## CHAPTER TWO

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter includes two parts. The first part is about English modal verbs. The general concepts about English modal verbs will be introduced from their forms to their meanings and functions. The second part is about difficulties in learning English modal verbs.

### 2.1 English Modal Verbs

English modal verbs belong to the larger category of auxiliary verbs. Therefore, they share some grammatical characteristics with the auxiliary verbs. There are three types of auxiliaries—tense auxiliaries, do auxiliary, and modal auxiliaries. Tense auxiliaries serve as a structural function only, including *be, have*, *shall*, and *will*. They are added to other verbs to make progressive, passive, perfect, or future forms. Do auxiliary is accompanied by the simple form of the verb to make questions, negatives and emphatic forms (Frank, 1972, p.94-95; Swan, 1995, p.84). As for modal verbs, they are used to express the speaker's attitudes or opinions like judgment, assessment or intention, that is, the modality (Hoye, 1997, p.40-42; Palmer, 1990, p.1-3; Parrott, 2000, p.119; Sweetser, 1990, p.49). In the following sections, English modal verbs will be introduced from two perspectives—the form and the meaning respectively.

### 2.1.1 Form of English Modal Verbs

English modal verbs as a part of auxiliary verbs share the following grammatical characteristics of auxiliary verbs:

a. They are not inflected in the third person; that is, when the subject is singular third person, no subject-verb agreement realizes in inflection so the form should be "He must go" instead of "He musts go".

b. They are followed by the "bare infinitive"—the base form of the verb alone. In other words, after modal verbs, the infinitive without to of other verbs is used so the form is "I must go" but not "I must to go".

c. They are negated by the addition of "n't" or "not". They are not added to "don't" as other verbs. That is, the negation of modal verbs is "I can't" or "I cannot" rather than "I don't can".

d. They are inverted with the subject to form a question without using "do". For example, the interrogative sentence is "Should I do it?" but not "Do I should do it?"

e. They have no non-finite forms—past and present participles.

f. They can't co-occur. In other words, two modal verbs can't be used simultaneously so the correct form is "He may come" or "He will come" instead of "He may will come" (Celce-Murcia, & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.137-38; Close, 1977, p.109-10; Frank, 1972, p.95-96; Kuo,1983, p.37; Palmer, 1990, p.4-5; Parrott, 2000, p.121; Quirk, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p.127-28).

These grammatical characteristics are different from those of the main verbs. For example, present-tense verbs with third person singular subjects require an –s ending. Some linguists, such as Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, think these differences might give rise to learning difficulty for students. However, according to my observation, Chinese students seldom get confused choosing correct modal verb forms. It seems that these grammatical characteristics are not the source of students'

difficulty.

According to the above grammatical characteristics, modal verbs are divided into two categories—pure modal verbs[1] and semi-modal verbs[2]. Pure modal verbs have all the grammatical characteristics mentioned above, and this category includes *will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, must*, and *ought to*[3](Hoye, 1997, p.2; Kuo,1983, p.526-30; Leech, 1987, p.72; Palmer, 1990, p.4-5; Parrott, 2000, p.121). Besides, *dare* and *need*[4] are taken as marginal because they are usually treated as main verbs as well as modal verbs[5]. Semi-modal verbs are very closely related to pure modals in terms of meaning but do not share all of their grammatical characteristics. Hoye (1997, p.3), Palmer (1990, p.3-5), and Parrott (1990, p.121-23) point out that semi-modal verbs are *had better*, *have (got) to, be able to, used to*, and *would rather*[6]. These semi-modal verbs are more fixed in meaning and they have their counterparts of pure modals[7]. If students want to express similar ideas, they would choose pure modal verbs rather than semi-modal verbs because pure modal verbs are much easier than semi-modal verbs in form. Semi-modals are more fixed in meaning without causing confusion for students, so they are not treated in the study.

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[1] Pure modal verbs are also known as central modal verbs, real modal verbs, or core modal verbs (Kuo, 1983, p.526).

[2] Semi-modal verbs are also known as quasi-modal verbs, phrasal modal verbs, periphrastic modal verbs, or pseudo modal verbs. (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.139; Kuo, 1983, p.530).

[3] There is only one exception reported by Palmer that *may* has no –n't form in the present. Besides, Palmer also points out that *ought to* is the only one that requires *to* in pure modal verbs. On the other hand, Quirk et al (1985, p.137) have different classifications. They divide *ought to* into marginal modal verbs.

[4] As Frank (1972, p.105) indicates, "*dare* meaning 'have the courage to' and *need* meaning 'have to' are sometimes classified among the modal auxiliaries. They might better be called "quasi-auxiliaries," because, while they function in all respects like regular verbs, they may also form negatives and questions in the same way as auxiliaries do." Besides, Duffley (1994, p.214-15) and Krug (2000, p.199-03) also give a very clear explanation for these two marginal modal verbs.

[5] Although *need* and *dare* are treated as pure modal verbs, they are not included in this study. For their meanings are very clear and won't make any confusion.

[6] Hoye uses modal idioms to replace semi-modal verbs and also includes *would sooner* in this category.

[7] The counterparts of the semi-modals are: *had better—should*; *have (got) to—must; be able to—can; would rather—will*. Only *used to* has no pure-modal counterpart.

## 2.1.2 Meanings of English Modal Verbs

English modal verbs are used to express the speaker's attitudes or opinions like judgment, assessment or intention. From semantic functions, they can denote epistemic and deontic meanings. When negation, interrogation, and tense come into the interaction with modal verbs, the usage and meaning of modal verbs become even more complicated. They are going to be discussed in the following sections.

## 2.1.2.1 Epistemic and Deontic Modals

English modal verbs that indicate necessity, probability, possibility or judgment are epistemic; the others that express obligation, permission, intention, or ability are deontic, or root modals[8] (Greenbaum, 1991, p.97). Epistemic modals refer to the speaker's knowledge, judgment, or belief about the events, affairs or actions. They bind the speaker to commit to the proposition whether it is true or not in the real world. Deontic modals encompass meanings such as permission, obligation, and ability. They bind the speaker to lay an obligation, give permission or prohibition. They also reflect the subject's ability[9] (Coates, 1995, p.55; Hofmann, 1993, p.104-11; Hoye, 1997, p.42-43; Palmer, 1990, p.5-8; Sweetser, 1990, p.49-51).

Almost all the modals discussed in the study can be used epistemically or deontically at the same time. Groefsema (1995, p.53) notes that "these modals can often be interpreted either epistemically or deontically". As in the example: "John may leave tonight", there are two different interpretations. One is that, "It's possible that John leaves tonight." The other is that, "John is permitted to leave tonight." The two interpretations represent epistemic possibility and deontic permission

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[8] In this study, the term "deontic" is used.
[9] Palmer (1990, p.7) gives a third category—dynamic , "which is concerned with ability and volition of the subject of the sentence, and is not, perhaps, strictly modality at all". However, in the study, *can* in the sense of ability and *will* in the sense of volition are classified under "deontic".

respectively.

Epistemic meanings of modal verbs are related to the speaker's subjective interpretation of the real world situation, which can be roughly divided into three categories: necessity, prediction and possibility. Epistemic necessity indicates the speaker's certainty about the proposition; it is usually represented by *must*. Epistemic prediction, realized by *will, would* and *shall*, often present a statement of "I predict that..." made by the speaker[10]. The other group modal verbs of *should, ought to, may, might, can*, and *could* are used to show epistemic possibility, which indicates the different levels of the speaker's uncertainty about the proposition (Jackson, 1990, p.99-101; Quirk et al, 1985, p.219-31 Tang, 1992, p.86-87).

Deontic modal verbs are associated with real world. By using them, the speaker may lay an obligation, give permission, and show his volition and ability. Modals like *must, should*, and *ought to* belong to the deontic obligation category, while *can, could, may*, and *might* belong to deontic permission. Still another group of modal verbs like *will, would* and *shall* are used to express willingness or intention about the events (Leech, 1987, p.73-81; Quirk, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p.221; Jackson, 1990, p.99-101). To get a clearer understanding on the usage of each modal verb in different meanings and its interpretation, please see Table 2.1 and Table 2.2.

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[10] According to Tang (1992, p.104), only *shall* doesn't have epistemic meaning because the speaker tends to use *will* to represent his prediction about the future. However, Quirk et al (1985, p.229-30) still thinks that *shall* has epistemic meaning, which is rarely used in present-day English.

Table 2.1 The Meaning of English Pure Modal Verbs

| Modal Verbs | Epistemic | | | Deontic | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | necessity[11] | prediction | possibility | obligation | volition | permission | ability |
| MUST | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | |
| WILL | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |
| WOULD | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |
| SHALL | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |
| SHOULD | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| OUGHT TO | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| CAN | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| COULD | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| MAY | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| MIGHT | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |

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[11] Necessity is a strong term implying high certainty. Although some researchers think the term "certainty" is more proper, in this study, the term "necessity" is adopted.

Table 2.2 The Interpretation of Each Pure Modal Verb

| Modals | Epistemic | Deontic |
|---|---|---|
| MUST | It's necessary that<br>It's necessarily the case | Sb. be obliged to + V<br>(stronger in comparison with *should* and *ought to*) |
| WILL/WOULD | be going to<br>I predict that | be willing to |
| SHALL | I predict that | be willing to |
| SHOULD/<br>OUGHT TO | It's highly possible that | Sb. be obliged to + V<br>(weaker in comparison with *must*) |
| CAN/COULD | It's possible that<br>(theoretical in comparison with *may* and *might*[12]) | be allowed to (spoken in contrast to *may* and *might*)<br>be able to |
| MAY/MIGHT | It's possible that<br>(factual in comparison with *can* and *could*) | be permitted to (written, formal in contrast to *can* and *could*) |

## 2.1.2.2 Negation

The form of negation in English modality system is very easy—just put a negative word "not" after the modal verb to form the negation. However, the meaning of the negative sentence is not as easy as its surface form shows. The negative sentence does not merely indicate the opposite meaning to the positive sentence—epistemically or deontically. "Not" in the modality system can mean two very different things. As Cook (1978, p.7-10) puts it, a sentence with modal verbs is

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[12] According to Tang (1992, p.91-92), *can/could* and *may/might* have a little difference when they are used in the meaning of possibility. The former is used in possible world, while the latter is used in real world. For example:
(a) The road *may* be blocked.
(b) The road *can* be blocked. (Tang, 1992, p.92)
Example (a) means that it is possible that the road is blocked. That is to say, the road is possibly blocked in real world. However, example (b) means that it is possible for the road to be blocked. In other words, there is only a possibility to block the road, which hasn't happened in real world yet.

two verb structures—the modal verb and the main verb. And, it would be a little complicated when the word "not" is put in the sentence. For the negative can negate the modal verb called modal negation or negate the main verb called main verb negation[13]. For example (Leech, 1987, p.91):

(1) He can't be serious. (modal negation)
(2) He may not be serious. (main verb negation)

Example (3) means it is *not* possible that he is serious so it is the modal verb that is negated, while example (4) means that it is possible that he is *not* serious so it is the main verb that is negated. In brief, if the negative is placed in front of the modal verb, the structure is modal negation; if the negative is placed in back of the modal verb, it is main verb negation. As mentioned above, the form of the negation of modal verbs is added to a negative word "not". Nonetheless, when it comes to the negation of meaning, there are some exceptions. Look at the following examples (Cook, 1978, p.8):

(3) John may be lying.
    (It's possible that John is lying. => epistemic possibility)
(4) John may not be lying.
    (It's possible that John is not lying. =>main verb negation)
(5) John can't be lying.
    (It's not possible that John is lying. =>modal negation)

In example (5), the sentence—John may be lying—means that "It's possible that John is lying." The contradictory does not simply add "not" to the sentence because example (6)—John may not be lying—means "It's possible that John is *not* lying". However, example (7)—John can't be lying—means "It's *not* possible that John is lying". It's very obvious that the contradictory of *may* in possibility is *cannot* but not *may not*. That is to say, for those modals, which take main verb negation, such as, *may* in possibility, *must* in necessity, and *must* in obligation, it's necessary to change the

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[13] Cook (1978, p.7-10) refers to modal negation as external negation and main verb negation as internal negation.

modal verb to reach modal negation effect. Likewise, the contradictory of *must* is not

*mustn't*; to form its contradictory, *must* is changed to *have (got) to* or *need* for the

negation sense (Cook, 1978, p.9-10).


### 2.1.2.3 Interrogation

As for interrogation, Palmer (1990, p.41) suggests that "with interrogation, only

the modality, never the proposition, can be questioned." That is, the modal verb,

which is used to form the negation, is used for interrogation. For example:

    (6) John may still be reading. (epistemic possibility)
    (7) John can't still be reading.
    (8) Can John still be reading?
    (9) May John be reading? (deontic permission)

In example (8), the sentence—John may still be reading—means "It is possible that

John is still reading. Its negation does not just add "not" to the sentence, but changes

the modal verb "may" to "can" as is explained above. Therefore, the contradictory

sentence is "John can't still be reading" as in example (9), which means "It's not

possible that John is still reading. Similarly, to form the interrogative sentence, only

*can* but not *may* is used. Example (10)—Can John still be reading—means "Is it

possible that John is still reading". As Groefsema (1995, p.54) proposes that "*may*

used in a question is always deontic, never epistemic". Hence, example (11)—May

John be reading—means "Is John permitted to be reading".


### 2.1.2.4 Tense

All the modals discussed in the study are used for the present or future time

because the proposition is permitted, obliged, or intended by the speaker to happen in

the very near future. Morphologically, *would, should, could*, and *might* are the past

tense forms of *will, shall, can*, and *may*, but semantically, they do not always carry the

past time meaning. In many cases, they are used for the present or future time to show the lower certainty about something or a kind of politeness. For example (Frank, 1972, p.97):

(10) Could I borrow your pencil?
(11) It might rain.

Example (12) makes a less strong request than "Can I borrow your pencil". The speaker uses "It might rain" in example (13) to show that he is not so sure of the possibility of the rain as he uses "It may rain".

However, *could* does mark past time under certain conditions. *Could* in deontic ability can be used to express past time but it needs to be associated with a past time indicator. For example:

(12) John could run ten miles with ease, when he was young. (Palmer, 1990, p.45)

*Might* is barely used for past time and *should* never. In addition, *must* and *ought to* don't have past time forms.

In a word, modal verbs, as auxiliaries with some special grammatical characteristics, are used to make an assessment, judgment, or interpretation of what the speaker is speaking or writing about. They can be further divided into two parts—pure modal verbs and semi-modal verbs. On the basis of meanings and functions, they can be divided into two categories—epistemic and deontic. The negation of modal verbs is to add "not" to the sentence. However, for the modal verbs which negate the main verb, their contradictories are not just added "not". These modal verbs should be changed to their corresponding modal verbs for negation. Besides, the modal verbs used in negation are also used to form the interrogative sentences. When it comes to the tense, all the modal verbs are used in the present or future tense. Although *could, would, might,* and *should* are sometimes used in the past

tense, they can be used in the present or future tense to show lower certainty. All these facts about the usage of modal verbs make modality the most difficult part for EFL learners. Since what students feel difficult about the modals is not in the basic grammatical rules but in the complicated semantic functions, the following section will review some difficulty in students' learning modal verbs.

**2.2 Difficulty in Learning Modal Verbs**

English modal verbs are regarded as one of the most difficult subjects when students learn English grammar (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.137; Cook, 1978, p.5; Tang, 1992, p.79). Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) mentions that

> Modal auxiliaries are among the more difficult structures ESL/EFL teachers have to deal with. One of the reasons for this is the form of modals. Some of your students, who have been told time and time again that present-tense verbs with third person singular subjects require an –s ending, over-generalize this rule to modals—for example, *He cans play tennis. This overgeneralization results in errors because in English modal auxiliaries (*can, may, shall, will,* etc.) are distinguished from other auxiliary verbs (*be, have, do*) as well as from ordinary verbs by their lack of tense and their resultant lack of subject-verb agreement; that is, modals do not inflect (p.137).

Also, Tang (1992, p.80) points that the different grammatical forms between English modal verbs and ordinary verbs are responsible for the learning difficulty in students. However, students seldom make such errors as adding –s to modal verbs, combining two pure modal verbs in one sentence, or inserting "to" between modal verb and main verb, because the grammatical characteristics of modal verbs are as easy as those of ordinary verbs. What's more, when teachers teach modal verbs, they always emphasize the grammatical differences between modal verbs and ordinary verbs. Thus, students won't have much difficulty learning the form of modal verbs.

Since the form of modal verbs is not the major reason that causes learning difficulty in students, then, the main factors may lie in the meaning of modal verbs.

Hoye (1993, p.1) mentions that "the notion of modality is tantalizingly problematic".

In other words, modality itself is rather complicated in meaning. The English modal

verbs used to express modality are also complicated in meaning. As is discussed

above, each modal verb has epistemic and deontic meanings. Besides, different

modals can share the same meaning, but there is subtle difference among these

modals. For example, *should*, *ought to*, *can, may, might,* and *could* all have the

meaning—possibility.

> A: Someone's knocking at the door.
> (13) B: It should/ought to be Henry.      High certainty
> (14) B: It can be Henry.
> (15) B: It may be Henry.
> (16) B: It might/could be Henry.      Low certainty

Examples (15) to (18) all denote the speaker's guessing about who is knocking at the

door; yet, there's a logical possibility hierarchy among them as shown above.

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p.142), *should* and *ought to*

represent the highest possibility of all[14]. As for *can* and *may*, the speaker uses the

former to show a higher certainty about his own inference. If the speaker uses *might*

or *could*, what he intends to convey is a relatively uncertain assumption. Hence, a

speaker can convey different degrees of certainty about something with different

modals according to evidence available in the real world or the belief he holds. In sum,

on one hand, every English modal has more than one meaning; on the other hand,

different modals can have the apparent same meaning. These features of English

modal verbs contribute to a considerable learning burden for the students because they

don't know which one they can use in a certain kind of situation.

    Moreover, Cook (1978, p.5) points out that "the problem lies in the recognition

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[14] Palmer (1990, p.122) says that *should* and *ought to* are interchangeable in most cases; the only point is that *should* is more common than *ought to*. Tang (1992, p.110) also says that *should* is more formal than *ought to*. The latter is often used in spoken language.

and proper use of the meanings underlying the English modal verbs". From personal experience, Altman (1982) also proposes similar idea.

> I began to look at the acquisition of expressions of modality when I noticed that even very advanced learners of English were using modals incorrectly. I was driving somewhere with a friend—a native Spanish speaker who speaks English almost perfectly. We were looking for a certain address, following the numbers on the street, and just where we would have expected the place to be, we came upon a driveway and my friend said: "That *should* be the place." Considering the circumstances, I was much more convinced that that was in fact the place and would have felt a lot more comfortable had she said: "That *must* be the place" (p.1)

What they mean is that another learning difficulty in students lies in associating the right modal verb with the right meaning or the right situation. Specifically, students may use modal verbs grammatically correctly; however, it is not proper or appropriate in the situation.

Aside from the complicated meanings of modal verbs, which result in learning difficulty, the teaching resources such as teachers and textbooks or grammar books may also contribute to learning difficulty. Both Bowen and McCreary (1977, p.183) and Kuan (1987, p.160) mention that senior high school teachers ignore the semantics of modal verbs. They only focus on the grammatical characteristics without noticing the subtle different meanings of each modal verb. Nor do they emphasize the appropriate use of each modal verb. The lack of complete description aggravates the learning problem. Similarly, textbooks and grammar books only emphasize that modal verbs are auxiliaries but do not focus on their semantics and functions.

In addition to all the reasons mentioned above, there is still one more important factor that causes learning difficulty—the interference of students' native language. As Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) denote

> Another source of difficulty with the form of modals, of course, may be your students' native language(s). Not all languages have modal auxiliaries; in those that do not, regular verbs or adjective / adverbs are used to express the meanings and functions that modals have in English. (p.138).

Tang (1992, p.79) distinguishes Chinese modal verbs from English modal verbs to give a clearer understanding of their differences. He says that Chinese modal verbs derive from main verbs so they have rather definite lexical meaning. Furthermore, in Chinese modality system, different modality is usually expressed by different modal verbs. On the contrary, English modal verbs are function words, whose meanings are more abstract. Thus, they are not easy for students to use. The differences between Chinese and English modal verbs give rise to students' learning difficulty in English modal verbs. Look at example (2) in page one, Chapter One, again. The student uses *can* to show her prediction in the sentence: "As long as I see it, I *can* become happier". Why does this student make such a mistake? Obviously, it is a transfer from her native language—Chinese. In Chinese, the counterpart of this sentence is like this:

(17) Zhih yiao    wuo    kan dao  ta,  wuo    jiu hui   bian de
     As long as   I      see      it,  I      will      become

     bi jiao kuai le
     happier.

     As long as I see it, I *will* become happier.

As students think of "hui" in Chinese, they always use *can* to translate this word. For they are taught that *can* is translated into "hui" in Chinese. Since they both denote "ability", students simplify the functions and meanings of modal verbs and regard them as equivalents. That is to say, the student should use *will* but not *can* in this sentence to express prediction. If this student understands that *can* has three major functions—possibility, permission, and ability, she will know that using *can* in the sentence is not correct. There is another example to show that the use of English modal verbs is affected by students' native language. In example (2), this student writes another sentence: "I wish I *can* have a sweet smile everyday just like a picture". As explained above, this modal verb *can* is not correct. The correct answer is *would* or

*could.* Again, the student makes this error because of the effect of her native language. The sentence is translated into Chinese like example (20):

| (18) Wuo | xi wuang | wuo | neng xiang | zhao pian zhong |
| I | wish | I | as | in the picture |

| yi yiang | mei tian | dou neng | yiu | tian mei de | xiao rong |
| the same | every day | would/could | have | sweet | smile |

I wish I *would/could* have a sweet smile as in the picture.

In this sentence, the student thinks that the "neng" represents "ability". However, it means willingness which is usually conveyed by *will* and *would* or possibility conveyed by *can* or *could* in English. Why does this student use *can* here? In this sentence, this modal verb is translated into "neng" in Chinese. As students think of "neng", they usually use *can* as its English counterpart. For *can* has the meaning of ability, which is translated into "hui" or "neng" in Chinese. Consequently, when students think of "neng" in Chinese, they are apt to use *can* in English without considering the real meanings and functions of *can*. That's why students use *can* in their sentences to express prediction and volition. They don't take into account the correct functions and meanings of modal verbs. They only translate the Chinese words into English, thus to make errors.

All in all, English modality is somewhat complex for EFL students. The form of English modal verbs is not that difficult. The real difficulty lies in: (1) Each modal verb has more than one meaning—epistemically and deontically. Besides, several modal verbs share the same meaning but have fine differences. (2) Students have difficulty associating right modal verbs with right meaning in the right situation. (3) Textbooks or grammar books do not provide complete description and teachers don't teach modal verbs in context. (4) Students' native language(s)' modality system is different from that of English, and this results in learning interference. In order to

solve these difficulties, the study focuses on the research of Contrastive Analysis. Through the Contrastive Analysis, the English modality system and Chinese modality system are researched in detail. Then the correct meanings and functions of English and Chinese modal verbs are made out. Students can learn the appropriate usages of modal verbs and apply them in the right situations. In addition, through the comparison and contrast of English and Chinese modal verbs, the differences and similarities between them can be found out. Then, interference between them can also be prevented in advance. In other words, most difficulties mentioned above can be solved through the research of Contrastive Analysis. As for the problems of textbooks and teachers' teaching methodology, they are not included in the scope of the study. Consequently, the next chapter focuses on the Contrastive Analysis.