

Teaching Modals to Low-Level ESL/EFL Students
(Helping low- & low-intermediate students understand
& learn the forms & meanings of modals)

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Grammar books for teachers & ESL/EFL students:

- BASIC ENGLISH GRAMMAR, 3rd ed., by B. Azar & S. Hagen (Pearson)
 - textbook
 - workbook
 - test book

Informative books for teachers, graduate students, etc.

- THE GRAMMAR BOOK: AN ESL/EFL TEACHER'S COURSE, 2nd ed., by M. Celce-Murcia & D. Larsen-Freeman (Heinle)
- KEYS TO TEACHING GRAMMAR TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK, by K. Folse (U. of Michigan Press)
- ENGLISH GRAMMAR: LANGUAGE AS HUMAN BEHAVIOR, 3rd ed., by A. Barry (Pearson)

“Modal auxiliaries are among the more difficult structures ESL/EFL teachers have to deal with” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, p. 137).

“Modals are small but important words or phrases that allow the speaker or writer to include nuances of meaning for verbs.... Consider why it is that a parent can tell a child, *It's getting late, so you'd better finish your homework now*, but a child cannot in turn respond, *Well, it's almost dinner time, so you'd better get in the kitchen and cook something good*. (The answer is that *had better* is used only by persons of power or authority to subordinates).... A modal verb is an auxiliary or helping verb that alters the meaning of the sentence by adding shades of meaning, or mood, to the main verb that it modifies” (Folse, pp. 224-25).

A modal verb “rarely has just one meaning, and rarely is one meaning expressed by only one modal” (Folse, p. 226).

As opposed to the auxiliaries *be*, *do*, and *have*, modals “carry some meaning of their own. In fact, they carry a wide range of different meanings and nuances of meaning that we learn as we learn English, but the meanings are very hard to spell out in exact and predictable terms” (Barry, p. 55).

Textbook: BASIC ENGLISH GRAMMAR

Ch. 10 – Expressing Future Time, Part 1

- Future time: *be going to*
- Future time: *will*

Ch. 11 – Expressing Future Time, Part 2

- *may/might* vs. *will*
- maybe (one word) vs. *may be* (two words)

Ch. 12 – Modals, Part 1: Expressing Ability

- Using *can*
- Using *know how to*
- Using *could* – past of *can*
- Using *be able to*

Ch. 13 – Modals, Part 2: Advice, Necessity, Requests, Suggestions

- Using *should*
- Using *have* + infinitive (*have to/has to*)
- Using *must*
- Polite questions: *May I*, *Could I*, and *Can I*
- Polite questions: *Could you* and *Would you*

SUMMARY CHART: MODAL AUXILIARIES AND SIMILAR EXPRESSIONS (p. 399)

Auxiliary	Meaning	Example
can	ability	I can sing.
	polite question	Can you please help me?
could	past ability	I couldn't go to class yesterday.
	polite question	Could you please help me?
may	possibility	It may rain tomorrow.
	polite question	May I help you?
might	possibility	It might rain tomorrow.
must	necessity	You must have a passport.
should	advisability	You should see a doctor.
will	future happening	My sister will meet us at the airport.
would	polite question	Would you please open the door?
be able to	ability	I wasn't able to attend the meeting.
be going to	future happening	Tina is going to meet us at the....
have to/has to	necessity	I have to study tonight.
had to	past necessity	I had to study last night too.

Revised:

<i>Modal Auxiliary</i>	Meaning	Example
can	ability	I can sing.
	polite question	Can you please help me?
	<i>permission</i>	<i>Can I borrow your dictionary?</i>
	<i>possibility</i>	<i>The coast can be quite cold & foggy in December.</i>
could	past ability	I couldn't go to class yesterday.
	polite question	Could you please help me?
	<i>permission</i>	<i>Could I borrow your dictionary?</i>
	<i>possibility</i>	<i>Don't touch it. It could be dangerous.</i>
may	possibility	It may rain tomorrow.
	polite question	May I help you?
	<i>permission</i>	<i>May I borrow your dictionary?</i>
might	possibility	It might rain tomorrow.
must	necessity	You must have a passport.
	<i>logical conclusion</i>	<i>He hasn't eaten in 24 hours. He must be hungry.</i>
should	advisability	You should see a doctor.
<i>ought to</i>	<i>advisability</i>	<i>You ought to get some rest.</i>
will	future happening	My sister will meet us at the airport.
	<i>polite question</i>	<i>Will you please help me lift this box?</i>
would	polite question	Would you please open the door?
	<i>offering, inviting</i>	<i>Would you like a cup of coffee?</i>
be able to	ability	I wasn't able to attend the meeting.
be going to	future happening	Tina is going to meet us at the....
<i>know how to</i>	<i>ability</i>	<i>Do you know how to swim?</i>
have to/has to	necessity	I have to study tonight.
had to	past necessity	I had to study last night too.

Not a complete list – still missing:

- **had better**
- **have got to**
- **be about to**
- **be supposed to**
- **be allowed to**
- **be permitted to**
- etc.

Discussion topics/questions

1. In low-level classes, is it a good idea to teach/explain **shall**? How about **shan't**?
2. In low-level classes, do you think it would be best to teach single-word, principal modals (perhaps along with **be going to**, **be able to**, and one or two other phrasal modals) but to avoid teaching many of the phrasal modals?
3. In polite questions, which modals (**may**, **can**, **could**, **would**) is/are used with the subject "I," which is/are used with the subject "you," and which is/are used with both?
4. Think about **have to** as in **I have to go now**. Is it **have** plus infinitive or **have to** plus base form/bare infinitive? In **I have to go now**, what's the main verb? And what's the main verb in this question: **Do you have to go now**? (Also, what's the main verb in this question: **Do you like pizza**?)
5. How would you help your students understand the difference in meaning between **must not** and **don't have to**?

	same	different
a) You must bring your passport.		
b) You have to bring your passport.		
c) You must not smoke in the building.		
d) You don't have to smoke in the building.		

6. Read the following quote and focus on the modals. What is your opinion about the underlined words? (This was President Obama after the tragedy at Fort Hood a few weeks ago.)

"We're heartbroken that something like this might have happened again.... I would just hope that everybody across the country is keeping the families and the community at Fort Hood in our thoughts and in our prayers."

Questions 7-10 adapted from *The Grammar Book* by M. Celce-Murcia & D. Larsen-Freeman (pp. 139 & 155-57):

7. Explain the ambiguity of the following sentence: *His mother says he **may** go.*
8. Make a few sentences with combinations of more than one modal or phrasal modal. Examples:
 Incorrect: We **can should** study hard.
 Incorrect: I'm **able to must** do that job.
 Correct: He **is going to have to** improve his pronunciation.
9. Consider the verb forms **need** and **dare**:
 - a) I **need** to see him.
 - b) You **needn't** worry.
 - c) Do we **dare** think that?
 - d) **Need** I bring anything?
 - e) I **dare** you to do that.

Are they modals, phrasal modals, regular lexical verbs, or a mixture of these forms?
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10. Sometimes, when referring to past ability, one can use the phrasal modal but not the true modal:

I **was able to** pick up the tickets last night. *I **could** pick up the tickets last night.

At other times, both the phrasal modal and the true modal are acceptable:

I **could** read at an early age. I **was able to** read at an early age.

Furthermore, even the ungrammatical sentence above is acceptable when it is negated:

I **couldn't** pick up the tickets last night.

Can you think of a generalization to account for these restrictions on the use of *could*?

Questions 11-14 adapted from *English Grammar: Language as Human Behavior* by A. Barry (p. 56):

11. What is the meaning of the modal in each of the following sentences?

- Carl **must** leave now.
- Lucy **might** be absent.
- Fran **should** tell him.

12. Which modals carry the meaning of necessity? Past ability? Advisability? Give some examples of sentences that demonstrate these meanings.

13. Explain the meanings that are conveyed by *could* in the sentence *She could swim ten miles*. (Hint: expand the sentence to put it in a larger context.)

14. One of the few grammar rules explicitly handed down from one generation to the next is the rule about *can* and *may*: *can* is for **ability**, and *may* is for **permission**. To what extent do you think this rule is in effect in modern English usage?

15. The following are from an online test (www.englishpage.com/modals/interactivemodal8.htm). Circle the best choices. When you finish, compare your answers with a partner. Also, think about which of these are not appropriate for low-level students.

1. Susan ___ hear the speaker because the crowd was cheering so loudly.
 - a) might not
 - b) can't
 - c) couldn't
2. The TV isn't working. It ___ damaged during the move.
 - a) must
 - b) must be
 - c) must have been
3. You ___ be rich to be a success. Some of the most successful people I know don't have much money.
 - a) can't
 - b) don't have to
 - c) shouldn't

4. I've redone this math problem at least twenty times, but my answer is wrong according to the answer key. The answer in the book ____ be wrong!
 - a) should
 - b) have to
 - c) has to

5. You ____ do the job if you didn't speak Japanese fluently.
 - a) can't
 - b) won't be able to
 - c) couldn't

6. You ____ be kidding! That can't be true.
 - a) ought to
 - b) have to
 - c) should

7. You ____ leave the table once you've finished your meal.
 - a) would
 - b) might
 - c) may

8. Jenny's wedding ring is huge! It ____ a fortune.
 - a) must be costing
 - b) must have cost
 - c) must cost

9. ____ we move into the living room? It's more comfortable, and there's a beautiful view of the lake.
 - a) Will
 - b) Must
 - c) Shall

10. If I had gone white water rafting with my friends, I ____ down the Colorado River right now.
 - a) would float
 - b) would be floating
 - c) would have floating

11. Terry and Frank said they would come over right after work, so they ____ be here by 6:00.
 - a) can
 - b) should
 - c) have to

12. Yesterday, I ____ cram all day for my French test. I didn't get to sleep until after midnight.
 - a) had to
 - b) must
 - c) should

“**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, overgeneralize 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.

“Another formal property of modals that may cause your students some trouble is that modals directly precede a verb without the intervening infinitive *to* that is required when two ordinary verbs follow each other in sequence:

Modal + Verb

I can go.

*I can to go.

Verb + Verb

I want to go.

*I want go.

“Many of your students will treat modals like ordinary verbs and produce errors by using a superfluous infinitive *to*:

*Jack must to study harder.

*We should to return the book.

“Another source of difficulty with the form of modals...may be your students’ native language(s). Not all languages have modal auxiliaries; in those that do not, regular verbs or adjectives/adverbs are used to express the meanings and functions that modals have in English. Students speaking such a first language may feel the need to inflect English modals as if they were ordinary verbs” (pp. 137-38).

“Multiword forms ending in infinitive *to*, which function semantically like true modals (in certain of their meanings), are called phrasal modals.... Every modal seems to have at least one phrasal counterpart, and some modals have several:

Modal

can, could

will, shall

must

should, ought to¹

would (= past habit)

may, might

Phrasal Modal

be able to [know how to]

be going to, be about to

have to, have got to

be to, be supposed to

used to

be allowed to, be permitted to

“Notice that the phrasal modals do not exhibit the same formal properties as the true modals in that the subject-verb agreement rule must be applied (except for *used to*, which is an inflected past tense) and that all phrasal modals require that a *to* infinitive precede the main verb; that is, the phrasal forms behave syntactically much more like ordinary verbs than they do like true modals.

is able to
is going to
She is allowed to go to Fresno tomorrow.
has to
has got to

¹ The form *ought to* is intermediate between a true modal (it doesn't inflect) and a phrasal form (it takes *to*)....

“In fact, phrasal forms developed in part because the original class of modals lost their connection to time, and the phrasal forms gave English users a way to mark tense and express modality on one and the same verb form. Phrasal modals, however, differ from lexical verbs in speech in that they have assimilated with *to...*” (p. 139).

“[P]hrasal modal verbs are tensed and inflected like ordinary verbs. Their relation to modal auxiliaries is a semantic one. When they occur with the aspectual markers, we must treat them syntactically as ordinary verbs taking infinitives rather than as phrasal modals. Many phrasal modals seem to be hovering somewhere between a regular verb and a true phrasal modal” (p. 140).

“[V]ery few languages have modal auxiliaries in the extreme form that English does – that is, as a separate verbal class that has very different syntactic properties from those of normal verbs.

“Although we have a fairly good understanding of the form and meaning of modals and their phrasal forms, we are very far from understanding all there is to know about their uses. English speakers use modals in extremely subtle ways to try to advise or control others, to express affect (positive and negative), to mark attitude or stance, to show authority, and for other purposes” (p. 152).

KEYS TO TEACHING GRAMMAR TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS by K. Folse

Pp. 224-31

MODALS

“Modals are small but important words or phrases that allow the speaker or writer to include **nuances of meaning** for verbs.... Consider why it is that a parent can tell a child, *It's getting late, so you'd better finish your homework now*, but a child cannot in turn respond, *Well, it's almost dinner time, so you'd better get in the kitchen and cook something good*. (The answer is that *had better* is used only persons of power or authority to subordinates.)

GRAMMAR EXPLANATIONS – WHAT ARE MODALS?

“A modal verb is an auxiliary or helping verb that alters the meaning of the sentence by adding **shades of meaning, or mood**, to the main verb that it modifies. One way to explain modals to ELLs is to teach that modals add ‘flavor’ to verbs to change the meaning.... In addition to single-word modals such as *will* and *can*, there are also modal phrases such as *be going to* for *will*...and *be able to* for *can*....

WHY ARE MODALS DIFFICULT FOR ELLS?

“**Modals present both vocabulary and grammar problems for ELLs**. In terms of vocabulary, each of these modals is a completely different word.

“A second vocabulary problem is that any modal can have multiple meanings that overlap with another modal. For example, *may* means possibility (e.g., *it may rain*), but it also means permission (e.g., *May I sit here?*). *Could* also means possibility (*it could rain*), but it also means polite request (*Could you help me?*) and past ability (*I couldn't find my keys*).

“Grammatically speaking, modals present three problems. First, ELLs try to conjugate modals: *I can go, you can go, *he cans go*.... Second, a modal is followed directly by a verb (*I can go, she might believe, they should stay*). In contrast, when a verb is followed by another verb, the second verb is often in the infinitive form (*I want to go, she needs to believe, they plan to stay*). Therefore, ELLs try to mimic this pattern and

produce errors such as **I can to go*, **she might to believe*, and **they should to stay*. A third...error occurs when negating and in questions when ELLs attempt to use the auxiliary *do*, as in **I don't should use Susan's phone* or **Do you can help me?*

TWO WAYS THAT ELL GRAMMAR BOOKS USUALLY PRESENT MODALS

“Textbooks generally take one of two approaches in presenting modals. One approach is to teach the modals one by one. Thus, the textbook will teach *can*, then *will*, etc. This approach is very clear for students and also later serves as a good reference source since ELLs can find information about any one modal very easily. The disadvantage to this approach is that modals usually share meanings. For example, after students study that *might* is for possibility, they will then see a few pages later that *may* and *can* are also used for possibility. In other words, **a modal rarely has just one meaning, and rarely is one meaning expressed by only one modal**. We can see this approach in this chart:

Modals	Meanings	Examples
might	possibility	A ticket might cost more than \$400.
may	1. possibility 2. permission	1. A ticket may cost more than \$400. 2. May I sit here?
can	1. ability 2. permission	1. She can speak several languages. 2. Can I sit here?
could	1. polite request 2. past ability 3. suggestion 4. <i>conditional</i> 5. possibility	1. Could you tell me where the bank is? 2. When I was a child, I could run fast. 3. You could fly to NY. It's not too expensive. 4. <i>If I had enough money, I could travel.</i> 5. He could be at work now, but I'm not sure.
will	1. future 2. polite request	1. The forecast says it will rain tomorrow. 2. Will you explain this to me again?
would	1. offering, inviting 2. polite request 3. <i>conditional</i>	1. Would you like some tea? 2. Would you read this & tell me what you think? 3. <i>If you won the lottery, what would you do?</i>
should/ ought to	1. advising, suggesting 2. expectation	1. I think you should buy the red jacket. 2. We ought to have 52, but we have only 50.
must*	1. obligation, necessity 2. conclusion	1. You must be at least 21 to enter the nightclub. 2. There must be thousands of books in that place.
had better	strong advice or warning	You'd better leave now, or you'll miss the bus.

*Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman: “Melrose (1983) found in her study of *must*, *have to*, and *have got to* in spoken American English that most native speakers of American English reserve the use of *must* for expressing inference (present and past): You must have the wrong number! John must have been joking when he said that” (p. 150).

“Another approach is to group modals by meanings. Thus, the textbook will teach ‘modals that mean request’ and ‘modals that mean permission.’ I favor the first approach for lower-proficiency students... and the second approach for more advanced students. Lower-proficiency students are learning the modals as new words, for example, *might* = possibility. They need time to absorb this type of information.”

For more advanced students:

Meanings	Modals
request	can could would may might
permission	can could would may
necessity	must, have to
possibility	may, might, could should, ought to must will
advisability	should, ought to had better
expectation	should, ought to
conclusion	must

Common ELL Mistakes – What Your ELLs Should Know:

1. Do not use **to** after single-word modals.

Wrong: Andrea should to study more.

Correct: Andrea should study more.

2. Do not add any endings (-s, -ed, or -ing) to verbs after modals.

Wrong: Shawn will helps Jim with the work.

Correct: Shawn will help Jim with the work.

3. Do not use **don't**, **doesn't**, or **didn't** to make negative forms of modals. Most modals form the negative by adding **not** after the modal. (This is just like with **be** and other auxiliary verbs.)

Wrong: Kathy doesn't can speak Japanese well.

Correct: Kathy can't speak Japanese well.

Note: Phrasal modals such as **have to** and **know how to** are exceptions:

I **don't have to** ____.

I/You/She/He/It/We/They **didn't have to** ____.

She **doesn't have to** ____.

I/You/She/He/It/We/They **didn't know how to** ____.

We **don't know how to** ____.

He **doesn't know how to** ____.

4. Do not use **do**, **does**, or **did** in a question with a modal. Most modals form the question by inverting the subject and the modal. (This is just like with **be** and other auxiliary verbs.)

Wrong: Do you could help me with this homework?

Correct: Could you help me with this homework?

Note: Phrasal modals such as **have to** and **know how to** are exceptions:

Do you have to ___?

Did I/you/she/he/it/we/they have to ___?

Does she have to ___?

Did I/you/she/he/it/we/they know how to ___?

Do they know how to ___?

Does he know how to ___?

5. Do not use **could** for past ability if it is a single past action in an affirmative sentence. In this case, use **was able to** or **were able to**. In a negative sentence, **couldn't** and **wasn't** or **weren't able to** are okay. We only use **could** for the past of can when the action was over a period of time.

Wrong: Did you find your wallet?

Yes, I could find it.

Correct: Yes, I **was able to** find it. Yes, I **found** it.

For a negative answer, both are possible:

Correct: No, I **wasn't able to** find it. No, I **couldn't** find it.

NATIVE LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE: COMPARE ENGLISH WITH OTHER LANGUAGES

“Modals present a very complex vocabulary problem for ELLs. Even with languages that have words that appear to have similar meanings for certain English modals, there is rarely a one-to-one correspondence between these words.”

IDEAS FOR TEACHING

“How you teach modals will depend on whether your students are beginning, intermediate, or advanced learners.

“A beginning lesson would focus on only one modal per lesson. Modals taught early usually include *can*, *will*, and *should*. Each modal would be taught separately from the others. For these, you would cover typical ELL grammar mistakes such as adding *-s...* or adding *to...*”

“At the intermediate level, ELLs are familiar with some of the modals and some of their meanings. Your syllabus might include some of the more difficult modals, such as *might*, *must*, and *could*, as well as the finer details about modals, such as: *must* has two meanings and the most important one is conclusion, not necessity; *could* is not used for single affirmative accomplishments; and *could* means more than the past of *can* (e.g., it can mean probability).

...

“Most ELL textbooks offer straightforward information on teaching modals. There is usually so much to cover that teachers have little time to do anything else. However, I would spend time drilling the patterns because modals are a very important part of English. Modals are important to our ELLs because modals help ‘soften’ a person’s speech. Sometimes native speakers perceive the tone of our ELLs as rude or overly aggressive, and this is often because our ELLs don’t use modals. Instead of saying the more usual *You might talk to the other teacher* as a suggestion, an ELL might say, *You need to talk to the other teacher*, which sounds more like a demand and maybe even reprimand.... (Remember that they do not realize that it sounds that way to native speakers.)

“Why should we do language drills? Our students make mistakes such as **I am take the bus to school every day* because they have internalized *I am* from all the practice that they have had with this in their beginning-level classes. You should aim for the same goal with *I can*, *I should*, and *I might*.”

Pages 55-57:

“The other kind of helping verb is a modal. There are nine modal verbs in English: *will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, must* (*ought to* is sometimes added to this list). They each have only one form: there is no *to shall* or *musting* or *woulded*, for example. Like the auxiliaries, they always occur with a main verb:

Carl must leave now.
Lucy might be absent.
Fran should tell him.

“But unlike the auxiliaries [*be, do & have*], they do carry some meaning of their own. In fact, they carry a wide range of different meanings and nuances of meaning that we learn as we learn English, but the meanings are very hard to spell out in exact and predictable terms.

Consider the meanings conveyed by the modal in each of the following:

Joe will sell his house. (future certainty)
As a child, Irene would hide in the garden. (repeated past activity)
The toddler might hurt himself. (possibility)
The child may eat now. (possibility or permission)
I should call her. (obligation)
He can swim a mile. (ability)
They should arrive by seven. (probability)

“You will notice that some may carry more than one meaning, so, spoken in isolation, the sentence might mean more than one thing, such as *The child may eat now*. We usually know from the context which meaning was intended.

“Another use for some modals is to soften commands and make them seem less blunt or rude. Here they tend to lose their individual meanings and are more or less interchangeable:

Could you help me?
Can you help me?
Might you help me? [?]
Would you help me?
[Will you help me?]

“You will notice that each of these has a literal meaning and can be answered literally:

Could you help me? I could yesterday, but I can't today, or I could if I had time.
Can you help me? Yes, I'm physically capable of helping you.
Might you help me? I might if I saw something in it for me.
Would you help me? I would if I were a more generous person.

“But there is another use for these questions that requires no verbal response at all. Opening a door or relieving someone of a heavy package might be a sufficient response if you interpret them as commands [requests?] for assistance (albeit softened and polite) rather than requests for information.”