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AN ESL WRITER'S DIFFICULTIES WITH THE MODAL VERB <WILL>ETTIEN KOFFI AND KAITLIN COMFORT¹**ABSTRACT**

Modal verbs present ESL writers with a paradox. They are both easy and difficult to use. In this paper, we investigate how a college-bound L2 writer succeeds and fails in using the modal verb <will> in an essay. Though the analysis is based only on one writer's mistakes, those who have studied ESL writers' usage of modal verbs concur that the mistakes made by this student are representative of the struggles that other L2 writers face when using <will>. The writer also has issues with deleting the grapheme <t> when it occurs in the coda of consonant clusters. We examine this orthographic issue quickly but spend most of the time on the erroneous uses of <will>. Pedagogical implications are drawn that can help ESL students and their teachers tackle the pesky issue of <will>.

Keywords: ESL Writers, Developmental Syntax, Modal Verb errors, Spelling of Coda Clusters, Unreal Mood, Spelling-Pronunciation Errors, Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP)

1.0 Introduction

The essay under consideration was written as part of a college entrance composition exam. It contains multiple issues. However, we focus only on two, i.e., the deletion of <t> in coda clusters and the erroneous use of <will>. The first issue is addressed in hurriedly since spelling is not the major focus of this paper. We devote a considerable amount of time to the difficulties that the writer experienced in using the modal auxiliary verb <will>. The lack of mastery of this verb is evidenced by the flip flop between correct and incorrect usages. Even when the phrase structure rule (PSR) for generating <will> is correct, the semantic accuracy of the sentences leaves much to be desired. In other words, this student, and many ESL learners like him, struggle with the correct usages of <will>. The paper pinpoints these issues and proposes a pedagogical solution.

2.0 Corpus Analysis

Non-native speakers seeking admission at Saint Cloud State University are given an essay prompt. Their essay helps the faculty in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program to assess students' readiness for college classes. The essays are usually handwritten because grammar check and spell check in various software programs can mask ESL students' true writing abilities. Essay 1 serves as the launching pad for the observations about the usage of the modal auxiliary verb <will>.

¹ **Authorship responsibilities:** The idea of writing on this topic originated with Author 2 from the Pedagogical Grammar course she took from Author 1 in fall 2022. Author 1 has reanalyzed and rewritten this paper for publication. Author 2 has had the opportunity to proofread the paper in its current form. Both share equally in the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of this publication.

Essay #1: A Universal Language

First it might be nice if everyone in the world spoke the some language. Juss 11 language for the entire world. I agree with the expert to have one language entire world. Also, I will like to see the entire world spoke English, because that the more popular language. Next, As I read this passage I see just 11 language are spoke by more than half the earth's population but, a few are being lelf behind as we become a more homogeneous, global society. For example, the one who lelf behind are like Africa. Africa are poor countries, and they don't have power language that them poor. Finally, if we all spoke one language entire world, that language could be English. We will more apportunity. Also, we will understand each other and no one lelf behind. I wish I can see that and I will be more happy in my entire life.²

The author of this essay graduated from a high school in the United States. Yet, the essay contains numerous spelling mistakes, punctuation issues, and grammatical errors. We ignore most of these issues in order to focus on the highlighted words in the text. These words have to do with coda clusters and the modal auxiliary verb <will>. A sympathetic grader would contend that these mistakes are not a “big deal” because the reader can “get the gist” of what the writer intended to say. However, in writing for college, both form and meaning matter. College professors expect the students in their courses to write with grammatical accuracy. They do not expect perfection. Yet, they do not expect an essay to have as many issues as this one.

3.0 Orthographic Issues with Coda Clusters Ending in <t>

Spelling issues reveal a lot about L2 speakers' explicit knowledge of orthographic rules. The deletion of <t> in coda clusters in this writer's essay tells us that they tend to write some words as they habitually pronounce them. This is known as “phonetic spelling.” Raymond et al. (2016:2) observe that many L2 writers delete <t> in coda clusters because they do not pronounce it when they speak. This error may also be due to the fact that the writer does not hear other people pronounce <t> clearly in these clusters. One such example from the essay is the spelling of <just> as <juss>. Coda clusters involving <t> occur nine times in the essay. In four occurrences, <t> was deleted, which amounts to a spelling error rate of 44.44%. This rate is high enough to demand pedagogical attention. Teachers will do well to make a list of commonly occurring words in which <t> occurs as the last segment in the coda. The list below can be helpful:

1. <list>
2. <east>
3. <just>
4. <west>
5. <first>
6. <last>
7. <worst>
8. <must>
9. <lost>
10. <fast>

² Source: Korver, Tiffany E. 2010.

11. <mist>

These high frequency words can be used to help students notice that these words actually end in <t> even though people often delete it when they are speaking.

3.1 The Phonological Source of the Misspelling

The deletion of <t> from coda clusters is not haphazard. It follows a well-known pattern found in languages across the globe. For instance, when native and proficient speakers produce <first of all>, <West Side Story>, or <east meets west> in running speech, the final <t> is either deleted or pronounced very faintly. Novice or inexperienced writers are likely to not write it because it is not pronounced. But why is it not pronounced? Phonologists and phoneticians opine that a universal principle is at play here. This principle is called the **Obligatory Contour Principle** (OCP). It states that segments that share the same place of articulation are prohibited from occurring right next to each other (Koffi 2021: 237, 242-3). English spelling is phonemic, not phonetic (Chomsky and Halle 1991:48-54). Even though <st> clusters abound in written English, they are not necessarily pronounced. This creates a dichotomy between spelling and pronunciation. ESL writers' attention must be drawn to such words, otherwise they are likely to misspell them.

The word <left> is misspelled twice. The omission of the final <t> in this case goes beyond the OCP. Since the native language of the author is Somali, phonotactic transfer may be lurking in the background of this misspelling. Somali has a simple syllable coda structure. The canonical structure of Somali syllables is either V, CV, or CVC. This means that if a consonant is to occur in the coda of a syllable, it must be a singleton consonant. Two or more consonants are disallowed from occurring in syllable codas. This phonotactic constraint may explain why, even when the OCP is not violated, <t> is still deleted from coda clusters, as in the case of <left>. Regardless of whether the error is caused by the OCP or a phonotactic interference from the L1, coda cluster errors must be tackled early on to help students.

4.0 The Syntax of <Will>

The previous sections have dealt with spelling issues. In the remainder of the paper, we turn our attention to the syntax of <will>. This modal auxiliary verb is used four times in the essay, twice correctly and twice erroneously. Since a 50% accuracy rate is not higher than chance, we err on the side of caution and conclude that the writer has not fully mastered the usage of <will>. We explore why and propose a remedy.

4.1 The Syntactic Source of the Error

The erroneous use of <will> is far from being specific to this writer. Vethamani et al. (2008:144) note that such errors are widespread among L2 writers in English. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999:137) concur and add that “modal verbs are among the more difficult structures that ESL/EFL teachers have to deal with. One of the reasons is the form of modals.” Some errors are caused by the misapplication of morphophonological rules, some by the faulty application of PSR, and others by issues related to semantics. In this section, we focus on errors that have their source in syntax. In the next, we deal with errors caused by semantics.

The PSR of sentences containing modal verbs can be formulated as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} S &\rightarrow NP VP \\ VP &\rightarrow V' \\ V' &\rightarrow V^1 V^2 (NP) \end{aligned}$$

The formula simply states that if a modal verb (V^1) is to be used in an English sentence, it must satisfy three conditions.

1. First, the sentence must have an NP, which we take to be the grammatical subject of the verb. This is important because English is not a Pro-drop language, i.e., a language in which a verb can occur without an overt subject.
2. Secondly, V^1 must be present in the sentence, i.e., it cannot be omitted.
3. Thirdly, V^1 must be followed by another verb (V^2), and that verb must be in the bare infinitive form.

The NP under the V' node in the PSR is the argument. It is between parentheses because its presence or absence does not affect the grammaticality of the sentence. Sentences 1a and 1b are well-formed because they meet the requirements of the PSR, notwithstanding the misspelling of <left> as <lelf>, and the inflectional morphology error of <more happy> instead of <happier>.

Sentence 1a. *Also, we will understand each other and no one lelf behind.*

Sentence 1b. *I will be more happy in my entire life.*

Sentence 1c, on the other hand, is ill-formed:

Sentence 1c. *We will _____ more oportunity.

It is not a grammatically correct sentence because the PSR is violated. The key issue here is not the misspelling of <opportunities> as <oportunity>, nor the use of <more> instead of <many>, but rather the fact that V^2 , the verb in the bare infinitive form, is missing, as shown in the diagram below:

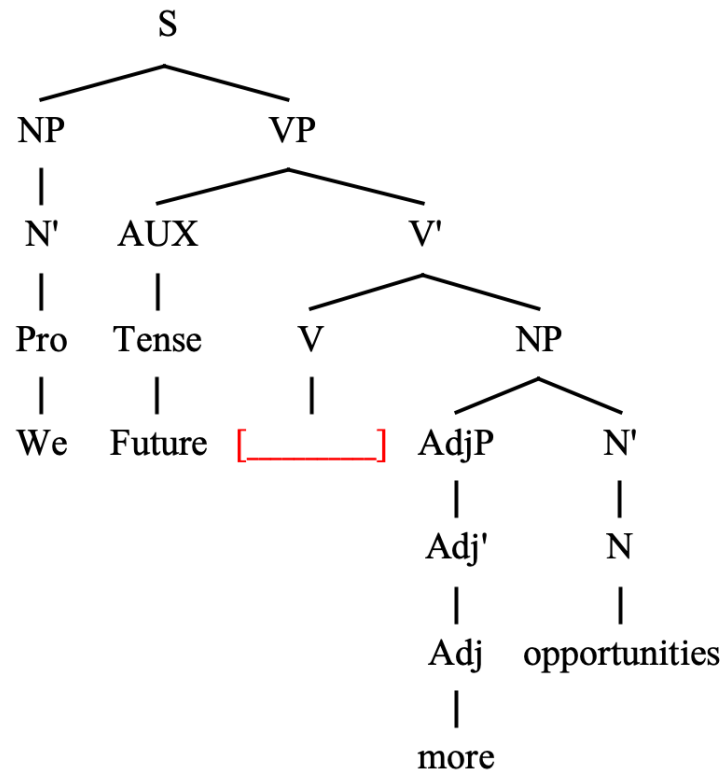


Figure 1a: Diagram of Sentence 1c

Sentence 1c can be easily corrected by inserting <have> after <will>, as shown in Sentence 1d below:

Sentence 1d. We will **have** more opportunities.

The resulting well-formed sentence can be diagrammed as follows:

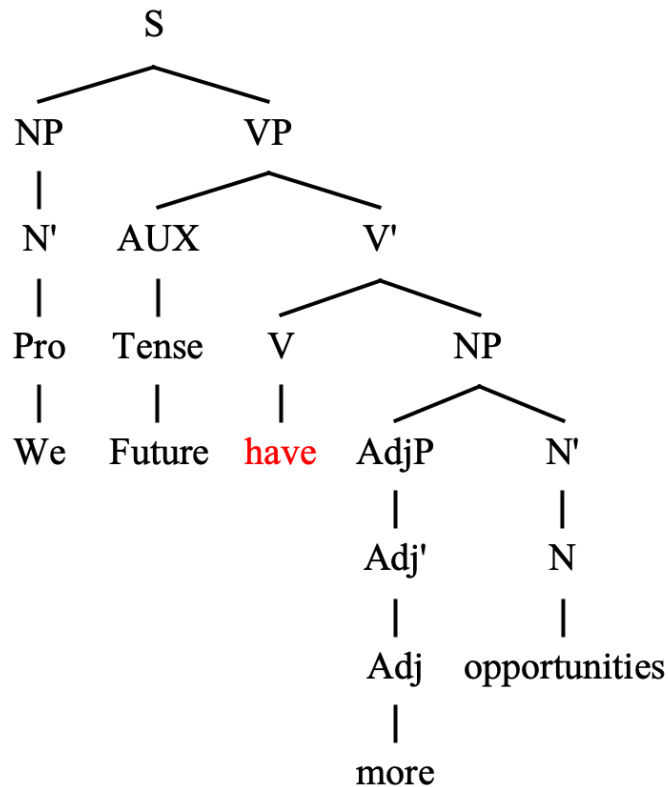


Figure 1b: Diagram of Sentence 1c

It is easy to excuse Sentence 1c simply by assuming that the writer “forgot” to insert a main verb. However, Vethamani et al. (2008:151) beg to differ. They report that the omission of a main verb or an incorrect usage of verb forms after <will> is a very common mistake in L2 writing. This error can be very easily remedied by telling ESL students that a V² must obligatorily follow the modal verb <will>. Tree diagrams such as those in Figures 1a and 1b can be used to show students visually what is missing from their diagrams. Florey (2006:4-5) recommends using tree diagrams because they help make abstract syntactic notions very concrete for students who are visual learners. She contends that all students can benefit from tree diagramming, but visual learners stand to reap the greatest benefits.

4.2 The Semantic Source of the Error

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999:141) write that “modals are used for several reasons: to give a proposition a degree of probability, to express one’s attitude, and to perform various social functions, such as expressing politeness or indirectness when making requests, giving advice, or granting permission.” Sentence 2a is ill-formed because the writer used the wrong form of <will>.

Sentence 2a: *Also, I will like to see the entire world...

Why is Sentence 2a wrong? Clearly, the PSR requirements are met. The sentence has a grammatical subject <I>, <will> is followed by the bare infinitive verb <like> as it ought to be. In other words, Sentence 2a checks all the syntactic boxes; yet its grammaticality is dubious. The issue here is the wrong use of **grammatical mood**. Many languages, including English, have six grammatical moods:

1. the declarative/indicative (affirmative)
2. the conditional (irrealis)
3. the interrogative
4. the imperative
5. the subjunctive
6. the negative

Mood is a syntactic device that speakers and writers use to convey their attitude or desires. The **indicative/declarative** mood is used to convey factual information. The essay prompt requires the writer to engage in some “wishful thinking,” as if they had the power to change the current linguistic conditions of the world. Obviously, nobody can do anything about this situation. Given this state of affairs, the indicative mood is not the right one for expressing what the essay prompt is calling for. A mature writer would turn to the **irrealis mood** in this situation. In English, the irrealis mood is not expressed with a future tense but by the form of the verb in the “past” tense. The future tense form of the verb is not used to convey the irrealis mood. This is the reason why the grammaticality of Sentence 2a is questionable. In English, proficient writers or speakers would call on the “past” tense form of modal verbs to encode the irrealis mood. Notice that “past” is between quotation marks. Though the past tense form of the modal verb is used here, the sentiment conveyed in the sentence has nothing to do with an event that took place in the past. The commonly heard expression <if I were you> is a good illustration of the “past” tense. Morphologically speaking, <were> is the “past” tense of <Be>, but the idea or sentiment expressed in this expression has nothing to do with an occurrence in the past. This is one of the reasons that led Koffi (2015:177) to state that the “past” tense of modals does not describe events or actions that have taken place in the chronological past. It is clear from the overall context of the essay that Sentence 2a should be expressed in the irrealis mood. Therefore, it should be written as follows:

Sentence 2b: Also, I would like to see the entire world...

Jenkins (1972:174) writes that when it comes to assessing the accuracy of modal verbs, the discourse context matters a lot, “Whether or not [a sentence] is marked deviant by the semantic rules depends in part on information from higher sentences.” The discourse context of the essay prompt calls for the use of the irrealis mood in this sentence, not the declarative mood with the tense of the verb in the future tense.

5.0 Pedagogical Application and Implications

The essay shows that the writer did not have any difficulties with the modal verbs in the sentences below:

Sentence 3a: *First it **might** be nice if everyone in the world spoke the some language.*

Sentence 3b: *That language **could** be English.*

We surmise from these sentences and others from the essay that the writer has a problem only with <will>. This writer could be helped by teaching the PSR of <will>, namely that it must always co-occur with a main verb. Secondly, the irrealis usage of <will> should be taught explicitly. These recommendations are similar to the ones made by Fong (2020: 6), Haegeman and Wekker (1984), namely that teaching the various syntactic and semantic contexts in which modal verbs occur is beneficial to L2 learners.

6.0 Summary

Developing writing proficiency in English is a daunting task for many L2 writers because they have to attend to multiple issues at once. The author of Essay #1 has a long road ahead. The essay has 10 sentences. Each sentence has one or more problems. In addition to misspellings, punctuation errors, and the infelicitous uses of <will>, there are additional issues such as missing articles, prepositions, and others. We have chosen to highlight only the omission of <t> in coda clusters and the usages of <will> because they can be remedied easily if orthographic and syntactic rules of English are taught explicitly.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ettien Koffi, Ph.D. linguistics (Indiana University, Bloomington, IN) teaches at Saint Cloud State University, MN. He is the author of five books and author/co-author of several dozen articles on acoustic phonetics, phonology, language planning and policy, emergent orthographies, syntax, and translation. His acoustic phonetic research is synergetic, encompassing L2 acoustic phonetics of English (Speech Intelligibility from the perspective of the Critical Band Theory), sociophonetics of Central Minnesota English, general acoustic phonetics of Anyi (a West African language), acoustic phonetic feature extraction for application in Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR), Text-to-Speech (TTS), voice biometrics for speaker verification, and infant cry bioacoustics. Since 2012, his high impact acoustic phonetic publications have been downloaded **54,717** times (**37,140** as per Digital Commons analytics, **17,577** (as per Researchgate.net analytics) and several thousand downloads from Academia.edu, as of **02/2023**. He can be reached at enkoffi@stcloudstate.edu.

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