

# Analysis of a Grammatical Category in English —Modal Verbs

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## Abstract

This article aims at introducing the modal verbs, analysing the difficulties in teaching and providing instructional implications for teaching modals from three aspects, namely, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. In particular, this article uses *can* to demonstrate the problems in teaching. Importantly, the instructional implications for grammar teaching are presented which organised around the concept of form, meaning, and function. It is suggested that teaching modals could balance students' ability of identifying the meaning and function of modals appropriately and using them properly.

## Keywords

Modal Verbs, Can, Difficulties in Learning, Instructional Strategies

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## 1. Introduction

Batstone (1994) advocated that “grammar is a key element in the process of language use” (p. 5). Teaching grammar is not only to teach the form and meaning, but also the function. Since the modal verbs are regarded as “one of the most difficult aspects of learning English” (Abdul-Majeed & Hassoon, 2016: p. 1), this article will focus on analysing modals. It will firstly examine the grammatical explanations of modal verbs. Secondly, the analysis of reason why this aspect of grammar is difficult for learners to manipulate will be explained. In particular, the present article will put focus on examining the modal verb *can* to briefly discuss the difficulties in language learning. Finally, the pedagogical variations of the complexity of modal verbs will be presented in accordance with the students' proficiency level in the teaching context.

## 2. The Concept of Modal Verbs

This section will introduce the definitions of modal verbs and put focus on giv-

ing the rationales of the selection of this aspect of English grammar which can be problematic for learners in EFL class.

Being a type of auxiliary verb, the modal verb is mainly used when speakers tend to express moods or attitudes (Ivanovska, 2014; Palmer, 1990; Sinclair, 1990). To be specific, Imre (2017) pointed out that modal verb express a variety of meanings, such as “possibility, necessity, politeness, etc” (p. 126). Furthermore, Ivanovska (2014) added that modal verbs convey the meanings as “probability, permission, volition and obligation” (p. 1093). For instance, the modal verb *can* in *It can be good* indicated the speaker’s attitude of agreement. In addition, it is noted that modal verbs could produce a particular effect, such as giving an instruction or making a request (Sinclair, 1990). For example, *can* in *You can park the car here* functions as an instruction.

There are mainly two types of modal verbs, namely, pure modal verbs and semi-modal verbs. The pure modals also named as central modals or core modals which “have a single form for all persons and numbers, whatever the time reference, and so they violate the rule of ‘concord’ (Quirk et al., 1985: p. 149) between the subject and predicate” (Imre, 2017: p. 126). The central modals contain verbs as *can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will* and *would*, (Swan, 2005). Semi-modal verbs which also referred as marginal, peripheral, quasi-modals (Swan, 2005) “are similar to the pure modal verbs, except that we use the infinitive after it rather than the bare infinitive” (Parrott, 2000: p. 121), such as *dare, ought to, used to, have to* and etc. (Quirk et al., 1985; Swan, 2005). Besides the above two types of modal verbs, researchers (e.g., Quirk et al., 1980; Swan, 2005; Imre, 2017) also listed other divisions of modals such as semi-auxiliary modal verbs, modal idioms, and catenative constructions.

“Grammar is not merely a collection of forms but rather involves the three dimensions of (morpho) syntax, semantics, and pragmatics” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999: p. 109). The followings will examine the difficulties in learning this grammatical aspect from three dimensions.

### 3. Difficulties in Learning Modal Verbs

Due to the various divisions of modal verbs as well as the meanings that conveyed for different communicative function and multi-use, it is noted that using modals properly becomes a challenge to EFL learners. Abdul-Majeed and Hassoon (2016) pointed out that EFL learners are faced with serious problems in using modal verbs. Particularly, using modals properly is rather difficult for non-native speakers of English (Sedigheh, Marziyeh, & Jenaabadi, 2017). According to Surujiu and Șcărbnaia’s (2012) explanation, no equivalent grammatical form in the native langue makes learning modal verbs to be “one of the most difficult grammatical topic” (p. 68).

Since *can* is regarded as “one of the most widely used modal verbs” (Carter & McCarthy, 2006: p. 642), the following parts will explicit the difficulties in learning modal verbs by using *can* as an example. Imre (2017) stated that “the discus-

sion of modal verbs should involve form, function, and inter-linguistic discussion” (p. 127). In this respect, the followings will examine from three dimensions, namely, syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

### Syntax

Thornbury (1999) put forward that “rules of form are generally easier to formulate than the rules of use”. The learning process, however, could be affected by the previous knowledge of language (Stevick, 1989) and the knowledge of first language (L1) (Ellis, 1986). To be specific, the rule that there are no inflections in modal verbs makes learners confused. No inflection means there is no “-s” form in the third person singular, and there are no “-ing” or “-ed” forms (Sinclair, 1990; Leech & Svartvik, 1975). For example,

*I can do.*

*He can do.*

As can be seen from the above example, the subject of the first sentence is “I” while the subject of the second sentence is “He”. The form of the verb *can* does not change although the subjects are different. Importantly, learning this structure may bring about difficulties for some English language learners in that learners’ previous knowledge of verbs will affect the learning of modals. For instance,

I/You/We/They fall

He/She/It falls

In the examples above, the form of the verb *fall* changes according to the rule of subject-verb agreement. When the subject of the sentence is “I”, “You”, “We” or “They”, the verb is *fall*. It can be seen from the second sentence that the form of the verb *fall* changes into *falls* when the subject is “He”, “She” or “It”. In EFL class, whereas, learners might tend to plus “-s” behind modal verbs when they find the subject in the sentence is the third person singular (Yule, 1998), such as *he cans*. This problem is partly due to the learners’ previous knowledge of grammar which follows the rule of the verb must agree in number with the subject.

Moreover, negative that are formed by putting a negative word such as “not” after the modal (Sinclair, 1990) could also be difficult to learners. For instance,

*He could not be over fifty.*

In Chinese grammar, the negative word is put before the modal verbs. Reliance on prior L1 (First Language) knowledge, learners might put “not” in front of “could” and the sentence above could be incorrectly structured as *He not could be over fifty*. This indicates that L1 could interfere with L2 (Second Language) learning. As Ellis (1986), and Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) noted that the learner’s L1 affects the other language levels. This finding is in line with Nazarova, Yarmakeev, Pimenova, Abdrafikova and Tregubove’s (2018) statement that learners have difficulties in learning and using modal verbs because of the complexity of syntactical form of modals.

### Semantics

In terms of Celce-Murcia and Olshtain’s (2001) statements, focusing on form is not enough and learners should pay more attention to the meaning. Besides having difficulties in understanding the form, EFL learners are faced with prob-

lems in understanding the meanings of modal verbs (Abdul-Majeed & Hassoon, 2016). This part will examine the chief meanings of modal verbs.

It is noted that one modal verb may have several meanings (Ivanovska, 2014; Parrott, 2000), which makes EFL learners confused in learning. For example, the core meanings of *can* are associated with ability, permission and possibility (Arts, 2011; Lewis, 1986; Yule, 1998). Concerning the meaning of ability, Imre (2017) concluded that *can* expresses several ability types which mainly involves physical ability, mental ability, moral ability, instrumental ability and etc. The following sentences show that *can* conveys different meanings.

*He can speak English.* (physical ability)

*I can understand the meaning of the text.* (mental ability)

*She can do something good.* (moral ability)

*He can play the piano.* (instrumental ability)

Regarding the meaning of possibility, it is noted that *can* refers to hypothetical solutions, imminent possibility, tentative ability, dynamic possibility and so on (Imre, 2017). For example,

*The problem can be solved if we worked together.* (hypothetical solution)

*The road can be blocked if there was an accident.* (imminent possibility)

*She can be work hard if she wants to.* (tentative ability)

*It can snow any time.* (dynamic possibility)

Besides the above two meanings, *can* also conveys the meaning of permission (i.e., *You can smoke here.*). In this respect, being clear with the different meanings of modal verbs will be helpful for learners to understand the meaning of the sentences. For instance, “could” in *When I was a student, I could travel at half-price* (Leech & Svartvik, 1975: p. 143) expresses the meaning of permission rather than ability or possibility. Thus, it can be concluded that without understanding the exact meaning of modal verbs, sentence could be misled into other meanings.

### Pragmatics

Thornbury (1999) put forward that “rules of use heavily depend on contextual factors” (p. 12). For example, *Sue can come* could be understood differently in different contexts. In this example, the underlying meaning of *can* is possibility. However, when interpreting *can* from the speaker’s view, it indicates that the speaker allows *Sue* to come, which is a kind of permission. Meanwhile, from the listener’s view, it can be comprehended as *Sue* is free on the day or *Sue*’s leg is better, and she is able to walk again. As Lewis (1986) concludes, “the modal verbs always express the speaker’s (or listener’s) judgment or opinion at the moment of speaking”. In this respect, in order to better understand the meaning of modal verbs, learners should take the specific context into consideration.

Furthermore, learners should realise that the modal verbs can function as polite requests in the context. For example,

*Can you open the window?*

*Could you open the window?*

In the second sentence, *could*, the past form of *can*, does not express past time but greater politeness than the corresponding present forms, *can*, in the first sentence. Without considering the context, learners might treat the sentence as expressing the meaning of something happened in the past rather than a polite expression. According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain's (2001) conclusion, without the context to which language exposes, it might be difficult for learner to catch the meaning of the sentences.

#### 4. Implications for Teaching Modals

De Carrico and Larsen-Freeman (2002) advocated three dimensions of grammar teaching which involve form, meaning and use.

When teaching low level learners, teachers could put focus on teaching forms of the grammar, which means "taking a product perspective on grammar, with teaching structured round a careful specification of language form" (Batstone, 1994: p. 51). For instance, teachers should explain the rule of using modal verbs that is "modal verbs do not take the inflection '-s' or '-es' in the third person singular, unlike other verbs" (Abdul-Majeed and Hassoon, 2016: p. 1437).

Adopting this approach could enhance recognition by drawing learners' attention to the rules and patterns of the grammar. Willis (2003) pointed out that teachers should encourage language system building by highlighting the forms of language. The aim of teaching how grammar works is to make certain specified forms as noticeable as possible. Furthermore, this approach could help learners to structure the knowledge of language system. As Batstone (1994) put forward that learners can discover more about how grammar works by adopting this approach. However, it is noted that this is "the traditional approach in which only linguistic forms are taught explicitly without communication and meaningful input" (Yu, 2013: p. 15). Furthermore, a Marzuki (2014) mentioned that "the form-focused method fails to make learners fluent in using the target language" (p. 9).

On the other hand, EFL learners should be taught the meaning of the modal verbs. Abdul-Majeed and Hassoon (2016) and Ivanovska (2014) mentioned that the multifarious and complex of modals comprise a serious challenge to language learners to identify the meaning of the modal verbs. In particular, it is noted that the same modals have different meanings in different contexts (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Furthermore, Abdul-Majeed and Hassoon (2016: p. 12) noted the phenomenon that students "are mostly introduced to modals, without paying great attention to their meanings and functions". Thus, it is suggested that students should firstly know the various meanings and usage of modals for avoiding the misuse. In this respect, EFL instructors are advised to put a heavy emphasis on explicating the meanings of modals to help learners master the usage of them.

It is suggested by many researchers (e.g., Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; De Carrico & Larsen-Freeman, 2002; Finneran, 2015; Han, 2013) that adopt-

ing a form-meaning-function (FMF) approach plays a pivotal role in grammar instruction. Particularly, Han (2013: p. 138) put forward that it is necessary to “develop the ability to map form-meaning-function (FMF) relations and to do so in real-time spontaneous communication” to cope with the problem of “learning an L2 entails more than wrestling with the surface forms”. Thus, in the light of learners’ proficiency, teachers should draw learners’ attention by teaching not only how the grammar works or but also the likely contexts of use.

Last but not the least, when the teaching context changes where the learners are intermediate or higher learners, the use of grammar used in different context will be explained to the students. As Ivanovska (2014) mentioned that the students’ task is to manipulate the modal verbs in particular context since “the meaning depends upon the context in which the auxiliary is used” (p. 1099). Batstone (1994) defined this approach as a process of teaching which refers to the approach that engages learners in language use. In other words, teaching grammar should not only introduce the forms but also teach how to use accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately in different context. This approach aims at concentrating learners’ attention on meanings in context. As Thornbury (1999) stated, “if learners are going to be able to make sense of grammar, they will need to be exposed to it in its contexts of use” (p. 72).

However, it should be noted that teaching learners the modal verbs cannot only focus on how to use appropriately. As Marzuki (2014: p. 9) stated that “the functions-focused method fails in promoting learners accuracy”. Thus, teachers could adopt “a combination method between form-focused that is learners” able to improve accuracy in using the target language with function-focused method which is believed to be able to make learners fluent (Marzuki, 2014: p. 9). For example, teachers could adopt the EEE method which involves three stage, namely, exploration, explanation, and expression that combines the form and the meaning in language teaching practice (Marzuki, 2014: p. 13).

As mentioned above, it can be concluded that teachers need to be aware of the interconnectedness and balance of language form, meaning, and use (Shumin, 2002). As Iranmanesh (2015: p. 39) mentioned that “focusing on meaning rather than form does not mean that grammar can be ignored”. Instead, it should mean a balance between language system and competence in its use, with an emphasis on meaning”.

## 5. Conclusion

Modal verbs, because of their complexity in both syntactical form and semantic meaning as well as of their importance in all communication types, are challenging for non-native speakers to learn and use.

This article mainly investigates on aspect of English grammar, modal verbs, which can be problematic for EFL learners in the Chinese teaching context. The difficulties in language learning and teaching, and rationales why modal verbs are tough to learn are examined. Then the two teaching approaches are examined,

teaching the grammar works and contexts of use, which should be focused differently according to learners' level of proficiency. The research on varying the relative complexity of teaching forms or language use needs to be further discussed in the future research.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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