# استخدام الأفعال المساعدة من قبل طلبة السنة الرّابعة في قسم اللّغة الإنكليزيّة بجامعة البعث

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## ملخّص

تُعتبر الأفعال المساعدة واحدة من أكثر القضايا الإشكالية التي تواجه متعلمي الإنكليزيّة بوصفها لغة أجنبية بشكل عام والمتعلّمين العرب لهذه اللّغة بشكل خاص. تبحث هذه الدّراسة في أداء طلّاب السّنة الرّابعة للّغة الإنكليزيّة في جامعة البعث في استخدام الأفعال المساعدة. وتركّز هذه الدّراسة بشكل رئيسيّ على الأفعال المساعدة بصيغتها البسيطة. ولتحقيق أهداف البحث المرجوّة تمّ استخدام اختبارين اثنين (اختبار فهم وإدراك الأفعال المساعدة واختبار استخدام هذه الأفعال) لتتبّع وتحليل أخطاء الطلّاب. تكشف هذه الدّراسة أنّ الطلّاب لديهم معرفة ضعيفة بمعنى واستخدام الأفعال المساعدة حيث يتأثرون في الغالب بالتداخّل السّلبي للّغة الأم بالإضافة إلى عدم معرفة قواعد اللّغة الانكليزيّة. وتبيّن أنّه لدى الطلّاب ميل نحو الشّكليّة الدّيناميكيّة ويندرج تحتها الأفعال ذات الصلة بالإرادة والتفضيل والمقدرة. كما أنّهم يميلون إلى استخدام بعض الأفعال المساعدة أكثر من غيرها للتّعبير عن المعنى نفسه كما في حالة الأفعال must ،may، can وcould. وتساعد هذه الدراسة الطلاب على إدراك المعاني المتغيرة التي تعبّر عنها هذه الأفعال بالإضافة إلى أنها ستمكّن أساتذة اللّغة الإنكليزية من معرفة كيفيّة التعامل مع الأخطاء التي يرتكبها طلّابهم عندما يستخدمون الأفعال المساعدة كما ستمكّنهم من إيجاد الطريقة الأكثر وضوحا لجعل عمليّة تعليمهم أكثر فاعليّة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأفعال المساعدة، التداخل السلبي للّغة الأم، الشّكليّة الدّيناميكيّة.

# The use of modal auxiliary verbs by fourth-year students of English at Al-Ba'ath University

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## Abstract

Modal auxiliary verbs are considered one of the most problematic issues that English as a foreign language learners face in general and Arab learners of English in particular. This study investigates the performance of fourth-year students of English at Al-Ba'ath University in using English modal auxiliary verbs. It focuses mainly on the main modal verbs in their simple form. Two tests (a recognition test and a production test) were used to trace and analyze the errors made by the students who participated in a questionnaire designed for this purpose. The study reveals that students have poor knowledge of the functions of modal verbs and they are mostly affected by negative first language transfer and ignorance of the English language rules. They have dynamic modality tendency and they are inclined to use some modal verbs rather than others to express the same meaning like *must*, *may*, *can* and *could*. This study helps students to be aware of the variable functions of these verbs. Besides, it will enable teachers of English to know how to deal with errors made by their students when using modal verbs and find a more enlightening way to make their teaching more effective.

**Keywords:** modal verbs, negative first language transfer, dynamic modality.

# 1. Introduction

Using modal verbs correctly is one of the main important tools in expressing ones' thoughts, opinions, ideas, etc. Modals help another verb (usually not a modal verb) to communicate a wide range of language functions in daily life to express necessity, obligation, ability, possibility, permission, requests, preference, etc. In general, modals show the speakers' point of view especially when the writer indicates his/her own attitude towards any issue. For example, when students want to modalize their statements, they have to use the right modal to make their ideas smooth and well perceived. For instance, they will not say *the meeting will be cancelled* when they mean *the meeting may be cancelled*.

For Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: p.145), many English as a second language (henceforth, ESL)/ English as a foreign language (henceforth, EFL) students, even at the advanced level, do not recognize that they are often perceived by native speakers of English as being abrupt and aggressive with their requests when they do not use the suitable modal verb. Students could soften their requests by employing the preterite forms of the modals, they might find their request being better received as in:

- Could (instead of can) you please bring me that book?

- Would (instead of will) you hold this door?

Another reason for the importance of using modal verbs is that students make economy of words by using modal verbs. For instance, instead of saying *it is possible that I will travel next week* the statement can be condensed by saying *I may travel next week*.

According to Hykes, (2000), modals are multi-functional verbs that can occupy more than one semantic function; they can be either intrinsic or extrinsic[1], depending on their occurrence. English modal

auxiliaries have more than one interrelated meanings. These semantic clusters and meanings of the modals will be discussed in

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[1] Intrinsic functions are related to the occasions and actions whereas humans have control on them such as volition, permission and obligation.

 - Modal functions become extrinsic when humans don't have control over them, such as possibility, prediction.

terms of the meanings and paraphrases of both epistemic and deontic[2] uses of modals.

## 1.2 Significance of the study

This study is of great importance because it deals with an important issue where Syrian learners of English commit serious errors in the area of modal auxiliaries. The complexity and multi-use of English modal verbs comprise a real challenge to EFL learners, yet Syrian learners of English need to overcome this problem to be native-like speakers of this language. Moreover, English instructors need to know how to deal with students' errors related to modal verbs and find a more helpful way to make their teaching more effective.

## 1.3 Objectives of the study

This study aims to help students at Al-Baath University become more aware of the various ways that English modal auxiliaries are used so that they do not make errors while using these modals. It shows how well fourth-year students at the Department of English at Al-Ba'ath University understand and make use of English modal verbs. In other words, it shows how well they use modals in appropriate contexts and how they understand the meaning of modals. This research seeks to identify and classify the errors that students make in their performance when using English modals. The results of this study are expected to be helpful for teachers and students of English in Syria as they enable them to understand the nature of errors made so that learners could avoid them and improve their performance in this domain.

## 1.4 Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study are as follows:
1. This study focuses only on English modal auxiliary verbs and excludes any other kinds of verbs as it only covers errors related to these verbs and ignores other errors that are related

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[2] In this research, I will discuss the semantic meaning of modal verbs in terms of two broad clusters of meanings, epistemic and deontic modal use. Yet, there is another area of modality -dynamic one- which will be referred to later on in this paper.

to grammar or sentence structure.

2. The sample of this study is limited to fourth-year students of English at Al-Ba'ath University, so other students elsewhere are not included.

3. The number of students used in this study is limited because of time constraints and the difficulty of administrating so many students.

## 1.5 Research questions

To achieve the objectives of this study, the following questions will be explored:

1. How would students recognize the modal verbs in contexts?
2. What is students' modality tendency?
3. How would students use modal auxiliary verbs to express certain meanings?
4. What is the most favorable modal verb for students?
5. What types of errors are made when using modal verbs?
6. How can such errors affect student's performance?

## 2. Literature Review

Modality is a grammatical or semantic-grammatical category that is expressed in English by modal verbs (Palmer, 1990). According to Lyons (1977), modality is related to the opinion and attitude of the speaker. Some of the meanings expressed by English modal verbs seem to be shared to a large degree to those that are represented through the two basic types of modality, epistemic and deontic. For example, the modal verbs *may* and *must* have meanings that correspond to either epistemic meaning or deontic one.

The modals *can* is used to express ability and *will* to express volition and futurity actually reflect the subject's attitudes of the sentence rather than the speaker. So, they are not matters of modality or futurity at all, but they have something in common with the modal meaning of the verb, therefore a third kind of modality is considered; dynamic modality. However, there are many forms that express modality like modal adverbs, adjectives, verbs and nouns. This study will discuss only what is related to the main modal verbs.

**2.1 The syntactic system of modal verb**

There are certain formal criteria that distinguish the modal verbs *will, shall, may, can, must* and *ought to* and to a lesser degree *dare*, *need*, and *used to* as a subset of auxiliary verbs.

Huddleston (1976: p. 333) refers to these criteria as the 'NICE' properties, the acronym of negation, inversion, code and emphatic affirmation. These criteria are for both modal as well as auxiliary verbs, but only the modal verbs will be discussed.

**2.1.1 Negation**

It means that the modal auxiliary is negated by adding the negative particle *not*:

(1) you can't go now.    (2) The train may not/* mayn't arrive on time.

*May not* doesn't have a negative contracted form like the rest of modal auxiliaries:

Sentence (2) is treated as a positive sentence and *not* is not connected with the verb *may*, but with *arrive*. The negative form *mayn't* is not used, but only *may not* is allowed. The form *mayn't* is incorrect because the negative particle is contracted.

**2.1.2 Inversion**

The alternation between the auxiliary and the subject is possible, while it is not possible between the main verb and the subject, so they can undergo subject-auxiliary inversion:

(3)  Shall we play the game?

Other verbs that cannot follow this order in negative constructions are not considered auxiliaries.

**2.1.3 Code**

Code in this context means 'avoidance of repetition' according to Firth (1968: p. 104). This characteristic means that a full verb can be substituted later or picked up by an auxiliary in a sentence and it occurs after the expression '…and so….':

(4)  Jermy can speak Italian and so can Sarah.

Instead of saying:

(5)  Jermy can speak Italian and Sarah can speak Italian.

The verb phrase is not repeated but it is substituted by a modal auxiliary after '…and so…'. It is only the auxiliary that is repeated.

## 2.1.4 Emphatic affirmation

Here, the stress is placed on the modals. This means that the auxiliary is emphasized through an accent in the pronunciation as in the following examples:

(6) He cán come.

Palmer (1986: p. 91) states that 'emphatic affirmation is used to reply where there is doubt' as in the denial of the negative and the meaning of (6) becomes:

- Of course he can come; it is wrong to think he cannot.

By stress on the modal verb, the speaker is emphasizing on what the modal express and removing doubts from the mind of the addressee.


## 2.2 The syntactic features of modal verbs

Some scholars such as Quirk et al. (1985: p. 137) distinguish between *'can*, *will*, *may*, *shall* and *must* as being the 'central' modal auxiliary verbs', and *'dare*, *need*, *ought to* and *used to* as being 'marginal' modal auxiliary verbs'. Yet, there are some expressions that behave like modals and have modal meaning with some of the characteristics of the principal modal verbs but are not considered modals. They are called Semi-modals, quasi- modals or pseudo-modals: *Had better*, *would rather* and *have* (*got*) *to.* According to Palmer (1990), *have to*, *be able to, be allowed to*, *be bound to* are expressions that are related semantically with some significant differences, but they are considered outside the system of modal verbs. However, the focus of this study will be on the use of the main modal auxiliary verbs in their simplest form with some expressions that could serve as alternatives of the main auxiliary verb in several situations.

In addition to the syntactic properties, there are some other criteria adapted by Palmer (1990), Collins (2009) to distinguish the modal verbs from the primary auxiliary verbs and other full verbs as well:

**1.** Modal verbs do not accept third person singular –s in the present tense (*cans*, *mays*, etc).

**2.** The complement of the central modal auxiliary is only a bare infinitival except for *ought to*.

(7) She can *to do/do it.          (8) She can*saw/see it.

(9) I am sorry for not *canning come/coming. (no present/gerund participle)

**3.** Modals do not co-occur in the sentence after each other.

(10)  *They may will come.

**4.**  The preterit forms do not necessarily indicate past tense, but they may be used as synonyms of other forms in the present. Palmer states (1986: p. 34) that 'the only modal verb that is used to indicate past time is *could*' as in the following examples:

(11) I could run fast when I was a boy. (It indicates ability in the past)

In order for modal auxiliaries to have past reference, they should be used with 'perfect infinitive', *have* and past participle as in the following example:

(12) The message could have been delivered.  (in the past)

The modals *will*, *shall*, *may*, *can*, *must* and *ought to* support all the previous properties except for *may* which has no –*n't* form and *ought to* which needs *to*- infinitive. The modals *must* and *ought to* do not have preterit forms like other modal verbs, they have different lexical items that express past tense, namely *had to* and *be supposed to* respectively.

(13) I *must/had to meet Sarah yesterday.

(14) You *ought to/were supposed to submit the project yesterday.

**2.3 Semi-modals or quasi- modals**

Semi-modals are some expressions that behave like modals and have modal meaning with some of the characteristics of the principal modal verbs but are not considered modals.

**2.3.1 Had better and would rather**

*Had better* and *would rather* fit the previous discussed criteria in that they has no –s form connected to it, they are followed by bare infinitive and not combined with other modals.

(15) You had better go.

Advice can be expressed by the use of *had better* while *would rather* indicates preference; *would rather* (x than y) which means *I would prefer to* as in:

(16) I would rather go outside than staying at home.

    (I would prefer to go outside)

### 2.3.2 Have (got) to

*Have (got) to* is not a modal, yet it has a close relationship with *must* and *need*. The full verb *have* has the NICE properties and does not require do-support in negation and inversion, etc. The same is true for the semi-modal *have to*. Forms with *do* are also possible and preferable especially in negation and inversion as in:

(17) John has to leave.

(18) He has not to/ does not have to leave yet.

(19) Has he to/ Does he have to leave?

(20) He has to leave and so has/does she.

(21) He hás to/ doés have to leave.

On the other hand, forms of *have got to* occur but not with do-support as long as such forms are formally perfect forms of *get*.

(22) Steve has not got to leave.                    (23) Has he got to leave?

(24) He has got to leave and so has she.        (25) He hás got to leave.

*Have (got) to, be able to*, *be bound to*, *be allowed to* are expressions that are related semantically, but they are considered as formally outside the system of modal verbs. According to Palmer (1990: p. 106) these forms are clearly not modals, yet they appear to have the NICE properties because they are composed of *be* or *have* plus a following verb.

### 2.4 The concept of modality

According to the ninth edition of <u>*Oxford advanced learner's dictionary,*</u> Hornby (2015: p. 997), modality is 'the idea expressed by modals' and these modals reveal the mood of the verb.

For Palmer (1986) the distinction between *mood* and *modality* is similar to that between tense and time, gender and sex. Gender is to sex like what modality is to mood and as long as gender includes sex, modality includes mood.

### 2.5 Types of modality

So many scholars including Lyons (1977), Palmer (1990), Sweetser (1990) and Papafragou (1997) acknowledge that modality falls into two main categories according to the expressed meanings by the modal verbs, epistemic modal meanings and deontic modal

meanings[3]. The former reflects speaker's knowledge and belief and how much the speaker commits himself/herself to the truth of the proposition that forms the complement of the sentence, while the latter is concerned with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by morally responsible agents i.e. obligation and permission. Yet, Von Wright (1951) and Palmer (1990) recognize another new area of modality, it is called dynamic modality. This type reveals the

theoretical categories of the real-world ability and intention/willingness. Dynamic and deontic meanings are gathered under agent-oriented modalities, Bybee et al. (1994) or root modality, Sweetser (1990) so that can be distinguished from speaker-oriented modalities (epistemic modalities) i.e. distinguishing between the epistemic uses and non-epistemic uses (root modality). I will adopt the epistemic, deontic and dynamic terminology.

## 2.6. Uses of modal verbs

Modals are tricky because they have diverse meanings and specific syntactic properties. However, students can master their syntactic properties. Yet, things are different when it comes to their meanings. However, these uses will be discussed in a relative fashion in terms of their epistemic, deontic and dynamic uses.

## 2.6.1 Epistemic use of the modal verbs

Jespersen (1924: p, 321, cited in Palmer, 1986: p. 10) states that epistemic modality 'contains no element of well' and it expresses the commitment of the speaker to the utterance and tells how sure the speaker is about things that are or will be. The certainty degree of the speaker of an utterance can be either low 50% indicating possibility

or high indicating probability or 100% indicating certainty as mentioned by Feigenbaum (1985: p. 120).

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[3] All these types are Greek-based names.

## 2.6.1.1 Possibility

The modal verbs that stand for possibility in present and future situations are *can*, *could*, *may* and *might*. They indicate that the event is possible to happen, for example:

(26) Jeff may/can/might/could travel this weekend.

        (it is something possible for Jeff to travel)

Leech (2004: p. 93) recognizes two kinds of possibility: factual possibility represented by the modal verb *may* and theoretical possibility represented by the modal verb *can*. To explain this, Leech mentions these examples (27) and (28) for factual possibility and theoretical one respectively:

(27) 'The road may be blocked.     (it is possible that the road is blocked= perhaps the road is blocked)'

(28) 'The road can be blocked.     (it is possible for the road to be blocked= it is possible to block the road)'

The example (28) describes 'theoretical conceivable happening' while the example (27) 'feels more immediate, because the actual likelihood of an event taking place is being considered.'

Leech concludes that factual possibility indicated by *may* is stronger than theoretical possibility indicated by *can* and the modal verbs *might* and *could* reveal a weaker possibility than *may* and *can*. Consequently, the scale of possibility will be as shown in the examples (134-137) decreasingly:

(29) Smoking may kill.        (30) Smoking can kill.

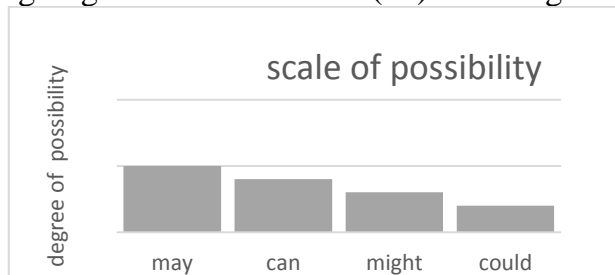(31) Smoking might kill.        (32) Smoking could kill.



**Figure 1. Column chart illustrating the scale of possibility**

At last when something is possible, this means that it is 50% certain to happen and even less according to the modal verb being used.

## 2.6.1.2 Probability

When something is probable, it is very certain and is expected to happen according to a theory or expectation and it indicates a conclusion or a deduction based on earlier information. The modal verbs that stand for probability in present and future conclusions are *should*, *ought to* and *must*.

According to Palmer (1990: p. 59), 'the modal verb *should* expresses rather extreme likelihood, or a reasonable assumption or conclusion.' And 'it allows the speaker to be mistaken'. The speaker is 90% sure of something when using *should* and *ought to* as in:

(33) It is half past nine, our friends should be waiting for us now.
 (the meeting is on nine o'clock but it is possible that they had a
 breakdown)

Leech (2004: p. 113) mentions that the modal verb *should* indicates that 'the speaker has doubts about soundness of his or her conclusion'. In addition to that, he calls this sense of *should* as 'weakened logical necessity'.

The modal verb *ought to* is as *should* used to express probability but with a little deference and has something to do with assumption. Leech (2004: p. 113) states that the modal verb *'ought to* is nowadays rather rare and it is less common as an alternative to *should'*. Besides that, the modal verb *ought to* is stressed being disyllabic and tends to receive more accentuation, whereas *should* is not so. The speaker lacks confidence in what he says.

(34) The contestant has a good opportunity of winning, he ought
        to get the prize.               (unless anything has happened)

The modal verb *must* is used here to express a conclusion based on a specific information or knowledge as stated by Leech (2004: p 89) *'must* is used here for knowledge arrived at by inference or reasoning rather than by direct experience' as illustrated in:

(35) The doorbell is ringing, that must be Andrew. I was expecting
        him to come.

The modal verb *must* in this sense is stronger than the modal verb *ought to* as long as it is based on known facts rather than

assumptions. The speaker with the modal verb *must* is more confident than of *ought to*. He is approximately 95% sure of what he is saying and he is more sure in negation when using the negative modal *cannot*; he is about 99% sure of that as in the following examples:

(36) Steve is/is not hungry now. (The speaker does not use any modal

here because he is100% of this as a fact)

(37) Steve must/must not be hungry now. (The speaker is 95% sure of this conclusion)

(38) Steve cannot/could not be hungry now.

(The speaker believes that there is no possibility for Steve to be

hungry. He is not 100% but 99% sure)

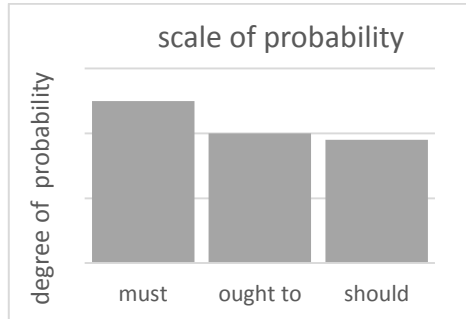So, a possible scale of probability will be as follows:



**Figure 2. Column chart illustrating scale of probability**

## 2.6.1.3 Certainty

With modals of certainty, the speaker is more confident of what he says than of modals of probability. These modal verbs indicate prediction, agreement or promise in present and future situations.

The modal verb *will* stands for this use and sometimes the modal verb *shall* specifically with the pronouns *I* and *we* as stated by Feigenbaum (1985: p. 121). The speaker feels that he is sure and 100% of that.

(39) It will rain tomorrow.

According to Leech (2004: p. 97), 'Will is used for prediction when the speaker makes a 'forecast about the present' concerning an event not directly observable' as in the following example:

(40) That will be the babysitter, I have called her this morning to come. (someone is knocking on my door)

In the previous example, the modal verb *will* can be substituted with the modal verb *must*, but *must* here has a weaker force.

Palmer (1987: p. 125) mentions that the semi-modal *be bound to* is an alternative to *must* in order to avoid ambiguity of deontic *must*, where *be bound to* expresses greater certainty with less implication of a conclusion than of must.

(41) The dean must be in his office.

(42) The dean is bound to be in his office. (it is something inevitable and very certain for him to be in his office)

Leech adds that 'predictability' comes to have the force of 'typical or characteristic behavior' and 'general statements, including scientific and proverbial statements, habitual 'predictability' are kinds of prediction as in the following examples:

(43) Lions will be dangerous. (It is a characteristic of wild animals to be dangerous)

(44) Love will find a way.                    (A proverb)

(45) Wood will float on water.         (Scientific fact)

(46) On Fridays, Antony will be at home with the kids. (Habit)

In addition, the modal verb *will* can be used for future time agreement or promise as in example (47):

(47) We will/shall meet at ten o'clock tomorrow morning.

Feigenbaum (1985: p. 122) states that 'the modal verb *shall* and sometimes the modal verb *will* with the pronouns *I* and *we* can be used in emphatic certainty to indicate emphatic agreements, predictions, or promises.'

(48) I shall never forget your memory.

(It is more than just a prediction or a promise; it is a very strong insistence of my intention not to forget the memory)

The speaker can move from assumption to assertion through using modal verbs, so the degree of certainty varies and ensures different levels of sureness as the following examples show:

(49) It will rain tomorrow.                              (100% sure)
(50) It ought to/ should rain tomorrow.           (90% sure)
(51) It may/might/ could rain tomorrow.          (50% sure or less)

The prediction or inference can be weak (could/might), stronger (may), strong (should), very strong (must), or absolutely certain (will).

(52) He is/ is not Steve.                                 (100% sure)
(53) He cannot/ could not be Steve.               (99% sure)
(54) He must/must not be Steve.                    (95% sure)
(55) He may/might/ could be Steve.                (50% sure or less)

The previous scales and percentages are adapted from Azar and Hagen (2009: p. 204) and from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: p. 143).

### 2.6.1.4 Sensation

Sensation refers to the all sensory evidence which belongs - according to Palmer (1986: p. 74)- to the 'evidential system of epistemic modality'. In English, there is a connection between sensation and modality. The most common way of expressing what one sees, hears, smells, tastes or feels is via using the modal verb *can* as in the following examples:

(56) I can see the stars in the sky.
(57) I can hear an exciting music.

In the previous examples it is indicated that the speaker has the sensation (i.e. he actually sees, hears, smells…) but not the ability to have it. In other words, he does experience the sensation rather than that he is able to experience it.

### 2.6.2 Deontic use of the modal verbs

Jespersen (1924: p. 320) quoted by Palmer (1986: p. 10) conceives that deontic modality is like 'containing an element of well' and it reveals some kind of interaction between the speaker and the hearer when the speaker is addressing the hearer. In deontic modality, the speaker tells how he wants things to happen. It is either directives or commissives and this corresponds to Searle's speech act theory where Searle (1979: p. 14) defines commissives as "where we

commit ourselves to do something" and directives as "where we try to get our hearer to do something".

The speaker may give permission, give advice, lay obligation or warning of necessity as it is going to be explained in the next sections.

### 2.6.2.1 Requests

According to Palmer (1986: p. 106) "the speaker cannot only express his own attitudes or deontic modality but he can also ask the addressee about his- whether he considers an action deontically permissible or necessary". He does it through request as in following example:

(58)  May I stay here?

This request is carried out by using the interrogative form with *may*, the modal verb of possibility. The speaker here does not ask for information, but he requests for permission. The previous example is not to be paraphrased by 'is it the case that I have permission to stay here?', but is to be paraphrased by 'I ask you to give permission to stay here'.

(59) Must I start now?

The use of the modal verb *must* in the interrogative form here is essentially a request for information alone. It will never be a request from the hearer to place an obligation upon the speaker.

(60) Shall I start now?

The case with the modal verb *Shall* here in the interrogative form is different from the case of the modal verbs *may* and *must*. It neither asks for information nor requests a commitment from the hearer. It cannot be interpreted as 'is this the case that I promise to start now' or 'do you promise that I shall start now?'. It is a request for advice from the hearer using the first-person subject. The modal verb *shall* is consultative in this use and it can be replaced by the modal verb *should* as in the following example:

(61) Shall I drive by myself?

(62) Should I drive by myself?

In addition to the previous use of the modal verb *shall*, it can be used to express invitation like in the following example:

(63) Shall we meet this evening?    (would you like to meet me this
evening = it is an invitation)

Here the modal verb *should* cannot replace *shall* and if it does, the meaning will not be the same as with the modal verb *shall* as in the following:

(64) Should we meet this evening?   (Is it advisable that we meet
this evening? = request for
advice)

Leech (2004: p. 102) states that ' *shall I* or *shall we* indicates a way of offering invitation to the listener…. it is more polite to consult the wishes of the listener, than to assert one's own wishes as speaker'.

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: p. 145), making requests can be of general nature or specific request for permission.

Requests of general nature can be achieved by using the modal verbs *will*/*would* and *can*/*could* with second-person, you, as in the following:

(65) Will/would you help me in this exam?

(66) Can/ could you help me in this exam?

By using the modal verbs *will* and *can*, the speaker seems to ask: Is this possible? Whereas by using the preterit forms *would* and *could,* the speaker seems to query the willingness of the addressee. Using *could* and *would* is more formal than using *will* and *can* and sounds more polite i.e. they serve as polite requests.

Specific requests for permission can be achieved by using the modal verbs *may*/*might* and *can*/*could* with the first-person subjects *I* and *we* as in the following:

(67) May/ might I leave now?

(68) Can/ could I leave now?

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: p145) state that 'the greater the addressee's degree of formal authority (as perceived by the speaker or projected by the addressee), the more likely the use of *may*.'

The modal verbs *can* and *may* are interchangeable. The modal verb *can* expresses permission in most common situations except in formal ones. The modal verbs *might* and *could* are less direct, so

The speakers often use the preterit forms in order to soften their request and to be more polite and sound more formal.

## 2.6.2.2 Permission

Although the present and the preterite forms of the modal verbs are used to make requests as in the previous examples (65), (66), (67) and (68), the responses to these requests are expected to be only in the present form as in (69), (70), (71) and (72) respectively:

Response to general request:

(69) Yes, I will/ *would; no, I will not/* would not.

(70) Yes, I can/ *could: no, I cannot/ *could not.

Response to request for permission:

(71) Yes, you may/ *might; no, you may not/ *might not.

(72) Yes, you can/ *could; no, you cannot/ *could not.

The preterit forms of the modal verbs are considered more polite and less rash than the present forms of these verbs. So the person making a request will use the preterit forms in order to soften his or her request and make it less direct whereas the person being addressed is expected to respond directly and use a present form otherwise it sounds as conditional:

(73) Q- Could you help me with this homework?

     A- Yes, I could (if you would wait while I finish cleaning)

As a result, the modal verbs *may* and *can* are used to give permission. The modal verb *can* occurs in common situations but not with the formal ones where the modal verb *may* is used and consequently the modal verb *can* is considered less polite and less correct than the modal verb *may,* as argued by Feigenbaum (1985: p. 118), who states that "very conservative grammar books say that only may expresses permission".

Leech (2004: p. 85) states that *'can* and *may* are almost interchangeable in giving and asking for permission, except that *may* is more formal and more polite' and 'especially in the following formula with the first-person subject'

For example:

(74) May I speak to you?

Palmer (1986: p. 103) draws a distinction between the modal verbs *may* and *can* being used for permission. The speaker is disassociating himself/herself from the permission when he uses the

modal verb *can*, whereas he/she is associating himself/herself with it in using the modal verb *may* as in the following examples:

(75) You may smoke here.          (You have my permission)

(76) You can smoke here.          (It is allowed to smoke)

Yet, the verbal construction- *be allowed to*- can be used to indicate permission and it can be used in all the tenses and forms of other verbs.

(77) Steve is allowed to stay with us tomorrow.

(78) Steve was allowed to flay last Monday.

*Be allowed to* in the previous examples is inflected in order to fit each sentence in all in past and future.


### 2.6.2.3 Advisability

Giving advice, as argued by Feigenbaum (1985: p. 123), implies that 'there is a benefit to do it or there is a disadvantage not to do it' and in both cases there is 'an element of choice whether to do it or not'. The modal auxiliary *should* and *ought to* are used to give advice or recommendation due to Collins (2009). The hearer may or may not take the advice and the consequences may not be bad. In other words, there is no obligation of doing so. For example:

(79) You should/ ought to study well to pass your exams.

The use of the modal verb *should* is more often and frequent than that of the modal verb *ought to. Should* indicates that there is a certain behavior that characterizes the involved subject as in:

(80) Your father should pay you the university fees.

       (The speaker thinks that the father does not pay any fees for

        his or her son and s/he recommends him to do so)

The modal verb *ought to* indicates that there are circumstances that should make the subject behave in a definite way.

(81) Your father ought to pay you the university fees.

       (The speaker thinks that it is normal and natural for the father

        to pay money for his or her son)

In addition to the previous use of *should* and *ought to* in giving advice, both modal verbs are used to talk about the speaker's opinions and beliefs where there is no recommendation or advice.

(82) You should/ought to save money for your marriage. (advice)

(83) People should/ ought to save their money for emergency
    cases.                          (personal opinion in general)

In the previous examples, both modals *should* and *ought to* suggest the opinion of the speaker in addition to the advice they express.

## 2.6.2.4 Necessity

Advisability and necessity are related in meaning in that they both indicate a reason or motivation for the action or situation. Necessity is stronger than advisability. It is something like obligation where there is no feeling of choice whether to do something or not.

The modal verb *must* is, as stated by Feigenbaum (1985: p. 124), 'a common way of indicating necessity'

(84) You look so tiered dad; you must visit a doctor soon.

The non-modal *need* can be used instead of *must* to express necessity as in:

(85) You look so tiered dad, you need/must to take a rest.

Palmer (1987: p. 125) mentions that 'one very striking use of *must* is in issuing invitations or making offers in a host/guest situation' as in the following examples:

(86) You must stay with us and try our food.

Here the speaker is not laying obligation or forcing the addressee to do something but rather it is a polite action form the speaker to insist because the addressee may be hesitant. This can be treated as deontic necessity.

There are statements like *I must confess, admit, say, agree,* etc; these are to be interpreted as special use of deontic necessity where the speaker imposes upon himself the necessity to confess, to admit or to say as in:

(87) I must admit/confess that you are trustworthy.

In necessity and advisability, the motivation or the reason is not out of speaker's authority but it is a social duty for him to advice and the love for someone.


## 2.6.2.5 Obligation

The speaker can impose his or her authority upon the addressee if s/he thinks that his or her piece of advice will not be taken and by that it turns into obligation.

Obligation is related to Searle's 'commissive' and 'directive' (1983: p. 166) since these two categories are concerned with making things correspond to what is said and 'fitting the world to the word'.

Palmer (1986: p. 115) clarifies that the modal verb *shall* with second-person and third-person subjects is used to express obligation as in:

(88) Henry/You shall bring the car in an hour.

The modal verb *will* can be used also in this sense as in:

(89) You will visit the dentist Harold whether you want or not.

    (it is a kind of imperative)

The speaker here commits himself to make sure that the event being considered takes place. The speaker promises to arrange that the addressee will go to see the dentist and bring the car on time.

Leech (2004) recognizes that the addressed person is obliged or required to do something out of laws, costumes, circumstances or urgent situations. The source of obligation may be internal extracted from speaker's authority or influence and this can be shown through using *must*:

(90) You must be back before evening.

(The speaker is laying an obligation upon his or her addressee; s/he is urging him or her to do so.)

The source of obligation can also be external where there is no involvement or influence of the speaker, but rather it can be from a doctor or the government or extracted from the power of situation and circumstances. In this sense *have to* is used as in:

(91) You have to come back before 10 P.M.  (This is a law here)

With *have to* the speaker is disassociating himself from obligation, i.e., it is external obligation as in the next examples:

(92) He must be obedient.                (obligation)

(93) He has to be obedient.                 (rule)

Finally, a summary of the previous deontic use of the modal verbs is as follow table:

| Deontic use | Could | Can | Would | Will | May | Might | Must | Shall | Should | Ought to |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Request** | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | | √ | √ | √ | |
| **Invitation** | √ | √ | √ | | | | | √ | | |
| **permission** | √ | √ | | | √ | √ | | | | |
| **Advisability** | | | | | | | | | √ | √ |
| **Necessity** | | | | | | | √ | | | |
| **Obligation** | | | | √ | | | √ | √ | | |

**Table 1. deontic functions of modal auxiliary verb**

### 2.6.3 Dynamic use of the modals

Von Wright (1951: p. 25) and Palmer (1990) recognize that there is a new type of modality which is concerned with the ability and disposition. With this type of modality, the subject of the sentence is of great interest rather than the speaker of the sentence. For Palmer (1986: p. 102) 'if any kind of modality is basic it is, surly, dynamic modality with its notions of willingness and ability'. Dynamic modality or 'subject-oriented modality' is illustrated by the modal verb *can* for ability and the modal verb *will* for volition.

### 2.6.3.1 Ability

Modality is expressed by the modal verb *can* in the sense of ability with animate subjects:

(94) Zendan can speak French fluently.  (general ability)

*Can* in this sense is more or less synonymous with *be capable of*.

The modal verb *could* can be used instead of *can* only if the statement indicates past time ability as in:

(95) John could run five miles when he was young.

Here, John has the ability to run amount of distance in the past.

According to Leech (2004: p. 85), there is a verbal construction – *be able to*- which is not always associated with the ability meaning of the modal verb *can*. Yet, this phrase has an advantage over *can*: it can be used as an infinitive after a modal auxiliary or it can be used with all the tenses and forms of other verbs.

(96) Zedan is able to speak French fluently.

(97) They have been able to buy a car last year.

(98) When you get enough money, you will be able to buy house.

In the previous examples, the semi-modal *be able to* fits all the various tenses and forms of other verbs.

## 2.6.3.2 Volition

Modality can be expressed by using the modal verb *will* in the sense of volition. According to Palmer (1987: p. 138), *will* is used to express volition or willingness on the part of the subject as in:

(99) John will help his friend.

Here, the subject of the sentence (John) rather than the speaker has a will or intention to help his or her friend.

This use of volition always carries with it the meaning of futurity. For example:

(100) *John will help his friend, but he's not going to.

Besides the meaning of willingness meaning indicated by *will*, will also indicates that the action will take place.


## 2.6.3.3 Preference

Preference is expressed by using the semi-modal *would rather*. Preference lies under dynamic modality because it expresses what the subject of the sentence prefers to do rather than the speaker.

(101) Jenny would rather travel abroad in the upcoming summer.

It means that Jenny prefers to travel than doing anything else. *Would rather* has a specialized meaning of preference of the subject of the sentence.

However, the concentration of this study was only about the main modal verbs with mentioning some modal-like expressions in present tense. Past, conditionals (The hypothetical use of the modals), negation was not discussed, yet some cases are mentioned. The great deal of this work is with the simplest forms.

## 2.7 Previous studies on learners' use of modal verbs

The most relevant studies related to the present research include those by Saeed (2009), who explores the acquisition of English modality by Arab learners of English, Torabiardakani et al. (2015), who make an analysis of the ways in which advanced EFL Iranian students use modal auxiliaries focusing specially on nine modals' semantic functions, Bensaid (2016), who investigates Arab EFL learners' difficulties when using English modality, Btoosh (2019), who studies Arab learners' application of English modality in

academic writing, and Ahmed (2021), who explores the competence of Saudi EFL students in the use of English modality.

The result established by Saeed (2009) is that students score low in the recognition and production of modal verbs and there is an immense difference in the element of modality between Arabic and English. He states that *might* and *can* are among the less difficult English modals for Arabs. The results found by Torabiardakani et al. (2015) reveal the wide use of certain functions—such as, the increased use of *can* for ability, and its decreased use for possibility. Bensaid (2016) focuses on the occurrence of modal verbs in textbooks, and reports that the primary difficulty is the interference of the mother tongue: Arabic. Students reveal the tendency to use the particle "to" after a modal as in "*he must to go." Students also use double modals, as in "* He will can go to school." Btoosh (2019) uses a corpus to compare Arab learners' writing production with that of native speakers. Findings indicate a significant difference between the Arab and native written productions in terms of frequency of occurrence of modal verbs. The study identifies a tendency in the former to overuse *must*, *should*, and *can* and underuse epistemic modals such as *may*, *might*, *could*, and *would*.

The findings of Ahmed (2021) reveal that Saudi EFL students have low proficiency level in the use of modal verbs. Less than one-quarter of the test items were correctly answered. *Might*, which is used to express permission and possibility, was the most correctly used model in the test: more than 35% of the students used it correctly.

Most studies reveal that students had real problems related to modal verbs. EFL learners, epically Arab learners, encounter difficulty in using and recognizing English modal verbs.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

The target sample consists of fifty fourth-year students of English at Al-Ba'ath University. I chose fourth-year students because students of their last year of study must have an adequate knowledge of English grammar and other English language skills as well. They studied English grammar at school during all their

various learning stages besides their duration of studying at university from the first year till the fourth one. Therefore, they were tested in order to assess their levels of competence in English. Consequently, they are supposed to perform well after that long time of learning English.

## 3.2 Material

A special drill was prepared to test the students' performance in using modal auxiliary verbs. The aim of these written tests is to examine the overall levels of the learners' knowledge of modal auxiliary verbs, to investigate the potential role of the first language in their production and perception of using English modal verbs, and to determine whether there is any differences among them in terms of recognition and production. By production, I mean the use of modal verbs whereas understanding refers to the capacity to recognize the meaning of modals in written sentences. The drill consists of two tests in a form of fill-in-the-gap- questions distributed to them randomly. All the sentences were formulated taking into account the distinctive features of the meanings of modal verbs.

## 4. Data Analysis and Discussion of the results

The main goal is to identify the difficulties that students face when dealing with modal verbs and explore students' weaknesses regarding the process of perception and production of modal verbs so that a suitable method can be established for helping students to overcome the difficulties connected to modal verbs.

## 4.1 Sources of error

It is something necessary and important to look at the sources of error. One of the sources is the interference of mother tongue or Arabic. In the case of our students, they are foreign language learners, so they may be transferring the Arabic modality system to English, given that modality exists in all languages though not expressed in the same way in all of them.

James (1998) identifies two main sources of error; interlanguage interference (mother tongue interference) and intralingual error (ignorance of the target language rules).

## 4.2 Data analysis

The data collected from the two different kinds of tests are analyzed statistically and then discussed in terms of error typology and student's performance as whole.

After checking the data, the results were analyzed in order to find out how the learners get to use and understand modal verbs. Errors should reflect the learner's knowledge of English as a target one and reveal student's weaknesses regarding modal verbs.

Students confuse functions or have tendency or fail to use the right modals or even avoid using modals; all of these have multiple sources. Such performance will be classified as follows:

## 4.2.1 Negative L1 transfer

Linguists like James (1998) and Brown (2007) state that this kind of errors committed by second language learners is referred to as transfer or interference. The learner uses the structures of his or her mother tongue and flesh them out with second language vocabularies. This process may result in correct utterances in case of positive transfer or errors in case of negative transfer.

## 4.2.2 Blank

Blank represents the unanswered left items. Brown (2007) argues that 'a learner who for one reason or another avoids a particular sound, word, structure, or discourse category may be assumed incorrectly to have no difficulty therewith'. James (1998) states that this is an avoidance strategy. It may be out of several reasons. One of them is that they may not understand the context of an item, or may not know the meaning of a word in the item. Moreover, lack of motivation may contribute to make students leave the items unanswered.

## 4.2.3 Miscellaneous errors

Error analysis models are not that perfect to include all errors. There are errors that do not fall under any category or not readily classifiable, as argued by Huang (2002). These miscellaneous errors occur when learners find themselves clueless about what the answer might be. They just write whatever comes to their minds. Besides, ignorance of the target language can be one of the sources that induce the student in the misuse of the modals because if a

student has never met one of the meanings of modals, it is sure that he will not be able to use the modals appropriately. Ignorance can be attributed to the fact that students have forgotten what they have learnt because of the lake of practicing modals.

## 4.3 The first test (modals recognition)

This test is a set of 17 sentences containing various modal verbs. Each item in this test is a complete sentence that contains a modal verb then it is followed by a statement which has a gap that needs to be filled with the appropriate function of the modal verb according to the context in each statement. These sentences are a combination of all kinds of modals. There is one sentence that may have three types of meanings. From this test, I want to know which function students may give to the modals in the sentences.

## 4.3.1 Data analysis

In this test, only six (6/50) students out of fifty got the average while forty-four (44) students did not. A large number of students failed to recognize the appropriate function of the modal verbs.

The following table shows the number of correct answers for each item (the correct answer for each item is placed between parentheses).

| Test item | Number/rate of correct answers | Number/rate of incorrect answers |
|---|---|---|
| 1. You may smoke here. I don't mind. The function is …………………(permission) | 15/30% | 35/70% |
| 2. Father, you must watch your health. The function is ………………… (necessity) | 14/28% | 36/72% |
| 3. You should travel, if you want to earn money. The function is……………(advice) | 28/56% | 22/44% |
| 4. Shall we go out for a drink tonight? The function is ……………….( invitation) | 26/52% | 24/48% |
| 5. Must I start writing now? The function is…………….( general request) | 6/12% | 44/88% |
| 6. May they stay with us? The function is………… (ask for permission) | 15/30% | 35/70% |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 7. You shall submit this work today. <br> The function is……………… (obligation) | **9/18%** | **41/82%** |
| 8. Smoking might kill. <br> The function is…………. (possibility) | **5/10%** | **45/90%** |
| 9. The doorbell is ringing, Suzan will be on the door, I am expecting her to come. <br> The function is ………………( certainty) | **11/22%** | **39/78%** |
| 10. She is late; they should be waiting for her. The function is …………(probability) | **11/22%** | **39/78%** |
| 11. You can swim. The function is……. (possibility/permission/ability) | **38/76%** | **12/24%** |
| 12. He must have a wife. He said he was married. The function is…….(probability) | **6/12%** | **44/88%** |
| 13. You will finish this or you are fired. <br> The function is ……………(obligation) | **16/32%** | **34/68%** |
| 14. He may play this match. I am not sure. The function is…………. (possibility) | **12/24%** | **38/76%** |
| 15. Mick can speak four languages. <br> The function is………….( ability) | **35/70%** | **15/30%** |
| 16. Jay's bound to be in his office. <br> The function is…………. (certainty) | **9/18%** | **41/82%** |
| 17. You ought to get up earlier. <br> The function is………………( advice) | **15/30%** | **35/70%** |
| **The mean percentage[4] of correct answers 31.5%** | **The mean percentage of incorrect answers 68.5%** | |

**Table 2. Number and percentage of the correct answers in test 2**
From the table above, the least known modal was *might* in test (8) where error percentage was 90% in contrast with *can* where the correct percentage was 70% in test (15) excluding the test number (11) which contains three meaning at the same time. It was intentionally set to identify students' modality tendency**.**

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[4] The mean percentage is calculated by dividing the sum of all the percentages by the number of items

### 4.3.2 The functions of the modals and confusion between kinds of meanings

In the first test, several functions are confused with others where 44% of students confuse between two degrees of epistemic modality, namely 'possibility 'and 'probability' and wrongly believe that *may* expresses probability. The confusion between probability and possibility may be due to students' misunderstanding of these meanings. If they do not know the meanings, they cannot use them appropriately. 40% of students confuse advice with necessity. Students wrongly attribute advice to *must* where *must* never indicates advisability at all besides, it was expected that the great percentage of error will be for attributing obligation to *must* which is 22%; that is, most of students, whenever they see *must,* they think of obligation. They do not know that *must* can express something else according to the addressee. The speaker in the sentence 'father, you must see a doctor' is probably a child and morally speaking a child can never oblige his father to do so although he can advise him, but with a different modal auxiliary *should* or *ought to,* not with *must* which indicates the necessity of event for seeing a doctor. The results show that the functions of modals are ignored deeply and not known for students. Students give several wrong functions to the modal instead of the right one.

### 4.3.3 Students' modality tendency

Item 11 is left intentionally without a clear context for the students to give the functions according to their perception. The modal being ambiguous, students interpret it differently as shown in Table 3, below:

| MEANING<br><br>MODAL | EPISTEMIC MEANING (POSSILITY) | DEONTIC MEANING (PERMISSION) | DYNAMIC MEANING (ABILITY) | SOMETHING ELSE | NOTHING |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Can** | 12<br>24% | 3<br>6% | 23<br>46% | 10<br>20% | 2<br>4% |

**Table 3. modality tendency**

Table 3 shows that 46% of students preferred the dynamic meaning with the modal *can*. This result is in line with a previous study

about advanced EFL Iranian learners′ use of modal auxiliary verbs that shows how some meanings are overly used like ability meaning of *can* (Torabiardakani et al.,2015). 24% of students chose the epistemic meaning which is not as frequent as the ability meaning of *can* whereas the percentage for deontic meaning was only 6 % which means that the meaning of permission for *can* is rarely used. So, students' modality tendency is dynamic one and this may be due to the fact that the meaning of *can* in Arabic is 'be able to'.

From the previous recognition test, it is clearly seen that students have a poor understanding of the modals regarding their confusion about functions of the modals and their level is under average, only 6/50 students get it.

### 4.3.4 Discussion

The mean percentage of correct answers in the first test is 31.5%, which is rather low. Students' performance was analyzed in terms of:

### 4.3.4.1 Negative L1 language transfer

Negative L1 transfer was presented in many sentences.20% of students thought that *may* indicates possibility since *may* in Arabic language means that 'it is possible for something to happen' where it does not carry the meaning for giving permission. In addition, 16% of students for the same reason wrongly attribute *may* for possibility where it indicates asking for permission. 22% of students thought that *must* indicate obligation where the Arabic meaning of must carries the notion of obligation but it expresses the necessity for something being done and 40% of students are misguided by the context thinking that the modal *must* indicates advice. 12% of students thought that *should* refers to necessity where the Arabic meaning of it may indicate something obligatory rather than advice. 20% of students confuse between *shall* expressing obligation and the meaning of necessity thinking that what is necessary to be done in a way or another is somehow something obligatory. The same thing for *will*, where 18% of students interpret the obligation meaning to something necessary.

From the previous results, the mean percentage of errors resulted from the negative L1 transfer is 8.7%.

### 4.3.4.2 Blank

In this test, (41) cases left some items without giving an answer. The mean percentage of students doing this is almost 4.8%. In such cases, the students prefer not to give any answer and leave the gaps empty. Students may not have any possible answer in their minds nor do they want to write incorrect answers. In addition, many students rarely practice English in addition to that they do not read in English until the exams time and they do so just to pass their exams no more no less. Certainty, advice, general requests and ask for permission were most left blank. This tendency of students to leave the items without answers is due to several reasons. So many students rarely practice English language skills. In addition, they do not read in English until the exam time and they do so merely for the sake of passing their exams.

### 4.3.4.3 Miscellaneous errors

Students are confused with meaning which can be illustrated that they use the functions randomly and haphazardly. For example, 30% of students say that *must* indicates *asking for permission* and 8% of students say that *must* indicates ability whereas 8% of students say that *can* expresses obligation and 6% of students confuse between giving permission and asking for permission. the mean percentage of these kind of errors was 55% of errors made in the first test.

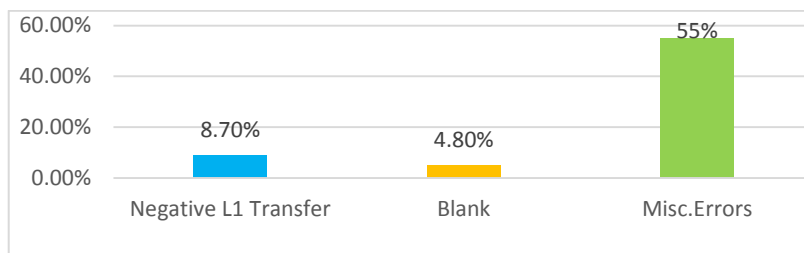The percentage of each error type is shown in the following figure:



**Figure 3. Column chart for error types percentages (first test)**

### 4.4 The second test (modals production)

Each one of the test items contains a gap that needs to be filled with an appropriate modal which is a verb given in the beginning of the test and the function is indicated between brackets at the end of each sentence. Only one modal verb is suitable in each gap except for four sentences where more than one modal verb is possible to be filled with. This is to detect the frequency of the modal verbs chosen by students. From this test, I want to know how students could use the modal verbs appropriately.

### 4.4.1 Data analysis

Thirty students (30) which correspond 60% failed to get the average whereas (20) twenty students; 40% passed this test successfully which is good in comparison with the first test where only six students get the average.

The following table shows the number of correct answers and the percentages of both correct and incorrect answers for each item, the correct answer to each item is included in the table.

| Test item | Number/rate of correct answers | Number/rate of incorrect answers |
|---|---|---|
| 1. A mother talking to her son "you …………….do your homework before going out". [ obligation] (must-shall-will) | 35/70% | 15/30% |
| 2. It is not forbidden, you…. smoke here. [permission].                    (can) | 29/58% | 21/42% |
| 3. You ………………. not tell all your secrets to your Friends.   [advisability]. (should) | 27/54% | 23/46% |
| 4. I feel like I am not okay. I……………..be careful to my food. [ necessity]. (must) | 10/20% | 40/80% |
| 5. My friend invites me to attend his wedding party, ………. we go together? [ invitation]      (shall) | 16/32% | 34/68% |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **6.** Sir, I have been waiting here for hours…………. I go now? [asking for permission] ( <u>can, may, could, might</u>) | **32/64%** | **18/36%** |
| **7.** My friend, …………… you give me a hand in this job? [ general request].      <u>(can)</u> | **21/42%** | **29/58%** |
| **8.** The food …………be ready within a few minutes. [ probability]. (should, <u>must</u>, ought to) | **9/18%** | **41/82%** |
| **9.** It …………rain tomorrow. I'm 100% certain of that. [certainty]. <u>(will)</u> | **24/48%** | **26/52%** |
| **10.** It ………. rain tomorrow. I'm 50% certain of it. [possibility]. <u>(may)</u> | **20/40%** | **30/60%** |
| **11.** …………you pass the salt please? [polite request]     <u>(could/would)</u> | **15/30%** | **35/70%** |
| **The mean percentage of correct answers: 43.3%** | **The mean percentage of incorrect answers: 56.7%** | |

**Table 4. Number of students and correct and incorrect percentages of the correct answerers in the second test.**

The table above shows that the best known modal verb is *must* expressing obligation in item (1) and this is due to the positive transfer of L1. The modals *can*, *could*, *may* and *might* are also well known expressing asking for permission in item number (6) where (32) thirty-two students give the right modal. The least known modals are modals of probability in item (8) where only nine (9) students give the right modal. Figure 4 shows the percentage of each correct answer to the items of this test.

### 4.4.2 Distribution modals to the meanings and confusion between modals

Many students use the wrong modal to express a given meaning instead of using the suitable modal. When the suitable modal is not used, the meaning of the sentence is changed into another meaning. The highest confusion (30%) lies between *might* and modals of probability, maybe they do not know that *might* refers to possibility rather that probability. 26% of students use *may* to indicate polite request where they had to use *would* or *could*, although *may* is used politely to ask for permission not request.20% of students wrongly use *will* to express necessity where they should use *must*.

### 4.4.3 Students' preferred modals

More than one modal can be used to express the same function without changing the meaning of the sentence. Four sentences are left intentionally where more than modal verb can be used without changing in meaning. Some students prefer some models to others as shown in the following table:

| USE OF RATHER THAN | Must | Shall | Will | May | Can | Might | Could | Should | Would | Ought to |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Must** | | | | | | | | | | **2** **4%** |
| **Shall** | **35** **70%** | | | | | | | | | |
| **Will** | **35** **70%** | | | | | | | | | |
| **May** | | | | | **10** **20%** | **1** **2%** | **3** **6%** | | | |
| **Can** | | | | **18** **36%** | | **1** **2%** | **3** **6%** | | | |
| **Might** | | | | **18** **36%** | **10** **20%** | | **3** **6%** | | | |
| **Could** | | | | **18** **36%** | **10** **20%** | **1** **2%** | | | **10** **20%** | |
| **Should** | **6** **12%** | | | | | | | | | **2** **4%** |
| **Would** | | | | | | | **5** **10%** | | | |
| **Ought to** | **6** **12%** | | | | | | | | | |

**Table 5. students' preferred modals**

When students have the choice to use modals, they prefer some to others. The previous table shows that if students have to choose between *must*, *shall* and *will* to express obligation, 70% of students prefer using *must*. 12% of students use *must* rather than *should* or *ought to* to express probability. 36% prefer *may* whereas 20% prefer *can* to express asking for permission. 20% of students prefer to use *would* while 10% prefer *could* in polite request.

### 4.4.4 Discussion

From the results of previous test, it is seen that students cannot use modal verbs appropriately. Their level is very low where 60% of students fail to use the suitable modal to express meanings. Students have a real problem in using modals appropriately and this is due to:

### 4.4.4.1 Negative L1 language transfer

The percentage (70%) of the correct answers in the first item (1) were rather high because of the positive effect of mother tongue on Arab students where they always match obligation with the modal verb *must* but at the same item 16% of students correspond *should* and *ought to* to obligation and this is due to negative L1 transfer where students carry the meaning of these two modals the same as *must* to express obligation. The effect of mother tongue is found in item (2) where 16% wrongly express permission with *may*, and 24% in item (3) correspond *must* and *shall* and *will* to advisability thinking that their meaning may carry some notions of advisability. In item (4), 50% of students think that the modals *will*, *shall* and *should* may have meanings of necessity since their meaning in Arabic is somehow close to it. In item (7), 28% of students uses the modals *may* and *could* and *might* to express general requests in interrogative situations since their meanings are the same in Arabic. In item (8), 54% of students uses *may*, *could* and *might* to refer to probability. They did not differentiate between possibility and probability since both almost have the same meaning in Arabic. In item (9), 10% of students relate the meaning of certainty to *must*. In item (10), 30% of students relate the modals *can*, *might* and *could* to possibility since all the preceded modals have the same meaning in Arabic and for the same reason 48% of students use *may* and *can*

to refer to polite requests in item (11). The mean percentage of these errors was 26%.

### 4.4.4.2 Blank
The percentages of blank answers caused by non-response was rather low by comparing them to the test of perception. The results were (11) cases representing 2% of errors that students make.

### 4.4.4.3 Miscellaneous errors
The mean percentage of miscellaneous errors in the production test was almost 28.7%.

| The error percentage in each item | Negative L1 transfer | Blank | Miscellaneous errors |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1-30% | 16% | 2% | 12% |
| 2-42% | 16% | - | 26% |
| 3-46% | 24% | - | 22% |
| 4-80% | 60% | - | 20% |
| 5-68% | - | %8 | 60% |
| 6-36% | - | %10 | 26% |
| 7-58% | 28% | %2 | 28% |
| 8-82% | 54% | - | 28% |
| 9-52% | 10% | - | 42% |
| 10-60% | 30% | - | 30% |
| 11-70% | 48% | - | 22% |

**Table 6. Rate of error types in each item (second test)**
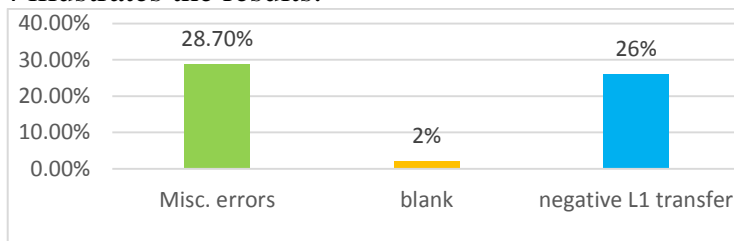
Figure 4 illustrates the results.



**Figure 4. Column chart for the percentages of types of errors (second test)**

### 4.5 Conclusion
Both tests show unsatisfactory results. The participants in the first test (test of recognition) face real problems in recognizing the functions that the modals have and this may be due to the fact that students rarely practice English. The results in the second test (test

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of production) were better than the first one. Maybe, it is easier for them to produce modals than recognizing them.

The sources of errors were discussed in terms of negative transfer for interference, non-response or avoidance and ignorance of rules of the target language categorized under miscellaneous errors.

In the first test, negative L1 transfer accounted for 8.7% of the errors; the non-response or blanks accounted for 4.8%; miscellaneous errors accounted for 55%. The mean percentage of the correct answers in this test was 31.5%.

In the second test, negative L1 transfer accounted for 26% of errors, blanks accounted for 2% and miscellaneous errors accounted for 28.7%. The mean percentage of correct answers was 43.3%.


## 5. Pedagogical implications

An Error Analysis was carried out in this study to help students to avoid making errors. They should be aware of the differences between types of modality and kinds of meanings and functions related to each type of modality and the modal verbs that correspond to each kind.

Students should expose themselves to authentic learning material through watching news in English, reading newspapers, articles and analyzing samples of good pieces of written English.

For English teachers, they should encourage their students to use the modal verbs because without practice, errors cannot be overcome. The results of error analysis will enable teachers of English to know how to deal with these errors and conduct a successful teaching taking into account the results that are found in the previous tests.

Teachers should explain the differences between the kinds of meanings within each type of modality. They should tell the students about the differences between necessity and obligation, probability and possibility, etc. Ignorance of these issues urges students to rush into using modals in an arbitrary manner.

In addition, teachers should be aware of the context and explain its importance in using modals. They should tell the students who is the speaker and who is the addressee because the use of modal verbs relay also on these issues. Politeness is also of great

importance when the addressee is of a higher status or rank than the addressor. The intention of the speaker is also something essential because it determines what modal verb to use.

Unlike the traditional grammar books which present modals by giving the modal followed by its different meanings, new methods of teaching are recommended to be used in teaching. Teachers should teach students the functions of modals instead of going from modal to meanings, it is more effective to go from meaning to modals. Instead of telling students that *must* expresses obligation, or *can* expresses possibility, it would be better to say obligation is expressed by *must*, *shall* and *will*. By doing so, students will be able to express their thoughts and feelings.

Finally, it is recommended that teachers should make their students aware of significant differences between Arabic and English as far as modal verbs are concerned.

## 6. Recommendations for further research

Future researchers at the English Department at Al-Ba'ath University interested in modal auxiliary verbs can:

1. Conduct further research on other modal words, modal-like forms, the past tense of modals, negation with modals, answer to questions with modals. Make some contrastive studies of the use of modals by female and male, English modality system and students' native languages modality systems (i.e. Compare the function and meaning of modals in Arabic and English).

2. Conduct a pre-test and a post-test to study modal auxiliary verbs errors; between the tests, the researchers can teach their participants the types of modality and the various kinds of meanings expressed by modal verbs that correspond to these types of modality to find ought what progress they achieve.

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