

Arab ESL Learners and Modals

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Abstract

Most English-as-a-second-language (ESL)/ English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers would agree that modal verbs remain difficult notions to teach. While intermediate to advanced ESL/ EFL students manifest sufficient command of form, they invariably struggle with using English modals in pragmatic and meaningful ways. With regard to Arab EFL learners' acquisition of modal verbs, several studies have investigated the issue (e.g. Elenizi, 2004; Saeed, 2009; Sabri, 2011). However, none of the previous research endeavors has tried to study Arab learners' difficulties with modal verbs outside of EFL contexts, nor have they explored how ESL/EFL textbooks deal with modality and Arab learners. Thus, this paper attempts to examine the nature of Arab ESL learners' difficulties with modal verbs in English and the inadequacies of ESL textbooks in this regard. Thereby, it analyzes modal verbs from the lenses of reference grammar books and also from the lenses of ESL student grammar textbooks, and it also puts forward some suggestions on how to approach the Arab students' challenges with English modal verbs.

Key words: Arab ESL learners, ESL/EFL grammar textbooks, Modal verbs

I. Introduction:

In English, notions of certainty, possibility, impossibility, probability, obligation, necessity, ability, volition and advisability are grammatically expressed by modal auxiliary and semi-modal verbs. The latter pose a problem for English-as-a-second-language (ESL) and English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners due to several reasons. Inter-lingual influence can be one of the major factors, in addition to intra-lingual and developmental reasons that originate from inherent features such as the modal verbs' semantic variability and also from the false hypotheses that a learner might employ about these structures. According to many researchers (e.g. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Vethamani, 2001; Thompson, 2002), modal verbs are one of the most complex structures that most ESL/EFL instructors have to teach. Modal verbs' inherent complexity does not really lie in their formal features; instead, most intermediate to advanced ESL students demonstrate enough declarative knowledge of form, but they struggle with fully comprehending them and pragmatically using them in meaningful and appropriate ways.

II. Rationale

The focus of the present paper is on Arab native speakers as modal verbs prove to be a problematic pattern for them. In my experience teaching in the United States and Morocco, most adult Arabic speaking ESL learners at English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs struggle with comprehending modal verbs and accordingly avoid using them as pragmatic components especially at the macro-level of text. The complexity of modal verbs is well documented in previous literature. A few studies investigated Arab EFL learners' acquisition of modal verbs (e.g. Elenizi, 2004; Saeed, 2009; Sabri, 2011). However, none of the previous research projects has tried to study Arab learners' difficulties with modal verbs outside of EFL contexts, and none has explored what ESL/EFL textbooks have to offer in order to help Arab learners. Therefore, this paper derives its importance from its attempt to investigate the nature of the Arab ESL learners' difficulties encountered while dealing with modal verbs in English and the inadequacies of ESL textbooks with regard to modal verbs. Prior to examining some of the most popular ESL textbooks in the U.S. market, an analysis of the pattern in question will be conducted. The analysis is based on some influential grammar reference publications that take disparate approaches to investigating modality.

III. An Analysis of Modal Verbs from the Lenses of Reference Grammars

Biber, Conrad & Leech (2002) examine modality as a variation in the verb phrase. They identify nine central modal auxiliaries: *will*, *would*, *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *shall*, *should*, and *must*. They also mention a list of semi-modals or periphrastic modals such as *had better*, *have to*, and *be going to*. What is most interesting about Biber et al.'s perspective is its classification of modal and semi-modal verbs into three categories in terms of personal and logical meanings: 1) the permission/ possibility/ ability modals; 2) the obligation/ necessity modals and semi-modals; and 3) the volition/ prediction modals and semi-modals. These categories of modals integrate intrinsic, personal meanings and extrinsic, logical meanings. Some of the modals and semi-modals (*will*, *shall*, *be going to*, and *used*

to) are essentially used to express a certain time frame. Also, modals and semi-modals can be combined with both aspects (simple, perfect, progressive, and perfect progressive) and passive voice. With regard to the frequency of their usage, modals are common across registers; however, they are most frequent in conversational English

In *Practical English Usage*, Swan (2005) follows a prescriptive approach in order to explain grammatical concepts. Looking at the style it is written in, this reference grammar is meant for advanced ESL students or anyone including native speakers with limited knowledge of grammar. In terms of organization, the grammar concepts are explained as they appear alphabetically. For example, the difference between *may* and *might* appears in the book before the section about *modal verbs*, which makes the book a reference guide and not a textbook. As far as the semantics of modal verbs, it divides modal verbs into two groups: the certainty group deals with degrees of certainty, possibility or impossibility; and the obligation group deals with the freedom to act and some other related ideas. For each entry, the author provides a short, simply written explanation followed by some examples. In the hope to cover as many questions that readers might have as possible, it offers scant explanation for and extremely limited analysis of grammatical concepts.

DeCapua (2008) provides a grammar reference for teachers to teach both non-native and native students. She defines the “pure” modals as those that consist of only one form such as *should*, *can*, *could*, and *must*; whereas, *ought to* and *had better*, for instance, are considered semi-modals. Then, modals and semi-modals are presented according to eight semantic meanings: ability; permission or polite requests; possibility or probability; necessity or obligation; prohibition; advice or suggestion; expectation; and unfulfilled expectation or mistake. In each section, the author introduces a problem and then suggests ways teachers can follow to effectively explain the concept. Each explanation is followed by a short discussion about the learner’s possible difficulties with the concept. Then, some practical activities are presented. The latter two features of this book make it different from the previous two reference grammars discussed above as it attempts to explain grammatical structures from the perspective of ESL/ EFL teachers. It also provides suggestions to help learners go beyond mastering the forms to understanding the nuances of their meanings and usages.

Another similar practical reference grammar is Ur’s *Grammar Practice Activities*. Ur (1988) proposes four stages to teach grammar: 1) presentation; 2) isolation and explanation; 3) practice; and 4) test. These steps are meant to provide a flexible framework allowing for a vast variety of teaching methodologies. With regard to modals, the author introduces eleven interactive activities that cover modals of ability, possibility, permission, advisability, obligation, necessity, and polite requests. While the author does not go in detail explaining the different uses of modal verbs, she provides useful and engaging classroom activities. These game-like activities fuse grammar instruction with communicative language teaching, a challenge that many ESL instructors find difficult to overcome. Nevertheless, the book’s lack of metalinguistic explanations of grammar structures should not be regarded as a limitation since it is intended to be a practical guide suggesting classroom grammar activities.

IV. An Analysis of Modal Verbs from the Lenses of ESL Grammar Textbooks

As mentioned previously, while most students can develop declarative knowledge of modals and master using the forms, the most considerable difficulties they have with modals lie in their pragmatic meanings and uses. Unfortunately, a number of ESL/ EFL textbooks place extra emphasis on the forms and little on the pragmatic usages. What follows will be an examination of three of the most popular ESL series of textbooks. I have purposefully selected different textbooks in terms of their focus. The Azar & Hagen's *English Grammar* series is a worldwide best seller that chiefly uses a grammar-based approach and only concentrates on grammar structures. The *NorthStar Reading and Writing* series is a skill-integrated textbook that teaches both reading and writing. Each unit of this book contains a grammar structure that is reinforced in reading and writing activities. Another skill-integrated textbook is the *Q: Skills for Success: Listening and Speaking*, which also includes a grammar section in each thematic unit.

First, The Azar & Hagen grammar series consists of three textbooks: *Basic English Grammar*, *Fundamentals of English Grammar*, and *Understanding and Using English Grammar*. The first modals and semi-modals are introduced in chapter 10 of the first book. These are used to express future plans, possibility, ability, necessity, requests, and suggestions. In the second book, either new modals or different uses of book 1 modal verbs are introduced. The new functions include expressing permission, prohibition, preferences, logical conclusions, and making suggestions. In the last book of the series, two chapters are devoted to modals. Similar to Swan's (2005) semantic categorization of modals, these two chapters somehow follow the same classification. The first chapter deals with modals that express obligation or freedom of choice. The following chapter is concerned with degrees of certainty. Overall, the entire series follows a pure grammar-based, drill-and-kill approach with few communicative mini-tasks especially in the latest edition. Thus, it provides ample practice opportunities for learners; however, it does not truly succeed at integrating meaningful, contextualized activities that allow students to use modals in authentic or even semi-authentic ways. At the macro-level of text, almost all activities are limited to the clausal or sentential level.

The *NorthStar Reading and Writing* is a five-level series that integrates reading and writing skills. Book 1 introduces making predictions with *be going to* and giving advice using *should*. Book 2 also touches on advisability and expressing future predictions and future plans, yet it introduces ability. Modals of requests are introduced in book 3. Book 4 expands on advisability and discusses obligation in the past. However, the last book of this series does not include any modal structures. It is important to note that integrated skills series such as *NorthStar* are divided into two stands: reading/ writing and speaking/ listening and do not include a separate textbook for grammar. Thus, ESL programs adopting such integrated skills series rely on the two strands to teach their students most useful grammatical concepts and structures; however, from the above brief investigation of what modals are included in the *NorthStar* series, it appears that several important functions expressed through modal verbs are excluded. In addition, the grammar sections contain only a few comprehension questions such as "Why did the writer use *should*?" and "What form of the verb follows *should*?" Then, what typically follows are fill-in-the-blank exercises and sentence writing activities using the grammar forms. Obviously, contextualization of the modal verbs is far from being hinted at in these grammar sections.

The third ESL textbook series examined here is the *Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking* strand. Similar to *NorthStar*, *Q: Skills for Success* is an integrated skills series. Since the textbooks follow a thematic organization, grammar structures are introduced because they either appear in the listening excerpts or the unit's topic calls for the use of certain grammatical form in speaking. However, the *Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking* strand can easily be criticized for not including sufficient opportunities to learn about modals in English. If we take book 4, for example, the only modals mentioned in passing are *could*, *would* and *might* while discussing past unreal conditionals. A difference between *can* and *can't* is drawn but only in terms of pronunciation. Whereas these integrated skills textbooks are supposed to furnish context-driven activities and meaningful, communicative interaction, they fail at making very common grammatical structures salient and do not represent their true frequency in authentic environments.

V. Solutions to Arab ESL Learners' Challenges with Modals

Returning to the main focus of this paper which is the difficulties that modals pose for Arabic speaking ESL learners, the students' level of proficiency can determine the type of challenges students face with regard to modals. At the lower levels, inter-lingual transfer is evident in constructions with *can*, *could*, *must*, and *should* as the learners tend to add the infinitive particle *to* after the modal. The addition of a particle after the modality word exists in Arabic. Let's consider the following two sentences:

- Arabic sentence: yajibu an yaḏ-haba ila al-madrasa.
- Word-for-word English translation: must to (he) go to school.
- English translation: He must **to** go to school.*

Using two modals is also common at the lower levels and it is a form of inter-lingual transfer as in Arabic two modality phrases/ words can coexist in one sentence. The example below illustrates this type of L1 negative transfer:

- Arabic sentence: sawfa yumkinuhu aḏhabu ila almadrasa.
- Word-for-word English translation: will can he going to school.
- English translation: He **will can** go to school.*

At higher levels of language proficiency, form does not remain a main concern. Rather, the challenge shifts to include more developmental types of errors such as misinterpreting the pragmatic usages of modals. For instance, the fact that possibility can be expressed using a number of modals (*will*, *may*, *might*, *could*, *can*, *must*, *should*) is oftentimes difficult to comprehend for Arab learners as this intricateness of meaning is not expressed through the use of a modal verb in their first language; instead, a number of linguistic categories can be employed to fulfill these functions. Although each utterance makes use of a different modal, the overall meaning is more or less the same, and nuances of meaning are what cause the confusion. Even when understanding the nuances of meaning happens, these nuances often do not become part of the learners' procedural knowledge and active, working memory. This leads them to avoid using modals entirely although they may understand most of their usages. Saeed (2009) investigated how well advanced Arab EFL learners, who have studied English for over 12 years, can use modals. The findings showed that the learners' performance in the recognition part of the study was much better than their performance in the production part in which less than 50% of the functions were used correctly.

Elenizi (2004) examined Arab EFL students' mastery of modals and conditionals in context. He argues that modals and modality are taught according to their grammatical function and not in terms of their pragmatic and socio-cultural role. In most study tasks, participants were unsuccessful at using modals and conditionals appropriately. The author attributes students' lack of pragmatic knowledge due to the way they are taught modals as most EFL instructors treat modals as "empty" grammatical structures with no social and pragmatic use. The same criticism can extend to several ESL contexts, given the fact that modal verbs are often only dealt with in grammar classes, which makes them seem inherently grammatical to the students. Ideally, they should be reinforced in speaking/ listening classes, used in reading and writing classes, and even taught through communicative language instruction in grammar classes.

Arab ESL students are driven by their cultural orality, a factor that should not be ignored. If taking into account the learning styles and needs of Arab students, it becomes lucidly clear that they learn better with oral-aural activities. Orality of Arab ESL students can surely help contextualize the usage of modals and help transcend their meaning recognition component to subsume their usages in pragmatic contexts. It can also allow for teaching modals beyond the clausal and sentential levels and include them in extended discourse. This orality has long been recognized in the research literature (e.g. Ong, 1979; Chafe, 1982; Abu Radwan, 2012), yet not a lot of research studies have attempted to use it as a learning feature for the students' benefit.

Communicative language instruction is adaptable to include useful and meaningful activities to teach modals in pragmatic contexts. The urgent need is to move ESL instruction beyond teaching declarative knowledge and focus more on productive skills. In fact, the advantage of teaching modals is that they allow for clarifying the usage of language in different registers. What modals can be used informally and which ones can be used formally or in academic contexts are examples of questions that ESL instructors should raise in their teaching practice. In the case of Arab ESL students, task-based instruction as part of communicative language teaching is preferable as it allows students to use language outside of the classroom and forces them to engage in authentic and meaningful activities. That, in turn, offers them ample opportunities to gain hands-on experience using grammatical structures such as modals when they need to. According to Richards (2006), the concept of "holistic learning" is a characteristic of communicative language teaching as it helps teachers contextualize grammatical structures by finding ways to use them in the classroom and outside, giving pragmatic meaning to what is taught. This combination can also enhance students' communicative competence.

With regard to what examples of activities to be used to teach modals to adult Arab ESL students, discourse-focused activities, collaborative tasks, and problem-solving tasks should be favored. First, discourse-focused activities are those that teach grammar through discourse and seek to improve students' discourse competence, which can be defined as students' ability to produce cohesive and coherent output. These activities stress learners' exposure to authentic input and also encourage them to use grammatical forms for real purposes such as talking to a native speaker on the phone or emailing someone regarding a real-life issue. Furthermore, collaborative tasks allow students to engage in meaningful give-and-take with their classmates. They emphasize students' production and negotiation of meaning. One example of a collaborative task that can be applied to teaching modals is having students give group presentations about modals. The concept of group work allows them to negotiate meaning in

English given that the group members' first languages are different. And it also helps them understand modals better as they are trying to somehow teach them to their audience. Finally, problem-solving tasks offer students abundant opportunities to use grammatical structures as they need to use those forms in order to solve a certain problem. In the case of teaching modal verbs, having students come up with practical pieces of advice for their peers' problems or having them write an academic essay where they explore options to solve the problem of begging in Morocco after reading a newspaper article are examples of activities that force students to use modals in meaningful and appropriate ways according to the given pragmatic contexts.

VI. Conclusion:

The aforementioned sample activities guide grammar instruction to move from the formulaic, sentence level toward more communicative instruction that places grammatical forms at the macro-level of text. This, in turn, enhances the learners' productive skills while still drawing their attention to form. As far as Arab ESL students are concerned, their orality and the inter-lingual features of their errors should be taken into account to direct classroom instruction. ESL instructors should use textbooks and activities that cater to the special needs of their students. As discussed above, three of the most popular ESL textbooks either focus more on form and disconnected exercises or do not enhance the saliency of common grammatical structures. It is essential that the teaching models advocated in ESL textbooks be changed to include communicative language learning and emphasize the learners' productive language skills.

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