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Analyzing the Problems of English Central Modal Verbs Experienced by
Foreign Language Learners of English at Tertiary Level

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the problems of central modal verbs experienced by Sudanese 4th years learners of English at tertiary level.. Special emphasis is placed on Central Modal Auxiliary Verb. The underling assumption is that the instructors of English do not give due attention to the teaching of Modal Auxiliary Verbs. Moreover, the teaching materials used at tertiary level do not cover the area of auxiliary verbs sufficiently. So, the present study attempts to identify the frequently occurring errors in the performance of the students and offer remedial solutions to them. This is accomplished through several steps: (1) selecting 100 final students in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, at Alneelain University as subjects (2) Two instruments for data collection were used: (a) students' test, (b) students' composition. The data were computed and analyzed with Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).The results of the investigation have revealed the following:

1. The majority of EFL students face grave problems when using English modal auxiliary verbs, particularly the central modals. They do not know how to use them to express possibility, intention, or necessity and they seldom use modal verbs in their compositions.

Keywords: Central Modal Verbs, Auxiliary Verbs , Frequently Occuring Errors, Foreing Language Learners of English, Analyzing the Problems

1. Introduction

Nowadays, there are debates about the teaching of grammar in schools and universities. The earliest research questioning the value of English grammar teaching advocated that it was simply a waste of time in the sense that most learners could not apply any of the categories even after many years of teaching (Macaulay, 1947; Cawley, 1957; Hudson, 1987). This actually is a

fundamental objection if it is true. There are studies, which show no benefit from teaching grammar in contrast with others that do. Educational fashions change and after a period of over twenty-five years since the formal teaching of grammar was abandoned in FL teaching situations, there have been persistent calls in the field of FL learning for the reintroduction of grammar teaching as part of 'a return to basics'. However, grammar is generally regarded as central to linguistics, and it should, therefore, be included in a linguistic curriculum on its own right. Interest in grammar has extremely increased. There have particularly been far more emphasis on the 'Verb' than on any other class of words, because it is so central to the structure of the sentence (Palmer, 1987). Another source of interest is the great complexity of the internal semantic and syntactic structure of the 'Verb Phrase' itself. Explicit study of the English language grammar can help students develop their ability to adjust their language appropriately to different contexts.

As is mentioned before, many educationists have denied that a study of grammar can improve the ability of the students to communicate through English correctly and effectively, but as it is the case with all subjects, it depends on what is taught and how it is taught. For instance, an area in grammar which is generally problematic to the EFL students (e.g. Sudanese learners) and is not given enough attention by the teachers is that of modal auxiliary verbs. Therefore, it would seem reasonable to suppose that the performance of foreign language learners can improve through learning the resources for grammatical structures such as modal auxiliary verbs.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Sudanese students of English at tertiary level make a large number of grammatical errors when using English modal auxiliary verbs. These errors reflect that the area of modal auxiliary verbs represents a challenge to the students and prevents them from expressing themselves freely, accurately and appropriately. As a result, they either misuse modal auxiliary verbs or avoid using them, this results in complete breakdown in communication

and/or inadequate conveyance of intended messages. On the other hand, the teaching materials used at tertiary level do not cover the area of modal auxiliary verbs sufficiently. So, the present study attempts to identify such errors that occur frequently in the performance of the students and suggest certain solutions to remedy these errors or at least lessen their severity.

1.3 Significance of the Study
The significance of this study stems from the fact that as far as I know it is the first attempt to investigate Sudanese university students' errors when using English modal auxiliaries from the syntactic and semantic point of view. It is different from previous studies in grammar, in that its focus is on central modal auxiliary verbs. It also attempts to find the sources of such errors and their types.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study is intended to:
1- reflect the grammatical and syntactic significance of central modal auxiliary verbs.
2- show the semantic aspects of these verbs because they are the most neglected grammatical elements and have a unique system.
3- pay attention to the shades of meaning of these verbs as the functions and meanings overlap and may be said to cohere rather than be distinguishable.
4- highlight the weaknesses in the performance of the students, the drawbacks in the teaching materials, and negative attitudes towards some central modal auxiliary verbs from the side of the instructors.
5- Promote students' abilities to use central modal auxiliary verbs as essential elements of various shades of meaning.

1.4 Research Questions
The study will try to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Do Sudanese learners of English use central modals correctly?
2. To what extent do Sudanese learners of English know the semantic aspects of central modal verbs?

1.5 Hypotheses

This study intends to test the following hypotheses:
1. Sudanese learners of English misuse central modal verbs.
2. Sudanese learners of English don't know the semantic aspects of central modal verbs.

1.6 The Methodology of the Research

This study is descriptive in nature and it adopts an analytic approach to the treatment of the research data and the presentation of the results. Two instruments will be used for data collection. These are:

1. A multiple -choice test to be answered by the students to find out the problems they face in relation to the central modal auxiliary verbs.
2. A composition written by the students in their 4th year final examination in order to find out how the students behave in their free writing as related to central modals

The data collected through these instruments will be treated statistically using SPSS programme. The results will be presented in tables, graphs which will be interpreted and discussed in the light of the research questions and hypotheses.

The results of the analysis and discussion of the data collected through the two instruments will be related to each other to see how far they correlate and support each other.

1.7 Limits of the Study

This paper investigates the use of the central modals auxiliaries in expository writing. This excludes genres such as Legalese, Scientific English and Creative Writing. Moreover, the style under which the central modal auxiliary verbs are examined is a formal one. This excludes other styles such as official, informal, colloquial and slang. In addition, some newly emerging varieties are not included in the study, e.g. the language of chartrooms, e-mails and SMS texting.

1.8 The subject

The population of this study consists of 100 subjects, aged between 19 – 31, at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Al-Neelain University. They are all majoring in English, speak Arabic as first language (henceforth L1). This is important since some of their errors may relate to the transfer of their mother tongue. The mode category is the age group (22 – 24).

2. Theoretical Framework

Modal verbs represent a special sub-group of auxiliary verbs. Whereas primary auxiliaries are very essential for the build of sentence structure, modal verbs have the additional advantage of expressing the mood of the sentence. They convey a lot of shades of meanings that are otherwise impossible to put across. Hence are the terminologies 'mood', 'modality' and 'modals'. Modal verbs belong to a closed class of verbs which consists of three sub-classes: (i) central modals such as can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would and must (ii) marginal modals such as dare, need, ought to, used to and have (got) to and (iii) phrasal modals such as be going to, be about to, be allowed to, be supposed to, be able to and be to (McCarthy, 2007: 220). Modal verbs generally encode meanings connected with degrees of certainty and degrees of necessity (ibid).

2.1 The Semantic System of Modals

The serious problem of modals is their meanings because each modal can have more than one meaning and different modals may have very similar or even identical meanings. Modals have specific semantic denotation such as epistemic, deontic and dynamic. Epistemic and deontic modality are widely accepted and acknowledged as the two most semantically fundamental kinds

of modality (Palmer, 1990; Bybee, et al. 1994).   The kinds of meaning conveyed by modals have been divided into different categories as illustrated by Hall (2001)
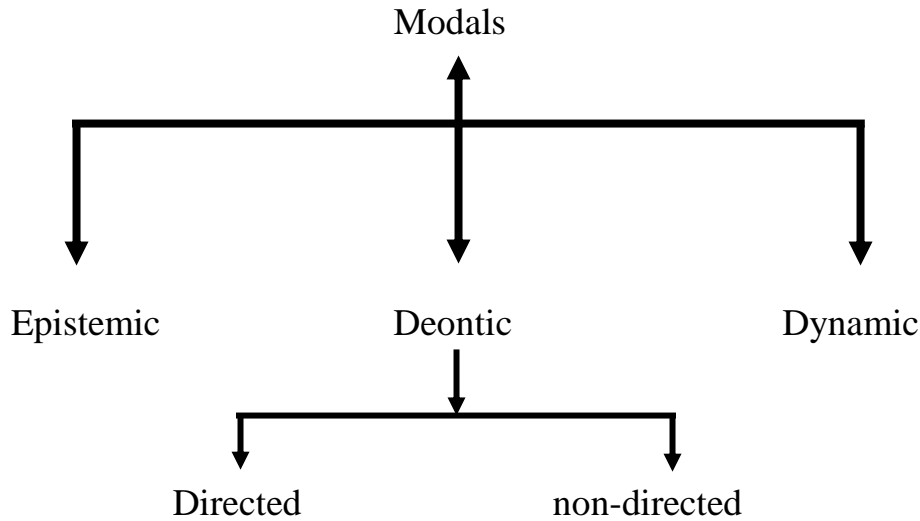

Fig (2.1): Traditional categories of modals (Based on Hall, 2001).

In the following section, the three types of the semantic denotation of modals will be discussed in more details.

2.1.1 Epistemic Modals

Epistemic modals refer to a judgment of the speaker about a proposition, indicating the possibility and necessity of the proposition's being or becoming true (Quirk, et al. 1985:223). The proposition is thought to be uncertain or probable relative to the knowledge of the speaker. Epistemic modality does not express a factual assertion because factual assertion makes a stronger claim than any epistemically modalized statement (Lyons, 1977:805), e.g. He is there. The epistemic denotation of *may* and *might* are used for expressing the speaker's doubt in the truth of proposition (Coates, 1983:133), e.g. You *may*/might be right. According to Palmer (1990:51), the status of *can* and *could* in epistemic modality is rather problematic because

they don't express epistemic modality except in non-assertion. They can be used in questions to express confusion doubt, or surprise (ibid), e.g. *Can/Could they be serious*? Epistemic *must* can be used to express that a proposition is necessarily true or at least has a high likelihood of being true (Quirk, et al. 1985:225), e.g. *I must have left my lecture notes in the car.* (= It is necessarily the case that I have left my lecture notes in the car). *Should* and *ought* to have also epistemic necessity value but they differ from epistemic *must* in that they do not express the speaker's confidence in the truth of what he is saying (ibid). Quirk, et al (ibid) use the term tentative inference to characterize the noncommitted necessity. That is to say that the speaker is not sure about the truth of his verbal assumption, but tentatively concludes that it is true on the basis of his knowledge, *e.g. The headmaster should/ought to be in his office. Will* is also an epistemic modal rather than future tense marker (ibid: 226). Epistemic *will* refers to what is reasonable to expect. It can be roughly paraphrased by 'a reasonable inference is that…', *e.g. Tom will be home by now.*

2.1.2 Deontic Modals

Deontic modality is essentially performative. The meanings associated with deontic modality are very different from those of epistemic modality. While the former is concerned with action by others and by the speaker himself, the latter is concerned with belief, knowledge and truth in relation to proposition (Palmer, 1990:69). Deontic meaning deals with permission or obligation. *May*, when used for giving permission, may be interpreted as expressing deontic possibility, and *must*, when used for laying an obligation, may be interpreted as expressing deontic necessity (ibid). In saying *you may/must come tomorrow,* the speaker imposes the possibility or necessity of coming tomorrow upon his hearer (ibid: 98). *Have (got) to* has also deontic meaning. The difference between deontic *must* and deontic *have (got) to* is that while

must might sometimes be subjective, *have (got) to* would always be objective, but both would be deontic in that some kind of deontic necessity was involved (Lyons, 1977:833). Daniel (2001: 14) explains that both deontic and epistemic modals are functions that take propositions arguments. For example, the denotation of *Sara might be playing ping pong* is (might) Sara is playing ping pong, and the denotation of *Tom must finish his work is* (must) Tom finish his work. In both cases, the denotation of the non-modal part of the sentence is calculated first, and then the modal applies to the resulting proposition. For epistemic modals, this treatment works well,

e.g. *Sara might be playing ping pong* can be paraphrased, as '*It is possible that Sara is playing ping pong*'. However, applying the same procedure to deontic modals misses a crucial generalization. Consider the deontic readings of the two sentences below:

    a. *Jane shouldn't distract Sarah.*

    b. *Sarah shouldn't be distracted by Jane*

If deontic should in each case as Daniel (ibid) explains, takes as its semantic argument the propositional content of the remainder of the sentence, then these two sentences are expected to be synonymous. They are not. Although each expresses the same desideratum, (a) places the obligation on 'Jane' while (b) assigns the obligation to 'Sarah', yet the meaning of each of these sentences can not be characterized as (should) 'Jane distract Sarah.' A similar alternation may be observed in the following examples taken from Daniel (ibid: 15).

(c) *Non-linguists cannot understand Chomsky's latest Paper.*

(d) *Chomsky's latest paper cannot be understood by non-linguists.*

The two propositions denoted by the non-modal parts of (c) and (d) are truth conditionally equivalent; however, (c) describes a property of non-linguists, while (d) describes a property of Chomsky's latest paper.The distinction between the deontic and the epistemic uses of English modals is very clear

in the case of must, as illustrated by the following examples from Lyon (1977: 835), who distinguishes between four stages for the example:

'You must be very careful.'

1. *You are required to be very careful (deontic, weakly subjective).*
2. *I require you to be very careful (deontic/ strongly subjective),*
3. *It is obvious from evidence that you are very careful (epistemic, weakly subjective).*
4. I conclude that you are very careful (epistemic, strongly subjective)

Furthermore, it is quite clear from the analysis of the four stages that the deontic meaning is the primary and the epistemic is the derived one, as is supported by etymological evidence. For example, Traugott (1989) writes:

"It is for example well known that in the history of English the auxiliaries in questions were once main verbs, and that the deontic meanings of the modals are older than the epistemic one."

There is rather less to be said about deontic modality than epistemic modality in a grammatical study because some types of deontic modality are often expressed in lexical verbs such as hope and wish as seen in the following examples:

(*a*) *I hope Tom will come.*

(*b*) *I wish Tom would come.*

2.1.3 Dynamic Modals

Deontic and dynamic modality refer to events that are not actualized, events that have not taken place but merely potential, and may, therefore, be described as 'event modality' (ibid:70). The dividing line between deontic and dynamic modality is far less easy to establish. The basic difference between them is that with deontic modality the conditioning factors are external to the relevant individual, whereas with dynamic modality they are internal. Thus, deontic modality refers to obligation or permission,

emanating from an external source, whereas dynamic modality relates to ability or willingness which comes from the individual concerned (ibid).The distinction can be seen in the following sentences taken from Palmer (ibid:73), e.g.

> 1-John must come in now (obligation).
>
> 2-John may/can come in now (permission).
>
> 3- John can speak French (ability).
>
> 4-John will do it for you (willingness).

Dynamic ability may sometimes be interpreted in terms of the general circumstances that make action possible or impossible rather than the actual ability of the subject (Lyon, 1977:850).

3. Previous Studies on Central Modal Auxiliary Verbs

EFL students need to use central modal verbs a lot in their academic life because they enjoy a special status in the grammatical system of English language. Moreover, they play a vital role in conveying messages between senders and receivers in the cycle of communication. In spite of their importance, they represent a challenge to these students. This is because the subtlety and complexity of their meanings and functions are more often than not disguised under a simple structural organization. In fact, non –native speakers including university students majoring in English do not find it easy to deal with them.

Many studies have been carried out on British, American, Australian and Indian linguistic differences in the use of the English modal auxiliary verbs. Huddleston (2002) investigated the uses of central modal auxiliary verbs in academic scientific writing, using for the purpose a corpus of scientific textbooks and articles in journals. He distinguished a variety of central modal verbs' meanings which are specific to the genre of scientific and

technical writing. The table below provides a summary of the meanings of these modals.

Table (3.1): Central Modals and their Meanings (adapted from Huddleston 1994)

Modal Verbs	Modal Meaning
May	Epistemic; qualified generalization; exhaustive disjunction; legitimacy; ability; general possibility; concession
Might	Past of may (real sense); epistemic; legitimacy; ability; qualified generalization
Can	Epistemic (in negative); qualified generalization; exhaustive disjunction. Legitimacy; ability; general ability
Could	Past of can (real sense); epistemic; exhaustive disjunction; legitimacy; ability
Will	Futurity; induction; deduction
Would	Past of will (real sense); tentativeness or prediction (unreal senses)
Should	Obligation; logical expectation; tentativeness
Must	Obligation; logical necessity

He concludes that _may_ is often used to express uncertainty or possibility, _might_ is an 'unreal' counterpart to _may_ regarding certainty/possibility, and _must_ expresses something necessarily true. Although his analysis indicates the features of these modal verbs in scientific writing, it does not explain the semantic functions of these verbs in the discourse of scientific writing.

Likewise, Butler (1990) used a corpus of scientific articles and textbooks in the areas of Physics, Botany and Animal Physiology. In comparison with Huddleston Corpus, Butler found out that _may_ and _might_ were more frequently used in his corpus, whereas _can_, _could_, _should_ and _would_ were

more frequent in Huddleston's Corpus. Huddleston (1971) argues that this phenomenon is natural since 'the uses of modals vary across the discipline' .

Coates and Leech (1980) investigated the modal verbs in British and American English. The findings of their study revealed that a compensatory relationship exists between British and American usage with respect to the following pairs of modals: *should/ ought to*, *must/ have to, shall/ will, can/ may*. The results show that American use of deontic *should* is balanced by the equivalent British use of deontic *ought to* and American use of epistemic *have to* corresponds to British use of epistemic *must*. Also the American use of epistemic *will* is counterbalanced by the British use of epistemic *shall* and the American use of deontic *may* is balanced by the British use of deontic *can*. The general conclusion of Coates and Leech is that in American English *shall* and *ought to* are rare and their main senses being expressed by *will* and *should* respectively.

Another study was made by Krogvig and Johnson (1981), where they compared the use of *shall, will, should* and *would* in American and British English. This investigation shows that the main difference between American and British English lies in the use of *shall* and *should*. However, the results of this study indicate that *shall* occurs more frequently with the first person subject in British English, and most of its occurrences in American English are in the third person.

Collins (1988) examined *must, should, ought, need, have to* and *have got to* in Australian, British and American English. The results indicate that the five modals have lower frequencies in Australian English than in the other two varieties. In this study, only *must* and *should* were discussed at great length. In Australian English, epistemic *must* is five times more frequent than deontic *must*. In the American data, the figures for deontic *must* dominate the epistemic ones. British English figures on the other hand, are fairly balanced in terms of the two meanings. With respect to *should*, the

figures for deontic meanings in Australian and American English are fairly the same, exceeding those for British English. However, epistemic meanings occur more frequently in Australian and British English than in American English. The most outstanding finding here is that of _should_ where no corpus example occurs in the Australian database. This modal occurs in no small number in both varieties of the British and American corpora.

Katikar (1984) investigated the modal verbs in Indian English. His findings indicate that modal usage in Indian English conforms to modal usage in British English. Regarding the differences, contracted forms like _'ll_ and _'d_ for _will_ and _would_ are used frequently in Indian English for conveying determination. _Shall_ is also reported in his study to be of a higher frequency in his corpus. The results also show that the modality of futurity and hypothesis have a low frequency in Indian English whereas the modality of certainty has a higher frequency. What stands out clear from these frequencies is that there are few marked differences between modals in Indian English and British English.

Viel (2005) studied modal auxiliary verbs in English for Science and Technology (EST) and compared their use with that in General Purpose English (GPE). By analyzing their occurrences and meanings, Vie intended to reveal the similarities, but, more interestingly, to point out differences - if any, and establish and interpret their functions in (EST). The first thing that can be noticed in his study is the significant different number of occurrences of modals in both corpora (3056 vs. 2507 or 15.2% modals per 1,000 words in the EST corpus vs., 12. 5% in GPE). It is striking to notice that EST has two predominating modals (_can_ and _will_), which account for 72% of all occurrences, while the others score modest percentages between 4% and 8%. On the other hand, in GPE the distribution is different. _Can_ is clearly in the lead, followed by a group of three modals _will_, _would_ and _may_. _Should_ and _must_ have low percentages. It may also be interesting to observe that _will_

and _would_ show large divergences: 967 occurrences of _will_ in EST and 429 in GPE, for _would_: 25% and 45% respectively, i.e. almost double in each case.

Another study was carried out in the University of Rio de Janeiro, by Viana (2006) who investigated the usage of Central Modals in compositions written by Brazilian advanced EFL learners. Only students who were about to graduate were asked to contribute. To this purpose, compositions written in English were collected in three private language schools located in six distinct areas in the city of Rio de Janeiro. After data collection, all compositions were typed so as to probe them by means of a computer program. The research corpus contained 155 compositions.The reference corpus was the Longman Spoken and Written English. This corpus describes the actual use of grammatical features in different varieties of English: mainly conversation, fiction, newspaper language, and academic prose (Biber et al., 1999: 4). Viana compared the results of his study to those obtained by Biber et al. (ibid) in their mapping of the academic prose register since both represent the written medium. Eight out of the nine modals which were analyzed were grouped into two categories: those which refer to non-past time and those which refer to past time (Biber et al., 1999 : 484-485). The first group consisted of _may, can, will_ and _shall_; and the second group included _might, could, would_ and _should_ respectively. The difference in usage between modals which refer to non-past time and the ones which refer to past time is noteworthy. The researcher summarized this contrast by pointing out that _may_, _can_ and _will_ were at least three times more common than their counterparts, namely, _might_, _could_ and _would_. The only exception was the pair _shall_ and _should_, the latter being much more common

than the former. There were no instances of _shall_ in the research corpus. These results are similar to the ones found by Biber et al. (1999: 486) who state that "considering the pairs of central modals, the tentative/past time member is less frequent than its partner in all cases except "_shall/should_"".

The difference between the results of Viana's study and the corpus of Longman Spoken and Written English is that in the learner corpus there were no instances of _shall_ whereas in the reference corpus this modal is present albeit rarely. The findings also show that the Brazilian learners of English investigated in this study tend to underuse modals which mark both permission, possibility or ability as well as necessity or obligation. On the other hand, they show a tendency to overuse modals signaling either volition or prediction, especially with the use of _will_. According to Biber et al. (1999: 489), _will_ and _would_ are least frequent in academic prose. The register which contains the highest frequencies of such modals is conversation. Therefore, the overuse of such modals in the research corpus may suggest that the research participants wrote in a way which was similar to the way speakers of English as a first language talk.

Another study is Mindt's (1996) 'English Corpus of Linguistics and the Foreign Language Teaching Syllabus'. One of the sections of his paper covered the area of modals. He argued that _would_, _can_ and _will_ are the most common modals in his research and _will_ is an extremely frequent modal in conversation in English. He proposes that EFL textbooks should introduce such modals in the first year of study instead of doing it in the second year. In other words, the presentation of _will_ should not be postponed in favour of the infrequent modals _must_ and _may_.

Another study is Ringbom's (1998) 'Compilation of Vocabulary Frequencies', which also covered some modals in the writing of learners of English from seven different nationalities (Dutch, Finnish-Swedish, Finnish, French, German, Spanish and Swedish). The results of Ringbom's study reveal that all the subjects overuse _can_ and underuse _would_ and _will_. Only one exception remains with the French group, which overuses _will_. In relation to _should_ the French, Finnish and Germans tend to use it more than Americans and British whereas the Spanish, Finnish-Swedish, Swedish and Dutch generally underuse it. As far as the modal _could_ is concerned, there are three distinct reasults, namely: (a) Finnish learners use it as much as Americans and British; (b) Spanish students overuse it; and (c) all the five groups underuse it.

Kamal (2000) investigated the uses of modal auxiliaries in Journalistic English. The data upon which his study is based consisted of twenty-four texts taken from The Times, one of the oldest British news papers.The texts included editorials, news items and news reports, consisting approximately of 14385 words. The modals scrutinized in his data were: _can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would_ and _must_. The results show that the modals _would_ and _will_ are the most frequent in the data (_would_ 20.02%, _will_ 25.70%). The third frequent modal is _should_ (11.61%). The modal _shall_ is the least frequent in the data. The most frequent of the negative forms are _cannot_ and _would not_.

Nkemleke (2005) examined the degree of certainty in Cameroon English by comparing frequency occurrences of _must_ and _should_ in the Cameroon English database with findings of similar corpus-based investigation in British English as reported in Coates (1993) and John (1993).The Cameroon English data used for this study is taken from the one-million-word corpus of Cameroon English printed texts located at the Department of English of the University of Yaonde. The corpus is made up of text categories

comprising a wide range of Cameroon English: fiction, popular scholarly and literary texts. The findings reveal notable semantic and stylistic variations in Cameroon English compared with British English. For example, deontic meanings of *must* and *should* are very frequent and for the most part they are used in very 'restrictive' ways. Furthermore, certain elements of context that normally mark spoken informal English occur freely in Cameroon English; making the distinction between formal and informal usage blurred.

Elenizi (2004) investigated Arab students' mastery of modals and conditionals in context. The study conducted was a result of an experiment on a sample of two sets of Arab learners at college level. The first set consisted of 25 Arab EFL majors and 25 Arab students majoring in French at college level. The two sets of subjects were asked to write what they would consider the most appropriate utterances for a set of specific real-life situations assigned to them by the researcher. The results reveal that the two groups of subjects did not have any serious difficulty using appropriate modals in real-life situations pertaining to the hypothetical but realistic future probability. Only 4 out of the 25 English majors used the simple future modal *will* instead of the appropriate one, which is *would* in this context. The next finding has to do with using modals for expressing an unreal hypothetical situation, such as expressing regret over something that could not have happened or a remote and imaginary opportunity. Both groups failed to come up with the appropriate modal in this context. They used either the simple present or the simple past of the modal expressing a real or a semi-real probability. Regarding the envisioned consequences of a highly likely event, both groups failed to use the appropriate modal. Most of them used the simple future modal will, a clear inference from Arabic, which has the form 'ـس', i.e. 'sa + verb in the present'. Both the English and the French majors had no difficulty using the appropriate expression with the appropriate modal in the first situation. Reporting something that was said

by someone else (i.e., in the indirect speech) posed no difficulty for the two sets of subjects. The second situation, which is essentially about a hypothetical event/ activity whose likeyhood is quite possible, posed serious difficulties for the English majors more than for the French majors. In the third situation, which was about regrets concerning hypothetical and highly unlikely to have happened, both groups found it difficult to come up with the appropriate response. This situation is based on the use of the 'If -clause type 3', which refers to a lost opportunity or a wish that had never been or would never be realized. The fourth situation pertains to a comment implying a high degree of uncertainty or to a statement that is meant to cast doubt on your 'knowledge' modality. This situation was found to be difficult for the English majors. The French majors did not have serious problems expressing themselves correctly in this situation. The fifth situation, which is somehow similar to the third situation, posed obvious difficulties to both groups of subjects. Both groups failed to come up with the appropriate modals in both hypothetical situations.

Finally, despite the relative little complexity of modals and conditionals in English and despite the fact that English is introduced to learners well before French, French learners seem to have a relatively better mastery of modals and conditionals. The researcher attributes this phenomenon to the textbooks in use and to classroom practices. He asserts that modals and conditionals should be taught in a pragmatically-oriented approach.

One further study was carried out in the University Putra Malaysia by Akbari (2008) under the title "Students' Use of Modals in Narrative Compositions: Forms and Functions". The aim of his study was to investigate the distribution and functions of modals used in the students' written narrative compositions. He used data from a corpus which consists of written and spoken data from students of three different levels: Primary 5, Form 1 and Form 4 in the Malaysian school system. For the purpose of this study, data from Form 1 and Form 4 students were used. The research design

comprised a qualitative technique through discourse analysis supplemented with some descriptive statistics. A total of 210 narrative compositions were selected and analyzed. The major findings of the study are as follows:

1. the most common modals used by the students were the modals of ability that include *can*, *could* and their negated forms.
2. the preferred modals for the two levels are *can*, *will* and *could* which were used to express ability and certainty.
3. Students were able to use modals that are not stipulated in the syllabus (*would* and *shall*), thus indicating learning of the modal auxiliary does not only happen in the classrooms.
4. Modals of probability and modals of necessity/certainty and obligation were minimally used.
5. Modals of probability/possibility showed lower frequencies of use in the writing.

This section presented a number of studies concerning modal verbs. The studies covered EFLstudents from different linguistic background they also dealt with different areas in modal verbs.

4. **Instruments**

4.1 **Composition**

The data collected by the instrument were taken from written answers to a composition test held in the academic year 2010- 2011 in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Alneelain University in which the students were asked to write a composition of not less than 250 words within two hours. The composition was entitled ' *Banning Smoking Cigarettes in Public Places Protects Health of the People*' The reason for selecting this kind of instrument is based on the

assumption that the students will be motivated to perform their best in free writing as compared with the direct grammatical questions.

4.2.The Students' Test

The researcher also designed a multiple-choice test for the students who were asked to choose the option, which they thought, was the correct answer.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Discussion of Students' Test

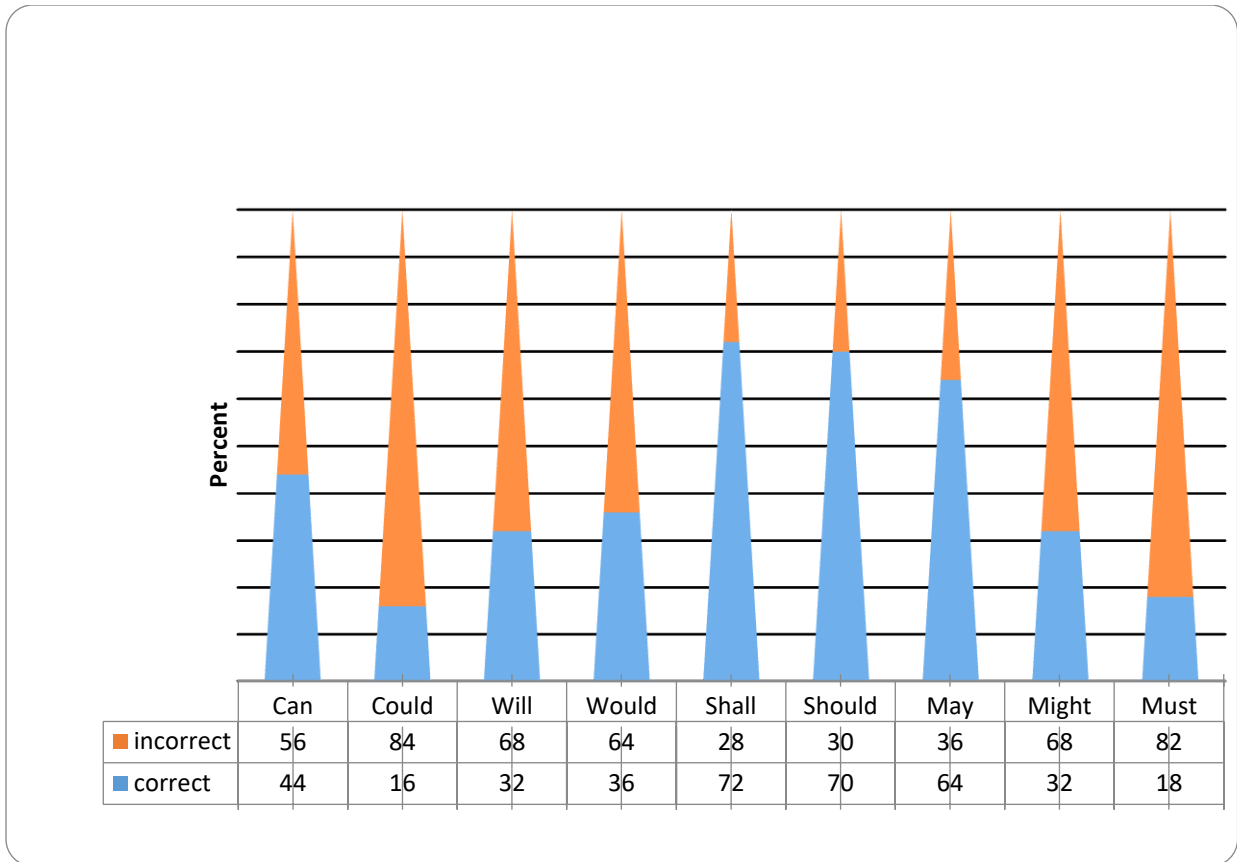The results are discussed in the light of the following aspects:

1. Frequencies of errors
2. Percentage of each type of errors

Each group of errors is separately tabulated, analyzed, and discussed to show the errors' distribution in the study.

Table (5.1): Students' Test: Correct and Incorrect Answers in Central Modals

Central Modals	Number of the Subjects	Correct Answers	Incorrect Answers
Can		44	56
Could		16	84
Will		32	68
Would		36	64
Shall	100	72	28
Should		70	30
May		64	36
Might		32	68
Must		18	82
Total		384	516

This table shows the frequency of the correct and incorrect answers in the students' test in relation to the central modals. The total number of the correct answers is 384 and the total number of the incorrect answers is 516.

	Can	Could	Will	Would	Shall	Should	May	Might	Must
■ incorrect	56	84	68	64	28	30	36	68	82
■ correct	44	16	32	36	72	70	64	32	18

Graph (5.1): Students' Test: Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Answers in Central Modals.
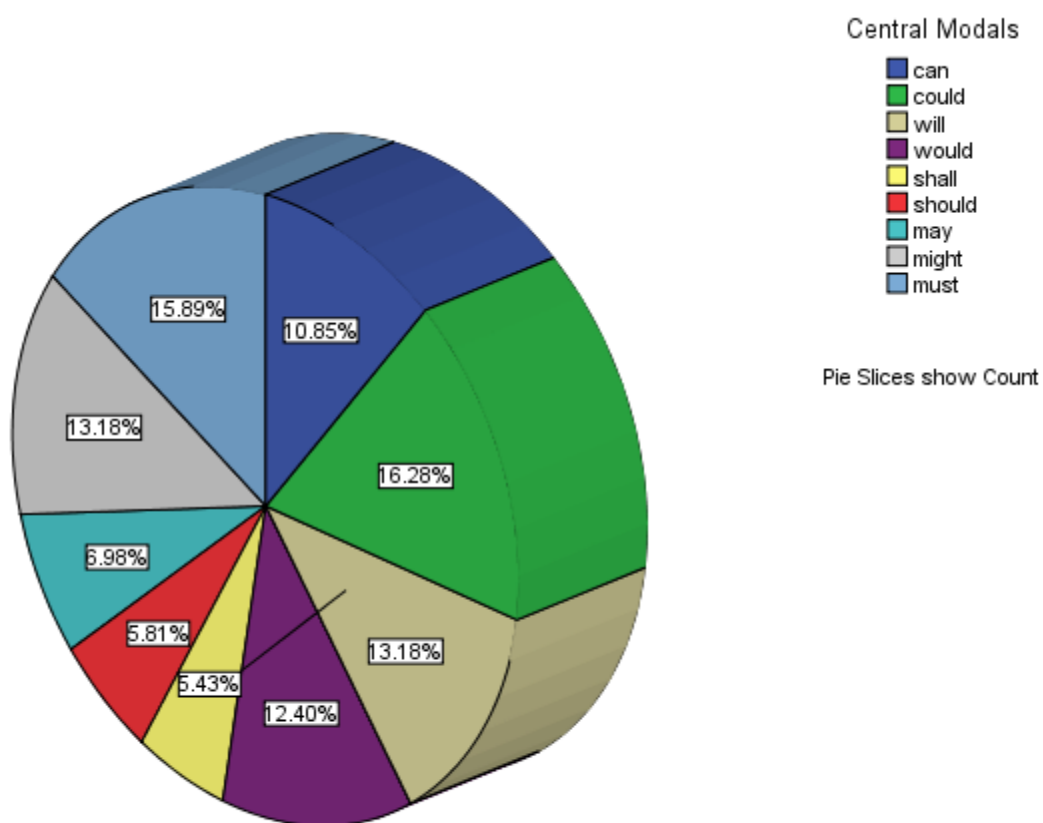
This graph shows the percentages of the correct answers and the incorrect answers for each of the central modals tested.

Table (5.2): Students' Test: Frequencies and Percentages of Central Modals' Errors in Relation to the Overall Percent

Central Modals	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Can	56	10.9	10.9	10.9
could	84	16.3	16.3	27.1
will	68	13.2	13.2	40.3
would	64	12.4	12.4	52.7

shall	28	5.4	5.4	58.1
should	30	5.8	5.8	64.0
may	36	7.0	7.0	70.9
might	68	13.2	13.2	84.1
must	82	15.9	15.9	100.0
Total	516	100.0	100.0	

This table shows the frequencies and percentages of each of the errors of central modals compared to the overall percent.

Graph (5.2): Students' Test: Percent of Errors in Central Modals

This graph shows the percentages of each error of central modals in the students' test.

All of the tables and graphs above indicate that there is a great tendency among the students not to use the central modals in the correct way. As is evident in table (2) the overall number of incorrect answers (516) is by far greater than the number of the correct answers (384). The same table also shows that the majority of the modals were incorrectly used by the students(6 out of 9).However, the frequency of central modals which were mostly used in a correct way by the students were comparatively low taking into account that the testees were fourth year students majoring in English, ranging between 64% and 72% .

5.2 Discussion of Students' Composition:

This section presents the analysis and discussion of data collected from the students' composition in which the subjects wrote a free 250-word essay. The composition was part of the final BA examination.

The data collected from the written work of the students is treated and discussed with reference to the frequency tables and pie charts below. Since the statistical outcome of the analysis is in percentage form, the treatment is made more rigorous by applying the One Sample k-S Test to ensure the normal distribution of data. The result of the test is presented in the tables and histograms with the curve of normal distribution. The results of central modals of auxiliaries confirm that the data is normally distributed.

Table (5.3): Students' Composition: Correct and Incorrect Usage of Central Modals

Central Modals	Occurrence	Correct	Incorrect
Can	74	58	16
Could	14	8	6
Will	74	50	24
Would	19	10	9
Shall	1	1	O
Should	86	53	33
May	18	13	5
Must	63	32	31
Total	339	215	124

This table shows the correct and incorrect occurrences of central modals in the students' composition.
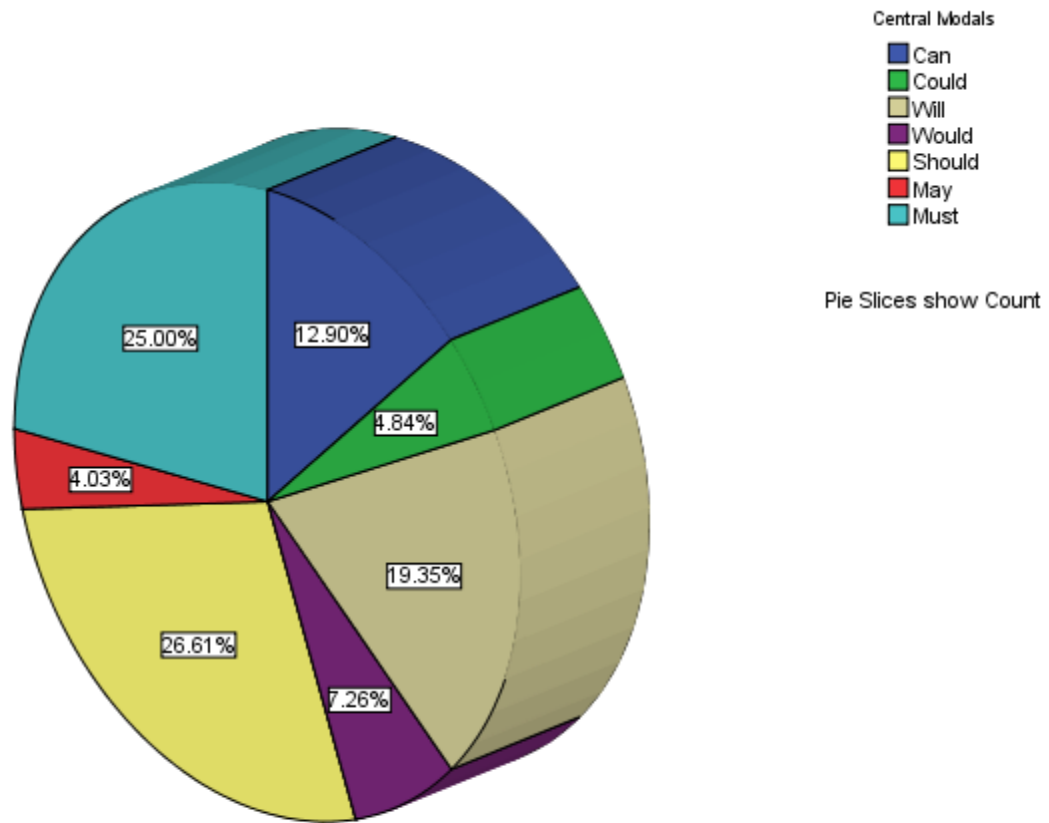
Graph (5.3): Students' Composition: Percentage of Errors in the Area of Central Modals

This graph shows the relationship of the errors made by the students in the usage of eight central modals *can, could, shall, should, will, would, may* and *must* expressed as percentages from the overall number of errors committed by the students in the area of central modals .

General Observations

The results in the above table and graphs show the performance of the students in the area of central modals. The results can be summarized as follows:

Can:

The percentage of the correct usages was 78.38% and the percentage of the incorrect usages was 21.62% .Even though can is one of the most frequently used central modals ,the percentage of errors committed by the students is relatively high ;taking into account the calbre of the students who wrote the composition. This indicates that the students do have a problem in using this central modal.

Could :

The percentage of the correct usages was 57. 15% whereas that of the incorrect usages was 42.85%. The figures show that the rate of the error frequency with regard to could is quite high; almost half of the occurrences in the whole data is incorrect, which an indication of this area being problematic for the students.

Will:

The percentage of the correct usages was 67.57% while the percentage of the incorrect usages amount to 32.43%. Bearing in mind that will is a very common central modal with a very high frequency, a ratio of nearly 1: 2 (incorrect to correct usages) can be considered as a serious sign of the inability of the students to appropriately use this significant central modal.

Would

The percentage of the correct usages was 52.63%. In contrast, the percentage of the incorrect usages was 47.37%. It is noteworthy that there is striking resemblance between the performance of the students in using would and could. The figures show that the performance of the students in connection with would is poor; nearly half of the occurrences of would is faulty, a thing which designates a problem that faces the students.

Shall

This central modal occurred only once in the whole data and that occurrence was correct. Although this might apparently seem to be a very peculiar phenomenon, it is actually justifiable for two reasons:(a) as an indicator for futurity, shall has long disappeared, and (b) shall is now used for a small number of language functions, e.g. suggestion, offers and strong obligation. For this specific situation (i.e. the students' composition test) the chances are that the legal register is not applicable here as well as the few language function mentioned above are not most likely to occur. So, it is not easy to decide on the students' ability to correctly use shall in free writing.

Should

The correct percentage of usage here was 61. 63% as apposed to 38, 37% for incorrect usage. It is clear that the percentage of errors exceeds more than

half of the correct usages of should .Taking into account the fact that the nature of the theme of the composition test (which was about smoking) calls for the usage of language functions such given advice, the percentage of errors can be considered a very high one. This can be taken as a sign of the students' weakness of using this central modal.

Must

The percentage of the correct usages of must was 50.79% whereas the percentage of the incorrect instances was 49.21%. By and large, the percentages of the correct and incorrect usages of must are equal. Like can the central modal must enjoys a very high frequency. The 49. 21% of the incorrect usage in the performance of students who are taking their final exam in their specialty is a very high one. This is an index of weakness in the performance of the students as regard to the central modal must.

May

The percentage of the correct usages of may was 72.22% while the percentage of the incorrect usages was 27.78%. Although the nature of the topic requires the students to use may for the expression of factual and theoretical possibility, the percentage of the incorrect usages can be considered very high in such situation. This is an indication of the students' weakness in this area.

Might

Might is one of the most delicate central modals that is used to express subtle nuances of meaning and functions such as doubt combined with possibility. This can explain the failure of the students to use this specific central modal throughout the entire data.

6. Summary, Conclusions, Recommendations and Suggestions

6.1 Conclusions

It has been proved that the majority of the students who study English as a foreign language face grave problems when using English auxiliary verbs, particularly the central modals. It has also been proved that teachers are of the attitude that central modals verbs are the most complicated areas for the students.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the objectives of this study and the answers to the research questions, the researcher makes the following recommendations, particularly addressed to the syllabus designers, teachers of English and EFL learners.

1. Textbooks' designers should provide for all the types of auxiliary verbs with concentration on the problematic areas that face the students as well as providing enough practice on them.
2. Teachers should give more concern to central modals as they do to other grammatical items in their teaching.
3. Teachers should concentrate on the nuances of meanings these modals convey because their functions and meanings overlap.
4. Provision of exercises which enhance the students' critical thinking and enable them to acquire the appropriate use of central Modals verbs from the various components of their specialty.

The methods and techniques of instruction at tertiary level should move away from the traditional lecture mode to a more communicative and interactive one. By the same token, the system of assessment and evaluations of the students' performance should match the communicative and interactive mode used in instruction. If this is true in all types of teaching, it is even more so in the area of auxiliary verbs.

6.3 Suggestions for Further Research

More focused research is needed to probe its varied aspects to come up with practical suggestions that can be applied in EFL classroom.

1. A comparative study between English and Arabic in the Sudanese context is needed in the area of auxiliary verbs in order to get to the origins of the problems and find solutions for them.
2. A more comprehensive study in English auxiliary verbs is needed in both basic and secondary levels so as to get to the roots of the problem and eradicate it before it worsens in higher education.
3. A similar study is needed to investigate the courses and materials used in teaching English language as a university requirement in all of the universities in Sudan. This acquires special attention in the case of the

Faculties of Arts and Education whose students will major in English language with special emphasis on auxiliary verbs.

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