



# Evaluating the Degree of Conviction in Environmental Texts in Cameroonian ELT Textbooks

Samuel Atechi<sup>1\*</sup>, Divine N. Ade<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Yaounde I, Cameroon

**Abstract:** This sociolinguistic study sets out to critically examine the way modals in prescribed English language teaching (ELT) textbooks in the English and French sub-systems of education in Cameroon convey conviction that potentially influences the attitudes of learners towards nature protection and degradation. More specifically, it looks into the opaque ways through which modals exude conviction in environment texts in Cameroonian ELT textbooks, and how this conviction affects communication regarding the protection of the natural world in diverse contexts. The work was corpus-based and was undertaken within the theoretical framework of Ecolinguistics propounded by Stibbe (2015). A mixed-methods approach was used in this research endeavour for the analysis of the collected data. The analysis reveals concerning trends. The results show that the modals deployed significantly exude low conviction in the environment texts, with the modal “can” dominating with 52.8%. Comparing newly prescribed and previously prescribed ELT textbooks in Cameroon, it clearly stands out that conviction levels remain stagnant, or decline, in the newer ELT textbooks. The findings hint that environment texts in ELT textbooks in Cameroon do not sufficiently achieve their purpose as recommended by the Competency-based Approach which anchors the country’s educational systems, and which requires connecting learners to their daily realities through classroom knowledge, and equipping them with contextual knowledge that aims at permitting them to resolve real-life situations. The prevalence of low conviction modals suggests that ELT textbooks in Cameroon may inadvertently hinder environmental conscientisation, thereby emphasising the need for linguistically informed textbook designers to promote effective environmental education.

**Keywords:** Conviction, Ecolinguistics, Biosphere, Protection, Conscientisation.

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## Research Paper

### \*Corresponding Author:

**Samuel Atechi**

University of Yaounde I,  
Cameroon

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## INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation has emerged as a pervasive and pressing global issue over the past few years. Up to 4.2 million people die each year as a result of the planet’s serious environmental concerns, which comprise pollution, biodiversity loss, desertification, and climate change (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2018). The need for urgent action to protect the environment is also echoed by the United Nations (UN) Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, who says “We must put the health of the planet at the centre of all our plans and policies” (UN Environment Assembly, 2021). This implies discussions on the natural environment and its preservation and problems are no longer the affair of just scientists and social scientists, but of everyone regardless of age, origin and domain. Linguists are also

not left out of environmental discussions. This explains the emergence of Ecolinguistics in the early 1990s (see Dastenaee and Poshtvan, 2018). In principle, Ecolinguistics probes into the part played by linguistic elements in spurring humans to either protect or destroy the natural environment. Alexander and Stibbe (2013) declare that there is a dialectic relationship between language and the ecosystem which cannot be overstressed. According to them, this relationship has poignant implications on the views and actions of people regarding the ecosystem. Stibbe (2015) states, “We can examine texts and ask whether they encourage us to notice and pay attention to animals, plants, forests, rivers, soil, air and nature, because only if we notice the natural world would we protect it.” Between the lines of the texts are found hidden stories that can be uncovered with the aid of these resources, and from an ecological standpoint,

it can be questioned if these stories promote the destruction or preservation of the natural environment, after which stories that are eco-friendly are encouraged and those that are harmful to the biosphere are discouraged (Stibbe 2015). Some previous ecolinguistic studies have investigated how language represents nature (Rosenfeld, 2019; Atieno and Njoroge, 2016) and non-human animals (Bhattacharjee and Sinha, 2021; Simotwo, 2019), for instance. In Cameroon, research in the domain has focused on linguistic preferences in environmental reporting (Munoh, 2012; Acha, 2022), climate change discourse (Angwah, 2020) and nature representation in traditional tales and fables (Ambe, 2021), just to name a few.

## 1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In Cameroon, government keeps making efforts to safeguard the biosphere. One domain that reflects these efforts is education whereby, through the Competency-based Approach (CBA), introduced in the year 2012 by the Ministry of Secondary Education through decree N°263/14/MINSEC/IGE/of 13<sup>th</sup> August 2012, every school subject is taught with the mission to associate classroom knowledge with realities of daily existence (Ndagang, 2019:7). Apart from the usual subjects like Geography and Biology that contain lessons on environmental preservation and degradation, the authorised English language teaching (ELT) textbooks for secondary schools in Cameroon go as far as having an entire module that discusses environmental issues with the aim of equipping learners with eco-friendly behaviours. Despite these numerous endeavours, the country continues grappling with the incessant scourge of pollution and other environmental issues that endanger the well-being of the biosphere, as reported by Afrobarometer (2023). Serious concerns, thus, get raised about what really is informing the negative human practices that continuously decimate the natural environment. Against the backdrop of Stibbe's (2015) view that language has the power to mentally reduce the natural world to mere objects and resources that have to be conquered, and it has the potential to equally inspire people to respect and protect their natural environment, an evaluation of the expression of conviction in environment texts in Cameroonian ELT textbooks is necessary to understand its potential impact on shaping students' environmental awareness and sustainability values. Specifically, from an epistemic point of view, this paper explores the opaque ways through which modals exude conviction in environment texts in Cameroonian ELT textbooks, and how this conviction affects communication regarding the protection of the natural world in diverse contexts. Stibbe (2015:129) establishes convictions as "stories in people's minds about whether a particular description is true, certain, uncertain or false". Language is an efficient means of communicating convictions, and modal expressions are one of the main linguistic tools for expressing epistemic stance because they allow a speaker to convey their level of certainty, conviction or doubt.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

The data for this study was made up of environment texts in ELT textbooks in the English and French sub-systems of education in Cameroon. These textbooks comprise officially authorised ELT textbooks in the English and French sub-systems of education. The ELT textbooks from the English sub-system of education include *Mastering English* Book One (ME1), Book Two (ME2), Book Three (ME3), Book Four (ME4), Book Five (ME5), and Book Six and Seven (MEHS), as well as the freshly introduced *Prime English* Book One (PR1), Book Two (PR2), Book Four (PR4) and Book Five PR5), and *Innovative English* Book Three (IN3). Those from the French sub-system of education are *Interactions in English* for *sixième* (6eIE), *cinquième* (5eIE), *quatrième* (4eIE), *troisième* (3eIE), *seconde* (2eIE), *première* (1eIE) and *terminale* (TeIE) classes, as well as the newly introduced *L'Eveil* for *sixième* (SIEV), *cinquième* (CIEV), *quatrième* (QUEV) and *troisième* (TREV) classes. These textbooks are each partitioned into five modules following the exigencies of the Competency-based Approach which guides teaching and learning in the English and French sub-systems of education in Cameroon. The study was only concerned with the module entitled "Environment, Well-being and Health" – the module aimed at equipping learners with environmental awareness and eco-friendly behaviours through linguistic activities. After acquiring all the targeted ELT textbooks, the researcher carefully read through the concerned section – Module Three – which deals with the natural environment. Thereafter, manual content analysis was deployed to gather the required data. This was carried out by reviewing the texts in a systematical manner to identify and extract the targeted linguistic feature – modals. Accurate identification of the targeted feature was assured by this methodical approach which guaranteed contextual understanding. In fact, not just every modal was of interest. Only those directly concerned with nature protection and degradation were of interest given that the benchmark for the analysis is Stibbe's (2015) ecosophy which hinges on care for the natural world, and given that the study investigates the potential role these modals play in spurring protection or degradation of the natural world. Once these modals were identified, the researcher catalogued them under their respective textbook titles. Additionally, the researcher noted the respective page numbers of the features, ensuring that the data remained referenced and retrievable. This organisational approach made the counting, comparison and analysis of the features less daunting.

Our study made use of a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The quantitative approach facilitated a comprehensive examination of trends and patterns within the targeted linguistic feature that comprised the dataset of the study, and went a long way in providing statistical validation. Conversely, the qualitative approach enabled in-depth exploration of linguistic nuances and contextual

meanings, offering richer thematic insights. This dual approach ensured a comprehensive understanding, leveraging numerical precision and narrative depth. Combining both methods guaranteed thorough understanding as it balanced statistical rigour with contextual understanding. To facilitate analysis, the data was systematically classified. Given the epistemic focus of the study, the researcher carefully categorised the modal verbs (e.g., “can”, “will”, “must”, “may”, and “might”) in the data, recording their frequencies and percentages. These frequencies and percentages reflected the prevalence of each modal verb, which, in turn, reflected the overall degree of conviction in the environment texts. Since modal verbs convey varying degrees of conviction, this analysis provided insight into the convictional tone of the texts. After computing the

overall frequency of each of the modals by summing up the specific frequencies at respective intervals, the analysis clearly outlined which modals the textbook writers have a penchant for, and what their choices express in relation to the ecosophy of Stibbe (2015). Furthermore, the frequencies and percentages were examined at the level of individual ELT textbooks. This allowed for an investigation into whether there is an increase in conviction from the previously prescribed ELT textbooks to the newly prescribed ones.

### 3. Data Presentation and Analysis

The following distribution table presents the total number of modals in the environment texts across all the six *Mastering English* (ME) textbooks used in the English sub-system of education in Cameroon.

**Table 1: Modals in MEs Combined**

Modal	Frequency	Percentage
Can	103	46.2%
Will	35	15.7%
Should	27	12.1%
Must	24	10.8%
Would	15	6.7%
May	10	4.5%
Could	7	3.1%
Might	2	0.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1 shows that “can” is the most frequently used modal, occurring 103 times and accounting for 46.2% of the total modal verbs. This is followed by “will” (35 occurrences, 15.7%), “should” (27 occurrences, 12.1%), and “must” (24 occurrences, 10.8%). The remaining modal verbs, including “would”, “may”, “could” and “might”, occur less frequently with

“might” being the least common, appearing only twice (0.9%). The total number of modal verbs that express nature protection or degradation in all the ME textbooks is 223. The following table contains the overall frequencies and percentages of the different modals used across the five *Interactions in English* (IE) textbooks.

**Table 1: Modals in IEs Combined**

Modal	Frequency	Percentage
Can	104	45%
Will	56	24.2%
Should	30	13%
Must	21	9.1%
Would	13	5.6%
Could	05	2.2%
May	02	0.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>231</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2 reveals the modal verb distribution in the IE textbooks, with “can” emerging as the dominant modal, representing 45% of the total. The frequency of “will” is also noteworthy, accounting for nearly a quarter (24.2%) of the modal verbs. The remaining modals, including “should”, “must” and “would”, demonstrate a

gradual decline in frequency, with “may” being the least represented. Overall, the analysis encompasses 231 modal verb occurrences. The following table captures the overall frequencies and percentages of the different modals used across the four *Prime English* (PR) textbooks and lone *Innovative English* (IN3) textbook.

**Table 3: Modals in PRs and IN3 Combined**

Modal	Frequency	Percentage
Can	47	40.9%
Will	31	27%
Should	18	15.7%
Must	05	4.3%
Would	09	7.8%
Could	02	1.7%
May	03	2.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3 captures the distribution of modal verbs in the PR and IN3 textbooks. The results show a dominant presence of “can” (40.9%) and “will” (27%). The modal “should” is the third most frequent modal (15.7%) followed by “would” (7.8%) and “must” (4.3%). The remaining modals, comprising “could” and “may”,

occur relatively infrequently. In total, there are 115 modals in environment texts in the PR and IN3 textbooks. Table 4 below presents a comprehensive overview of modal verb usage across all the *L’Eveil* (EV) textbooks.

**Table 4: Modals in All EVs Combined**

Modal	Frequency	Percentage
Can	190	69.9%
Will	24	8.8%
Should	16	5.9%
Must	05	1.8%
Would	28	10.3%
Could	06	2.2%
May	03	1.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>272</b>	<b>100%</b>

As shown in Table 4 above, there is a striking dominance of the modal “can” in the EV textbooks, which accounts for 69.9% of the total stock of modals in the EVs. “Would” is the second most frequent modal (10.3%), followed by “will” (8.8%) and “should” (5.9%). The remaining modals, including “must”, “could” and

“may”, trail behind, each accounting for less than 3% of the total. Table 5 and Figure 1 below provide a holistic view of modal verb usage across all the ELT textbooks in both the English and French sub-systems of education in Cameroon.

**Table 5: Modals in All the ELT Textbooks Combined**

Modal	Frequency	Percentage
Can	444	52.8%
Will	146	17.4%
Should	91	10.8%
Must	55	6.5%
Would	65	7.7%
May	18	2.1%
Could	20	2.5%
Might	02	0.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>841</b>	<b>100%</b>

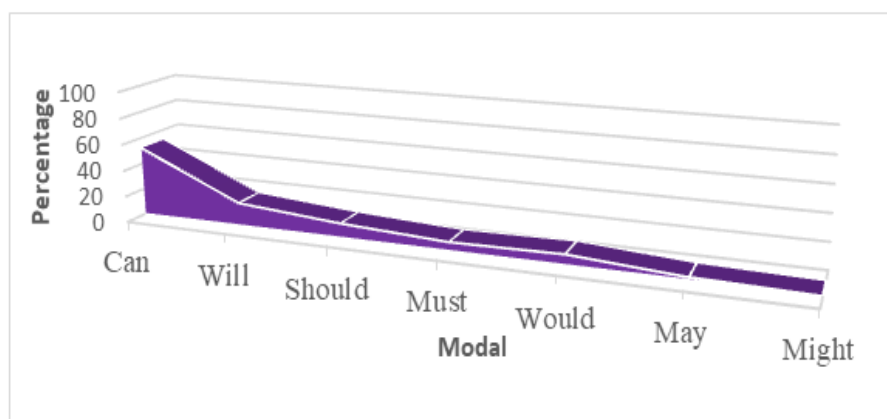


Figure 1: Overall Distribution of Modals in All the ELT Textbooks Combined

From the above table and figure, it is observed that there is a total of 841 modal verbs expressing environmental preservation or degradation across all the ELT textbooks. Out of this total, there is a significant dominance of “can” which accounts for more than half (52.8%) of the total modal verbs. The second most frequent modal is “will” (17.4%), followed by “should” (10.8%), “must” (6.5%) and “would” (7.7%). The remaining three modals, “may”, “could” and “might” occur relatively infrequently, collectively accounting for less than 10% of the total.

## DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

Through statements or propositions, modals (especially systemic ones) are known to convey a degree of certainty and knowledge, as well as consciousness of uncertainty (Bashir *et al.*, 2023). Even though the vast majority of epistemic modals exhibit certainty, the certainty levels vary in strength from one modal to another as displayed in the table below culled from Zhang (2019).

Table 6: Epistemic Modals

Modality	Modals	Certainty
Epistemic modality	Necessity	Must
	Predictability	Will
		Shall
		Would
	Probability	Ought (to)
		Should
		Can
	Possibility	May
		Could
		Might

### 4.1 The Epistemic Modal “Can”

The modal “can” is generally deployed to play three different functions – expressing ability, requesting permission and expressing possibility (see Zhang 2019:882). While many scholars have established that the modal “can” is epistemic when expressing possibility and deontic when expressing permission, there have been debates on the category of “can” when expressing ability. However, many scholars agree that it can be directly substituted with “be able to” or “be capable of”, which gets it considered as epistemic as well for being described as a case of dynamic modality (Griffiths 2006 mentioned in Zhang 2019). On the above premise the current study considers ability “can” and possibility “can” as both epistemic. From a purely epistemic perspective, the modal “can” is mainly exhibits theoretical possibility.

As displayed in the table above, the modal “can” features up to 444 times in the environment texts across all the textbooks combined and that number stands for 52.8% of the total number of instances of modal use. We find these modals to be all epistemic. Observe the examples below.

1. We must take care of our environment so that it can take care of us. (ME1:187; PR1:164)
2. Radioactive pollution can cause cancer, infertility, blindness, and defects at the time of birth; it can sterilise soil and affect air and water. (ME5:158)
3. Educating people about eating bush meat is one of the best things we can do to protect wildlife. (4eIE:108)
4. When you recycle paper, you can save a tree. (3eIE:107)



5. When pollutants charge the atmosphere, less heat escapes. This can also cause the earth's temperature to rise. (PR1:157)

The modal “can” expresses possibility, which can undermine the intended message in various contexts. For instance, in Example 1, the use of “can” implies uncertainty about the environment's ability to provide a safe haven. Similarly, in Example 2, the writer's use of “can” suggests a lack of certainty about the consequences of pollution. Additionally, in Examples 3 and 4, the deployment of “can” implies uncertainty about the effectiveness of education in protecting wildlife and the impact of recycling papers on saving trees. Overall, the use of “can” in these examples creates a sense of indeterminacy which may reduce the motivation and urgency in addressing environmental issues.

#### 4.2 The Epistemic Modal “Will”

In total, there are 146 instances of the use of the modal “will” in environment texts across the different ELT textbooks and that total makes up 17.4% of the total number of cases of modal use in the textbooks. In an epistemic sense, the modal “will” is often used in relation to prediction (Zhang 2019: 883-884). It is concerned with futurity and predictions made using “will” are often carried out on the premise of personal judgement which hinges on prevailing possibilities (Zhang, *ibid*). As viewed above, the epistemic modal “will” exhibits high certainty, only trailing “must” in the classification of modals that have the highest degree of certainty. Observe the textual examples below.

1. Research into development of the next generation of low-carbon technologies will be critical to deep mid-century reductions in global emissions. (ME5:197)
2. Trees form a good source for medicine. It can authoritatively be said that without trees' roots, back, stems and leaves, the pharmaceutical industry will not survive. (MEHS:201)
3. Scientists believe climate change will affect our water resources, energy supplies, agriculture, transportation, and health in the future. (3eIE:96)
4. If we do not reduce our carbon footprint, the global temperature will rise by 2 degrees Celsius by 2050. (TREV:116)
5. If the government works in synergy with other stakeholders like local communities, NGOs, the media, the private sector, academia, neighbouring countries, it will be a lamp light to effectively manage natural and man-made disaster. (PR4:164)

Examples 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 indicate how “will” is employed to express a significant degree of conviction about the relevance of research in lowering carbon emissions, the pharmaceutical industry's reliance on trees, the dangers posed by climate change, and the effects of greenhouse gas emissions. The use of “will” in

these instances serves to make explicit predictions, convey confidence, foster reader trust and generate a sense of urgency, ultimately motivating readers to adopt actions that lessen environmental concerns.

#### 4.3 The Epistemic Modal “Should”

The modal “should” has the third highest frequency among modals that feature in the textbooks that make up the data of our study. It occurs 91 times, symbolic of 10.8% of the total. The modal “should”, from an epistemic viewpoint, expresses necessity. It is not as strong as “must” but it is ranked higher than “can”, “may”, “could” and “might” in terms of degree of certainty (see Zhang, 2019:884). Observe the following excerpts.

1. No matter where we go on the planet, there are beautiful plants, flowers and animals that catch our attention or admiration. Thus preserving our natural environment, flora and fauna should be one of our top priorities. (ME2:140)
2. We should buy less polluting cars, get more efficient refrigeration and reduce water heating requirements. (MEHS:192)
3. People should recycle plastic bags and plastic bottles. There are many ways of doing this. (3eIE:107)
4. By the end of this lesson, learners should talk about strategies to protect forest and wildlife. (PR5:121)
5. We should use steel or glass cups instead of plastic ones and we should also carry cloth bags every time we go out shopping. (CIEV:77)

From the excerpts above, it is observable that “should” does not give off a sufficient amount of imperativeness that equates to the urgent call for environmentally friendly action to protect the ecosystems that sustain life. Due to the weightiness of the issue, humans have to be made to feel obliged opting for less polluting cars, as well as recycling. Unfortunately, “should” is not potent enough to exude as much conviction that solicits prompt action.

#### 4.4 The Epistemic “Must”

From an epistemic standpoint, the modal “must” expresses necessity and is ranked highest in terms of modals that exude the highest degree of certainty (see Zhang 2019). In this light, therefore, “must” is most effective in calling for actions that safeguard the biosphere. The modal “must” is used a total of 55 times across all the ELT textbooks, and constitutes 6.5% of the total number of times modals are deployed in the texts. Below are some textual examples of “must”.

1. All countries must work together to stop climate change from happening. (ME1:192)
2. They must not kill any animals or fell trees. (5eIE:84)
3. Nature is a gift that we must preserve. (4eIE:106)
4. Why must we take care of nature? (PR4:164)

The deployment of “must” as viewed above chronicles sufficient conviction that aligns with the dire need to safeguard the natural world. Through the deployment of “must”, the reader is made to feel that working in synergy to find solutions for climate change, and preserving fauna and flora are obligations. The sense of unquestionableness that the writer conveys the message with leaves the reader with no other option but to vouch for actions and initiatives that safeguard the well-being of the natural environment.

#### 4.5 The Epistemic Modals “Would”, “May”, “Could” and “Might”

The epistemic modals “would”, “may”, “could” and “might” jointly make up 12.5% of the stock of modals in the environment texts across all the ELT textbooks. From an epistemic point of view, the modal “would” expresses a hypothetical or conditional possibility or necessity, “may” is generally used to show possibility, and “could” is used to express ability and possibility, while “might” expresses unlikely possibility (Zhang, 2019:882). These four modals give off medium to low degree of certainty. For instance, in the textual example “The amazing fact is that animals and people would not be able to live in a world without plants (PR1:164), the modal “would” indicates a predicted outcome but gives off a plummeting certitude regarding the indispensability of plants to human beings and animals. Similarly, the modal “may”, which is generally used to show possibility (Zhang, 2019:882), expresses a low degree of certainty, as seen in the textual example “Water pollution in terms of oil spill may lead to the death of several species (ME5:159), whereby there is no

assurance that water pollution as a result of oil spill causes the death of living organisms. Likewise, the modal “could” exudes quite a low degree of certainty as viewed in the excerpt “Current research on battery technology, new materials for solar cells, harnessing energy from novel sources like bacteria and algae, and other innovative areas could provide important breakthroughs” (ME5:197), wherein its the employment of the modal “could” raises scepticism in relation to whether actual research on battery technology, new materials for solar cells, harnessing energy from novel sources like bacteria and algae, and other innovative areas are crucial in the fight against global warming. In a similar way, the modal “might” expresses significantly low degree of conviction as indicated in the excerpt “If you suspect that nearby water sources have been contaminated by a corporation then it might be a good idea to hire an expert to see your options (ME5:158), whereby the reader is left unsure of whether it is good idea or not to consult an expert in a situation of suspected water pollution. To sum up, the low level of conviction exhibited by these modals could dent the motivation of readers who are left in skepticism and doubt in the face of adopting eco-friendly actions.

We further compared conviction levels between environment texts in the newly introduced ELT textbooks and those in the previously introduced ones in a bid to check if there is any significant improvement in the new. The graphs below compares the degree of conviction in outgoing and incoming prescribed ELT textbooks in Cameroon.

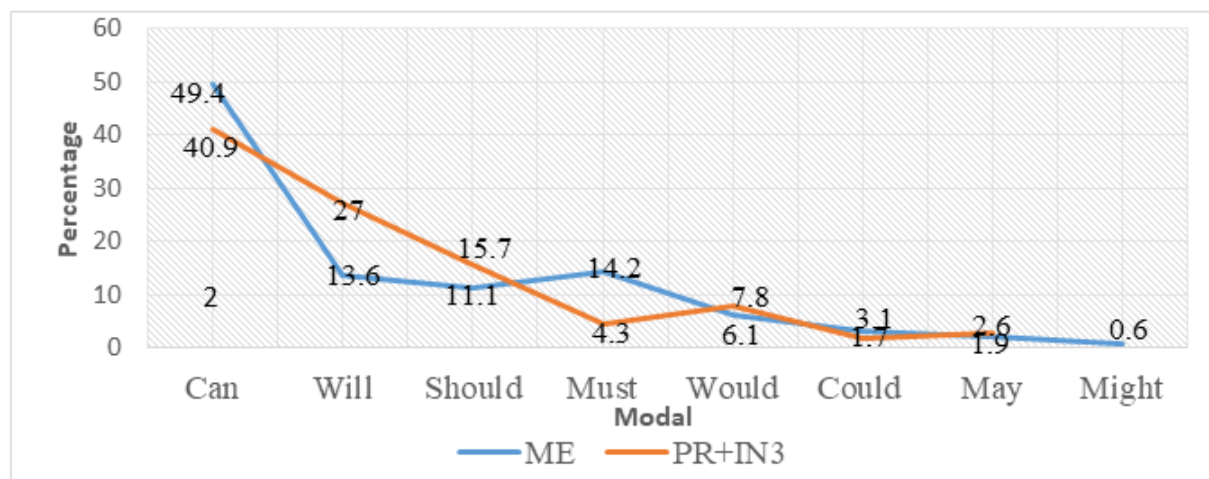
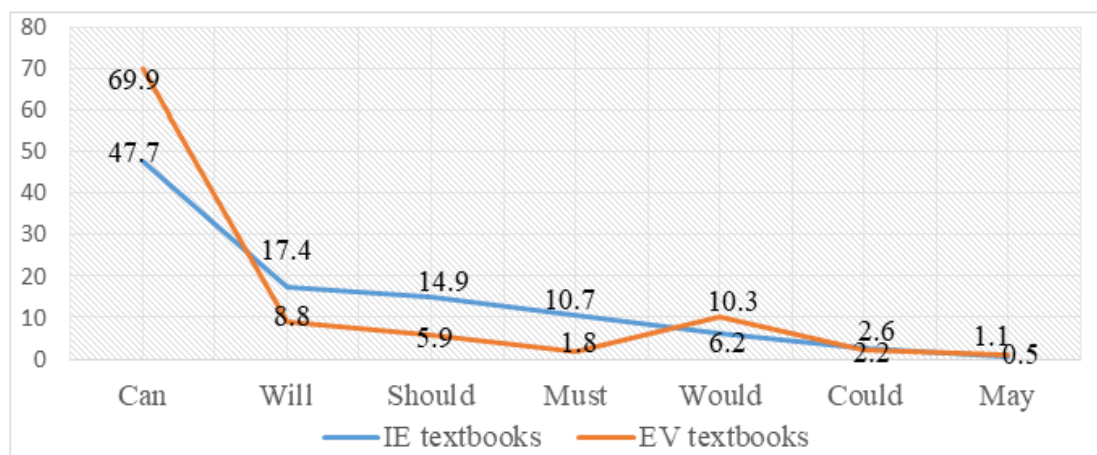


Figure 2: Degree of Conviction in Outgoing and Incoming Prescribed ELT Textbooks in the English Sub-system of Education in Cameroon



**Figure 3: Degree of Conviction in Outgoing and Incoming Prescribed ELT Textbooks in the French Sub-system of Education in Cameroon**

Figure 2 reveals that there is no marked improvement in the degree of conviction through modals, moving from the outgoing ELT textbooks to the newly introduced ones in the English sub-system of education. As concerns the ELT textbooks in the French sub-system of education, we find out that modals are used in the newly introduced EV ELT textbooks in a way that even exudes a significantly lower degree of conviction than in the IE ELT textbooks as displayed in

Figure 3 against the backdrop of growing demand for English language skills among francophone learners fuelled by globalisation and English's status as a global lingua franca (Atechi, 2015), these ELT textbooks should offer a timely platform for promoting eco-friendly awareness and values within this demographic. Regrettably, our findings reveal that the environment texts in these ELT textbooks fall short of such expectations.

## CONCLUSION

From the perspective of the ecosophy of this study (Stibbe, 2015), we can advance that, even though the prevalence of “can” and “will” (relatively) convey determination and optimism and encourages readers to take action against the degradation of the natural world, the bipolar nature of the modal “can” also exudes a low degree of conviction as the use of the modal opens the door to scepticism which can dent the motivation of the readers in the face of adopting certain environment-friendly actions. That downside is further highlighted by the relatively low percentage of the high conviction modal “must” deployed in the texts. The results imply that environment texts in ELT textbooks fall short of expressing the urgent need to stop the degradation of biodiversity which is a sacrosanct aspect of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, and which is also a key element of Cameroon's National Development Strategies. It also is observed that the exhortation for nature protection in environment texts in Cameroonian ELT textbooks does not correlate with the ever-

increasing urgency for action to protect the natural environment.

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