

# THE PRIMARY AUXILIARY AND MODAL VERBS: SOME PROBLEMS OF ESL USERS

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## Abstract

*The authors of this paper examined the problems of ESL (English as second language) users with regards to the use of the primary auxiliary and modal verbs. The problems identified included the mis-use of primary auxiliary verbs; used to indicate aspects of tenses and to indicate the passive voice; the users of English as second language examined do not use these verbs appropriately. Hence, their expressions, both in the spoken and written forms are often faulty. Data from responses to a test instrument administered on one hundred NDII undergraduates of five of the Departments in the Faculty of Management and Communication Studies, Oyo State College of Agriculture and Technology, Igboora, were used for the study. The findings revealed that most of the respondents are deficient in the use of the modals. This dealt a big blow on their written English. 55% of the respondents failed the questions meant to test them on the primary auxiliary verb "am"; 62% got the question on the use of the modals 'may' and 'might' wrong. It was also revealed that most of the respondents got wrong the use of the modals "Will" (70%); Would (65%); SHALL (55%); "USED TO" (60%) CAN (57%) MUST/HAD (67%) and "OUGHT TO" (96%). This research, therefore recommended that teachers/lecturers in all levels of education-primary, secondary and tertiary focus more on the teaching of the primary and the modal auxiliary verbs in schools.*

**Keywords:** ESL users, Auxiliary; Modals respondents; Instruments; Tertiary.

## Introduction

That English language has become the Nigerian official language can no longer be contested. Amusa (2013) noted that in most Anglophone countries formerly ruled by the British, of which Nigeria is one, the English language has maintained its prominent position among the local languages.

Corroborating Amusa (2013); Abolaji and Lilian (2012) who observed that the status of English in Nigeria is underscored by the important place it occupies in the educational sector and the daily life of the people in the cities whether formal or informal purposes. As a result of this wide acceptability, both private and government schools in Nigeria start the teaching of English from the kindergarten while some parents start from the cradle.

Today, the English language has become not only the official language of administration in Nigeria, it is the language of education, the mass media, the judiciary, international relations, commerce to mention but a few.

However, it is generally observed that the majority of students, even in tertiary institutions, have great difficulties in speaking and writing sample and correct English. Hence, the hopes of lecturers teaching

general courses in English, with the hope of just building on the "great" knowledge the students must have acquired in the primary and secondary schools, are clashed.

Such Lecturers often discover they have to start from the scratch, as most undergraduate users of English do not obey simple grammatical rules including the use of the primary and the modal auxiliary verbs. The above is the observation that motivated our present investigation.

## Theoretical framework

The Systemic Function Grammar (SGF) is used for the analysis of this study. It is performance –oriented; based on insights into the way language operates effectively.

It posits that whatever expression that will be made should be grammatically correct, following adequate rules.

A grammatically-correct sentence should adhere to the rules of the tense-verb. The verbal group which is the most important element in a sentence dictates the time an action is performed, including other salient functions.

There are different types of verbs including Lexical, Auxiliary (primary/modal), transitive, intransitive, stative, finite, non-finite, regular and irregular verbs; in accordance with their forms and functions (Abolaji and Lilian 2012). The focus of this paper is the primary and modal auxiliary.

### The Primary Auxiliary Verbs

These are the verbs that cannot stand on their own to express complete sentences. They are used with the main verbs to form meaningful and complete sentences. The parent of these verbs is "BE". From "BE", and the auxiliary "Has", are the following:

| Present tense | Past tense |
|---------------|------------|
| Am, is        | was        |
| Has           | had        |
| Have          | had        |
| are           | were       |

Each of the above verbs is used to help form different aspects of sentences; and to indicate the passive form of voice.

Ajao, (2005) identifies the following as the functions of the

#### 1) TO INDICATE ASPECTS OF TENSE

- I am writing a letter (present continuous)
- She is dancing (present continuous)
- He was cleaning the toilet when I saw him (past continuous)
- Taiwo has come (present perfect)
- They are playing football (present continuous)
- We have completed the task (present perfect)
- They were writing their tests then (past continuous)
- He had bought a beautiful car (past perfect)

#### 2) TO INDICATE PASSIVE VOICE

- He is considering the lady for the job (active)
  - The lady is being considered for the job (passive)
- They have written the examination (active)
  - The examination has been written (passive)
- We had got the money (active)
  - The money had been got by us (passive)

### The modal auxiliary verbs

Ajao, (2005) identifies the forms and functions of the modal auxiliary verbs as follows:

The modal auxiliary verbs express a variety of moods or attributes.

They are: can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, must, ought to.

#### USES OF MODALS

CAN/COULD (i) - 'Can' expresses ability, power or capacity to do something. e.g They can dance very well.

ii) Can and Could are used to make requests and grant permission.

Could is more polite. e.g.

a) Can I leave my car here? (request)

b) Could you tell me the time (request)

#### MAY/MIGHT

These are used (i) to give, refuse or ask for permission.

They are more formal than can/could. e.g.

a) May I sit on this chair? Yes, you can

b) May we start the meeting? (do we all agree that we should start?)

ii) To show possibility, MIGHT gives a weak possibility. e.g You might be right

iii) To show a reproach .e.g. You might have at least, sought our consent.

iv) MIGHT expresses indirect statements. e.g He said that he might travel the next day.

#### SHALL/SHOULD

They are used to:

- Form future tenses. Shall is used with I and We. e.g I shall return this book tomorrow /We shall go next week .
- Express a request for advice. e.g. Sir, Shall I put in for "medicine " ?
- Show determination, promise or threats e.g. You shall have the pen back (promise)
- Show an emphatic reproach .e.g. You should have known that that action is inconsiderable Should is used as the past form of shall in the direct statement .e.g. He said that he should come.

#### WILL/WOULD

They are used to:

- Express future actions .They are often used with 'He' 'She', 'It', 'They' and 'You' e.g He will follow us to Lagos.
- Express conditional statements e.g I would do the work if I got the money.
- Seek a request .WOULD is more polite e.g Would you repair this wristwatch for me?
- Show habitual actions .e.g she will greet us cheerfully whenever we meet
- Show commands .e.g No one will step out here without permission.
- WOULD replaces WILL in the reported speech. He told me he would be here next week.

#### MUST

i) It expresses obligation, usually due to necessity, but also in some cases, for moral reasons:

e.g. a) I must get to the bank before it closes (It is essential)

b) You must attend lessons punctually (It is essential, very important)

ii) To show a logical conclusion. e.g.

a) He must be dead by now because he has been bleeding profusely

b) They must have gone, I had given them money.

It should be noted that 'HAD TO' is used as the past form of MUST e.g.

a) We had to rescue the accident victim yesterday when the accident occurred.

b) I had to react the way I did.

OUGHT TO

This is an equivalent of 'SHOULD'. It expresses a moral obligation, but not a necessity e.g.

a) I ought to see the boy tonight.

b) You ought to go to church more often.

USED TO

It is used to show a past habitual action that has stopped.

i) People used to think that the earth was the centre of the universe.

ii) When I was younger than this, I used to play table tennis.

### Methodology

The method used in the collection of data for the study was the administration of a test on one hundred undergraduate users of English; randomly selected from the five Departments in the Faculty of Management and Communication Studies, Oyo State College of Agriculture and Technology, Igboora.

The five Departments are:

- i) Accountancy Department
- ii) Business Administration and Management Department
- iii) Public Administration Department
- iv) Office and Technology Management Department
- v) Library and Information Science Department

Twenty students were randomly selected from each of the departments. The test instruments contained a-10 typed multiple choice objective questions; with options A-D. The respondents were requested to circle the correct options.

## OYO STATE COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY, IGBOORA FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES TEST ON PRIMARY AUXILIARY VERBS AND MODALS

CLASS-ND II

DURATION-15minutes

INSTRUCTION- From the word / a group of words lettered A-D; choose the one that perfectly completes the following sentences:

1. You and I \_\_\_\_ to go (a) are (b) am (c) has (d) is
2. When Ade was leaving, I told him I \_\_\_\_ not wait any longer for him (a) may (b) might (c) am (d) were
3. \_\_\_\_ you please leave my sight right now? \_\_\_\_ (a) will (b) may (c) ought (d) might
4. She \_\_\_\_ finished eating before I got there (a) have (b) will (c) had (d) need
5. If she gives me the money, I \_\_\_\_ surely share it with you (a) shall (b) am (c) might (d) should
6. In the past, the teacher \_\_\_\_ teach us Mathematics (a) was (b) are (c) used to (d) use to
7. If she had come; Olu \_\_\_\_ (a) Shall have seen him (b) Saw him (c) Would see him (d) Would have seen him
8. Everyone knows Olu has the ability. He \_\_\_\_ sing very well. (a) Must (b) need (c) can (d) shall
9. Then, we saw the thug beating the innocent lady up, mercilessly. We therefore \_\_\_\_ to rescue her from him (a) have (b) must (c) need (d) had
10. You \_\_\_\_ to go to church every Sunday as a Christian. Though, you are not. (a) ought (b) shall (c) must (d) will.

### Analysis of findings

The answer scripts were collected and marked. They were 100 scripts altogether. Frequency and Percentage of how each of the respondents got each of the questions right or wrong was determined.



| S/N | QUESTIONS                                                                                      | RESPONSE  | FREQUENCY | PERCENTAGE |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| 1   | You and I—to go                                                                                | Correct   | 45        | 45         |
|     |                                                                                                | Incorrect | 55        | 55         |
|     |                                                                                                |           | 100       | 100        |
| 2   | When Ade was learning, I told him I ___ not wait any longer for him.                           | Correct   | 38        | 38         |
|     |                                                                                                | Incorrect | 62        | 62         |
|     |                                                                                                |           | 100       | 100        |
| 3   | ___ please leave my sight now?                                                                 | Correct   | 30        | 30         |
|     |                                                                                                | incorrect | 70        | 70         |
|     |                                                                                                |           | 100       | 100        |
| 4   | She ___ finished eating before I got there                                                     | Correct   | 35        | 35         |
|     |                                                                                                | incorrect | 65        | 65         |
|     |                                                                                                |           | 100       | 100        |
| 5   | If she gives me the money, I surely ___ share it with you                                      | Correct   | 45        | 45         |
|     |                                                                                                | incorrect | 55        | 55         |
|     |                                                                                                |           | 100       | 100        |
| 6   | In the past, the teacher ___ teach us Mathematics                                              | Correct   | 40        | 40         |
|     |                                                                                                | incorrect | 60        | 60         |
|     |                                                                                                |           | 100       | 100        |
| 7   | If she had come, Olu ___                                                                       | Correct   | 42        | 42         |
|     |                                                                                                | incorrect | 58        | 58         |
|     |                                                                                                |           | 100       | 100        |
| 8   | Everyone knows Olu has the ability.He ___ sing very well.                                      | Correct   | 43        | 43         |
|     |                                                                                                | incorrect | 57        | 57         |
|     |                                                                                                |           | 100       | 100        |
| 9   | Then, we saw the thug beating the girl mercilessly up. We therefore ___ to rescue her from him | Correct   | 33        | 33         |
|     |                                                                                                | incorrect | 67        | 67         |
|     |                                                                                                |           | 100       | 100        |
| 10  | You ___ to go to church every Sunday, as a Christian. Though you are not.                      | Correct   | 40        | 40         |
|     |                                                                                                | incorrect | 60        | 60         |
|     |                                                                                                |           | 100       | 100        |

## Discussion

From the data analysis, it has been revealed that most of the respondents have difficulties with the English modals. This can be seen in the table above. Each of the questions tested the knowledge of the respondents on the primary and modal auxiliary verbs. Only 45% got question one correctly. 55% did not. 38% got question two correctly; while 62% got it wrong. 30% got question three correctly; while 70% got it wrong. Question four was got correctly by only 35%; while 65% got it wrong. It was the same finding in questions five, six, seven, eight, nine and ten; as the respondents who got the correct answers to each of the Modal questions were fewer than those who got them wrong. In question five, 45% got the answers correct; while 55% got it wrong. Only 40% got question six correctly, while 60% got it wrong. In question seven, 42% got the correct answers. 58% got it wrong. 43% got the correct answer to question eight while 57% got it wrong. Only 33% of the respondents got correctly the answer to question nine; while 67% got it wrong. 40% respondents got the answer to question ten correctly. 60% got it wrong.

## Conclusion

In this study, the authors have made an effort to identify the problems the users of the English Language as a second language have, in the use of the primary and modal auxiliary verbs. The problems, as identified included the use of the primary auxiliary verbs such as “am”, “is”, “are”, “were”, “has”, “have”, and “had”. The appropriate use of these auxiliary verbs in both the aspects of the tense and the voice (active and passive) are examined. The other problems examined are the wrong use and application of the modals, in their different moods and tenses.

These included “may/might”; can/could; will/would; shall/should; must/had; ought to; among the others.

The multiple-choice objective questions given them to answer revealed that they have poor knowledge of the use of these verbs, their being tertiary institutions students notwithstanding.

It is therefore recommended that teachers in the General Studies Department; especially those teaching the English Language, should do more by teaching the students more rudiments of the English Grammar. In their GNS 101, 102, 201 and 202 classes, which are, of course; designed to improve the students writing and speaking skills in the English Language, emphasis should be laid on the frequent and relentless teaching of the verbs; especially the primary / modal auxiliary verbs.

Teachers should introduce different textbooks that teach elements of grammar to the students.

Suitable methods and approaches should be employed to teach these topics so as to make learning them easier and interesting. When they make mistakes, Abolaji and Lilian (2012) submit that it is the responsibility of the teachers of the English Language to help the learners to develop strategies for self-correction and regulation.

They also submit that ESL users' works require feedback from teachers not only on content but also on the form and structure of writing.

Ajao and Adeleke (2014) also recommended that to ensure students success in the use of English, teachers must teach their students very well, using adequate instructional aids and suitable textbooks.

The school should also provide very conducive environment for the teaching and learning of the courses.

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