

## A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF STATE EXPECTATIONS AND BUDDHIST ETHICS IN THAI ENGLISH CIVICS TEXTBOOKS: A MODALITY PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

In the contemporary Thai educational context, English-Medium Instruction (EMI) is often regarded as a form of symbolic capital that provides access to global educational and professional opportunities. However, its broader role in shaping civic perspectives, moral values, and social expectations within educational discourse remains relatively underexplored. This academic article discusses the discursive construction of the concept of the “quality citizen” in the Civics, Culture, and Living textbook series used in Thai lower secondary education, particularly within English-medium learning contexts. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the discussion explores how modality functions as a linguistic resource for expressing obligation, recommendation, and possibility in civic and moral discourse. Particular attention is given to the relationship between modal expressions, civic expectations, and Buddhist ethical principles embedded in Thai educational materials. The article argues that high modality tends to frame civic responsibilities as explicit obligations, while medium and low modality contribute to moral guidance, self-regulation, and representations of achievable social conduct. Through critical academic discussion, this article highlights how linguistic choices in educational discourse may contribute to shaping learners’ understanding of citizenship, ethical responsibility, and socially valued behavior in contemporary Thai society.

**Keywords:** Systemic functional linguistics, Critical discourse analysis, Modality, Buddhist ethics, Civics textbooks

### Introduction

In contemporary Thai education, the expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) through English Programs (EP) has positioned English as a form of symbolic capital associated with global opportunities (Bourdieu, 1991/2011). However, language policy is not entirely neutral, as it may reflect broader socio-economic and cultural priorities (Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018). In Thailand, English is often used alongside the promotion of traditional values (khwa-m-pen-thai), particularly among students oriented toward global perspectives (Irham, 2024). Without critical examination, this dynamic may

contribute to linguistic inequality, where academic success is linked to alignment with institutional expectations (Tollefson, 1991; Nomniam, 2018).

Textbooks play a central role in conveying “official knowledge” and shaping learners’ perspectives (Althusser, 1971). As Apple (2014) notes, curricula may reflect competing views of the “desirable” citizen. In Thailand, textbook content is typically aligned with national curriculum goals, emphasizing social harmony and “Thainess,” while offering limited representation of diverse perspectives (Manjanda & Numun, 2024). Additionally, repetitive linguistic patterns and uneven communicative forms may reinforce particular interpretations of social roles and expectations. Consequently, textbook series such as Civics, Culture, and Living function not only as sources of knowledge but also as frameworks for presenting moral and social values.

The integration of Buddhist ethics into civic education represents a key component of the Thai pedagogical approach and has been described as a form of moral governance (Mulder, 1997). Through religious discourse, civic expectations are often framed in relation to social order and collective values. State-supported interpretations of Buddhism have been noted to emphasize hierarchy and social cohesion (Nasaweang & Thairoongrojana, 2023). Similarly, although pedagogical approaches increasingly incorporate active learning, the underlying moral content often remains grounded in established doctrinal principles (Sutussano, 2025), contributing to civic identities that emphasize responsibilities alongside rights.

A key linguistic resource in this process is modality, which expresses degrees of obligation, probability, and judgment (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The use of modal verbs such as *must*, *have to*, and *should* can reflect underlying assumptions about authority and expected behavior (Fairclough, 2003; Machin & Mayr, 2023), potentially presenting certain actions as normative rather than negotiable.

While scholarly discussions have frequently focused on English language teaching and educational policy in Thailand, relatively limited attention has been given to the role of interpersonal grammar in civic and moral discourse. Existing discussions of Thai English textbooks have identified tendencies toward directive language and normative communication, particularly regarding socially appropriate conduct (Phaisarnsitthikarn, 2025). However, broader academic discussion concerning modality as a discursive resource for constructing civic identity and ethical expectations remains comparatively underdeveloped.

This article therefore discusses how modality in English-medium civic education materials contributes to the construction of civic expectations, moral values, and representations of the “good citizen” within the Thai educational context. By drawing on perspectives from Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis, the discussion considers the relationship between language, ideology, citizenship, and ethical discourse in contemporary educational settings.

## Theoretical Context

### Modality as a Grammar of Governance

In linguistic studies, modality is often understood as a resource for expressing attitudes and judgments. Within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), however, modality is part of the interpersonal metafunction through which social roles and relationships are constructed (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In institutional contexts, modality can be linked to patterns of authority. Mulderrig (2011) describes this as a “grammar of governance,” where modal choices help shape how obligations and expectations are expressed. In this sense, modality may influence the degree to which actions are presented as negotiable. In Thai civics textbooks, the frequent use of modal verbs such as *must* and *need to* may function as implicit subjective modality, presenting expectations as objective or widely accepted.

### **Critical Discourse and the Role of English in Educational Contexts**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how language relates to power and social structures. In education, English can function as a medium through which local and global influences interact. Pennycook (2021) views English as a flexible resource shaped by context, while Fairclough (2015) emphasizes that power often operates through discourse and shared meanings. Within this framework, median modality (e.g., *should*) may guide behavior by presenting certain values as appropriate. Similar patterns have been identified in other contexts, such as Singapore, where citizenship is constructed through a combination of modern competencies and cultural values (Tan & Abbas, 2024).

### **State Buddhism and Moral Discourse**

The integration of Buddhist ethics into Thai education represents a key dimension of civic instruction. State-supported interpretations of Buddhism often emphasize social order and collective values (Nasaweang & Thairoongrojana, 2023). These principles, including the Five Precepts (*Sila*), are frequently presented as guiding frameworks for behavior. Educational practices may combine these values with modern approaches, including the use of English, to frame them in contemporary contexts (Draper, 2019). From a discourse perspective, modal expressions, particularly those indicating recommendation or expectation, may present moral qualities such as honesty and responsibility as socially appropriate. This can be further examined through the Discourse-Historical Approach, which considers how cultural meanings are recontextualized in contemporary discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

### **Analytical Perspective on Modality**

Modality provides an important linguistic perspective for understanding how civic expectations and moral guidance are communicated in educational discourse. In English-medium civics textbooks, language serves not only to present knowledge but also to shape learners’ understanding of social responsibility, ethical behavior, and citizenship. The Civics, Culture, and Living textbook series for lower secondary education (M.1–M.3), developed in accordance with the Basic Education Core Curriculum and used in both standard and English

Program (EP) classrooms, offers a relevant context for discussing how language reflects civic and moral values within Thai education.

Particular attention may be given to modal expressions that relate to civic expectations and Buddhist ethical principles, as these linguistic forms frequently communicate obligation, recommendation, and possibility. Through such expressions, educational discourse may frame certain forms of conduct as necessary, desirable, or socially appropriate. This makes modality a useful conceptual lens for examining how civic and moral meanings are represented in educational materials.

For discussion purposes, modality can be broadly understood across three levels based on the degree of obligation or certainty expressed. High modality includes forms that communicate strong obligation or necessity, such as *must* and *need to*. Medium modality refers to expressions of recommendation or normative guidance, such as *should*. Low modality includes forms that express possibility, flexibility, or capability, such as *might*, *could*, and *can*. These categories help illustrate how different linguistic choices may contribute to the representation of civic responsibilities, ethical expectations, and socially valued behavior within civic educational discourse.

## Analytical Approach

### Critical Linguistic Inquiry

Critical linguistic inquiry provides a useful perspective for understanding the relationship between language and broader social meanings in educational discourse. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), this perspective emphasizes that language does more than communicate information; it also shapes interpersonal relationships, authority, and social expectations (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In this context, English-medium civics textbooks may be understood as discursive texts that reflect institutional perspectives, educational objectives, and broader sociocultural values (Fairclough, 2015; Mulderrig, 2011).

From the perspective of the interpersonal metafunction, modality plays an important role in representing authority and social relationships. High-value modal expressions such as *must* and *have to* may present expectations as necessary, authoritative, or widely accepted. Through repeated use, these linguistic forms may contribute to the normalization of particular understandings of civic responsibility and socially appropriate conduct.

Modality also relates to the construction of moral expectations and internal dispositions. Medium-value modal forms such as *should* and *ought to*, particularly when linked to Buddhist ethical principles (*Sila*), may present values such as honesty, responsibility, and self-discipline as socially desirable forms of behavior. This perspective is further supported by discourse-oriented approaches, including the Discourse-Historical

Approach, which emphasizes the role of cultural and historical contexts in shaping contemporary meanings (Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

### **Operationalizing the SFL–CDA Framework**

The integration of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a valuable perspective for discussing the relationship between linguistic features and broader social contexts. While SFL offers insight into how grammatical structures function within discourse, CDA extends this perspective by examining how language reflects power, ideology, and institutional influence. Together, these approaches support a broader understanding of how meaning is constructed within educational discourse.

From an SFL perspective, modal expressions may be understood in relation to different levels of interpersonal force. High modality includes forms such as *must* and *have to*, which communicate strong obligation or necessity. The medium modality includes expressions such as *should* and *ought to*, which convey recommendations or normative guidance. Low modality includes forms such as *may* and *can*, which express possibility, flexibility, or capability. These distinctions help explain how linguistic choices may shape perceptions of responsibility, authority, and social expectations.

CDA further broadens this discussion by considering discourse at multiple levels. Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model highlights the relationship between textual features, discursive practices, and wider social contexts. At the textual level, attention may be given to specific linguistic structures such as modal verbs. At the level of discursive practice, educational materials may be understood as institutional texts shaped by curriculum priorities and educational systems. At the level of social practice, civic discourse can be interpreted in relation to broader cultural values, educational ideologies, and national understandings of citizenship.

Through this integrated perspective, language can be understood not simply as a neutral communicative tool, but as part of broader social processes through which expectations, values, and identities are constructed. In civic educational discourse, modal expressions therefore play an important role in shaping how learners encounter ideas of citizenship, responsibility, and moral conduct.

### **Discussion**

This section discusses how modal expressions in civic educational discourse may be interpreted in relation to broader socio-cultural meanings. Rather than viewing modal verbs as isolated grammatical features, the discussion considers how they contribute to the representation of civic expectations, moral guidance, and socially valued behavior within educational texts. The selected examples from the Civics, Culture, and Living textbook series

illustrate how different levels of modality may shape understandings of citizenship and ethical responsibility in the Thai educational context.

### **The Role of High Modality in Structuring Obligation**

“Youth must follow the teachings of the religion that one believes, because virtue and ethics help create a peaceful coexistence and prevent people from hurting or taking advantage of each other” (Book M1, page 4)

The first example employs high-value modality through the modal verb *must*, which expresses strong obligation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The modal choice positions religious adherence as a necessary condition for maintaining social harmony and ethical coexistence. The discussion highlights how obligation is framed not as an individual preference but as a socially expected form of conduct. In relation to Mulderrig (2011) concept of the “grammar of governance,” the statement presents moral behavior as a fixed expectation within civic discourse. Taken together, the wording may contribute to presenting a particular moral framework as broadly beneficial and socially legitimate (Fairclough, 2003, 2015).

“Good democratic citizens need to maintain ethics and morality in their daily lives.” (Book M2, page 6)

The second example also employs high modality through *need to*, signaling obligation and necessity. The statement establishes a close relationship between ethical behavior and civic identity by defining the characteristics of a “good” citizen in normative terms. The broader interpretive significance lies in how morality is positioned as an essential component of democratic citizenship. The discussion highlights how educational discourse may shape social expectations and reinforce particular understandings of civic responsibility, consistent with discussions of “official knowledge” in educational materials (Althusser, 1971; Apple, 2014).

“It is needed to teach youth to live their lives with honesty and to be shame on the doing wrong acts.” (Book M3, page 67)

The third example extends the function of high modality to both external behavior and internal dispositions. The expression *is needed to* conveys necessity, while the reference to shame introduces an affective dimension linked to moral evaluation. The discussion highlights how obligation is connected not only to appropriate behavior but also to expected emotional responses. Taken together, the statement reflects broader discussions of moral governance within educational discourse (Mulder, 1997; Nasaweang & Thairoongrojana, 2023), where civic expectations may influence both public conduct and internalized values.

### **Median Modality and the Construction of Moral Evaluation**

“They (Youth) should be shameful and afraid of sinful actions.” (Book M1, p. 4)

This example illustrates the use of medium modality through the modal verb *should*, which expresses recommendation rather than direct obligation (Halliday & Matthiessen,

2014). Although less forceful than high modality, the expression still carries normative influence by guiding readers toward a particular moral response. The inclusion of affective terms such as shameful and afraid extends the role of modality beyond behavioral guidance to emotional regulation.

From a broader discursive perspective, this linguistic construction encourages internal alignment with socially approved moral expectations rather than relying solely on explicit instruction. In line with Mulderrig (2011) concept of the “grammar of governance,” such expressions may shape how individuals are expected to think and feel in relation to ethical conduct. This also reflects broader discussions of moral governance in Thai educational discourse, where emotional self-regulation is closely linked to civic and ethical development (Mulder, 1997; Nasaweang & Thairoongrojana, 2023).

“For example, one should exercise religious practices and live his/her life in accordance with religious teachings.” (Book M2, p. 10)

The second example similarly employs medium modality through the modal verb should, presenting religious practice as a desirable and socially appropriate course of action. Although the expression allows a degree of flexibility, it continues to guide readers toward a preferred behavioral framework. The use of the generalized pronoun one contributes to presenting this expectation as broadly applicable rather than directed toward a specific individual or group. This linguistic choice strengthens the impression that the recommendation represents a general moral principle rather than a context-specific suggestion. From an academic perspective, such discourse reflects the role of educational materials in presenting normative models of conduct and reinforcing socially approved understandings of citizenship and ethical behavior (Althusser, 1971; Apple, 2014).

“Furthermore, we should build emotional skills by practicing meditation, being mindful with our thoughts, understanding our thoughts, and use our free time wisely by, for instance, exercising, listening to music, or joining art activities to relax from study at work.” (Book M3, page 73.)

The third example continues this pattern through the use of medium modality in relation to emotional self-regulation and personal discipline. The modal verb should presents these activities as recommended forms of conduct, while the inclusive pronoun we reduces interpersonal distance and creates a sense of collective participation. From a discursive perspective, this combination may function to normalize specific emotional practices and self-regulatory behaviors by presenting them as shared social expectations. The emphasis on mindfulness, emotional control, and productive use of time aligns closely with broader discussions of moral and affective governance in Thai educational discourse (Mulder, 1997; Nasaweang & Thairoongrojana, 2023). In this sense, civic education extends beyond behavioral instruction to include the shaping of internal attitudes and socially valued emotional dispositions.

### Low Modality and the Framing of Capability

“Even though the youth, who are still in education age cannot follow all of the guidelines, they can still follow what they are able to based on their age.” (Book M1, page 6)

The first example illustrates low modality through the use of *can*, which expresses possibility and ability rather than obligation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The modal choice introduces flexibility by acknowledging limitations and individual capacity. Although the statement appears less directive, it still maintains an expectation that youth align with social guidelines within their capabilities. The discussion highlights how low modality may soften expectations while continuing to present them as reasonable and attainable within educational discourse (Fairclough, 2003, 2015). Taken together, the example suggests that civic expectations can be communicated through accommodation rather than direct obligation.

“Education develops people to have complete physical, mental and intellectual attributes so that they can apply their knowledge to their lives in order to live happily.” (Book M2, page 9)

The second example also employs low modality through *can*, presenting outcomes in terms of possibility rather than obligation. The statement emphasizes capability and positive consequence while simultaneously promoting a particular understanding of education as a pathway toward personal and social fulfillment. The broader interpretive significance lies in how educational values are represented as desirable and socially beneficial. The discussion highlights how such discourse may contribute to presenting particular value orientations as common sense within educational contexts (Althusser, 1971; Apple, 2014).

“We might not be able to choose how we are born, but we can choose to be a good person.” (Book M3, page 62)

The third example combines the low modality forms *might* and *can* to express uncertainty and possibility. These modal choices create a balanced interpersonal tone that acknowledges limitations while emphasizing individual agency. At the same time, the statement frames moral behavior as both achievable and personally meaningful. The discussion highlights how low modality may influence readers’ understanding of moral conduct as an individual responsibility and a socially valued choice. Taken together, the example reflects broader discussions of moral governance within Thai educational contexts (Mulder, 1997; Nasaweang & Thairoongrojana, 2023).

The discussion of high, medium, and low modality highlights how modal expressions contribute to the communication of civic expectations, moral guidance, and socially valued behavior within educational discourse. High modality is closely associated with the presentation of civic responsibilities as explicit expectations, while medium modality supports moral guidance and encourages the internalization of socially approved values. In

contrast, low modality frames actions and outcomes in terms of possibility, capability, and personal agency, presenting desirable conduct as both realistic and achievable.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that modality plays an important role in shaping how civic expectations are represented, ranging from externally structured obligations to more internally oriented forms of self-regulation. Through these linguistic choices, educational discourse may influence how learners understand responsibility, ethical conduct, and citizenship within the broader sociocultural context. The key relationships between modality levels, linguistic functions, and their broader interpretive significance are summarized in the table below.

**Table 1** Modality Levels, Linguistic Features, and Discursive Functions in Civics Textbooks.

| Modality Level | Primary Modal Verbs    | Ideological Domain         | Linguistic Strategy                                                                              |
|----------------|------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| High           | Must, Have to, Need to | Legal & Institutional      | Regulation: Presenting civic responsibilities as clearly defined and non-negotiable obligations. |
| Medium         | Should, Ought to       | Moral & Affective          | Guidance: Encouraging the internalization of socially valued norms and ethical conduct.          |
| Low            | Can, Might, Be able to | Functional & Developmental | Possibility: Framing desired outcomes and capacities as achievable and personally attainable.    |

## Theoretical Debate

The discussion presented in this article is consistent with Mulderrig (2011) concept of the “grammar of governance,” particularly in relation to the frequent use of high-value modality. Modal expressions may contribute to presenting civic expectations as clearly defined obligations rather than optional forms of conduct. This pattern reflects the broader role of textbooks as instruments for conveying “official knowledge” and shaping social perspectives (Althusser, 1971; Apple, 2014).

In the Thai educational context, textbook content is often structured to reflect dominant cultural values such as social harmony and Thainess (Manjanda & Numun, 2024). From this perspective, the repeated use of high-obligation modal forms may contribute to reinforcing particular interpretations of appropriate civic behavior and responsible citizenship.

This discussion may also be understood in relation to Fairclough’s (2015) concept of the naturalization of discourse, in which recurring linguistic patterns can present specific values and assumptions as normal or widely accepted. Within educational discourse, such patterns may influence how learners understand civic duty, moral responsibility, and socially valued conduct.

At the same time, modality in these texts appears to extend beyond a purely directive function. While Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) describe modality as a resource for negotiating meaning, modal choices in this context may also limit the range of alternative interpretations available to readers. Similar patterns have been discussed in relation to Thai English textbooks, particularly concerning the prominence of directive language in educational discourse (Phaisarnsittikharn, 2025). From this perspective, such linguistic patterns may also be interpreted in relation to Foucault (1977) concept of disciplinary mechanisms, in which regulation operates not only through explicit instruction, but also through the internalization of socially approved norms.

The use of English as the medium of instruction can also be considered through Bourdieu's (1991/2011) concept of symbolic capital. In this context, English may contribute to framing civic expectations within a global linguistic register, which can give them an appearance of neutrality or universality. This observation reflects broader trends in Thai education, where English is used alongside the promotion of traditional cultural values (Irham, 2024). It is also consistent with Pennycook's (2021) view of English as a resource that is shaped by local contexts and purposes.

Finally, the relationship between civic expectations and Buddhist ethical discourse is consistent with Nasaweang & Thairoongrojana (2023) analysis of state-supported Buddhism, in which moral conduct is closely associated with social order and collective values. This pattern aligns with Mulder (1997) description of moral governance in Thai society, where ethical frameworks are embedded within institutional practices. In addition, research on Buddhist education suggests that, despite the increasing use of interactive or active learning approaches, core moral teachings are often presented as stable and authoritative (Sutussano, 2025). Taken together, these perspectives highlight that modality functions not only as a linguistic resource, but also as part of a broader discursive framework through which civic expectations, moral values, and socially approved forms of conduct are communicated.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed the role of modality in English-medium civics textbooks and its contribution to the construction of civic expectations within educational discourse. High-obligation modal expressions, such as *must*, *have to*, and *need to*, may frame civic responsibilities as clearly defined expectations. Medium modality contributes to the communication of normative moral values, while lower modality is more commonly associated with possibility, capability, and future-oriented understandings of conduct.

By applying an integrated SFL-CDA framework, the analysis suggests that these linguistic patterns can be understood not only as grammatical features but also as part of broader discursive practices. In line with Fairclough (2003), the repeated use of modal structures may contribute to presenting particular social values as widely accepted or taken

for granted. These patterns are also consistent with the broader role of textbooks in conveying “official knowledge” and shaping perspectives, as discussed in the literature. Furthermore, the presence of Buddhist ethical discourse reflects the cultural and educational context in which civic expectations are embedded, aligning with previous studies on moral governance and the role of religion in Thai education.

The use of English as the medium of instruction situates these discursive patterns within a global linguistic context. This supports Bourdieu’s (1991/2011) notion of symbolic capital, while also reflecting the interaction between global language practices and locally embedded cultural values (Pennycook, 2021; Irham, 2024). In this sense, the discussion highlights how language, culture, and educational practices intersect in shaping learners’ understandings of civic roles.

Overall, modality may play an important role in shaping how civic and moral expectations are communicated within English-medium educational contexts. This discussion also suggests the potential value of developing Critical Language Awareness in English-language education. Encouraging learners to examine how linguistic features contribute to meaning-making may promote more reflective engagement with educational materials and their broader social and cultural contexts.

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