

Looking beyond the content plane – Modal assessment in Norwegian learners' texts in German as a foreign language

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Abstract. This article seeks to obtain a better understanding of interpersonal meaning-making in short written responses by Norwegian learners of German as a foreign language by analysing the modal assessment strategies used in four different task settings. Based on the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the study focuses on how modal verbs, modal adjuncts and corresponding paraphrases are employed, and on the meanings which are realised accordingly. The study identifies several strategies and shows how they contribute to expressing different attitudes and to enacting different social relations. Overall, the study raises awareness of the central role of modal assessment in writing.

Mehr als nur die Inhaltsebene im Blick – Modale Bewertung in Texten norwegischer DaF-Lernender
Das Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, ein besseres Verständnis darüber zu erlangen, wie norwegische DaF-Lernende interpersonelle Bedeutung in kurzen Texten herstellen. Dafür wurden modale Bewertungsstrategien in Lernerantworten zu vier verschiedenen Aufgaben analysiert. Die Studie basiert auf der Systemisch-funktionalen Linguistik und untersucht, wie Modalverben, Modalwörter und entsprechende Paraphrasierungen verwendet werden und welche Bedeutungen mit diesen einhergehen. In der Studie konnten zahlreiche Strategien aufgedeckt werden und gleichzeitig konnte gezeigt werden, wie diese unterschiedliche Einstellungen ausdrücken und unterschiedliche soziale Beziehungen zu Rezipient*innen herstellen. Insgesamt wird durch die Studie die zentrale Rolle der modalen Bewertung in schriftlichen Texten hervorgehoben.

Keywords: Interpersonal meaning-making, modal assessment, writing, German as a foreign language | Interpersonelle Bedeutungskonstruktion, modale Bewertung, Schreiben, Deutsch als Fremdsprache

1 Introduction

One major aspect of learning a foreign language (FL), such as German, is the development of the knowledge and competence required to communicate adequately (cf. e.g. Council of Europe 2001; Utdanningsdirektoratet 2020). Adequate communication means considering what a listener/reader expects from us and thus making our own attitudes more or less visible relative to a rhetorical situation. In line with this, Lindgren and Stevenson (2013: 390) highlight that, within the context of the school environment, “young writers are expected to be able to express attitudes, feelings, and opinions; [and] to gradually develop a sense of ‘the other’ in their writing in the form of audience awareness”.

Yet there is only limited research into how and through which language choices FL learners express attitudes and interact with readers (cf. Ryshina-Pankova 2011; Yasuda 2019). This lack of research is particularly pronounced for secondary school classroom contexts in which FLs like German or Spanish are taught, i.e. languages that are commonly called third languages (L3s). To the best of my knowledge, previous studies conducted in primary or secondary school L3 contexts have only looked into how learners interact with readers and express opinions either in terms of more clear-cut genre writing (see e.g. Hamann 2023; Troyan 2016) or with respect to how learners acquire modal verbs (see e.g. Lindemann 1996). Accordingly, the current study seeks to further explore secondary school L3 learners’ interactional strategies in their written productions by focusing on how they enact personal and social relationships in short task responses through the use of modal assessment strategies. These include the use of modal verbs as well as modal adjuncts and paraphrased forms. Modal adjuncts are adverbs that, for example, express degrees of *possibility* (e.g. “maybe”) or comment on a proposition (e.g. “unfortunately”), while paraphrased forms can rephrase the meanings of modal verbs and adjuncts in other linguistic forms (e.g. “It is possible that ...”) (cf. e.g. Halliday/Matthiessen 2014: 186). By exploring modal assessment strategies used in L3 learners’ texts, this study aims to better understand how learners interact with others, evaluate content and present their own attitudes in short responses to writing prompts. This study focuses on secondary school learners of German as a foreign language (GFL), with the following two research questions guiding the analysis:

1. What modal assessment strategies are used in Norwegian GFL students’ (aged 17–18, in school year 12 and their 5th year of FL learning) written responses of short text length?
2. What variation in the use of modal assessment strategies can we observe in the datasets, and how do they contribute to shaping distinct enactments of social relationships and expressions of students’ own attitudes and assessments?

The theoretical framework chosen to answer the question of how and through which resources learners enact social and personal relationships is Systemic Functional Linguistics

(SFL; cf. e.g. Halliday/Matthiessen 2014; Schleppegrell 2012). According to this theory, language has three functions: ideational, textual and interpersonal. Besides creating experience (content; the ideational function) and organising the discursive flow (message; the textual function), the interpersonal function of language is to maintain social relationships and express one's own attitudes and assessments (cf. Halliday/Hasan 1989). The SFL-based functional grammar approach advocated by researchers like Halliday (e.g. 1994) and Halliday and Matthiessen (e.g. 2014) proposes distinct lexicogrammatical systems and resources for describing how all functions, including the interpersonal function, can be realised. This makes it a valuable tool for the analysis of social and personal relationships, which is also seen in this study. While there are different lexicogrammatical systems linked to the interpersonal function, this study focuses on describing how learners use linguistic resources connected to the interpersonal system of modal assessment, i.e. the resources of modal verbs, modal adjuncts and corresponding paraphrases that add a subjective meaning to a message. The data of the present study stems from the German part of the Tracking Written Learner Language (TRAWL) Corpus, comprising authentic school texts written by Norwegian learners of English, French, German and Spanish (cf. Dirdal/Hasund/Drange/Vold/Berg 2022). Overall, however, the German part of the corpus is quite small.

2 Interpersonal meaning-making

Interpersonal meaning-making has been approached through different research frameworks, such as stance (see e.g. Hyland 1999), metadiscourse (see e.g. Hyland 2005) or appraisal (see e.g. Martin/White 2005). Yet most research concerns the context of higher education and English as a foreign language (EFL) (cf. e.g. Lindgren/Stevenson 2013). To some degree, research can also be found on secondary school EFL contexts or L3 writing settings. Two common approaches to researching interpersonal meaning-making in those settings are, on the one hand, the evaluation of interpersonal language use in personal genres such as a recount of habitual events (see e.g. Abdel-Malek 2020) or a personal letter (see e.g. Lindgren/Stevenson 2013; Yasuda 2019) or, on the other, investigations of the development of certain features such as modal verbs or modal adjuncts in data from large learner corpora (see e.g. Hasund/Hasselgård 2022; Maden-Weinberger 2009). In contrast, little is yet known about secondary school L3 writers' interpersonal meaning-making in short text responses.

In the following, I will provide an overview of findings from research studies from EFL and GFL settings that, in line with the research goals of this study, investigate the use of interpersonal meaning-making features that can overall be assigned to the lexicogrammatical system of modal assessment. Subsequently, I will describe modal assessment strategies based on Halliday and Matthiessen (2014).

2.1 Previous research on the use of interpersonal meaning-making features

An investigation into how Norwegian EFL writers in lower secondary school use interpersonal meaning-making features was conducted by Hasund and Hasselgård (2022). They explore features related to writer/reader visibility (WRV) in argumentative and expository genres and found that young Norwegian EFL learners are visible writers, exhibiting an overuse of WRV features compared both to more advanced Norwegian EFL writers and to native writers. In particular, Hasund and Hasselgård (2022) identified the frequent use of first-person pronouns and modal verbs, and some use of the subjective stance expression “I think” and modal adjuncts like “maybe” and “really”. These findings are in line with other studies of Scandinavian EFL learners in tertiary education (cf. e.g. Aijmer 2002; Hasselgård 2009).

Ryshina-Pankova (2011) researched developmental changes in the use of interactional resources as the first part of the clause (i.e. in theme position) by university GFL learners in FL book reviews. She found that interpersonal themes expressed by modal adjuncts such as “möglichlicherweise” and “it”-constructions like “es war interessant” were used minimally in comparison to thematising the writer, reader, or book, with the former making the texts appear more subjective. Looking at GFL learners’ texts holistically, Maden-Weinberger (2009) identified a global tendency by university GFL learners to overuse modality markers of non-epistemic modal verb type compared to native speakers. Amongst other things, she found a frequent use of the *Konjunktiv II* form of the modal verb “mögen” and explained this with the learners’ higher inclination for expressing their own or other people’s intentions or volition in their essays (165). Yet Maden-Weinberger (2009) also pointed to the text-type sensitivity of this overuse (169–170). In line with Hasund and Hasselgård (2022), she found, for example, an overuse of modality markers in the case of argumentative texts.

Regarding the question of how GFL learners acquire modal verbs longitudinally, the findings by Maden-Weinberger (2009) were close to those by Lindemann (1996). Among other things, Lindemann (1996) found that Norwegian secondary school GFL learners experience problems in acquiring the German system of modal verbs, despite the similar nature of the systems of Norwegian and German. She also concluded that learners acquire the modal verbs in GFL by drawing on their existing language repertoire in Norwegian and English. This applied to the modal verb systems of “kunne”/ “can”, “må”/ “must”, “skulle”/ “shall” and “ville”/ “will”, with the learners trying to assign the most approximate lexemes of German to those verbs of the basic system (see also Hasund/Hasselgård 2022). Accordingly, the verbs most prevalent in the students’ learner language are “können”, “müssen”, “sollen” and “wollen” – which, according to Lindemann (1996), already allow the learners to express varied meanings at that stage of the learning process. In comparison, the

acquisition of, for example, “dürfen” expressing allowance and of the *Konjunktiv II* form “möchte” (“mögen”) for expressing a wish is found to be more complicated for the learners.

Overall, the studies that investigate modal assessment strategies in learners’ texts show similar interpersonal patterns. First, learners’ texts are often considerably subjective at earlier developmental stages. Second, many learners express personal stances in similar ways, for example through the construction “I think”. The studies indicate that these features are those which Norwegian learners are most familiar with. In addition, the studies point to various reasons why particular patterns of modal assessment resources occur, namely language development (cf. e.g. Maden-Weinberger 2008), a more speech-like style in writing (cf. e.g. Aijmer 2002), the influence of the mother tongue (cf. Hasselgård 2009; Lindemann 1996) and textbook-/teacher-induced influences, as well as the topic of a text (cf. Aijmer 2002). Regarding the latter, Aijmer (2002) calls for further research to take topic more closely into consideration when studying modality in learner writing. Aijmer (2014) further stresses the need for widening the focus on modal assessment in research and recommends doing so from a functional framework, with the latter accounting for a wide range of interpersonal features and strengthening the relationship between form and function. Moreover, Aijmer (2002) underlines the crucial nature of modal assessment features in the establishment of style and tone in a learner’s text – for example, by pointing to the influence which modals expressing certainty have on the rhetorical effect of the text. All this underlines the importance of further research on patterns of modal assessment and their linguistic representation, including with respect to pre-tertiary GFL contexts and different writing situations.

2.2 Modal assessment strategies

The following descriptions of modal assessment strategies are largely based on Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) and Andersen and Holsting (2015). The former work, together with the previous editions that were initially authored only by Halliday, constitutes the most central descriptive framework within SFL theory. Andersen and Holsting (2015) present detailed functional grammar descriptions of another Germanic language, namely Danish. This is significant given the lack of detailed SFL descriptions of German – the work by Steiner and Teich (2004) comprises only concise descriptions. In this section, all examples on the clause level presented in German have been created by me.

As mentioned earlier, modal assessment subsumes the ways of assessing a proposition subjectively (cf. Halliday/Matthiessen 2014). To that end, ideas are not only realised as being either positive or negative, such as “Sie hat die Prüfung (nicht) bestanden” but are located along different subjective meaning dimensions as in “Sie kann die Prüfung nicht bestehen”, “Sie muss die Prüfung bestehen” or “Hoffentlich besteht sie die Prüfung”. In line with Andersen and Holsting (2015; cf. also Halliday/Matthiessen 2014), four main modal

assessment strategies can be identified: (a) modality, (b) temporality, (c) intensity and (d) comment (see Table 1). In the following paragraphs, these are explained in detail.

Table 1: Modal assessment strategies (cf. Andersen/Holsting 2015; Halliday/Matthiessen 2014)

Type	Examples of assessment resources		
(a) Modality			
Modalisation	(1) <i>possibility</i>	<i>wahrscheinlich, vielleicht</i>	
	(2) <i>usuality</i>	<i>immer, selten</i>	
Modulation	<i>obligation</i>	(3) <i>allowance</i>	<i>können, dürfen</i>
		(4) <i>liability</i>	<i>sollen, müssen</i>
	<i>inclination</i>	(5) <i>will</i>	<i>wollen, Lust haben</i>
		(6) <i>ability</i>	<i>können, fähig sein</i>
(b) Temporality	<i>letztlich, bald, immer noch, schon</i>		
(c) Intensity	<i>kaum, eigentlich</i>		
(d) Comment	<i>leider, ehrlicherweise, persönlich</i>		

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 176) define (a) modality as the region of uncertainty in between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in which a proposition (i.e. exchange of information) or proposal (i.e. exchange of goods and services) is located. With respect to modality, two major subtypes are commonly differentiated, and these are modalisation and modulation. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 176–177), *modalisation* relates to propositions and concerns those assessments associated with the idea of modality in a strict sense, i.e. the degree of (1) *possibility* (probably yes, maybe no) and the degree of (2) *usuality* (always yes, sometimes no) (see Table 1). As an example of the subtype modalisation, the modal verb “muss” in “Tom muss beim Training sein” expresses that the language user assesses the incident of Tom being at training as very likely. Accordingly, the different modal verbs and modal adjuncts of modalisation type express varying degrees of likelihood or usuality. In contrast, *modulation* relates to proposals and locates a message between the poles of ‘do it’ and ‘don’t do it’ (177). Concerning the example of “Tom muss Fahrrad fahren”, the language user expresses a strong degree of obligation for Tom to ride a bike. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) consider modulation in terms of the subcategories of *obligation* and *inclination*, which Andersen and Holsting (2015) differentiate further into (3) *allowance* and (4) *liability* on the one hand, and (5) *will* and (6) *ability* on the other (see Table 1). *Liability* subsumes the categories of self-commitment, commitment, and necessity (216). While the distinctions regarding modality are very specific, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 181) stress this level of detail as important as “in the analysis of discourse (...) all these variants are likely to be met with, and their differences in meaning may have a marked effect on the unfolding and impact of the discourse” (see also Maden-Weinberger 2008).

The interpersonal assessment of (b) temporality locates propositions in the subjective dimension of time. It expresses how time is perceived by the speaker or what attitude the speaker has towards a course of time (Andersen/Holsting 2015: 223–224; Halliday/Matthiessen 2014: 187–188). Accordingly, Andersen and Holsting (2015) also assign adjuncts such as “plötzlich” to this category, stating the speaker’s surprise.

If speakers assess a proposition in terms of (c) intensity, they express how extensive, serious or natural they consider an action or incident, such as in “Ich habe mir nur/fast/tatsächlich mein Bein beim Unfall gebrochen”. Andersen and Holsting (2015) define *intensity* as one category with various meanings, having either the purpose of weakening or reinforcing a proposition (221–222; see also Halliday/Matthiessen 2014: 188–189).

Another kind of modal assessment is (d) commenting on a proposition (or proposal), for example by expressing how desirable, correct or significant something is. Both Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 187–193) and Andersen and Holsting (2015: 224–226) stress that this strategy comprises various meanings and aims at commenting within or outside of the boundaries of a sentence. The former is, for example, the case in “Klugerweise hörte er auf seinen Vater” and the latter in “Ganz ehrlich, du solltest auf deinen Vater hören“.

Modal assessments are realised through different linguistic resources. In the current study, these resources are analysed and described according to the following three categories: (i) modal verbs, (ii) modal adjuncts and (iii) paraphrased forms realised through related adjectival and noun groups and verbal constructions (cf. e.g. Halliday/Matthiessen 2014; Maden-Weinberger 2008). It is important to note that this is only one of several ways to categorise modal resources and that the categories do not represent closed groups either.

(i) Modal verbs are resources associated with the modal assessment category of (a) modality (cf. Andersen/Holsting 2015; Halliday/Matthiessen 2014). In German, the modal verb system is typically described in terms of six core verbs (“müssen”, “können”, “dürfen”, “sollen”, “wollen”, “mögen”) (cf. e.g. Duden-Grammatik 2016; Helbig/Buscha 2013). Nevertheless, the definition of modal verbs in the German language is still ambiguous (cf. e.g. Diewald 1999; Helbig/Buscha 2013; Hentschel/Weydt 2003), partly because the same verbs may sometimes be used as the only verb in German clauses. Also, there are verb groups such as the modal infinitive with “sein” and “haben” and verbs like “lassen” or “werden” that can express modal meaning comparable to that of the modal verbs. In addition, the use and meanings of the six core modal verbs are difficult to describe in clear and concise ways. This is why, for example, Hentschel and Weydt (2003: 80–82) and Helbig and Buscha (2013: 132) draw on additional criteria such as intensity, formality, or tense to describe the differences between “dürfen” / “können” (*allowance*), “sollen” / “müssen” (*liability*) and “wollen” / “möchte” (*will*). Commonly, the modal verbs are also differentiated in terms of epistemic use when expressing possibility and non-epistemic use when modulating a message (cf. e.g. Duden-Grammatik 2016: 571). For the current study, a brief

overview of modal verbs must suffice. In Table 2, an attempt is made to assign the six German modal verbs to the modality categories presented above. The asterisks in Table 2 mark *Konjunktiv II* forms.

Table 2: Overview of modality types and corresponding modal verbs, based on Helbig/Buscha (2013) and Lindemann (1996)

Modalisation	1. <i>possibility</i>	<i>können, *dürfte, mögen, *müsste, müssen</i>
	2. <i>usuality</i>	-----
Modulation	3. <i>allowance</i>	<i>dürfen, können</i>
	4. <i>liability</i>	<i>müssen, sollen</i>
	5. <i>will</i>	<i>wollen, *möchte</i>
	6. <i>ability</i>	<i>können</i>

(ii) Modal adjuncts are realised either as adverbial groups or prepositional phrases, comprising items such as “schon”, “noch immer”, “dem Anschein nach” or “im Großen und Ganzen”. They have the function of expressing *temporality*, *intensity* and *comments*, as well as modality of modalisation type (*possibility* and *usuality*) (cf. Andersen/Holting 2015; Halliday/Matthiessen 2014: 419–423). In traditional German grammar descriptions, the group of modal adjuncts is generally linked to classifications such as “Modalwörter” or “Kommentaradverbien” (cf. e.g. Duden-Grammatik 2016: 598–599; Helbig/Buscha 2013: 430–439).

(iii) Meanings expressed by modal verbs and modal adjuncts can also be encoded in paraphrased ways by transforming them into a clause including a verb or adjective with modal meaning (see examples 1.–3.). Helbig and Buscha (2013: 438–439) consider these forms as modal paraphrase constructions, while Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 679–685) term them explicit forms and distinguish them further as being either subjective, when formed with “ich” (see example 1.), or objective, when encoded in the relative “es ist” clause (see examples 2. and 3.). In addition to explicit forms, some modulation and comment subtypes can also be expressed with predicators of modal meaning (Halliday/Matthiessen 2014: 186) (see example 4.). Overall, the classification and identification of paraphrased forms is more ambiguous, as they do not take the form of a word but of a group or clause.

1. Ich *glaube*, dass sie heute arbeitet.
2. Es ist *wahrscheinlich*, dass
3. Es ist *überraschend*, dass
4. Er *hat* das *Recht*, dort zu fahren.

3 Methodology

In this section, the data and methodology of the analysis are presented. As this overview will show, the data analysed is small. Against this backdrop and the fact that paraphrases of modal assessment are part of a set of open class items, the analysis is mainly qualitative, including quantitative elements for obtaining a clearer overview of modal assessment strategies used by the learners.

3.1 Data

The data of this study stems from the German part of the TRAWL Corpus (cf. Dirdal et al. 2022). This corpus is still under compilation and contains texts retrieved from in-class work (ordinary writing activities, homework, school tests or mock exams) written by Norwegian secondary school learners of English as a first FL (beginning in year 1, aged 5–6), and German, French and Spanish as an L3 (beginning in year 8, aged 13–14).

Four subsets of the German part of TRAWL make up the data, which have the following four-letter codes in the corpus (cf. Dirdal et al. 2022): SCHU, FREU, JUNG, GESE (see Table 3). The responses stem from year 12 mock exam contexts in which the learners were in their fifth year of GFL learning. Here, it was customary practice up to and including the school year of 2020/21 to have a first task that is obligatory for all learners and revolves around a topic closely linked to the learners' everyday life, combined with the instruction to write a short text of three to five sentences. The four subsets were chosen because all learner group members responded to the same task, which led to larger data sets. In addition, the subsets present tasks that were of similar structure and elicited responses of comparable text length. In order to obtain broader insights into strategies and resources applied, I chose to use the data from two different learner groups, including in total 51 responses. Similar data from further learner groups was not available in the corpus. Both learner groups, here called group A and B, consisted of 13 GFL learners (aged 17-18) respectively (for further information on the learner codes, see appendix). The data sets were collected in the school years 2020/21 (group A) and 2018/19 (group B).

Table 3 presents the writing prompts that elicited the short text responses from either learner group A or B, together with the codes of the parent data sets in the TRAWL Corpus. I also added translations to the prompts and underlined words/groups which are indicators of modal assessment. In the third column of the table, I added information on which strategy is indicated. It needs to be stressed that the strategy of *ability* outlined for the FREU prompt has to be understood as ability due to external circumstances and not to one's own capacity. Here, one could speak of possibility but in a modulating sense (cf. Maden-Weinberger 2009: 158).

Table 3: Overview of writing prompts comprising the data

Code	Prompt	Strategy	Group
SCHU	Was machen Sie <u>persönlich</u> , um die Umwelt zu schützen? [<i>What do you do personally to save the environment?</i>]	personal engagement (comment)	A
FREU	Was <u>kann</u> man mit einem guten Freund/mit einer guten Freundin machen? [<i>What can you do with a good friend?</i>]	ability (modulation)	
JUNG	Was ändert sich, wenn man 18 wird? [<i>What changes when one turns 18?</i>]	-----	B
GESE	Wie wichtig sind soziale Medien, zum Beispiel Facebook, <u>in Ihrem Leben</u> ? Begründen Sie Ihre Antwort. [<i>How important is social media, for example Facebook, in your life? Give reasons for your answer.</i>]	personal engagement (comment)	

Table 4 provides further information on the data of this study. It shows how many learners of the respective learner group responded to each prompt and provides information on the number of words per response (mean length, and the lowest and highest value). Even though the higher number of words observed in learner group B might be an indication of more advanced skills compared to learner group A, the study does not control for language skills.

Table 4: Overview of the data

Group	Prompt	No. texts	Number of words per response		
			Mean	Lowest	Highest
A	SCHU	13	40.5	27	67
	FREU	12	42	27	82
B	JUNG	13	56	42	105
	GESE	13	48	39	101

3.2 Analytical approach

The empirical data is analysed in two steps, first through quantitative overviews of learners' modal assessment strategies, followed by a qualitative close reading of the learners' strategies. In the quantitative part, each learner text was analysed for instances of modal verbs, modal adjuncts and corresponding paraphrases, as well as for which modal assessment (sub)types they express in line with the categorisations by Andersen and Holsting (2015) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) (see also section 2.2). For two main reasons, this analysis was conducted manually. First, paraphrases of modal assessment in particular are part of a set of open class items (cf. e.g. Maden-Weinberger 2009: 104), and to allow for automatic retrieval, this class of resources would have had to be narrowed down.

Considering the small amount of data available for this study, I assessed this to be a disproportionate effort. Second, and most importantly, the main aim of the current study was to investigate the meanings that underlie quantitative patterns and not to investigate consistent developmental patterns (cf. e.g. Durrant/Brenchley/Clarkson 2020). Searching for quantitative patterns manually thus allowed me to explore modal assessment resources in all their breadth and to observe the underlying meanings in depth.

3.3 Methodological limitations

A main limitation of this study is that it is of restricted generalisability. The data is small and represents short text responses to only four writing prompts of varying character. In addition, the data stems from only two different learner groups which were not controlled for their specific language level. Regarding the analytical approach, it also appears difficult to maintain a thoroughly lexicogrammatical perspective. While certain paraphrased forms such as “Es ist wichtig” can clearly be assigned to grammatical descriptions as provided by, for example, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), rephrased expressions such as “Ich finde ... wichtig” or “... ist wichtig in meinem Leben” are not clearly outlined by the scholars. Another main limitation of this study is that quantitative patterns are analysed manually and the categorisations made have not been cross-checked by others. While the categorisations are based on extensive grammatical descriptions, the possibility of errors cannot be ruled out.

While both larger and more homogeneous data sets and a corpus-based statistical analysis would have been valuable for making reliable statements about the learners’ interpersonal strategy use, this study makes an important contribution as it considers corpus data presenting texts and prompts retrieved from an authentic classroom situation. Thus, the findings can provide valuable initial insights into the learners’ interpersonal strategy use and their linguistic repertoire regarding modal assessment resources, which again is relevant to future research on interpersonal meaning-making and the discussion of grammar teaching.

4 Findings

This section presents patterns of modal assessment strategies and resources identified in the learners’ responses to the four writing prompts of SCHU, FREU, GESE, JUNG. It begins with a general overview of the assessment strategies utilised (see section 4.1). Subsequently, these findings are presented in more detail, with a focus on how the strategies employed affect the interpersonal meaning-making process and what kind of resources were applied. This will be done in a twofold manner: To begin with, modal assessments of *modality*, *intensity* and *temporality* are described, as assessments of certain aspects of *temporality* and *intensity* were often found to interrelate with indications of *modality* (see section 4.2). Subsequently, I describe how the learners *commented* on propositions (see section

4.3). The qualitative findings are presented together with examples from the learner texts in their original, authentic form. To present implications for the meaning-making process, some examples of *modality* assessments are also contrasted with statements indicating no modality. Due to the difficulty of translating specific meanings, the examples are given only in their original German version without translations.

4.1 Modal assessment strategies – Overview

Figure 1 shows an overview of the types of assessment strategies found in the learner responses, together with the number of responses in which this strategy was applied at least once. The overview presents several general insights into modal assessment across the responses. First, all major assessment strategies can be found in the data of this study (i.e. across in total 51 responses). Second, *modality* of the modulation type presents itself as a major assessment strategy across all four writing prompts. Third, the overview shows a high number of comment strategies in the responses to two writing prompts. However, these, as well as indications of *temporality*, appear as highly dependent on the topic or writing prompt. The following sections present in more detail the use of different assessment strategies and resources regarding the four different writing prompts.

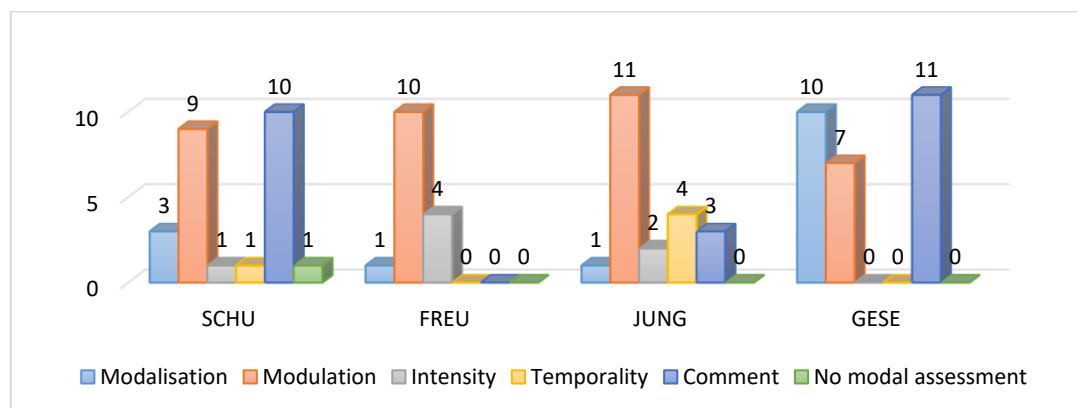


Figure 1: Number of learner responses with modal assessments of the various types

4.2 Modal assessment strategies of modality, intensity and temporality type

An overview of the distinct kinds of *modality* assessment strategies (modalisation and modulation) found in the learner responses is provided in Figure 2, together with the number of responses in which this strategy was applied at least once. The figure shows that the types of *modality* assessment vary from prompt to prompt. While the responses particular to FREU and to JUNG are characterised mostly by assessments of the same type (*ability* or *allowance*), the assessments of *modality* appear varied in the responses to SCHU and GESE.

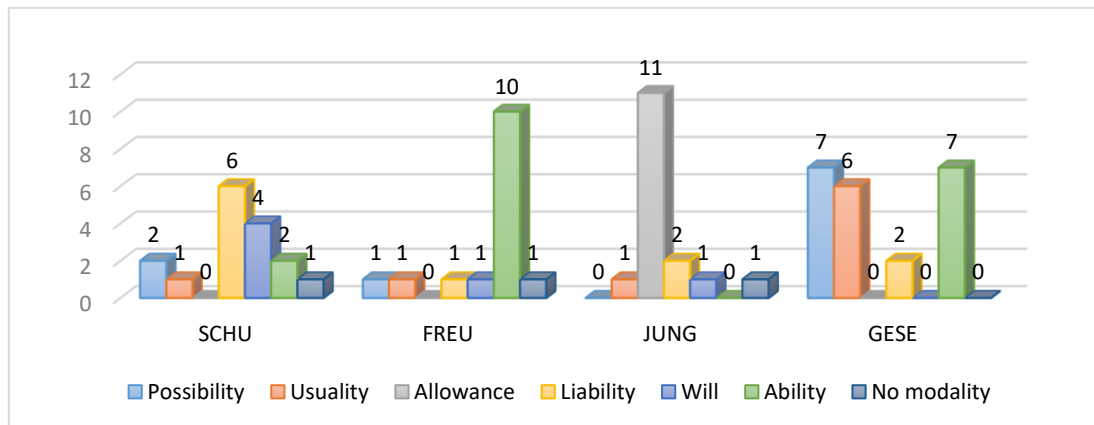


Figure 2: Number of learner responses with assessments of modality of the various types

In the following, the use of the different *modality* assessments across the individual prompts is described in detail, also with a focus on the resources used. Due to the distributions presented in Figure 2, the descriptions focus first on the strategies applied to FREU and JUNG, followed by those to GESE and SCHU. In all examples provided in this section, assessments of **modality** are marked in bold, those of TEMPORALITY are capitalised and those of intensity as underlined.

In ten out of all twelve responses to FREU, the assessment strategy of *ability* can be observed. This reflects the type of assessment indicated in the writing prompt by the modal verb “können”. Across those ten responses where *ability* is indicated, around two thirds of all propositions comprise possible activities that can be done with a good friend (see example i.). The other two learner responses differ in that they contain propositions that are either not assessed in terms of modality or only assessed in terms of *liability* (see examples ii. and iii.). As can be seen in the examples i. and iii., learners also assessed how natural common activities with a friend or requirements of a good friend are in terms of *intensity*.

- i. Zum Beispiel **kann** man ins Kino gehen, Computerspiele spielen oder (...). Wir **können** auch einfach miteinander reden. (P60660)
- ii. Ich bin mit meinem guten Freund zu Oslo gewesen. (...) Wir haben es sehr Spaß hier. (P60666)
- iii. Ein guter Freund **muss** natürlich werden ganz glaubhaft. ... Zu der Letzt **müssen** dich und deinen Freund ganz Spaß haben. (P60667)

Most often, the responses to JUNG contain propositions unassessed in terms of modality and deal with what happens when one turns eighteen. However, almost all responses also present at least one assessment of *allowance* (see examples iv. and v.). The learners characteristically state what they/people turning eighteen are allowed to do, and sometimes also what parents are not allowed to do any longer. In total, this strategy is applied to more than a quarter of all propositions. Another modality assessment strategy applied additionally in two responses is *liability*, used to express impatience regarding becoming independent (see

example vi.). These meanings are partly also created through assessments of *temporality* (see examples v., vi.). Additionally, some assessments of *intensity* can be found where learners express how natural life at the age of eighteen and the associated opportunities are to them (see examples iv. and vi.).

- iv. *Ein achtzehnjähriger ist verantwortlich für seine Wirtschaft. Er ist nicht abhängig von seinen Eltern, und er **kann eigentlich** machen was er selbst wollen. (P60269)*
- v. *Man ist ENDLICH selbstständig und man **kann** über sich selbst bestimmen. Die Eltern **haben auch nicht so sagen**, wenn man 18 wird. (P60261)*
- vi. *Ein Leben als 18, sieht für mich wirklich gut aus. Aber es gibt ein Problem (...). Das heißt, dass das Leben NOCH NICHT so verändert wird (...). Man **muss** also bis 20 warten! (P60264)*

In the responses to GESE, there are various propositions that are assessed only in terms of *usuality* (“jeden Tag”, “immer”, “oft”). These assessments mostly express how often a certain device or app is used (see examples vii., x. and xi.). In addition, seven learners employed assessments of *ability* (“können”), most often expressing that various things can be done through social media (i.e. in the sense of options) (see example viii.). In some cases, the assessment of *ability* is also used by learners to express that they are (not) able to live without their mobile phone or social media (see examples ix., x.). In a similar way, two learners also use the assessment of *liability* (“sollen”) to indicate that they should reduce their screen time (see example x.). In both instances where this is presented as a necessity, the learners present this proposition as something they are sure of, indicated by modalisation resources of *possibility* (“ich denke”, “ich weiß”). The assessment of *possibility* is also used in other ways: two learners use modalisation to evaluate their use of social media as (un)likely to be a sign of addiction (see example xi.), while two other learners express certainty concerning the role of social media in their lives (see example ix.).

- vii. *Ich benutze Snapchat (...) **jeden Tag** weil ich mit meinem Freunde da kommuniziere. (P60269)*
- viii. *(...) weil ich mit Freunde und Familie kommunizieren **kann**. (P60266)*
- ix. ***Ich denke**, dass soziale Medien ganz wichtig in meinem Leben sind. Es ist ein Teil (...), aber ich **kann** ohne soziale Medien ein paar Tagen überlebe. (P60272)*
- x. *wenn ich mein Frühstück esse, ist das Handy **immer da!** Ich **kann** es nicht wecklegen, obwohl **ich weiß**, dass ich nicht zu viel Zeit mit meinem Handy brauchen **soll**. (P60264)*
- xi. *Meine Mutti fragt mich **oft**, ob ich abhängig bin, doch **ich denke nicht so**. (P60271)*

In the responses to SCHU, most propositions carry no assessment of modality. Commonly, propositions appear similar to example xii., and sometimes also to example xiii. If a modal

assessment strategy is used, this is mostly *liability*, occurring across six learner responses in one or two propositions respectively (see example xiv.). This strategy can be linked to the wider context of environmental protection, with the propositions being realised as demands for commitment. The second most common assessment of modulation is *will*, expressing that there is a strong motivation to protect the environment (see example xv.). Other minor assessment strategies applied are *ability*, expressing that life on earth is only possible in a healthy environment (see example xvi.), and modalisation in terms of *possibility* (see example xv.).

- xii. *Der Klimaschutz ist wichtig, weil Menschheit (...) gut Klima brauchen. (P60661)*
- xiii. *Ich fahre ein Elektroauto und sortiere Müll. (P60670)*
- xiv. *Wir **müssen** der Mull recyceln und zusammen arbeiten für ein besser Klima. (P60668)*
- xv. *Die Erde hast selbstverständlich in sehr viele Jahre dauert, und **ich denke**, dass wir **will**¹ die Erde behält viel länger. (P60666)*
- xvi. *(...) so dass Menschen und das Tiere **können** überleben. (P60664)*

Concerning SCHU in particular, the analysis further indicates that modal assessment strategies also interrelate with the subjects chosen in a proposition, which in combination lead to distinct tones. In Table 5, an attempt is made to stress some of those relations (*liability*, no modal assessment and subject choice) and their impact on the meaning-making process.

Table 5: Subject and modal assessment strategy choice and their implication for meaning-making

Subject	Expression of <i>liability</i>	No modal assessment
“Ich”	Expression of self-commitment to environmental protection (=EP)	Description of own EP activities
“Wir”	Call for common EP commitments	Description of how life is without EP
Other	Expression of necessity to take care of the earth	Explanations of connection between EP and life

As different modal assessments were expressed within and across the responses to the four writing prompts, the linguistic resources indicating *modality*, *temporality* and *intensity* also varied. Table 6 presents what kind of modality markers the learners employed across the prompts, i.e. modal verbs, modal adjuncts and paraphrases, along with the total number of

¹ Due to typical interference errors with English, it is not entirely clear at this point whether the learner wants to express “wollen” or “werden”. However, based on the previous sentences, I tend to read the meaning “wollen” into this part.

times a specific resource was used. The asterisks (see also Table 7) mark incorrect language learner forms.

Table 6: Modality assessment resources

Modality type	Modal verbs	Modal adjuncts	Paraphrases
possibility		<i>vielleicht (3), wahrscheinlich,</i>	<i>ich denke,... (3), ich weiß, ... (2), ich denke nicht</i>
usuality		<i>jeden Tag (4), immer (3), oft (2) normalerweise selten, nie</i>	
allowance	<i>können (28), nicht können (2)</i>		<i>haben ... *so [zu], das Recht haben</i>
liability	<i>müssen (11), sollen (4), nicht dürfen, *können</i>		
will	<i>wollen (2), nicht wollen (2), möchten</i>		
ability	<i>können (76), nicht können (4)</i>		

In line with the resources commonly associated with modalisation on the one hand and modulation on the other, the overview in Table 6 shows that the learners mostly express the former through modal adjuncts and paraphrases, while modulation is nearly exclusively expressed through modal verbs. Regarding the latter, the modal verb most dominantly used is “können”. This results from the meanings associated with the prompts of FREU and GESE but also from the fact that all learners realised the meaning of *allowance* in response to JUNG through “können” as a variant of “dürfen”. Other modal verbs which are commonly found are “müssen”, “sollen” und “wollen”, associated with the meanings of *liability* and *will*. The verbs “dürfen” and the *Konjunktiv II* form of “mögen” appear only once. In response to JUNG, two instances of paraphrased indications of *allowance* can also be found, realised as the verbal construction “Recht haben” and the modal infinitive “haben zu”.

The modal adjuncts that were used to realise the assessments of *temporality* and *intensity* are presented in Table 7. As Table 7 shows, diverse resources were found across the responses, including “endlich” as a frequent resource for expressing *temporality* and “nur” for expressing *intensity*.

Table 7: Adjuncts of temporality and intensity

Prompt	Adjuncts of temporality	Adjuncts of intensity
SCHU	<i>*immer noch [noch immer]</i>	<i>nur</i>
FREU		<i>einfach, natürlich, nur (2)</i>
JUNG	<i>endlich (3), *nur [noch], noch nicht</i>	<i>sogar, wirklich, eigentlich</i>

4.3 Modal assessment strategies of comment type

As shown in Figure 1, comment strategies were particularly common in the responses to SCHU and GESE, and to a smaller degree also to JUNG. Table 8 presents an overview of the types of comment strategies and resources identified in line with Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 191) across the responses.

Table 8: Types of comment strategies and resources identified

Prompt	Type of comment strategy	No. of responses	Resources
SCHU	significance	10	<i>Es ist wichtig, dass (2)</i> <i>Ich finde ... wichtig. (10)</i>
JUNG	desirability/undesirability	1	<i>leider</i>
JUNG	specific validity	2	<i>in der Theorie, offiziell, gesetzlich</i>
GESE	personal engagement/ individuality	11	<i>für mich (6)</i> <i>in meinem Leben (6)</i>

As Table 8 shows, the learners generally comment in similar ways on propositions with respect to the different prompts. Dominant in responses to SCHU is the expression of significance (see example xvii.), while the learners commonly indicated personal engagement or individuality in their responses to GESE (see example xviii.). It needs to be noted that the structure “ich finde ... wichtig” is considered a paraphrase of the form “es ist wichtig, dass ...”, and the group “in meinem Leben” as a paraphrase for “für mich” (see Table 8). The strategy employed in response to GESE reflects what has been indicated in the writing prompt. As example xviii. shows, indications of personal engagement or individuality can often be found in connection with propositions in which (types of) social media are outlined as significant.

xvii. *Ich finde Umwelt- und Klimaschutz sehr wichtig. (SCHU)*

xviii. *Soziale Medien sind sehr wichtig in mein Leben. (GESE)*

In response to JUNG, two learners use comments to assess allowances or conditions linked to turning eighteen from an official point of view (see examples xix. and xx., as well as the resources described in Table 7). With this comment strategy, learners express that not every person turning 18 inevitably can or wants to make use of this right.

xix. *In der Theorie, kann man alles allein machen. (JUNG, P60264)*

xx. *Viele Leute starten auch über Alkohol zu denken, weil sie das **gesetzlich** trinken können. (JUNG, P60266)*

4.4 Summary of findings

Overall, the analysis of strategies in the learners' responses to SCHU, FREU, JUNG and GESE shows various modal assessment strategies employed. It became evident that each prompt led to one major strategy employed across the majority of responses, in addition to other further assessment strategies. Table 9 presents an overview of the major and further strategies observed in the data.

Table 9: Overview of major and further modal assessment strategies across the data sets

Code	Prompt	Major modal assessments	Further modal assessments
SCHU	Was machen Sie persönlich, um die Umwelt zu schützen?	<i>significance</i>	<i>liability, will, ability</i>
FREU	Was kann man mit einem/r guten Freund/in machen?	<i>ability</i>	
JUNG	Was ändert sich, wenn man 18 wird?	<i>allowance</i>	<i>specific validity</i>
GESE	Wie wichtig sind soziale Medien (...) in Ihrem Leben?	<i>personal engagement</i>	<i>ability, possibility, usuality</i>

In general, the findings show that the various strategies applied – partly also in combination with one another – led to distinctive social relationships and attitudes being enacted and expressed by the writers. Amongst other things, the learners made calls to save the environment (SCHU), expressed impatience with respect to becoming independent (JUNG), or articulated their view on their own social media use in connection with addiction (GESE). The findings further indicate that not only the presence of certain strategies, but also the absence thereof may have important rhetorical effects.

To express assessments of modulation, the learners predominantly drew on the modal verbs “können”, “müssen”, “sollen” and “wollen”. As could further be seen, the encoding of *possibility, usuality, temporality, intensity* and *comments* elicited the use of modal adjuncts or paraphrases, which often were of the same type. Particularly in responses to JUNG, however, it could be seen that the range and type of modal adjuncts in part differed notably from those used in response to the other prompts.

5 Discussion

The aim of this article is to describe modal assessment strategies used by Norwegian GFL learners in responses of short text length and to observe how the different strategies employed contribute to shaping distinct enactments of social relationships and expressions of attitudes and assessments. As stated in the introduction, a major assumption within SFL theory is that we as speakers always enact social and personal relationships when constructing experiences. By presenting different modal assessment strategies, including cases in which no modal assessment is applied, the current study points out the various ways in which GFL learners present different perspectives on a topic and add distinct tones in short written responses in terms of modal assessment. Thus, the study has provided insights into how and through which language choices L3 learners express attitudes and interact with readers in short text responses. When examined in more detail, the findings revealed strategies which were directly or indirectly linked to the wording and content construed in the writing prompt, including modal assessment strategies that were less predictable. These insights are in line with Aijmer (2002 and 2014), who emphasises the influence of the writing prompt and its topic. Thus, the findings of the current study contribute to raising awareness of the fact that modal assessment strategies cannot always be concluded from the surface structures of the writing prompt but also result from the learners' individual perspectives on a topic. This was particularly the case for the responses to SCHU: the prompt does not indicate assessments of modality – neither directly nor indirectly – yet the learners assessed propositions widely in terms of *liability*. This is likely a result of SCHU revolving around a very current topic associated with a diversity of opinions and even calls for action. The fact that learners also present rather individual perspectives on a topic might be linked to a learning context such as the secondary school GFL classroom, which still seems to place little focus on specific modal assessments to be conveyed, with more room for writer/reader visibility and for expressing assessments reflecting one's own ideas regarding a topic.

The findings further show the impact which the unique ways of employing modal verbs, modal adjuncts and corresponding paraphrases – or their absence – may have on the overall communicative purpose of a response. In the responses to FREU, for example, the analysis showed that the absence of modal assessment resources ultimately gave the propositions a reporting nature. Regarding the responses to SCHU, Table 5 suggests even more specifically how modal assessment resources – together with the use of specific subjects – shape the communicative purpose of a response in varying ways, from expressing certain realities, to making requests or describing particular facts. These findings thus stress the role of interpersonal resources in the overall meaning-making process.

The analysis of the use of modal assessment resources further shows that the learners have many linguistic means to assess messages in different ways: Regarding the use of modal

verbs, the study could – in line with Lindemann (1996) – point out that the learners appear to have a good command of the four basic modal verbs, allowing them to realise varied meanings of modulation. These findings also reflect the prevalent focus on modal verbs in GFL grammar teaching in Norway (cf. Haukås/Malmqvist/Valfridsson 2016). At the same time the findings also point out modal assessment resources which are likely still under development. In line with Lindemann (1996), it appears, for example, that the modal verb “dürfen” is not yet part of the learners’ general linguistic repertoire. While it seems that the learners were able to express their ideas through another variant of modal verbs (see Table 2), “dürfen” would still appear most appropriate for expressing allowance given by an external party in formal language use (cf. Maden-Weinberger 2009: 40–41). Concerning other assessment resources, it could also be seen that the learners commonly made use of modal adjuncts and paraphrastic forms like “vielleicht” and “ich denke, dass ...” – that is, resources that were also found more frequently in corpus-based studies on modality resources in less advanced learner language (see also e.g. Hasund/Hasselgård 2022; Maden-Weinberger 2009). A broader range of modal adjuncts and paraphrastic resources were found particularly in some responses to JUNG for expressing *allowance*, *intensity* and *comments*. Reasons for this broader range might be that the structure and topic of those prompts allowed for more varied ways of positioning oneself as a writer, or that the learners who used those resources have more advanced language skills (cf. Maden-Weinberger 2008). In any case, the specific adjuncts and paraphrases identified in the responses to JUNG show how a growing range of modal assessment resources allows the learners to express certain nuanced interpersonal meanings.

Overall, the findings may have important pedagogical implications with respect to teaching grammar and writing activities. The findings suggest a general need to raise the learners’ and teachers’ awareness of modal assessment strategies in the entire meaning-making process, possibly also with respect to the wording of writing prompts. To that end, the study also stresses the importance of teaching modal verbs not only from a grammatical perspective (cf. Haukås et al. 2016), and the value of developing a nuanced repertoire of modal adjuncts and corresponding paraphrases also in the secondary school GFL context. This might also imply a need to give secondary school L3 learners different writing opportunities for learning how to express their own perspectives in regard to a topic.

6 Conclusion

This study investigated patterns of modal assessment strategies and resources employed in Norwegian GFL learners in responses of short text length to four different writing prompts. It presented in detail what attitudes and assessments the learners expressed and how they did so, with some responses being closely linked to what was indicated in the writing prompt, while other strategies contributed to expressing rather individual attitudes and

enactments of personal and social relationships. The findings indicate that the strategies are linked in unique ways to the writing prompt, its wording and topic, the learners' own perspective towards a topic, and the informal writing context.

Overall, the findings underlined the impact which modal assessments of the distinct types have on the interpersonal meaning-making process. Considering, for example, the texts written in response to the task coded as FREU, it can be seen how the assessment of *ability* is central to responding in a way expected by the reader, while the responses in which modal assessment is absent rather represent accounts of a common experience. With respect to the prompt SCHU, it became particularly clear how the variable expressions of the students' own attitudes and assessments shape the rhetorical effect on the reader. As an implication, the findings stress the important role of interpersonal meaning-making strategies in written responses.

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Appendix

Overview of learner data

Due to standards in TRAWL-based research, this table provides information on the learners that provided the data for this study. The table shows the unique student codes with which each individual learner can be searched in the TRAWL Corpus. As the learners assigned to groups A and B belonged to two different classrooms, their codes differ (in this case, the third digit is different).

Learner codes in TRAWL Corpus	
Learner group A	Learner group B
P60660	P60260
P60661	P60261
P60662	P60262
P60663	P60263
P60664	P60264
P60665	P60265
P60666	P60266
P60667	P60267
P60668	P60268
P60669	P60269
P60670	P60270
P60671	P60271
P60672	P60272

Kurzbio:

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