

Modal Verbs: Review and Recommendations for Effective Presentation

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Introduction

A modal, also termed modal verb or modal auxilliary, is defined as 'any of the auxilliary verbs which indicate attitudes of the speaker/writer towards the state or event expressed by another verb, i.e. which indicate different types of modality. The following are modal verbs in English: *may, might, can, could, must, have (got) to, will, would, shall, should*'. (Richards, Platt & Platt 1992, p. 232). Modal verbs, that contribute to linguistic complexity and accuracy of meaning, are necessary for second language learners to comprehend owing to their frequency and multiple functions. Unlike tense, in which a state is defined between speakers and responded to with similar grammatical forms, modals offer more dynamic linguistic opportunity indicating various speaker/writer intent. Moreover, it is the illocutionary force of an utterance, as opposed to merely grammar/tense to which a speaker replies. Effective listeners respond to the feelings/attitudes of a speaker and thus can engage in meaningful communication through shared affective linguistic cues. Beyond recognising the function of modals,

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proficient English language learners will further understand how varying intonation can affect the illocutionary force/meaning of utterances. This article provides examples to show the form and function of some modal verbs. Their presentation in common macro-skill English language textbooks is reviewed. It is suggested that language learners can become more effective communicators by focusing on the functions modal verbs rather than their grammatical forms. Another opinion based on teaching experience is that students should not learn modals as individual lexical items, but as components of longer, sometimes fixed expressions. The way in which learners encounter modal verbs can therefore exemplify one aspect of a lexical approach to teaching.

Presentation of modal verbs

The information in Table 1 and associated example sentences depict some of the functions of selected modal verbs; refer Table 1. There are other examples not included in Table 1, specifically, *need*, *dare* and *used*, that can be referred to as semi-modals; those verbs that share features of lexical and usual modal verbs. The verb *need* can precede an infinitive (with 'to') as in *I need to see him now*. The same verb can feature by itself as a usual lexical verb, for example, *I need your help*. Semi-modals are not specifically dealt with in this article. For further explanation of grammatical form and function of semi-modals, see the Collins Cobuild Essential Dictionary (1988, p. 719).

Table 1: Examples of modal verbs and their function * formal usage

	can can't	could couldn't	may may not	might mightn't	should shouldn't	must mustn't	will won't
request/ permission	1	5	9	12*	14	X	21
ability	2	6	X	X	X	X	X
possibility	3	7	10	13	15	18	22
obligation	X	X	X	X	16	19	23*
prohibition	4	8	11	X	17	20	X

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. <i>Can</i> I speak to Ms Watson? | 13. That candidate <i>might</i> win the next election. |
| 2. I <i>can</i> swim well. | 14. <i>Should</i> I turn the light on? |
| 3. You <i>can't</i> be serious. | 15. She studied hard, so she <i>should</i> pass the test. |
| 4. You <i>can't</i> smoke in this restaurant. | 16. You <i>should</i> see a doctor if you're sick. |
| 5. <i>Could</i> I please have a copy? | 17. You <i>shouldn't</i> be so critical. |
| 6. I <i>could</i> run fast 10 years ago. | 18. I <i>must</i> have left my book at home. |
| 7. There <i>could</i> be a delay due to fog. | 19. You <i>must</i> listen to the typhoon warnings. |
| 8. I <i>couldn't</i> take fruit into the USA. | 20. You <i>mustn't</i> park here. |
| 9. <i>May</i> I ask a question? | 21. <i>Will</i> you help me? |
| 10. I <i>may</i> be late for the meeting. | 22. It <i>won't</i> rain today. |
| 11. Children <i>may</i> not swim without supervision. | 23.* <i>Won't</i> you have another drink? |
| 12.* <i>Might</i> I make an appointment for 3 o'clock? | |

The following examples from Table 1 are arranged according to modal verb function.

Request/permission

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. <i>Can</i> I speak to Ms Watson? | 5. <i>Could</i> I please have a copy? |
| 9. <i>May</i> I ask a question? | 12.* <i>Might</i> I make an appointment for 3 o'clock? |
| 14. <i>Should</i> I turn the light on? | 21. <i>Will</i> you help me? |

Ability

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| 2. I <i>can</i> swim well. | 6. I <i>could</i> run fast 10 years ago. |
|----------------------------|--|

Possibility

- | | |
|---|---|
| 3. You <i>can't</i> be serious. | 7. There <i>could</i> be a delay due to fog. |
| 10. I <i>may</i> be late for the meeting. | 13. That candidate <i>might</i> win the election. |
| 15. She studied hard, so she <i>should</i> pass the test. | 22. It <i>won't</i> rain today. |
| 18. I <i>must</i> have left my book at home. | |

Obligation

- | | |
|---|---|
| 16. You <i>should</i> see a doctor if you're sick. | 23.* <i>Won't</i> you have another drink? |
| 19. You <i>must</i> listen to the typhoon warnings. | |

Prohibition

- | | |
|---|---|
| | 8. I <i>couldn't</i> take fruit into the USA. |
| 4. You <i>can't</i> smoke in this restaurant. | 17. You <i>should</i> not be so critical. |
| 11. Children <i>may</i> not swim without supervision. | 20. You <i>mustn't</i> park here. |

Forms, functions and expressions

Although representative, the examples in Table 1 are not necessarily exclusive to or exhaustive of each category. Regarding function, there can be a lack of definitive modal verb classification. The function of the modal verb *will*, is most often prediction and is clear in the example; *Tomorrow it will rain*. However, the use of *will* in the sentence *I'll cook breakfast*, is an utterance indicative of a spontaneous decision. Furthermore in Table 1, modals are presented with their equivalent negative forms. It is possible that *won't* can be used to express prohibition, as in the example of the formal utterance; *You will not speak to me that way*. However, the opposite modal, *will*, is not used to express prohibition.

Although no example is provided for *might* for the function of obligation, it could be suggested that the following examples indicate that function: *It might be best if you didn't go/It might not be a good idea to go*. From this perspective, the use of the modal verb could be considered in the context of the attitude conveyed by both of these expressions.

To generalise, the meanings of the example sentences in Table 1 seem to be clearer when arranged according to their function rather than form. It is the function of modals that usually feature in English language textbooks, in effect offering a framework for teaching methods. One of the aspects of the lexical approach is to make learners aware of lexical phrases that feature in natural language. These range from totally fixed sequences (idioms) to more flexible phrases that can function within sentences or as independent expressions, such as: *Do you want me to...; I'd be happy to...; Can I do anything...?; Would you like me to ...?; It'd be great to ...; Could you do me a favour?; Can you give me a hand?; Would you like a hand?; and*

Let me help you. First language transfer will feature when comprehending the modal verbs in the above expressions. However, for meaningful language retention, learners should be encouraged to make lexical, not structural comparisons between their first and target language (Lewis 1997, p. 205).

(Pre)listening: lexical or illocutionary focus?

The following extract is from a listening exercise featured in Unit 4, 'Expressing Requests and Offers' in the initial Headway Intermediate textbook series (Soars & Soars 1986). Although the speaker utters coherent and natural English, at times a more formal style of speech is produced with perhaps less common examples of modal verb usage. This practice is aimed at listening for gist. Nevertheless, the formality of spoken style can be more challenging to learners of even intermediate proficiency. Listening skill therefore depends on understanding the speaker's attitude rather than on specific lexical items. This exercise features Mrs Gibbs, an elderly English lady, who speaks of her extensive travel overseas in a van:

Now I *would* not camp in a tent. That I *should* never have a minute's peace. I don't think I *should* ever sleep but I always think if anybody wants to get at me they're going to have quite a job in a vehicle and you know I *can* make quite a noise with my horn to attract attention.

(Soars & Soars 1986, p. 108).

According to the intrinsic meanings shown in Table 1, the first example of *should* in the utterance *That I should never have a minute's peace* could correspond to example 15, probability/likelihood; i.e. it is probable/likely that I would not have a minute's peace, or to example 6,

ability; i.e. I would not be able to have a minute's peace. In the sentence following this example, further variations of intrinsic meaning can be suggested. The utterance, *I don't think I should ever sleep...*, could correspond to example 15, probability/likelihood; i.e. I probably would not sleep, indicating a slight chance of actual sleep. Alternatively, meaning could correspond to example 6, ability; i.e. I would not be able to sleep, indicating no chance of actual sleep. These variations indicate how modal verbs are encountered as examples of a speaker's illocutionary force. Suitable prelistening questions could be: *How does Mrs Gibbs feel about sleeping in a tent?* or *Why would Mrs Gibbs not like to sleep in a tent?* Clearly, the focus of the listener's attention is focused on the attitude of the speaker and not on the actual modal verbs, although these, combined with intonation, are what convey the speaker's opinion. Moreover, in spontaneous conversation, listeners respond to the attitude of a speaker, given that it is not always possible or appropriate to respond by simply matching the speaker's grammar. This exercise also demonstrates the importance of modal verbs in comprehending attitude, while recognising how incidental they might seem in natural speech.

Speaking and writing with modals

Learners need to be aware of modals as they function in whole sentences rather than simply on their lexical form. The following examples in figure 1, show how obligation using *have to* and permission using *can* might be used for simple speaking or writing practice. Learners can practice variations in sentence form such as: *When flying, do you have to...?*; *When you fly, do you have to...?*; *Do you have to ... when you fly?*

Although the meaning of *must* is equivalent to *have to*, the former is generally more formal, perhaps more emphatic and written more than spoken. Furthermore, *must* does not have an equivalent negative meaning as *don't have to*. Utterances such as *You must visit Paris in the summer* might not exemplify obligation if expressed informally. In that case, the function would be a suggestion. Examples using, *can* in figure 1 do not refer to ability. The questions and positive answers associated with this practice reflect request/permission. However, negative answers reflect prohibition; refer figure 1.

Figure 1: Sample exercise with practice of *have to* and *can*

When travelling	}	Do you have to buy a ticket?
by subway,		Do you have to wear a seat belt?
While driving,		Do you have to sit down?
When flying,		Do you have to make a booking?

(Yes,) you have to = obligation (No,) you don't have to = permission

When travelling	}	Can you smoke? (permission)
by subway,		Can you eat dinner? (ability)
When flying,		Can you use a mobile phone? (permission)
While driving,		Can you listen to a CD? (permission)

(Yes,) you can = permission (No,) you can't = prohibition

Suitable topics for speaking and writing using these few examples include the explanation of customs and giving advice.

How textbooks present modals

Attention now turns to a random selection of contemporary textbooks that contain specific exercises to practice modal verbs. The purpose is to compare their examples and presentation. Most of the featured textbooks are for intermediate proficiency learners. Each informal description is based mainly on the student's book, in some cases with a few comments given about the corresponding teacher's book.

The format and examples by Buckingham & Craven (2001) seem elementary for a 'book 2' level. Unit 9 'You should say you're sorry' presents the modal *should* only for giving advice. The following unit 'You can't smoke in the street' introduces a range of modals, but the grammar check exercises at the back of the book would be better placed within the unit, so that students can better understand the function of those modals before they write their own examples of customs. Functions include permission and prohibition, although these are not explained clearly in the textbook.

Unit 5 in Doff & Jones (1994), 'Obligation', features practice for all macro skills, a review grammar checklist for structures relating to obligation, permission, *make & let* and lastly, freedom from obligation, which forms expressions with *whoever, wherever, whatever, anyone, anywhere + you like*. There is then a whole page 'focus on form' showing multiple examples of all these structures, enabling learners to form their own spoken and written sentences.

In Forsyth (2000), Unit 10, 'Other Houses, Other Rules' deals specifically with modals whose function is obligation and permission, specifically *can, have to, must, be allowed to, should* and *need to*. The following functions feature briefly: Unit 17, 'What We Want', making requests with

can and *could*; and Unit 18 'Future Not Guaranteed', speculating about the future using *might well*, and *will probably*. Unit 20, 'All Change', considers possibilities using *could* and *would*. This textbook clearly has a grammar focus with numerous structures for practice within each unit. The supplementary speaking game for unit 10 is simple, but effective to reinforce common modal functions and their forms in full sentences.

Lee, Yoshida & Ziolkowski (2000) Unit 6, 'First Dates' has a listening and speaking focus on what you *should* and *shouldn't* talk about on a first date. Unit 7, 'On the Job' features listening, reading and writing practice for what you *get to* do and *have to* do. End of unit vocabulary lists provide limited language support in Japanese. Unit 11, 'That's Shocking', does not include modals to discuss customs, but concentrates on imperative verb forms. Nevertheless, the information from this unit can be used to expand spoken/written responses to include modals.

Molinsky & Bliss (1995) Unit 8, 'Offering Help, Gratitude and Appreciation' has numerous examples using common idiomatic expressions. The focus is on listening and speaking. The teacher's book has a clear summary of structures that can be useful for students of elementary to intermediate level proficiency.

The modals in the final unit (15) by Rost, Thewlis & Schmidt (2002) are limited to *can*, *should* and *must/have to*. The word *need* is also included, but as a lexical verb not a semi-modal. Furthermore, student practice is limited to writing single words in blanks and focus on sentence forms instead of modal verb functions. Inclusion of alternative functions in the student's book seem incidental rather than key to understanding various meanings. The grammar table at the end of the textbook shows structures

only, with no mention of function. Examples showing *It can/should/must sing* seem incongruous. The grammar guide in the teacher's book offers the best outline and examples of modals. However, this is placed at the end of the guide (point #16) instead of at the beginning, which would better support learner comprehension.

In contrast to the other textbooks mentioned here, Sampson (1999) deals specifically with speaking and listening. Unit 9, 'Making complaints and requests' has a range of modal verbs presented as examples of 'natural speech'. The variety and format of practice presented is interesting and should allow learners to comprehend modal verb functions. Furthermore, this textbook explicitly focuses learner attention on pronunciation which is key to listening comprehension. From the review of textbooks for this article, it is clear that attention is not usually paid to pronunciation, for example that *can* is pronounced /kən/ unless it is a more emphatic utterance.

The incredibly successful Headway series has been extensively revised and is now published as the new edition New Headway (Soars & Soars 2003). There are two units devoted to modal verbs. Unit 4 'Doing the right thing' deals with obligation and permission, requests and offers. Unit 9 'Relationships' focuses on probability and it compliments Unit 4 practice, but predominantly in the first half of the unit. Both units have a variety of short, useful exercises for all macro skills. This textbook is suitable for daily intensive language practice and would challenge learners of intermediate proficiency with its level of vocabulary and topics for practice. Although the exercises have been improved since the original 1986 edition featuring the Mrs Gibbs listening practice discussed previously, this could

also be used to supplement the activities in the new edition.

One of the textbooks that effectively presents a variety of modals in everyday contexts is by Uhl Chamot, Rainey de Diaz & Baker-Gonzalez (2002). Three units (6, 8, 12) focus on modals with a range of macro skills exercises. Functions are clearly stated in the contents and at the beginning of each unit as 'communication goals'. The clear and colourful format make the text appealing. This textbook is recommended for speaking and listening practice.

The most comprehensive presentation of modals is the textbook (Viney & Viney 1996) comprising 8 units with a thorough range of activities to practice modals in common contexts. There is an emphasis throughout on language functions and these are arranged clearly to support learners as they formulate spoken and written sentences using modals. The presentation of the teacher's book is clear with extensive grammar and culture notes highlighted in different colours. This textbook is recommended for speaking and writing classes.

What type of syllabus?

Obviously there are varying approaches to second language teaching and these are influenced, if not controlled by the type of syllabus that teachers pursue. A structural syllabus will focus on grammatical forms considering their frequency, difficulty, usefulness or a combination of these (Richards, Platt & Platt 1992, p. 358). Alternatively, a notional (or notional-functional) syllabus arranges linguistic content according to the meanings a learner needs and the functions they will use language for (Richards, Platt & Platt 1992, p. 250). This reflects an evolution of the situational

method (Richards, Platt & Platt 1992, p. 337) which organises content around specific linguistic situations. Modal verbs can feature in all of these syllabuses in the way they are presented by a teacher or in textbooks. The presentation of modals in textbooks reviewed in this article display aspects of these syllabuses influencing the methodology of language instruction. Japanese second language learners are perhaps more familiar with a structural syllabus given the emphasis on grammar-translation in junior and senior high school foreign language classes. Although the three syllabuses mentioned have their own strengths, it is suggested that for meaningful spontaneous communication, a notional or situational syllabus might benefit learners more.

Conclusion

Learners cannot avoid encountering modal verbs when studying English. They have a variety of forms and are often incorporated into common expressions. Beyond form, the linguistic functions of modals are an essential way that affective meaning is conveyed. Therefore, learners should aim to understand modal functions so that they can better respond to and effectively convey their own attitudes and feelings, thereby increasing their linguistic proficiency through the flexible use of modals in writing or speech. Listening and pronunciation practice can help learners get used to the spontaneity of modal usage in the context of natural discourse. Moreover, from a combination of listening and speaking practice focusing on intonation, a higher level of linguistic awareness can be achieved that otherwise would not feature if only the grammatical structures associated with modals were studied.

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