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Teaching Readers to Evaluate Knowledge and Credibility: A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis of Epistemic Language across CEFR Levels in British Council LearnEnglish Reading Materials

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ABSTRACT: Graded EFL reading materials are organised by proficiency level, yet how they construct knowledge, certainty and credibility remains underexamined. This study investigated epistemic stance and evidentiality in British Council LearnEnglish texts through three questions: which markers occur and how frequently; how they construct knowledge, authority, certainty and uncertainty across genres, topics and CEFR-labelled levels; and what pedagogical opportunities and limitations they present for critical reading and epistemic literacy. The corpus comprised 18 texts (9,017 words) representing B1, B2, C1 and general-level materials. Corpus-assisted analysis identified and quantified epistemic and evidential resources, while critical discourse interpretation examined their contextual functions. The analysis identified 56 instances of epistemic stance, predominantly possibility (66.1%), followed by probability and qualification (26.8%) and certainty and strong commitment (7.1%). It also identified 31 instances of explicit attribution, 12 references to research and evidence, and quantitative information in 11 texts. Patterns varied across genres and topics, cautioning against interpreting the CEFR labels as evidence of developmental progression. The study extends research on graded reading materials by foregrounding their epistemic and evidential dimensions and providing a basis for teaching learners to evaluate how claims are expressed, sourced and supported.

KEYWORDS: critical reading, epistemic stance, epistemic literacy, evidentiality, graded EFL reading materials.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Reading in English language education increasingly involves more than identifying information or demonstrating comprehension: it requires readers to evaluate how information is presented, whose knowledge is represented, and how claims are made to appear credible. In contemporary information environments, readers encounter statements that combine established knowledge, attributed evidence, interpretation, prediction and opinion. Their ability to distinguish among these forms of knowledge is therefore an important dimension of critical reading (Arman et al., 2026). For English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, this task is particularly consequential because linguistic comprehension does not necessarily entail an understanding of the rhetorical and evidential resources through which a text constructs authority and certainty (Ghozali et al., 2026). Graded reading materials occupy an influential position in EFL education because they provide texts selected or adapted to support learners' developing linguistic competence (Kara, 2019). The British Council's LearnEnglish Reading resource, for example, presents reading texts under proficiency-related categories, including B1, B2 and C1, and across a range of topics and text types (British Council, n.d.). Such materials can support vocabulary development, reading fluency and comprehension. However, their educational value also depends on the kinds of interpretative practices they make available to readers. A text about scientific discovery, environmental change or social behaviour does not merely communicate subject content; it also presents propositions through particular degrees of certainty, sources of information and forms of authorial commitment. These linguistic choices can influence how readers interpret the status and credibility of the information presented.

Two linguistic concepts are especially relevant to this issue: epistemic stance and evidentiality. Epistemic stance concerns the ways writers' express degrees of certainty, probability, possibility, commitment or reservation towards propositions (Whitt, 2023). Evidentiality concerns how information is presented in relation to its source, such as through reference to research, expert opinion, reported statements or observation (Myketiak et al., 2017). Although related, the concepts are not interchangeable: a writer may qualify a proposition without identifying its source, or attribute information to a source while expressing strong or limited

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commitment to it. These distinctions matter for reading because expressions of certainty and attribution are not merely grammatical features; they contribute to the construction of knowledge and the positioning of readers in relation to claims.

Recent corpus-based studies indicate that the frequency of epistemic expressions is not linearly related to communicative task or proficiency; accordingly, such frequencies should be interpreted cautiously as indicators of language development. In parallel, research on critical reading has highlighted the importance of identifying evidence and evaluating claims for which no explicit source is provided (Zaini & Shokouhi, 2024). Such work suggests that readers need opportunities to examine not only what a text states but also how its statements are warranted, qualified or presented as authoritative.

1.2 Problem

Evaluations of EFL reading materials commonly give substantial attention to linguistic difficulty, vocabulary, text length, readability, and comprehension demands. These dimensions are important, but they do not fully explain how materials represent knowledge or what kinds of critical interpretation they invite (Al-Jarf, 2026). A text may be linguistically accessible while presenting claims whose certainty, evidential basis or source attribution requires careful evaluation. Conversely, the presence of reporting expressions or references to research does not, by itself, establish the reliability of the information being reported (Kuutila et al., 2023). The distinction between linguistic accessibility and epistemic transparency, therefore, deserves closer attention in materials research (Marsden et al., 2018). This issue is relevant to the selected British Council LearnEnglish texts, which cover varied subject areas and include different forms of informational and narrative writing. Their analysis provides an opportunity to examine how writers communicate certainty, uncertainty, probability, attribution and commitment within graded reading content. The concern is not to assume that the texts are deficient or that learners necessarily misinterpret them. Rather, it is to investigate which epistemic and evidential resources are present and what opportunities or limitations they may create for critical engagement with written information.

1.3 Gap

Recent studies provide important but largely separate foundations for this investigation. In two studies, Pyykönen (2023a, 2023b) analysed learner corpora from a corpus-based perspective, focusing on epistemic stance and its variation across proficiency levels and task types. Zaini and Shokouhi (2024) examine the relationship between unsourced evidentiality and critical reading, while Brocca et al. (2026) illustrate the pedagogical value of considering implicit linguistic evidence in EFL materials. Together, these studies establish the value of investigating linguistic choices that shape how information is interpreted. However, they do not provide a direct account of how epistemic stance and evidentiality operate together in graded EFL reading texts or how their discourse functions may be considered in relation to text genre, subject area and proficiency-level labelling.

A further issue concerns the relationship between linguistic description and pedagogy. Corpus studies can identify recurring forms and distributional patterns, while critical reading research can explain why readers need to evaluate sources and claims. The connection between these perspectives remains important for materials research: frequency counts alone cannot establish how a marker functions in context, and pedagogical recommendations should be grounded in identifiable textual evidence (Mur-Dueñas, 2026). Moreover, comparisons across CEFR-labelled categories require caution when text numbers, genres and topics are unevenly represented. The present study, therefore, treats proficiency labels as characteristics of the selected materials rather than as evidence of a developmental progression in epistemic language.

1.4 Research objectives and questions

This study aims to investigate how epistemic stance and evidentiality are linguistically and discursively constructed in selected British Council LearnEnglish reading texts, and to consider the implications of these patterns for critical reading and epistemic literacy in EFL education. Using corpus-assisted analysis alongside contextual discourse interpretation, the study identifies and classifies epistemic stance and evidential markers; examines how certainty, uncertainty, probability, attribution, and authorial commitment are communicated; explores patterns across topics, genres, and represented CEFR proficiency labels; and evaluates the pedagogical opportunities and limitations suggested by these patterns. On this basis, the study seeks to develop evidence-informed recommendations for integrating epistemic awareness into graded EFL reading instruction and materials design. Accordingly, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What types and distributions of epistemic stance and evidential markers occur in the selected British Council LearnEnglish reading texts?

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2. How do these markers construct knowledge, authority, certainty and uncertainty across different text genres, subject areas and represented CEFR proficiency levels?
3. What pedagogical opportunities and limitations do these patterns reveal for developing critical reading and epistemic literacy in EFL education?

1.5 Significance of the study

The current study contributes to the field of applied linguistics by extending corpus-assisted materials analysis from merely describing lexical and grammatical features to analyzing linguistic constructions of knowledge and credibility. The combined analysis of epistemic stance and evidentiality makes it possible to examine the relationship between authors' commitment to their propositions and the sources of information they invoke. For critical reading research, the study foregrounds textual features that can be made explicit in instruction, including degrees of certainty, qualified claims, reported information and unattributed assertions. For EFL teachers, curriculum developers and materials designers, the findings may inform reading tasks that ask learners to identify who makes a claim, what evidence is invoked, how strongly a proposition is expressed and what remains uncertain or unsupported. The study does not measure learners' actual reading performance or establish the effectiveness of particular teaching interventions; rather, it identifies text-based resources and pedagogical possibilities that can inform subsequent classroom research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Critical reading in contemporary applied linguistics

Critical reading is increasingly conceptualised as an interpretive and evaluative practice that extends beyond literal comprehension. Readers must examine how arguments are constructed, distinguish evidence from assertion, recognise authorial positioning and consider whose perspectives are represented or marginalised. This orientation connects reading pedagogy with critical literacy, in which texts are treated not as neutral containers of information but as forms of discourse shaped by linguistic choices and social contexts (Mur-Dueñas, 2026). In EFL settings, this is particularly important because learners may understand a text's propositional content without necessarily recognising the assumptions or persuasive strategies through which that content is presented (Yildiz & Turan, 2021).

Recent research has begun to translate these concerns into more explicit language-teaching practices. In a critical review of critical literacy in TESOL, Weng (2023) highlights the persistent challenge of translating critical-literacy principles into practice, particularly in EFL contexts. Brocca et al. (2026) extend this discussion to critical digital literacy by proposing the Implicit Content Extraction approach, which helps learners identify presupposed information in instructional materials. Similarly, Zaini and Shokouhi (2024), in a micro-case study involving four international postgraduate students, demonstrate the relevance of recognising unsourced evidentiality to critical reading. The study provides valuable interpretive insights, although its context-specific design limits the generalisability of its findings. Collectively, these studies support a view of critical reading as attention to the linguistic construction of claims, not simply the extraction of information. However, they also indicate that critical reading research has not yet fully connected classroom-oriented approaches with systematic descriptions of epistemic and evidential patterns in graded EFL reading materials.

2.2 Epistemic stance in written discourse

Epistemic stance concerns the linguistic expression of a writer's assessment of the status, likelihood or certainty of a proposition. It includes resources through which writers present information as certain, probable, possible or tentative, and through which they strengthen or limit their commitment to claims. In written discourse, these meanings are commonly realised through modal verbs, stance adverbs, reporting verbs, evaluative expressions and other lexical or grammatical constructions. Hyland's (2005) stance-and-engagement framework remains influential because it conceptualises stance as an interpersonal resource through which writers express positions and negotiate relationships with readers. A useful distinction is that between hedging and boosting. Hedges, such as may, might, perhaps and appears to, qualify propositions and limit the strength of commitment. Boosters, such as clearly, certainly, and there is no doubt, present propositions with stronger commitment (Yang & Guo, 2025). These categories should not, however, be treated as fixed lists of words: the function of an expression depends on its context, discourse purpose and scope. A modal verb may signal epistemic possibility in one sentence but obligation or ability in another.

The importance of contextual interpretation is also supported by corpus-based research. In particular, the use of epistemic markers does not increase uniformly across proficiency levels and varies across writing tasks. Although the research concerns

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learner production rather than reading materials, it challenges the assumption that the frequency of epistemic markers can be interpreted as a direct measure of proficiency. For the present study, this finding supports examining stance in relation to text genre and topic rather than treating CEFR labels as an independent explanation of linguistic variation.

2.3 Evidentiality and the construction of knowledge

Where epistemic stance concerns a writer's commitment to a proposition, evidentiality concerns how information is sourced or presented as known. Evidential resources may refer explicitly to research findings, expert statements, statistics, observation or reported information. They may also leave the source unspecified, presenting a proposition as generally accepted or already established. The distinction is analytically important: attribution identifies or invokes a source, whereas epistemic stance indicates how strongly a proposition is endorsed or qualified. The two may operate together, but neither ensures the reliability of a claim.

Zaini and Shokouhi's (2024) study highlights the significance of unsourced evidentiality in writing. Their results indicate that readers' interpretations of evidential expressions are influenced not only by linguistic cues but also by sociocultural expectations. These studies converge on the importance of making implicit and explicit textual positioning available for critical analysis. Nevertheless, evidentiality should not be reduced to a simple distinction between sourced and unsourced statements. A named expert, research institution or statistical reference may lend authority to a claim without providing sufficient information to assess its evidence, scope or relevance (Wu, 2026). Accordingly, the present study treats evidentiality as a textual resource through which knowledge claims are attributed, supported, generalised or left without an explicit source. Its relationship with epistemic stance is central: a claim may be strongly asserted but weakly sourced, or cautiously expressed while being attributed to a named research source. Examining both dimensions enables a more precise account of how reading texts constructs authority and credibility.

2.4 Corpus-assisted discourse analysis

Corpus-assisted discourse analysis provides a methodological means of connecting recurring linguistic patterns with their communicative functions. Frequency analysis can identify the distribution of potentially relevant expressions, while concordance analysis allows researchers to inspect their immediate context and determine how they operate in particular contexts. Quantitative frequency alone cannot establish discourse meaning (Gillings & Jaworska, 2025). Bednarek (2024) also warns that analyses focusing on word frequencies, keywords, or repeated sequences may overlook intra-textual organisation. This is particularly relevant to epistemic language, since the interpretation of a marker may depend on the proposition it qualifies, the source it invokes and its position within the wider text. A combined analytical approach is therefore justified. In the present study, descriptive corpus analysis identifies and compares epistemic and evidential expressions, while qualitative discourse analysis examines their contextual functions in constructing certainty, qualification, attribution, and authorial commitment. This integration avoids two methodological limitations: treating every occurrence of a lexical item as functionally identical, and relying exclusively on selected examples without establishing how representative they are of the corpus. It also makes the analytical process more transparent by linking interpretative claims to identifiable textual evidence (Bednarek et al., 2024).

2.5 CEFR and graded EFL reading materials

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages provides proficiency descriptors for communicative activities, including reading comprehension, and provides a shared basis for describing language-learning objectives and materials (Council of Europe, 2020). However, a proficiency label should not be interpreted as a complete description of a text's linguistic or discourse demands. Reading difficulty may involve vocabulary, syntax, cohesion, genre knowledge, conceptual density and the interpretative work required to evaluate claims. Recent research illustrates both the value and the limitations of classifying materials by proficiency level. Wen and Yu (2025) investigate online graded reading materials and identify systematic differences in lexical demands across levels. Using expert classifications of 1,181 texts across three categories and CEFR levels, Zhang and Lu (2025) demonstrate that models incorporating multiple linguistic-complexity features predict CEFR levels more accurately than conventional readability-formula baselines. These studies strengthen the case for evaluating graded materials through more than a single readability measure. Nevertheless, their emphasis on lexical or linguistic complexity does not directly address how texts represent certainty, evidence or knowledge. This distinction is consequential for the present corpus. The selected British Council LearnEnglish materials include 18 text units labelled across B1, B2 and C1, alongside one general-level text. The distribution is

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uneven, and the texts vary in topic and genre. Consequently, comparisons across CEFR-labelled categories must remain descriptive; differences cannot be attributed to proficiency level independently of genre, topic or corpus composition.

2.6 Synthesis and conceptual framework

The literature points to three related propositions. First, critical reading involves evaluating how claims are framed and supported, rather than merely retrieving textual information. Second, epistemic stance and evidentiality provide complementary linguistic resources for examining how writers express commitment and present sources of knowledge. Third, corpus-assisted discourse analysis can identify recurring patterns, but their interpretation requires contextual examination. Research on graded reading materials has advanced the analysis of lexical and linguistic complexity, yet the epistemic and evidential dimensions of these texts remain comparatively underexamined. The present study brings these perspectives together through a conceptual framework in which the selected British Council reading texts are examined in relation to their genres, subject areas and CEFR-labelled levels. Epistemic stance is analysed through expressions of certainty, possibility, probability and commitment; evidentiality is examined through attribution, sourcing and references to evidence. Their interaction is then interpreted in terms of how texts construct knowledge, authority, credibility, certainty and uncertainty. These discourse patterns provide the basis for identifying pedagogical opportunities and limitations for EFL critical reading and epistemic literacy. The framework does not assume that marker frequency demonstrates textual quality or learner competence. Rather, it uses linguistic patterns as evidence for examining the interpretive challenges and pedagogical opportunities associated with graded reading materials.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

The present study adopted a qualitatively oriented, mixed-methods, corpus-assisted discourse-analytic design to examine how epistemic stance and evidentiality are represented in selected British Council LearnEnglish reading texts. The design integrated quantitative corpus techniques with qualitative discourse interpretation. Quantitative analysis established the frequency and distribution of relevant linguistic expressions, while qualitative analysis examined their contextual functions in constructing knowledge, certainty, attribution, authority and authorial commitment. This combination was appropriate because frequency patterns alone could not establish the discourse functions of individual expressions, whereas qualitative interpretation without systematic corpus evidence might have over emphasised selected examples. Corpus-assisted discourse analysis provided a systematic means of connecting linguistic patterns with their communicative functions (Baker, 2006; Partington et al., 2013). The study was documentary and text-based. It involved no human participants, classroom intervention or experimental manipulation. Its mixed-methods character is derived from the integration of quantitative descriptions of textual patterns and qualitative interpretations of their discourse functions.

3.2 Research context and data source

The primary data source was the British Council's LearnEnglish Reading resource. The study examined 18 reading texts. These texts covered a range of topics, including science and technology, the environment, society, culture, work and lifestyle. The corpus also included several text types, including informational articles, narratives, explanatory texts, and personal correspondence. The corpus comprised six C1 texts, eight B2 texts, three B1 texts and one general-level text. As shown in Table 1, the distribution across proficiency labels was uneven. The selected texts, therefore, constituted a purposive corpus rather than a random or exhaustive sample of the British Council LearnEnglish collection.

Table 1. Composition of the selected British Council LearnEnglish reading corpus

Represented proficiency label	Number of text units	Percentage
B1	3	16.7
B2	8	44.4
C1	6	33.3
General level	1	5.6
Total	**18**	**100.0**

Note. Percentages were calculated from the 18 selected text units. The general-level text was retained as a separate category rather than assigned to a CEFR level.

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3.3 Corpus development

The corpus was developed through the retrieval, verification and preparation of the 18 selected texts. The titles, source URLs, proficiency labels and textual content were checked against the corresponding British Council webpages. The retrieved versions were compared with those in the compiled dataset, and any differences in wording, paragraphing, or content were documented. The texts were cleaned by removing webpage navigation, interface material, and other content unrelated to the reading passages. Original headings, paragraph boundaries, quotations and attribution expressions were retained because they were relevant to discourse interpretation. Each text was assigned a unique identifier, and the cleaned texts were compiled into a digital corpus. A metadata record was maintained for each text, including its identifier, title, source URL, proficiency label, genre, subject area and word count. Word counts were generated consistently from the cleaned texts. This procedure documented the corpus composition and supported comparisons among texts of different lengths. The final corpus was treated as a collection of the selected reading units rather than as a representative sample of all British Council reading materials.

3.4 Analytical framework

The analysis integrated three complementary perspectives: epistemic stance, evidentiality and critical discourse analysis. Epistemic stance refers to the linguistic expression of writers' degrees of certainty, possibility, probability, and commitment to propositions. Evidentiality concerned how information was attributed or presented as knowledge, including references to research, experts, statistics, observation and reported statements. Critical discourse analysis provided the interpretive lens through which the contribution of these resources to the representation of knowledge, authority, and credibility was examined. The coding framework distinguished between epistemic and evidential functions while allowing overlapping classifications where an expression performed more than one function. Table 2 presents the principal analytical categories and their operational definitions.

Table 2. Analytical framework for epistemic stance and evidentiality

Dimension	Analytical category	Operational definition	Illustrative expressions
Epistemic stance	Certainty and commitment	Expressions presenting propositions with strong writer commitment	certainly, undoubtedly, there is no doubt
Epistemic stance	Possibility and probability	Expressions indicating possibility, likelihood or prediction	may, might, could, probably, likely
Epistemic stance	Hedging and qualification	Expressions limiting commitment or presenting propositions tentatively	perhaps, apparently, seems, suggests
Evidentiality	Explicit attribution	Expressions identifying a source or attributing information to an identifiable source	according to NASA, scientists say, researchers found
Evidentiality	Implicit or generalised attribution	Expressions presenting information as known or reported without identifying a specific source	it is believed, research shows, people think
Evidentiality	Reporting and sourcing	Reporting expressions through which claims, statements or findings are attributed	reports, claims, argues, states

Note. The categories were not treated as mutually exclusive. Expressions were classified according to their function in the surrounding linguistic and discourse context.

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3.5 Data analysis

Three study-specific instruments supported the analysis: a corpus-profile and frequency record, a concordance and contextual-analysis protocol, and a discourse-function coding framework. AntConc was used to retrieve concordance lines and examine recurring linguistic patterns (Anthony, 2022). The relationship between the research questions, instruments and analytical procedures is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Alignment of research questions, analytical instruments and procedures

Research question	Instrument or analytical tool	Analytical procedure
1	Coding framework, corpus profiling record and concordance software	Identification, classification, raw-frequency and normalized-frequency analysis
2	Metadata record, concordance protocol and contextual coding framework	Descriptive comparisons and qualitative discourse interpretation
3	Discourse-analysis record and evidence-to-implication matrix	Synthesis of textual patterns into pedagogical implications

The analysis proceeded in five stages. First, the corpus was profiled according to text, genre, subject area, proficiency label and word count. Second, potentially relevant epistemic and evidential expressions were identified through keyword searches and manual examination of their contexts. Third, raw and normalized frequencies were calculated to describe the distribution of the identified expressions. Normalised frequencies were expressed per 1,000 words using the following formula:

Normalised frequency per 1,000 words = (raw frequency ÷ total corpus words) × 1,000.

This procedure facilitated descriptive comparisons among texts of different lengths. Fourth, concordance lines and their surrounding paragraphs were examined to establish whether expressions indicated certainty, possibility, qualification, source attribution, reporting or authorial commitment. Collocation patterns were also examined when sufficient recurring instances were available. Sparse patterns were interpreted cautiously and were not treated as evidence of statistically meaningful associations. Finally, the findings were compared across genres, subject areas and represented CEFR proficiency labels. Given the corpus's small size, heterogeneity, and uneven distribution of texts, the analysis relied on descriptive comparisons rather than inferential statistical tests. No population-level or developmental claims were made from differences between the proficiency-labelled groups. Representative textual extracts were interpreted in their wider contexts to connect distributional patterns with the construction of knowledge and authority. For RQ3, the findings were synthesised through an evidence-to-implication framework. This framework connected observed textual features with potential reading activities, such as identifying the source of a claim, distinguishing established information from predictions, and evaluating the degree of certainty expressed by the writer. These implications were derived from the textual analysis rather than from measured learner outcomes.

3.6 Reliability and validity

Because the study was conducted by a single author, reliability procedures focused on coding consistency, contextual verification and analytical transparency. The author piloted the coding scheme on a subset of the corpus to assess the clarity and applicability of the analytical categories. Ambiguous expressions and instances of overlapping functions were examined, and the coding definitions were refined before the complete corpus was analysed. The author then coded the entire corpus and, after an interval of two to three weeks, independently recoded a selected subset without consulting the initial coding decisions. This procedure provided a basis for assessing intra-coder consistency. No second coder was involved; therefore, inter-coder reliability was neither calculated nor claimed. The analysis also maintained an audit trail of the coding framework, corpus records, search procedures and analytical decisions. Quantitative frequency patterns were checked against concordance lines and their surrounding

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textual contexts. This process connected the distributional evidence with the qualitative interpretations and reduced the risk of assigning discourse functions to isolated expressions without considering their context. These procedures strengthened the transparency and dependability of the analysis while acknowledging the interpretative role of the single researcher.

3.7 Ethical considerations

The study used publicly accessible educational texts and did not recruit human participants or collect personal, confidential or sensitive information. Participant consent was therefore not applicable. Nevertheless, the study followed established practices for responsible documentary research and publication. The British Council was acknowledged as the source of the reading materials, and the original titles and URLs were recorded. Copyrighted texts were not reproduced in full; only brief extracts necessary to illustrate analytical points were used with appropriate attribution. The analysis also distinguished the source texts from the author's interpretations and did not present the selected materials as representative of the entire British Council LearnEnglish collection.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Corpus profile

The corpus comprised 18 reading texts drawn from British Council LearnEnglish, representing three CEFR proficiency levels and one general-level category. After source URLs and document-level titles had been removed, the corpus contained 9,017 words, including internal headings. The distribution was uneven: six texts were classified as C1 (3,406 words), eight as B2 (3,772 words), three as B1 (1,164 words), and one as general-level material (675 words). The texts covered scientific, environmental, social, cultural, business, technological, and literary topics and included informational articles, explanations, personal accounts, book summaries, and fictional narratives. Contextual coding distinguished epistemic expressions that communicated certainty, probability or possibility from modal forms expressing ability, permission or other non-epistemic meanings. Evidential coding identified explicit source attribution, reporting constructions, references to research and evidence, and the use of numerical or statistical information to support claims. This distinction was particularly important because forms such as can, could and would occurred frequently but did not consistently express epistemic possibility. The findings below, therefore, report contextually interpreted instances rather than treating every lexical occurrence as an epistemic or evidential marker.

4.2. Distribution of epistemic stance markers

Three principal categories of epistemic stance were identified: certainty and strong commitment, probability and qualification, and possibility. Across the 18 texts, 56 contextually interpreted instances were identified. Possibility markers were the most common, accounting for 37 instances (66.1%), followed by probability and qualification markers, with 15 instances (26.8%). Four instances (7.1%) of certainty and strong commitment were identified. Table 4 illustrates the distribution of epistemic stance markers from the selected corpus.

Table 4. Distribution of epistemic stance markers in the corpus

Epistemic stance category	Representative markers	Frequency	Per 1,000 words
Certainty and strong commitment	no doubt, certain, definitely	4	0.44
Probability and qualification	probably, perhaps, apparently, likely, unlikely, seems	15	1.66
Possibility	epistemic may, might and could	37	4.10
Total		56	6.21

Note. Frequencies represent contextualised marker instances across 9,017 words. Non-epistemic uses of modal verbs, including expressions of ability and practical possibility, were excluded.

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Possibility markers predominated, suggesting that the texts often presented propositions as potential, conditional, or not fully established rather than as categorically certain. This pattern was particularly evident in scientific and explanatory texts. For instance, in *Life on Mars*, the statement that organic molecules "could have been formed by non-living processes" qualifies the interpretation of the scientific findings. Likewise, the phrase "may have been a watery lake" presents one possible interpretation of Mars's geological past. These constructions help distinguish observations from interpretations that remain subject to further investigation. Probability and qualification markers also helped writers moderate the strength of their claims.

Expressions such as "probably", "perhaps," and "unlikely" allowed writers to communicate degrees of confidence without presenting every proposition as definitive. In *Robot Teachers*, for instance, "Perhaps the question is not 'Will robots replace teachers?' but 'How can robots help teachers?'" shifts the discussion from a categorical prediction towards a more qualified and exploratory position. Explicit expressions of certainty occurred less frequently. Statements such as "There is no doubt that we still have a long way to go" in *Sustainable Supermarkets* and "One thing is certain" in *Robot Teachers* demonstrate how stronger commitment was used selectively to reinforce particular evaluative positions. Overall, the distribution suggests that possibility and qualification were more prominent than categorical certainty in the corpus.

4.3. Distribution of evidential markers

The evidential analysis identified two recurring resources for presenting information and knowledge claims: attribution to identifiable sources and references to research or supporting evidence. Numerical and statistical information provided an additional means of presenting claims as factual or empirically grounded.

Table 5. Distribution of evidential resources in the corpus

Evidential resource	Representative forms	Frequency or coverage	Per 1,000 words
Explicit attribution and reporting	according to, says, said, reports, claims, argues, predicts, estimates, suspects, suggests, point out	31 instances	3.44
Research and evidence references	study, research, evidence, data, findings, statistics	12 instances	1.33
Quantitative and statistical support	Percentages, population figures, measurements, dates and numerical estimates	Present in 11 of 18 texts	—

Note. The first two categories report contextualised lexical instances. Quantitative and statistical support is reported as text coverage rather than as a frequency of individual numbers. Some evidential resources occur together within the same passage and are therefore not mutually exclusive.

Explicit attribution was prominent in texts discussing scientific findings, social trends, and cultural practices. In *Life on Mars*, references such as "According to NASA" and "NASA suspects" identify institutional sources while also distinguishing reported information from interpretations that remain uncertain. In *Cultural behaviour in business*, a reference to research on smiling across cultures, followed by the phrase "the researchers found," presents a general claim as an attributed research finding. The corpus also contained reporting constructions that presented different positions rather than simply confirming information. In *Four Book Summaries*, for example, expressions such as "according to the authors," "he claims," and "Pinker argues" attribute propositions to particular writers. This enables readers to distinguish the authors' positions from the voice of the text summarising their work. Similarly, The *Legend of Fairies* refers to what photography experts thought and what Arthur Conan Doyle believed, placing contrasting interpretations alongside one another.

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Quantitative information was especially visible in scientific, environmental and social issue texts. Examples included the percentage of climbers using oxygen in *A Biography of Kilian Jornet*, estimates of methane emissions in *Life on Mars*, population projections in *The State of the World*, and numerical estimates of clothing consumption in *The Buy Nothing Movement*. These details lent claims an appearance of precision and factual authority. However, the presence of numerical information did not, in itself, establish the quality or adequacy of the underlying evidence.

4.4. Discourse patterns across genres and topics

The distribution and communicative functions of epistemic and evidential resources varied across the genres and subject areas represented in the corpus. Scientific and technical texts generally combine institutional attribution, references to research and possibility markers. In *Life on Mars* and *Asteroids*, claims were frequently associated with NASA, scientific investigations or proposed technological solutions. Possibility expressions were used to differentiate between observations and predictions, explanations and scenarios about the future. Social, environmental and economic texts more frequently combined quantitative information with evaluative language. Sustainable supermarkets, The Buy Nothing movement and *The State of the World* used numerical claims to establish the scale of issues before presenting interpretations or recommendations. In these texts, factual detail and evaluative positioning worked together: numerical information provided apparent evidential support, while expressions of concern, qualification and possibility guided readers towards particular interpretations.

Cultural and interpersonal texts relied more heavily on reported perspectives and generalisations. *Cultural Behaviour in Business* used modal expressions such as might and could to qualify statements about cultural expectations and behaviour. This use of modal language is notable because the text also cautioned against the homogenisation of national cultures as categories. The text *Digital Habits across Generations* similarly used reported speech to illustrate generational differences in technology use, allowing individual accounts to support broader social observations. Literary and narrative texts, however, displayed a different pattern. The short-story excerpt relied primarily on narration and character dialogue, with few explicit references to external sources of evidence. *Star Wars and the Hero Myth* used attribution to Campbell to establish the interpretative framework through which the film narrative was discussed. *The Legend of Fairies* combined historical references, attributed beliefs, and competing explanations, making it particularly important to distinguish cultural beliefs from historical evidence. Table 6 summarises the genres, subject areas and prominent discourse patterns represented in the corpus.

Table 6. Genre, subject area and prominent epistemic–evidential patterns

Text	Predominant text type and subject	Prominent discourse pattern
A biography of Kilian Jornet	Biography; sport and achievement	Quantified detail and qualified description
Cultural behaviour in business	Informational article; intercultural communication	Modal qualification and attributed research
Four book summaries	Book summaries; global development	Attribution of authors' positions and evaluative claims
Life on Mars	Scientific information; astrobiology	Institutional attribution, research evidence and possibility
Sustainable supermarkets	Informational article; sustainability	Statistical estimates, evaluation and qualified recommendations
The state of the world	Expository article; global development	Population statistics, projections and probability
A short story extract	Fictional narrative	Character perspective and narrative modality
An email from a friend	Personal correspondence	First-person experience and personal evaluation
Asteroids	Scientific information; astronomy	Numerical estimates, institutional attribution and prediction
Star Wars and the hero myth	Film and literary commentary	Attribution to a theoretical source

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The Buy Nothing movement	Informational article; consumerism	Quantitative claims and evaluative positioning
The sharing economy	Explanatory article; digital economy	Generalisation and qualified claims about consequences
Why bridges collapse	Explanatory article; engineering	Causal explanation and conditional possibility
Work–life balance	Personal accounts; employment	Subjective evaluation and individual perspectives
Digital habits across generations	Informational feature; digital society	Reported speech and numerical social indicators
Robot teachers	Expository article; technology and education	Prediction, possibility and expert attribution
The legend of fairies	Expository article; folklore	Competing explanations and attributed beliefs
April Fool's Day	Magazine feature; culture and media	Reported claims, numerical detail and contrasting evaluations

Note. Patterns reflect contextual qualitative coding across the 18 analysed reading texts.

The patterns in Table 6 indicate that epistemic and evidential resources were associated with the communicative purposes of individual texts rather than being distributed uniformly across the corpus. Scientific and explanatory texts tended to make the status of knowledge claims more visible through attribution and qualification. Personal and fictional texts relied more strongly on experiential or narrative perspectives. These differences suggest that opportunities for examining credibility and authorial commitment are partly shaped by text type and subject matter.

4.5. Patterns across CEFR labels

The distribution of epistemic stance markers varied across the represented CEFR categories. As shown in Table 7, the B1 texts had the highest normalised frequency, followed by C1, B2 and the general-level text.

Table 7. Epistemic stance markers across represented CEFR categories

CEFR category	Texts (n)	Words	Certainty	Probability	Possibility	Total markers	Per 1,000 words
C1	6	3,406	1	7	19	27	7.93
B2	8	3,772	2	3	11	16	4.24
B1	3	1,164	1	5	6	12	10.31
General	1	675	0	0	1	1	1.48
Total	18	9,017	4	15	37	56	6.21

Note. Frequencies are based on contextual coding. Normalised frequencies are descriptive and do not establish differences attributable to proficiency level.

The comparatively high rate for B1 texts was largely associated with the language used in *Robot Teachers* and *The Legend of Fairies*, particularly expressions of possibility, prediction, and competing explanations. The C1 texts showed a broader range of epistemic and evidential functions, including the qualification of scientific interpretations and the attribution of claims to researchers. The B2 texts contained fewer epistemic stance markers relative to their combined word count, although individual texts, such as *Asteroids*, used possibility and prediction extensively. These findings do not demonstrate a linear relationship between CEFR proficiency and epistemic language. The B1, B2 and C1 groups were not balanced, and their texts varied in genre, topic and communicative purpose. The general-level category was represented by only one text. Consequently, the observed differences are

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more appropriately understood as features of the selected materials than as evidence of systematic linguistic progression across proficiency levels.

4.6. Summary of findings

The analysis identified frequent instances of epistemic possibility and qualification across all 18 reading texts. Evidential expressions were also prevalent, particularly institutional attributions to experts, researchers, and authors, as well as references to studies, numerical information, and data. The discourse strategies varied according to genre and topic. In scientific and technical texts, institutional sources were often combined with interpretive statements, whereas social and environmental texts frequently combined numerical data with evaluative statements. Personal and narrative texts relied more heavily on individual perspectives, reported speech and narrative positioning. Differences across CEFR categories were descriptive and did not establish a developmental progression. Thus, these findings indicate that the selected materials provide varied textual instances through which readers can examine how knowledge claims are presented, qualified, attributed and supported. They also reveal that the presence of an authority reference or numerical detail should not automatically be equated with reliable evidence. The distinction between a claim, its source, and the evidence provided in its support and the degree of certainty attached to it is therefore central to understanding the epistemic dimensions of these reading materials.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Epistemic stance and evidential resources in the reading texts (RQ1)

The analysis identified a range of epistemic stances and evidential resources across the 18 British Council LearnEnglish reading texts. Possibility and qualification featured more prominently than categorical expressions of certainty. This pattern suggests that the texts often present knowledge claims as open to interpretation, dependent on available evidence, or subject to varying degrees of certainty. Such language allows writers to communicate claims without presenting every proposition as a fact. This interpretation is consistent with Hyland's (2005) account of epistemic stance as a means through which writers position themselves in relation to propositions and readers. The texts also used attribution, reporting expressions and references to research or numerical evidence to support claims. These resources help establish the basis on which information is presented and contribute to the construction of textual authority. However, the presence of an attributed source or numerical evidence does not automatically mean that a claim is credible or accurate. Readers should also consider the identity of the source, the relevance of the evidence, and the relationship between the evidence and the proposition. The distinction is especially relevant in the context of the discussion by Zaini and Shokouhi (2024) about unsourced evidentiality and its issues for critical reading.

5.2 The construction of knowledge, authority and uncertainty across genres, topics and CEFR categories (RQ2)

The analysis suggests that epistemic and evidential resources vary by genre and subject area. Scientific and technical texts tend to present explanations and research findings through attribution and qualification. Social and environmental texts include factual and numerical information alongside evaluative language, whereas personal and narrative texts foreground the writer's perspective. These differences suggest that the linguistic construction of knowledge reflects the communicative purposes and evidential demands of individual texts. Nevertheless, these patterns should not be interpreted as fixed characteristics of particular genres or subject areas. Differences may also arise from the specific topics, authorship and communicative purposes represented in the corpus. Similarly, the distribution of markers across the represented CEFR categories does not establish a linear progression in epistemic sophistication. The uneven number of texts across categories and the variation in their genres and subject matter limit direct comparisons. The CEFR descriptors mainly focus on language competence and communicative competence, and not on the frequency of specific epistemic or evidential expressions (Council of Europe, 2020). This interpretation also accords with Pyykönen's (2023a, 2023b) findings that task type, proficiency and authorial style can influence the use of epistemic stance markers in L2 writing. Therefore, the observed differences should be understood as variations within the selected corpus rather than as developmental stages associated with different proficiency levels.

5.3 Pedagogical opportunities and limitations for critical reading and epistemic literacy (RQ3)

The results highlight the potential of using EFL reading texts at different levels of difficulty to enhance students' understanding of how texts construct knowledge, certainty, and credibility. This interpretation is consistent with Hyland's (2005) emphasis on the interpersonal dimensions of stance and with recent research highlighting the need to teach critical reading and

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IJCSRR @ 2026
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digital literacy explicitly in language classes (Hà & Huertas-Abril, 2024). The study contributes a corpus-informed perspective on the epistemic and evidential features of graded EFL reading materials. The analysis also provides a basis for selecting texts and designing classroom activities that encourage learners to question how information is presented rather than accept textual authority uncritically. However, the findings concern the linguistic characteristics of the selected materials, not learners' actual critical-reading abilities or learning outcomes. The relatively small and uneven corpus, its reliance on one educational resource and the overlap between CEFR category, genre and subject matter also constrain generalisation. Further research involving larger and more balanced corpora, other educational publishers and classroom-based investigations could establish how learners interpret these features and whether explicit instruction in epistemic language supports the development of critical reading and epistemic literacy.

5.4 Implications

The findings highlight the importance of integrating epistemic awareness into EFL reading instruction. Teachers can use graded reading materials to help learners distinguish factual statements from interpretations, recognise expressions of certainty and uncertainty, identify attributed sources, and evaluate the evidential support for textual claims. These activities can foster critical engagement with the linguistic construction of knowledge and credibility, moving beyond information retrieval alone (Hyland, 2005; Zaini & Shokouhi, 2026). Comparing attributed and unattributed claims, interpreting numerical evidence, and identifying hedging and possibility markers can support the development of critical reading and epistemic literacy. Materials developers should therefore consider epistemic and evidential complexity alongside vocabulary, grammatical difficulty, genre and conventional CEFR classifications (Brocca et al., 2026; Pyykönen, 2023a, 2023b).

5.5 Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study has certain imitations that should be clearly acknowledged. First, the corpus comprised only 18 purposively selected texts from one educational resource, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Second, the uneven distribution of texts across B1, B2 and C1 categories, together with variations in genre and subject matter, restricts direct comparisons and prevents conclusions about developmental progression. This caution is particularly significant because epistemic-language patterns may vary according to task and text characteristics, as well as proficiency (Pyykönen, 2023a, 2023b). Finally, the study examined textual features rather than learners' interpretations or learning outcomes. Consequently, the pedagogical implications remain propositions requiring empirical evaluation. Future research should examine larger, more balanced corpora from multiple EFL publishers and educational contexts to investigate epistemic and evidential patterns across genres and proficiency levels. Classroom-based and experimental studies are also required to investigate how learners interpret certainty, attribution, and evidential support, and whether explicit instruction enhances critical reading skills and epistemic literacy (Brocca et al., 2026; Weng, 2023). Longitudinal research could further explore how learners' ability to evaluate knowledge claims develops across proficiency levels.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explored how epistemic stance and evidentiality construct knowledge, authority, certainty and credibility across CEFR-labelled British Council LearnEnglish reading materials. The results indicate that possibility and qualified stance are prominent features of the selected texts, alongside diverse forms of source attribution and evidential support. These patterns varied across genres and subject areas, suggesting that epistemic meaning reflects not only linguistic proficiency labels but also the discursive purposes and contexts of individual texts. The study extends materials research beyond conventional measures of linguistic complexity and provides a framework for examining the epistemic and evidential dimensions of reading. In practice, teachers and materials developers should make certainty, attribution and evidential support explicit objects of critical reading, while avoiding assumptions that proficiency labels alone indicate epistemic complexity. However, whether such instruction improves learners' evaluative reading abilities remains unknown. Ultimately, developing critical readers requires more than understanding what texts communicate; it requires understanding how, on whose authority, and with what evidence knowledge is presented.

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