

The Acquisition of Modals by Iraqi EFL University Students
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Abstract

This research investigates the problem of EFL learners' use of modals in written tasks, and checking whether or not Iraqi EFL university students make use of modals and what difficulties they face in its production. In addition the research investigates the distribution and functions of modals used in the subjects' writing.

The findings showed that the preferred modals used by the subjects are can, will and could used in expressing ability and certainty. Modals of probability/possibility showed lower frequencies of use in their writing.

Key words : acquisition, modal auxiliary, discourse analysis, written task.

الخلاصة

يعنى هذا البحث باستقصاء المشكلة التي يواجهها الطلبة العراقيون الجامعيون الدارسون للغة الإنكليزية لغة اجنبيه في استخدام نمطية الافعال المساعدة في مهمه كتابيه وقد استهدف البحث تقصي مدى استخدام شكل الفعل المساعد من قبل الطلبة الجامعيون وطبيعة الصعوبات التي يواجهونها في تلك الاستخدامات. كما ويعنى البحث بتقصي وظائف وتوزيعات اشكال الافعال المساعدة التي يستخدمها الطلبة في كتاباتهم, واطهرت النتائج بان نمطيه الافعال المفضلة عند الطلبة هي افعال القدرة والإمكانية والتأكيد بينما افعال الاحتمالية اظهرت استخداما اقل في كتاباتهم.
الكلمات المفتاحية: اكتساب، مساعد مشروط، تحليل الخطاب، مهمة كتابية.

1. Introduction

1.1 The problem

The difficulty of the English modal auxiliary has been a main problem in learning and teaching English as a foreign language. This difficulty appears when the same modals express different notions, from probability through permission to obligation. Literature has shown that EFL learners face problems in comprehending and using the English modal system accurately. Modals are not only auxiliaries in the prescriptive grammarian sense but they also appear to contribute to the semantics of communication. It is a difficult task for the learners to be able to learn and use the correct usage of modal auxiliaries in their written work. De Carrico (1986: 656) and Hinkel (1995:325), in their respective work on modals, stress that L2 learners use modals differently from L1 learners.

They found that L2 learners use modal verbs more in context as opposed to L1 learners. The current study, which focuses on how Iraqi EFL university learners' use modals in their written work, will contribute to the data on how L2 learners use modal verbs. One of the problematic grammatical items faced by Iraqi EFL university learners is the correct use of modals. Wong (1983: 125) agrees with the fact that the modal auxiliary system of standard formal English is extremely complex, with the same modals sometimes being used to express different notions like that of probability, possibility and certainty, and of inclination, ability, permission and obligation. Iraqi EFL university students would use these modals in so many ways with various meanings Possibly leading to incoherence. So, the study seeks to investigate the use of modals by Iraqi FFL university learners.

1.2 Aims of the Study

This study aims at :

1. Investigating the use of English modals in terms of their functions by Iraqi EFL students at the university level.
2. Checking whether or not the students face difficulties in producing modals.
3. Finding out the causes behind the students' errors in order to suggest helpful remedial work.

1.3 Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that :

1. Most of Iraqi EFL learners at the university level face difficulties in mastering the use of modals in terms of their functions.
2. The modals of ability are preferred and used more frequently than the other modals.

1.4 Procedures

- 1- A theoretical survey is presented first to describe the functions and the uses of modals.
- 2- A written task is administered to a representative sample of Iraqi EFL university students.
- 3- The results are then analyzed using statistical means to get at a corpus of data that can verify the validity of the hypotheses proposed in section 1.3 above.
- 4- Useful conclusions are drawn from the results and certain relevant recommendations are offered.

1.5 Limits

This study will limit itself to the analysis of the performance of Iraqi EFL learners at the university level in the use of modals. The subjects of the study consist in the fourth level students at the Department of English at the College of Education, University of Babylon.

1.6 Value

It is hoped that the work conducted in this study will shed the light upon the use of modals in terms of their functions, as well as on the performance of Iraqi EFL learners in this topic.

In addition, it is hoped that the results of this study can prove to be beneficial in understanding the learners' difficulties and in designing affective remedial programs in this respect.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Definitions of Modals

Linguists have given different types of definitions for modals and modality. Lyons (1977:53) regards modality as having to do with possibility or probability, necessity or contingency, rather than merely with truth or falsity. Marino (1973: 18) states that modality is related to the speaker's view of the potentials involved in the prediction. Shaffer (2004: 175-195) defines modals and modality as the conceptual domains of necessity and possibility. It is also expressed in a given language by modals (lexemes or auxiliaries) or grammatical mood (inflectional coding on the verb).

Fowler's (1986: 11-23) description of modal auxiliaries is that they are words that signal caution or confidence to various degrees. They also provide important means of developing politeness strategies; For example a sentence with no modal would sound impolite: "come here!" as opposed to "Could you come here?" making the request more polite (Simpson 1993). These different definitions make learning the modal auxiliary difficult. Despite the attention the study of modality has received in recent years, linguists have not agreed on what constitutes the modality domain. Consequently, how the researchers delimit and define modality affects what is studied.

2.2 Modals and the English Language

The common lexical ways of expressing modality according to Hemeren (1978:10-11) is as follows:

Nouns such as *chance, hope, intention* and *determination*.

Adjectives such as *possible, likely* and *obvious; appropriate* and *necessary*.

other adjectives such as *sure, surprise, able, doubtful* and *certain*.

Adverbs such as *hardly* and *perhaps; evidently, regrettably, surprisingly, and strangely*.

Verbs: such as *think, believe* and *predict; suggest; want, prefer, desire, permit* and *forbid*.

Modal verbs such as *shall, should, will, would, can, could, may, might, must* and *ought*, which students are more familiar. Some of the modals may be combined in the same sentence

and may not occur individually as in the sentence, “Perhaps he might have did it” (Hemeren, 1978: 119) with the word perhaps and *might* reinforcing each other. Modals may appear in a sentence with no equivalent meaning as in “Surely, he might have did it,” which Lyons (1977: 807-8) calls modally harmonic and non-harmonic. These different ways of expressing modality may be difficult for Iraqi EFL learners. so, to reduce difficulties of modals, we need to have a good understanding of the complexity. then teachers would be able to explain the intricacies in terms of the rules that come with modals.

3. Methodology

The research offers discourse analysis with some descriptive statistics. It was designed to investigate Iraqi EFL learners’ use of modals in written narrative compositions at the fourth stage at the department of English, college of Education University of Babylon. The data comprised the “Sea Trip in a Summer Day” narrative composition. The analysis aims at a detailed description of the phenomenon under study. Descriptive statistics enable the researchers to

summarize the most vital properties of the observed data. A qualitative analysis was preferred as de Monnik (1997:128) has posited a quantitative analysis would lack the descriptive richness of the nature of structures which a qualitative analysis could provide.

3.1 Data Analysis

Discourse analysis is used to analyze sentences in the written tasks and also to identify the functions of the modals used. In this way, language characteristics that extend across clause boundaries can be focused (Biber, et al., 1998). Also the discourse analysis employed in this study will show if there were repetitious use of modals by these students.

4. Results And Discussion

4.1 Distribution of Modals

The modals which appeared through data analysis were *must*, *have to*, *could*, *should*, *will* and *may* and their negated forms, their appearance would serve to reinforce students’ knowledge on their use. A total of 9 different modals were found in the narrative compositions and these were *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *have to*, *need to*, *must*, *should*, *may* and their negated forms. The modal *need to* is also identified. The frequency count of the modals used in the narrative compositions totaled to 119 instances as shown in Table1.

Table 1. Frequency Counts of Modals Use in Narrative Compositions

Modal	Frequency
Can/can't	42
Could/couldn't	29
Will/won't	29
Would/wouldn't	9
Have to/had to	4
Need to	2
Must	2
Should/shouldn't	1
May/may not	1
Total	119

The figures in Table 1 show that the present tense forms of the modal *can*, has the highest frequency of 42, while the modal *could*, showed only 29 instances. Below are examples of sentences with the modal *can* found.

1. “The woman looked for people who *can* help her husband”
2. “... asked Adam to help the woman because they *cannot* swim”

The examples above show that students used more present tense form modals than the past. Since the present tense form is more commonly found, this could be an indication of students’ preference for the present tense form. The examples below are sentences with the modal *could* found in the search:

3. “She swelled too much water and *could not* wake up”
4. “She *could not* swim to the river bank....”

Alternatively, *could* has more functions than *can*, one function of *could* is the degree of probability, differs in sentences that use *could* instead of *can*, such as in “Ali *could* go (if he wanted to)” versus “he can go.” In the former sentence, probability is more prevalent than in the latter. Students may have not acquired the knowledge of these additional roles of *could* and thus limit its use to the “ability” function as a past tense form of *can*. The distributions of *will* and *would* are similar to modals *can* and *could*, where the instances of the present tense form was found to be more than the past tense form. The examples below are some sentences identified with the use of *will*.

5. “...I *will* see her again in heaven”
6. “I was very sad...and I *won't* forget her face...”

The findings show that *will* is used much more than *would*, with 29 instances as opposed to *would* with only 9. The examples below show the use of the modal *would* found in the narrative compositions.

7. “The doctor said that he *would* be dead if he....”
8. “They run away quickly so that the police *wouldn't* catch them”

The examples above give evidence to students’ competence in using the modal *would*. Another modal found in the present and past tense form is *have to*, as shown in the following examples:

9. “...I *have to* confess it was bad”
10. “Nada and I *had to* fight with them”

This modal has the same function as the modal *must*. The low count of the modal *must* with two instances (as shown in Table 1) could be because the students did not find the situations necessary to use in their narrative compositions. *Need to* for necessity also found with 3 instances in the narrative compositions. The modal *need to* according to Coates (1983:269) and Mindt (1995:183) is a semi- modal, and *need* according to Coates is the modal. Investigation reveals that the three most frequently used modals are *can*, *will* and *could* comprised more than half of all modals used by the students. This shows that students are directed by two types of modal function: ability and certainty.

An alternative explanation is given by Oxford (1990) who states that the use of the mother tongue knowledge is one of the strategies used by EFL learners to overcome limitations in the target language.

The findings also show that *can* has been used more in comparison to the modal *could*. The same pattern applies to the modals *will/would*. Mindt (1996:232) states that in teaching English as a second language, the syllabus should start with the main clauses before introducing sub-clauses. With that reason, it is appropriate for the present form modals to be introduced first before the past forms.

4.2 Modals and their Functions as Used by the Students

All the sentences containing modals have been identified in the narrative compositions and listed. The modals and their negated forms have been analyzed according to their functions and categorized as follows: modals of ability, modals of probability and modals of necessity/certainty/obligation.

4.2.1 Modals of Ability

The modals of ability is described by the modals *can*, *could* and their negated forms. Table 2 shows the distribution of these modals in the data.

Table 2. Frequency Counts of Modals of Ability

Modal of Ability	Frequency
Can/can't	42
Could/couldn't	29
Total	71

The acquisition of modals of ability shows that in the narrative compositions produced by students, the modal *can* appeared as the most frequently occurring modals. The functions of the modal *can* are ability, possibility and permission.

However, the functions described by the modals used are more for ability than possibility or permission.

4.2.2 Modals of Probability

Table 3 shows the modals for probability and their distribution in the data.

Table 3. Frequency Counts of Modals of Probability

Modal of Probability	Frequency
Will/won't	29
Would/wouldn't	9
May/may not	1
Total	39

Modals of probability include *will*, *would*, and *may* and their negated forms. They also indicate a future event. The probability of the future event ranges from certainty to probability.

Mindt (1995:247) suggested that there are three prominent meanings of the modal *will* and they are certainty/prediction, volition/intention and possibility/high possibility. The figures in table 3 show a higher frequency in the number of modals of probability. The modal *will* and its negated form show the highest number of occurrences. Examples of *will* that explains the range of probability function are as shown below:

11. "...otherwise I *will* feel guilty"
12. "Suha *will* also be refused..."
13. "They *will* make him happy...."
14. "he *will* be fine"

The modal *would*, also occurs in the students' composition with a total of 9 instances. Some examples of sentences with the use of modals of probability *would* are as shown below:

15. "She *would be* dead"
16. "I was afraid that I *would* lose her"
17. "The boy suggested he *would* go"
18. "...I felt it *would be* silly to harm her"

The examples above support Mindt's (1995:183) argument that in most instances the modal *would* has past time orientation and is most prominent in narration. On the other hand, the occurrence of the probability modals *may* is minimal in use. It was found that the modal *may* for probability totaled to 1 instance, the modal *can* is always more preferred than *may* (Biber et al., 2002:486).

4.2.3 Modals of Necessity/Certainty/Obligation

Necessity and obligation modals include *should*, *must*, *have to/had to* and *need to*.

Table 4 shows the count of the modals of necessity/obligation.

Table 4. Frequency Counts of Modal for Necessity/Certainty/Obligation

Modal for Necessity/Certainty/Obligation	Frequency
Should/should not	1
Must/must not	2
Have to/had to	4
Need to/need not to	2
Total	9

Out of the four modals of necessity/obligation, *must* shows 2 instances. Examples of sentences where *must* occur are given below:

19. "We *must* do that"
20. "...he *must* rescue the girl"

The next type of modal found in the narrative compositions is *have to/had to*. The sentences below show examples of *have to* \ *had to*:

21. "It was really exciting to *have to* go"

22. "The ship *had to* stop at the river bank"

Need to is another modal found in the data and one of the examples is shown below: "He prepared things that **need to* bring along*" the occurrence of *need* in general is rare. Students seem not to prefer its use even if they do have the knowledge of it.

5. Conclusion

This study explained Iraqi EFL learners' use of modals in their written tasks. Main conclusions became apparent throughout the findings. The conclusions are mainly related to how EFL learners use modal auxiliary in their writing.

These conclusions are:

1. Iraqi EFL learners have a great tendency to over-use and under-use certain modals and functions, this has been reflected by the fact that students did use certain modals often and others rarely.
2. The analysis indicated that the most frequently used modals by the students were the modals of ability with a total of 71 occurrences. These include *can*, *could* and their negated forms. Other modals have shown lower frequencies of use, especially modals of probability/possibility. This verified the second hypothesis mentioned in section 1.3.
3. The present tense modals were most apparent indicating the students' ability and understanding in using the present tense form.
4. The students grasp the concept of narration, where the past tense form is used.
5. It has also been found that the students face difficulty in choosing the appropriate modals with the appropriate functions. Modals of probability and of necessity/certainty and obligation were minimally used. This verified the first hypothesis mentioned in section 1.3.

5.1 Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed :

1. All of the nine modals must be introduced and taught to enhance students' understanding. Introducing modals according to function is an appropriate method of teaching modals.
2. Teachers must consider teaching modals in a structured way to enhance understanding.
3. Teaching students forms and functions of linguistic items must be continued and reinforced so that students can get enough exercises that will enable them to practice and understand usage of modals and their functions.
4. The findings showed that students were more familiar with the modals of ability, and this was shown by the high frequency of *can*, while modals of probability and the modals of necessity/certainty/obligation were found to have lower frequencies indicating students' lack of competence in using these two modals. Reinforcing and explicit teaching of these two modals may be necessary to increase students' understanding and their ability to use these two modals more.

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