

## **EFL Advanced Adult Learners' Use of English Modals in Narrative Composition**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study was conducted to investigate the use of modals in narrative writing of English for foreign advanced adult learners. This study had two objectives: first, to determine the distribution pattern of modals and, second, to see if the participants used the modals accurately in their compositions. This was a learner corpus study, based on students' writings. The participants in this research were 136 randomly selected adult advanced learners attending English learning programs in six English institutions in Shiraz, Iran. The data used in this study were obtained from the written data consisting of compositions, which volunteers need to write. The study applied the qualitative method, which was supplemented with some descriptive statistics from a concordance. The WordSmith Tools, Version 4.0, was used for the purpose of this research. It was found that there were some discrepancies in the frequency of modals used by native speakers and the ones used by our EFL advanced students. In addition, students were rather competent in producing modals syntactically but simplification features were also detected in these learners' compositions as a means to overcome their limitations in using modals in English.

*Keywords:* EFL learners, Corpus linguistics, Discourse analysis, Narrative writing

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Learners having problems in writing may encounter a number of difficulties in various facets of writing, including the appropriate use of grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some other basic and initial aspects of writing (Ghabool, Edwina, &

Kashef, 2012). In this research, however, modals have been chosen as one of the most problematic grammatical items. These problematic features of modals, as mentioned by some researchers and linguists (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Hoyer, 1997; Thornbury 1999; Wong, 1983), are attributed to a number of factors, including the forms and semantic functions of modals, the deficiency of a thorough description of their pragmatic use in grammar books, especially textbook materials, teachers' lack of proper knowledge of conveying modals to students, and, finally, the lack of learners' exposure to the matter.

Concerning their form and meaning, modals play a crucial role in learners' language application. However, literature has revealed the fact that ESL/EFL students encounter difficulties in terms of comprehending and applying the English modal system correctly (Khojasteh, 2011; Khojasteh & Kafipour, 2012a, 2012b). The problem lies in the surface locations of the modals, their wide range of meanings, and in associating the right modals with the right meanings (Cook, 1978). Wong (1983) also says that the English language system of modal auxiliaries is so complex that the same modals are utilized in order to express various notions of "possibility," "certainty," "probability," "ability," "obligation," "permission" and "inclination." Besides, although the modals are often used to make requests or offers, or express obligation, necessity, etc., their semantic complexities have posed a challenge to both semantic theory (Boyd & Thorne, 1969; Marino,

1973) and descriptive grammar (Palmer, 1965; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985).

As evident from the above discussion, not only modal forms, but also their semantic functions are troublesome for teachers, particularly when they try to convey knowledge on modals to their ESL students (Palmer, 1990). This fact might have been emphasized by previous pieces of research, which concluded that textbooks do not precisely exhibit modals (Hyland, 1994; McEnery & Kifle, 2002). In short, modal auxiliaries are considered difficult structures for learners that have often been misconceived in English language textbooks. Furthermore, Hyland (1994) offers the following conclusions: "For the most part, modal expressions are simply introduced without system or comment and are summarily dealt with in a single exercise which fails to emphasize either their function or importance. Generally, the range of modal verbs addressed and the information provided on their use is inadequate" (p. 247). Moreover, according to Wong (1983), another reason that makes learning modals difficult for learners may be the learners' limited exposure to various modal verbs and their applications, leading to an excessive use by teachers of one form or function in comparison with others. Since modal auxiliaries are very difficult, they are more likely to be specifically impacted by the input and instruction quality learners receive on them (Khojasteh & Reinders, 2013).

In order to mitigate the uneasiness regarding the use of modals, conducting a corpus-based study on learners' production may meet the ends of language teaching. Such a study will be able to push learners toward a standardized form of language use and communicative competence. Moreover, if the major purpose of EFL teaching is for learners to communicate effectively and accurately, it is of utmost importance for them to be exposed to the full set of meanings that focal modals can have. As such, Mukundan and Khojasteh (2011) advocated the significance of learners' exposure to different modal phrase structures so that they can effectively communicate in various situations.

It is vital to undertake this research since: a) textbook writers might provide learners with incorrect information regarding the range of modal language available to them; b) many grammarians and applied linguistic researchers emphasize the fact that modal auxiliary verbs are considered one of the most problematic structures to be used by second and foreign language learners and to be taught by teachers whose first language is not English; and c) students' abilities to understand and use modals appropriately play an important role in their academic success, and, finally; d) despite their obvious importance, there has been surprisingly little research on errors learners make while using the language in Iran.

Consequently, the current study was conducted to determine the distribution pattern of modals. Additionally, the researchers attempted to find out whether

participants used the modals accurately with respect to their syntactic features in their compositions. This corpus-based study is an attempt to provide researchers with an overview of the difficulties the learners' encounter while using modals auxiliaries. Thus, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the usage patterns of modal auxiliaries by advanced adult EFL learners of English?
2. What types of errors do advanced adult learners of English make in their use of modal auxiliaries?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tenuta, Oliveira and Orfanó (2012) in Brazil, in a comparative study, analyzed the application of modal auxiliaries between a learner corpus of Brazilian Learners of English (CABrI) and the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS). CABrI consists of academic essays written by advanced students from the Liberal Arts course. Till the date of the investigation, CABrI included around 36,187 words. The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays contains essays written by American and British speakers, ranging from academic to literary texts. The selected texts for composing the sub-corpus belonged to the American argumentative section. The LOCNESS sub-corpus used in this study contained 60,241 words. The result of analysis showed the predominance of epistemic modals in both corpora, with differences in the expression of this type of modality. In the corpus of non-native

speakers, there was a greater variety of modal verbs, whereas in the corpus of native speakers, there was predominance of adverbs with modal meanings.

In a study by Manaf (2007) in Malaysia, the use of modals was investigated in two written tasks by Form 4 Malaysian secondary school ESL learners. This study was done with the purpose of examining English modal utilization at the syntactic and semantic levels. The data for this study was made available by the EMAS Corpus. The results demonstrated that the two modals, *would* and *shall*, which were not required in the syllabus, were found in the narrative compositions. The secondary school English Language syllabus indicated the attribution of distinct meanings to the modals; however, the study revealed that the students frequently applied only a few similar modals for these various functions. The outcome of the study revealed insufficiencies in the syllabus as reason students encountered problems.

Kader, Beigi and Vaseghi (2013) applied Form 4 and college students' argumentative compositions, which were extracted from the Malaysian Corpus of Students' Argumentative Writing (MCSAW). The population for this study was drawn from Malaysian ESL learners. The corpus for this study included 406,500 running words (tokens), which were picked to determine the utility of English modals regarding their functions and frequency. A total of 1,010 students (404 males and 606 females) wrote compositions. In order to analyze the collected data, this research made use

of discourse analysis and some descriptive statistics using WordSmith Tools, Version 4.0. The results of the study showed that, in argumentative compositions, Form 4 and College students used *can* and *will* more frequently compared to the other modals. In addition, the results revealed greater use of the present tense form of modals than their past tense form. Finally, it was also shown that the most frequently applied modals in Form 4 and College students' compositions were the modals of "ability." For the sake of teaching and learning improvement and an effective application of modal auxiliaries among ESL learners, all the central modals must be emphasized repetitively to enhance students' perception of modal functions.

Mukundan, Saadullah, Ismail, and Zasenawi (2013) studied the use of modals in argumentative written tasks among Form 5 Malaysian secondary school ESL students. The data used in this study was gathered from the MCSAW (Malaysian Corpus of Students' Argumentative Writing) Corpus. The corpus consists of 406,500 running words (tokens). The compositions were written by 1010 students. The sample size of the sub-corpus was determined in accordance with Krejcie and Morgan (1970). The purpose of the study was to investigate the application of English modals at the syntactic level from data presented in the MCSAW Corpus. The research was conducted using a qualitative technique through discourse analysis, assisted by a concordant descriptive statistics. The research findings exhibited that Malaysian students did not have much problem utilizing

modal verbs grammatically in argumentative writing. It was also found that Malaysian students tend to use a lot of modals in their writings, allowing the conclusion that in spite of semantic incorrectness majority of students could use syntactically accurate modals in their statements.

Viana (2006) was concerned with the use of modals in compositions by Brazilian advanced EFL learners. To this end, compositions written in English were collected from three private language schools situated in six different parts of the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. As the study focused only on advanced students, only those who were attending the last two terms in each of the three language courses were selected as participants. The collected compositions varied greatly in terms of their length. The shortest one had 112 words and the longest, 478 (average 288 words). As the research corpus was compared to the academic prose register studied by Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan (1999), the divergence became apparent, with findings indicating that the participants wrote in a non-proficient way, contradicting previous expectations.

McDouall (2015) argued that, although searching into the L2 acquisition of modality was usual, there are few studies about the L2 acquisition of English modal auxiliaries for adult Korean learners. Through a corpus-based study, he attempted to fill this gap by determining how English modal auxiliaries are applied by adult learners of English with a Korean L1 background (L2-learners).

To this end, two corpora were used: a) the Sookmyung University Corpus of Advanced L2 English (SMU corpus), compiled by Bill Rago of Sookmyunh University, in Seoul, and b) the Yonsei University Corpus of L2 English at intermediate level (Yonsei corpus), compiled at Yonsei University in Wonju. The corpora were collected by collating soft-copies of assignments which learners completed in their course. The SMU corpus consisted of written assignments by Korean graduate students completing an MA in TESOL at Sookmyung Women's University, while the Yonsei corpus consisted of written assignments by Korean undergraduate students completing lower-intermediate to upper-intermediate conversation and writing courses. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008) was used as a reference. A part of written academic English by speakers of American English consisting of almost 86 million words was, in particular, employed for comparison. The tools used to examine the SMU and Yonsei corpora were AntConc 3.2.4w, and the Stanford POS tagger. The study suggested a qualitative interpretation of the data, referring to typological distinctions which existed between usage of modals which influence modal application, and cognitive factors which influence adult SLA of English and Korean systems.

Khojasteh and Reinders (2013) pointed out that modal auxiliary verbs (e.g. could, might) were cases of a problematic structure for many learners. They were both

particularly complex semantically and there was no one-to-one correspondence with the students' L1, especially in the context of Malaysian learners. In other words, they are good examples of a structure for which successful acquisition depends to a large extent on the quality of the input and instruction. Their study analyzed 230,000 word corpora of Malaysian English textbooks and showed that the relative frequency of the modals differed with that of the native speaker corpora (e.g. with British National Corpus, hereafter BNC). Khojasteh and Reinders (2013) also compared the learner corpus of Malaysian Form 4 learners with the textbook corpus and concluded that no direct relationship existed between the frequency of presentation of modal auxiliaries in the textbooks and their use by students in their writing. They also reported presence of a very large percentage of errors in their written work.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Design**

The design of this research is discourse analysis using qualitative techniques to: a) identify the forms depicted by modals; and b) find out whether the modals used are accurate syntactically and whether students are using other alternatives in instances where modals are absent or inappropriately used. The research was supplemented with descriptive statistics derived from a concordance in order to identify the distribution of modals used by students in writing.

### **Participants**

As mentioned earlier, this is a learner corpus study based on students' writing. The participants in this research were 136 randomly selected adult advanced learners attending English learning programs in six English institutions in Shiraz. Participation in this research project was voluntary. Students of all classes were given a volunteer sign-up sheet to acknowledge willingness to participate.

### **Instrument**

The WordSmith Tools, Version 4.0, consisting of Concord, WordList, and Keywords was used in this research. Another instrument used in this study was the students' narrative writings. In order to build this learner corpus, each student's composition was typed carefully and converted into a Tagged Image File (TIF) format. The files were then saved and put through the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software which converted all TIF files into text files (.txt). The .txt files were then saved and renamed according to the individual student's compositions. These .txt files were then analysed using WordSmith.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The purpose of this study is to detect, understand and gain insight into how EFL students used modals in their written work. Data was obtained from the written compositions. Furthermore, since the occurrence of tenses and aspects in a discourse are likely to be influenced by

its genre (Lenko-Szymanska, 2007), the decision to choose narratives—both fiction and non-fiction— allows for wider scope in investigating modal auxiliaries used in the past and present tenses. Therefore, “The Happiest Day of My Life” was chosen as a topic as it gave students a choice to either describe a non-fictional happy day or write a piece of fiction, in the form of a short story. It is important to note that all the compositions were written in the classroom (without using a dictionary) under the supervision of the students’ English teacher and one of the researchers of this study.

#### Data Analysis Procedure

For the first research question, “What are the usage patterns of modal auxiliaries used by advanced adult learners of English?”, the frequency count was obtained by keying in nine central modals for the grammatical data to be further analyzed. For the second research question, “What types of errors do advanced adult learners of English make in their use of modal auxiliaries?”, the researchers only focused on the grammatical accuracies and inaccuracies in the sentences constructed with modals by the EFL advanced learners. This analysis was based on the framework adopted by Mindt (1995):

- (a) Modal + bare infinitive (e.g. We will miss you)
- (b) Modal + passive infinitive (e.g. It will be published)
- (c) Modal + progressive infinitive (e.g. You’ll not be seeing him anymore)
- (d) Modal + perfect infinitive (e.g. The total population will have increased)
- (e) Modal + perfect passive infinitive (e.g. No harm will have been done)

Based on the above-mentioned structures, the researchers coded the occurrence of each modal auxiliary. Code was assigned for *C* (Accurate Syntactically) and *In* (Inaccurate Syntactically). This can be seen in the sample shot below which shows the accurate and inaccurate coding of the modal *can*. After coding, which in itself was analytical, the researchers undertook several additional steps. These steps, too, were taken within the framework of the research question. At first, the findings identified during the coding were summarized and then the patterns were identified and articulated. Then, these patterns were compared and contrasted with the results of major corpus-based findings on modal verb phrase structures such as Kennedy’s (2002), and Mindt’s (2000, 1995).

N	Concordance	Set	Tag	Word #	t.	#	os	#	os	#	os	File	%
1	years ago. When my father told me you can enter to your favorite school. That	22	1	2%	0	6%	0	6%	0	6%	0	g:\note\97.txt	25%
2	day in your life. I become happy that can help another person. Time of that my	10	1	7%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	g:\note\92.txt	20%
3	god and I may become happy. And I can hear sounds my emotion.	152	10	0%	0	7%	0	7%	0	7%	0	g:\note\90.txt	96%
4	He might not be alive any more. I can talk with my god and I may become	140	9	3%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	g:\note\90.txt	89%
5	into water and saved him. Then he can breathe. He might not be alive any	130	8	0%	0	3%	0	3%	0	3%	0	g:\note\90.txt	82%
6	more. I know that I can do my job and I can be a doctor I am happy and if I study	21	1	1%	0	3%	0	3%	0	3%	0	g:\note\90.txt	13%
7	be pessimistic any more. I know that I can do my job and I can be a doctor I am	15	1	1%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	g:\note\90.txt	10%
8	future. So by achieving to their wishes I can thank them for every thing. But I	87	6	4%	0	6%	0	6%	0	6%	0	g:\note\9.txt	83%
9	life. And when I become a dentist and I can get my first salary I could help to	29	2	3%	0	9%	0	9%	0	9%	0	g:\note\9.txt	28%
10	If I pass in university entrance exam I can be a successful person. It is the	8	0	7%	0	8%	0	8%	0	8%	0	g:\note\9.txt	8%
11	I have not a lot of days like that, so I can speak about this in summer or in	19	0	0%	0	7%	0	7%	0	7%	0	g:\note\89.txt	15%
12	I go to the very good university. When I can make my mother happy. Because	18	1	0%	0	1%	0	1%	0	1%	0	g:\note\87.txt	22%
13	them! Tomorrow we went swim. I can not forget this note and may be my	84	9	1%	0	8%	0	8%	0	8%	0	g:\note\86.txt	89%
14	We won't be the same as each other. I can not possible. We should think to	73	6	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	g:\note\85.txt	68%
15	I don't have any hope in my life... I can not say my feeling I might impose	42	2	4%	0	4%	0	4%	0	4%	0	g:\note\83.txt	68%
16	son was born I became so happy and I can not forge that day. Babies are gift	11	0	3%	0	4%	0	4%	0	4%	0	g:\note\81.txt	12%
17	the big test I have more free time and I can doing more thing in free times & the	98	6	2%	0	4%	0	4%	0	4%	0	g:\note\80.txt	73%
18	The nearest day in the future that I can mention, is the day that I graduate	30	2	3%	0	3%	0	3%	0	3%	0	g:\note\80.txt	23%
19	a day that I finish my education then I can do what ever I want to do.	128	7	2%	0	4%	0	4%	0	4%	0	g:\note\8.txt	95%
20	leave this boring country. You know if I can go to the other country I will be	102	7	5%	0	5%	0	5%	0	5%	0	g:\note\8.txt	77%
21	in my whole life. The other thing that can make me happy is leaving Iran. I	78	5	0%	0	7%	0	7%	0	7%	0	g:\note\6.txt	58%
22	don't study. I want to find a day that I can have some time to get some rest. If I	44	3	9%	0	2%	0	2%	0	2%	0	g:\note\6.txt	30%

Figure 1. The snapshot of search result for modal “can”

### Inter-rater Reliability

Reliability has been defined as the extent to which a measuring procedure yields the same results following repeated trials (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). When a coding system is applied by a human coder in content analysis, Neuendorf (2002) believes that at least one more coder is required to provide validation of the coding scheme. The criteria for choosing a coder for this study was the fact that this study was chiefly concerned with grammatical aspects, requiring, as a coder, an experienced English teacher who had mastery over grammar. Hence, in this study a reliable coder was chosen to work on the corpus besides the researchers. The inter-coder reliability was checked with the Cohen Kappa coefficient, where higher values indicates better reliability. For this study, a TEFL PhD student at Tehran University, with more than nine years of experience in teaching English, was chosen. He was the most qualified person for this academic task because he taught writing and analyzed different grammatical aspects

in students' compositions at the Master's and PhD levels.

The analysis of coding took two months for the inter-coder to code the entire data. Once the coding was done, SPSS was run to calculate the Kappa value. By convention, a Kappa > 0.70 is considered an acceptable inter-rater reliability. The Kappa value for modal verb phrase structures was 100% and for semantic functions 90%.

### RESULTS

The analysis of data is explained in detail below according to the research questions.

#### Research Question One

What are the usage patterns of modal auxiliaries used by advanced adult learners of English?

For this question, the researchers first keyed in nine modal auxiliary verbs including their negative forms one by one to study their distribution within EFL advanced learner corpus.

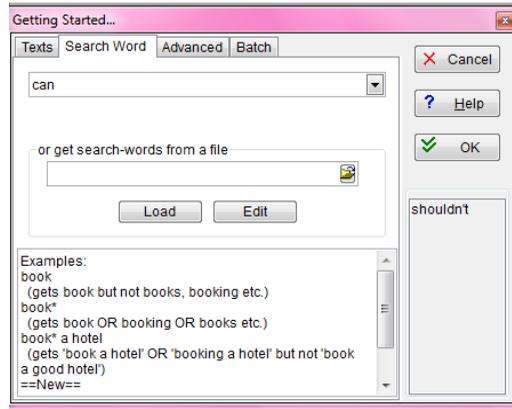


Figure 2. The snapshot of Search word “can”

The modal auxiliary can was keyed in (Figure 2) and then the negated forms cannot, and can't were tagged, as seen in the sample shot below (Figure 3). As shown,

in the case of modal can, there were only 25 instances of the modal can not although this kind of spelling is not the preferred one. There were no instances of the modal can't.

N	Concordance	Set	Tag	Word #	t	# os	f	# os	f	# os	t	# os	f	File	%
1	was so boring. I hate this days you can not trust nobody and nothing. All	N		21	2	8%	0	2%	0	2%	0	2%	0	g:\note\39.txt	19%
2	you never think they will go and you can not be with them forever. Being with	N		121	4	0%	0	8%	0	8%	0	8%	0	g:\note\46.txt	88%
3	So it might dangerous for us. We can not understood what they want to	N		86	6	0%	0	3%	0	3%	0	3%	0	g:\note\45.txt	84%
4	grand father opened his eyes and we can not imagine he got better. That day	N		81	9	7%	0	5%	0	5%	0	5%	0	g:\note\30.txt	85%
5	I can not say! Student in this situation can not answer this question! What can	N		9	1	0%	0	7%	0	7%	0	7%	0	g:\note\8.txt	7%
6	We won't be the same as each other. It can not possible. We should think to	N		73	6	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	g:\note\85.txt	68%
7	learning how to drive is so hard and I can not learn it. One day I decided to	N		31	2	2%	0	9%	0	9%	0	9%	0	g:\note\24.txt	27%
8	I saw imam reza I become very happy. I can not said anything because I always	N		10	1	1%	0	7%	0	7%	0	7%	0	g:\note\31.txt	15%
9	I don't have any hope in my life... I can not say my feeling I might improve	N		42	2	4%	0	4%	0	4%	0	4%	0	g:\note\83.txt	68%
10	I can not say! Student in this situation ca	N		2	0	0%	0	1%	0	1%	0	1%	0	g:\note\8.txt	0%
11	something and I didn't know what.now I can not trust no body.i should think	N		40	2	3%	0	5%	0	5%	0	5%	0	g:\note\118.txt	34%
12	He knew that the things that I can not say them he could feel them	N		24	2	1%	0	9%	0	9%	0	9%	0	g:\note\71.txt	29%
13	son was born I became so happy and I can not forge that day. Babies are gift	N		11	0	3%	0	4%	0	4%	0	4%	0	g:\note\81.txt	12%
14	teacher that I have had up to now. I can not forget that day and my teacher	N		83	7	7%	0	5%	0	5%	0	5%	0	g:\note\4.txt	78%
15	and they walked in my neve. Actually I can not tolerated them any more our lov	N		44	2	1%	0	6%	0	6%	0	6%	0	g:\note\59.txt	55%
16	day will be my best day in my life and I can not wait for it.	N		104	4	7%	0	6%	0	6%	0	6%	0	g:\note\42.txt	96%
17	now I just work and work and work. I can not do whatever I did on those days.	N		72	6	7%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	g:\note\67.txt	89%
18	know why god created world I know I can not interfered to gods work but I am	N		54	4	1%	0	6%	0	6%	0	6%	0	g:\note\39.txt	56%
19	I could not see my parents tears. I can not talk or did nothing because I was	N		16	1	5%	0	5%	0	5%	0	5%	0	g:\note\36.txt	25%
20	I like to achieve to every thing may be i can not achieve to every thing. I do not	N		77	4	1%	0	2%	0	2%	0	2%	0	g:\note\2.txt	80%
21	better in future. now i'm writing these i can not imagine that i am so good.	N		98	1	3%	0	3%	0	3%	0	3%	0	g:\note\119.txt	93%
22	good partly I like win the game, but I can not win the game so I came to	N		73	3	9%	0	8%	0	8%	0	8%	0	g:\note\101.txt	77%
23	university. I won't afraid of somebody i can not let anybody make some	N		98	2	0%	0	5%	0	5%	0	5%	0	g:\note\118.txt	84%
24	them! Tomorrow we went swim. I can not forgot this note and may be my	N		84	9	1%	0	8%	0	8%	0	8%	0	g:\note\86.txt	89%
25	suddenly we understood that the car can not move so my father called	N		117	6	7%	0	2%	0	2%	0	2%	0	g:\note\50.txt	71%
26	That is so amazing. Believe me. you can try it. May be you accept my idea	N		78	7	1%	0	7%	0	7%	0	7%	0	g:\note\37.txt	86%
27	future. So by achieving to their wishes I can thank them for every thing. But I	N		87	6	4%	0	6%	0	6%	0	6%	0	g:\note\9.txt	83%
28	can be your best day in life and you can thank god for having good and health	N		69	1	5%	0	8%	0	8%	0	8%	0	g:\note\105.txt	78%
29	He might not be alive any more. I can talk with my god and I may become	N		140	9	3%	0	8%	0	8%	0	8%	0	g:\note\90.txt	89%
30	accepted in medical university. then I can take my degree and go to the	N		94	6	7%	0	8%	0	8%	0	8%	0	g:\note\7.txt	79%
31	for us. We went to the pool and can swam here. There was a water park	N		62	6	0%	0	3%	0	3%	0	3%	0	g:\note\3.txt	64%
32	day. I should accepted in university. I can study book more for accepting it.	N		21	3	3%	0	9%	0	9%	0	9%	0	g:\note\104.txt	49%

Figure 3. The snapshot of search result for modal “can”

The rest of the modals including their negation forms were keyed in one by one.

The results can be seen in the following table.

Table 1  
The distribution of modal auxiliary verbs in EFL learner corpus

Modal	Frequency	Total
Can	68	93
Cannot	25	
Can't	0	
Could	66	89
Could not	20	
Couldn't	3	
Will	73	78
Will not	1	
Won't	4	
Should	50	63
Should not	13	
Shouldn't	0	
Would	31	34
Would not	3	
Wouldn't	0	
May	28	32
May not	5	
Might	17	28
Might not	11	
Must	11	12
Must not	1	
Mustn't	0	
Shall	0	0
Shall not	0	

Table 1 shows in the descending order the modals used by EFL advanced students were *can* (93 instances), *could* (89), *will* (78), *should* (63), *would* (34), *may* (32), *might* (28), and *must* (12). Out of 9 modal auxiliaries, there was only the modal, shall, which has not been used even once by our EFL learners. It is worth mentioning that of all the negative forms, the most used modal is *can* with 25 instances, followed by *could* by 23 instances, *should* with 13, *might* with

11, *will* and *may* with 5, *would* with 3, and *must* with 1 instance.

## Research Question Two

What types of errors do advanced adult learners of English make in their use of modal auxiliaries?

To get to the root of the above classification in terms of EFL advanced learners, the researchers examined all the sentences in which there was a modal including the negation form to find the inaccurate verb form in each sentence. For example, in one of the sentences that one EFL advanced student wrote, "mashhad was a big city so we might lost some places", the researchers considered this as an inaccurate sentence and tagged it as IN (stands for inaccurate) in the concordance line in WordSmith software. Based on Mindt classification, the results are presented in the following table.

Table 2  
Distribution of syntactically accurate and inaccurate modals

Modals	Accurate	Inaccurate
Can/Cannot/can't	82	11
Will/ will not/ won't	63	15
Could/Could not/ couldn't	75	14
May/May not	27	5
Should/ should not/ shouldn't	52	11
Would/ would not/ wouldn't	32	2
must/ must not/ mustn't	10	2
Might/ might not	23	5
Shall/ shan't	0	0
Total	364	65

As it can be seen in the Table 2, 364 out of 429 modals used by EFL advanced students were syntactically accurate and 65 modals were syntactically inaccurate which make about 15.15% of the all the modal tokens that were used. This shows that Iranian advanced EFL students are somewhat competent in using modal verbs. However, when the errors are analyzed further, it was revealed that the majority of the errors occurred with the verb forms where the basic form of the verb should have been used after the modal verb. These errors can be seen in the following sample sentences.

- (1) May be I could accepted in Olympiad.
- (2) It might been a little strange for you, but my phone ring and they told me that I won a prize in the lottery.
- (3) I will liked to go to the Azad University but my father dislikes it.

So we can see here that this type of error is categorized into: modal + wrong verb forms: non-infinitives. 7 out of 11 errors made in the case of can were in this category. The other 4 errors belonged to this category: modal+ a non-verb word/ lack of verb.

This can be seen in the following sample sentences.

- (4) It can not possible.
- (5) I can no trust nobody.
- (6) think the characteristic of people can a good reason for being happy.

These two types of errors are also common in terms of other modals. For example, in terms of *will*, 11 of the errors belonged to modal + wrong verb forms: non-infinitives category and 4 of them again belonged to modal+ a non-verb word/ lack of verb category.

- (7) My sister is very clever and she will gets an important person for my work.
- (8) ... and I know it will comes as soon as my imagination.
- (9) I will happier than now.

Since the same is true in terms of other modals, there is an attempt to avoid repetition. . The researchers also checked on the kind of modals advanced EFL students used in each category related to Mindt's (1995) classification. The results are shown below.

Table 3  
*Result of syntactically accurate and inaccurate modals*

Modal	Type a Modal + bare inf	Type b Modal + passive inf	Type c Modal + progressive inf	Type d Modal + perfect inf	Type e Modal + perfect passive inf
Can	82	0	0	0	0
Will	67	0	0	0	0
Would	32	0	0	0	0
Could	87	0	0	0	0
Should	39	0	0	2	0
May	22	0	0	0	0
Must	8	0	0	0	0
Might	18	0	0	0	0
Shall	0	0	0	0	0

As it can be seen here, the only type that advanced EFL students have used in their sentences is “type a” which is Modal + bare infinitive. Only in the case of *should*, two instances were found in which EFL learners have used “type d” which is Modal + perfect infinitive. These two sentences are presented here:

(10) so I should have tried a lot.

(11) but I should have left my family and go to USA.

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The first item that looked at in analyzing modal auxiliary verbs was the distribution of nine modal auxiliary verbs in the advanced EFL corpus. This section summarizes the findings for this research question and discusses the results.

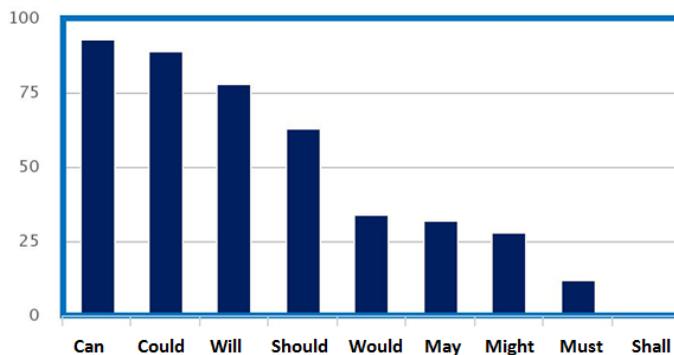


Figure 4. The frequency of modal auxiliaries

Figure 4 shows that, at the advanced level, EFL students are capable of using various modal forms (except *shall*) in their narrative compositions. There were altogether 429 instances of nine modals in this learner corpus. Of all, the modals *can*, *could*, *will* and *should* were the leading modals altogether used 323 times in advanced EFL learner's compositions, accounting for 75% of all modal tokens in this corpus. *Would*, *may* and *might* with 34, 32 and 28 hits were almost one-third of all modal tokens, accounting for 21%. *Must* (had 12 hits) and *shall* was not been even used once in this learner corpus. Considering the pairs of modal auxiliary verbs, the past tense was less frequent than their partners in all cases except for *shall/should*.

Although care should be taken when making comparisons between large corpora of native speakers and a small corpus, our findings are not consistent with the distribution usage of modals used by native speakers in the most famous reference corpora available. That is, British National Corpus (BNC), the corpus of Survey of English Usage (SEU), the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus (LOB), and the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English corpus (LGSWE). However, it is worth mentioning that since the researchers did not have any access to these corpora, all the data available in the literature review regarding modal auxiliaries were used for the purpose of analysis. In the study conducted by Kennedy (2002) on modal auxiliaries in BNC, the four most used modals by native speakers were *will*, *would*, *can* and *could* in

narrative writing. Likewise, Coates (1983) reported that *would*, *will*, *can* and *could* accounted for 71.4% of all modals. Hence, the modal *would*, which is supposed to be one of the most frequent modals in written English, stands in the 5<sup>th</sup> place, with only 34 stances. In contrast, we see that *could* has been overused by advanced EFL learners because its usage should come only after *will*, *would* and *can*. The distribution of other modals were compared with Quirk Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985, p. 136) and Coates (1983) and is presented here in descending order: *will*, *would*, *can*, *could*, *should*, *must*, *may*, *might* and *shall*. In which case, the modal *should* has also been overused by our EFL learners, when it should have been underused as done by native speakers. The discrepancy between the ways in which advanced level learners in Iran have used modals is consistent with the results of Khojasteh and Reinders (2013) regarding Malaysian advanced level learners.

The data also showed that EFL advanced learners preferred to use present tense modals than the past form. This finding is supported by Biber et al. (2002), who report that present tense modals are more frequent than their counterparts except in the case of *should*. Mindt (1995) claimed that *should*, the past tense of *shall*, is used more in writing. Taking the modals' semantic functions into account, however, the degree of "probability" in the case of modal *could* is more prevalent than *can*. In the two sentences, "She *can* go" and "She *could* go (if she wants to)", the degree

of “probability” of *could* is greater than *can*. This pragmatic function should have been acquired by the time English learners reached advanced levels (Vethamani, Manaf & Akbari, 2008). However, since the difference in the use of *can* and *could* was found to be negligible in this study, we can perhaps assume that advanced students are not far behind in using the modal *could* compared to *can*.

Studying the type of errors advanced EFL students made in their compositions with regard to modal auxiliaries showed that at the syntactic level, students did not have major problems producing modals. This result is supported by Mukundan, Saadullah, Ismail, and Zasenawi (2013), who found that Malaysian Master’s students did not have much difficulty in producing grammatically correct modals. In another study, by Vethamani et al. (2008), the same conclusion was reached, indicating that students at higher levels were able to use various modals in their narrative compositions. However, what emerged from this finding is that except for two instances (*should*), all other modals were used in “type a” (Modal + bare infinitive). Thus suggesting that the absence of too many errors by advanced EFL students should not be considered as a promising result because an avoidance strategy may have accounted for low frequency of errors. Wong (1983) refers to this as a simplification technique by which ESL learners use alternatives to overcome their inadequacy in L2 in relation to the use of modals. Oxford (1990) supports this view, indicating

that L2 learners adopt certain strategies to overcome their limitations in learning a second language. The adoption of strategies is due to the students’ motivation to learn a second language and find alternatives faced with obstacles in their learning process. Moreover, the use of strategies indicates conscious learning and students’ awareness of the learning process (Kafipour et al., 2010, 2011). This phenomenon accelerates learning as supported by a study conducted by Manaf (2007) on Malaysian students.

## CONCLUSION

This study had two objectives: to determine the distribution pattern of modals, and examine whether participants used the modals accurately in their compositions. The researchers aimed to study the difficulties that advanced EFL learners could encounter while using modal auxiliaries. The results for the first objective showed that there were some discrepancies in the frequency of modals used by native speakers and the ones used by advanced EFL students. For example, *would*, which is one of the most frequently used modals by native speakers, was not used frequently by our learners. Accordingly, we can say that the use of modal auxiliary verbs in our learners’ compositions do not really represent their use in natural English. To see the type of errors students made in their composition regarding modal auxiliaries, the researchers found that students were rather competent in producing modals syntactically although simplification features were also detected in these learners’ compositions.

## IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

With regard to modal auxiliaries, the results of this learner corpus study revealed how advanced EFL students used modal auxiliaries in their narrative compositions. The process would ultimately help teachers to make the best use of a textbook's strong points and recognize the shortcomings of certain exercises, tasks, and entire texts. Furthermore, when one modal auxiliary is introduced to students, teachers should make sure that the modal is featured repetitively in order to enhance the students' understanding before it fades away from their memories. The results of this study can help EFL teachers make sure their advanced students, who represent proficient English learners, are competent enough to write English fluently, especially in academic settings. Textbook writers, too can benefit from the results of this study when designing and planning their lessons for EFL learners.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

The following recommendations are proposed. It is recommended that a larger corpus should be made from all the learners from various proficiency levels. In view of the fact that constructing a corpus is a very tedious and difficult task, it is suggested to strengthen teamwork. In addition it is suggested students' voices be tape-recorded in English language classes to prepare a spoken corpus as well. In this way, many comparative analyses can be made regarding any grammatical feature used in spoken and written English.

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