

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation

Students in senior high school are required to learn how to write a short composition. The topics are mostly related to their daily lives. The aim of the compositions is to ask students to express their thoughts and feelings. When it comes to the expression of personal opinions, modality is a very important factor that affects the appropriateness of expression. However, it is found that students seldom use modal verbs in their compositions. It seems that they don't know how to make use of modal verbs to express their ideas related to possibility, intention, or necessity. From the compositions written by the students in Hsintien Senior High School collected in the last year, 38 out of the total 136 compositions don't have any modal verbs. It's almost one-third—a rather high proportion. Why don't these students use any modal verbs in their writing? Do they have any difficulty using modal verbs? If so, what's the primary difficulty they have? It's necessary for English teachers to know the answers and to help their students to solve the problems.

It's also found that among the modal verbs, only two of them—*will* and *can*—are frequently used by the students as in the following examples:

- (1) I have a CD player. It is the most precious things in my room. Maybe you *will* ask me why I like it so much. It is because I like to buy CD and listening it. When I am in my room, I *will* choose one CD and play it, then listening to the wonderful melody. It *can* make me happy and forget all bad things. So I like my CD player. (20416)
- (2) The most precious thing in my room is one picture. There are Dad, Mom, my brother, and me in it. It was taken in our first trip. And there is a beautiful

city – Hong Kong. I put it on my table. Because I *can* see it everyday. As long as I see it, I *can* become happier. The most important reason I love it is in the picture we all have a sweet smile. Second, that was first time we took a picture together. Maybe it just a little thing. But I don't think so. I consider it is a most expensive thing in the world. So I *can* remember this picture forever even it lost. I wish I *can* have a sweet smile everyday just like a picture. (20430)

From the two examples, it is found that the two students only use two modal verbs—*will* and *can*—in their compositions. In example (1), the first *will* is used by the student to indicate prediction; the student predicts that someone may ask her this kind of question. The second *will* symbolizes the student's willingness to play the CD when she is in her room. The only *can* in text (1) indicates a kind of ability, meaning the music has the power to make her happy¹. The three modal verbs are used properly in the composition. In example (2), the first *can* and the third *can* are an expression of ability. It represents the student's capability of seeing and remembering something. The two modals are also used correctly. However, the second *can* has some problems here. According to the context, the student should use *will* to predict that she may become happier as long as she sees the picture, or not to use any modals and just to indicate a fact. It's not proper to use *can* here to show the possibility of her becoming happier when she sees the picture. Similarly, the fourth *can* is not correctly used either. The right modal should be *would* or *could*. Based on the grammatical rule, "wish" should be followed by the subjunctive, so the student should use *would* or *could*, the past tense form of *will* or *can*, to show her willingness or possibility to have a sweet smile every day. From the examples, it's obvious that students prefer to use *will* and *can* to express their opinions or feelings in the writing without full understanding of the usage.

¹ According to Tang (1992), only animate creatures have ability. If the subject is inanimate noun, the sentence only can be paraphrased as possibility. However, Frank (1972) and Palmer (1990) hold different opinion. They think the inanimate subject indicates that it has the power to cause the event to take place.

From students' compositions, it is found that they indeed have difficulty using modal verbs. Therefore, English teachers should investigate this problem and make out a solution.

1.2 Research Questions

Modal verbs are always ignored in the teaching process because their forms and grammatical rules are very easy for students to remember. However, from the above examples, it's found that students have difficulty using modal verbs correctly. They do make mistakes when using modal verbs. Then, it's English teachers' responsibility to help students overcome the difficulty in learning and using English modal verbs.

Therefore, this study asks the following questions:

- (1) Which modal verbs are used most often in students' compositions?
- (2) Are these modal verbs used correctly?
- (3) What are the problems with the use of modal verbs in students' compositions?
- (4) Why do students misuse these modal verbs?

It's hoped that through the analysis, the answers to the above questions can be found. Furthermore, the complexity of the modality can be resolved in a more systematic and effective way. Through the effective teaching method, students can have a better understanding of the meanings and usages of modal verbs and then use them correctly without hesitation.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to find out the difficult parts of the use of modality for senior high school students. Most of the modals are taught in junior high school,

and only few are taught in senior high. The meanings of these modals are clearly defined and their forms are easily recited. However, students in senior high school still don't know how to use the modals correctly. Even if students understand the meaning of every modal verb and remember all the grammatical rules set for the modality, they still do not use modals or use only a few of them. It's quite interesting to find out the answers. Besides, the causes that result in students' misusing modal verbs will be investigated and the effective teaching methods will be introduced.

1.4 Organization

The organization of this study is as follows. Chapter One is the overview of the study, inclusive of motivation, research questions, purpose, and organization of the study. Chapter Two is the review of the research related to the analysis of English modal verbs, including their grammatical characteristics, meanings and functions. Besides, a review of the studies on possible learning difficulties caused by modal verbs is also put in this chapter. In Chapter Three, Contrastive Analysis Theory is introduced. Then the usages of English modal verbs—*can* and *will*—and Chinese modal verb—*hui*—are reviewed specifically in turn. Since *can* and *will* are translated into “hui”, the differences and similarities between them are compared and contrasted in order to see whether they have interference. Chapter Four is the analysis of students' compositions and test papers. The detailed process and methods are presented. The discussion of the possible reasons that give rise to students' difficulty is also included in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, a summary of the whole study is put in the first section. Then, some drawbacks of the current teaching methods are pointed out. Some suggestions and implications are also presented in this chapter.