

MODAL VERBS USED IN PERMISSION, OFFER, OBLIGATION, AND POSSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how modal verbs are used by 4 level of students taking IELTS preparation course in expressing permission, offer, obligation, and possibility. The objectives of the study were to analyze two major issues; 1. is there any significant different between male and female students in using modal verbs properly? and 2. is there any significant different in using modal verbs in regards to the level of the students? As the objectives of the research, 50 male and female students were chosen as a sample who later did a test comprising 40 statements of modal verbs as permission, offer, possibility, and obligation. As a result, the difference attitude between males and females in using modal verbs is significant. In addition, the result of this study revealed that the highest proportion of correct answers made was by advanced, upper intermediate, intermediate, pre-intermediate, and elementary, respectively.

Keywords: female; IELTS; male; modal verbs

INTRODUCTION

A modal verb is a lexical marker for asserting modality to illustrate various levels of certainty or uncertainty (Suzuki, D. & Fujiwara, 2017: 827). The range of Modal verbs as one of the auxiliary verbs can be widely analyzed from the pragmatic perspective, and they are applied to exhibit different meanings as a request, obligation, order, and permission. It becomes challenge for every English learner that tends to come up as misunderstanding or miscommunication and results in an awkward interaction since the tone changes; making them appear inappropriate. By imitation and reinforcement, learners could understand basic modal verbs (Chomsky, 1970)

Modal verbs possess syntactic and morphological properties which differ them from primary auxiliaries and full verb. Halliday (1976) makes list of the most important distinctions that modals appear as the first element of the verb phrase, and there is no -s form; Besides, unlike other auxiliaries, modal verbs have only finite forms (Halliday, 1976). Meanwhile, (Palmer, n.d.) describes modality as semantic information related to with the speaker's attitude or opinion about what is said. For example, will and shall are usually used to mark future time and modality. He applies mood and modality as two opposite categories- the

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former is grammatical whereas the latter is semantic.

The use of modal verbs varies and rely upon the situations and culture but the students may still apply them depend on their own culture that appears overly assertive, ashamed, or even rough (Abu Jarad, 2008:54). Even when the verbs can be understood by the speaker, they must be taught based on the diverse meanings in the social rules. Abu-Jarad (2008) did an analysis in regards to the errors made by English major students in a grammar test. The sample of the study consisted of 179 English major students and there was an achievement test to answer the questions of the study. The results of the study revealed that there was a natural development in the students' control of the grammatical items tested as the students moved to the upper levels.

Schmied (2010) did a research involving ten Master theses written at Chemnitz University of Technology. The texts were analyzed according to four types of hedges, namely epistemic lexical verbs, epistemic adverbs, adjectives and epistemic modal verbs. Those expressions were analyzed according to their frequency in the 29 theses separated by gender. The results showed that females used a slightly higher number of lexical epistemic verbs and epistemic adverbs, whereas males applied slightly more epistemic adjectives. The findings indicated no difference between male and female in using modal verbs. Mair and Leech (2006) in (Leech, 2009) tracked the distinctions in written English between 1961 and 1991. The sample of this study consisted of two million words for each time period. The study ended up that a quasi-modal rose of 10.0% in British writing with one of 17.3% in British 25 speech, and an overall fell of 9.5% of the modals in British writing with one of 17.3% in British speech. They indicated the frequency of quasi-modals was 62.5% greater than in that of modal verbs in American speech.

Some factors affect a weak understanding towards modal verbs. Firstly, English learners have negative attitudes towards learning English that become a major reason they do not explore more. Teaching materials may provide a lot of information, however, inexperienced teachers who do not know how to use the books can make the process is not running well since they do not apply the materials into right activities.

This study aims at analyzing the capability of English language learners in applying modal verbs in the real-life situations. Students are expected to understand how modal verbs used; for example, for requesting something, offering help, or asking permissions well. Besides, it is also crucial to understand the way modal verbs used for showing responsibility, as well as expressing possibility in such a way that makes people get the message correctly based on the context.

This study will explore two major purposes; is there any significant difference between male and female students in using modal verbs properly? And is there any significant different in using modal verbs in regards to the level of the students?

METHOD

Since this study investigated the application of modal verbs in permission, offer, obligation, and possibility by students taking IELTS preparation course in four different levels, it was carried out by using experimental research.

The population of the study consisted of 50 male and female students who were taking IELTS preparation course of four different levels; advanced, upper-intermediate, intermediate, and pre-intermediate level.

A test, in a form of 40 statements, was designed for students to read and choose the meaning of the modal verbs; whereas, each statement was followed by four areas namely permission, obligation, possibility, and offer. The students did the test independently in the classroom in 30 minutes. The answers were relied upon the point of views of the experts.

Once the students finished the test, it was then collected, corrected, and presented in tables exhibiting the frequency of each modal

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verb along with its different usage in permission, offer, obligation, and possibility.

DISCUSSION

The study found that both male and female students could understand how to use modal verbs properly for permission offer, obligation, and possibility. According to Lakoff (1975), women use more polite language than men, whereas they apply language by avoiding strong expression of feeling and favour expression of uncertainty. Therefore, the way how male and female students interpret modal verbs may be different. There was also stated that the function of possibility was the second highest proportion that was achieved by male students. The reveal did not agree with Saeed's (2009) who claimed that the usage of offer and permission ranked first on the correct responses, meanwhile, the usage of possibility showed a low percentage of correct responses. The challenge found by English learners in regards to using modal verbs is as a result of misunderstanding and oversimplification as claimed by Roderick A. Jacobs (1995).

According to the study conducted, 81% male students and 88,5% female students answered correctly to the questions regarding modal verbs for permission as presented in the table below.

Statements	Male				Female			
	Correct answers		Wrong answers		Correct answers		Wrong answers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Might I ask whether you are using the computer?	15	60%	10	40%	18	70%	7	30
Could I sit here?	23	90%	2	10%	24	95%	1	5
You may leave now	24	95%	1	5%	25	100%	0	0
You may call me if you want to	20	80%	5	20%	23	90%	2	10
You can have a break after you complete your task	18	70%	7	30%	20	80%	5	20
Can I make an appointment ?	23	90%	2	10%	24	95%	1	5%

May I see the result?	23	90%	2	10%	24	95%	1	5%
Can I get into the room now?	17	65%	8	35%	19	75%	6	25%
Will you give permission?	20	80%	5	20%	23	90%	2	10%
Would you mind if I turned down the AC	23	90%	2	10%	24	95%	1	5%
Total Average	21	81%	4	19%	22	88.5 %	3	11.5 %

The data above presents the total number of male and female students who did the test correctly and incorrectly along with the percentage. The result shows that both male and female students could understand how to use modal verbs for expressing permission.

Modal verbs that are frequently used daily hit the highest percentage of correct answers, around 90% to 95%. Take as an example, an expression like *you may leave now* is daily uttered by the students. In addition, expressions like *may I see the result*, *would you mind if I turned down the AC*, *can I make an appointment*, and *can I sit here* are also used commonly by the male students, therefore they found it recognizable once they put the modal verbs in sentences. Meanwhile, the same modal verbs *will you give permission*, and *you may call me if you want* seem confusing for some. On the other hand, sentences like *might I ask whether you are using the computer* and *you can have a break after you complete the task* show the lowest percentage of correct answers (60% to 70%) as they are considered to be the most confusing ones.

Looking into more detail, the percentage of female students answering questions show around 7% higher compared to male students. All students answered correctly on statement *you may leave now*. It is the most common expression used in daily life. Meanwhile, statements like *could I sit here*, *can I make an appointment*, *may I see the result*, *you may call me if you want*, and *will you give permission* are able to be recognized by female students, thus, the percentage of correct answers are 90% to 95%. However, expression *can I get into the room now* and *might I ask whether you are using the computer* have the lowest

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proportion, around 10% higher than male students.

Moving into the use of modal verbs for offer, the percentage of male students who understand how to use these verbs is 2% higher compared to that for permission. In contrast, female students have a 3% less understanding towards using modal verbs for offer as presented in the table below.

Statements	Male				Female			
	Correct answers		Wrong answers		Correct answers		Wrong answers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
I can drive the car.	10	40%	15	60%	13	50%	12	50%
Can I pick you up now?	22	85%	3	15%	22	85%	3	15%
Shall I drop you now?	22	85%	3	15%	22	85%	3	15%
You can stay here if you like	19	75%	6	25%	18	70%	7	30%
We will wait for you if you want	20	80%	5	20%	23	90%	2	10%
Shall I make you a cup of tea?	23	90%	2	10%	24	95%	1	5%
Would you like to have a dinner tonight?	25	100%	0	0%	25	100%	0	0%
May I carry your luggage, Sir?	23	90%	2	10%	22	85%	3	15%
May I help you?	25	100%	0	0%	25	100%	0	0%
Shall I help you with your suitcase?	22	85%	3	15%	23	90%	2	10%
Total Average	21	83%	4	17%	22	85%	3	15%

According to the data, 83% male students answered the questions correctly, meanwhile, the percentage of female students who could do so is higher slightly (85%). All students both male and female could understand how to use expressions *would you like to have a dinner tonight* and *may I help you* since those two expressions are commonly used especially when someone offers them something.

According to the data, 85% to 90% of male students answered correctly expressions like *can I pick you up now*, *shall I drop you now*, *shall I help you with your suitcase* since these are considered as ordinary expressions. Meanwhile, expression *I can drive the car* is confusing especially when the context is unclear; thus, only 40% male students could answer it correctly.

There is no significant different between male and female students who answered correctly expressions like *can I pick you up now*, *can I drop you now*, *we will wait for you if you want*, *shall I make you a cup of tea*. The percentage of correct answers on those statements was 85%, 90%, and 95%, respectively. And half female students could understand the meaning of *I can drive the car*, which is 10% higher than that on male students.

The percentage of students who could understand how to use modal verbs for obligation is around a tenth lower compared to the proportion of those who could understand modal verbs for offer and permission. The data can be seen in the following table.

Statements	Male				Female			
	Correct answers		Wrong answers		Correct answers		Wrong answers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
You should practice today	13	50%	12	50%	15	60%	10	40%
Test takers must answer all the questions	19	75%	6	25%	19	75%	6	25%
She must attend the meeting on time	20	80%	5	20%	19	75%	6	25%
You ought to talk to your kids more	18	70%	7	30%	15	60%	10	40%
They must show their identification cards before doing the test	20	80%	5	20%	22	85%	3	15%
Each lecturer should publish one article	17	65%	8	35%	19	75%	6	25%
You ought to call your parents more often	17	65%	8	35%	15	60%	10	40%
People should be good	18	70%	7	30%	22	85%	3	15%

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listeners to be good conversationalists								
You should do as the doctor said	22	85 %	3	15 %	20	80 %	5	20 %
Each person must obey the rule here	20	80 %	5	20 %	22	85 %	3	15 %
Total Average	18	72 %	7	25 %	19	74 %	6	26 %

The percentage of female students who could answer the questions is 74% which is 2% higher than male.

The highest percentage of correct answer by male students was in the expression of *you should do as the doctor said* (85%) followed by statements like *she must attend the meeting on time, they must show their identity card before doing the test* and *each person must obey the rule here* (80%). Half of male students could understand expression *you should practice today* as an obligation. The usage of *ought to* as in the sentence *you ought to call your parents more often*.

Majority of female students (87%) responded correctly to expressions *they must show their identification cards before doing the test, people should be good listeners to be good conversationalists, and each person must obey the rule here* as these expressions are used ordinarily. In contrast, merely 60% of female students understand *ought to* as an obligation as in the sentences *you ought to talk to your kids more* and *you ought to call your parents more often*. While the modal verb *must* could be understood as an obligation as 75% students answered correctly sentences containing this verb; *test takers must answer all the questions, she must attend the meeting on time, and they must show their identification cards before doing the test*.

The last modal verbs tested are *might, can, might, could, should* as possibility. Unlike modal verbs for offer, permission, and obligation, the understanding of female students towards modal verbs for possibility is lower than that in other modal verbs as presented in the table below. As per data, the percentage of male students who could answer the questions correctly is 6% higher than female students.

Statements	Male		Female	
	Correct	Wrong	Correct	Wrong

	answers		answers		answers		answers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
They haven't come, they may not know the address	18	70%	7	30%	19	75%	6	25%
The building may be reconstructed	19	75%	6	25%	18	70%	7	30%
She may be lying	20	80%	5	20%	20	80%	5	20%
Be careful, the gun may be loaded	18	70%	7	30%	17	65%	8	35%
Can there be living creatures in mars?	20	80%	5	20%	19	75%	6	25%
Your sister might be telling the truth	19	75%	6	25%	20	80%	5	20%
His presentation was the best that could be hope for	15	60%	10	40%	13	50%	12	50%
You should bring your raincoat; it could rain later	17	65%	8	35%	14	55%	11	45%
It could be him	20	80%	5	20%	15	60%	10	40%
She can't be working. The internet connection is disabled	19	75%	6	25%	14	55%	11	45%
Total Average	19	73%	6	27%	17	67%	8	33%

The percentage of male students who understood the use of modal verbs for possibility is 73%, whereas the most correct answer (80%) is in the expressions *she may be lying, can there be living creatures in mars, and it could be him*. Meanwhile, expressions like *your sister might be telling the truth, the building may be reconstructed, and she can't be working, the internet connection is disabled* could be answered by 75% of male students. The lowest percentage (60%) is shown in the expression *his presentation was the best that he could hope for*. In addition, 65% of male students understood expression *you should bring your raincoat, it could be rain later* as possibility.

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Moving into female students, 80% students could understand the use of modal verbs *may* and *might* for possibility as in the expressions *she may be lying, your sister might be telling the truth*. In contrast, only half female students could answer correctly an expression *his presentation was the best that he could hope for*. Expressions *you should bring your raincoat, it could be rain later* and *she can't be working, the internet connection is disabled* were answered correctly 5% higher. In short, the number of female students who could answer correctly modal verbs for possibility is moderate.

In addition to the area of discussion of this study, the level of understanding towards modal verbs is different based on the student's English levels. This finding is in accordance with a statement claimed by Abu-Jarad, (2008)

who stated that there are significant differences among the students' performance as a result of class level. The data of percentage of male and female students who could answer the questions correctly is presented in the table below:

Levels	Permission		Offer		Obligation		Possibility	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Elementary	7	70%	5	50%	6	60%	5	50%
Pre-intermediate	8	80%	8	80%	6	60%	7	70%
Intermediate	8	80%	9	90%	8	80%	7	70%
Upper-intermediate	10	100%	10	100%	8	80%	9	90%
Advanced	10	100%	10	100%	9	90%	8	80%

From the data, the higher the level of the students, the more they could answer the questions.

All advanced students understood how to use modal verbs as permission and offer. Almost all (90%) could answer the questions in regards to modal verbs as obligation correctly and only 20% students failed to understand how the application of modal verbs as possibility.

Moving into upper-intermediate students, similar to advanced ones, all students understand precisely the usage of modal verbs as permission and offer. Only 20 students

failed at answering questions about modal verbs for obligation and 10% failed at possibility modal verbs.

Majority of intermediate students had a good understanding towards modal verbs for offer (90%) followed by permission and obligation that hit 80%. However, 7 out of 10 students could understand the application of these verbs for possibility.

Students at pre-intermediate level had less understanding towards the intermediate ones. There were 80% students who answered correctly the permission using modal verbs. Meanwhile, modal verbs for possibility and obligation were answered moderately by this level of students; The former was 70% and the latter was 60%.

Half students at elementary level could understand the application of modal verbs for offer and possibility. In addition, 6 out of 10 students answered them correctly in regards to their use for permission and obligation and 70% students answered correctly when it comes to modal verbs for permission.

CONCLUSION

Modal verbs, from pragmatic perspective, appear to have different meanings as a request, obligation, order, and permission. This perspective usually results in misunderstanding among English learners. Thus, this study investigated whether there are any differences towards how male and female students understand modal verbs. According to the data, more female students tend to answer correctly modal verbs for permission, offer, and obligation. In contrast, their understanding about modal verbs for possibility is likely to be lower compared to that on male students.

In addition, advanced and upper-intermediate students had great understanding towards modal verbs for request, obligation, order, and permission. The lower the level, the less understanding they have in regards to modal verbs.

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