

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE USE OF MODAL VERBS IN LEARNERS' DATA**

There are three parts in this chapter. The first part is an analysis of students' uses of modal verbs through their compositions. The second part is the analysis of students' uses of modal verbs in a test. The last part is the discussion drawn from the previous two analyses.

#### **4.1 Analysis of Students' Compositions**

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative analyses are adopted. In this section, how students actively use modal verbs will be investigated based on the composition data. The purpose of this analysis is to know which modal verbs students use more often and if they can use them correctly in their writing. Besides, through this analysis, which usage—epistemic or deontic—used more by students will also be examined. That is, whether students totally realize the different usages of epistemic and deontic and which usage occurs more often than others will be analyzed. After the analysis, students' difficulty in using these modal verbs will be presented.

##### **4.1.1 Subjects**

The subjects for the study are 131 seniors in the National Hsintien Senior High School. There are 81 boys and 50 girls. All of these students were admitted to the school by passing the Joint Entrance Examination To Senior High School. As for the students' level, Hsintien Senior High School is in the middle of all the national and municipal high schools in northern Taiwan so the academic performances of students

in this school roughly represent those of the average students. In other words, the academic performances of the students in this study are on the average level according to the grades of Academic Proficiency Examination.

#### 4.1.2 Data Collection

The data for this study come from 219 compositions written by the third-graders in National Hsintien Senior High School. The compositions are written on two different topics in class. One topic is “I shall never forget what happened between \_\_\_\_\_ and me when I was \_\_\_\_\_.”<sup>1</sup> The other one is an essay question which asks students to write down their choice and to explain the reason why they make such a decision after reading a story<sup>2</sup>. The first composition is written by the 131 students, whereas the second one is written by 88 students out of all the 131<sup>3</sup>. Both compositions are finished within 30 minutes in class. The purpose of using different topics is to exclude the possibility that some modals tend to appear in the compositions of certain kinds of topics. Besides, the students are asked to finish the two compositions within thirty minutes in class because they are not expected to consult dictionaries. The aim of this design is to preclude the possibility of students’ looking up sentences in the dictionaries. For students might copy sentences from the dictionary. Then the modal verbs used in their compositions might not be what they originally want to use. That’s why students are asked to finish their compositions in class but not at home. The data are gathered over a period of two months from

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<sup>1</sup> The instructions of this composition are attached in the Appendix I.

<sup>2</sup> The whole article and the question are attached in the Appendix II.

<sup>3</sup> The number of students in the two compositions is different. That is because students have different majors in senior high school. There are mainly three majors—arts, science, and science and biology. The first composition is written by three different classes whose majors are different. The reason for choosing three different classes is to exclude the possibility that students with different majors will have different performances in their writing. However, the second composition is only written by two classes of them because the teacher only teaches two classes. Owing to the limitation of teaching hours and schedule, it is difficult to ask the other class to join in the experiment.

September 2002 to November 2002.

### 4.1.3 Procedures

After all the data are collected, the analysis is divided into two parts. The first part is to classify all the sentences with modal verbs under several groups. The object of this part is to understand how many modal verbs are used correctly or incorrectly. The second part is to further classify and analyze the modal verbs used incorrectly. The purpose of this part is to find out how modal verbs are used wrongly. In other words, which modal verb is used incorrectly more often? Which usage—epistemic or deontic—is more difficult for students? These questions will be answered after the first experiment.

The process of the first part includes the following steps. First of all, each composition is analyzed sentence by sentence; the sentences with modal verbs are picked out. Secondly, all the sentences picked out are classified into different groups first according to the modals used then based on the meaning, epistemic or deontic, of each modal verb. The way to decide if one modal is epistemic or deontic is to paraphrase each sentence with support from context clues. In this step, whether modal verbs are used correctly is checked. However, the grammatically wrong use of modal verbs is ignored<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, after this step, there are two groups—right use in meaning and wrong use in meaning. Every modal verb used with wrong meaning, no

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<sup>4</sup> Grammatically wrong use here means the wrongly used tense of the modal verbs. If students use present tense in the past-tense context, it is viewed as grammatical wrong use and is ignored. Modal verbs used wrongly in grammar but correctly in meaning are not regarded as wrong use in this study because the research focuses on whether the students understand the meaning and function of every modal verb. Therefore, each modal verb is used correctly in meaning but incorrectly in tense will be classified in the category of “right use in meaning.” For example, a student writes, “Because I was so young, I *can't* understand his duty, his work, and his situation.” (30802) In this sentence, the student uses *can't* to express impossibility so the modal verb is used correctly in meaning. However, the student should use past tense to describe something happening in the past rather than present tense—*can't*. Therefore, these errors belong to the field of grammar, which is not the major concern of this study.

matter it is grammatically correct or not, will be put in the category of wrong meaning. The others are put in the category of correct use. All the data will be discussed in detail in the following section 4.1.4.

After all the sentences are sorted, then the next stage starts. First, all the data are double checked by a native speaker so as to see if they have been put in the correct category. Second, all the sentences in the category of wrong meaning are sub-classified into different groups according to how they have been used incorrectly. The last step is to find explanation for students' incorrect uses of these modal verbs.

#### 4.1.4 Data Analysis

Among all the 219 compositions, there are 65 compositions without any modal verbs. That is a pretty high percentage—30%. See Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Numbers of Students' Composition With and Without Modal Verbs

	Compositions without modal verbs	Compositions with modal verbs	Total
The number of compositions	65	154	219
The percentage(%)	29.68	70.32	100

From Table 4.1, it is easy to see that almost thirty percent of the compositions are written without modal verbs. It means that nearly one third of the students don't use any modal verbs in their compositions. And, seventy percent of students' compositions include modal verbs.

Among the 154 compositions with modal verbs, there are 327 sentences with modal verbs in total. 293 sentences have modal verbs used correctly. Only 34 sentences are used incorrectly in terms of the meaning indication. See Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Frequency of Students' Correct or Incorrect Use of Modal Verbs

	Used with correct meaning	Used with incorrect meaning	Total
The number of sentences	293	34	327
The percentage(%)	89.6	10.4	100

From Table 4.2, it is obvious to find that almost ninety percent of the sentences have modal verbs used correctly in meaning. As for the category—used with incorrect meaning, which is the major concern of this study, there are 10.4 percent of the sentences that have modal verbs used wrongly in meaning.

The results in Table 4.2 show that most students have no difficulty in using modal verbs correctly in meaning in their compositions. However, does that mean students know the usage of each modal verb? It is not necessarily true. Table 4.3 shows that students' uses of modal verbs are confined to certain usages of modal verbs.

Table 4.3 Frequency of the Modal Verbs Used Correctly in Meaning

Modal verbs	Epistemic		Deontic		Total	Percentage (%)
	Meaning	Frequency	Meaning	Frequency		
Can	Possibility	27	Ability	60	96	32.76
			Permission	9		
Will	Prediction	56	Volition	37	93	31.74
Could	Possibility	2	Ability	28	32	10.92
			Permission	2		
Would	Prediction	18	Volition	12	30	10.24
Should	Possibility	2	Obligation	18	20	6.83
Must	Necessity	5	Obligation	3	8	2.73
May	Possibility	8	Permission	0	8	2.73
Shall	Prediction	1	Volition	4	5	1.71
Might	Possibility	1	Permission	0	1	0.34
Ought to	Possibility	0	Obligation	0	0	0
Total		120		173	293	100
Percentage (%)		40.96		59.04	100	

From Table 4.3, it is easy to find that the two different usages—epistemic and deontic—have different percentage. Deontic modal verbs, used 173 times in students' compositions, are used more often than epistemic modal verbs, which are used 120 times. The former is 59.04% and the latter 40.96%. In other words, students tend to use modal verbs to express their ability, volition, obligation and permission. Besides, among the ten modal verbs, *can*, *will*, *could*, and *would* are used most often,

especially *can* and *will*, while *ought to*, and *might* are rarely used. *Ought to* even doesn't show up in students' compositions. *Can*, *will*, *could*, and *would* take up 85.66% in total. That's a pretty high percentage. It shows that students are apt to use these four modal verbs in their compositions. On the contrary, *must*, *may*, *shall*, *might*, and *ought to* take up only 7.51% in total. Compared to *can*, *will*, *could*, and *would*, the percentage is quite low. What's more, *can* and *could* in the sense of ability are used more often than the sense of possibility and permission whereas *will* and *would* are used more often in the sense of prediction than in the sense of volition. The number of *can*, *could* in the sense of ability and *will*, *would* in the sense of prediction appear 88 and 74 times respectively.

From Table 4.1, it is found that almost 30% of the students don't use any modal verbs in their compositions. From Table 4.2, it is found that only 10.4% of the sentences are used wrongly in meaning. From Table 4.3, students' uses of modal verbs are found to focus on these four modal verbs—*can*, *could*, *will*, and *would*. It can be concluded that students will avoid using modal verbs if they are not sure of the usage. Similarly, students will also avoid using modal verbs that they are not familiar with in order not to make mistakes. It is very obvious to see that students tend to use *can*, *could*, *will*, and *would* in their compositions because they are more familiar with the usages of these four modals than they do with other modal verbs. That's the reason why the frequency of students' uses of modal verbs wrongly in meaning is quite low as in Table 4.2. The following examples show how students use these four modal verbs in their compositions.

(1) I shall<sup>5</sup> never forget what happened between Mother and me when I was 17.

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<sup>5</sup> This modal verb is not included because the first sentence is given to students as a guided sentence. Every student is asked to begin their composition with this sentence—I shall never forget what happened between \_\_\_\_\_ and I when I was \_\_\_\_\_. Consequently, *shall* will show up in every student's composition so it is not included.

I have a great interaction between my mother and I. I share with her all my school life and feelings. For me, she is just like my diary. I even think I (1)couldn't live without her. If my memory serves correctly, we had a terrible argument ten days ago. The reason is that the living room is a big mess because of my laziness. She was in a fit of anger, sharpening on me loudly. Under such circumstance, I'm on the edge of mental collapse. I shouted to her, "I hate you! Just leave me alone! I don't want to see you anymore!"

I (2)can't believe what I had said to her. My heart bleeds at that moment. Sorry, Mom! I just (3)couldn't control myself. Three days later, I wrote a note to her for my silly behavior. Mother, of course, forgave me and gave me a sweet hug. This event tells me that we (4)should cherish the love what our parents have given us. They (5)will die some day. And they love us the most in the world. Be a good child, or you (6)will regret deeply after you become an adult. (30414)

- (2) If I were the princess, I would<sup>6</sup> tell the young man to open the door to the lady. Because the man I have ever loved, now I (7)can't see him be torn to pieces by the hungry tiger. If I love him, I (8)should let him marry the beautiful lady even I am insanely jealous. If my love lived happily, I (9)would do, too. (30426)

In these two examples, there are nine modal verbs used in total. (1)Couldn't, (2)can't, (3)couldn't, and (7)can't are used with the meaning of ability. They are used because the authors think they have the ability to do something. (4)Should and (8)should mean obligation. The authors use this modal verb to express that they are obliged to do something. (5)will, (6)will, and (9)would express the meaning of prediction. They are used to predict something that is going to happen in the future. From the two compositions, it is found that students use *can*, *could*, *will*, and *would* frequently. Besides, *can* and *could* are used to indicate the meaning of ability; *will* and *would* are used for prediction just as what has been found in Table 4.3.

As for the wrong use in meaning, there are 34 sentences in total. The modal verbs that students use wrongly in meaning are sub-classified into two different parts—mis-selection and addition. Please see Table 4.4 for the frequency of the wrongly used modal verbs.

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<sup>6</sup> This modal verb is not included, either. For it is a part of the question. Therefore, students are sure to use this modal verb to answer the question. Similarly, *would* will be used by every student.

Table 4.4 Frequency of the Modal Verbs Used Incorrectly

	Mis-selection	Addition	The Total
The number of the sentences	18	16	34

The modal verbs used wrongly by students are divided into two parts. One is mis-selection, and the other is addition. This classification is based on the surface structure taxonomy. The mis-selection category indicates the case in which students select a wrong modal verb in their composition. The addition category means that students use a modal verb in sentences that don't need one. They are discussed in detail in the following section.

#### 4.1.4.1 Mis-selection

According to Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, p.160), misformation is the “use of wrong form of a structure or morpheme”. And they give examples like: “I \*seen her yesterday”, “He hurt \*him”, and “I read that book\*s”. However, James (1998, p.108) disagrees with them on the term of misformation. James points out that “It is indeed clear that the use of *seen* for *saw* is the problem of wrong form, but why is it called ‘misformation’? Actually, what the learner has done is not mis-form but mis-select, and these should be called **mis-selection** errors.” As a result, James changes the term of misformation into mis-selection. In this study, mis-selection is adopted. In students’ compositions, they select the wrong modal verb so that the sentences are not correct.

Among the total 34 sentences, there are 18 sentences classified under mis-selection. That is to say, students make wrong sentences due to the selection of the wrong modal verbs. Table 4.5 shows the mis-selected modal verbs.

Table 4.5 Mis-selection: Analysis of Modal Verbs Used Wrongly by Students

Modal verbs used wrongly by students	Frequency	The meaning of the modal verbs	Correct form
Can	3	Volition	Would
	2	Possibility	May
	1	Prediction	Will
	1	Prediction	Would
	1	Obligation	Should
Must	2	Prediction	Would
	1	Permission	Can
	1	Obligation	Should
Could	2	Volition	Would
May	1	Ability	Can
	1	Prediction	Would
Will	1	Possibility	Could
Would	1	Ability	Could

It is found in Table 4.5 that students use *can*, *must*, *could*, *may*, *will*, and *would*, to replace other modal verbs. *Can* is used most often—eight times—to replace *would*, *may*, *will*, or *should*. *Must* is used four times to replace *would*, *can*, and *should*. *Could* and *May* are used two times; *will* and *would* are used only once. From the modal verbs students used, it is found that *can* and *could* have the highest frequency. Students use *can* and *could* to replace *will* or *would* with the meaning of prediction, to replace *would* with the meaning of volition, to replace *may* with possibility and *should* with obligation. On the contrary, the two modal verbs are substituted for other modal verbs,

such as *may*, *will*, and *would*. It is interesting that students use *can* to express the meaning of volition or the meaning of prediction. Besides, *will* and *would* are also likely to be used wrongly. They are replaced with *can*, *must*, *may*, and *could*. If the students are not confused with the usages of these modal verbs, they would not select the wrong ones. Please look at the following examples.

- (3) At that time, the building on B1 was on fire. Many people were scared and ran away. I was so little that I was losing with my mother. I was crying because I couldn't find my mother. And no one would help me. (31102)
- (4) The thing let me think. Every parent all can accept their sons or daughter faults, no matter they argue or cold war. (30810)
- (5) She didn't sleep well almost every night—she looked at me, and wished God could help me. (31104)
- (6) In my childhood, Mother is my teacher and friend. She had teached me many thing. I believe it “Rome wasn't built in one day.” Home education usually caught person's personality. I can say it loudly, “Thank you and I fall in love with you forever, my dear mother.” (30423)

In example (81), the student uses *would* in the sentence “No one *would* help me.” It is incorrect. *Would* has two meanings—prediction and volition. However, in that situation, it is not reasonable to predict that other people don't have the volition to help the author. Instead, what the student meant is that no one had the ability to help her. Therefore, the student should have used *could* in the sentence. The correct sentence should be “And no one *could* help me.” In example (82), the student shouldn't have used *can* here. *Can* has three meanings—possibility, permission and ability. One cannot say that it is possible for a parent to accept his or her sons' or daughters' faults. In addition, it is not possible that a parent is allowed to accept his or her sons' or daughters' faults. Nor is it reasonable to say that a parent has the ability to accept his or her sons' or daughters' faults. Since the student puts a conditional sentence—no matter—here, he must have the prediction that every parent *will/would* accept his or her sons' or daughters' faults. Hence, he should use *will* or *would* here. Similarly, in example (83), God is sure to have the ability to help people. Therefore, it

is not proper to use *could*. The student should use *would* with the meaning of volition. For one can only hope that God has the volition to help people. That is to say, the correct sentence should be “She didn’t sleep well almost every night. She looked at me, and wished God *would* help me”. Example (84) is also incorrect because an ordinary person is sure to have the ability to say something loudly. The student should use *would* here. In this sentence, the student wants to show her love to her mother so she has the volition to say something loudly to her mother. Therefore, the correct sentence should be “I *would* say it loudly, ‘Thank you and I love you forever, my dear mother.’”

In short, students tend to use *can* or *could* to replace other modal verbs regardless of the original meanings each modal verb has. That’s why *can* and *could* appear in more than half of the wrong sentences.

#### **4.1.4.2. Addition**

As Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, p.156) points out, “Addition errors are the opposite of omissions. They are characterized by *the presence of an item which must not appear in a well-formed utterance.*” In other words, addition refers to the case that something is used when it is not expected to appear in the sentence. In this category, students use a modal verb in the sentence that is not expected to have one. This category is called addition, which means that students “add” a modal verb to the sentence that doesn’t need one.

There are 16 sentences in this category. Modal verbs of *will*, *would*, *could*, and *can* are found. Please see Table 4.6.

Table 4.6 Frequency of Addition

	Modal Verbs				
	Will	Would	Can	Could	The Total
The number of sentences	4	3	7	2	16

In Table 4.6, it is found that students use *will*, *would*, *can* and *could* in the sentences that are not expected to have a modal verb. It is inferred that students are confused with these four modal verbs as mentioned above. In consequence, when they write a sentence, they are apt to use these four modal verbs inappropriately. It is quite interesting that only these four modal verbs—*can*, *could*, *will*, and *would*—appear in this category. It can prove that these four modal verbs really puzzle students a lot.

Please look at the following examples.

- (7) I first touch the Zenange, I will love with it. (30831) => When I first touched the Zenange, I fell in love with it.
- (8) One day when I was studying in my room, my mother asked me, “Would you love me?” (30417) => Do you love me?
- (9) I’ll tell the young man to open the door to the lady. Because I can’t see the tiger spring upon him and tear him to pieces. He is my lover! (30820) => I don’t want to see the tiger spring upon him and tear him to pieces.
- (10) I learned swim when I was 12 years old. At first, I hated water and dare not jump in the water. During some days, I couldn’t act in the water with happy. (30835) => During some days, I wasn’t happy in the water.

In example (85), the student uses *will* in the sentence. He may want to represent the volition he has or to predict his love for Zenange. However, the student doesn’t have to use any modal verb because he is describing something really happening in the past. He only needs to use a verb in simple past tense to indicate a past fact. In example (86), the student’s mother is asking her daughter whether her daughter loves her. There is no need to use *would*. *Would* has the meaning of prediction or volition. It is not possible to ask somebody if he predicts to love someone else. Therefore, the

correct sentence should be “Do you love me?” rather than “Would you love me?” Example (87) is not appropriate, either. According to Tang (1992, p.90) when *can* goes with verbs of inert perception, it is used to represent the state of perception. That is to say, the speaker has the perception when he makes the statements. Hence, the student shouldn’t use *can* in the sentence. In this sentence, the student is trying to express his unwillingness to see his lover killed by a fierce tiger. He just uses “do not want to” to express his unwillingness. In example (88), the student uses *could* to express his inability to act happily in the water. However, the sentence is wrong because the student is trying to describe his unhappiness in the water in the past so he doesn’t have to use any modal verbs to describe a past fact. He only needs to say, “I wasn’t happy in the water.”

In sum, students are apt to use *will*, *would*, *can* and *could* in their compositions. In addition, they frequently use these four modal verbs to replace other modal verbs. They also use them when the sentences needn’t a modal verb. However, from the first analysis, it is a little difficult to find out the real problems that students have. For the frequency of students’ uses of modal verbs wrongly in meaning is very low. It is hard to judge whether students make such mistakes because they have difficulty using these four modal verbs—*will*, *would*, *can* and *could*. Therefore, it is necessary to design another form of test to verify that students do have problems with these modal verbs—*will*, *would*, *can* and *could*.

#### **4.2 Analysis of Translation Test of Modal Verbs**

From the first analysis, it is found that students use these four modal verbs—*can*, *could*, *will*, and *would*—most often. In students’ compositions, the four modal verbs are likely to be used wrongly frequently. Since these four modal verbs can be

translated into “hui” in Chinese. In order to understand if students are interfered by their native language, we design the second test from Contrastive Analysis Theory to see if students’ errors are caused by L1 transfer. The questions are designed in the form of translation to examine if students will use wrong modal verbs when they see certain Chinese words, such as “hui, neng, or ke yi” (會, 能, 可以).

#### **4.2.1 Subjects**

The subjects for the second experiment are 84 seniors who have participated in the first part of the project. There are 45 boys and 39 girls.

#### **4.2.2 Design of Translation Test**

Since the result of the analysis of compositions shows that the students’ errors are related to the use of the four modal verbs—*can*, *could*, *will*, and *would*, the second part of the project is focused on them. In addition, students’ problems with using these four modal verbs seem to derive from native language interference—Mandarin Chinese. The design is based on this preliminary finding. In the second part, a test of 25 translation questions is given. The students are asked to fill in the blanks in the English sentences. Below each English sentence, the corresponding Chinese translation is given. There are seven possible answers for students to choose from<sup>7</sup>.

##### **4.2.2.1 Principle of the Design**

All the questions are based on the book—*Practical English Usage*—written by Michael Swan. Since the test paper aims to find out if students’ errors are caused by L1 transfer, its design is based on two different parts. The first part includes nine

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<sup>7</sup> The test paper is attached in Appendix III. The answers and the purposes of design is attached in Appendix IV.

questions which involves the use of modal verb—“hui” in Chinese translation. All the usages of “hui” are included, such as assertive hui, ability hui, and personal deontic hui<sup>8</sup>. After these questions are designed, they are translated into English. The translations are all checked by a native speaker. The purpose of this design is to see if students make sentences through translation from their native language. That is to say, we want to know if the students are aware of the different meanings of “hui” and the corresponding English modal verbs under different contexts. The second part is designed from the different usages of English modal verbs. It has sixteen questions, including all the different meanings of *can*, *could*, *will*, and *would*, for example, the possibility, suggestion, and permission in *can*, and prediction and volition in *will*<sup>9</sup>. After all the questions are settled, they are translated into Chinese, too. Similarly, all the sentences are checked by a native speaker. The aim of this part is to find out if students know all the different usages of these four English modal verbs. Besides, we also want to see which usage is more difficult for students than others are.

After all the 25 questions are written, they are checked by a native speaker to make sure that the answers are correct. Some of them have more than one correct answer. The test also includes seven possible answers for students to choose from. Some of them are correct.

#### **4.2.2.2 Explanation of Some Controversial Questions**

In the 25 questions, there are some controversial ones, which means there is more than one answer. It is necessary to explain why these questions have more than one correct answer.

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<sup>8</sup> Question 1, 3, 4, and 6 are assertive hui; Question 2, 5, and 7 are ability hui; Question 8 is personal deontic hui; Question 9 is contrary-to-expectation hui.

<sup>9</sup> Question 10 is ability. Question 11, 13, 14, and 15 are possibility. Question 12 is suggestion. Question 16 and 17 are permission. Question 18 is offer. Question 19, 20 and 25 are volition. Question 21, 22, 23 and 24 are prediction.

First, Question 3, 6, and 23 are to express the prediction. However, the answers can be *will* or *would*. The speaker uses *will* to express his certainty about the prediction, and if he isn't so sure about his own prediction, he uses *would*. Question 3 is given below.

Question 3: The clothes \_\_\_\_\_ get dirty if you do it this way. (will, would)<sup>10</sup>  
這樣子衣服會弄髒的。

Question 4 and 24 are also to express the prediction; however, their answer is *will*. The reason is that these two questions have some words that strongly imply the high certainty, such as "I am sure" and "always". Look at Question 4.

Question 4: I am sure that he \_\_\_\_\_ like you. (will)  
我確定他會喜歡你的。

Question 5 and 11 are interrogative sentences to ask someone if he has the ability to do something. The answer of the two questions is *can* in the grammar book. However, after checking with the native speaker, the answer, *could*, is added. According to the native speaker, one will use *can* to ask the question if he is 100% sure that the hearer has the ability to do it, whereas he will use *could* when he is not so sure about the hearer's ability. For this reason, the answer of Question 5 and 11 are *can* and *could*. The two questions are listed below.

Question 5: \_\_\_\_\_ you drive? (Can, Could)  
你會開車嗎？

Question 11: How many people \_\_\_\_\_ fit into a mini car? (can, could)  
一部迷你車能擠下幾個人呢？

Question 10 is a sentence that the speaker expressed his ability to have his parents stay with him under the condition that he had his own house. The sentence is given below.

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<sup>10</sup> The modal verbs in the parentheses are the correct answers of the question.

Question 10: I \_\_\_\_\_ have my parents stay with me if I had a house of my own. (could, would)  
如果我有自己的公寓的話，我就可以讓我父母跟我住在一起。

The answer is *could* without question. However, *would* is also possible because the speaker may want to express his volition to live with his parents. Here the English modal verb is translated into “ke yi” (可以). “Ke yi” (可以) in Chinese also has different meanings. It could be ability or volition. Please look at another similar question.

Question 18: I \_\_\_\_ do the shopping for you, if you're tired. (can, could, will, would)  
如果你累了，我可以替你去買東西。

The original answers of this question are *can* and *could* to express the speaker's offer to do something for the hearer. However, *will* and *would* are also possible because the speaker can show his volition to do it. Therefore, the answers are *can*, *could*, *will*, and *would*.

The last controversial sentence is Question 14.

Question 14: Who \_\_\_\_\_ that be at the door? (can, will, could)  
在門口的那個人會是誰呢？

The fundamental design of the question is to test whether students know the possibility usage of *can* in an interrogative sentence. However, the native speaker gives the other answers—*will* and *could*. His explanation is that the answer is *can* if the speaker supposes the person at the door is someone he knows. That is, if the speaker thinks the person is one of his friends, he will use *can* to ask the question. Nevertheless, if the speaker doesn't have any idea who is at the door, he will use *will* and *could*. Hence, the answers of this question are *can*, *will*, and *could*.

### **4.2.3 Procedures**

The test paper is handed out to the students who have fifteen minutes to finish it. After all the students finish the test, they are asked to exchange their test paper to check the answers. Then the test papers are returned to the teacher to analyze students' answers.

The process of this analysis includes the following steps. First, all the students' answers are recorded whether they are right or wrong. Then, the number of students of every answer is counted. Third, the percentage is also calculated. The last step is to analyze all the data.

### **4.2.4 Data Analysis**

After all the data are recorded, the result is shown in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7 Frequency of Students' Answers in the Translation Test

Question Number	Correct Answer	Students' Answers			
		Correct		Wrong	
		Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	would	36	43.37	47	56.63
2	could	66	78.57	18	21.43
3	will, would	69	82.14	15	17.86
4	will	31	36.9	53	63.1
5	Can, Could	76	90.48	8	9.52
6	Will, Would	66	78.57	18	21.43
7	can	67	79.76	17	20.24
8	will	63	75	21	25
9	would	46	54.76	38	45.24
10	could, would	56	66.67	28	33.33
11	can, could	73	86.9	11	13.1
12	can, could	50	59.52	34	40.48
13	could	6	7.14	78	92.86
14	will, can, could	19	23.75	61	76.25
15	can	12	14.29	72	85.71
16	Can, Could	46	54.76	38	45.24
17-1	Can, Could	68	80.95	16	19.05
17-2	can	66	79.52	17	20.48
18	will, would, can, could	81	96.43	3	3.57
19	will	10	12.05	73	87.95
20	will	11	13.1	73	86.9
21	will	47	56.63	36	43.37
22	would	42	50	42	50
23	will, would	52	62.65	31	37.35
24	will	55	65.48	29	34.52
25	will	39	46.99	44	53.01

Table 4.7 shows the frequency and percentage of the correct and incorrect answers

used by students in every question. The second column lists all the correct answers. The third column is the frequency of students' correct and wrong answers. Take question 3 for example. The correct answers are *will* and *would*. Then, the frequency of students' correct answers is 69, which means 69 students choose either *will* or *would* as their answer in question 3. In other words, 15 students choose wrong modal verbs like *must*, *shall*, *can*, *should*, and *could*<sup>11</sup>. In the following section, the data will be analyzed based on the usages of the modal verbs.

First of all, the usages of *will* are analyzed. Questions 1, 3, 4, 6, 9, 21, 22, 23, and 24 are the questions about prediction of *will*. It is found that all questions are not difficult for students because their percentages of students' correct answers are more than 50% except for Question 1 and 4. The two questions are listed below.

Question 1: Yesterday he said that he \_\_\_\_\_ go to school.  
他昨天說他會來上學。

Question 4: I am sure that he \_\_\_\_\_ like you.  
我確定他會喜歡你的。

In Question 1, there are 47 students using the wrong answers, among which are 36 *wills*, 4 *cans*, 4 *coulds*, 2 *shalls* and 1 *must*.<sup>12</sup> Students choosing *will* are as much as those choosing *would*, the correct answer. It seems that most students know that they should take the meaning of prediction but they forget the tense which should be the past. As for Question 4, among the wrong answers, there are 21 *woulds*, 18 *musts*, 9 *shalls*, 2 *cans*, 2 *coulds*, and 1 *should*. Students tend to use *would* and *must* to show their prediction.

As for the meaning of volition, Question 8, 19, 20, and 25 are the representatives.

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<sup>11</sup> Table 4.7 only shows the frequency and percentage of the correct and incorrect answers. As for the precise answers used by students in every question, they are attached in Appendix V and VI. The former is the frequency of every answer in every question; the latter is the percentage.

<sup>12</sup> Please see Appendix V for detailed figures.

From Table 4.7, it is found that only Question 8 is easy for the students since 75% of them give right answers. Question 19, 20, and 25 are pretty difficult for students. Only ten students give the correct answer in Question 19, which is listed below.

Question 19: “Can somebody help me?” “I \_\_\_\_\_.”  
“有沒有人能幫我一下呢？” “我來。”

In this question, ten students choose the correct answer—*will*. However, 44 students choose *can*, 13 choose *could*, 10 choose *would*, 4 choose *shall*, and 2 choose *should*. Most students use *can* because they don’t notice that they are showing their volition, and in such a case only *will* is the correct answer. Similarly, Question 20 is to test the meaning of volition. However, there are up to 56 students choosing *must*, which indicates obligation rather than volition. As for Question 25, 23 students choose *would*, 7 choose *must*, 4 choose *can*, 4 choose *should*, 3 choose *shall*, and 3 choose *could*. The distribution of students’ wrong answers in the three questions is quite different. The questions are all about the volition, but students use different modal verbs that convey other meanings. The reason will be discussed in detail in the next section.

The next target is the usages of *can*—possibility, permission, ability, offer, and suggestion. Question 11, 13, 14, and 15 are the ones about the usage of possibility. It is interesting to find that except Question 11, all the other questions’ percentages of correct answers are lower than 25%. It means that students seem to have much difficulty with this usage of *can*. Please look at the three questions first.

Question 13: It \_\_\_\_\_ rain later on this evening.  
今晚稍後可能會下雨。

Question 14: Who \_\_\_\_\_ that be at the door?  
在門口的那個人會是誰呢？

Question 15: It \_\_\_\_\_ not be true!  
這不可能會是真的。

Question 13 is the most difficult for students of the three questions. Only six students choose the correct answer. Up to 43 students choose *will*, 13 students choose *would*,

10 choose *must*, 7 choose *should* and 5 choose *shall*. Most students use *will* here. They may not notice the Chinese words—*ke neng*(可能), which indicate possibility. They only think it a question about the future tense so most of them choose *will*. Question 14 has three correct answers—*will*, *can*, and *could*. However, the correct percentage of students' answers is still very low—only 23.75%. There are 25 students using *shall*, 17 using *would*, 14 using *should* and 5 using *must*. As for Question 15, there are 32 *musts*, 16 *woulds*, 10 *shoulds*, 8 *coulds*, 4 *wills* and 2 *shalls*. It is also interesting that students' choosing modal verbs to express their attitude towards possibility is not so consistent. Most students choose *will* in Question 13, *shall* in Question 14, and *must* in Question 15.

Question 2, 5, 7, and 10 are to test the meaning of ability. This meaning of *can* seems to be the easiest one for students because the percentages of students' correct answers in every question are more than 65%. That means students understand this usage of *can* and choose the correct answer.

Question 16 and 17 are to test the permission of *can*. The questions are listed below.

Question 16: \_\_\_\_\_ I ask you something, if you're not too busy?  
你要是不太忙的話，我可否問你一些事情？

Question 17: “\_\_\_\_\_ I use your telephone?” “Yes, of course you \_\_\_\_\_.”  
“我可以用你的電話嗎？” “當然可以。”

This usage seems not so difficult for students because most students choose the correct answers<sup>13</sup>. It is quite interesting that 23 students using *shall* in Question 16. The number of students using *shall* is more than that using *can*—7 students.

The last usage of *can* is suggestion and offer in Question 12 and 18. There are 50 students choosing the correct answers—*can* and *could*—in Question 12 and 81 in

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<sup>13</sup> In Table 4.7, there are 17-1 and 17-2 because there are two blanks in Question 17. Hence, the first blank is 17-1 and the second is 17-2.

Question 18. Among the wrong answers students give in Question 12, there are 16 *shoulds* and 14 *shalls*. As for Question 18, there are four correct answers so only one student chooses *must* and two choose *shall*. Among the correct answers, there are 41 *cans*, 24 *coulds*, 9 *wills* and 7 *woulds*. Most students tend to use *can* and *could* in this question. This part seems not so difficult for students, either.

From the above data analysis, it can be concluded that students have difficulty with the usages of prediction and volition in *will* and possibility in *can*. When it comes to the usages of ability, permission, offer and suggestion in *can*, more than half students choose the correct answers. The reasons of students' choosing wrong answers will be discussed in detail in the next section.

### **4.3 Discussion**

From the above analysis, students' use of modal verbs is found to have some problems. For example, in the composition analysis, students seldom use *can* to express possibility. They often use *can* to express ability. Among the sentences used wrongly by students, the errors focus on the four modal verbs—*can*, *could*, *will*, and *would*. As for the translation test, students have difficulty with the three usages: (1) prediction in *will* and *would*, (2) volition in *will* and *would*, and (3) possibility in *can* and *could*. Besides, students seem to confuse *can*, *could* with other modal verbs. Why do students make such errors in their compositions and the translation test? There are some possible reasons.

The first reason is the misunderstanding of modal verbs. Misunderstanding here means that students learn some grammatical rules of modal verbs and apply them to all the situations, which may result in errors. For example, there is a grammatical rule of modal verbs that students should use the same modal verb appear in the question to

answer the question. That is to say, if the question starts with *can*, then students should use this modal verb to answer the question. This rule is emphasized by teachers so students retain it firmly. If teachers not only put emphasis on this grammatical rule but also teach students that they should pay attention to the different situations and the meanings of modal verbs, students will apply this rule more appropriately. Take Question 19 in the translation test for example. “Can somebody help me?” “I \_\_\_\_\_.” In this question, it starts with the modal verb—*can*. However, the answer is not *can* at all. The hearer should use *will* to show his willingness instead of *can*. For the speaker is asking if someone has the volition to help him. He doesn’t mean to ask if someone has the ability to help him. Nevertheless, more than half students—44—choose *can* in the question. It is obvious that students remember the grammatical rule that using the modal verb used in the interrogative sentence to answer the question.

The second reason why students make errors is oversimplifying modal verbs. Oversimplification means that students learn some meanings of modal verbs but they only remember one of them. Thus, they think the modal verb only has one meaning. For instance, *will* is much emphasized in the meaning of prediction which is related to the future. Students learn that and they use *will* when they want to predict something happening in the future. In other words, when students translate Chinese into English, they tend to use *will* in the sentence denoting the future tense. Take Question 13 in the translation test for example.

Question 13: It \_\_\_\_\_ rain later on this evening.  
今晚稍後可能會下雨。

43 students choose *will* in this sentence. They are affected by the Chinese words—jin wuan shao hou(今晚稍後), which means something will happen later this evening. This phrase conveys a future tense, so most students choose *will* to express the tense.

However, they do not know that *will* has the meaning of prediction, which means the speaker has a strong belief that something is going to happen. The correct answer is *could* because it has the meaning of possibility, which can express the speaker's uncertainty of something.

Students know one of the usages of *will* is prediction and oversimplify this rule. Whenever they encounter a sentence with the future tense, they just use *will* to signify the tense without considering the meaning and situation. There is another example that can illustrate oversimplification.

(11) As soon as I heard, I was so angry. I even won't see my father again.  
(31131)

In example (89), this student wants to express his unwillingness to see his father because he is very angry. The use of *will* in this sentence is wrong because "I even *won't* see my father again" means the speaker predicts that he can not see his father for a certain reason and this is not what he means. Why do this student use *will* in this sentence? It is because he learns that *will* has the meaning of volition. *Will* does have the meaning of volition; however, when it goes with "see", it loses this meaning—volition. One can't have the volition to "see" something because every normal person does "see" only if he opens his eyes. As a result, when *will* goes with "see", it always holds the meaning—prediction. If the student wants to express his volition, he should revise his sentence as following.

(12) As soon as I heard, I was so angry. **I didn't want to** see my father again.

In other words, this student should use "want" to express his volition.

The third reason is the effect of frozen idiomatic expression. The frozen idiomatic expression means some fixed idiomatic usages in English. As long as students learn some frozen idiomatic expressions, they might be affected and misuse them. For example, "Would you" is a frozen idiomatic expression to show the

politeness of the speaker in the following sentences. “Would you like some tea?” or “Would you mind opening the window?” After some practice, students learn this term and they might misuse it. Using “Would you love me” to replace the correct sentence “Do you love me” is a typical example. The students have learned the grammar that using “do” to change the affirmative sentence—I love you—into an interrogative sentence. However, instead of using the structure, the student uses *would* to make this sentence. Apparently, he is affected by the frozen idiomatic expression—would you. There is another example to illustrate this effect. After students learn this usage—I *would*, they are told this term is more polite so they practice this idiom often. Then there seems to be a tendency that students always use this term—I *would*. In Question 25 in the translation test, 23 students choose *would* to express their strong volition.

Question 25: I promise I \_\_\_\_\_ not get drunk again.  
我答應再也不喝醉。

In this question, it is obvious that *will* is the correct answer because the speaker wants to show his strong willingness. *Would* is used to show a less definite and a less strong volition so it's not proper to use *would* in this sentence. However, 27.71 percent of the students choose *would*. It is because students get accustomed to this term and don't take account of the expression of strong volition.

The last reason is the effect of students' mother language—Mandarin Chinese. In this study, most of the students' errors arise due to this interference. For students usually think in Chinese and they tend to translate Chinese into English word for word. When they learn a new English word, they are apt to connect this English word with its Chinese counterpart. Then they will memorize the new word and its counterpart simultaneously. When students see the Chinese term, they will think of the English word. For example, students learn the English word—*can*, and its Chinese counterpart—hui(會) or neng(能). When they see the Chinese words—hui or neng,

they will think of its English counterpart—*can*. They do not know that “hui” in Chinese has more than one meaning and so does *can*. This is very common in students’ compositions.

(13) I would tell the young man to open the door to the lady because I can’t see the tiger spring upon him and tear him to pieces. He is my lover. (30820)

In example (91), the student wants to express that she loves her lover very much so she doesn’t want to see him killed by the tiger. However, the student shows her unwillingness with this sentence—I *can’t* see the tiger spring upon him and tear him to pieces. It is incorrect because *can* has three meanings—possibility, permission, and ability. Then this sentence can have three different interpretations.

- (91a) It is impossible that I see the tiger spring upon him and tear him to pieces.  
→ possibility
- (91b) I am not allowed to see the tiger spring upon him and tear him to pieces.  
→ permission
- (91c) I don’t have the ability to see the tiger spring upon him and tear him to pieces. → ability

From the context, it is found that none of the above interpretations is correct. Since the student wants to express his volition, he shouldn’t have used *can*. The correct expression is shown in (91d).

(91d) I would tell the young man to open the door to the lady because I ***don’t want to*** see the tiger spring upon him and tear him to pieces. He is my lover.

However, students might inquire if they can use *will* to show their volition here—I *won’t* see the tiger spring upon him and tear him to pieces. This is still incorrect because *will* here has nothing to do with volition. It means the speaker predicts that this matter, seeing the tiger spring upon him and tear him to pieces, never happens. That is, the speaker is expressing his prediction but not volition. Since *can* doesn’t have the meaning of volition, why does this student use it here? It is because she translates Chinese into English directly. In Chinese, the sentence “I can’t see the tiger

spring upon him and tear him to pieces” is “wuo bu neng yian kan lao hu pu xiang ta bing qie ba ta szu cheng sui pian” (我不能眼看老虎撲向他並且把他撕成碎片).

When the student sees “bu neng” (不能) in Chinese, she thinks of *can't*. That's why she makes such a mistake. She is apparently affected by Chinese. What's more, the phenomenon is even more common in the translation test. Take Question 4 and 20 for example.

Question 4: I am sure that he \_\_\_\_\_ like you.  
我確定他會喜歡你的。

Question 20: I \_\_\_\_\_ stop smoking.  
我決心要戒煙。

Question 4 is a strong prediction while Question 20 is a strong volition. Both of the answers are *will*. However, in Question 4, there are 18 students choosing *must*; in Question 20, there are 56. Why do so many students choose *must*? In Chinese, “que ding” (確定) and “jue xin” (決心) are very strong modality. Therefore, students will associate them with another strong term—“yi ding” (一定), whose English counterpart is *must*. Students regard *must* as “yi ding”. That's why students use *must* to express their strong modality. Since “yi ding” in Chinese is a very strong term, students misinterpret *must* as a similar strong term. No wonder students use *must* to express their affirmative modality because they are affected by Chinese.

In this section, the possible reasons that affect students in using wrong modal verbs are discussed. There are four reasons. The first one is misunderstanding of modal verbs, which results from students' incomplete understanding. They apply one grammatical rule to every situation. The second reason is the oversimplification of modal verbs. Students think every modal verb has only one meaning. The third reason is the effect of the frozen idiomatic expression. After students keep practicing some fixed idioms, they get accustomed to the terms and tend to use them in an apparent

similar situation. The last reason, most importantly, is affected by students' mother language—Chinese. Students tend to think in Chinese. When they think a certain Chinese term, they will think of its English counterpart and make errors. All these four reasons influence students' learning and using of modal verbs.