

# Speaking with Care, Thinking with Depth: How Modality Shapes Critical Thinking and Engagement in EFL Learners' Classroom Interaction

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## ABSTRACT

Speaking with care and thinking with depth are essential competencies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, yet many learners struggle to balance politeness with assertiveness when contributing to discussions. While modality has been studied as a grammatical feature, its function as a pragmatic tool for shaping critical thinking and sustaining engagement remains underexplored. This qualitative descriptive study investigated how modality is employed by fourth-semester EFL learners at Universitas Muhammadiyah Bulukumba to manage stance, encourage respectful dialogue, and support deeper reasoning in classroom interaction. Data were collected over six weeks through classroom observations and audio recordings of discussion sessions, stimulated recall interviews with seven students, and semi-structured interviews with two lecturers. Thematic analysis revealed that modality served both interpersonal and cognitive purposes: hedging expressions such as *maybe* and *I think* reduced the perceived risk of error, encouraged openness to multiple perspectives, and fostered group harmony, while stronger forms such as *must* and *should* enhanced clarity and argumentative strength. However, excessive hedging sometimes weakened reasoning and reduced precision. Lecturers emphasized that explicit, context-based instruction, supported by sentence starters and role-play activities, increased learners' confidence and participation, even among hesitant speakers. These findings position modality as a vital communicative strategy for cultivating critical thinking and inclusive engagement, suggesting that EFL pedagogy should integrate targeted modality training to prepare learners for effective, courteous, and intellectually rich communication in academic and professional settings.

## 1. Introduction

The ability to communicate with care while engaging in deep, reflective thought is increasingly recognized as an essential competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. In the 21st century, English Language Teaching (ELT) has shifted from a narrow emphasis on grammatical accuracy toward a broader vision that includes critical thinking, collaborative interaction, and the capacity to articulate ideas respectfully while engaging with diverse perspectives (Dash, 2022; Baskal et al., 2024). Classroom conversations have become a key mechanism for achieving these aims, providing opportunities for EFL learners to construct arguments,

examine beliefs, collaborate in problem-solving, and consider multiple viewpoints (Tahang et al., 2025; Imran et al., 2023). Yet, success in such interaction depends heavily on learners' ability to regulate their interpersonal stance and express nuanced meanings, both of which are closely tied to the use of modality (Gulnaz, 2020).

Modality is not merely a grammatical feature but a critical discourse resource that enables learners to qualify statements, avoid overgeneralization, temper disagreement, and signal openness to alternative perspectives (Davariyina & Asl, 2017). Its role is particularly important in classroom settings where meaning is constantly negotiated and challenged. Effective critical discussion requires a balance

between assertiveness in presenting and defending ideas, and politeness in respecting others' viewpoints. In EFL contexts, especially those influenced by collectivist cultural norms, modality allows learners to engage critically without appearing confrontational (Khoram et al., 2020; Fortanet-Gómez & Ruiz-Madrid, 2014). The ability to navigate this balance is fundamental for promoting respectful dialogue, sustaining engagement, and deepening cognitive processing (Grapin, 2019).

Previous studies have shown that classroom discourse can be an effective tool for fostering critical thinking and engagement, yet they have seldom examined the specific role of modality in achieving these goals. Azkarai and Del Pilar García Mayo (2015) reported that task modality influences learners' language choices, while Gulnaz (2020) found that in-class debates can enhance analytical and reflective skills. Resnik et al. (2025) observed that modality in instructional delivery affects learners' participation patterns, and DeWaesche (2015) demonstrated that questioning techniques associated with modality can promote deeper engagement. Other research has documented that learners with higher language proficiency can overcome sociocultural barriers to critical dialogue (Resnik et al., 2025) and that debates stimulate reflective, receptive, analytical, and critical skills (Gulnaz, 2020). However, these studies have not fully addressed how learners consciously balance politeness and assertiveness through modality in real-time classroom interaction, nor how such strategic use supports both cognitive and interpersonal dimensions of learning.

In terms of pedagogy, many EFL programs still approach modality narrowly, emphasizing the correct use of modal verbs such as *can*, *might*, and *must* without exploring their communicative functions (Syam, 2022). This form-focused instruction leaves learners ill-equipped to use modality for hedging, showing doubt, indicating obligation, or softening disagreement (Almusharraf et al., 2024). As a result, hesitant students often overuse hedging expressions like *maybe* and *I think* to avoid conflict or the risk of being wrong, while more confident peers may rely heavily on obligation markers like *must* and *have to*, which can restrict the openness of dialogue (Resnik et al., 2025). These tendencies can undermine both inclusivity and depth of discussion. Although politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Sadeghoghli & Niroomand, 2016) highlights that hedging and indirectness reduce face-threatening acts, empirical research rarely connects this theory with practical, context-sensitive teaching strategies for modality in EFL classrooms. There is also limited investigation into how lecturers perceive modality use and scaffold it to promote balanced participation among learners with differing confidence levels (Pacheco et al., 2021; Susilowaty et al., 2025).

The present study was conducted at the English Language Education Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Bulukumba, an institution committed to interactive, student-centered pedagogies that emphasize speaking and discussion as vehicles for language development. The fourth-semester speaking-focused courses provide authentic opportunities for learners to engage in sustained group and class discussions on topics such as cultural identity, education policy, and environmental issues.

This setting offers a mix of confident and reserved participants, enabling observation of a wide range of interactional strategies. The lecturers' active role in guiding respectful communication and encouraging participation makes the site particularly suitable for investigating how modality is used and taught to balance assertiveness and politeness while supporting critical thinking.

This study addresses existing gaps by investigating modality not only as a grammatical structure but also as a pragmatic resource for shaping interpersonal relationships, promoting respectful disagreement, and fostering critical engagement. Its novelty lies in positioning modality within authentic EFL classroom discourse, where it is examined through its cognitive, social, and pedagogical dimensions. By adopting this perspective, the research advances beyond a purely grammatical analysis and demonstrates how modality functions as a vital mechanism that enables meaningful, reflective, and inclusive academic interaction.

The primary aim of the study is to evaluate how fourth-semester EFL learners at Universitas Muhammadiyah Bulukumba use modality to balance politeness and assertiveness in classroom interaction, and how this practice influences critical thinking and engagement. The research also investigates lecturers' perceptions of modality and their instructional strategies for developing students' pragmatic competence. Drawing on classroom observations, stimulated recall interviews, and lecturer interviews, the study provides a comprehensive account of modality as a bridge between linguistic form and communicative function.

In conclusion, this study seeks to contribute to ELT by demonstrating how explicit, context-based modality instruction can enhance learners' ability to communicate with care and think with depth. In the ELT domain, the integration of grammatical and pragmatic perspectives on modality can foster inclusive participation, respectful dialogue, and critical engagement. In the broader linguistic context, the study provides empirical insight into how language form interacts with social interaction and cognitive processing, offering implications for pragmatic instruction, discourse analysis, and intercultural communication.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design (Creswell, 2021) to examine how EFL learners use modality in classroom discussions and how such usage reflects and supports their critical thinking and engagement. The qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of language use as both a cognitive and social resource, focusing on naturally occurring interaction in its authentic context.

Rather than seeking statistical generalizability, this approach prioritizes rich, detailed descriptions and thematic insights that emerge directly from participants' perspectives and observed behaviors. The design was particularly appropriate for capturing the dynamic and negotiated nature of classroom discourse, where meaning is continually shaped by interaction and context.

### 2.2 Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in the English Language Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Bulukumba, an institution known for its emphasis on interactive, student-centered language learning. This site was selected because its fourth-semester speaking-focused courses provide authentic opportunities for sustained interaction, integrating content knowledge with communicative practice. These classes encourage students to engage in debates and collaborative problem-solving, making them ideal for observing modality use in balancing politeness and assertiveness.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select nine participants: seven fourth-semester EFL students and two English lecturers. The students were chosen to represent diversity in gender, speaking confidence, and participation styles (dominant vs. reserved) based on lecturer recommendations. The two lecturers were selected because they teach speaking and seminar-based courses that incorporate structured discussion activities. This sampling strategy ensured that the study captured a range of interactional behaviors and teaching practices relevant to modality.

### 2.3 Instruments

Three main instruments were used. First, classroom observation and audio recording captured authentic discussion sessions, providing primary data on learners' spontaneous use of modality. Second, stimulated recall interview guides were developed to prompt learners' reflections on their own language choices, allowing insights into their metalinguistic awareness and affective considerations. Third, semi-structured interview guides for lecturers were created to elicit perspectives on students' modality use, its role in fostering engagement and critical thinking, and pedagogical strategies for teaching modality.

The interview protocols were developed with reference to relevant literature on modality, critical thinking, and engagement, and were refined through input from experienced ELT practitioners and a pilot test involving one student and one lecturer to ensure clarity and appropriateness.

### 2.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection spanned six weeks. For the observation phase, three discussion sessions were selected in which students engaged in group and whole-class debates on topics such as cultural identity, education policy, and environmental challenges. With consent from lecturers and students, these sessions were audio-recorded and supplemented by detailed field notes documenting turn-taking patterns, gestures, body language, and interactional dynamics such as peer support and responsiveness.

Following each recorded session, stimulated recall interviews were conducted individually with all seven student participants. Each student listened to selected excerpts from their recorded contributions and was asked reflective questions such as "Why did you use *might* instead of *must* here?", "What did you mean when you said *I think maybe...?*", and "Were you certain about your opinion, or were you unsure at that moment?". This approach helped uncover learners' decision-making processes, pragmatic considerations, and emotional factors, such as politeness strategies or confidence levels, influencing their modality choices.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with both lecturers to explore their perceptions of modality use in classroom discourse, their evaluation of its role in critical thinking and engagement, and their teaching approaches related to modality. Interview questions addressed how students typically express certainty or uncertainty, the functions of modality in discussion, strategies for teaching polite disagreement, and the perceived impact of explicit modality instruction on participation. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis.

### 2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative, multi-stage process aligned with qualitative research standards (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). First, classroom transcripts were generated from the recordings and coded line-by-line to identify linguistic markers of modality such as modal verbs, hedging devices, and adverbs. Codes captured both form and function, for example:

- "Maybe it is because of the culture" → coded as uncertainty and hedging
- "We must protect nature" → coded as strong obligation and commitment

- “I think we can try another way” → coded as suggestion with engagement marker. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories including epistemic stance, politeness and face management, and critical engagement. Axial coding was applied to examine relationships between categories, leading to the emergence of core themes such as modality as a cognitive buffer, linguistic diplomacy in critical dialogue, and stance negotiation for inclusive participation. Theoretical coding integrated these themes into a grounded explanation of how modality supports both critical thinking and engagement. Throughout the analysis, analytic memos were written to document coding decisions, emerging interpretations, and potential theoretical connections.

## 2.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Lecturers and students were briefed on the research objectives, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reporting to protect confidentiality.

## 1. Result

The analysis of classroom observations, student stimulated recall interviews, and lecturer semi-structured interviews revealed three interrelated themes that illustrate how modality shaped classroom interaction: *Modality as a Tool for Interpersonal Balance*, *Modality as a Catalyst for Critical Engagement*, and *Scaffolding Modality for Confident and Reflective Participation*. Each theme builds on the others, creating a picture of modality as both a grammatical resource and a pragmatic strategy that influences the social and intellectual quality of discussion.

### 3.1. Modality as a Tool for Interpersonal Balance

This theme focuses on how learners used modality strategically to balance politeness and assertiveness during classroom discussions. The findings reveal that modality choices were not made randomly but with conscious awareness of their potential interpersonal effects.

Learners demonstrated a consistent awareness of the need to maintain respectful interaction while contributing to discussions. Many students adopted hedging devices such as tentative modal verbs (*might*, *could*, *would*) and cautious stance markers (*I think*, *maybe*) to soften their statements. This strategy allowed them to share ideas without appearing confrontational, protecting peer relationships and lowering the perceived risk of error. Observational data showed that hedging often created conversational space that invited contributions from others, especially

when students were uncertain about their ideas. Evidence from classroom observation, student stimulated recall interviews, and lecturer semi-structured interviews highlights two main categories:

- 1) Hedging for Politeness and Openness
- 2) Strong Modality for Clarity and Authority

#### 3.1.1 Hedging for Politeness and Openness

Hedging appeared frequently during the exploratory stage of discussions when students exchanged ideas and sought feedback. Tentative modal verbs such as *might*, *could*, and *would* and stance markers such as *I think* and *maybe* were used to soften the strength of a statement.

**Excerpt 1 – S3 (Observation, Session 2):** “Maybe [Code: Hedging, Epistemic Tentativeness] we could [Code: Possibility Marker] focus on recycling campaigns in schools so that students are more aware.”

- *Context:* Group discussion on environmental policy. The student leaned forward but kept her gaze on her notes, speaking in a quieter tone toward the end of the sentence.
- *Interpretation:* The combination of hedging expressions and body language suggests a cautious approach, aiming to propose an idea without imposing it on the group and encouraging others to respond.

In this same discussion, another student (S6) responded:

**S6 (Observation, Session 2):** “Yes, maybe [Code: Agreement with Hedging] we could also include activities for parents so the awareness spreads.”

This exchange illustrates that hedging can create a conversational space that encourages idea expansion and collaboration.

Student	Interview	Findings
		Students reported that hedging was often used intentionally to avoid sounding overconfident and to signal openness.

**Excerpt 2 – S3 (Interview):** “I wanted to share my idea but I was not completely sure. Saying ‘maybe’ [Code: Hedging, Politeness Strategy] makes it softer and shows I am open to other opinions. If I say it too directly, it might sound like I think my idea is the best.”

This reflects a clear awareness of how language choice can influence peer perceptions and group dynamics.

Lecturer	Interview	Findings
		Lecturers viewed hedging as a valuable tool for promoting participation among less confident students.

**Lecturer 1 (Interview):** “Students who use ‘maybe’ or ‘I think’ [Code: Hedging, Face Management] make it easier for others to respond. It signals that the idea is not fixed and invites discussion.”

### 3.1.2 Strong Modality for Clarity and Authority

Strong modality appeared more frequently during the decision-making stage of discussions. Confident students used modal verbs such as *must*, *have to*, and expressions like *it is clear that* to show certainty and obligation.

**Excerpt 3 – S1 (Observation, Session 3):** “We must [Code: Strong Modality, Obligation] improve English speaking clubs in our campus to help students speak more fluently.”

- *Context:* Whole-class debate on improving campus language programs. The statement was delivered with an upright posture, steady gaze, and a firm tone, accompanied by a hand gesture toward the whiteboard.
- *Interpretation:* The assertive choice of *must* framed the suggestion as necessary and urgent. However, the pause that followed and the limited immediate responses indicated a possible reluctance from peers to challenge the statement.

Students who used strong modality were aware of its persuasive power but also recognized that it could limit contributions from others.

**Excerpt 4 – S1 (Interview):** “If I say ‘must’ or ‘have to’ [Code: Strong Modality, Conviction], people know I believe it strongly. But sometimes they just agree quickly and do not give other ideas.”

Lecturers noted that strong modality often reflected leadership but required careful management to ensure inclusive participation.

**Lecturer 2 (Interview):** “Confident students often take leadership in discussion with strong words like ‘must’ or ‘should’ [Code: Strong Modality, Directive]. This is useful for moving forward but they also need to allow space for other voices.”

Combining evidence from observation, student interviews, and lecturer interviews presents a comprehensive understanding of modality as a resource for balancing interpersonal relations. Hedging supported politeness and encouraged openness, particularly in the initial stages of discussion when multiple perspectives were sought. Strong modality enhanced clarity and decisiveness, which was beneficial in moving discussions toward concrete conclusions.

However, the data also revealed that both strategies had limitations. Excessive hedging could weaken the impact of arguments, while frequent use of strong modality could restrict the exchange of ideas. The most effective interactions occurred when students demonstrated flexibility, moving from hedging to strong modality according to the stage of discussion and the group’s needs.

This finding suggests that modality in the EFL classroom is both a grammatical feature and a pragmatic strategy. It allows learners to manage the flow of ideas, protect social relationships, and guide discussions toward productive outcomes. For these skills to be developed consistently, targeted pedagogical interventions should be introduced to make students more aware of how modality choices affect both interpersonal dynamics and the quality of collaborative thinking.

## 3.2 Modality as a Catalyst for Critical Engagement

Modality also acted as a driver for deeper intellectual engagement. Questioning modality, using forms like *could*, *might*, and *would*, encouraged peers to reconsider ideas or explore alternative approaches. Evaluative modality, often marked by *should* or *ought to*, emerged as a preferred means of expressing constructive disagreement. The evaluative modal, paired with reasoning, enabled the student to challenge the previous point while maintaining a respectful tone.

This theme examines how learners employed modality not only to convey ideas but also to provoke critical thinking, challenge assumptions, and deepen classroom dialogue. The findings from classroom observation, student stimulated recall interviews, and lecturer semi-structured interviews consistently indicate that modality functioned as a linguistic trigger for intellectual engagement. Two main categories emerged:

- 1) Questioning Modality for Idea Exploration
- 2) Evaluative Modality for Constructive Disagreement

### 3.2.1 Questioning Modality for Idea Exploration

Students often used modality in the form of tentative or speculative questions to encourage peers to reconsider ideas or approach topics from different perspectives. These questioning strategies employed modals such as *could*, *might*, and *would* in ways that opened space for multiple interpretations.

**Excerpt 1 – S8 (Observation, Session 4):** “Could [Code: Modal Question, Possibility] this approach work better if we involve community leaders from the beginning?”

- *Context:* Small group discussion on community-based environmental programs.

The student's tone was upwardly inflected at the end, accompanied by raised eyebrows, signalling genuine curiosity rather than rhetorical challenge.

- *Interpretation:* The use of *could* framed the idea as an open possibility, prompting others to consider an alternative implementation strategy without dismissing earlier suggestions.

Such questioning modality often acted as a spark for collaborative brainstorming. In the same group, a peer (S5) responded with, "It might [Code: Modal Affirmation] make people more motivated if leaders support it," which extended the discussion toward community motivation strategies.

Students reported that using questions with modals allowed them to participate without appearing confrontational while still encouraging deeper thought.

**Excerpt 2 – S8 (Interview):** "I like to ask questions using 'could' or 'might' because it feels less like I am saying someone is wrong. It is more like opening a door for us to think together."

Lecturers confirmed that questioning modality played an important role in shifting discussions from simple opinion exchange toward critical exploration.

**Lecturer 3 (Interview):** "When students ask 'could we' or 'might it be,' it changes the energy of the discussion. It moves from defending positions to exploring possibilities."

### 3.2.2 Evaluative Modality for Constructive Disagreement

Evaluative modality emerged as a key feature when students engaged in respectful disagreement. Modals such as *should* and *ought to* were often paired with evaluative language to assess ideas and suggest alternatives.

**Excerpt 3 – S2 (Observation, Session 5):** "We should [Code: Strong Suggestion, Evaluative Modality] focus more on practical workshops rather than just lectures, because they help us apply the concepts directly."

- *Context:* Class debate on improving teaching methods in the language department. The statement was delivered with steady pacing and a calm tone, avoiding any sign of aggression.
- *Interpretation:* The combination of evaluative modality (*should*) and supporting reason allowed the speaker to disagree with the previous point without creating interpersonal tension.

This pattern frequently led to constructive reformulation of ideas rather than competitive debate. Students explained that evaluative modality helped them maintain respect while challenging ideas.

**Excerpt 4 – S2 (Interview):** "If I say 'should' or 'ought to' and give my reason, it sounds like a suggestion, not an attack. People listen more when they do not feel I am rejecting their ideas completely."

Lecturers valued this use of modality as a marker of mature academic discourse, where disagreement was handled in a way that supported rather than fractured group interaction.

**Lecturer 1 (Interview):** "The use of 'should' or 'ought to' with reasons helps students disagree in a way that still moves the discussion forward. It shows they can combine critical thinking with politeness."

Across all three data sources, modality emerged as a key driver for critical engagement. Questioning modality created space for exploring new perspectives without forcing a defensive reaction. Evaluative modality enabled disagreement to be expressed in a constructive manner, maintaining the collaborative spirit of the discussion while still pushing for deeper analysis.

Observation data revealed that questioning modality was more common among students who were less dominant in discussion, suggesting that it served as a safe entry point for participation. Evaluative modality was often employed by students with stronger language proficiency, who were able to pair their modal choice with a well-reasoned explanation.

Student interviews confirmed that both forms of modality were consciously chosen to influence the quality of discussion. Learners viewed questioning modality as a way to engage others in collective reasoning, while evaluative modality was seen as a means of expressing disagreement without damaging relationships.

Lecturer interviews reinforced the view that modality could transform discussion from surface-level agreement into critical, collaborative inquiry. They observed that classes where modality was used flexibly tended to have richer and more balanced exchanges, with ideas being tested, refined, and integrated.

Overall, the findings suggest that modality serves as more than a grammatical device in the EFL classroom. It acts as a catalyst for critical engagement, shaping both the intellectual depth and the interpersonal tone of discussions. By integrating questioning and evaluative modality into their interactional repertoire, students can become more confident in expressing their views and more skilled in engaging with alternative perspectives. This highlights the importance of explicit teaching strategies that raise awareness of modality as a resource for both critical thinking and respectful dialogue.

### 3.3 Scaffolding Modality for Confident and Reflective Participation

The development of modality use was strongly influenced by scaffolding from both instructors and peers. Instructional scaffolding included explicit modeling of modal verbs and sentence stems followed by opportunities to apply them in discussion tasks. This theme explores how scaffolding, both from instructors and peer interaction, enhanced learners' ability to use modality in ways that built confidence, encouraged reflective thinking, and supported active participation in class discussions. Evidence from classroom observation, student stimulated recall interviews, and lecturer semi-structured interviews shows that scaffolding was crucial in transforming modality from a passive grammatical feature into an active tool for self-expression and group contribution. Two main categories emerged:

- 1) Instructional Scaffolding for Modal Awareness and Application
- 2) Peer Support as a Confidence-Building Mechanism

#### 3.3.1 Instructional Scaffolding for Modal Awareness and Application

During targeted lessons on modality, instructors modeled how different modal verbs could change the force of a statement. They provided sentence stems such as *we might consider...* or *we should prioritise...*, and then encouraged students to adapt these in group tasks. This explicit modeling led to observable changes in participation patterns.

**Excerpt 1 – Lecturer 1 (Observation, Session 6):** “Try using ‘might’ when you are not completely certain, and ‘should’ when you want to make a suggestion. Let us see how it changes the response from your group.”

- *Context:* Whole-class language focus activity before group discussion on improving extracurricular programs.
- *Interpretation:* By making modality choices explicit and linking them to interactional outcomes, the instructor empowered students to use them purposefully rather than relying on intuition.

After this modeling stage, several students began experimenting with more varied modal choices in discussion. For example:

**Excerpt 2 – S4 (Observation, Session 6):** “We might [Code: Modal Tentativeness] need to make the schedule more flexible if we want everyone to join.”

Students reported that this kind of scaffolding made them more confident because they understood

both the meaning and the social effect of different modals.

**Excerpt 3 – S4 (Interview):** “Before, I used ‘should’ all the time because I thought it was just giving ideas. Now I know it sounds stronger, so I use ‘might’ or ‘could’ when I want people to add more.”

Lecturers explained that scaffolding modality helped students develop metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to consciously manage the balance between confidence and openness.

**Lecturer 2 (Interview):** “Once they understand why certain modals create certain responses, they become more intentional in their language choices. This helps them join discussions with a clearer purpose.”

#### 3.3.2: Peer Support as a Confidence-Building Mechanism

In peer-led activities, students often encouraged one another by affirming modal choices or building on them. Positive reinforcement from peers appeared to increase students' willingness to use stronger modality or experiment with new forms.

**Excerpt 4 – S6 to S9 (Observation, Session 7):** “Yes, you could [Code: Modal Agreement, Peer Reinforcement] say it like that, it sounds more polite.”

- *Context:* Pair-work exercise on giving feedback for a class presentation.
- *Interpretation:* Peer acknowledgement of appropriate modality created a supportive environment for experimentation, reducing anxiety over making language errors.

This support was particularly valuable for students who initially avoided participating in larger group settings. In small group contexts, they began to integrate both hedging and strong modality more flexibly.

Students acknowledged that peer feedback helped them to refine their use of modality and feel less pressured when speaking.

**Excerpt 5 – S9 (Interview):** “When my friends say my sentence sounds polite, I feel more confident to speak again. I can also try stronger words without worrying they will think I am too direct.”

Lecturers observed that peer reinforcement complemented teacher scaffolding by normalising modality use in authentic communication.

**Lecturer 3 (Interview):** “Peers play a role in validating language choices in real time, something that teachers cannot always do for every student during a discussion.”

Across the three data sources, a consistent pattern emerged: scaffolding modality through explicit instruction and peer reinforcement enabled students to participate more actively and reflectively in class discussions. Instructional scaffolding-built awareness of the pragmatic force of different modals, while peer support encouraged experimentation and reduced fear of negative judgment.

Observation data showed that explicit modeling led to immediate changes in students' modal usage, both in form and function. Student interviews confirmed that understanding the social impact of modality gave them greater control over their participation style. Lecturer interviews reinforced the finding that scaffolding was necessary to move students from unconscious use of modality to deliberate, context-appropriate deployment.

This dual process of teacher-led instruction and peer-supported practice allowed students to manage both the interpersonal and cognitive demands of discussion. They could choose weaker modality to invite input, stronger modality to drive decisions, and reflective modality to consider alternative viewpoints. The result was a classroom environment where modality was not only a linguistic tool but also a means of shaping group interaction and building individual confidence.

Taken together, these themes show that modality functioned as both a linguistic and interpersonal resource in the classroom. It enabled students to manage the balance between politeness and assertiveness, to engage critically with peers' ideas, and to participate with growing confidence and reflective awareness. The interplay between hedging and strong modality was dynamic, often shifting according to the stage of discussion and the social needs of the group. Questioning and evaluative modality expanded the intellectual depth of discussions while maintaining collaborative relationships. Scaffolding, through teacher modeling and peer reinforcement, accelerated the development of these skills, allowing students to consciously adapt their modality use to different communicative goals.

In the context of English language teaching, these findings highlight the pedagogical value of integrating explicit pragmatic awareness training into speaking-oriented curricula. By helping learners recognise and control their use of modality, educators can foster classrooms where discussions are not only linguistically rich but also socially inclusive and intellectually engaging. This integration of linguistic form, pragmatic function, and collaborative practice reflects the broader aim of preparing learners for effective communication across academic and professional contexts, fostering critical awareness, mutual respect, and adaptability in diverse interactional settings.

## 4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that modality in EFL classroom interaction functions as both a linguistic and pragmatic resource that shapes the tone of discourse, enhances cognitive engagement, and fosters respectful as well as inclusive participation. Based on triangulated evidence from classroom observations, stimulated recall interviews, and lecturer perspectives, three interconnected themes emerged. These themes are modality as a means of balancing politeness and assertiveness, modality as a catalyst for critical engagement, and scaffolding as a driver for confident and reflective use. Collectively, the results indicate that modality is not simply a grammatical element but a purposeful communicative choice that manages interpersonal relationships, frames epistemic stance, and influences the depth of academic discussion (Azkarai & Del Pilar García Mayo, 2015; Fortanet-Gómez & Ruiz-Madrid, 2014).

A prominent finding is the deliberate use of epistemic hedging, reflected in learners' frequent use of expressions such as *maybe*, *I think*, and *perhaps*. This strategy was observed most often during the exploratory stages of discussion, when students were generating and refining ideas collaboratively. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this choice aligns with face-saving strategies as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987), which suggest that indirectness can reduce confrontation and maintain group harmony. Data from classroom observations confirm that hedging created space for peers to contribute without feeling pressured. Student interviews further revealed that hedging was consciously used to avoid appearing overly dominant or certain, supporting the claim that learners are aware of the interpersonal impact of their linguistic choices. Similar observations have been made by Page (2021), who reported that hedging enables negotiation of meaning and collaborative thinking in learner-centered discussions.

Lecturers' perspectives reinforce this interpretation. Lecturer 1 explained that students often replaced strong assertions with softer modal expressions such as *maybe we can* to invite more responses from peers. Lecturer 2 added that hedging helped reduce the risk of error for less confident students, making participation less intimidating. This finding aligns with Gulnaz (2020), who found that strategic use of hedging encourages greater participation by mitigating face-threatening acts. Nevertheless, both lecturers also cautioned that excessive hedging can weaken argument strength and reduce clarity, which is consistent with the concerns expressed by Karnasuta (2017) that while hedging is valuable for maintaining diplomacy, it must be balanced with assertiveness to preserve academic rigor.

In contrast, the study found that strong modality was most common during decision-making stages.

Learners used modals such as *must* and *have to*, along with expressions like *it is clear that*, to express obligation, urgency, and certainty. This mirrors the observations of Khoram et al. (2020) and Resnik et al. (2025) that strong modality signals leadership and conviction in communicative settings. Observation data in this study show that these expressions were often delivered with confident body language and tone, enhancing their persuasive effect. However, some students acknowledged that such strong expressions sometimes led to quick agreement without further debate, indicating a possible suppression of alternative viewpoints. This tension reflects the findings of Fortanet-Gómez and Ruiz-Madrid (2014), who warned that overuse of strong modality can unintentionally limit opportunities for dialogic exchange.

The study also demonstrates that modality is a cognitive tool for fostering deeper engagement. Questioning modality, expressed through forms like *could* and *might*, prompted peers to reconsider positions and explore alternative ideas without creating defensiveness. This finding is consistent with the work of Azkarai and Del Pilar García Mayo (2015), who found that speculative questions encourage collaborative reasoning in EFL tasks. Evaluative modality, typically framed with *should* and *ought to*, enabled learners to express disagreement constructively, pairing critique with justification. This pattern reflects Gulnaz's (2020) observation that evaluative modality coupled with reasoning promotes critical thinking while maintaining respectful discourse.

Evidence from recent studies shows that questioning modality is frequently used by less dominant speakers as a safe entry into discussions, while evaluative modality is more common among speakers with higher proficiency who can justify their stance effectively. These findings support Pacheco et al. (2021), who argue that varying modality according to communicative purpose reflects advanced pragmatic competence. Research further indicates that the use of different modal expressions correlates with proficiency. As Berezenko (2019) notes, nuanced use of modality signals communicative competence, with broader usage reflecting higher proficiency. This perspective aligns with frameworks emphasizing the link between grammatical and pragmatic abilities, where a strong grammatical foundation supports the development of nuanced pragmatic skills (Li, 2016; Xiao, 2015).

The reliance on questioning modality among less dominant speakers reflects a strategic approach to managing interpersonal dynamics. Activities such as discourse completion tasks and explicit instruction strengthen pragmatic awareness and help learners adapt their speech acts to social contexts (Aufa, 2011; Aufa, 2016). These practices build competencies that guide modality choice based on situational

appropriateness (Taguchi, 2011). Variation in modality highlights the complexity of pragmatic competence, which integrates sociopragmatic sensitivity to norms with pragmalinguistic ability to use appropriate forms (Eslami et al., 2022). Advanced learners display greater flexibility in evaluative modalities to construct argumentative stances aligned with formal discourse (Qi, 2023). Intercultural sensitivity further enhances pragmatic competence, enabling effective modality use across contexts (Qi, 2023). Thus, the interplay between questioning and evaluative modalities provides a framework for refining pragmatic skills and bridging communicative gaps (Zughaibi, 2022; Dutt et al., 2023).

Another significant outcome is that shifting between hedging and strong modality signals communicative adaptability. Skilled speakers often begin with hedging to encourage participation and later move to stronger modality as discussions progress toward decision-making. This reflects the principle in communicative language teaching that linguistic choices should align with the purpose and stage of interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Research shows that navigating modalities strengthens communication and supports collaborative decision-making (Hendriks, 2016). Hedging fosters inclusion and supportive dialogue (Merghmi & Hoadjli, 2024), while the shift to strong modality illustrates cognitive adjustment to context and audience (Hendriks, 2016; Pickering & Garrod, 2004). Effective communicators optimize strategies as interactions unfold, demonstrating sensitivity to appropriateness and audience expectations (Pickering & Garrod, 2004).

Scaffolding also plays a central role in developing modality use. Lecturers modeled modal expressions and offered sentence starters such as *we might consider* and *we should prioritise*, linking these to communicative effects. Role-play and guided discussions provided realistic practice opportunities. This approach aligns with Heinonen and Lennartson-Hokkanen (2015), who emphasize the importance of scaffolding for meaningful participation. Peer reinforcement further supported this process, as students validated each other's modal choices during interaction. Such peer support reduces anxiety, fosters experimentation, and normalizes effective language practices in real-time communication (Susilowaty et al., 2025; Pacheco et al., 2021).

Evidence from observations, interviews, and lecturer feedback indicates that conscious management of modality enhances both interpersonal quality and intellectual depth in classroom discourse. Yet, the overuse of hedging may weaken arguments, while excessive reliance on strong modality can suppress divergent viewpoints. These findings echo the balance highlighted by Fortanet-Gómez and Ruiz-Madrid (2014) and Gulnaz (2020), emphasizing the need to teach not only linguistic forms but also their contextual appropriateness. Ultimately, the strategic

use of modality allows learners to balance harmonious relationships with critical inquiry. By integrating explicit instruction, guided practice, and peer support, educators can help students build a versatile repertoire of modality choices for academic, intercultural, and professional contexts, in line with the pedagogical emphasis on integrating pragmatic competence with communicative proficiency (Almusharraf et al., 2024; Resnik et al., 2025).

## 5. Conclusions

This study advances understanding of modality in EFL classroom interaction by revealing its dual function as a linguistic form and a pragmatic strategy that mediates both interpersonal balance and cognitive depth. The key findings show that hedging expressions such as maybe and I think create safe conversational spaces that reduce the risk of conflict and invite broader participation, while strong modality markers like must and should enhance clarity and decisiveness, particularly during decision-making stages. The novelty lies in situating modality within authentic classroom discourse and demonstrating how explicit, context-based scaffolding through modeling, sentence starters, role-plays, and peer reinforcement transforms it from a passive grammatical element into an active tool for inclusive, critical, and confident engagement. These insights carry significant implications for English language teaching, suggesting that integrating pragmatic competence training alongside grammatical instruction can foster classrooms where students engage in socially appropriate, reflective, and collaborative communication. Future research could explore how modality functions across different cultural contexts, proficiency levels, and academic disciplines, or investigate its impact in online and blended learning environments where interactional dynamics differ from face-to-face settings.

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