



Thai Learners' Interpretation of English Modality

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Abstract

This research aimed to examine the frequency and percentage of Thai undergraduate-level learners' accurate interpretation of the modality meanings and time references denoted by nine core modal verbs of English: can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, and must. Each of these auxiliaries serves not only semantic (e.g., ability, possibility, permission of "can") but also pragmatic functions (e.g., request of "can"). Some of them are "basic or unmarked," and others are "extended or marked" (e.g., formality, politeness). Meanwhile, Thai preverbal modals convey a subset of these modality meanings, so complication may occur during the English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) modal learning. Fifty multiple-choice questions with four choices representing the basic and extended modality meanings and time references were designed for the Thai participants to answer. It was found that the informants interpreted "can" the most successfully and "shall" the least successfully. Moreover, for each modal verb, some meanings were achieved more frequently than the others such as the meaning of "ability" of "can" over "possibility." These findings were in line with the previous ones. With respect to time references, the Thai learners tended to associate tense with the modal forms, and the perfective forms of the verbal complements of the modal verbs caused interpretation challenges. The concepts "marked" and "unmarked" features under Markedness Theory were proposed to account for the EFL modality acquisition. The unmarked meanings were primarily acquired more successfully or earlier than the more marked ones, regardless of the first languages of the EFL learners.

1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale

“Modal verbs” in English are a type of auxiliary verbs which expresses the speaker’s viewpoints, attitudes, or judgment over a topic, an incident, or a state, giving rise to three major classes of semantic notions: namely, (1) **deontic** (e.g., permission, obligation), (2) **epistemic** (e.g., possibility, necessity), and (3) **dynamic** (e.g., ability, volition) (Halliday, 1970; Palmer, 1990, 2001; Quirk et al., 1985 as cited in Li, 2022; Torabiardakani et al., 2015). Also, modal verbs convey **pragmatic** meanings such as offer, request, suggestion, which trigger actions or reactions from the interlocutors (Sinclair, 1990 as cited in Li, 2022). For instance, “can” in “My mother can speak French fluently. She studied in France for 15 years” conveys the meaning of “ability” of the dynamic class whereas, “can” in “Can you help me with this form?” expresses the pragmatic meaning of “request,” which is meant to elicit an act of help from the listener.

In the context of English-as-a-Foreign/Second Language (henceforth, EFL/ESL) learning, the modal verbs pose challenges which are not easy to overcome (Li, 2022; Torabiardakani et al., 2015). One crucial factor of the difficulties lies in the complicated nature of the form-to-meaning connections (Van Patten et al., 2004 as cited in Li, 2022). As exemplified by “can” above, one modal verb form encodes more than one semantic/pragmatic function.

In addition, unlike other auxiliary verbs (i.e., be, do, have), the interpretation of tense in the verbal constructions with a modal verb is not achieved through the form of the modal verb. Instead, time reference must be interpreted through the context and, in some cases, through the combination of the modal verb and its verbal complement. For instance, “could” is connected to past tense in the context of “When I was young, I could easily touch my toes,” but it is interpreted as present tense in “A: What is her favorite color? B: It could be blue.” Another example is “modal + have + V-en,” which denotes past tense as in “A: I spent a month in hospital before I was able to walk. B: That can’t have been easy for you.”

Research on acquisition of English modal verbs by Thai learners has been carried out such as Sakkanayok (2016), Tangpijaikul (2008), and Yangklang (n.d., 2012, 2018). Nevertheless, several modality meanings were left unexplored, especially the

specific meanings extended from the basic ones. For example, in “When you go to London next month, you can stay with my sister,” the modal construction “can stay” expresses the deontic meaning of “permission for a future event with the speaker being surer than when “could stay” is used.” Such lack motivated a more complete depiction of interpretation of both basic and extended meanings of the English modal auxiliary verbs.

2. Objective of the Study

Based on the motivation mentioned above, an objective was set to examine the frequency and percentage of Thai learners’ accurate interpretation of both basic and extended meanings of nine English core modal auxiliary verbs in combination with time references. The core modals consisted of “can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, and must.”

3. Literature review

This section presents information on (1) modality in English, (2) modality in Thai, (3) a comparison between English and Thai modality, (4) previous studies on EFL modality, and (5) a theoretical background for EFL modality acquisition.

3.1 Modality in English

“Modality” refers to a speaker’s or a writer’s attitudes or viewpoints towards the necessity, possibility, or likelihood of the events or states mentioned in an utterance. English has several linguistic mechanisms to deliver modality meanings such as modal auxiliary verbs (e.g., can, may, should), lexical verbs (e.g., think, seem, doubt), adjectives (e.g., necessary, likely, possible), and adverbs (e.g., really, probably, surely). The focus of the current study is the core modal auxiliary verbs: namely, can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, must (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d.). Each of these core auxiliaries serves both semantic and pragmatic functions.

“**Deontic**” modality denotes the speaker’s directive or didactic opinions and judgment over a situation in which something should or should not or must or must not be done, based on some rules and regulations or moral and social measures, reflecting

a sense of “obligation, prohibition, permission.” The modal verbs which convey the deontic functions consist of “must, should, can, could” (Li, 2022; Sakkanayok, 2016; Torabiardakani et al., 2015; Yangklang, n.d.). For example, “must” in “Seat belts must be worn even in the back of the car” expresses the modality meaning of “obligation.”

“**Epistemic**” modality reveals the speaker’s knowledge, belief, or confidence of a proposition being communicated, giving rise to a wide range of “possibility, predictability, necessity, extreme likelihood.” The epistemic modal verbs include “can, could, will, shall, would, must, should, may, might” (Li, 2022; Sakkanayok, 2016; Torabiardakani et al., 2015; Yangklang, n.d.). For instance, “may” in “A: I wonder why Kate didn’t answer her phone. B: She may have been asleep” conveys the meaning of “possibility.”

“**Dynamic**” modality focuses on what the subject of a proposition can perform rather than focusing on the speaker’s opinions. The performance involves the subject’s “ability, volition, possibility, necessity” (Palmer, 1990 as cited in Li, 2022). For example, “can” in “My mother can speak French fluently. She studied in France for 15 years” denotes the semantic function of “ability.”

As mentioned, apart from the semantic notions, the modal verbs can be used to deliver **pragmatic** meanings such as “offer, request, suggestion, advice, invitation, command, instruction, appeal for help, wish, persuasion” (Sinclair, 1990 as cited in Li, 2022). The modals with these pragmatic functions aim to elicit an action from the addressee rather than to convey the speaker’s attitudes or judgement. For example, “could” in “Could I ask you a personal question?” serves as a polite request (i.e., more polite than “can”). Table (1) below presents the basic semantic and pragmatic functions of each core modal verb. The information is based on Azar and Hagen (2009), Biber et al. (1999, as cited in Torabiardakani et al., 2015), Maurer (2016), Palmer (1990), Sinclair (1990, as cited in Li, 2022), and Vince (2008). Some modal verbs may carry further specifications such as “formality, politeness, rarity, hypotheticality.” For example, “Can you help me with this form?” is less formal and less polite than “Could you help me with this form?” Therefore, the modality system of English is quite challenging for non-native speakers. The information of the extended meanings will be presented in the Findings section.

Table 1*Basic Semantic and Pragmatic Functions of Core Modal Auxiliary Verbs*

Modal Verbs	Semantic Functions			Pragmatic Functions
	Deontic	Epistemic	Dynamic	
Can	<u>Permission</u> (Students <u>can</u> use calculators during the exam.)	<u>Possibility</u> (The weather <u>can</u> change very quickly in the mountains.)	<u>Ability</u> (My mother <u>can</u> speak French fluently. She studied in France for 15 years.)	<u>Request, offer, invitation, suggestion, command</u> (<u>Can</u> you help me with this form?)
Could	<u>Permission</u> (Only the emperor and his family <u>could go</u> in there basically.)	<u>Possibility</u> (A: What is her favorite color? B: It <u>could be</u> blue.)	<u>Ability</u> (When I was young, I <u>could</u> easily touch my toes.)	<u>Request, suggestion, instructions, appeal for help</u> (<u>Could</u> I ask you a personal question?)
Will	-	<u>Predictability, prediction</u> (A: He is still there at the moment. B: He <u>will be</u> there until the new guy starts.)	<u>Volition</u> (A: What would you like to drink? B: I <u>will have</u> an orange juice, please.)	<u>Order, offer, appeal for help</u> (<u>Will</u> you clean up your room?)
Would	-	<u>Predictability, prediction</u> (weaker future possibility) (The President is proposing a new bill that <u>would</u> significantly change Social Security.)	<u>Volition</u> (I decided that I <u>would give up</u> .)	<u>Request, instruction, offer, appeal for help</u> (<u>Would</u> you make dinner?)
Shall	-	<u>Prediction</u> (I <u>shall be</u> late this evening.)	<u>Volition</u> (We <u>shall</u> remember this day forever.)	<u>Offer, command</u> (<u>Shall</u> I carry your bag?/This door <u>shall be kept</u> closed at all times.)

Table 1

Basic Semantic and Pragmatic Functions of Core Modal Auxiliary Verbs (Cont.)

Modal Verbs	Semantic Functions			Pragmatic Functions
	Deontic	Epistemic	Dynamic	
Should	<u>Obligation</u> (weaker) (You look tired. You <u>should go</u> to bed.)	<u>Extreme likelihood</u> (Helen has been studying hard for the exam, so she <u>should pass</u> .)	<u>Necessity</u> (If you're a linguist, you <u>should know</u> already, shouldn't you?)	<u>Suggestion</u> (I am not saying that you "must apologize" to him. I personally think that you <u>should apologize</u> to him.)
May	<u>Permission</u> (You <u>may do</u> your language work if you want to.)	<u>Possibility</u> (weak) (A: Where is Jack? B: He <u>may be</u> in his office.)	<u>Possibility</u> (I haven't decided yet where to go on holiday. I <u>may go</u> to Ireland.)	<u>Request</u> (<u>May I come</u> in?)
Might	<u>Permission</u> (She said I <u>might go</u> .)	<u>Possibility</u> (with doubt) (Take an umbrella with you. It <u>might rain</u> later.)	-	<u>Request</u> (Formal) (<u>Might I interrupt</u> you for a moment?)
Must	<u>Obligation</u> (Seat belts <u>must be worn</u> even in the back of the car.)	<u>Necessity/ likelihood</u> (based on evidence) (A: I called you yesterday around three o'clock, but you <u>must have been</u> out. B: We <u>must have been</u> in the garden. That's a pity.)	<u>Necessity</u> A: Where are the tissues? B: Oh, we <u>must buy</u> boxes of tissues.	<u>Invitation, persuasion</u> (I tried this chocolate cake yesterday. It was super-delicious. You <u>must try</u> some.)

With respect to past, present, and future **time reference**, the modal auxiliaries are not inflected for tense. As mentioned in the Rationale, the context around the modal verb signifies the time reference such as the present event expressed in "A: What is her favorite color? B: It could be blue." Apart from the contexts, the form and the lexical class of the verb following the modal auxiliary play an impact on the interpretation of

tense and modality meanings. Following Yangklang (2012, p. 42), the modal verbs “must/may/might + a stative verb” (e.g., Ben may like the chocolate) indicate present time reference. The combination “may/might + an eventive verb” as in “He might study math” and “will + a stative/eventive verb” as in “He will be late/ will miss the bus” mark future time reference.

The use of “must/may/might + be + an eventive verb + -ing” as in “He must/might be studying math” refers to a present situation. The past time reference is expressed through the perfective form of the verbal complements (have + V-en) as in “She may/might/must/can/could have baked the chocolate cookies.” All these combinations render epistemic readings such as “possibility, probability, prediction, predictability.”

Following van Gelderen (2003) as cited in Yangklang (2012), the modal “must” is not necessarily interpreted as “deontic” (e.g., “Seat belts must be worn even in the back of the car. They must follow the rule strictly”), but the utterances can be read as “epistemic,” i.e., “deduction based on facts or evidence” when “must” is followed by “have + V-en (perfective)” and “be + V-ing (imperfective)” as in “John must have cleaned up his room; the man must be cleaning other rooms.”

In conclusion, to interpret the meaning of an utterance which contains a modal auxiliary verb requires not only the basic and extended meanings of a particular modal verb but also the context under which the utterance is discussed and the lexical classes (i.e., stative, eventive) and the aspectual forms (i.e., perfective, imperfective) of the verbal complements.

3.2 Modality in Thai

Following Sakkanayok (2016), Smyth (2002), Yangklang (2011), and Rangkupan (2005, as cited in Yangklang, 2012), modality in Thai is linguistically indicated through several means: (1) preverbal modal auxiliary in /sùdā: k^hūantçà pāj hǎ: mǎ:/, “Suda should go see a doctor,” (2) postverbal modal auxiliary in /sùdā: p^hū:t p^hā:sǎ: fāràŋsè:t dāy (or pēn)/, “Suda can speak French,” (3) lexical verb in /dū:mūan sùdā: ró:ŋhâj mûak^hū:n nī:/, “It seems that Suda cried last night,” (4) lexical adjective in /pēnpājdāi t^hī: sùdā: tçà klàpmā: t^hī:nī: ʔi:k/, “It is possible that Suda will return here again,” (5) lexical adverb in /sùdā: t^hāmŋā:n t^hī:nī: nē:nō:n/, “Suda certainly works here,” and (6) sentence-final particles in /sùdā: pāy k^hā:ŋnō:k mán/, “Maybe, Suda goes/went outside.” The Thai modality device which corresponds to the English modal auxiliaries is the preverbal modals. See Table (2) for a full list of the Thai preverbal modal auxiliaries.

Table 2

Preverbal Modal Auxiliaries in Thai

No.	Preverbal Modal Auxiliaries in Thai	Modality Meanings	Equivalent Modals in English	Examples
1	ควร /k ^h ūan/ ควรจะ /k ^h ūantɕà/ น่าจะ /nâ:tɕà/	Advice	should	/sùdā: k ^h ūantɕà pāj hǎ: mǎ:/ “Suda should go see a doctor.”
2	สามารถ /sǎ:mâ:t/ ... (ได้ /dây/)	Ability	can, could	/sùdā: sǎ:mâ:t p ^h ū:t p ^h ā:sǎ: fārànsè:t dâ:/ “Suda can speak French.”
3	อาจ /ʔà:t/ อาจจะ /ʔà:ttɕà/	Possibility, probability	may, might, can, could	/sùdā: ʔà:ttɕà klàpmā: t ^h î:nî: ʔi:k/ “Suda may return here again.”
4	“คง /k ^h ōŋ/ คงจะ /k ^h ōŋtɕà/	Possibility, probability	may, might	/sùdā: k ^h ōŋ lû:ak sî: t ^h î:ŋ/ “Suda may choose the gold color.”
5	ย่อม /jôm/ ย่อมจะ /jômɕà/	Probability	will, be likely to	/sùdā: jôm k ^h āwtɕāj/ “It is likely that Suda understands it.”
6	มักจะ /máktɕà/	Probability	be likely to	/sùdā: máktɕà pàtisè:t k ^h wā:mrápp ^h ittɕóp/ “It is likely that Suda will not take responsibility.”
7	ต้อง /t ^h î:ŋ/	Obligation	must	/sùdā: t ^h î:ŋ t ^h āmŋā:n t ^h úkwān/ “Suda must work everyday.”
8	จำเป็นต้อง /tɕāmpēntōŋ/	Necessity	have to	/sùdā: tɕāmpēntōŋ kīn jā: nî: mū:awānnî:/ “Suda had to take this medicine yesterday.”
9	จะ /tɕà/	Future	will, would, shall	/sùdā: tɕà sū: sî:jt ^h î:ŋ/ “Suda will buy a gold necklace.”

The preverbal modals of different kinds may be combined in a specific order. For instance, the epistemic modal “อาจจะ /ʔà:ttɕà/,” meaning “possibility, probability” may precede the deontic modal “ต้อง /t^hî:ŋ/,” meaning “obligation” as in /sùdā: ʔà:ttɕà t^hî:ŋ klàpmā: t^hî:nî: ʔi:k/, “Suda may have to return here again.” But the modality meaning delivered through this combination is the epistemic one. Moreover, each of the

preverbal modals shown in Table (2) can be combined with different temporal adverbials such as “เมื่อวานนี้ /mû:awā:nní:/, yesterday, วันนี้ /wānní:/, today, พรุ่งนี้ /pʰrûŋnī:/, tomorrow, or ปีที่แล้ว /pī:tʰí:lɛ:w/, last year” with no need to change the form of the modals due to the fact that tense in Thai is not conveyed at a morphological level but at a lexical level or at a discourse level instead, as in examples (7) and (8) in Table (2).

Finally, modality can be affected by the presence of aspectual lexemes such as the preverbal lexeme marking an ongoing action or state “กำลัง /kām-lāŋ/,” the postverbal elements marking a completed action or state “แล้ว /lɛ:w/, already” and “เคย /kɔ̌:/, used to or once,” and the postverbal adverb “อยู่ /jù:/,” also marking an ongoing action or state. Following Yangklang (2012), when these aspectual lexical items co-occur with a modal auxiliary verb in Thai, only epistemic interpretations are possible as in /sùdā: t̂v:ŋ kʰǰ:j mā: tʰí:ní:/, “Suda must have come here before.” On the other hand, the deontic modal verbs “ต้อง /t̂v:ŋ/” and “ควร /kʰuān/, ควรจะ /kʰuāntɕà/” cannot cooccur with an ongoing action or state markers “กำลัง /kām-lāŋ/” and “อยู่ /jù:/.” The construction */sùdā: t̂v:ŋ (or kʰuāntɕà) kām-lāŋ tʰāmŋā:n (jù:)/ “Suda-must (or should)-ongoing-work-sentence-final particle (ongoing)” is ungrammatical in Thai.

3.3 A Comparison between English and Thai Modality

Both English and Thai have preverbal modal auxiliaries to serve as a linguistic device to express a variety of modality meanings. In both languages, tense is not interpreted through the forms of the modal verbs but through the surrounding words such as the context or the time adverbials. Furthermore, a combination between the deontic modal verbs and the aspects expressing a completed action/state (perfective) and an ongoing action/state (imperfective) leads to an epistemic reading. Thus, to understand the modality meanings in Thai and English, learners must understand the generic meanings of the preverbal modal auxiliaries and understand the tense and aspect markers around them.

A crucial difference between English and Thai modal verbs is that in Thai, one preverbal modal delivers much fewer modality meanings than the counterpart in English (see Table 2), and the preverbal modals in Thai express only semantic meanings, but those in English convey not only semantic but pragmatic ones. Hence, to acquire and fulfil the whole range of semantic and pragmatic meanings expressed by English modal auxiliary verbs is not a simple task for native Thai speakers.

3.4 Previous studies on EFL modality

Research on acquisition of English modal verbs by EFL learners is scarce. In this section, Li (2022), Sakkanayok (2016), Tangpijaikul (2008), Torabiardakani et al. (2015), and Yangklang (n.d., 2012, 2018) are reviewed. The important findings obtained from these past works are as follows.

First, some modal auxiliaries of English were successfully acquired earlier or more frequently than the others. “Can” was found the most successful one among EFL learners of different first languages such as among Thai undergraduate-level learners (Tangpijaikul, 2008), Chinese 7th, 8th, and 9th graders (Li, 2022), and advanced EFL Iranian learners (Torabiardakani et al., 2015). As for Iranian learners, nine English modal verbs were used at different levels of frequency as follows: “can” (ability, 73%), “should” (obligation, 63%), “could” (ability, 62%), “will” (prediction, 58%), “may” (possibility, 32%), “might” (possibility, 27%), “would” (prediction, 21%), “must” (obligation, 11%), and “shall” (prediction, volition, 0%). In subsequent stages of L2 development, more modal auxiliary verbs were added (Li, 2022).

Secondly, as earlier presented, one form of English modal verbs is generally related to more than one meaning (e.g., epistemic, deontic, dynamic, and pragmatic ones). However, EFL learners tended to associate one form with one meaning, especially at the early stage of acquisition. For instance, Li (2022) found that the Chinese learners used “can” to primarily convey the meaning of “ability” rather than that of “permission and possibility,” in line with advanced EFL Iranian students of Torabiardakani et al. (2015). Likewise, Thai and Iranian learners associated “could” with the meaning of “past achievement” of “can” rather than that of “possibility” (Tangpijaikul, 2008; Torabiardakani et al., 2015).

Likewise, Torabiardakani et al. (2015) reported advanced EFL Iranian learners showed a non-native imbalanced use of modality meanings of “may, might, should, must, will, should, shall.” To be precise, “may” and “might” were primarily associated with the meaning of “possibility” rather than “permission.” “Should” and “must” primarily conveyed the meanings of “obligation” rather than “necessity.” Finally, “will” and “would” were used to indicate “prediction” rather than “volition.” But the modal “shall” was not found used.

In Sakkanayok (2016), Thai learners were confused by the basic (e.g., ability, possibility, obligation, etc.) and extended (e.g., formality, politeness, certainty, etc.)

meanings of English modals, and the lack of one-to-one correspondence between English and Thai modality was claimed to be responsible for such confusion. For example, modal verbs in Thai are not used to indicate degrees of formality and politeness, so Thai learners were not sensitive to these functions in English. Yangklang (n.d.) found that Thai learners, regardless of their language proficiency levels, failed to distinguish the epistemic and deontic meanings of “must” (i.e., epistemic in “must + have + V-en” and “must + be + V-ing” versus deontic in “must + non-finite verb”), although a parallel system existed in both Thai and English.

In addition, Li (2022) provided details on the Chinese students' EFL modality path as follows: “Can” started out with the use of “ability, permission, and dynamic possibility” and the meaning of “epistemic possibility” was added later. “Could” developed from the meaning “permission” to “permission and dynamic possibility,” and finally to “permission, dynamic possibility, and epistemic possibility.” The modal “will” started as “volition and prediction” and remained multi-functional in the subsequent stages. “Would” initially conveyed “volition” and developed into “volition and prediction.” Lastly, “must” and “should” were connected to only “obligation” throughout the three grades of the informants, never to the meanings of “epistemic necessity and dynamic necessity.”

In regard to acquisition of pragmatic functions of English modal verbs, according to Li (2022), the Chinese informants rarely used the modal verbs to convey pragmatic meanings in their writings across the three grades. In addition, like the cases of semantic functions, only some pragmatic meanings were used in both initial and later stages. For instance, “can” was used to indicate “request and suggestion” rather than to deliver “advice, invitation, and command.”

Finally, interpretation of time reference expressed through utterances with modal verbs was found problematic for Thai learners. In Yangklang (2012, 2018), Thai learners with a low level of English proficiency failed to identify the past event or state denoted by “modal + have + V-en” more frequently than when they interpreted “modal + non-finite verb,” which may refer to either present or future or both. This was probably because Thai expressed tense through contexts or lexically, not through verbal forms as in English.

All in all, a general phenomenon of EFL modality was that some modal verbs and some modality meanings were acquired sooner than the others.

3.5 Theoretical background for EFL modality

3.5.1 L1 transfer

Yangklang (2018) found that transfer of knowledge of Thai modality was active in Thai learners' interpretation of time references in utterances with modal auxiliaries. Following Corder (1981, as cited in Yangklang, n.d.), L1 transfer refers to carrying over linguistic characteristics from the first language of language learners into the acquisition of their second language. If the two languages share certain linguistic aspects, positive transfer is likely, that is, L2 learning is facilitated. On the other hand, negative transfer tends to result if the linguistic aspects under focus are different in L1 and L2 (Yangklang, 2011). Yangklang (2018) reported the Thai participants' failure to identify past tense in "Ben might have been at home" and "Ben must have cooked the dinner" and claimed that the lack of the corresponding use of the verbal forms following modals to mark tense in Thai was accountable for such failure. Prior to Yangklang (2018), Yangklang (2012) argued for the "Full Transfer/ Full Access" Model, which was proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996, as cited in Yangklang, 2012). Under this model, L2 development was seen to be influenced by L1 in the initial stage, which was in turn constrained by Universal grammar (UG), input, "parameter resetting," the apparatus of UG, and by learners' cognitive processes. The Thai learners with a low level of English proficiency showed non-native-like temporal interpretations of English modals but followed the Thai patterns. Meanwhile, advanced learners developed specific time reference of "modal + have + V-en" via input, cognitive processes, or some apparatus of UG. Combining Yangklang (2018, 2012), L1 transfer seemed to play a crucial role in at least the early stage of EFL modality acquisition.

In accordance with L1 transfer in the groups of Thai learners, Li (2022) reported the negative influence of the Chinese modal verbs on the English counterparts. For example, the English "**must**" and the Chinese counterpart share the meanings "obligation" and "necessity," but the Chinese "must" lacks the authoritative overtone of the English "must," leading to misuse of EFL modals.

Nevertheless, Yangklang (n.d.) found no evidence of L1 transfer in the study of discrimination of English epistemic and deontic modality by Thai learners. As reviewed earlier, English epistemic modals take perfective (e.g., John must have eaten the whole cake.) and imperfective (e.g., John must be eating the cake.) as their complements;

whereas deontic ones do not (e.g., John must eat the whole cake). Thai also carries the same pattern of interpretation, but these did not seem to facilitate the Thai participants' epistemic (possibility) and deontic (obligation) discrimination tasks. Thus, the concept of L1 transfer failed to be attested in this case.

3.5.2 Markedness Theory

Markedness Theory was and still is active in the circle of formal linguistics and second language acquisition studies in the 20th and 21st centuries. It was originally proposed by a leading linguist of the Prague School, Nikolai Trubetzkoy. Following Zhang and Tian (2015), this theory argues that when two linguistic elements are compared upon a certain feature, one of them is "more natural, more basic, more general, or more frequent" than the other. Zhang and Tian (2015) classified "markedness" into three types: (1) formal markedness, (2) distributional markedness, and (3) semantic markedness. "Formal markedness" involves the presence and absence of a feature with the absent one being "unmarked" and the present one being "marked." For example, in regard to phonological features such as "voice," the voiceless phonemes /p, t, k/ are considered as "unmarked," and the voiced phonemes /b, d, g/ are "marked." At a morphological level, derivational and inflectional affixes distinguish marked and unmarked words such as "happy" being "unmarked" and "happiness" or "unhappy" being "marked."

In terms of "distributional markedness," an unmarked word has a more general or more neutral meaning than a marked counterpart. For instance, "old" is considered unmarked, but "young" is marked because "old" can be generalized and neutralized when it occurs in "How old are you?" which does not suggest that the person is old but is equivalent to "What is your age?" On the other hand, "How young is she?" means that she is young and cannot be generalized to "What is her age?" In the case of "semantic markedness," two words of the same category may have a different range of meanings. For example, "actor" is considered "unmarked," but "actress" is "marked" because the former can be interpreted as a female or male performer, but the latter limits its reference to only a female one.

As for the role of Markedness Theory and second language acquisition, Jiang and Shao (2006) mentioned that L2 learners acquired unmarked cases more successfully than marked cases, especially in the early stage of L2 development. "Unmarked" features are defined as the linguistic elements shared by most languages or innate or core

grammar; whereas, “marked” features are language-specific, typology-specific, peripheral, or idiosyncratic. Jiang and Shao (2006) also noted that some principles in the second language were considered as marked, based on the universal principles, but could become less marked in L2 learning because learners had acquired these specifications in their first language. Thus, a comparison between the relevant linguistic aspects in L1 and L2 remained a rudimentary necessity.

4. Research Methods

This section provides details on the participants, instrument, data collection process, and data analysis.

4.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 101 English-major undergraduate-level students who were enrolled in semester 2/2022 in the Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University in Thailand. The criterion of participant recruitment was that they had completed the course 205131 English Grammar for Communication in their first year of study because the information about the forms and meanings of the English modal auxiliary verbs were taught and practiced in this course. Therefore, the participants were expected to have some background knowledge about English modality and to manage the instrument of this research. These 101 participants were the main researcher’s former students, and they voluntarily applied for this project.

4.2 Instrument

The instrument of the study was a test of 50 multiple-choice questions with only one target answer each out of four choices. The modal auxiliary verbs under focus consisted of the nine core ones: “can, could, must, may, might, should, will, would, and shall.” The test was designed by the main researcher, using the information about the English modality taught in the course 205131 English Grammar for Communication, which amalgamated the contents in the main textbook (Vince, 2008) and the supplementary materials (Azar & Hagen, 2009; Maurer, 2016).

The participants were asked to read the utterances in question, which were written in English, and to choose the best interpretation of the modality meanings and

time references. The four choices were written in Thai script to reduce chances of guessing the answers. See below for an example of the questions in the test.

- Question: “My mother can speak French fluently. She studied in France for 15 years” and “What do you think “can speak” mean?
- Choice (1) เรื่องสมมุติในปัจจุบัน (จริง ๆ แล้ว ในปัจจุบัน แม่ไม่มีความสามารถในการพูดภาษาฝรั่งเศส) (unreal present situation)
- Choice (2) แม่สามารถพูดภาษาฝรั่งเศสได้ในปัจจุบันและเป็นเรื่องจริง (present real situation) (correct answer)
- Choice (3) มีการอนุญาตให้แม่พูดภาษาฝรั่งเศสได้ในปัจจุบันหรือในอนาคตอันใกล้ (permission to speak French in the present or future time)
- Choice (4) มีความเป็นไปได้ว่าแม่อาจจะพูดฝรั่งเศสได้ในปัจจุบัน (likelihood to speak French at present).

The 50-question instrument was written on Microsoft Form. The quality of the test was examined by three professors from the Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University. The average IOC value across 50 questions was 0.934. Eight of them were revised, following the experts' recommendations. The test items are indicated in Table (4)–Table (12).

4.3 Data collection

After the names of the volunteers were collected from their application, a Microsoft Team was created as a channel of communication and data collection. The link and the QR Code to the Microsoft Form of the modality test were posted on the Team. The participants could access the test and reach the researchers at anytime and anywhere. They were requested not to consult any resources on English grammar for the answers.

4.4 Data analysis

To answer the research objective, frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation values of accurate answers were calculated. Each correct answer was given one point, and each incorrect answer was given a zero. The total frequency was 5,050 across the 101 participants. The scores were automatically calculated by the Microsoft Form program.

5. Findings

Table (3) reports the overall frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation (SD) of accurate interpretation across the nine modal auxiliaries. Table (4)–Table (12) report the frequency and percentage of accurate interpretation of each shade of meaning (semantic/ pragmatic/basic/extended/time references) of each modal verb.

In Table (3) below, the Thai participants “fairly well” succeeded in identifying the modality meanings and the time references of the nine core modal verbs (69.21% accurate and the mean value of 34.60 of the full score of 50 with the standard deviation of the data at 0.46).

Table 3

Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References across Core Modal Verbs

No.	Modal Verbs	Frequency (Total)	Percentage (%)	Mean (Total)	SD
1	Can	527 (606)	86.96	5.22 (6)	0.34
2	Could	588 (808)	72.77	5.82 (8)	0.45
3	Would	432 (606)	71.29	4.28 (6)	0.45
4	Must	350 (505)	69.31	3.47 (5)	0.46
5	Will	209 (303)	68.98	2.07 (3)	0.46
6	Should	404 (606)	66.67	4.00 (6)	0.47
7	Might	442 (707)	62.52	4.38 (7)	0.48
8	May	311 (505)	61.58	3.08 (5)	0.49
9	Shall	232 (404)	57.43	2.30 (4)	0.49
Total score		3,495 (5,050)	69.21	34.60 (50)	0.46

Among these nine modal verbs, the participants were the most successful in the interpretation of “can” (86.96% accurate and the mean value of 5.22 of the full score of 6.00) but achieved the interpretation of “shall” the least (57.43% accurate and the mean value of 2.30 of the full score of 4.00). Between these two points, the levels of success ranged from “good” to “fair” in “could, would, must, will, should, might, may,” respectively. It is noted that the “good, fairly good/well, fair” levels followed the Naresuan University undergraduate-study evaluation scale. To sum up, the core modal auxiliary verbs in English posed different degrees of challenge to the Thai learners. See Table (4) for the interpretation of “can.”

Table 4

Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by “Can”

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
My mother <u>can</u> <u>speak</u> French fluently. She studied in France for 15 years.	Ability	-	Present	100 (99.01)	0.99 (0.10)
Students <u>can</u> <u>use</u> calculators during the exam. Usually, no devices are allowed, but this time, it is alright.	Permission	-	Present/ Future	95 (94.0)	0.94 (0.24)
<u>“Can</u> you <u>help</u> me with this form?”	Request	Less formal polite than “could”	Present	92 (91.09)	0.91 (0.28)
A: I spent a month in hospital before I was able to walk. B: That <u>can’t have</u> <u>been</u> easy for you.	Impossibility	Certain (based on some facts)	Past	85 (84.16)	0.84 (0.37)

Table 4

Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by “Can” (Cont.)

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
The weather <u>can</u> change very quickly in the mountains.	Possibility	General truth	Present/future	79 (78.22)	0.78 (0.41)
When you go to London next month, you <u>can</u> stay with my sister.	Permission	Surer than “could”	Future	76 (75.25)	0.75 (0.43)
Total frequency, percentage, mean, and SD				527 (86.96)	5.22 (0.34)

Table (4) shows that the modal “can” was accurately interpreted as “**present ability**” more frequently than the other meanings. The extended meanings heightened the challenge of interpretation. The past time reference of “can + have + V-en” was not interpreted as successfully as the present and the future. See Table (5) for the interpretation of “could.”

Table 5

Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by “Could”

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
When I was young, I <u>could</u> easily touch my toes.	Ability	-	Past	98 (97.03)	0.97 (0.17)
<u>Could</u> I ask you a personal question?	Request	More formal and polite than “can.”	Present	97 (96.04)	0.96 (0.20)
Jenny was an excellent swimmer.	Ability	General truth (not specific situation)	Past	76 (75.25)	0.75 (0.43)
She <u>could</u> beat anyone.					

Table 5*Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by "Could" (Cont.)*

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
They <u>could have taken</u> a taxi home instead of walking and getting wet.	Possibility	Unreal situation	Past	69 (68.32)	0.68 (0.46)
I <u>couldn't have arrived</u> any earlier. There was a terrible traffic jam.	Impossibility	Strong	Past	69 (68.32)	0.68 (0.47)
When you go to Italy next month, you <u>could stay</u> with Anthony.	Permission	Less sure than "can."	Future	63 (62.38)	0.62 (0.48)
A: What is her favorite color? B: It <u>could be</u> blue.	Possibility	Less sure than "can."	Present	59 (58.42)	0.58 (0.49)
I am so tired. I <u>could sleep</u> for a month.	Ability	Unreal situation	Present	57 (56.44)	0.56 (0.50)
Total frequency, percentage, mean, and SD				588 (72.77)	5.82 (0.45)

Table (5) shows that "could" was understood as a major indicator of "**past ability**." The use of "could" as a **polite** and **formal present request** was also successful. Other than the two shades of meanings mentioned above, the past tense was preferable. The epistemic meanings of "possibility/ impossibility" were less successfully achieved.

Next, Table (6) below shows that the Thai learners were more familiar with "would" in a more formal present/ near-future **request (pragmatic)** than when it expressed "predictability or prediction." The informants did not strictly associate "would" with a particular time reference. Like the cases of "can" and "could," "would + have +V-en" posed more of a challenge of interpretation than "would + non-finite verb."

Table 6

Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by "Would"

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
<u>Would you make</u> dinner?	Request	Less direct and more polite than "will."	Present/near future	92 (91.09)	0.91 (0.28)
Whenever Richard was angry, he <u>would walk</u> out of the room	Predictability	Regular activity	Past	90 (89.11)	0.89 (0.31)
It <u>would be</u> nice to buy a new car, but we can't afford it.	Predictability	Imagination	Present	83 (82.18)	0.82 (0.38)
Liza <u>would have passed</u> the test if she had studied harder.	Predictability	Imagination	Past	71 (70.30)	0.70 (0.46)
When I was young, I thought that in years to come I <u>would be</u> really tall.	Prediction	-	Future in the past	62 (61.39)	0.61 (0.49)
I <u>wouldn't have come</u> tonight except that Elaine died.	Prediction	Imagination	Past	34 (33.66)	0.34 (0.47)
Total frequency, percentage, mean, and SD				432 (71.29)	4.28 (0.45)

See Table (7) for the cases of "must" interpretation.

Table 7*Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by "Must"*

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
A: My house is very near the motorway. B: It <u>must be</u> very noisy.	Deduction	-	Present/future	90 (89.11)	0.89 (0.31)
I tried this chocolate cake yesterday. It was super-delicious. I have tried so many before, and this is the best. You <u>must try</u> some.	Persuasion	-	Present	87 (86.14)	0.86 (0.35)
Seat belts <u>must be worn</u> even in the back of the car.	Obligation	Strong	Present	71 (70.30)	0.70 (0.46)
A: I called you yesterday around three o'clock, but you <u>must have been</u> out. B: We <u>must have been</u> in the garden. That's a pity.	Likelihood	-	Past	70 (69.31)	0.69 (0.46)
I <u>must try</u> harder next time.	Necessity	General reference to the future	Future	32 (31.68)	0.32 (0.47)
Total frequency, percentage, mean, and SD				350 (69.31)	3.47 (0.46)

Table (7) above reports the Thai learners' preference of the meaning "**deduction**" for "must" to the meanings of "persuasion, obligation, likelihood, and necessity." The extended meaning "general reference to the future (not a specific point in time)" added difficulty in interpretation. Like the previous modals, the past tense of "must+ have + V-en" was less successfully achieved than the present and future references. See Table (8) for the interpretation of "will."

Table 8

Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by "Will"

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
A: He is still there at the moment. B: He <u>will be</u> there until the new guy starts.	Predictability	The speaker is certain.	Future	73 (72.28)	0.72 (0.45)
If she gets the job, she <u>will have to move</u> to Germany. But nothing is certain. Let's wait and see.	Possibility	-	Future	69 (68.32)	0.68 (0.47)
A: What would you like to drink? B: I <u>will have</u> an orange juice, please.	Volition	Immediate decision	Present / near future	67 (66.34)	0.66 (0.47)
Total frequency, percentage, mean, and SD				209 (68.98)	2.07 (0.46)

Table (8) shows that the Thai learners could access the meanings of "will" as an indicator of "a **predictable** situation in the **future** expressed with the speaker's **certainty**" more frequently than when they interpreted the meanings of "possibility and volition." Next, see Table (9) for "should."

Table 9

Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by "Should"

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
You look tired. You <u>should go</u> to bed.	Obligation/ advice	Weaker than "must, have to"	Present	99 (98.02)	0.98 (0.14)
You missed a great party last night. You <u>should have come</u> .	Regret	Unreal situation	Past	93 (92.08)	0.92 (0.27)

Table 9*Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by "Should" (Cont.)*

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
I am not forcing you to apologize to Jim. I am not saying that you "must apologize" to him. I personally think that you <u>should apologize</u> to him.	Suggestion	Weaker than "must, have to"	Present	88 (87.13)	0.87 (0.33)
I'm feeling sick. I <u>shouldn't have eaten</u> so much.	Regret	Unreal situation	Past	60 (59.41)	0.59 (0.49)
Helen has been studying hard for the exam, so she <u>should pass</u> .	Likelihood	Extreme	Present/future	52 (51.49)	0.51 (0.50)
We <u>should love</u> to meet her again if we had a chance	Condition	More formal than "would."	Present	12 (11.88)	0.12 (0.32)
Total frequency, percentage, mean, and SD				404 (66.67)	4.00 (0.47)

Table (9) reports the most frequent interpretation of "should" as "**obligation or advice at present** (weaker than "must, have to)." The use of "should" in "a present conditional sentence" with the extended meaning of "more formal than "would" was the least accessible. See Table (10) for the cases of "might."

Table 10

Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by "Might"

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
Take an umbrella with you. It <u>might rain</u> later.	Possibility	Doubtful	Future	94 (93.07)	0.93 (0.50)
You <u>might have told</u> me you weren't coming home for dinner.	Disapproval/ criticism	-	Past	84 (83.17)	0.83 (0.37)
You <u>might like</u> to try one of our wonderful desserts.	Suggestion	Polite, less direct	Present	76 (75.25)	0.75 (0.43)
<u>Might</u> I <u>interrupt</u> you for a moment?	Request	Very formal and rare	Present	70 (69.31)	0.69 (0.46)
A: I can't find my phone anywhere. B: You <u>might have left</u> it at work.	Possibility	-	Past	58 (57.43)	0.57 (0.49)
A: Where is Jack? B: He <u>might be having</u> lunch.	Possibility	Weak	Present	40 (39.60)	0.40 (0.49)
If they paid me better, I <u>might work</u> harder.	Possibility	Unreal situation	Present	20 (19.80)	0.20 (0.40)
Total frequency, percentage, mean, and SD				442 (62.52)	4.38 (0.48)

Table (10) shows that the most common interpretation of "might" was "**possibility** in the **future** expressed with **doubt**." The extended meaning "unreal situation" made it the hardest to understand. Next, see Table (11) for the interpretation of "may."

Table 11*Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by "May"*

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
A: Where is Jack? B: He <u>may be</u> in his office.	Possibility	Weak	Present	89 (88.12)	0.88 (0.32)
I haven't decided yet where to go on holiday. I <u>may go</u> to Ireland.	Possibility	Weak	Future	76 (75.25)	0.75 (0.43)
<u>May</u> I <u>come</u> in?	Request	More formal than "can" and "could"	Present	58 (57.43)	0.57 (0.49)
A: I wonder why Kate didn't answer her phone. B: She <u>may have been</u> asleep.	Possibility	-	Past	55 (54.46)	0.54 (0.50)
A typical farmer's cottage <u>may be seen</u> in the Ulster Folk Museum.	Likelihood	General truth/ more formal than "can"	Present	33 (32.67)	0.33 (0.47)
Total frequency, percentage, mean, and SD				311 (61.58)	3.08 (0.49)

Table (11) indicates that "may" was associated to the meaning of "**present possibility**" rather than other meanings such as "future possibility, formal request (than "can" and "could"), and past possibility," especially than the meaning of "general truth in the present time with more formal connotation than "can." See Table (12) for "shall."

Table 12

Accurate Interpretation of Modality and Time References Conveyed by “Shall”

Test items	Modality		Time Reference	Frequency (%)	Mean (SD)
	Basic	Extended			
Shall I <u>carry</u> your bag?	Making offer	-	Present	85 (84.16)	0.84 (0.37)
We <u>shall</u> remember this day forever.	Volition	More formal than “will”	Near future	55 (54.46)	0.54 (0.50)
This door <u>shall</u> be kept closed at all times.	Command	Public notice/ very formal	Present	52 (51.49)	0.51 (0.50)
I <u>shall</u> be late this evening.	Prediction	Unplanned decision	Near future	40 (39.60)	0.40 (0.49)
Total frequency, percentage, mean, and SD				232 (57.43)	2.30 (0.49)

Finally, Table (12) reports the most frequent use of “shall” as “an **offer**.” The specification of “formality, unplanned decision” added complication to Thai learners’ interpretation.

6. Discussion

The current findings support the previous ones in the following aspects. First, the Thai participants accurately interpreted the modality meanings and the time references of “can” more frequently than the other modal verbs, in line with the Chinese EFL learners of Li (2022) and the advanced Iranian learners of Torabiardakani et al. (2015). Secondly, the modality meanings of “shall” were scored the least among all the modal verbs, corresponding with the performance by the Iranian speakers of Torabiardakani et al. (2015). This suggests that Thai learners of English could be more familiar with American English than British English in which the use of “shall” was common.

Thirdly, as for each modal auxiliary, only some of its modality meanings were acquired more successfully than the others. This finding agreed with the performance by Thai learners of Sakkanayok (2016) and Yangklang (n.d.), the Chinese speakers of

Li (2022), and the Iranian learners of Torabiardakani et al. (2015). Like these previous studies, “can” was interpreted as “present ability” rather than “possibility, permission;” “could” was associated with “past ability” rather than “permission, possibility;” “must” as “deduction” rather than “necessity;” “will” as “predictability” rather than “possibility, volition;” “should” as “obligation/ advice” rather than “likelihood, condition;” and “might, may” primarily as “possibility” rather than others.

Finally, as with Yangklang (2012, 2018), the Thai learners of this study did not interpret the past time reference of “modal + have + V-en” as successfully as when they interpreted “modal + non-finite verb.” Instead, they tended to associate the time references with the modal verb forms rather than with the combination of the modals and their verbal complements or the contexts as in the cases of “can-could, will-would.”

This research proposes that the concept of “Markedness” serves as an efficient account for the phenomena of EFL modality acquisition. The similarities and differences of Thai and English modality systems fail to explain why the patterns of modal acquisition found in this research were in line with learners of other first languages. Instead, following the Markedness Theory with the concept of the “unmarked” features being potentially successfully acquired sooner than the “marked” ones, we can provide a better account for the EFL modality phenomena as follows.

First, among all the nine core English modal verbs, “can” is unmarked, and “shall” is marked. The modal “can” is generally used in a wider variety of modality than “shall.” As shown in Table (1), “shall” is not used in a deontic context and is used only to deliver the notions of “prediction” (epistemic), “volition” (dynamic), and “offer or command” (pragmatic). Therefore, there is assumed to be a higher chance for learners to be exposed to “can” in the input than “shall,” thus a higher chance of success.

Secondly, the extended meanings of each modal verb such as “formality, politeness, certainty, confidence, hypotheticality” is considered “marked,” therefore, EFL/ESL learners tend to find it more challenging to achieve their interpretation. This could be seen in the interpretation of “can, could, must, shall.” For example, a sense of different degrees of confidence in “When you go to Italy next month, you can/could stay with Anthony” were rarely achieved when compared to the basic meaning “ability.”

Thirdly, among the basic meanings of each modal auxiliary, some of them were assumed to be “less marked” than the others, thus a higher degree of interpretation

success. For instance, the meanings of “ability” (dynamic) and “permission/request” (deontic/pragmatic) of “can” and “could” were considered less marked than the meaning “possibility” (epistemic). The meaning “weaker obligation/ advice” (deontic) of “should” was less marked than the meaning “suggestion” (pragmatic), which was, in turn, less marked than the meaning “likelihood” and “condition” (epistemic). See Table (4)–Table (12) for further details.

Fourthly, time reference in English was generally morphologically marked such as “is, were, have, had, goes, wanted.” Therefore, association of change of verbal forms and change of time reference were considered salient and, accordingly, more natural. Hence, the non-nativelike association of “present-past” tenses in “can-could” and “future-past” tenses in “will-would” was possible at some point of EFL modality acquisition. This explains why Thai, Chinese, and Iranian learners tended to relate “can” with “present ability,” “could” with “past ability,” and “will” with “future predictability.” Moreover, the past time reference conveyed by the “modal + have + V-en” constructions was hardly achieved by EFL learners. This was probably because the perfective modal constructions appeared more complicated than the “modal + non-finite verb” counterparts, and their temporal denotations were not as salient as the change of verb forms, making the perfective construction a marked one.

Finally, the notion of “hypotheticality/ unreal situations” expressed by “modal + have + V-en” was considered an “extended” meaning added to the basic epistemic one of “possibility, predictability.” Consequently, such extended notions were marked and harder to acquire when compared to the non-hypothetical “modal + non-finite verb.”

All in all, although the one-form-to-one-meaning connection in Thai modality system and its shorter, less complicated list of preverbal modals seemed to provide a reasonable account for success/failure in English modal interpretation among Thai learners, the marked/unmarked concepts proved a more efficient means of clarification for varied degrees of success/failure across EFL learners in general. Therefore, the Markedness Theory is argued for in ESL/EFL modality acquisition.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the frequency and percentage of 101 Thai undergraduate-level learners' accurate or target-like interpretation of the basic and extended meanings of nine English modal auxiliary verbs: can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, and must. Fifty multiple-choice questions were designed to elicit the participants' understanding of the modality meanings and time references. As in several previous studies, the Thai learners were the most successful in interpreting "can" and the least successful in interpreting "shall." Moreover, some meanings of each modal verb were acquired more successfully than the others. The basic or unmarked meanings were achieved better than the marked ones. As for time references, the Thai learners tended to associate tenses with the forms of the modal verbs. Furthermore, the more complicated forms of the verbal complements of the modals (e.g., the perfective forms) caused more interpretation challenges than the less complicated one (i.e., the non-finite form). To sum up, the Markedness Theory, then, has provided an efficient account for ESL/EFL modality acquisition, regardless of the first languages of the learners.

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