

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter, first, a summary of the whole study is represented. Then, some drawbacks in teaching will be mentioned. Besides, there are some suggestions and implications in pedagogy. The last part is the limitations of the present study.

#### 5.1 Summary

Most Chinese students don't like to use modal verbs to express their modality. Some students do use modal verbs in their compositions, but they usually use *can* and *will*. The reasons why students seldom use modal verbs and why they use *can* and *will* so often are worthy to be found out for English teachers. If English teachers can make out the problems, they can figure out some solutions to help their students. Therefore, the purposes of this study are to find out: (1) what modal verbs students like to use, (2) whether students use these modal verbs correctly, (3) what difficulties students have in using these modal verbs, and (4) why they use modal verbs wrongly.

To find out students' difficulties, the first step is to understand the usages and meanings of English modal verbs. The grammatical characteristics of modal verbs are the same as the auxiliary verbs. There are six characteristics. (1) They are not inflected in the third person. (2) They are followed by the "bare infinitive". (3) Their negation is to add "not". (4) Their interrogation is to invert the subject and modal verbs. (5) They don't have the forms of past and present participles. (6) They can't co-occur. From these grammatical characteristics, modal verbs can be divided into two parts—pure modal verbs and semi-modal verbs. The former includes *will*, *would*,

*shall, should, can, could, may, might, must, and ought to* and the latter includes *had better, have (got) to, be able to, used to, and would rather*. In this study, only pure modal verbs are analyzed because the meaning of semi-modal verbs is easier than that of pure modal verbs. As for the meanings of pure modal verbs, there are two different meanings—epistemic and deontic. The former is related to the speaker’s subjective interpretation of the real world situation, including necessity, prediction, and possibility. The latter is associated with real world, obligation, permission, volition, and ability included. All the modal verbs have epistemic and deontic usages in different contexts. That is, a modal verb’s meaning is reached only in the context. The negative form of English modal verbs is to put “not” after the modal verbs, except for *may* in possibility, *must* in necessity and obligation. The above three modal verbs belong to main verb negation. Their negated forms do not always represent opposite meanings. That is to say, the contradictory of *may not* in the meaning of impossibility is *can’t*. Similarly, the contradictory of *mustn’t* in the meaning of necessity and obligation is *have (got) to* or *need*. The interrogation of modal verbs is to invert the subject and its modal verb, and as what happen in negation, the interrogation form may require a different modal verb. The modal verbs are mostly used for the present or future meaning. *Could, would, might, and should* can be used for the past events but they can also be used for the contexts involve present and future meanings when the speaker wants to show lower certainty about something.

After understanding all the usages of modal verbs, teachers should realize the difficulties in students’ learning modal verbs. The main difficulty does not lie in modal verbs’ surface forms, but in the meaning and function aspect. In addition, students are also confused with the subtle differences among modal verbs. Even if students understand every usage and meaning of modal verbs, they still have difficulty

using modal verbs in the right situation.

As students' learning of modal verbs is possibly affected by their native languages, Contrastive Analysis Theory is necessary to be reviewed. The two different forms of Contrastive Analysis Theory are prediction and explanation. In this study, both aspects are adopted. In order to find out if students are affected by their native languages, the comparison between English and Chinese modal verbs is necessary, especially between the English modal verbs, *can* and *will*, and the Chinese modal verb "hui". *Can* have the following meanings: possibility, permission, ability, request, suggestion, and offer. *Will* means prediction, volition, request order, and offer. As for Chinese modal "hui", it has three different usages and meanings—ability hui, assertive hui, and tendency hui. Among these usages and meanings, *can* with the meaning of ability is like ability hui, and *will* with the meaning of prediction, sometimes volition, is just like assertive hui in Chinese. Since *can* and *will* can both be translated into "hui" in Chinese, students will have difficulty distinguishing the differences.

To understand what problems students have in learning or using modal verbs, there are two experiments included in the study. The first one is to analyze students' two compositions written in 30 minutes in class. From the first analysis, it is found that almost 30 percent of the students don't use any modal verbs in the compositions. Among the compositions with modal verbs, there are 327 sentences including modal verbs. There are 293 sentences having modal verbs used correctly in meaning and 34 sentences with modal verbs used wrongly. In the 293 sentences, *can*, *will*, *could*, and *would* are used most often which take 85.66% of the frequency of modal verbs.

As for the wrongly used modal verbs, they are divided into two parts based on the forms. One is Mis-selection, which means students use a wrong modal verb to

replace the correct one. The other one is Addition, which refers to cases when students use a modal verb in the sentence that does not need one. To find out if students make errors because of their native languages, the second experiment, a translation test, is designed based on the Contrastive Analysis Theory. The test includes 25 questions. Each question has one blank for students to fill out. Besides, each question has its Chinese translation for students to refer to. After the test, it is found that students have difficulty with *will* carrying the meaning of prediction and volition and with *can* conveying possibility. It seems that students don't know the usage of volition in *will*. When they encounter such a question as "I promise I ...", they don't know they should use *will* to express their strong volition.

From the two analyses, students' difficulties in modal verbs are concluded to be caused by four factors. The first one is misunderstanding of modal verbs, which means that students only remember a part of the grammatical rules of modal verbs and use it in every situation. The second one is the oversimplification of modal verbs. Students learn some meanings of modal verbs but they only remember one of them. In other words, they think each modal verb only has one meaning. The third factor is the effect of frozen idiomatic usages. In English, there are some fixed idiomatic expressions, such as "Would you...". After repeated practice, students are used to this idiom and over-generalize the use of it. The last but not the least important factor is the interference of students' native languages. For example, when they think about "hui" or "neng" in Chinese, they may use *can* because they learn the meaning and Chinese translations from their textbooks.

After the analysis of students' difficulties, in the following sections, some drawbacks of the present teaching methods will be pointed out. The pedagogical implications and suggestions will be proposed to help teachers solve students'

problems.

## 5.2 Some Drawbacks of Present Teaching Method

All the pure modal verbs have been taught in junior high school; however, teachers don't take much notice of them. They only emphasize the grammatical rules of modal verbs. As for the different meanings of each modal verb, they don't put much emphasis, not to mention the subtle differences of each modal verb which shares the same meaning. There are three drawbacks in teaching modal verbs in the present classroom practice.

The first one is the ignorance of modal verbs. Since the grammatical rules of modal verbs are very easy, teachers usually don't put much emphasis on them. They only ask their students to memorize the grammatical rules. They don't emphasize the importance of using modal verbs correctly in expressing one's modality. If a person can use appropriate modal verbs to express his attitude, he won't make himself misunderstood. However, teachers don't emphasize the importance of the proper use of modal verbs. Students only remember the grammatical characteristics of modal verbs. They don't know the differences between the answers—I *will* and I *can*—when a person asks them if someone can help him. The ignorance of modal verbs in teaching causes students to underestimate the importance of appropriate expression with modal verbs. Besides, they don't know the precise meanings of each modal verb. They only know that *can* has the meaning of ability so they will not use it to express possibility. Although the grammatical characteristics of modal verbs are very easy, their meanings are actually very complicated. Teachers should not ignore them.

The second drawback is that the translation of modal verbs in textbooks is too simple. From the textbooks in the junior high school, it is found that only one or two

Chinese translations are given. For example, in Lesson Two, Book III of the junior high school English textbook published by National Institute for Compilation and Translation (2001), *couldn't* is listed in the vocabulary table. However, the explanation is that it is the past tense of *can't* and the Chinese translation is “bu neng” (不能). This explanation is quite misleading because students don't know the actual meaning of *couldn't*. Does it mean inability, disallowance, or impossibility? If the explanation in the textbooks is not clear enough, how can students get the correct information and knowledge? They only think that one certain modal verb has one Chinese counterpart. They don't know that it might have another meaning and the same Chinese term may be translated into different modal verbs in English.

The last drawback is that the context of the presentation of modal verbs is not manifold. The presentation of modal verbs is in a context. However, the context does not represent various situations. For example, *can* is taught in Lesson Nine Textbook One. The dialogue is like this.

A: Look at those boys!

B: They're very good.

A: *Can* you play basketball?

B: Yes. *Can* you?

A: No, I *can't*. But my sister *can*. She *can* play basketball and baseball.

B: My brother *can* play baseball, too.

From the dialogue, it is found that *can* is only used in the meaning of ability. Other usages of *can*—possibility and permission—do not appear in the textbooks. If there is only one usage of the modal verbs presented in the textbooks, then students will only learn this usage. It is not enough. The design of the contexts should include all the common usages of every modal verb.

In sum, there are three drawbacks in the present teaching method of modal verbs. The first one is the teachers' ignorance of modal verbs. Then the explanation of modal verbs is simplified and thus fails to give students a complete understanding. The last

one is the lack of variety in presenting context in the textbooks. These drawbacks result in students' incomplete understanding and learning of modal verbs and lead to errors in their compositions. In the following section, some teaching suggestions and implications will be introduced.

### **5.3 Some Pedagogical Suggestions and Implications**

Since modal verbs are so complicated, they must be presented in a well-developed and systematic sequence so that students will learn them easily. Of course, the presentation of modal verbs should be made appropriate to the students' level and given to them whenever they are ready. The steps of the presentation of modal verbs are discussed as follows.

#### **5.3.1 Presentation of the Different Usages of Each Modal Verb**

In teaching the usages of modal verbs, most teachers present each modal verb individually. However, as Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) mention in the grammar book, "Traditional grammar books tend to list or summarize the form and meaning of the modal verbs one by one. Such presentations give a rather fragmented view of modals, since they suggest that they should be learned and taught form by form and meaning by meaning (p.141-142)." Bowen and McCreary (1977) also propose that "Materials for English language study often group several modal perfect functions in one presentation. This leads to unnecessary confusion. The different functions reinforce one another only structurally; the learner is not encouraged to individualize each one and determine the possibilities for its use (p.290)." Consequently, it can be concluded that every modal verb should not be presented one by one, nor can the modals be taught all at once. The best way to present the modal

verbs is to take into account the entire relative features or environments that each modal occurs.

It is preferable, therefore, to begin presenting the modal functions one at a time. For example, Bowen and McCreary (1977) give a good example for teachers to teach modal perfects.

The teacher might begin with deductions, what we have called *inferred certainty* with *must*. Another possible starting place is reprimands, or expressions of regret for a lost opportunity, which we have called *advisability* with *should*. Not only should the teacher limit beginning lessons to one function, he should also choose one modal to express that function (p.290).

What Bowen and McCreary mean is to present the most common meaning of each modal verb in the beginning. Take *must* for example. It has two meanings, necessity and obligation. Teachers can present necessity first. After students are familiar with this usage, then teachers go on to the other meaning of *must*. Only after students learn the most typical modal verb will they know how to extend the usage to another modal verb. Therefore, the teachers should give students the typical meaning of each modal verb in the very beginning. Moreover, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) propose another way to present each modal. They suggest that teachers should give students every modal, which has the same meaning. They also give an impressive example.

Teach the modal verbs in systems so that the relationship between them is clear. One of the uses of the logical probability modals is to predict something such as the chance of rain tomorrow. Show your students what degree of prediction is expressed by each modal (or combination of modal and adverbs[s]):

(possibly)	weak, outside chance	It could/might rain tomorrow.
(perhaps)	stronger chance	It may rain tomorrow.
(probably)	even stronger chance	It may very well rain tomorrow.
(very likely)	very strong chance	It will very likely rain tomorrow.
(certainly)	certainty	It will rain tomorrow.(p.153)

It can be seen that, in the above example, students can learn many modals with the



similar meaning at a time. It's easier for students to understand the differences between each modal verb. Besides, students will get the more precise meaning of each modal.

Besides the different presentation of each modal, teachers should be aware of the relevant features or environments that the modal occurs. Cook (1978) points out that teachers must first know some basic facts about modals and then present the modals to students.

In order to teach modal verbs to students of English as a foreign language, the teacher should be aware of the basic facts about modal verbs, such as (1) Is the modal an epistemic or a root modal? (2) Is the negative of this modal an example of internal or external negation? (3) Does the past tense modal carry a present or a past meaning in this context? and (4) What is the nature of the sentence which occurs with the modal? Is the verb inflected for passive, progressive, perfective? The answers to these questions should provide clues which, in most cases will determine the precise meaning of a particular modal in context (p.15).

Cook is trying to give teachers a way to understand the nature of each modal. Only when teachers understand the basic characteristics of modal verbs will they know how to present the modal verbs to students. In other words, teachers not only should understand the meanings of each modal verb, but they should also realize the relative part, such as tense or negation. Another linguist, Hubbard (1984), also gives the similar suggestion.

In my own presentation of modals to ESL classes, I begin by discussing the historical meanings of the modals. I then point out that the purpose of all modals is to indicate potentiality, so that most of the time they represent a kind of future orientation. I discuss a single modal, and show how the various uses relate to each other and to the original meaning. (p.22).

What Hubbard means is that teachers should notice the related part of modal verbs before they start teaching them. It can be concluded from what the linguists have proposed that it is very important for teachers to understand different aspects of each modal. Only after all the various uses have been treated individually in class can the

teacher safely offer the student a context where they are grouped together.

### **5.3.2 Presentation of Modal Verbs in Different Contexts**

As mentioned above in the previous chapter, each modal verb has at least two distinctly different functions: (1) an epistemic meaning expressing logical reasoning and (2) a deontic function expressing a use related to social interaction. Modal verbs have different usages and meanings in the different contexts so students should understand how each modal verb is used in the two fields. The choice of modals for a given function depends on their basic meaning, not just their position on a scale of probabilities, and there is a principle of “social distance” related to epistemic distance.

Bowen and McCreary (1977) mention in their study that “when the various functions of the perfect modals are isolated and presented in the highly precise contexts in which the native speaker regularly uses them, the student will learn. A series of mini-situations, set by a sentence or two of context, can be used to present each discrete use in turn (p.290).” They point out that a precise context is necessary and important. For modal verbs have different meanings in different contexts. Students should be given the exact context that each modal verb is used. Then they will know how to use modal verbs correctly. Similarly, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) also give teachers the same suggestion.

Modals are frequent in a discussion or written description of job openings that need to be filled. Ur (1988) and Thewlis (1997) each suggest exploiting this situation by asking students to describe a suitable candidate for a particular job, possibly after examining some advertisements from newspaper. Students could also write their own want ads or job descriptions. He then asks students to discuss why any of the jobs would not interest them (p.154).

They suggest that teachers should give some real-life situations to ask students to practice the use of modal verbs. Besides, teachers should separate epistemic meaning and deontic meaning. They are significantly different. Celce-Murcia and

Larsen-Freeman (1999) say that

when modals are used for social interaction, the person using them must take into account the relevant features of the social situation. For example, in “You may leave the room,” the speaker should have sufficient status and authority to be able to grant permission to the interlocutor(s). Furthermore, the situation should be formal rather than informal, or the speaker would have used “can” instead of “may” for granting permission(p.141).

From the example above, it can be seen that knowing all the relevant features of participants, time, and place of the social situation allows the speaker to select the appropriate modal auxiliary in any given interaction. Before students are given different contexts to use modals, it is necessary for them to know when and where each modal will appear. That is, the different modal verbs will be associated with certain syntactic or semantic features as mentioned by Ney (1981).

- a. In general, the root interpretation is excluded by the progressive and perfect. (p.3)
- b. Epistemic modals occur with state, process and action verbs, but root modals occur with action verbs only. (p.4)
- c. Root modals do not occur with the progressive or with the perfect tense markers in English. (p.10)

Teachers may not explain these principles to students, but they need to be equipped with this kind of knowledge to judge grammaticalness and appropriateness in their teaching.

### **5.3.3 The Application of Pragmatics**

Modal verbs are used to express the speakers’ attitudes toward something. One modal verb may have different meanings in different contexts, which involves pragmatics. Richards, Platt and Platt (1998, p.356-57) give pragmatics a clear definition.

Pragmatics is the study of the use of language in communication, particularly the relationships between sentences and the contexts and situations in which they are used. Pragmatics includes the study of

- a. how the interpretation and use of utterances depends on knowledge of

- the real world.
- b. how speakers use and understand speech acts
  - c. how the structure of sentences is influenced by the relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

From the above definition, it is very clear to find that pragmatics has much to do with communication, which is the purpose of using language. In other words, modal verbs should be connected with pragmatics because they are used to express a person's attitudes when he is communicating with others. Besides, the principle that the different meanings of modal verbs used in different contexts coincide with pragmatic consideration. Therefore, the concept of pragmatics should be put into the process of teaching. For example, when a person asks the question "Can you drive", he has a high certainty that the hearer has the ability to drive. If he uses *could* to ask the question, he is not so sure of the hearer's ability. Nevertheless, in the real world, "Can you drive" is a question to ask a person's ability, while "Could you drive" is to represent your intention in asking him to take over the wheels. This is a specific example of pragmatics. If pragmatics is not put into modal verb instruction, students will not learn authentic English. Students may learn that using *can* to ask a person of his ability, but they will not know the real intention of using *could*. This pragmatic issue should be included in the textbooks and receive more emphasis.

In this section, some teaching suggestions and implications are introduced. When teaching modal verbs, first, the typical usage and meaning of each modal verb should be clarified. Then, extend the basic meaning into other meanings of each modal verb. After students learn that modal verbs have different meanings and usages, the subtle differences of different modal verbs should be introduced and compared. Besides the presentation of each modal verb, different contexts where each modal verb occurs should be introduced. Teachers should give students some real world situations to make them acquainted with the different usages of modal verbs. This part

can be combined with pragmatics. An understanding of the limitation and appreciation of the variety on the patterns of each modal verb can be a useful instrument for the ESL student, who needs a feeling for these patterns but lacks the opportunity to become acquainted with the individual form of the modals in the context of daily life. As a result, teachers should provide students with this tool by combination of different teaching methods and the theory of pragmatics.

#### **5.4 Limitations of the Present Study**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the uses of modal verbs in senior high school students. The data are confined to students' compositions and tests. However, in the process of analysis, sometimes, it is not easy to decide what the students really want to express. In students' composition data, the meanings of some sentences can not be figured out. Likewise, some of students' answers in the test papers can not be understood and explained. The best way to solve the problem is to interview the students to make out students' real intentions.

In addition, in the process of consulting the native speakers about the usages of modal verbs in this study, it is found that even native speakers have different opinions and explanations about the usages and meanings of modal verbs. In other words, modality is a rather difficult part even for native speakers. Sometimes, the usages are not completely wrong. They are only a bit inappropriate. In this study, the different opinions and explanations of the three different native speakers are all adopted as long as they think the usages are acceptable.

As for the translation test, the sentences are not in a context. Since modal verbs are used to express the speaker's opinions and attitudes, they are used in the process of communication. Using authentic discourse to test if students know how to use

modal verbs in a context would help the researchers get more information and more natural data. Therefore, I suggest that interviews with students and using authentic discourse should be included in the further study.