



Saudi EFL Learners' Use of English Modal Verbs: A Study of Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

It has been reported that English modal verbs can be one of the most challenging grammatical structures to be mastered by EFL learners. Hence, this research aims to explore the reasons behind Saudi EFL students' low proficiency in using English modal verbs. It also seeks practical solutions for enhancing the students' competency in using them. The study participants are 13 Saudi EFL instructors who are requested to answer an open-ended descriptive question. These responses are then coded thematically to identify the recurring themes. Findings of the study show that the most prominent reasons for students' poor performance in the use of modal verbs are: (i) absence of Arabic equivalents to English modals; (ii) difficulty of English structures; (iii) multiple language functions of English modals; (iv) demotivation of students; (v) use of traditional textbooks and teaching pedagogy. Moreover, the study shows that to increase the Saudi EFL learners' proficiency in the use of English modals, (i) EFL instructors need to use communicative teaching methodology; (ii) urge students for more practice and; (iii) use suitable textbooks and teaching resources. The study recommends inclusion of the grammar component according to the students' existing knowledge and explicit teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

Using modal verbs correctly is considered amongst the primary challenges for EFL learners (Cournane & Pérez-Leroux, 2020; Bensaid, 2015; Hinkel, 2011; Saeed, 2009; Torabiardakani et al., 2015; Yang, 2018). This troublesome fact stems from the differences between the two languages, Arabic and English (Torabiardakani et al., 2015), or it may be a result of students' low level of competence (Saeed, 2009) or even the superficial education they received. Recent research trends have witnessed a growing tendency to construct learner-corpus and analyze to compare students' production in different levels -spoken or written- with native speakers' corpus (Cournane, 2014, 2019; Deshors & Gries, 2016; Litvinova, 2018; Sun, 2014; Torabiardakani et al., 2015). According to Fuertes-Olivera and Tarp (2011), a specialised corpus contains demonstrative oral and written texts that simulate the sort of language of a certain area of a function. Researchers often have to create their own corpora because of the lack of publicly available corpora that includes specific English use. The genre and subject of the texts, as well as the type of texts and the quantity and diversity of the corpus, must all be

taken into account while compiling the corpus (Riadil, 2020). If, for example, corpus analysis is used to focus on the structure of textual communication, for example. Modal verbs and modal verb phrase structures are the focus of this research article, which aims to offer findings from the study of modal verbs, as well as to examine each modal identified by the researcher of modality in academic-type professional writings, such as "Sherry Johnson."

Modal verbs have been explored in different contexts, for instance, by (Yang, 2017; Li (2017) in China and the Arab world (Saeed (2009; Btoosh, 2019; Bensaid, 2015). There are few studies on modals by Arab learners (Saeed, 2009). It would not be an exaggeration to note that modal verbs in the Saudi context seem to be an unexplored area of recent studies. This places much significance on the current study, which explores the reason behind EFL students' weakness in modality and seeks solutions for developing them in the Saudi context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Modal verbs are considered among the most complicated grammatical categories for EFL learners to master because a single modal can express various language functions. Furthermore, the same modal may represent different functions. According to Biber et al. (1999), modal verbs are classified into three types: The first type describes possibility, permission or ability. They include can, could, may, and might; the second group are the obligation or necessity modals. They are, must and should, and the last group comprises prediction or volition modals. These include will, shall, and would.

Mujtaba (2016) notes that training students in the use of modal auxiliary verbs has always been a difficult challenge for EFL instructors. In the same way, English as foreign language (EFL) students must work hard to master and engage in rigorous practice to correctly use modal auxiliaries in their writing. Earlier research has pointed out that EFL learners are more likely to employ modal verbs in context and circumstance than native learners, making it even more pertinent for them to master these. To put it another way, non-native speakers of English employ modals differently than the foreign learner of English.

In addition, students of English linguistics and language must be familiar with the viewpoint and descriptive rules of the English language to be more efficient in their language applications. Learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) must acquire different grammatical rules at varying points in their language development (Waters, 2012). Some language assignments need EFL students to become familiar with specific grammar rules, especially those like subject-verb agreement, sentence structure and others, so they can discuss with the teacher the errors that have been made. Since modal auxiliary verbs are one aspect of grammar, the rules must be simplified so that EFL learners can properly use them. German students who are learning English are also hesitant and sceptical about several grammatical components of the language, such as the pragmatic category modals and modality and how they are used to account for varied contextual insinuations, according to Genç (2017). There is no question that ESL students may be dealing with issues comparable to those encountered by native speakers.

Whether foreign language classes need to include explicit grammar instruction (Liu Sun, 2015). Nonetheless, there is some ambivalence about what should be taught and what should not.

Teachers need to be more positive and know what and how much knowledge to carry and transfer to these learners to enable learners to more successfully attain and develop all four skills in learning the foreign language. This will help these students become better target language users in the end.

In a prior study, Hinkel (2011) noted that teaching learners' usage of modal verbs was a good place to start in academic writing in both L1 and L2. The study also analyzes the modal verbs used in educational essays written in British and American Englishes. Given the importance of modals in a phrase or expression, it is critical to identify EFL learners' difficulties with employing modals and devise strategies to fix them. There are two educational essays in this collection: one by Johnson (2017), titled "Essay: U.S. public education something to be proud of," and the other by Mujtaba (2016), titled "Education in London: Challenges and possibilities for young people."

Many linguists are interested in categorizing the use of modal auxiliaries in different English dialects and different writing genres (Lindquist, 2009). Because of the uncertainty of the definitions associated with modals, semantic theory and succinct grammar have both been challenged (Hwang & Lardiere, 2013). Various writers have devised a variety of classification schemes in an attempt to investigate the functional role played by modals. Verstraete (2001) to discuss modals uses all Deontic, epistemic, and dynamic categories. Specific authors, such as Azar (2002), perceive the functional properties of the modal verbs, who do not thoroughly comprehend classes. Despite their differences in marking, they both agree on the importance of modal auxiliaries in the depiction of language exchange mode.

Researchers, as is frequently the case, employ a variety of techniques and approaches while looking for modal auxiliaries along specific routes. In the Contrastive Rhetoric approach, for example, modal verbs have been used to demonstrate the influence of culture in writing and the differences in writing styles among cultures. Studying academic writings from three different languages, Chan (2015) found that modal verbs are commonly used in academic writing to indicate distance and are given less weight when evoking a response or showing commitment to the idea.

Corpus linguistics, a technique in language study that has grown significantly during the 1990s, has enhanced research in modal verbs (Deshors & Gries, 2016). This cutting-edge advancement in scientific methodologies and methods is ideal for a wide range of inquiries requiring massive data sets and computer-aided analysis. A detailed corpus study can potentially add valuable information about the use of modals in various varieties of English. When examining the London-Lund and LOB corpora, Nesselhauf (2011) found significant trends that have been utilized as a starting point for future studies comparing the application of modals in various English varieties. Some of these findings are: (1) Shall is used to express obligation much more in written than spoken texts; (2) There seem to be significant differences between genres in terms of the relative frequency of the "root" and "epistemic" uses of some modals; and (3) The epistemic must, should, may, and shall use is more frequent than the root used in written texts.

In the Iranian context, Torabiardakani et al. (2015) studied the advanced EFL students' use of modal auxiliaries on nine language functions. They pursued a learner-corpus composing 136

written compositions. The result showed that some functions were widely used, such as the use of can for ability and the less use of the same modal for possibility.

Likewise, in the Chinese context, Yang (2018) explored the use of modal verbs in writing compositions of Chinese students. A learner-corpus was constructed to compute the data using Antconc 3.2.4w application. The findings showed that Chinese learners used modal verbs regularly. They maximally used the modal can, will and could while minimally used may be compared to proficient language users.

2.1.Modal use in the Arab world

Some studies investigated modal use in the Arab learners' language output (Al-Sharafi, 2014; Btoosh, 2019; Bensaid; 2016; Saeed, 2009). Saeed (2009) explored the acquisition of English modals by Arab learners of English. The study included university students who scored 500 and above in the TOEFL. The results of the study established that students scored low in the recognition and production of modal verbs. Furthermore, Btoosh (2019) studied the Arab learners' application of the English modality in academic writing. A corpus was used to compare the Arab learners' writing production with native speakers' production. Findings indicated a huge difference between the Arab and the native written productions in terms of frequency of occurrence of modal verbs. The study found a tendency in the former to overuse must, should and can and sparse use of epistemic modals like may, might, could and would.

Similarly, Bensaid (2016) investigated Arab EFL learners' difficulties with using the English modality. The study focused on the occurrence of modal verbs in textbooks. The study reported that the primary difficulty is the interference of the mother tongue, Arabic. Students tended to use the particle after a modal, as in "*he must go". Students also used double modals as in "* He will go to school". This and similar studies indicate a need for further research into the trends and reasons for poor acquisition and application of English modality in the Saudi context, a perceptible gap which this study tries to bridge by evaluating the status of Saudi learners' repertoire of modal verbs.

2.2.Purpose of the study

The Saudi EFL learners' use of English modals is very inefficient, and there, too, are plagued with many problems such as an apparently limited repertoire, inappropriate use, and poor knowledge of the multiple functions of these words in English. This compelled a study into the English teachers' perspective on the reasons for such depressed proficiency. It was also prompted by a visible gap in the available literature that examines this phenomenon in the Saudi context.

2.3.The questions of the study

The prevalence of poor performance in the use of English modals by Saudi EFL students guided this study to raise the following questions:

1. What are the reasons behind Saudi EFL students' low proficiency in using English modal verbs?
2. How can Saudi EFL students' proficiency in modality be boosted?

3. METHODS

3.1. Research design

The study adopted a qualitative approach by seeking individual feedback from EFL teachers to identify the reasons behind Saudi EFL students' low proficiency in English modality and their suggestions for improving them. It was considered that qualitative research was suitable to investigate the problem at hand, as it offered a more profound scope of the study. Moreover, participants' views were expected to add new perspectives to the research.

3.2. Participants

The study included a sample of 13 Saudi EFL instructors affiliated with four universities in Saudi Arabia, with varied teaching experience in courses taught and a number of years in the profession. The purpose of the research was duly explained to them to assure them of the confidentiality of their responses and their use strictly for research purposes. Consent to use the same for this purpose was also formally obtained from the participants.

3.3. Instrument

The researcher used his prior experience as a teacher and colleagues' input to develop an open-ended question to elicit the participants' responses. Experienced EFL teachers employed in three Saudi universities validated this. The question was sent to the participants over email with the request to revert freely with their views on the reasons behind Saudi EFL students' low proficiency in the usage of modal verbs in English (1. Please share your views on the reasons for the poor performance of your students in English modals. 2. Can you suggest some measures that you deem fit to rectify this?)

3.4. Data Analysis

The responses of the instructors were preliminarily placed under two sections. The first section dealt with the reasons behind Saudi EFL students' poor performance in using modalities, whereas the second section concerned the solutions for boosting the Saudi students' competence in using modals in English. Then, the answers in each section were reclassified according to related themes. For coding the responses, the abbreviation Inst. was employed for the specific instructor numbered from one to 13.

4. RESULTS

RQ1: What are the reasons behind Saudi EFL students' low proficiency in using English modal verbs?

Analysis of the responses showed that they could be classified under the following themes:

- (i) Modal verbs do not have Arabic equivalents;
- (ii) Modals present difficult structures;
- (iii) The English modals perform more than one language function;
- (iv) Learner motivation is low;
- (v) The textbooks and pedagogy are outdated.

The following section discusses these findings in some detail.

No Arabic equivalence for the English modal verbs:

Nine of the participants considered this the main reason for Saudi EFL students' poor performance in using English modals. Moreover, they (N=7) opined that this absence of non-equivalence led to their adding a "to-infinitive" after modals like can, could, should, etc.

Modal verbs present difficult grammatical construction

The teachers (N=6) believed that Saudi students found it difficult to use the modals in the past form. They would find it difficult to use could, would, or should be followed by have, followed by a past participle verb. Most students prefer to use auxiliary verbs like 'did', 'was', 'were' and 'had'.

Nine participants reported that students find it challenging to have two verbs (following each other) in one sentence. Past forms of modal verbs were even more complex for the students (N=8). Four participants added that students had poor vocabulary and grammar, while twelve reported that their main challenge lay in the grammatical structure of modals.

Modal verbs are used to perform various language-functions

Three of the teachers interviewed reported that Saudi EFL students failed to appreciate the multiple functions of modals. For example, students may not know the difference between using 'could' as a simple past of 'can' to express ability and using 'could' to ask polite questions.

Six teachers added that their students had no idea of using modals as function words, while six held that the division of modals into attitudinal and communicative types was difficult for EFL students to grasp. For instance, the use "can" refers to ability, opportunity, permission, request, possibility, etc.

Twelve teachers opined that students often confuse the meaning of a modal. For instance, if they want to express certainty, they use a probability modal.

Finally, all thirteen of the teachers agreed that their students' use of modals depended heavily on culture, context, topic and discourse, which prevented their attaining proficiency in their use of English.

Traditional textbooks and instructional reasons

One participant out of the thirteen held that the poor show in English modals was due to their failure to master them in high school. On the other hand, nine participants attributed it to a lack of practice. In an interesting trend, six participants reported that the reason for this was that the EFL Instructors see the modals as empty grammatical structures with no social and pragmatic use. They added that importance is not given to the correct pronunciation of modal verbs (strong or weak forms).

Five participants opined that the Saudi EFL students' poor performance in modals was due to lack of clear goals, interest in extra-curricular activities, lack of study habits, and an exam-oriented system. Moreover, eleven participants expressed dissatisfaction with the course books, which they felt were commercial in nature and not concerned about students' exact level of understanding.

Less motivation and awareness

Six participants cited a lack of awareness of the functions of modals as a cause for students' poor performance in these, while five participants thought it was a lack of interest in learning these.

RQ2: How can Saudi EFL students' proficiency in modality be boosted?

Most participants focused on the importance of teaching modals that are more used in the English language. Even amongst these, all responses were classified under three recurrent themes: communicative teaching methodology, more focused practice in modals, and suitable textbooks and teaching resources.

Using communicative teaching methodology

Two teachers were of the opinion that the modules on modals in the textbooks needed to be changed to include communicative language learning with greater emphasis on the learners' productive language. Four teachers suggested that modals' teaching should be limited to only one modal per lesson. Five teachers added that it was of utmost importance to encourage communicative language learning and emphasize the learners' productive language, while ten of the teachers advocated the use of the communicative approach in the classroom.

Urging students for more practice

Nine teachers felt that students need to be urged to undertake more practice in using modals, while five of the teachers reported that acquisition of the English modals took years of practice which was not feasible with reliance only on the educational institutions. Three teachers felt that practice in modals ought to be undertaken as regular drills to improve their use. In addition, five teachers raised a pertinent point by saying that learning the grammar of a language requires many and repeated opportunities for practice, not only in school but also in real life outside the school environment.

Amongst the suggestions for improvement in students' use of modals, ten teachers suggested using engaging video clips of movies to show the use of modal verbs and choosing some of the students to emulate the actors who appeared in the previous scenes. Twelve teachers, on the other hand, preferred to administer structured exercises using modals but with engaging materials such as the narration of personal experiences etc.

Using suitable textbooks and teaching resources

Two of the teachers pointed out that the books and materials they used were not suitable for the specific needs of the Saudi EFL learners. Four teachers thought that YouTube videos could be a good resource for teaching EFL students modals. Significantly, as many as eleven teachers stressed the need to analyze students' level, ability to learn, needs and requirements so that suitable courseware can be developed to enhance the effectiveness of learning not only modals but also the overall grammar.

5. DISCUSSION

The study set out to investigate the reasons behind Saudi EFL students' lack of proficiency in English modal verbs and sought solutions from the teachers as they are the players on ground zero and understand the issues involved better than others.

Based on the data collected from teachers' feedback, it can be stated that the study found some reasons that negatively affected the learners' competence in modal verbs. They include the absence of Arabic equivalents, which means that EFL students tend to transfer grammar rules from the mother tongue to the target language, which is a questionable practice. Further, modals present difficult structures and perform various language functions of which the students are generally not aware. With so many learning challenges, motivation to learn is low, which is not helped by the unsuitable textbooks and traditional teaching methods. These findings are interesting and match many previous findings (i.e., Cournane & Pérez-Leroux, 2020; Bensaid, 2015; Hinkel, 2011; Saeed, 2009; Torabiardakani et al., 2015; Yang, 2018), which reported that modal verb usage is challenging for EFL learners.

The finding of the absence of equivalence in MT is in line with Torabiardakani et al. (2015), who associated the source of complexity with the differences between the two languages, Arabic and English. Similarly, another reason is that the English modal verbs have other functions in the language. This is confirmed by Hymes' (1972) idea that various forms can convey a language function, and a sole form can be used to express various language functions. Furthermore, the study showed other reasons like the traditional instruction and textbooks used as the causes for poor proficiency of students in the TL grammar. Saeed (2009) pointed out that superficial education of Arabic students received is among the reasons for the students' weakness in using modal verbs. Besides, Bensaid (2016) found that most difficulties that Arab EFL learners face with using English modals springs from the interference of the Arabic mother tongue.

Regarding the second question, the study reported solutions for improving EFL students' use of English modals by calling EFL instructors to use communicative teaching methodology, urging students to more practice and helping develop suitable textbooks and teaching resources. These findings are confirmed by (Hinkel, 2011; Mujtaba, 2016; Waters, 2012).

Hinkel (2011) found that teaching learners the usage of modal verbs were a good place to start in academic writing in both L1 and L2. However, Mujtaba (2016) pointed out that training students in modal auxiliary verbs have always been a difficult challenge for EFL instructors. Similarly, Waters (2012) affirmed that teachers should use some language assignments that help EFL students become more familiar with specific grammar rules. Mukundan and Khojasteh (2011) found a huge discrepancy between the inclusion of modal verbs in a Malaysian textbook compared with the British National Corpus and a considerable difference between the inclusion of modality and natural language use.

6. CONCLUSIONS

When learning and teaching a new language, grammar is very important. This study looked at the factors that prevent EFL students from developing good competence in using English modals. The study reported some themes like the many language functions that one modal may perform in the TL, absence of equivalence in Arabic language, traditional teaching and unsuitable coursebooks, in addition to the poor motivation that the students demonstrate. Furthermore, the study reported some solutions for developing students' proficiency in using models, including the use of communicative teaching methods and activities, encouraging students to engage in more practice and using suitable coursebooks. Language learners,

especially when they are in an advanced stage of learning, as in the present case, might have trouble in social situations if they don't understand how modals work.

Recommendations

It is of utmost importance to keep repeating modal auxiliaries at different levels so students can fully understand their different meanings. EFL teachers who want to make sure that their students, especially advanced students who may soon get a diploma from a language centre and are expected to be good at English, can use this information to make sure they can use natural English when they use multimedia or travel to English-speaking countries or use the language outside of the classroom. Finally, teachers, textbook authors, researchers, and students will find this study useful because it is relevant to day-to-day language use. This could be a wake-up call for researchers, who may want to look into the matter in greater detail after seeing these findings.

Limitations

In this study, EFL instructors' perceptions of the reasons that affect Saudi EFL students in acquiring modal verbs have been studied; future researchers are encouraged to study the modal verbs in students' speaking. Moreover, percentages of the modals' occurrences were shown; comparing the event of modals with other corpus like the BNC and others is necessary.

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