

A Pragmatic and Semantic Analysis of EFL Learners' Use of Modal Verbs: A Perception Study

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Abstract

The current study, which employed a new analysis approach -an explicit and implicit data collection method-, investigates the perception of the English modal verbs by forty-six Saudi EFL undergraduate learners. Findings revealed that Saudi EFL students struggled with the semantic functions of English modals more than the pragmatic ones. Deontic possibility modal verbs like *can* and *might* were the most challenging forms for the EFL learners. Functional complexity, input frequency, students' L1 influence, and cultural variation were thought to cause students' misunderstanding of these modals. Students, on the other hand, appeared to perceive the pragmatic functions with ease, reinforcing the role of the input frequency in the acquisition of English modality because modals of Request, Suggestion and Offer are frequently introduced to students in the classroom. Furthermore, findings revealed that students' performance in the perception test was better than the explicit one, which could be attributed to the lack of explicit instruction of the English modals. Some pedagogical implications were suggested.

Keywords: English modal verbs, modality, EFL learners, semantic functions, pragmatic functions

1. Introduction

Modal verbs are indispensable linguistic means in written and spoken discourse. They play an important role in English grammar as they modify the meaning of a main verb that follows them by providing additional information about the action it expresses (Biber et al., 2002). A wide variety of meanings, such as ability, possibility, necessity, obligation, and permission can be expressed by modals (Biber et al., 1999). They can also be used to make suggestions or requests. Thus, modals are an essential part of English grammar, as they add subtle nuances of meaning to sentences.

An EFL learner's ability to correctly use modal verbs is crucial to developing fluency in English as the slightest error in these linguistic means can sometime change the speakers' intention or purpose. However, they are among the most difficult linguistic forms perceive because of their functional complexity, i.e., one form may mark more than one semantic meaning (Biber et al. 1999; Palmer, 1990). For instance, the sentence '*he must have lost his way*' does not imply any obligation; it suggests an inference as well as having distinct semantic and pragmatic meanings (El- Hassan, 1990).

A thorough understanding of modal verbs is therefore essential for anyone learning or teaching English as a second/foreign language. The use of modal verbs may vary greatly between languages. For instance, they can be used in a wide variety of contexts in one language whereas in some other languages they are used in certain situations only. For example, in Arabic, the modal verb *rubbamaa* "رُبَّمَا" (*may/might*) can be only used to express possibility while in English it is used to express different semantic and pragmatic functions such as ability, possibility, request and offer. Therefore, the study of modal verbs can provide a general insight into the language learning process. By analyzing how EFL learners perceive and use modal verbs, we can gain a better understanding of the strategies and processes that learners use to learn a new language. Such knowledge can facilitate the development of more effective language teaching methods and materials.

There is a consensus among semanticists and linguists that modal verbs can carry various semantic and pragmatic meanings (Biber et al. 2002; Collins, 2009; Greenbaum & Quirk 1990; Papafragou, 1998; Palmer 1990). Semantic meanings of modal verbs refer to the linguistic meaning of the verbs to express ability, certainty, possibility, and obligation. Pragmatic meanings of modals refer to the social context in which the verb is used, such as the speaker's attitude and intention when using the verb. Consequently, EFL students may experience overlap between these functions of a given modal verb. For example, the modal verb *may* in '*you may leave now*' from a friend to another is a possibility modal; however, in a context from a boss to his secretary, it is realized as a necessity modal, and therefore will be interpreted as an instruction, not a mere permission (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

Despite their widespread use in second language acquisition, modal verbs have received relatively little attention (Davies, 2003) from researchers who have mainly focused on other aspects of English grammar, such as tense and aspect (Schmidt, 1990). Researchers have only recently begun investigating the role of modal verbs in the language learning process (Ellis, 1994). Consequently, there is still

much more that needs to be discovered about the use of modal verbs by second language learners (Davies, 2003). In the Saudi EFL context, little research has been conducted to examine the perception of English modals by tutored learners in an instructional setting. Furthermore, the majority of the previous studies have been based on corpora analyses at the semantic level (e.g., Ahmad 2021a, 2021b; Akeel 2014; Btoosh, 2019; Bensaid, 2015; Al-Sharafi, 2014; Saeed, 2009; Saoudi, 2010). Accordingly, the current study examined Saudi EFL undergraduate students' understanding of the semantic and pragmatic functions of English modals. Specifically, it explores which of the English modal functions, the semantic or the pragmatic functions, are more difficult for EFL learners to perceive. By investigating the form-functions complexities of modals, EFL learners would be able to unveil their difficulty. In addition, the systematic analysis of how EFL perceive the different semantic and pragmatic functions of modals provides insightful implications for EFL instructors and curriculum specialists. Three research questions guided our investigation:

- 1) Which of English modals' functions are more difficult for EFL learners to perceive, the semantic or the pragmatic functions?
- 2) What type(s) of the semantic and pragmatic functions are the most problematic for EFL learners?
- 3) Do EFL students perform better on the explicit test or the perception test?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Modality in English

Modality is generally used as an umbrella term for all modal verbs with a particular meaning. Having modals in everyday language allows people to express themselves as well as their feelings about what they say and do. The importance of their position in everyday language cannot be overstated (Novotná, 2015). Modality can be also defined as "the manner in which the meaning of a clause is qualified, so as to reflect the speaker's judgment of the likelihood of the proposition it expresses being true" (Quirk et al. 1985, p. 219). The relationship between mood and modality can be compared to the relationship between tense and time, further explained by Palmer (1986) as a semantic term related to mood meanings.

Traditionally, modalities are categorized into epistemic and deontic categories. There are, however, many modalities that simultaneously fulfill both deontic and epistemic functions. The modal *must*, for example, has overlapping epistemic and deontic meanings (Papafragou, 2021). For instance, when we say: "*because it's after 9, my son must be in bed,*" we may refer to one's certainty of knowledge, or we may refer to one's bedtime obligations.

Epistemic modals include past and non-past forms, *may* and *might*, *can* and *could*, *will* and *would*, *shall* and *should*, etc. The epistemic modality is subjective, which means the speaker does not express objective, knowing truth, but rather his or her inferential judgment is based on experience and/or circumstantial evidence (El-Hassan, 1990).

It is important to distinguish between epistemic modals and factual modals because epistemic modals express the speaker's logical probability, which typically refers to inferences or predictions made by the speaker (Lyons, 1977). According to Palmer (1990), epistemic modals reflect the speaker's own judgment on a specific matter. Further, the epistemic modality has to do with the speaker's commitment to the content proposition (Warner, 2009). In other words, there is a degree of certainty expressed by a speaker. For example, the epistemic *must* implies a higher degree of certainty than *might*, *may*, or *could*. Taking *must* as an epistemic necessity does not mean the proposition is actual or non-actual, but rather the proposition is logically required to be true (Ali, 2013). Essentially, epistemic modality is a judgement about a proposition, emphasizing its likelihood or necessity to be true or be true soon (Quirk et al., 1985).

By contrast, deontic modality, according to Lyons (1977), marks different semantic functions such as possibility or necessity. It is thus related to the speech acts of social functions of permission, necessity, undertaking and obligation. Deontic modals can be realized by verbs like *must*, *may* and *can* of permission, and *should* and *shall* of undertaking.

2.2 The Semantic and Pragmatic Functions of Modal Verbs

According to sociolinguistics, modality refers to the way in which a speaker or writer expresses their attitudes and opinions about the reality, necessity, or likelihood of a situation. In language, modality is typically expressed by some modals such as *would*, *will*, *shall*, *can*, *may*, *must*, or *should*. Modal verbs have both semantic and pragmatic functions. Semantics is concerned with the meaning of words and sentences while pragmatics is concerned with how language is used in context to communicate effectively. With respect to modal verbs, Wardhaugh (2021) stated that, semantic functions refer to the meaning that a modal verb conveys within a sentence. Modal verbs can express various degrees of probability or likelihood (e.g., *will*, *might*), necessity or obligation (e.g., *must*, *should*), permission or ability (e.g., *can*, *could*), and conditional or hypothetical situations (e.g., *would*, *may*). However, pragmatic functions refer to the way in which modal verbs are used to encode the speaker's position towards the truth value of the proposition (Wardhaugh, 2021). For example, a speaker might use a modal verb to indicate that they are making a suggestion or a request (e.g., "could you pass me the salt?"), or to express an offer (e.g., "can I help you?"). The focus of the current analysis is on both the semantic and pragmatic functions of English modals. More specifically, the former include ability, necessity and possibility functions; the latter include offers, requests and suggestions.

2.3 Previous Research

As indicated earlier, modal verbs can be challenging for non-native speakers to use because of their semantic functions (Holmes, 1998). Accordingly, a number of studies have been conducted to examine the use of English modals among both Arabic-speaking learners of

English and other worldwide EFL learners. A small body of literature has been produced to investigate the use of modal verbs by Arab EFL students (e.g., Ahmad 2021a, 2021b; Akeel 2014; Al-Sharafi, 2014; Btoosh, 2019; Bensaïd, 2015; El-Hassan, 1990; Saeed, 2009; Saoudi, 2010).

In a corpus-based analysis of modal verbs, Akeel (2014) compared Saudi writers' use of modal verbs in MA dissertations to those of English L1 writers. Findings revealed that Saudi writers didn't prefer to use modal verbs in general. Modal verbs (would, could, and may) were significantly underused. Additionally, it was found that both nonnative and native writers used modal verbs, *might* and *must*, and their function with similar frequency rates. The writer, however, attributes this practice to the absence of an organized modal verb system in Arabic, which might impact the EFL learners' use of modal verbs. The absence of the English modals' equivalents in Arabic was also illustrated in El-Hassan's (1990) study which sought out to explore the Arabic equivalents of English modal auxiliaries to facilitate the understanding of these modals by Arab learners of English.

In the same line of research, Btoosh (2019) comparatively examined the use of English modals by Arabic-speaking EFL learners and English L1 speakers. It was found that native writers used modals far greater than nonnative speakers. Findings also revealed that EFL learners predominantly used modals such as *should*, *must*, and *can*, compared to epistemic modals such as *may*, *might*, *would*, and *could*, which were underused.

Rouissi & Abdesslem (2015) also investigated learners' cognition of possibility in epistemic modal auxiliaries among 29 Saudi students and 3 native speakers using an utterance completion test. Findings showed that Saudi EFL learners were unable to distinguish epistemic from deontic modality, as well as possibility from necessity. In addition, past epistemic possibility modals were found to be difficult for the learners. According to this study, this confusion is caused by L1 transfer and unfamiliarity with culture-related pragmatic aspects of English. Likewise, Bensaïd's (2015) findings support Rouissi & Abdesslem (2015) in that the low occurrence rates of modals in textbooks for Arab EFL was the result of the interference of the learners' mother tongue, Arabic. One form of the (beginning) students' L1 influence is the use of a preposition after a modal, as in "he must **to** go". Another example of the Arab-speaking learners' interlanguage is the use of double modals as in "he will **can** go to school" (Bensaïd, 2015, p. 94).

Ahmad (2021a) investigated whether students' level of proficiency influences their ability to use English modalities by testing 31 Saudi Arabian students at three universities in the kingdom. Results revealed that students did not possess a high level of proficiency in the use of modals. However, the modal *might* was the most appropriately used one. Based on the semantic function, there were significant differences between the students' use of modals. In addition, there was a substantial difference between the use of modals of possibility and obligation in favor of possibility, and between volition and obligation in favor of obligation. Thereafter, Ahmad (2021b) investigated the reasons why Saudi EFL students struggled with the use of English modal verbs. A descriptive question was asked to 13 Saudi EFL instructors. Accordingly, students' poor performance on the use of modal verbs was found to be primarily caused by (1) the different modality systems of Arabic and English, (2) difficulty of the English forms, (3) the multiple functions of the English modals, and (5) teacher-centered classrooms. Similarly, using a questionnaire to test students' mastery of modal verbs at two levels: recognition and production, Saeed' (2009) study examined the difficulty's degree of modals for EFL learners. Results showed that EFL learners were not competent enough in using English modals. The students' poor mastery of the English modals was attributed to the semantic and pragmatic complexity of the modals and the students' L1 influence.

There is also a considerable body of literature on the use of English modal verbs by EFL learners with different L1 backgrounds (e.g., Hinkel, 1995, 2009; Kecskes & Kirner-Ludwig 2017; Yang, 2018). For instance, Hinkel's (1995) analysis proposed that culture has an impact on the employment of modals between the English L1 speakers and Asian EFL learners. Confirming Hinkel's main claim that Asian English learners' tendency to use the modals, *should* and *must*, is due to the cultural influence, compared to those forms used by the English L1 speakers, Kecskes & Kirner-Ludwig (2017) found that while both English native speakers and Asian English learners used the deontic modal *should* more the direct *must*, Asian English learners used *must* and *should* more purposefully than English natives, who appeared to apply them much more vaguely and polysemously. In the same line of research, Yang (2018) found that Chinese students tended to use modal verbs more frequently than professional researchers. In addition, they particularly overused *can*, *will*, *could*, and *would*, while underusing *may*. These findings support previous research, which has shown that Chinese EFL students frequently used modal verbs in their essays.

Likewise, in a study targeting Chinese, Korean, and Japanese students, Hinkel (2009) found that the frequency of obligation and necessity modals in the writing of EFL learners is significantly influenced by the topic being written about. For instance, when writing about parental roles, familial duties, and choices of majors, as well as teaching and studying, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean speakers used obligation and necessity modals more frequently than native English speakers. These findings could be attributed to the Asian concept of that self that includes inseparable relationships with one's parents and children that is in contrast to the western emphasis on individual independence. In contrast, the use of "possibility and ability" modals does not seem to be as dependent on the topic or context.

In short, the previously mentioned research studies have examined the use of modal verbs by EFL non/Arabic-speaking and learners; however, these studies only investigated the learners' use of modals at the semantic level. The current study set out to provide a systematic analysis of both the semantic and pragmatic uses of modal auxiliaries by EFL students by employing a new data collection method whereby students completed a task that explicitly measured their semantic and pragmatic knowledge of English modals.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Forty-six Saudi EFL undergraduate learners took part in this cross-sectional study. They were all male students aged between 19 and 21 years old enrolled in the English Language and Literature B.A. program at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University. Based on the university’s placement, these participants were considered beginners/freshmen. They were selected based on their availability and to meet study sample requirements. All the participants had similar backgrounds and educational attainment levels. They were already familiar with modal verbs from an English course they had taken previously making them a suitable study population.

3.2 Instruments and Procedures

This study utilized a new analysis approach: an explicit and implicit data collection method. The explicit test allows us to gather information about the learners’ explicit understanding of the semantic and pragmatic function of the modal verbs. Therefore, their responses will reveal to what extent explicit instruction is useful. The implicit test, on the other hand, provides more information about the learners’ contextualized comprehension of the use of the same semantic and pragmatic function of the modal verbs. Additionally, using these two instruments facilitates the comparison of the learners’ performance in the same target functions.

First, the purpose of the explicit recognition test was to gauge the students’ perception of the semantic (ability, necessity, and possibility) and the pragmatic (offer, request, and suggestion) functions of the English modal verbs. It consisted of thirty items, (see appendix A), five items equally examined each of the three semantic functions and three pragmatic functions in a different context. All the items had clear and simple sentences in an arbitrary sequence. Sample answers were given at the beginning of the test to guide students in responding to the rest of questions.

The second research instrument was a multiple-choice perception test which was used to assess the students’ recognition of the same semantic and pragmatic functions of modals that were listed in the explicit test. This multiple-choice test consisted of twenty items with three distractors (see appendix B) which examined the students’ ability to identify the correct function of each modal verb in twenty different scenarios. The same criteria and rules used the explicit test were applied to the perception test.

After the researchers and two experts examined the content validity and assessed the reliability of the research instruments (the Cronbach’s alphas for the 30 items and 20 items were 0.87 and 0.91, respectively), the instruments were piloted. Subsequently, the instruments were administered to students in 2022 in two different sessions by one of the researchers. First, the explicit test was administered during one of the students’ classes in the first semester. Students were instructed to read each sentence and mark the exact function of the appropriate modal verb. Two weeks later, the second test was given to all the participants who had to identify the most suitable modal verb for the context and select it from among four options.

3.3 Data Analysis

A descriptive analysis was employed in line with main objective of this study was to examine Saudi EFL learners’ perception of the modal verbs by evaluating them semantically and pragmatically. Students’ correct answers were coded with number (1), and the incorrect responses were coded with (0). The three researchers rated the students’ answers to establish reliability. Data obtained from the learners from each test was entered into excel sheets where the six categories of modal verbs’ functions (ability, necessity, possibility, offer, request, and suggestion) were separately labeled in isolated columns. Under each one of these categories the 16 modal verbs were labeled horizontally. The total of the correct responses of each function was calculated in a separate column. Then the average of the items that target the same function was calculated. Finally, the percentages of each target modal verb across the six functions were calculated.

4. Findings

4.1 Findings of the Explicit Test

4.1.1 The Semantic Functions of Modals in the Explicit Test

Table 1 below presents the overall perceptions of the semantic functions of modals by Saudi EFL learners. The necessity modal *must*, was the most accurately perceived form, with a score of 82.60%. Ability modals such as *can* and *could* had accuracy levels of 76.08% and 71.74%, respectively. Meanwhile, the possibility modals, *might* and *can*, were the most difficult for EFL learners; they were equally understood with 2.17% difference in favor of the modal *might* (41.30 % and 39.13%, respectively). However, the possibility modal, *could*, was relatively difficult for the learners to perceive (60.86%) but learners perception exceeded 50% of the students’ correct responses. As a result, necessity modal was the most accurately employed semantic function of modals, followed by ability; however, possibility functions were the most problematic for Saudi EFL learners.

Table 1. The semantic functions of modals in the explicit test

Ability		Necessity	Possibility		
can	could	must	can	could	might
76.08	71.74	82.60	39.13	60.86	41.30

4.1.2 The Pragmatic Functions of Modals in the Explicit Test

Table 2 shows that the Request modal *could* had the highest rate of accuracy (71.74%), followed by the Suggestion modal *should*, with a rate of 67.39%. The Request modal *can* had a higher accuracy level than the Offer verb *can*, with scores of 65.22% and 50%, respectively. Interestingly the modal *would* of both Request and Offer tied at 63.04%. Similarly, the modals *may* and *should* of Offer were perceived equally, with a rate of 54.35%. The Suggestion verb *shall* had an 56.52% accuracy rate, and the least grasped modal by EFL learners was the modal *could* of Suggestion had a score of 45.65%. On the contrary, the modal verb *could* of Request was the most appropriately perceived verb by EFL learners.

Table 2. The pragmatic functions of modals in the explicit test

Offer				Request			Suggestion		
would	may	can	should	can	could	would	shall	could	should
63.04	54.35	50	54.35	65.22	71.74	63.04	56.52	45.65	67.39

4.2 Findings of the Perception Test

4.2.1 The Semantic Functions of Modals in the Perception Test

This section presents the students’ perception of the semantic functions of modals in the perception test. As shown in Table 3, Ability modals possessed the highest accuracy rates, with 73.91% for the modal *can* and 65.22% for the verb *could*. Meanwhile, the Possibility function was the least grasped by EFL learners, with an accuracy rate of 41.30% for *might* and 43.48% for *can*, (with a difference of only 2.18% between *might* and *can*) but *could* had a higher percentage score (54.34%). Finally, the Necessity modal *must* scored 60.87%. Therefore, the modals expressing semantic ability were the easiest for EFL learners to understand. However, semantic possibility and necessity were more challenging, with slight differences in difficulty between the two.

Table 3. The Semantic functions of modals in the perception test

Ability		Necessity	Possibility		
can	could	must	can	could	might
73.91	65.22	60.87	43.48	54.34	41.30

4.2.2 The Pragmatic Functions of Modals in the Perception Test

Table 4 demonstrates that the Request modal *can* and Suggestion *shall* had the highest rate of accuracy (91.30%), followed by the modal of Offer, *would* (86.96%). EFL learners, however, perceived the modal *would* of Request less accurately; an accuracy rate of 71.74%. Surprisingly, similar to the explicit test, the Request modal *can* had a higher accuracy score than the Offer verb *can* (91.30% and 78.26%, respectively). The modal *could* of Request and *may* of Offer tied at 73.91%. The verb *should* of Offer was to some extent difficult for EFL to grasp (67.39%) making suggestions with the modals, *could* and *should*, the least perceived by EFL learners (56.52% and 52.17%, respectively)

Table 4. The pragmatic functions of modals in the perception test

Offer				Request			Suggestion		
would	may	can	should	can	could	would	shall	could	should
86.96	73.91	78.26	67.39	91.30	73.91	71.74	91.30	56.52	52.17

5. Discussion

The first research question investigated whether semantic or the pragmatic functions of English modals were more difficult for EFL learners to perceive. In both tests (the explicit and perception tests), Saudi EFL learners faced more difficulties perceiving the semantic functions of modals. These findings are somewhat consistent with previous studies (e.g., Ahmed, 2021b; Rouissi & Abdesslem, 2015) which attributed this confusion to L1 transfer and unfamiliarity with the cultural context necessary to understand a particular modal usage. These findings suggest that L1 transfer significantly influences Saudi EFL learners’ confusion regarding modals. However, the influence of L1 transfer requires further investigation. According to Bensaid (2015), there are no Arabic equivalents to the English possibility modals. Another rationale for the learners’ primary language influence could be their high accurate use of the Necessity modal *must*, which is similar to its encounter in Arabic, *yajib* يجب. : a similarity that aided the students in perceiving this form with ease. Moreover, participants culture may serve as another source of misunderstanding of these modals. In Arabic, for example, speakers tend to be direct and assertive, and this explains the high accuracy’s rate of the necessity modal, *must*. In concurrence, Hinkel’s (1995) findings that attributed the divergence in the use of modals to the cultural variations between the nonnative learners and native speakers of English.

The second research question examined which types of semantic and pragmatic functions EFL learners found most problematic. The possibility modals were the most difficult for Saudi EFL students to perceive in both the explicit and the perception tests. More specifically,

the modals *can* and *might* of Possibility were the most challenging for EFL learners to comprehend. These findings concur with the findings of learners from other studies (Rouissi & Abdesslem, 2015) whereby learners experienced difficulties with epistemic possibility but disagree with Ahmad's (2021a) study. These findings also align with Bensaid's (2016) rationalization that the Arabic language lacks equivalents of the English modal verbs, and the Arab learners find it difficult to grasp Possibility since *can* can be expressed in a variety of ways. Further, the input frequency may have influenced the students' misunderstanding of the possibility modals because students are frequently taught to use the verb *can* for making requests and expressing ability, but not for expressing possibility. Apparently, the Request modal *can* was the most appropriately perceived verb by EFL learners, which lends support to the role of the input frequency: a finding congruent with Yang's (2018) study which found that modals that are more common and taught first were used far better than other forms that are less frequent.

The third research question investigated whether EFL students performed better on the explicit or perception tests. Findings obtained from the two tests revealed that students performed better on the perception test. A plausible explanation for this finding is that explicit and form-based activities help the learners identify the appropriate use of the English modals. As indicated earlier, due to their 'functional complexity' (Ellis, 2002), modals, in addition to the cultural factors, tend to be challenging for EFL learners. These findings suggest that modals are better taught explicitly. However, this proposal needs an additional experimental investigation.

6. Pedagogical Implications

Based on the findings of the present study, four crucial pedagogical implications could be suggested for instructors and curriculum specialists. First, findings have revealed that student performance in the explicit test was better than the perception one. Further, the complexity of modals' meaning presents problems to Saudi EFL students. Thus, students need guidance in learning some functions of the English modals. Explicit instruction (form-focused) maybe required because all students share the same L1. Explicit instruction and corrective feedback would help students identify the possible functions of modals and use them accurately and appropriately. Form-focused activities inside the classroom will help improve students' accuracy in modal related tests. Furthermore, instructors should pay more attention to the different functions of possibility modals because Saudi EFL learners found such modal forms most problematic to grasp.

Second, results showed that the inaccurate uses of modals by EFL students might have been the result of the students' culture. Additionally, students are exposed to an unauthentic input because they are traditionally taught, i.e., a teacher-led approach. Therefore, a crucial pedagogical implication is to provide students with positive evidence whereby teachers and instructors use real-world activities and authentic input inside the classroom because input plays an essential role in second language acquisition (White, 1998). Positive evidence allows the students to identify the possible and appropriate structures in the target language (Oliver, 2018), and it has been found to have a positive influence in acquiring second/foreign language (e.g., Muñoz, 2012).

Third, the results revealed that possibility modals (*can* & *might*) were the most problematic forms for Saudi EFL learners, which might be due to the insufficient input. Therefore, instructors and teachers should expose students to these modal forms and provide them with sufficient input through a combination of task-based and form-focused activities. Introducing students to such activities (i.e., fluency and accuracy activities) will help students identify the subtle differences between their different semantic and pragmatic functions and use them for communicative purposes. Thus, the possibility modals, *can* and *might*, and the suggestion modal, *could*, should be used more frequently in the classroom activities. Additionally, textbooks should first introduce the possibility and suggestion modals rather than the ability and request modals, so that they can understand these forms with their different functions.

Finally, results showed that the inaccurate uses of modals by EFL students might be due to the students' L1 interference. In other words, students' L1 (Arabic) is thought to have a negative influence on their perception of modals and their functions. Some contrasting studies (e.g., Ashour, 2017) have found that teaching students the differences between their L1 and the target language has a positive influence on their performance. Therefore, students should be introduced to modality systems in Arabic and English, especially at the early stages of language acquisition. Recently, some studies (e.g., Ahmed, 2021b; Rouissi & Abdesslem, 2015) found that Arabic-speaking EFL learners' difficulty in recognizing the target language modals stems from the differences between their primary language and the target language. The misperception of the different functions of English modals by Saudi EFL student might have resulted from their L1 interference, but this requires a further investigation.

7. Conclusion, Limitations and Future Directions

This study, which employed a new analysis approach -the explicit and implicit data collection method-, examined Saudi EFL learners' perception of English modal verbs and explored whether the semantic or the pragmatic functions were more difficult for learners to perceive. Saudi EFL students struggled with modals that expressed semantic meanings more than with the pragmatic modals. For example, EFL learners found possibility modal verbs like *can* and *might* to be the most challenging. Functional complexity (Ellis, 2002), input frequency, students' L1 influence, and cultural variations (Hinkel, 1995) are thought to hinder students' perception of these modality forms. Students, on the other hand, appeared to perceive the pragmatic functions with ease explaining the role of input frequency on the acquisition of English modality: modals such as *can*, *shall* and *would* are frequently introduced to students in the classroom. Furthermore, students' performance on the perception test was better than the explicit one. Therefore, instructors and teachers should adopt explicit instruction (form-focused) to help students identify the possible functions of modals and the subtle differences between the functions these forms convey.

Although this study provided well research-informed insights to the perception of English modal verbs by Arabic-speaking learners of

English, some limitations should be addressed. First, female students were not included in the current analysis yet participants' gender may have an impact on the semantic-pragmatic uses of English modality. A further limitation is related to the study's sample size of forty-six participants which limits results' generalization to a larger population.

Students' L1 is thought to have negatively influenced their perception of the English modal verbs. Further research is needed to investigate the possible influence of the students' primary language on their perception and production of the English modal verbs and their functions. Furthermore, a future experimental analysis should investigate the effect of explicit instruction of modals to provide data-driven findings. Finally, the relationship between the production and perception of the English modals should be investigated to paint a complete picture about the acquisition of these forms by EFL learners at different proficiency levels.

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Appendices

Appendix A

The explicit test

Read the following sentences and choose the exact meaning of the modal verb by putting (√) under the appropriate modal. Look at the given example. ONE answer is ONLY possible.

No	Statements	Ability	Necessity	Possibility	Offer	Request	Suggestion
Ex.	Cell phones must be in your backpacks during class.		√				
1	Tom could play tennis when he was four.						
2	All applicants must take an entrance exam.						
3	Shall we leave at two? Is that OK?						
4	Would you like one of these chocolates? Yes, please. Thank you.						
5	Tom is strong. He can lift that heavy box.						
6	May I help you?						
7	You can learn a lot by watching English movies.						
8	Would you pass the salt please?						
9	Your signature on the document must be legible.						
10	(A) : I'm having trouble in math class. (B) : You could talk to your teacher.						
11	Maria can play the piano. She's been taking lessons for many years.						
12	Could you pass the salt please?						
13	Spices can be expensive.						
14	Can I borrow your pen?						
15	You must sign the forms in ink.						
16	Can I get a taxi for you? Yes, please.						
17	Liza might need your help in the kitchen.						
18	It is hot in here. Shall I open the window?						
19	May I carry your suitcase, Sir?						
20	I can see Central Park from my apartment.						
21	It is a lovely day. Shall we go for a walk?						
22	You should take an umbrella, it could rain later.						
23	All passengers must show their passports to the customs officer.						
24	Shall I help you with your luggage?						
25	Would you mind if I opened the window?						
26	A person must eat in order to live.						
27	The story could be true. I suppose.						
28	I could speak French ten years ago.						
29	(A)Where should we go for our holiday? (B) What about Spain?						
30	Could you help me?						

Appendix B

The perception test

Circle the correct word.

- Drivers_____ stop when the traffic lights are red.
a) could b) must c) may d) should
- You _____ sign before you leave the exam.
a) must b) could c) may d) should
- Candidates_____ answer all questions.
a) should b) could c) may d) must
- Kate _____ swim very well, she is a great swimmer.
a) Should b) can c) mustn't d) can't
- What _____ I get you for your college graduation ceremony? I have no idea.

- a) May b) can c) must d) do
6. You ____ invite friends around. Yes, why not?
a) could b) must c) may d) won't
7. It is a lovely day. ____ we go for a walk?
a) shall b) must c) may d) won't
8. We ____ give you a lift if you like. Oh, thank you.
a) Can b) must c) should d) shall
9. ____ you help me? This exercise is really hard.
a) Should b) Can c) Must d) Mustn't
10. ____ I help you with your assignment? I am done, thank you.
a) Will b) Shall c) Must d) Do
11. ____ I ask a question? Yes, of course.
a) May b) Must c) Should d) Will
12. Take an umbrella. It ____ rain outside.
a) need b) should c) mustn't d) might
13. Whose is this bag? I don't know, but it ____ belong to Saud.
a) could b) may c) should d) would
14. You ____ win a million dollars!
a) must b) could c) need d) do
15. I ____ talk already before I was two years old.
a) should b) could c) can d) might
16. ____ you like to go for a ride with us? Oh, it is my pleasure.
a) Might b) Would c) Should d) Will
17. ____ I show you the way? Oh, thank you.
a) Do b) Will c) Would d) Shall
18. I ____ see my school from our house.
a) should b) could c) can d) might
19. My grandfather is 75, but he ____ use computer very well.
a) should b) could c) can d) might
20. ____ you help me with the housework, please?
a) Could b) Should c) May d) Must

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