

ARAB EFL LEARNERS' ACQUISITION OF MODALS

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Abstract

This paper investigates Arab EFL learners' acquisition of modal verbs. The study used a questionnaire, which comprises two versions, testing students' mastery of modals at the levels of both recognition and production. The questionnaire was distributed to 50 English major university students who had studied English for 12-14 years and who had scored 500 or more on the TOEFL. The findings of the study show that the overall performance of the subjects in the study was quite low. The study established a hierarchy of difficulty and identified the major causes of difficulty in the use of modals.

Key words: Acquisition, modals, EFL Arab learners

1. Introduction

Modal auxiliaries constitute one of the major grammatical categories in English. Many studies have explored this subject including Halliday (1970), Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Lyons (1977), Leech (1987), Kreidler (1999), among others. Some of these studies have attempted a thorough account of modality, delineating the various uses of modal verbs and the kind of modality expressed by these verbs i.e. epistemic modality, deontic modality, etc. (see Lyons, 1977 and Kreidler, 1999, for instance). Thus, while epistemic modality refers to "the possibility, probability or impossibility of a particular proposition," deontic modality expresses "the necessity of an individual to act or not act in a particular way" (Kreidler, 1999: 241). Other studies have attempted a detailed account of the uses of each modal verb in contextualized situations. Leech's (1987) is probably the most thorough of such treatments.

Acquiring modals, form and function, is essential in the process of learning English. Rarely would one find a speech situation in which modals are not used. They convey different senses, including ability, possibility, request and permission, all of which are of paramount importance in daily communication. While modals tend to have straightforward meanings, they can take on shades of meaning depending on the context in which they occur. Kreidler (1999) states, "modal verbs have numerous subtleties in what they express in different contexts" (240). This, in fact, is one of the factors that render mastering modals a challenge for EFL learners. Leech (1987: 71) maintains "many pages, chapters, books have been written about the modal auxiliary verbs in English. What makes it so difficult to account for the use of these words ... is that their meaning has both a logical and a practical (pragmatic) element." He also admits that "the distinctions between the meanings are not so clear-cut", pointing out that it is, for

instance, difficult “to decide whether a given instance of *can* belongs to one category [i.e., possibility, permission or ability] or the other” (p. 72). This makes mastering the uses of modals a rather challenging task for most EFL learners. In this respect, Harris, McLaughlin and Still maintain that, “The meanings of the modal auxiliaries are difficult for ESL students to understand. Many students are not aware of the subtle shades of meaning that are found within the meaning of a modal; for example, there are many layers to the meaning of *can*”.

Arab learners, in particular, encounter difficulties in both using modals and comprehending their meanings or discourse functions in texts. This difficulty can be attributed to a number of factors, one of which is 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 (see Abunowara, 2005, for example). While we agree that these two markers, mainly known as future markers in Arabic, are somewhat similar to the modals in English, they do not constitute a modal system that conveys a myriad of senses and attitudes, as is the case with the English system. That is, the scope of these two markers is, to a certain extent, similar to the scope of one single item in the English modal system, namely *will*. Thus, the absence of an equivalent modal system in Arabic places such a grammatical structure at a high level of difficulty for Arab EFL learners. The fourth level of difficulty in Prator’s hierarchy of difficulty (1967) is *overdifferentiation*, which is defined as “a new item entirely, bearing little if any similarity to the native language item...” (see Brown, 2000: 210). In other words, Arab learners have to learn an entirely new system that does not exist in the syntactic system of their mother tongue. Lack of such a system in Arabic is shown in the erroneous attempts of lower intermediate learners to produce utterances that are supposed to convey modal senses. The following is a sentence produced by an Arab learner of English:

1. On me that I go now.

This learner meant “*I must go now,*” which is a direct translation of the Arabic sentence:

2. *ʿalia ʿan ʿadhhaba ʿalaan*

On-me that go-I now

The word for word translation shows that the student was trying to use his mother tongue structure to convey his message (see also Saeed 2003). Of course the impact of L1 interference tends to fade away in the advanced stages of learning the language.

Another factor contributing to the difficulty of modals is that the role they play in the grammatical system is not so much controlled by tense rules as by the non-temporal senses or subjective attitudes that they customarily convey. Consider the following example:

3. I will go shopping tomorrow.

The modal here does not merely indicate futurity but also intention, volition, and other senses that the speaker might have depending on the speech situation and the interlocutors involved (see Wallace, 1982 for discussion of the non-temporal uses of tenses). In fact, the non-temporal senses that the modal *will* in the sentence can convey may very well supercede that of tense.

Related to this is the lack of correspondence between the functions of a modal in its present tense form and its functions in the past tense or perfect forms, as the following examples show:

4. I shall go shopping tomorrow.
5. I should practice pronouncing the new words.
6. I should have done my homework before going to sleep.

In these examples one observes that the present form of the modal conveys a modal sense that differs entirely from that which its past counterpart conveys. Thus, while example (4) indicates futurity together with a sense of intention and volition, examples (5) and (6) convey a sense of obligation and a sense of regret respectively.

The third source of difficulty originates in the treatment of such structures in EFL textbooks. Most textbooks attempt a shallow treatment of modals, focusing more on the form at the expense of the more essential aspect, i.e. use and functions, which renders modals a real challenge even for advanced learners

Furthermore, the multiplicity of meaning each modal can encompass in real discourse intensifies the difficulty of such a grammatical system and consequently renders it difficult to master. The modal *should*, for instance, can be used to express senses of regret, necessity, criticism, blaming, offering and inferring probability. Consider the following examples:

7. You look really sick – you should go to the doctor. (*Advice*)
8. You have missed many classes. You should see to it that you attend regularly from now on or you will fail the class (*Warning*).
9. Children should be disciplined. (*Necessity*)
10. You shouldn't have spent all your salary—we are just in the beginning of the month (*Disbelief* and or *Criticism*)
11. You should not have missed your exam (*Criticism*).
12. I shouldn't have wasted my time watching that silly game. (*Regret*)
13. Ali's plane took off at 6 am from Dubai. Now it is 6 pm. He should be in Paris now. (*Inferring probability*)
14. Should I help you clean the board (*Offer*)?

All these examples demonstrate how a single modal can be manipulated to generate many different senses or shades of meaning. In fact, many other senses can be conveyed by *should*.

On the other, hand more than one modal can convey more or less a single sense, and in the absence of appropriate contexts, differences in meaning will be hard to decipher. The following is an example.

15. A: She told me that her brother took her money. I am mad at him.

B: Oh, take it easy --

- a. She *can* be lying.
- b. She *could* be lying
- c. She *may* be lying
- d. She *might* be lying

All these examples (a-d) convey a sense of possibility and in the absence of the appropriate context that legitimizes the use of one rather than the other, all of these utterances should be acceptable continuations for B's response.

The following is another example illustrating further the fact that more than one modal can convey more or less the same function or sense.

- 16. I *could* help him if he wanted my help.
- 17. Although Tom is selfish, he *can* be very helpful.
- 18. I *may* stop by your office if I have time.
- 19. According to weather forecast, it *will* be sunny tomorrow.
- 20. Take an umbrella. It *might* rain.
- 21. Mary's flight from Hong Kong to New York took more than 24 hours. She must be exhausted.
- 22. Dubai has many good restaurants. It *should* be easy to find a Yemeni restaurant.

Despite the fact that each sentence in the above examples has a different modal, all of them convey more or less the same sense, namely that of possibility. It is true that possibility may not be the only function they express, but the sense of possibility is manifest in all of them. Thus, while it is possible that the speaker in example (16) will extend help, it is also possible that Marry, who spent twenty-four hours traveling, is exhausted.

This kind of overlapping in the functions of modals and the senses they convey intensifies the difficulty of acquiring them. The interesting overlap in the meanings and functions that these examples illustrate support Leech's claim (1987) that "the distinctions between the meanings [of modals] are not so clear-cut" (72).

The fact that more than one modal can express a variety of functions has been tested empirically. In his study, Mindt (1995), for instance, found, from the analysis of the data used in his study that "The modals used to express permission are *can* (58%), *may* (16%), *could* (13%), and *might* (13%)". Again, this kind of overlapping in the functions of modals and in the senses of meaning they convey makes it quite challenging for EFL learners to master the uses of modals.

2. Objectives and Rationale

2.1 Objectives

This study aims to investigate the extent to which University Arab learners of English have mastered modals at the levels of recognition and production. More specifically, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How well can Arab learners of English select the proper modal to express a certain function?
2. What are the salient errors that these learners may commit in recognizing and producing modals?
3. What implications may such a study have to language teaching and learning, as well as writing textbooks?

2.2 Rationale

The significance of this study stems from the fact that it addresses a language topic that is essential in our daily communication, and which constitutes a tangible difficulty for EFL learners. The nuances that modal verbs convey tend to be so intricate that delivering a message could fail due to either misusing or misunderstanding a modal. Language instructors have always pointed to the constant difficulty that EFL learners encounter when learning modals. Problems in recognizing or using the appropriate modal verb can disrupt communication. Since such a language issue has this immense importance, exploring it becomes a necessity. Another aspect of the significance of this study relates to the paucity of research in this area, particularly in the domain of Arab EFL learning. That is, although the field of EFL is replete with studies that have focused on virtually all aspects of English grammar, no study has endeavored, as far as I know, to investigate Arab EFL learners' acquisition of this important language topic. The results of this study are expected to encompass significant implications to the teaching of modals and thus contribute to alleviating the intensity of the difficulty EFL Arab learners encounter when learning modals.

3. Method

3.1 Data Collection

To test the questions posed in the study the author designed a questionnaire that comprises two versions, one assessing students' ability to recognize the use of modals (recognition) and the other gauging students' ability to use them (production). The recognition part of the questionnaire comprised 40 multiple choice items where subjects were instructed to choose the best answer. In the production part, the subjects were asked to fill in the gaps with appropriate answers from a list of options written on the top of the

questionnaire. The 40 contextualized items in each version of the questionnaire attempted to test the major functions of modals: *possibility*, *ability*, *permission/offering*, *requesting*, and *suggesting /advising*. Each one of these functions or pairs of functions is represented by seven (7) tokens in the questionnaire, characterizing it in different contexts except for the function of possibility, which is represented by twelve (12) tokens. This function can be subdivided into two: possibility and predictability. However, for brevity purposes, the author decided to use the term possibility as a cover term since anything that is predictable is necessarily possible. The following table shows the distribution of the nine modals in the questionnaire based on their function:

Table 1: Distribution of the modals and their functions in the questionnaire

| No | Function | Can | Could | Shall | Should | Will | Would | May | Might | Must |
|----|-------------------------|--------|------------|-------|------------|------------|--------|-----|---------------|--------|
| 1 | Requesting | | 1, 3 | 19 | | 5, 19 | 4 | | | 30 |
| 2 | Offering Permission | 6, 7 | | 26 | | 13, 11, 25 | 36 | 24 | | |
| 3 | Possibility | 38 | 15 | | 22, 29 | 9 | | 8 | 2, 10, 28, 32 | 23, 39 |
| 4 | Ability | 16, 17 | 14, 34, 35 | | | | 33 | 27 | | |
| 5 | Suggesting/ Advising | | 37 | 31 | 18, 20, 40 | | 12, 21 | | | |

Table 1 shows that the functions carried out by each modal are not exhaustive. Attempting to represent all the senses that a modal can convey means devising a rather too long questionnaire. Thus, in the case of *can*, for instance, the most frequent functions it expresses include *possibility*, *permission* and *ability*. These three functions are represented by 5 situations in each version of the questionnaire.

The two versions of the questionnaire were given to three native speakers of English – colleagues in the department of English – to comment on the accuracy of the context created for each item. They were asked to complete both versions in order to see if there were any items that would allow more than one answer. Their comments were integrated into the questionnaire before distributing it to the subjects of the study.

3.2 Subjects

Data were collected from 50 senior English major students in the Department of English, University of Sharjah during the academic year 2007-2008. The English level of these students is supposed to be upper intermediate since they had studied English for 12-14 years before joining the university. Besides, they had met the admission requirement of the Department, which is scoring 500 or more on the TOEFL. Moreover, the students had taken many courses in Linguistics, Translation and Literature as well as skills courses such as Advanced Language Skills, Debating and Advanced Writing. At the time

of the study, there were 5 senior sections in the Fall semester of 2007 and in the Spring of 2008. Fifty (50) students were randomly selected from these five sections. The subjects were given enough time and were encouraged to respond to each item in the questionnaire. However, some subjects submitted incomplete answers, i.e., they did not respond to all the items in the questionnaire. In such cases, the author discarded their answers and selected (randomly) other subjects to do the task. The production version of the questionnaire was distributed to the subjects first and two weeks later the same students were given the recognition version.

3.3. Method of analysis

The students' responses were examined and each correct answer in both the recognition and production versions of the questionnaire was given a grade of 1. Wrong responses were given 0. Percentages of the correct responses were calculated and each function was rank ordered based on the position it occupied on the scale of difficulty. Similarly, percentages of responses to the individual modals were calculated and each modal was rank ordered on the scale of difficulty based on the number of correct answers it received.

As mentioned above, attempts were made to make sure that the choices in the recognition version of the questionnaire were clear and only one option would be the appropriate response given the context tailored for each situation. However, this was rather difficult in the production version. That is, with a group of choices at the top of the questionnaire, some subjects filled in the gaps of certain situations with more than one modal. This was mainly due to the overlapping nature of the functions of modals. Consider the following example:

23. You _____ be broke! You have just received your salary.

In the recognition part, this item was stated as follows:

24. You _____ be hungry. You have just eaten.
a. can't b. might not c. may not

Given the three choices, the accurate option is *can't*. However, in the production part, some items accepted more than one choice, as is the case in (23). Here, some subjects used *can't* while others opted for *shouldn't*. Now, there is no restriction in the sentence that calls for the use of one of these but not the other. Both are appropriate responses, though with slightly different types of emphasis as we will explain below. Hence, in such cases, we considered both answers to be correct. This flexibility makes us take the percentages of subjects' responses to individual uses of modals in the production version of the questionnaire with a grain of salt. That is, counting the tokens of correct responses in the production version of the questionnaire may, in a few cases, not reflect the actual use of a specific modal. This, however, should not constitute any problem with the findings; since the focal point here is observing the extent to which the learners in the study are able to use appropriate modals in specific situations. With the boundaries

between the functions of certain modals being fuzzy, as we have argued earlier and as many linguists have pointed out, endeavoring to elicit the use of a single modal at the exclusion of all others means, in many cases, building a very meticulous, lengthy context.

4. Findings

4.1 Recognition

The following table shows the number of tokens for each function tested and the number of correct responses given by the subjects. For instance, 7 items or situations in the questionnaire represent the function of *Requesting*. Since 50 students responded to each version of the questionnaire, the total number of responses should be 350.

Table 2: Recognition Level: Percentages of correct answers rank ordered from the lowest to the highest (Functions)

| No | Function | No. of Tokens | No. of Correct Answers | % |
|----|-------------------------|---------------|------------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Requesting | 350 | 171 | 48.8 |
| 2 | Possibility | 600 | 345 | 57.5 |
| 3 | Ability | 350 | 242 | 69 |
| 4 | Suggesting/ Advising | 350 | 248 | 70.8 |
| 5 | Offering/ Permission | 350 | 271 | 77 |
| | Average | 400 | 255 | 64 |

Findings of the study reveal that the students have considerable difficulty recognizing the correct uses of modals. As table (2) shows, only 64% of the functions received correct responses. This means that more than one third of the functions received incorrect answers. The table illustrates the rank of difficulty each function occupies with the function of *Requesting* emerging as the most difficult for learners. On the other hand, the function of *Offering/permission* received the highest number of correct responses. The function of *possibility* received a low rate of correct responses; it ranked second in terms of difficulty with a percentage of correct answers as low as 57.5%. This is quite surprising since many of the modals in the study convey various senses of possibility, which made us predict that such a function would occupy a high position in terms of correct answers. The functions of *offering/permission* ranked the highest with 77% of correct responses. More will be said about these results when discussing the results of the individual uses of modals.

Table 3: Recognition Level: Percentages of correct answers rank ordered from the lowest to the highest (Individual Modals)

| Rank of Difficulty | Modal | No. of Tokens | No. of Correct Answers | % |
|--------------------|----------------|---------------|------------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Could | 350 | 156 | 47 |
| 2 | Shall | 150 | 86 | 57 |
| 3 | May | 150 | 90 | 60 |
| 4 | Would | 250 | 151 | 60.4 |
| 5 | Will | 250 | 153 | 61 |
| 6 | Must | 150 | 93 | 62 |
| 7 | Should | 250 | 173 | 69 |
| 8 | Might | 200 | 159 | 79.5 |
| 9 | Can | 250 | 216 | 86.4 |
| | Average | 222 | 141.8 | 64 |

Table 3 presents the students' responses to the items representing each modal in the study with the nine modals rank ordered from the most to the least difficult based on the students' answers. As the table shows, while the modal, *could*, received less than 50% of correct responses, the modals *might* and *can* emerged as the least difficult with a remarkably high rate of correct responses. Although the average score of correct responses in the recognition part is 64%, six out of the nine modals in the study received an average score of less than 60%. More will be said about students' responses to individual modals below.

4.2 Production

The subjects' performance in the production version of the questionnaire is remarkably worse than their performance in the recognition part. The average of the correct responses, as Table (4) below shows, is strikingly low; less than 50% of the functions received correct answers, an alarming finding indeed.

Table 4: Production Level: Percentages of correct answers rank ordered from the lowest to the highest (Functions)

| Rank of Difficulty | Function | No. of Tokens | No. of Correct Answers | % |
|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------|------------------------|-----------|
| 1. | Suggesting/ Advising | 350 | 125 | 35.7 |
| 2. | Possibility | 600 | 249 | 41.5 |
| 3. | Requesting | 350 | 148 | 42 |
| 4. | Ability | 350 | 209 | 59.7 |
| 5. | Offering/ Permission | 350 | 241 | 68.8 |
| | Average | 400 | 194.4 | 49 |

The percentages of correct answers that most of the functions received were below 50%. It is of course anticipated that the percentage of correct responses will be less in the production version of the questionnaire. However, such a low result indicates very clearly that the learners are having considerable difficulty with modals. In scrutinizing

the students' performance in each function, we can observe that the function of *Suggesting/Advising* received the lowest score of correct answers, i.e., 35.7%. This same function ranks fourth in terms of difficulty in the recognition part. The second place of difficulty in Table (4) is occupied by the function of *possibility*, just as is the case in the recognition part, albeit here with almost 60% of the responses being incorrect. The function that received the highest percentage of correct responses is *Offering/Promising*; more than two thirds of the subjects gave accurate answers. Interestingly enough, this same function received the lowest percentage of correct responses in the recognition part of the questionnaire, which is supposed to be easier for the learners than the production part.

In scrutinizing the subjects' responses to each modal, we find that they responded by means of inaccurate answers to virtually half the modals in the study, as Table (5) shows, with *shall* receiving the lowest score of correct answers.

Table 5: Production Level: Percentages of correct answers rank ordered from the lowest to the highest (Individual Modals)

| No | Modal | No. of Tokens | No. of Correct Answers | % |
|----|----------------|---------------|------------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Shall | 150 | 43 | 28.6 |
| 2 | Should | 250 | 86 | 34.4 |
| 3 | Could | 350 | 153 | 43.7 |
| 4 | Might | 200 | 96 | 48 |
| 5 | May | 150 | 76 | 50.6 |
| 6 | Would | 250 | 136 | 54.4 |
| 7 | Must | 150 | 83 | 55.3 |
| 8 | Can | 250 | 143 | 57.2 |
| 9 | Will | 250 | 156 | 62.4 |
| | Average | 222 | 108 | 49 |

The findings of the analysis indicate that the vast majority of the subjects were unable to produce sentences with proper modals; only one of the nine modals in the study received a score of a little more than 60%. The following is a brief discussion of the main difficulties that learners encountered in producing each modal.

Shall

The modal that emerged as the most difficult to use is *shall*. It ranks first in terms of difficulty in the production part of the questionnaire and second in the recognition component. Such a position of difficulty is expected due to the fact that *shall* is not very commonly used in daily communication. In fact, in some dialects as is the case in American English, this modal is rarely used. Brown (2006) says "Shall is fairly rare in modern English, particularly in American English." Quirk and Grrrenbaum (1973) state: "Shall is, on the whole and especially outside BrE, an infrequent auxiliary with restricted use compared with should, will and would..."(64). Our findings support these claims for

in virtually all the situations tailored to elicit the use of this modal, most learners shied away from it and used instead modals such as *should*, *will* etc.

Another source of the difficulty of this modal originates in the way it is discussed in EFL/ESL textbooks. In surveying a number of these textbooks, we found that *shall* is one of the modals that do not receive as much discussion as the other modals. In fact, some elementary and intermediate textbooks do not even mention it (see for instance Riggerbach and Samuda, 2000; Sturtevant, 2000; and Richards, Hull and Proctor, 1997).

While the use of *shall* is not as frequent, and this is why it was represented by three situations only in the questionnaire, it remains the appropriate modal in many situations, including cases where the speech situation conveys a suggestion as in the following example:

25. A: _____ we visit Ahmed tonight? He has been sick for a week.

B: Good idea, let's visit him after dinner.

Shall, the appropriate response in this instance, was used by only 18 of the 50 students in the study. On the other hand 13 students used *could* and 10 used *should*. The other students used *can* and *will*. Of course the modals *could* and *should* are not incorrect here, yet the sense of suggestion intended in (25) is best expressed via *shall*. The utterance, *Good idea, let's visit him after dinner* indicates very clearly that the message conveyed here is a suggestion. *Could* conveys the impression that the asker seeks permission to visit Ahmed, while the use of *should*, though fairly appropriate, suggests that the speaker perceives visiting Ahmed as an obligation.

Opting for modals that share certain features with *shall* is certainly expected. What is startling, though, is the fact that less than 40% of the subjects opted for the ordinary choice i.e., *shall*. While such low results imply that this modal is indeed losing ground in daily communication, they concurrently prove that learners are not fully aware of the central features that characterize *shall* and which differentiate it from the other modals whose semantic senses tend to overlap with those of *shall*. This means that EFL textbooks should reassess the kind of treatment they offer to modals particularly those that are not as frequent.

Could

The second most difficult modal for students was *could*. The findings of the analysis reveal that this modal ranks third on the difficulty scale in the production part of the questionnaire and, interestingly enough, first in the recognition component. One of the reasons that contributed to having this modal occupy such a high position of difficulty in both forms of the questionnaire is confusing it with other modals and particularly *can*, as in the following example:

26. I am really hungry – I _____ eat a horse.
a. can b. could c. may

In this instance, 33 of the 50 subjects chose *can* as a response while the remaining 17 chose *may* and *could* with the latter being the answer of only 7. The situation in the production version of the questionnaire is similar. Consider the following example:

27. I am very hungry – I _____ eat all the food in this restaurant.

In investigating all the responses to items (27), we found that only 6 responses out of 50 were correct. Other answers included *can* and *will*, with *can* being the one used by most learners in both instances. Using *can* here does not reflect the sense intended in the situation. One of the senses carried out by means of the modal *can* is ability, which is what probably motivated most learners to opt for this modal in this instance. However, ability is not the only sense intended here, but rather one of two senses namely ability and exaggeration, with the latter being the primary sense intended. That is, the illocutionary force of the sense of exaggeration sounds more dominating in the example, for no one can eat all the food in a restaurant no matter how hungry s/he might be. In fact, the expression: *I am so hungry -- I could eat a horse*, is a saying (See *Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary*, for instance). Hence, *could*, is the more appropriate choice of the two.

Another example that shows how learners substitute *could* with other related modals is found below.

28. [*A son talking with his father on the phone*] There is a lot of noise here. _____ you speak up, please?

Only 16 subjects of the 50 used *could* as a response to this item in the production part of the questionnaire. On the other hand, 30 out of the fifty chose *could* in the recognition part. In scrutinizing the other answers students had in the production version, we find *can*, *will*, *shall*, and *may*, with *can* being, again, the choice used the most. Of course, *may* and *shall* are absolutely unacceptable. The use of such modals in this instance reflects learners' ignorance of the meanings and the senses that these modal verbs can convey. As for *can*, which was the choice of as many as 32 of the 50 subjects, we cannot say that it is not acceptable, for the situation requires a modal that conveys a request sense. However, this modal does not sound as apt as *could* for the addressed in this situation is a parent. Three of the native speakers who were given the questionnaire used *could* as a response to this item and the fourth used both *can* and *could*. Thus, while both *can* and *could* should be acceptable in such a situation, *could* sounds more appropriate for politeness considerations since the addressed is a parent. Using *can* in place of *could* in such instances implies that students are unaware of the fine attributes that distinguish modals from each other, particularly the pairs that convey more or less similar senses. This means that these learners, despite many years of studying English, did not have adequate exposure to well-contextualized situations that require the use of a specific modal as opposed to all others.

Should and must

The findings reveal that students do not encounter a huge difficulty recognizing or producing the modal *must*. In both parts of the questionnaire, this modal occupies a high position in terms of accurate answers; it ranks sixth in the recognition part with a 62% rate of correct answers, and seventh in the production part with 55.3% of correct answers. In contrast, the position that the modal *should* occupies in the hierarchy of difficulty at the level of production is rather surprising. While students did not have much difficulty recognizing the correct uses of this modal which is shown from the high percentage of correct answers it received, i.e., (69%), they seem to have considerable difficulty producing or using it in sentences; it ranks second in the production part with a remarkably low percentage of correct responses (34.4%). In scrutinizing the students' responses to all the items in the questionnaires that require the use of *should*, it was found that many students confuse it with *must*, as in the following example:

29 A: China has become an attractive market for investors. Let's invest there.

B: Well, I don't know. I think we _____ not invest much in China. Nobody knows what is going to happen next year.

In this example, only 13 subjects used *should*. On the other hand, 26 of the 50 used *must*, a response that reflects the amount of confusion that learners experience when using pairs of modals that convey related senses. In this example, although *must* looks apt on the surface, it is not as appropriate as *should*, since *must* conveys a stronger sense of assertion and determination than *should*, which is not what the context of the example calls for. The second speaker here is not strongly against investing in that country, for he uses the expressions: "*I don't know*" and "*I think...*" This example is different from the following example:

30. The exam starts at 8:00. You _____ be here on time. Latecomers won't be allowed to sit for the exam.

In this instance, the context calls for the use of *must*, for being late for exams is against schools' regulations. *Must* conveys a strong tone of obligation and firmness, which is what is required in such a situation. The second part of the example *Latecomers won't be allowed to sit for the exam* indicates very clearly that *must* is the appropriate choice.

On the other hand, many students replaced *must* with either *may* or *might* in examples such as the following sentence:

31. Mary _____ be really sick. She has been throwing up since the early morning.

The following mini table shows the responses of the fifty subjects to this item.

| Modal | Can | Could | Shall | Should | Will | Would | May | Might | Must |
|-------|-----|-------|-------|--------|------|-------|-----|-------|------|
| % | 0 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 10 | 23 |

As this table shows, 20 learners filled in the blank with either *may* or *might*. While these two modals could be acceptable, they don't seem the best choice in this context, for Mary is seen to be "throwing up since the early morning," therefore, she must be sick. Besides, both modals sound odd preceding the phrase *really sick*, since the adverb *really* intensifies the situation and, thus, calls for a modal that conveys a strong sense of possibility. Definitely, the use of *may*, *might* or *could* won't convey this strong sense.

The use of *may*, *might* and *could* in this instance indicates that learners are unaware of the degrees of possibility conveyed by each of these modals. In addition, the improper use of modal in this instance implies that the students have an inference problem. Students are unaware of the fact that *must* can be utilized to express the function of inferring. This, in part, may be ascribed to the way modals are presented in most EFL textbooks and also to the way students are taught at schools. Many of the EFL textbooks the author surveyed put a great deal of emphasis on the form at the expense of the uses or functions of these forms. Even the few intermediate and advanced level textbooks that attempt a fairly satisfactory discussion of modals fall short of highlighting the very subtle uses that modals can perform. They also fail to delineate the distinguishing features that characterize each modal, particularly those whose uses tend to overlap (see Riggenbach and Samuda, 2000 and Soars and Soars, 1996 for example).

May and Might

The findings of the study show that the modals *may* and *might* occupy different positions of difficulty. While the recognition component of the questionnaire places *may* in the third position in terms of difficulty, it places *might* in the eighth. On the other hand, the students' responses in the production version place both modals in adjacent positions of difficulty with *might* in level four and *may* in level five.

The results of the analysis show that *might* received the second highest percentage of correct answers in the recognition component of the questionnaire; however, in the production part it is one of the four most difficult modals for learners, with less than 50% of correct answers. One of the factors contributing to having *might* occupy such a high position of difficulty is confusing its functions with other modals such as *may*, *will*, *can* and *would* particularly in cases which involve inference. For instance, in example (32), 10 out of the 50 students filled in the blanks with *will*.

32. (Looking at the partly cloudy sky): Hmm. It _____ be cold tomorrow.

Of course, *will* is not a very appropriate response, for it conveys a high degree of certainty, which is not what the context here calls for.

Another modal that was found to replace *might* in this example is *may*. In the following example, 23 subjects out of the 50 used *may*.

33. Although it looks sunny today, you'd better take an umbrella—it _____ rain.

The use of *may* instead of *might* in this instance is not very appropriate. The statement says, "it looks sunny," which means the chance of raining is a remote possibility. *Might*, therefore, should be more appropriate. Again, the inability of the subjects to use the appropriate modal here implies that they have a difficulty discerning the boundaries that divide the semantic and pragmatic uses of each modal, particularly the pairs whose features tend to overlap. This, again, stresses the importance of providing learners with enough contextualized situations that demonstrate the subtle meaning differences that ensue as a result of using each modal in different contexts.

Can and May

Differentiating the subtle shades of meaning conveyed by both *can* and *may* is one of the apparent difficulties that EFL learners encounter. The common features that both modals share result in a clear overlap in their uses. Consider the following examples:

34. How _____ I help you?

35. You _____ go now.

36. He _____ tell lies.

These examples illustrate the extent to which these two modals can overlap. Here, either *can* or *may* is absolutely acceptable, unless the voice of the speaker is manipulated in such a way as to produce an effect that requires the use of one modal rather than the other. Alternatively, a meticulous context can be built to render one of them the only appropriate choice. In the following situation, the possibility of these two modals overlapping is very little.

37 A: I don't know which shopping center I should take my guests to.

B: Take them to Mega Mall or you _____ take them to Carrefour. It is usually good at this time of the year.

In this instance, 33 of the subjects used *can*, an appropriate response indeed. However, the overlap in the use of *can* and *may* led some learners to think that *may* and *can* are interchangeable, and thus 9 of them used *may* in 38, which is an incorrect response. The context in this example is that of a consultation; A is trying to get B's opinion regarding an appropriate shopping center he can take his guests to. *May* is not appropriate, for it implies, among other things, that B is giving permission. *Should*, on the other hand, which was used by almost 20% of the respondents is fairly suitable, though not as acceptable as *can*, for *should* here denotes a sense of obligation, which is not what A has in mind. One reason for using *should* by these students may be due to the use of *should* in the question. The appropriateness of *should* increases if the conversation proceeds as follows:

38. A: I don't know which shopping center I should take my guests to.

B: You _____ take them to Carrefour. It is usually good at this time of the year.

Would

Although *would* occupies the fourth position of difficulty in the recognition component, it ranks sixth in the production one. Receiving a high rate of accurate responses in the production part is to a degree ascribed to the fact that many of the items that test the use of *would* are governed by grammatical rules. Consequently, it was comparatively easy for learners to come up with the right answer in cases such as the following:

39. If I were you, I *would* ...

40. *Would* you like to...

The high rate of correct responses in the case of *would* implies that learners find situations that are governed by grammatical rules relatively easier than those governed by context, since deciphering the contextual subtleties surrounding modals is a fairly advanced language skill.

Like *can* and *may*, the modals *would* and *could* overlap a great deal, particularly when expressing a request. This overlap is revealed in instances such as the following:

41. [A guest to his host] _____ you open the window? It is stuffy in here.

There is nothing in the context that doesn't legitimize the use of either modal, although the use of *would* is felt more fitting, probably because it is the primary modal used most frequently in requests. However, the overlap was not just between *would* and *could*, *can* was also a strong choice here.; in fact *can* was the choice of nearly one third of the subjects. As stated above, using *can* in such situations is not incorrect, but it does not sound as polite as *would* or *could*. That is, the speaker here is a guest and guests are expected to be fairly polite particularly in situations such as 41 where a guest is telling the host that a room in his house is stuffy.

On the other hand, *could* or *would* may not switch places in situations such as the following:

42. When I was young, I would pretend to be a TV broadcaster.

43. When I was young, I *could* swim well.

All the subjects except 1 used *could* in (43). In this example only *could* is a possible answer for the context is that of a past ability. However, if the example is modified to become:

44. When I was young, I _____ swim everyday,

then the context accepts either *could* or *would* with different shades of meaning: with *could* the meaning is a past possibility or permission i.e. it was possible for me to swim everyday, whereas with *would* the meaning is a past habit.

Will and can

The modals *will* and *can* were found the easiest for learners with the former occupying the lowest rank of difficulty and the latter occupying the second lowest rank in the production component of the questionnaire. In the recognition part, *can* emerged as the easiest with 86.4% of correct responses to the items testing the uses of this modal. This doesn't mean, however, that these two modals do not constitute any difficulty for learners. In fact, they do. The overall percentages of correct responses they received were 62.4 and 57.2, respectively. The following were some of the instances that posed a difficulty for learners.

45. According to weather forecast, it _____ be sunny tomorrow.
a. will b. may c. could

This sentence is the same in both versions of the questionnaire, but of course in the recognition version with options. In the production form, only 17 out of the 50 subjects came up with the right response. The other 33 wrote options such as *may*, *might* and *must*, all of which convey senses of possibility with different degrees. Since the sentence talks about weather forecast, then the appropriate answer should be *will* for the prediction is based on scientific pieces of evidence that show the strong possibility that it will be sunny. This is of course different from sentence (46) below where the type of modal conveying possibility depends on the degree of authority of the speaker. Consider:

46. [Looking at the cloudy sky]: It _____ be cold tomorrow.

Here if the speaker is an ordinary layperson then *might* will be acceptable. However, if the speaker is an authority, i.e., a weather expert, then *will* should be the appropriate answer. This kind of overlap in the use of the modals conveying possibility functions is one reason for having *will* occupy the fifth level of difficulty in the recognition part.

Can

The uses of *can*, which express *ability* are found to be relatively easy for learners. This is shown from the appropriate responses given to examples such as the following:

47. I _____ speak French. I learned it when I was in high school.

In this example, 41 out of the 50 respondents filled in the blank with the correct answer, i.e., *can*. This high percentage of correct responses might be ascribed to the fact that *can* is the standard modal that expresses ability, i.e., ability is the central feature

distinguishing this modal from the other modals. Moreover, most of the EFL textbooks we considered show, shallowly though, how this modal is used to convey such senses as ability, request, and permission. However, examples such as the following constituted a problem for learners.

48. You _____ be broke! You have just received your salary.

The following is a table showing the fifty subjects' responses to this item.

| Modal | Can't | Couldn't | Shan't | Shouldn't | Won't | Wouldn't | May not | Might not | Mustn't |
|-------|-------|----------|--------|-----------|-------|----------|---------|-----------|---------|
| % | 13 | 6 | 3 | 19 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 3 |

As the table shows, only 13 out of the 50 subjects used *can* to fill in the blank. On the other hand, 19 out of the 50 used *shouldn't*. While both *can't* and *shouldn't* are acceptable, each of one of them conveys a special sense: with *can't* there is a sense of disbelief on the part of the speaker whereas with *shouldn't* one feels a sense of criticism. The author thought the context was enough to make the respondents opt for *can't*, but this, once again, shows the degree of overlap in the uses of modals as well as the need to create a sufficient amount of context that allows the use of one modal only in a given situation. Considering *can't*, *shouldn't* and *couldn't* as possible answers here, we observe that 12 of the learners (approximately one quarter of the total number in the study) came up with inaccurate answers.

In the recognition version of this item, which is stated in (49) below, 42 subjects used *can't*.

49. You _____ be hungry. You have just eaten.

A. can't B. might not C. may not

5. Conclusions and implications

The study has attempted to investigate the extent to which Arab EFL learners, who have studied English for as many as 12-14 years, have mastered the use of modals. The results of the study show that the performance of the students in both forms of the measuring instrument is remarkably low. The average percentage of correct responses in the recognition part is 64% against 49% in the production part. Such low results are shocking, given that these students are supposed to have attained a level of proficiency that should enable them to perform better. The findings of the analysis revealed many difficulties that Arab EFL learners encounter in recognizing and/or producing modals. The following are some of these difficulties:

1. The overlap in meaning and function that exists among most modals emerged as one of the major difficulties resulting in the misuse of modals.

2. The semantic complexity of modals and the multiplicity of meanings that a single modal can express render this grammatical category a challenge for EFL learners.
3. The lack of an equivalent modal verbs system in Arabic contributes to the difficulty encountered by Arab EFL learners when learning modals, especially in the pre-advanced stages of learning the language.
4. Ignorance on the part of the learners of the idiomatic uses of modals, as in the inability to perceive the appropriateness of *could* in utterances such as “*I am so hungry – I could eat a horse.*”
5. The inability of learners to decipher the fine features that characterize each modal and which make it a proper choice in one context and improper in another.
6. Contextually motivated uses of modals were found more difficult for learners than those governed by grammatical rules. For example, most of the subjects had no difficulty coming up with the right response in situations requiring the use of the modal *would* as in: *would you like, or if I were you, I would...etc.*

In light of these difficulties, the following recommendations might help alleviate the intensity of this problem.

1. Teachers and textbooks should raise the level of students' consciousness to the importance of modals in daily communication.
2. Teachers should alert learners to the negative consequences of misusing modals. For instance, they could show them how a misuse of a modal can result in altering the meaning intended.
3. Students should be exposed to a great deal of contextualized situations that enable them to decipher the subtle nuances that modals, and particularly those that tend to overlap, can convey.
4. In each level of EFL learning, students should be exposed to certain uses of modals. That is, textbooks and teachers should introduce the various uses of modals gradually depending on the level of the learners. Discussion of the problem of overlapping in the use of modals should be delayed till the intermediate or pre-advanced stages of learning the language. When presenting such a topic, teachers should provide their learners with dozens of examples that illustrate the problem of overlapping in most modals verbs.
5. To help learners comprehend the fine boundaries that separate the semantic field of each modal, teachers and textbook writers should create a sufficient amount of context that allows the use of one modal only in a given situation.
6. Teachers and textbooks should present the modals in a grid form, showing how most of the modals share semantic features with each other, highlighting the features that make each one different from all others.
7. Students can be asked to read short articles and/or short stories, underlining the modals and attempting to identify their functions together with the subtle nuances they convey in their contexts.

8. Teachers can use such Net sources as the British National Corpus (BNC) for extracting illustrative examples that highlight the use of modals in different contexts.
9. EFL textbooks should evaluate the kind of treatment they offer to modals particularly those that are not as frequent such as *shall*.

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Appendix 1. Production Version of the Questionnaire

Complete each of the following sentences with one of the modals in the box below.

Will would shall should can could may might must

1. [A son talking with his father on the phone]. There is a lot of noise here. _____ you speak up, please?
2. (Looking at the cloudy sky): It _____ be cold tomorrow
3. [A guest to his host]: _____ you switch on the TV, please? I always watch the 7 o'clock news.
4. [A stranger to a stranger:] _____ you open the window? It is stuffy in here.
5. A friend to his friend:] _____ you open the door for me, please?
6. A: I need somebody to help me with my math homework.
B: I _____ help you. It will be my pleasure.
7. A: My printer is out of ink and I need to print a ten-page document.
B: You _____ use my printer.
8. A: She told me that her brother took her money. I am mad at him.
B: Oh, take it easy. She _____ be lying.
9. According to weather forecast, it _____ be sunny tomorrow.
10. A: Are you attending the poetry seminar tomorrow?
B: I'm not really sure. I _____ attend it.
11. A: I need somebody to call Ahmad?
B: I _____.
12. A: Do you know how this works?
B: Ask Terry. She _____ be very happy to help you.
13. Excuse me, my father is on the other line. Let me talk to him and then I _____ call you back.
14. He is a very skillful typist. She _____ all these pages in no time.
15. I am really hungry. I _____ eat all the food in this restaurant.
16. I _____ smell something rotten. Try to check the fridge and see if the milk has gone off.
17. I _____ speak French. I learnt it when I was in France.
18. Nobody can answer this question. You _____ ask a lawyer.
19. I _____ have order in my court, the judge roared.
20. I think we _____ invest much in Somalia. The situation is very unstable.
21. I _____ give him a penny if I were you. He doesn't appreciate what you are doing for him.
22. It is 10:PM now. No one _____ be there by now.
23. Marry _____ be really sick. She has been throwing up since the early morning.
24. How _____ I help you?
25. Please don't worry, mom, I _____ do all that I can to help you.

26. A: _____ we visit Ahmed tonight? He has been sick for a week.
B: Good idea, let's visit him after dinner..
27. She's strange; she _____ pass without saying hi to anyone of her colleagues.
28. Take an umbrella. It is sunny, but it _____ rain.
29. Dubai has many good restaurants. It _____ not be difficult to find a Yemeni restaurant.
30. The exam starts at 8:00. You _____ be here in time. Latecomers won't be allowed to sit for the exam.
31. [A nurse to her doctor in his clinic] You look terrible. _____ I cancel today's appointments?
32. A: Where is Tom? I have been looking for him all morning.
B: Try the gym. He _____ be there.
33. When I was young I _____ pretend to be a TV broadcaster.
34. When he was young he _____ swim very well.
35. When I went into the house I _____ smell something burning – someone had been cooking.
36. _____ you like to go the cinema tonight?
37. A I don't know which shopping center I should take my guests to.
B: Take them to Mega Mall or you _____ take them to Carrfore. It is usually good at this time of the year.
38. You _____ be broke! You have just received your salary.
39. You have been lecturing the whole day. You _____ be tired.
40. You _____ learn English if you would like to have a good job.

Appendix 2.

Recognition Version of the Questionnaire

Choose the most appropriate option (a, b, or c). *Please Circle all possible answers.*

1. (An employee to his senior): There's a lot of noise on the line.
_____ you speak up?
A. Could B. Shall C. Will
2. (Looking at the cloudy sky): hmm. It _____ be cold tomorrow.
A. might B. should C. will
3. [A guest to his host]: _____ you pass the salt, please?
A. Will B. Could C. shall
4. [A stranger to a stranger:] _____ you open the window? It is stuffy in here.
A. Would B. Will C. Can
5. [A friend to his friend:] _____ you pass the salt, please?
A. Will B. Shall C. May
6. A: I need somebody to give me a ride to the airport.
B: I _____ give you a ride. It will be my pleasure.
A. might B. could C. can
7. A: My car is broken and I need to run some errands.

B: You _____ use my car

A. will B. can C. should

8. A: She told me that her brother beat her. I am mad at him.

B: Oh, take it easy. _____ make things up.

A. She B. may C. can

9. According to weather forecast, it _____ be sunny tomorrow.

A. will B. may C. could

10. A: Are you going to the party?

B: I'm not really sure. I _____ go.

A. may B. might C. shall

11. A: Can somebody carry this for me?

B: I _____.

A. will B. can C. would

12. A: Do you know how this works?

B: Go to Terry. She _____ be very happy to help you.

A. would B. can C. might

13. Hang up and I _____ call you back.

A. will B. would C. can

14. He is very strong. He _____ pull this truck!

A. can B. could C. should

15. I am really hungry. I _____ eat a horse.

A. can B. could C. may

16. I _____ smell something burning. I will go to the kitchen to check.

A. can B. could C. may

17. I _____ speak French. I learnt it when I was in high school.

A. can B. could C. will

18. I can't answer this question. You _____ ask a lawyer.

A. could B. should C. may

19. I _____ have order in my court, the judge roared.

A. shall B. will C. would

20. A: China has become an attractive market for investors. Let's invest there.

B: I think we _____ invest much in China. Nobody knows what is going to happen next year.

A. shouldn't B. wouldn't C. couldn't

21. I _____ speak to him if I were you.

A. would B. will C. might

22. It is nine o'clock now. Someone _____ be there by now.

A. should B. might C. would

23. Marry _____ have some problems – she keeps crying.

A. may B. can C. must

24. _____ I help you?

A. Might B. May C. Should

25. Please relax. I _____ do it no matter what.

A. will B. should C. can

26. _____ we go out for dinner? It is my treat tonight.

A. Shall B. Can C. Could

27. She's strange, she _____ sit for hours without talking.
A. would B. may C. will
28. Although it looks sunny today, you'd better take an umbrella.
It _____ rain.
A. may B. might C. can
29. The city has many restaurants. It _____ be difficult to find a good one.
A. shouldn't B. wouldn't C. can't
30. The exam starts at 8:00. You _____ be here in time. Late comers won't be allowed to sit for the exam.
A. may B. must C. should
31. These bags are heavy _____ I call a porter.
A. Shall B. May C. Could
32. A: Where is Tom? I have been looking for him all morning.
B: Try his house. He _____ be there.
A. must B. might C. will
33. When Ali was young, he _____ pretend to be a pilot.
A. would B. could C. may
34. When he was young he _____ play tennis very well.
A. would B. could C. might
35. When I went into the house I _____ smell something burning – someone had been cooking.
A. could B. can C. would
36. _____ you like to join us for dinner tonight?
A. Will B. Might C. Would
37. A I don't know which restaurant to take my guests to.
B: You _____ try Al-Fawwar. It is usually good.
A. can B. could C. might
38. You _____ be hungry. You have just eaten.
A. can't B. might not C. may not
39. You have been traveling for 24 hours. You _____ be tired.
A. may B. can C. must
40. You _____ study hard if you are to pass this course.
A. should B. could C. may