

## Investigating Students' Ability in Identifying English Modals

**Asst. Prof. Maysaa Rasheed Abdul-Majeed**

**Fatimah Khudair Hassoon**

[mra-memo@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mra-memo@yahoo.co.uk)

[fatima.khudaior@yahoo.com](mailto:fatima.khudaior@yahoo.com)

**University of Baghdad**

**College of Education for Women**

### Abstract

Modal verbs are also called auxiliary verbs, helping verbs and modal auxiliaries. They are special auxiliary verbs that express the degree /of certainty of the action in the sentence, attitude or opinion of the writer concerning the action. These auxiliary verbs are *can, could, may, might, must, ought to, shall, should, will, would* and *had better*.

Modality is one of the most difficult aspects of learning English, because the form of modals does not follow the conventional rules of grammar, and there are so many meanings of modals that students often get confused about which modal to use. Also, many EFL learners face difficulty in choosing the proper modal verb that fit certain situations because each modal verb has many functions. The present study is conducted to investigate fourth-year-college students' ability in signifying English modals appropriately and using them correctly. To fulfill the basic requirement of this study, the researchers organized a test, which consists of two questions; the first one is recognition, the second is production. The results show that the students have a real problem in recognizing and using modals.

### Section one: Introduction

#### 1.1 The problem and Significance of the Study

Modals of English derive from a special Germanic class of verbs (the ancestor of English and the other Germanic languages). They always differ from ordinary verbs, and in the course of history of English, they have diverged from verbs even further, to the point where they now belong to a syntactic category of their own (Siewierska, 1991: int.). They are important because they form tenses and alter the meanings of sentences to show "necessity, demand, strong deduction, recommendation, permission and desire"(phpBB Group, 2014:int.).

Modality refers to the speaker's attitude towards the judgment / or assessment of what he says. The complexity and multi-use of English modal auxiliaries comprise a serious challenge to EFL Students. EFL students have serious problems in using modals. Such problems are:

1. The misuse of modal auxiliary, that is attributed to the fact that the same modal can express different meanings in different contexts as in Mathies( 1995: 73).

I **could** meet you for coffee after class

In this example, **could** means future possibility, whereas in its usual use it expresses past ability as in

I **could** speak French when I was a child

Moreover, two or more modals can be used to express one single meaning for example:

That **must** be Sara

That **should** be Sara

That **may** be Sara

That **could** be Sara

**Must, should, may, could** in the above examples express **certainty**, the difference is only the degree of certainty.

This may result in confusion and even worse, among people who are trying to communicate either speech or writing (ibid., pp. 73- 75).

2. There is a rule assumes *present tense verbs with third person singular subject require an –s ending*, when students use this rule with modals - for example, she **can**s swim. It will cause an error because modal verbs do not take the inflection –s or –es in the third person singular, unlike other verbs (Freeman, 1999: 138).
3. Modals directly precede a verb without the intervening infinitive to that is required when two ordinary verbs follow each other in sequence:

I **can** go                      I **want to** go

\*I **can to** go                    \*I **want** go

This formal property may cause the students some trouble (Ibid, p.137).

4. The negation of the modals can be complex for students. There are two main reasons for this: Adding “not” after the modal does not always give the opposite meaning (because it can over generalize the idea/rule again) (Cristina, 2011:int.).
5. EFL learners encounter difficulties in both using modals and comprehending their meanings or discourse functions in texts. This difficulty can be attributed to the lack of a modal system in Arabic; although some Arab linguists have suggested that certain markers in Arabic such as *sa* and *swafa* can convey modal senses (Saeed, 2009:76).

## 1.2 Aim of the Study

The present study aims at finding out whether fourth year college students are able to identify the meaning and function of English modals appropriately and using them properly.

## 1.3 Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that fourth-year-college students have the ability to identify the meaning and function of English modals appropriately and using them properly or not.

### 1.4 Limits of the Study

This study is limited to the fourth year college students, Department of English, College of Education for Women- University of Baghdad, during the academic year (2013-2014).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Modals and Modality

Modals are defined by Feigenbaum (1985:115) as an attitude or evaluation of a situation, i.e., to give the speaker's or writer's point of view. For example, an action is *probable* or that it is *contrary-to-fact* (which is an indication of *permission* or *obligation* to do something).

In English grammar, modals are treated as one type of auxiliaries. An auxiliary in the sentence is everything from the end of the subject, noun phrase to the beginning of the main verb. Either past or present, the auxiliary is composed of various kinds of "helping" verbs, which may or may not be present in any particular sentence. As a matter of fact, the three types of "helping" verbs, the perfect, and the progressive are the modal auxiliaries (Wardaugh , 2003: 13 ).

Modality is not clear in the area of study because of its two broadly kinds: epistemic and deontic modality. Epistemic modality deals with the degree of speaker commitment to the truth of the proposition embedded under the modal. Deontic modality is concerned with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by the speaker ( Papafragou ,1997:1).

Traditionally, modality is interpreted in terms of using modals. Although this is the most important notion through which modals can be studied, many linguists find that it is better to study modality in relation to other terms like tense and aspect. Modality and tense are closely related and encoded in prediction at the same level of depth as they clearly interact with each other. Aspect and modality are also interrelated in the sense that they both deal with the internal configuration of time as it is expressed in verbs. The perfective and progressive aspects are normally excluded when the modal expresses ability, or permission, and also when shall or will express volition. These aspects are freely used, however, with other modal meanings as in (Feigenbaum, 1985: int.):

<b>Possibility</b>	<i>He <b>may</b> have missed the train</i>
	<i>He <b>may</b> have been visiting his mother</i>
	<i>He <b>can't</b> be swimming all day</i>
	<i>He <b>can't</b> have been working</i>
<b>Necessity</b>	<i>He <b>must</b> have left his umbrella on the bus</i>
	<i>I <b>must</b> be dreaming</i>
	<i>You <b>must</b> have been sitting in the sun</i>
<b>Prediction</b>	<i>The guests <b>will</b> have arrived by now</i>
	<i>John <b>will</b> still be reading his paper</i>

According to Fintel (2005: x) there is cross-linguistic evidence that the three categories tense, aspect, and modality are expressed mainly by auxiliaries and closely interrelated. But for many linguists, modality is not a clear area of study. Thus, linguists recognize two broad kinds of modality; epistemic and deontic modality. Epistemic modality deals with the degree of speaker commitment to the truth of the proposition embedded under the modal. Deontic modality is concerned with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by the speaker (Papafragou, 1997:1). Palmer (1987:97) supports this by distinguishing the three functions of modality epistemic, deontic, and dynamic. These can be illustrated in the following examples:

John <b>may</b> be in his office	<b>epistemic</b>
John <b>may/ can</b> come in now	<b>deontic</b>
John <b>can</b> run ten miles with ease	<b>dynamic</b>

The difference in meaning between these three is that the first means it is possible that John is in his office, the second gives permission for John to come in, the third states that John has the ability to run ten miles with ease.

## 2.2 Form and Function of Modals

English modal auxiliaries are characterized by having certain formal restrictions that are reflected in some morpho-syntactic characteristics, such as the fact that they have no *-s* endings for the third person singular, and no infinitives. Marianne et. al. (1999: 138) states that modals are described formally as tensless auxiliaries that take no subject-verb agreement and no infinitive *to* before the following verb. For example:

1. I **can** go                      \* I **can to** go
2. You **must** study            \*You **must to** study

Some modals may be inflected for either present or past tense like *should, might, could, and would*. However, the past tense of these modals doesn't always work in past time frames. For example:

3. **Would/ could** you please pass me the salt

In the above example, *would* and *could* refer to present time not past. Furthermore, modals have no past participle and are therefore barred from combining the auxiliary 'have' to form the perfect:

4. We **have** \***must / had to** tell them.

Modals also don't have an '-ing' participle, and as a consequence, a modal is unacceptable in a position where this participle is required, e.g.:

5. We regret \***musting / having to** tell you this.

In addition, many of them also have weak and contracted forms. Examples:

**Can can't                      Must not      mustn't**

All modals except *ought* are followed by simple-form verbs. Negatives are made by adding *not* to the modal. However, some modals like *have to* and *need* can be negated by adding *do* as in Murphy (1994:65)

6. We **needn't** hurry      or      We **don't need to** hurry

7. We've **got** a lot of time      We **don't have to** hurry

In example no.6, don't need used with to but needn't without to

Questions are made by moving the modal before the subject as with any other auxiliary. Auxiliary *do* is never used with a modal (Lapalombara, 1976:int.). Examples:

8. **May** I borrow your book?

9. **Would** you hurry up please?

With respect to their function, modal verbs are considered to be a special kind of auxiliary verbs. Like other auxiliary verbs, they are always used with a main verb but they express an attitude to what we say. They can express how certain or uncertain we are about an event, or how willing or unwilling we are to do something. Modals are used for several reasons: to give a proposition a degree of probability, to express one's attitude, and to perform various social functions, such as expressing obligation, necessity, prohibition, and refusal; possibility, expectation, probability and certainty; promise and intention, ability and willingness. Politeness or indirectness for making request, giving advice, or granting permission. The following table shows the form and function for each modal.

**Table (1) Forms and Function of Modals**

<i>Modal</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Form in Present/Future</i>	<i>Form in Past</i>
<b>Can</b>	To show ability	I <u>can run</u> 10 miles.	I <u>could run</u> 10 miles when I was in high school.
	To suggest a possibility or to give an option	Students <u>can pre-enroll</u> in classes or sign up at in-person registration.	
	To ask for or to give permission	<u>Can I call</u> you? You <u>can leave</u> when you have finished your exam.	
	To show impossibility	It <u>cannot be</u> Jim standing over there. He went away for the weekend.	

<b>Could</b>	<p>To show past ability</p> <p>To ask a polite question</p> <p>To show possibility</p> <p>To show impossibility</p> <p>To show a past opportunity that was not realized</p>	<p><u>Could I call you?</u></p> <p>Why isn't Maria here? She <u>could be</u> busy.</p> <p>He <u>could not be</u> here at the party. He is out of town.</p>	<p>I <u>could run</u> 10 miles when I was in high school.</p> <p>Why wasn't Maria at the party last night? She <u>could have been</u> busy.</p> <p>He <u>could not have been</u> at the party last night. He was out of town.</p> <p>I <u>could have asked</u> for help on the math problem set, but I wanted to do it myself.</p>
<b>May</b>	<p>To ask for or to give permission (formal)</p>	<p><u>May I call you?</u></p> <p>You <u>may leave</u> when you have finished your exam.</p>	<p>The instructor <u>may have come</u> to class late yesterday.</p>
<b>Might</b>	<p>To show possibility</p>	<p>The instructor <u>may come</u> to class late today.</p> <p>The instructor <u>might come</u> to class late today.</p>	<p>The instructor <u>might have come</u> to class late yesterday.</p>
<b>Should</b>	<p>To show advisability</p> <p>To show advisability after the fact</p> <p>To show obligation</p>	<p>You <u>should try</u> that new restaurant downtown.</p> <p>I <u>should renew</u> my driver's license. It expires next month.</p>	<p>We <u>should have tried</u> that new restaurant downtown. (But we did not.)</p> <p>You <u>should not have said</u> that to Tom. (But you did.)</p> <p>I <u>should have renewed</u> my driver's</p>

<b>Ought to</b>	To show an obligation that was not carried out	You <u>should receive</u> my letter in two days.	license. (But I forgot to do so.) You <u>should have received</u> my letter two days ago. (But you did not.)
	To show expectation		
	To show an expectation that was not realized		Francis <u>ought to have exercised</u> before his
	To show advisability		backpacking trip. (But he did not.)
	To show advisability after the fact	Everyone <u>ought to exercise</u> regularly.	I <u>ought to have registered</u> to vote by
	To show obligation		October 5. (But I did not register.)
	To show an obligation that was not carried out	I <u>ought to register</u> to vote if I want to vote in the next election.	You <u>ought to have received</u>
<b>Had better</b>	To show expectation	You <u>ought to receive</u> my letter in two days.	my letter two days ago. (But you did not.)
	To show an expectation that was not realized	We <u>had better leave</u> . It is getting late.	Mike <u>had to make up</u> the physics lab he missed.
	To show advisability	Mike <u>has to make up</u> the physics lab he missed.	I <u>did not have to cook</u> last night.
	To show necessity	I am glad that I <u>don't have to cook</u> tonight.	
<b>Have to</b>	To show lack of necessity		

These functions are not consistent; they may be changed according to the context in which they occur. For example, sometimes it doesn't matter whether you use *must* or *have to* to say that it is necessary to do something

**10. It's cold here. I must close the window or I have to close the window**

But, in other situations, they are completely different

11. I promised I **would** be on time. I **mustn't** be late. (I must be on time) But;

12. I'm not working tomorrow. So, I **don't have to** get up early. (I don't need)

Freeman et. al ( 1999:141) state that the person using modals must take into his /her own consideration the relevant features of the social situation. In the following examples:

13. You **may** leave the room and

14. You **can** leave the room

Both *may* and *can* are used to give permission. The speaker here should have sufficient status and authority to be able to grant permission to the interlocutor(s).

From what is mentioned, the researchers summarize that modals "are used mainly in contexts where the speaker is talking about states of the world which he cannot assert to be true or real" (Mitchell 1988: 173-4 as cited in Klages and Romer, 2014: int. ). There is an equally general lack of clear-cut categories into which the interpretations of specific modals may be parceled, especially within a language-teaching and language-learning context. (ibid)

### **2.3 Modals and Indirect Speech**

The direct – to –indirect speech shift requires changing the tense of the verb from present to past. This rule can not be applied to all modals, because some modals don't have past form like *must* and *ought* , other modals although they have the so-called past tense but they don't always work in past- time frames eg.

15 *Would/ Could* you bring me a cup of coffee.

The use of reporting speech may result in some confusion, because (*will* and *would*) (*shall* and *should*) are changed into reported speech *will* becomes *would* and *Shall* becomes *should* as in

16 *Mary asked , "Shall / will I carry these for you" which changes to Mary asked if she should/ would carry those for him. Where as should and would remain as they are when applying the direct- to indirect speech rule.*

## **3. The Test**

### **3.1 Test Construction**

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2014, a test about English Modals has been constructed. It is made of two questions (A and B) that include thirty items. A completion and composing sentences types are used for question A. Each type consists of ten items; one mark was given for each item. Changing the sentences into indirect speech is used in question B that consists of ten items. Each item is given two marks,

which were divided as follows: one mark for the form of grammar and the other one for spelling. The total number of marks was 40 (see the Appendix A).

### **3.2 Population and Sample Selection**

#### **A. The Population**

Eighty Iraqi EFL students of the Department of English, College of Education for Women- University of Baghdad were the population of the present study during the academic year (2013-2014).

#### **B. The Sample**

The sample was randomly selected from the population mentioned above, because fourth year students have been introduced to English modals in their syllabus (during their study in the first, second and third year), i.e., they should have a clear idea about them. The total number of the sample was fifty after excluding those students who are teachers and those who failed to attend the test.

### **3.3 Test Validity**

Validity means the extent to which a test measures what is intended to measure (Downie, 1967:92). For face validity, a jury of experts in language and linguistics are given the test in order to judge whether its items are suitable or not for the aim of the present study. The jurors are asked to read the test, check, change, and delete the items. After that, the jurors have agreed upon its validity and suitability (see Appendix 2).

### **3.4 Test Reliability**

The concept of reliability refers to the degree of consistency of the test measurement (Oller, 1979:4). Pearson correlation formula is used for test reliability; the items were divided into two halves (odd and even), by applying the formula it is found out that the test reliability is 0.754. By using Spearman Brown formula, it is found out the test reliability is 0.859. This means that the test is acceptable and reliable.

## **4. Results, Conclusions, Recommendations and Suggestions**

### **4.1 Results**

A. The t-test formula for one sample is used to find out whether students of English department have the ability to identify the meaning and function of English modals appropriately and using them properly or not. As shown in Table 2, the calculated t-value is 0.6426 which is less than the tabulated value (2) at level of significance 0.05.

**Table (2) t-Test statistics for the responses of English Department Students in Recognizing English Modals**

<b>N</b>	<b><math>\bar{x}</math></b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Computed t-value</b>	<b>Tabulate dt-value</b>	<b>d.f</b>	<b>Level of Significance</b>
50	16	11.005	0.6426	2	49	0.05

**Table (3) The Responses of Students of the English Department in Recognizing English Modals**

<b>English Department</b>		
<b>Item No.</b>	<b>Correct Answers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	47	94%
2.	28	56%
3.	20	40%
4.	12	24%
5.	18	36%
6.	32	64%
7.	18	36%
8.	28	56%
9.	18	36%
10.	32	64%
11.	14	28%
12.	37	74%
13.	32	64%
14.	20	40%
15.	40	80%
16.	14	28%
17.	13	26%
18.	10	20%
19.	32	64%
20.	20	40%
21.	23	46%
22.	35	70%
23.	21	42%
24.	38	76%
25.	17	34%
26.	23	46%
27.	21	42%
28.	42	84%
29.	39	78%
30.	40	80%

Table 3 reveals that some participants tend to use English modals correctly while others tend to use it incorrectly; below are **the top five percentages** used by the sample of the study:

The highest top five percentages of the fourth-year students were (94%) on item no. (1)

***I forgot to close the door. -----you mind closing it for me?***

(84%) on item no. (28)

***They had better to carry the injured.***

(80%) on item no. (15)

***Ability***

(78%) on items no. (29)

***The policeman could do a good job.***

and (76%) on item no.(24)

***Obligation***

These correct responses might have occurred due to students' overgeneralization of the grammatical rules based on their prior knowledge that enabled them to identify and recognize English modals (meaning and function) properly.

The lowest top five percentages of the fourth-year students were (20%) on item no. (18)

***Prohibition***

(24%) on item no. (4)

***Thank goodness we \_\_\_\_\_ eat fish again tonight.***

***Dad didn't catch any today.***

(26%) on item no. (17)

***Preferences***

(28%) on item no. (11 and 16)

***Opinion and Advice***

(34%) on item no. (25)

***Susan has to learn Geography.***

These incorrect responses might be attributed to many meanings of modals that students often get confused about which modal to use. Also, many EFL learners face difficulty in choosing the proper modal verb that fit certain situations because each modal verb has many functions.

## **4.2 Conclusions:**

The present study has investigated student ability in identifying and using modals. The results proved the followings:

1. Fourth-year-college students have weak the ability to identify the meaning and function of English modals appropriately but they lack the ability in using them properly because by using the T-test formula, it is found that the calculated T-value is (0.6426), which is less than the tabulated value (2)(see table 2).

2. EFL students are mostly introduced to modals, without paying great attention to their meanings and functions. Students are taught the rules for modals rather than how to use them in context. This happens because of the lecture method, traditional way of teaching (PPP Approach)<sup>1</sup>.

#### 4.3 Recommendations:

On the basis of the findings arrived at, the following recommendations can be stated:

1. Modality is the most difficult aspect in learning English so that attention should be paid by students and teachers of EFL with this kind of verbs and how to deal with them.
2. Meanings of modals are considered to be one of the main problems that face EFL learners. Thus, students should read more about them, knowing their meanings and usage. EFL instructors are advised to put a heavy emphasis on the meanings of modals to help learners master the usage of them.
3. New methods of teaching are recommended to be used by college instructors in teaching EFL learners.

#### 4.4 Suggestions for Further Research

1. A similar study can be carried out to investigate the ability of students in other stages.
2. A project can be conducted to compare the function and meaning of modals in Arabic and English.

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- Lapalomba, (1976: int)

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<sup>1</sup> The Presentation Practice Production Approach, with this model, the teacher **presents** the language items in context through a text, a dialogue..etc. Then, students are asked to complete a controlled **practice** of the items through choral or individual drilling, fill gaps or match between halves of sentences. Finally, students are given a communicative task that they are expected to **produce** the target language for completing it (Frost, 2004: Int.).

- Marianne et. Al. (1999:138)  
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### Appendix 1

#### Q A:

**I. Complete the following sentences with correct modal auxiliaries taken from the list given below. Notice that in some cases you need to use negative: (1 marks for each item)**

(*can, would, may, could, should, might, ought, must, have to*)

1. I forgot to close the door. \_\_\_\_\_ you mind closing it for me?
2. I have some work I \_\_\_\_\_ finish before I go to bed tonight.
3. Soldiers \_\_\_\_\_ disobey a superior officer.
4. Thank goodness we \_\_\_\_\_ eat fish again tonight. Dad didn't catch any today.
5. Bruce has lost a lot of weight lately. He \_\_\_\_\_ see a doctor.
6. Last night, Jack was very tired, he \_\_\_\_\_ go to a meeting.
7. A: I need to see Tom. Where is he?  
 B: In his room. Knock on his door softly. He \_\_\_\_\_ take a nap
8. The sky is getting overcast. It is quite likely that it----- rain tonight.
9. I used to be a good swimmer. I \_\_\_\_\_ swim long distances.
10. Why ..... anyone else decide whether I ..... Smoke in my own home? It's ridiculous.

**II. Compose sentences using the modals given between brackets to express the following meanings: (1 marks for each item)**

(have to, may, should, must, might, can, could, ought to, had better, would)

Opinion obligation possibility impossibility ability advice  
 preference prohibition permission request

**Q B. Change the following sentences into Indirect Speech: (2 marks for each item).**

1. Flight attendants will serve meals.
2. Passengers must fasten their seatbelts.
3. They will demonstrate safety precautions.
4. Passengers should read the safety precautions.
5. Susan has to learn Geography.
6. The children can read books.

