013). If they do not get 65 or above, they have to attend the prep classes offered by DBE, where they receive full-time English language training. The students can take the EPE again after a semester or at the end of the academic year if their Yearly Academic Grade (YAG) (i.e., the cumulative mean of all of their exams) is above 64.49. Students whose YAG is between 49.5 and 64.49 are not allowed to take the proficiency exam in June (i.e., at the end of the academic year) but can attend the Summer School offered by DBE. The Summer School starts after the English Proficiency Exam in June and lasts for four weeks during which students receive 120-hours of intensive training in reading, writing, listening and grammar in English.

In their writing classes, students cover the material included in the writing booklet which features an introduction explaining the basics of academic writing, and comprehensive information about the parts of a condensed paragraph in English (i.e., an introductory sentence, topic sentence, major and minor supporting ideas, examples and a concluding sentence). These sections are followed by paragraphs exemplifying the discourse types students are taught during the academic year (i.e., argumentative, compare and contrast, cause and effect, descriptive). In class, students go over the rules that should be followed while writing argumentative paragraphs, for instance, and then, they are asked to write paragraphs on topics selected from TOEFL. Students can write the paragraphs either in class or at home but they are expected to show the finished product to their writing instructors and to get detailed feedback from them. If necessary, students are asked to write a number of drafts and rewrites of their paragraphs.

Participants

The informants in this study were 52 (F=34, M=18) native speakers of Turkish learning English at a prep program in a Turkish English medium university. Their age range was 18-20 years and the majority of them were either Anatolian (46.2%), "Regular" (21.2%) or Teacher Training (11.5%) High School graduates. None of the informants had lived in a foreign country for more than six months. At the time of the data collection process, the participants had already completed their first year at the English prep program at METU and were attending the Summer School offered by the university.

Data Collection

Two data collection tools were used in this study: (i) a background questionnaire and (ii) student argumentative paragraphs. The background questionnaires enabled researchers to collect detailed information related to the participants. They were asked to provide information related to their age and gender, the name and type of the high school they graduated from, the native and foreign languages they spoke, and their levels of proficiency in these languages. Information related to the level of education of their parents and the economic status of the family was also collected.

After completing the background questionnaire students were given six writing prompts from the TOEFL's web page (http://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/pdf/989563wt.pdf) and they were asked to pick one. Most of the students vouched for *'Should children start learning a foreign language as soon as they start school?'* When asked to explain their choice it was seen that students were affected by their experiences. They stated that they thought they failed the METU proficiency exam because they started learning English relatively late, hence they were not able to adequately master the language. Therefore, they believed that this was the topic which they could argue more persuasively for.

To avoid the use of external materials and to elicit students' actual knowledge and ability to use hedges, the argumentative essays were written in class. Before they started writing, students were reminded the rules of writing argumentative paragraphs and were instructed to use related examples and reasons supporting their claims. The 52 argumentative paragraphs written by the students in English had 10.257 words in total.

Data Analysis

The argumentative paragraphs collected for the study were analysed in four stages:

Stage 1

The aim of Stage 1 was to compile a reference search list of hedges. Earlier studies focusing on hedges in English (e.g., Hinkel, 2009; Hoye, 2005; Hyland & Milton,

1997) were scrutinized and the initial version of the list was created. Then, the paragraphs written by the participants in the current study were read carefully by both of the researchers and the hedges missing in the initial list were added to compile a more comprehensive, context specific list to be used in Stage 2.

Stage 2

In Stage 2, the handwritten argumentative paragraphs of the students were digitalized by the researchers and saved in separate folders. Apart from the spelling of the hedges, no punctuation, grammar, cohesion or any other mistakes/problems in the texts were corrected. The incorrect spellings of the hedges were amended in order to uncover the actual number of modals in the corpus and to ensure the reliability and validity of the results.

Next, the digitalized texts were formatted and coded following the conventions of CLAN CHILDES (i.e., Computerized Language Analysis Child Language Data Exchange System, https://childes.talkbank.org/). This program was selected for the analysis of the collected texts since, among other functions, it calculates the frequency (FREQ) of the words in the texts and enables researchers to search quickly and efficiently for specific words or word strings (COMBO). These properties of the program increase the accuracy of the analyses and minimize the chances of missing important items.

Finally, the frequencies and the contextual uses of the hedges in the argumentative paragraphs were identified (see Figure 1).
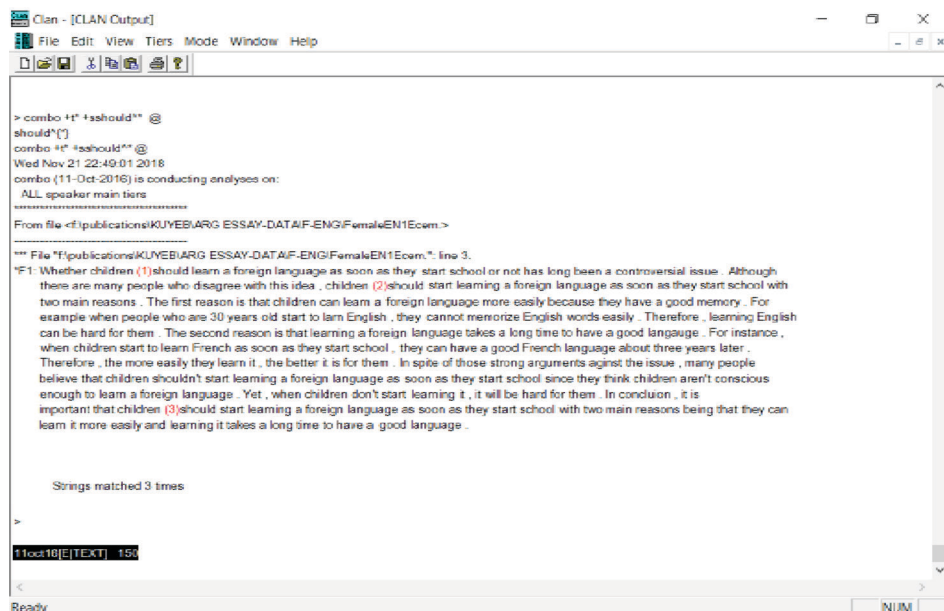

Figure 1. Example COMBO results for "should".

Stage 3

The goal of Stage 3 was to uncover how successful students were in using English modal hedges (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Milton & Hyland, 1999). It was hoped that by achieving this aim, some trends and/or generalizations related to the employment of hedges by NS of Turkish could be identified and these, in turn, would allow researchers to suggest some pedagogical approaches related to the teaching of these devices.

The categories of analysis in this stage were:

(i) Correct use (CU): Appropriate use of the modal allowing writer to show his/her commitment to the proposition.

(ii) Incorrect use (ICU): The incorrect use of a modal to assess the certainty the writer attributes to the proposition.

(iii) Overuse (OU): The presence of a modal where it is not required (see Table 1).

Table 1

Representative Examples of Appropriate Use (CU), Incorrect Use (ICU) and Overuse (OU)

Example	CU	ICU	OU
(i) Although many people believe that children should not start learning a foreign language as soon as they start school, this is not true thing. It CAN be explained two main reasons.	X		
(ii) However, some interest groups claim that children should not begin learning a language as soon as they start school .The opponents have a point but their argument is not strong enough The reason for this is that when old people want to learn languages they CANNOT do so easily as there are a lot of things to concentrate on.		X	
(iii) However, the opponents of the issue claim that children should begin learning a foreign language as soon as they start school because it is very important that children CAN develop themselves			X

The two researchers and an experienced English language teaching expert worked independently to analyse and classify the usages of the modal hedges in the collected essays as shown in Table 1. The interrater reliability was .89 and each discrepancy in the classifications was discussed until the differences were resolved.

Stage 4

The quantitative data collected in the study were analysed using SPSS.

Results and Discussions

The analysis of the data in the corpus was done using the taxonomy developed by Hyland (2005b; 2010) and Hinkel (2005). Scrutiny of the English paragraphs for hedges revealed that the writers who participated in the study used four categories of lexical

devices to soften their propositions: modals, epistemic verbs, adjectives, and nouns. First, the overall distribution of these metadiscoursive tools and then, a more comprehensive analysis of each of the modal hedge categories will be presented and discussed.

Overall Results/Overview

The initial analysis of the 52 argumentative paragraphs written in English by the participants in the study showed that in total 10.257 words were used and 600 of them were hedges. That is, writers used 6 hedges in every 100 words. This finding is both similar and slightly different to the results of some of the more recent studies focusing on the use of metadiscourse markers in the argumentative essays of NS and NNS of English. Bayyurt (2010) who examined the argumentative essays of NS of Turkish writing in English also found that the hedges were the most frequently employed interactional expressions in these essays and that the freshman year students in the English language teaching department employed 5.85 hedges per 100 words. Can (2006) reported slightly different results, however. He worked with freshman year university students who were monolingual NS of American English, and Turkish-English bilingual NS of Turkish. When he examined the metadiscourse markers in the English argumentative essays written by these groups of student, he found that NS of American English used 7.46 hedges while NS of Turkish used 10.58 hedges on average. That is, NS of Turkish used 1.8 times more hedges than the participants in the current study in their English argumentative texts. Lee and Deakin (2016) looked at the hedges used in L1 English university students' essays, and in successful (A-graded) and less-successful (B-graded) argumentative essays written by US-based Chinese ESL students. These researchers once again found that the hedges were the most frequently used interactional metadiscourse markers in the three corpora and that there were more hedges in the A-graded essays than in the B-graded ones.

Scrutiny of the collected paragraphs also showed that four tools were utilized as hedges in the present corpus: modals, adjectives, epistemic verbs and nouns (see Table 2). Among these, the most frequently used category was Modals (53%) which comprised more than half of the hedges in the corpus. With a combined value of 42%, adjectives (23%) and Epistemic verbs (19%) were respectively the second and third most frequently employed categories; while Nouns (5%) were rarely used and accounted for only 5% of the hedge data.

Table 2
Hedge Categories in the Corpus

	N	%
Modals	317	53
Adjectives	139	23
Epistemic Verbs	116	19
Nouns	28	5
TOTAL	600	100

Hyland and Milton (1997), who compared the use of hedging devices in the essays written by Hong Kong students for the A level "Use of English" exam and British school leavers for the GCE A level General Studies exam, found that their participants used not four but five groups of grammatical units as hedges: modal verbs, adverbials, lexical verbs, adjectives and nouns. Both NS and NNS of English used modals the most, then adverbials, verbs, adjectives and nouns, and there was a broad agreement on the use of verbs, adjectives and nouns between the two groups (i.e., both student groups used lexical verbs, adjectives and nouns in similar proportions). However, there were marked differences in the use of modals and adverbials. NNS used modals 1.7 times more than NS, and NS used adverbials 1.3 times more than Hong Kong students. Hyland and Milton (1997) mentioned two plausible reasons for the observed differences: L1 transfer and the L2 pedagogical writing materials. Both of these explanations appear to be valid for the results observed in our study. When Hatipoğlu and Algı (2017) examined the argumentative paragraphs of NS of Turkish written in Turkish, they found that modals formed 67.1% of the hedging devices in the corpus. Scrutiny of the L2 writing materials by Algı (2012) showed that modals were "disproportionately" overrepresented in the teaching materials to which the students were exposed.

Modals

Analysis of the collected argumentative corpus showed that eight modals were used as hedges by the participants in the study (see Table 3). Among these *should* (46%) and *can* (29%) were the most frequently used ones. They both accounted for 75% of all modal verbs in the corpus. The other six modals comprised the remaining 25% of the data. When we look at the distribution of obligation/necessity (i.e., *should, must*) (N=158, 49.4%) vs. ability/possibility (i.e., *can, could, will, would, may, might*) (N=159, 50.6%) modals, however, we see that the split is almost even. That is, the modality attributed claims of the students were marked with both necessity and possibility/ability meanings.

Table 3
Modal Hedge Categories in the Corpus

Rank	Modal verbs	N	%
1.	Should	147	46
2.	Can	91	29
3.	Will	28	9
4.	May	26	8
5.	Must	11	3.4
6.	Might	6	2
7.	Could	6	2
8.	Would	2	0.6
	TOTAL	317	100

Should

Should, the most frequently used modal hedge in our corpus, is a multifunctional polysemous modal auxiliary. It can be used as a social interactional, logical probability (epistemic) or obligation modal (Aijmer, 2018; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Verhulst & Heyvaert, 2015). When employed as a social interactional modal, *should* (together with *might, could, had better, must* and *will*) expresses "the speaker's degree of authority and/or conviction, or the urgency of advice" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 85). In this group, *might* is the least authoritative modal (e.g., You *might* see a doctor) while *will* is the most authoritative one (e.g., You *will* see a doctor). *Should* (e.g., You *should* see a doctor) is in the middle of the list.

In its logical probability function *should,* similarly to *could, might, may, must* and *will*, expresses speaker's/writer's knowledge and belief about probability and logical possibility (Bublitz, 1992; Huebler, 1983; Lyons, 1977). In this group *could* and *might* are used to express the lowest levels of possibility (e.g., Someone knocks on the door and John says: That *could/might* be Mary) while *will* shows the most probable prediction (e.g., That *will* be Mary). *Should*, again is in the middle of the probability list showing moderate certainty (e.g., That *should* be Mary).

Finally, *should* can be used to indicate that something is necessary for a situation to actualise (Coates, 1983; Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1986; Quirk et al., 1985), to talk about obligation and duty (Swan, 2005), or the right and best thing to do (Eastwood, 2005). *Should, must* and *have to* are the most frequently used obligation markers in English and together with *ought to*, *should* is often described as the weaker version of *must* which is "used for orders and commands" (Aijmer, 2018, p. 141).

In our corpus *should* functions mainly as a marker of necessity where, as described by Verhulst and Heyvaert (2015), who examined the use of *shall* in British English, it expresses the speaker's personal opinion in the given contexts (see Examples 1 and 2).

Example 1

F7: I think they SHOULD start learning a foreign language when they start school for two main reasons.

Example 2

M11: Although many people think that children should begin learning a foreign language as soon as they start school, I think this SHOULDN'T be because of two main reasons.

Should was also frequently utilized to underline the importance of foreign language education at an earlier age by writers who strived to maintain their objectivity (see Example 3).

Example 3

F8: Secondly, foreign language may provide good job opportunities in the future. For example, they might study at schools where the medium of instruction is English, they may go abroad for reasons of work in international business. As a result, learning foreign language is important and necessary. Therefore, its importance SHOULD BE GIVEN to children at young ages.

In Example 3, F8 employs *should* to 'reinforce' the second main idea in her argumentative paragraph. The writer uses *should* appropriately (despite the minor problem related to the overall structure) and manages to emphasise the importance of giving children the chance to learn foreign languages at an early age. In line with the expectations of the academic writing genre, F8 also employs a passive voice structure (Biber, 1988; Myers, 1989) which allows her to refrain from directly referring to the speaker or hearer, and imposing or threatening hearer's and/or speaker's positive and/ or negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

This frequent use of *should* in our corpus differs slightly from the findings of some of the previous studies. Researchers examining academic texts report that modals of obligation (*must*) and necessity (*should*) are less frequently encountered in formal academic prose than modals of ability and possibility (e.g., *can, will*). In their corpus-based study of oral conversations, fiction, newspaper and academic texts, Biber et al. (1999) have noted that ability and possibility modals are used almost twice more frequently than obligation and necessity modals since the latter group convey strong meanings such as obligation and a sense of duty.

Meyer (1997) argues, however, that using modals such as *should* and *must* brings along the advantage of making writer's claims stronger and, in turn, helps them to communicate a sense of objectivity. Moreover, in their studies of matching corpora from

the 1960s and the 1990s, Leech (2004) and Smith (2003) note that within those 30-years there has been a decline in the use of *must*, "which has associations with direct speaker authority or power" and increase in the use of the modals *need to* and *should*, which are "associated with a tendency to suppress or avoid overt claims to power and authority by the speaker or writer" (Leech, 2004, p. 237). Leech (2004) argues that this tendency might be called "democratization" in writing. So, that trend might be one of the reasons why the participants in our study used such a big number of modal *should* in their paragraphs.

Another plausible reason for the high level of *should* in the collected essays might be the effect of training and the teaching materials to which the participants in the study have been exposed during the last academic year. As mentioned earlier, these students are learning English at METU prep school where, among other genres, they are taught how to write and structure argumentative paragraphs. When the writing handout used to teach argumentative paragraphs was examined it was seen that *should* was the most frequently occurring modal in the instructions and example texts. Almost half of the modals found in the writing handout were *should* (47.9%) (for more detailed information *see* Algı, 2012). That is, there was parallelism between the uses of *should* in the teaching materials and in the students' paragraphs. This finding underlines once again, in our opinion, the importance of the content and quality of the teaching materials in EFL contexts as the materials presented to the students are usually their only reference points or the guides they use the most.

How the writing prompt was phrased might be the third reason why *should* was used so often in the examined argumentative paragraphs. The prompt given to the students was "*Should children start learning a foreign language as soon as they start school?*" It looks as if that students saw the "should structure" in the prompt as a good example and frequently repeated it in the topic, concluding and supporting sentences of their paragraphs (see Table 4).

Table 4
Use of SHOULD in the examined argumentative paragraphs

	N	%
Introduction sentence	25	17
Topic Sentence	41	28
Supporting sentence	33	22
Counter argument	13	9
Refutations	0	0
Concluding section	35	24
Total	147	100

So, this finding in a way supports Hinkel (1995; 2002; 2009) and other researchers (Carlson, 1988; Yarar, 2001; Zuloaga, 2017) who argue that a preponderance of modal verb employment in L2 writing can be topic and context dependent.

Must

Must, similarly to *should,* is an obligation modal (Collins, 1991; Šinkūnienė & Olmen, 2012). Its root meaning (i.e., obligation, necessity and requirement imposed by a source of authority; [Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1986]) is illustrated in Example 4 below.

Example 4

John must come in (Palmer, 2001, p. 10).

Must is sometimes also used as an epistemic modal where the speakers/writers, as in Example 5, express their knowledge and belief about certainty, probability, and logical possibility of an event (Bublitz, 1992; Huebler, 1983; Lyons, 1977).

Example 5

Liz is not here today. She must be sick.

When describing *must,* Leech (2005, p. 34) emphasises the fact that its use is "suffering a decline in present-day English". Parallel to this observation, we also found that *must* was used much less frequently (14 times less) than *should* (the other obligation modal) in our study. There were only 11 (3.4%) examples of *must* in the corpus and only 10 (19%) of the 52 participants employed it (i.e., 81% of the students avoided using it). *Must* was used correctly 10 times and overused once. In our corpus *must* was always employed as an obligation modal (see Example 6) and no instances of epistemic *must* were encountered. This might have been the effect of the genre (i.e., argumentative paragraphs) in which the students were writing. In argumentative texts writers aim to persuade their readers that what they claim is correct. Therefore, logical deduction would not have been relevant.

Example 6

M2: To sum up, I think that children MUST start learning English language owing to the fact that they can learn easier than elderly and they have more time.

As can be seen in Example 6, *must* attaches the notion of necessity to the expressions within which it is used. In that sense its meaning and functions were closely related to that of *should* in the examined argumentative paragraphs but NS of Turkish were neither willing nor able to use it as frequently or successfully as they used *should*.

Example 7

M10: Nowadays, there is a discussion about whether children should begin learning a foreing language as soon as they start school. Children ought to learn a foreign language for two important reason. To begin with, a person who learnt a foreign language when he started to primary school can be well-learned and it effects ones bussiness life positively. Recent days companies try to chose a employee knowing a foreign languange. For example, an international company MUST chose a bi-lingual employee for communicate with their customers easily.

In Example 7, a student overuses *must* while trying to manipulate it as a marker of obligation. M10 first emphasises the importance and necessity of learning foreign languages at a young age, and lists two advantages associated with knowing a foreign language well: (i) those who start learning a foreign language early have the chance of learning it better and (ii) bilingualism affects business life positively. Then, M10 states that international companies prefer employees who speak more than one language. Finally, comes the statement where M10 argues that international companies are bound to (i.e., *must*) choose bi- or multilingual candidates so that they are able to interact easily with their customers. Employing multilinguals in international companies might be a trend valid in general but the international companies are not required/obligated to do so. Therefore, *must* in the last sentence was classified as an example of overuse. By using must in this context, the writer changed the illocutionary force of the statement which led to an ambiguous and vague claim.

Can and Could

The modal verbs *can* and *could* are among the "most frequently" used modals in English (Leech, 2005, p. 114). The first one is a present tense or primary modal auxiliary while the latter (i.e., *could*) is a secondary form auxiliary (Leech, 2005). In written and spoken interactions *can* carries the meanings of ability, possibility and permission (less often) (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Coates, 1983; Leech, 2005; Palmer, 1990) and together with other linguistic devices, it can mark proposals for future actions, likelihood as well as strategic vagueness and politeness (Chafe, 1986; Channell, 1994; Markkanen & Schroeder, 1997; Perkins 1983). *Could*, on the other hand, can be used to talk about present or future hypothetical possibility or ability. When *could* is employed to show present possibility of a future event as in "*It could happen again*" its interpretation is "It is possible that it will happen, if circumstances permit" (Cook 1978, p. 12). When utilized as a root modal *could* frequently expresses ability to perform a future action (*would be able to*, Cook, 1978, p. 12) if the speakers/writer decides to pursue it or is given the chance.

Can was the second most frequently used modal verb in the examined paragraphs. It formed about one-third of our corpus (N=91, 29%). A closer analysis of the collected data

showed, however, that 10 (19%) of the participants in the study did not use *can* at all. The remaining 81% of the students used it to denote either ability (N=50, 55%) or possibility (N=41, 45%) (see Example 8), and 94.5% (N=86) of these usages were correct. *Can* was overused in 4.4% (N=4) and incorrectly used in only 1.1% (N=1) of the examples.

Example 8

F12: Although many people believe that children should not start learning a foreign language as soon as they start school, this is not true thing. It (1) CAN (possibility) be explained two main reasons. The first reason is that brain activity. That is to say, due to young ages, they (2)CAN (ability) learn more easily than old ages and their brain does not fill up with another things.

Can was the most frequently used modal to express possibility in our corpus. It was used 1.6 times more than *may* (N=26), the second most frequently used possibility marker. There are two plausible explanations for this finding: (i) level of commitment and (ii) recent trends. In an article entitled "Subjective modality", Siebel (1980, p. 16) compares *can* and *may* as possibility modals and states that *can* gives the writer/speaker more freedom than *may* since "the speaker using can is not necessarily committing himself to even a weak conjecture about the realization of the proposition". With *may*, however, there is always a weak guess or a prediction or "at least an assertion on the part of the speaker, although he does not know if a proposition is true or not, has no compelling reason to believe that it is (or was or will be) false in the actual world" (Seibel 1980, p. 16). This "nonbinding" meaning of *can*, might be one of the reasons why it was used more frequently in our corpus. The frequncy difference between *can* and *may* could also be due to what Leech (2003) calls "trends in writing". After examining three decades (1960-1990) of data in four spoken and written corpora of American and British English, Leech (2003) reported that there was a sharp decline in the use of modals such as *may* and *must* while the frequency of use of *can* remained relatively stable in the examined dialects. The students who participated in the study were learning English which meant that they had to read, watch and listen to various materials in English. They might have been affected by the trends in the materials they were exposed to.

Could was utilized substantially less frequently than *can* by the NS of Turkish writing in English. There were only six examples with modal *could* and it formed only 2% of the hedge group in this study. Scrutiny of the paragraphs showed that only two of the participants (4%) employed *could* and five out of the six examples in the corpus were coming from an essay written by F10, a writer who hardly used any other modal. Of the six examples in the data, three were used as hypothetical *could* of ability while the remaining three denoted hypothetical *could* of possibility. Unfortunately, only three of the *could* uses were correct while two of the uses that were intended to express ability and that was that intended to express possibility were incorrect. (*see* Example 9).

> **Example 9**
>
> F10: Today at a new world, everything has also been developing rapidly. People change their minds, habits, lifes and they try to keep up with innovations and developments. Communication and information have been gaining importance actually. At this point, learning and knowing a foreign language especially at an early age for children is very important. There are several reasons for learning a foreign language for children as soon as they start school. To start with, children have brilliant and more active brain than old people. If they take a lesson at an early age, they (1) COULD achieve more easily and quickly that language than middle age or old people. This learning improves brain activity such growing brain curls and growing up their abilities at learning languages. Secondly, they might be good at communicating with other people with ease in their social and job life; that is, they (2) COULD also use foreign language in holiday in order to meet a beautiful girl or a nice boy or have a different friend. In addition, they can use that saying their needs in foreign country if they were here. Moreover, it is not only useful in social life, but also in job life for agreements with companies especially foreign and international companies and sure for investigators which want to earn money. Thirdly, if they learn a foreign language at an early age, this strengthens their ability and they (3) COULD choose to learn more new languages and there are more intellectual people who live in a society and educational level will be high. At an early age, learning foreign language has many beneficial sides contrary to some beliefs for it's confusing for children's minds and they (4) COULDN'T (incorrect) learn best their native language, but it is not logical and it doesn't prove by scientists. If we were give high quality education in every branches at school, our children I am sure (5) COULD (incorrect) do best and learn much than two languages.

In Example 9, the first, second and third uses of *could* are correct. The first one denotes ability (i.e., would be able to) while the second and third examples denote possibility. The fourth and the fifth uses of *could*, however, are incorrect. In (4), F10 used *couldn't* and wanted to express ability which is a function fulfilled by *can't* in negative forms in English (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Coates, 1983; Cook, 1978). She replaced *can't* with *couldn't,* which according to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 87) expresses not the intended meaning of ability but 100% logical probability. The last (5) *could* in the paragraph was classified as an incorrect use due to the grammatical and lexical contexts in which it was employed. The writer first uses "I am sure", which displays a strong conviction in what she is claiming, but then, continues with *could*, which weakens the claim and leaves the reader wondering what the real message is and how the statement should be interpreted. She also used a conditional statement, probably to indicate hypothetical possibility. However, the passive voice in the "if conditional" part is incorrect. This makes the meaning of the statement even more ambiguous and more difficult to decode.

The frequency and level of accuracy with which *can* and *could* were used in the collected paragraphs show that the polygrammatic nature of *could* and the more subtle rules that govern its use were not completely mastered by the participants in our study which, in turn, led to the avoidance of the use of *could*. The findings related to *can* and *could* seem to support Papafragou (1998, p. 377) who argues that "the link between comprehension and production is not as straightforward as it might seem" and similarly to the children who at the early stages of acquiring their mother tongues, L2 learners may "avoid using parts of a linguistic system … until they feel quite confident in the system they have constructed" (Papafragou, 1998, p. 377).

Will and Would

Will is a multifunctional unit in English. It is a future tense marker and at the same time it is one of the central modals in English conveying the meanings of intention, supposition and volition (Lyons, 1977; Ultan, 1972). According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), and Lakoff (1970), within the hierarchy of logical probability modals, *will* is the one that marks the highest degree of certainty. They argue that speakers utter sentences such as *"It will rain tomorrow"* when they are 100% certain.

Leech's (2005) research showed that despite the decline in the level of use of some other probability modals (e.g., *may*), the frequency with which NS of English employ *will* remains relatively stable. In our corpus *will* was the third most frequently employed modal and it formed 9% (N=28) of the overall corpus. All of its uses were correct but only 37% (N=19) of the students found a place for it in their paragraphs. An overwhelming majority of students did not use *will* even once.

Example 10

F18: Secondly, some students may not have enough time for practice in high school or university because they may concentrate on other lessons. On the other hand, IF students begin learning a foreign language as soon as they start school, they WILL have a background so they know more vocabulary and grammar structures.

Scrutiny of the collected paragraphs revealed an interesting co-occurrence pattern for *will*. In half of the contexts (14 out of 28) where it was used, it was combined with if-clauses as in Example 10 by NS of Turkish. In all of these instances it was placed in an affirmative sentence and at firsts glance it looked as if it conveyed strong predictions. The interpretation of the level of certainty and the meaning of these messages was complicated, however, by the fact that students insisted on combining *will* with conditional statements. When used in academic writing, if-clauses are seen as "hypothetical assumptions that are often associated with indirectness, ambiguity, and politeness when the speaker hedges the illocutionary force and presents propositions

and claims as if they would be denied or refused" (Hinkel, 1997, p. 381). That is, *will* in these contexts might have been interpreted as expressing uncertainty as futurity, according to Palmer (1990), always involves some uncertainty. Nonetheless, this meaning was regarded as less likely in the examples in our corpus since as Hyland and Milton (1997, p. 195) emphasise, *will* appears to express "an assessment that the accompanying proposition is valid as far as the writer can be sure" and Coates (1983), maintains that epistemic *will* expresses strong prediction about present, timeless or future events based on previous experience. When we look at the "if-clause + will" examples in our data we see that writers are making clear assessment statements about the problem and many of their claims related to learning foreign languages successfully if children begin young are based on their own experiences (i.e., while choosing the topic for the argumentative essays they argued that they had failed EPE and had to attend Summer School since they did not start learning English at a young age). Because of these, the occurrences of *will* in the corpus were classified as certainty markers that disclose writer conviction.

The results of the current study regarding *will* are different from the findings of some of the earlier studies. Hyland and Milton (1997) who examined the essays written by NS of British English and NS of Cantonese writing in English reported that in the first corpus *will* was the second most frequently employed epistemic modality marker while in the Cantonese NS data *will* was the most frequently utilized device. *Will* formed 30% of the total hedging devices in the Cantonese NS corpus while in our study it formed only 4.7% of the total hedge markers. This means that unlike Cantonese writers, Turkish students who participated in this study refrained from making strong claims that the use of *will* brings along and employed more tentative language to talk about their beliefs and claims.

With only two uses (0.6%) *would* was the least frequently employed modal in our study. Except the two students who utilized *would* only once in their paragraphs, all of the participants avoided using it. This finding is in striking contrast with the use of *would* by NS for whom this is the most preferred modal verb in argumentative paragraphs.

May and Might

May and *might* are two middle-frequency modals whose uses are declining in present-day English (Leech, 2005). Together with *could*, they are used almost exclusively to express logical possibility (Biber et al., 2002) and as hedging devices, *may* and *might*, show doubt and certainty (Holmes, 1988; Hyland & Milton, 1997).

May, with 26 (8%) uses was the fourth most frequently employed modal in our corpus and the second most frequently used modal of logical possibility. Despite that, thirty-six (69%) of the participants avoided using it. The remaining 16 students used

it correctly either once or twice mainly in the supporting sentences (see Example 11) or in the counter argument (*see* Example 12) and refutation sections (see Example 13) of their paragraphs.

Example 11

F12: The second reason is that learning a foreign language is of great importance today. In other words, they aware that they should improve language skills. To illustrate, children MAY watch films, read books and listen to music to develop language ability. (Supporting Sentence)

Example 12

F13: However, the opponents of this issue claim that children should not start learning a foreign language as soon as they start school because they think it MAY affect native language badly when the young student learning a foreign language. (Counter argument)

Example 13

F21: Those who do not favour this proposal might argue that if the age of learning is more early, children will be more successful. Although it MAY be true to a certain extent, this argument is not valid any longer because this situation is not same for every children. (Refutation)

Studies focusing on metadiscourse in spoken and written texts produced by NS of English revealed that *may* was primarily employed as a marker of logical possibility, which is also an important feature of academic texts (Biber et al., 2002). Similarly, Hyland and Milton (1997) who examined the epistemic modality markers in the essays of NS of British English and NS of Chinese writing in English found that *may* was the preferred marker of possibility in these essays. *May* was the second most frequently employed epistemic modality marker in the essays of NNS and formed 17.7% of the corpus and the third most frequently used marker by NS of English forming 11.5% of that corpus. In the corpora examined by Hyland and Milton (1997) *can* was not even among the most frequently used ten epistemic modality markers.

The results of our study are slightly different from the ones reported by Hyland and Milton (1997). Our writers used *can* 3.6 times more than may (can=29%, may=8%). That is, *can* was the primary marker of possibility and *may* was the second marker in our corpus. One reason for the observed difference may be the native culture of the writers and the meaning and importance attached to the modals by the different groups of writers (Hatipoğlu & Algı, 2017; Hinkel, 2009). Hinkel (2009) worked with four groups of participants (i.e., NS of English, Chinese, Korean and Japanese) and asked

them to write essays on five different topics. She reported, for instance, that the ability and possibility modals such as *can* and *could* were found to have higher median rates in the essays of Japanese and Korean speakers on Parents and Majors topics while *may* and *might* were utilized slightly more frequently in the NS data on the same topic.

Conclusion

This study focused on the modal hedges used by NS of Turkish while writing argumentative paragraphs in English, their foreign language. The aim of the study was twofold: to uncover the type, frequency and functions with which the modal hedges were employed by Turkish writers and to compare and contrast these results with the findings of studies conducted with other NNS of English as well as the ones where the writers were NS of different varieties of English.

To be able to fulfil the goals of the study 52 argumentative paragraphs on *"Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Children should start learning a foreign language as soon as they start school. Use specific reasons and examples to support your position"* topic were collected and analysed. The hedges in the paragraphs were classified using the taxonomy developed by Hyland (2005a; 2010) and Hinkel (2005).

The findings of the research showed that NS of Turkish employed eight modal verbs to hedge their statements (i.e., *should, can, will, may, must, might, could, would*) but they used them with substantially differing frequencies and levels of accuracy. The most frequently employed modal in the current study was *should* and all of its uses were correct. In contrast, modals such as *can* and *could* were used less frequently but also less accurately. In addition, modals such as *would, will* and *may* which showed to be the most preferred modal hedges for NS of English were rarely utilized by the participants in our study. Analysis of the instructional materials utilized in the examined program showed that there was a parallelism between the frequencies and classes of modals in the teaching materials, and the ones utilized by the students in their argumentative paragraphs. Therefore, foreign language teaching material writers should have a careful look at the resources they are creating and should consider revising them in the light of the available research findings and the data coming from the native English corpora such as BNC and ANC.

Foreign language teachers, on the other hand, should be aware of the fact that some modal verbs in English pose more problems for the NS of Turkish than the others. They should identify those and should devote more class time to explaining and practicing them. Our findings showed, for instance, that the functions of *would* and *could*, at least for this group of participants, were the most problematic ones. Our suggestion, therefore, is that foreign language teachers provide clear explanations

and wealth of examples illustrating the uses and functions of modals such as *would* and *could* as hedges in their writing classes. The functions of these verbs could also be introduced together and in comparison to easier possibility modals such as *will* and *might* so that students have more criteria to depend on while questioning the uses of the more difficult modals.

Finally, the study showed once again that modal hedges are a group of markers particularly problematic for second language learners as they are multifunctional, multifaceted and culture dependent (Axelsson, 2013; Hatipoğlu & Algı, 2017; Hinkel, 2009; Hyland, 2005); and that some overuses of modals in English are caused by accepted practices in L1. These findings emphasised once more the importance of detailed training in this field and how vital it is to find a place for them in the foreign language writing training programs as well in the paragraph assessment rubrics. Without being trained and assessed in the use of metadiscourse devices in L2, NS fall back and "catch the tiger by the toe". That is, they start using forms with which they are comfortable in their L1 but unacceptable or inappropriate in L2 (also *see* Bogdanović & Mirović, 2018). This, in turn, leads to the creation of texts in which the sentences are grammatical but are the texts themselves are weak and do not succeed to transfer the intended message, do not succeed in persuading the audience and ultimately fail to establish the longed for bond between the writers and readers.

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