STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON THE USAGE OF ENGLISH MODAL VERBS A CASE STUDY AT HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY

Nguyen Thi Mai Huong*, Phan Thuy Duong*, Nguyen Thi Hong Anh[*]

Abstract: The study aims at checking students' understanding of the meanings of English modal verbs in classroom and real-life contexts. Accordingly, a questionnaire survey on a population of 100 sophomores majoring in the English language serves as the key instrument to collect data for the quantitative study. The study analyzes students' perception on primary meanings and uses of modal verbs which are further illuminated by examples collected in real life communicative settings. By providing the research participants with situations which involve the meanings and uses of modal verbs, mismatches concerning the primary meanings and uses of modal verbs in academic and communicative settings have been found, i.e., though students perform well in tasks related to the meanings and uses of modal verbs in classrooms, they are confused by the same modal verbs used in real life contexts.

Keywords: English modal verbs, primary meanings, communicative context

I. Introduction

English modal verbs have long been popular research topics for students, teachers, and linguists. No matter how much the verb category is studied, the role of modal verbs has always been an argumentative focus in the linguistic field because their meanings and uses are often related to attitudes, opinions and emotions, which makes it hard for new English language learners to thoroughly understand and use modal verbs. It is also necessary to compare the primary meanings and uses of modal verbs in academic settings with those in more communicatively inclined situations so as to find out how the meanings and uses shift.

This research studies common meanings and uses of modal verbs in English. It also addresses the uses of modal verbs in communicative contexts and identify problems face when using the verbs and suggestions on how to avoid them.

Also, the study on "*Students' perceptions on the usage of English modal verbs: a case study at Hanoi Open University*" is conducted to check the second-year students' understanding of the meanings of English modal verbs

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[*] Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University

in classroom and real-life contexts. Once findings on the mismatch in their perceptions have been pinpointed, it is possible for teachers and students to make up for it in the teaching and learning process.

Hopefully, problems the second-year students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University face, with regard to the uses of modal verbs in communicative settings and solutions to deal with them would be found, and the study would bring about a deeper look at modal verbs, thereby improving students' understanding of meanings and uses of the important verb category.

II. Literature review

This part presents the unified definition of modal verbs in English, their syntactic and semantic features, especially the common uses of the modal verbs. It also addresses the intended meaning of *communicative* as is used to refer to real life contexts in which modal verbs used, as opposed to illustrations for the uses of modal verbs in classroom or academic contexts.

2.1. English modal verbs

In English grammar, different terms are used to refer to modal verbs. The most common terms include *modals* (Jacobs, 1995:217-241), *modal verbs* in Eastwood (1994: 113-129) and Wikipedia, and *modal auxiliaries* as used in (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1974: 37-58) and (A.J Thomson & A.V. Martinet, 1986: 105-148). Whatever terms are employed, modal verbs including *will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, must, need, ought to,* and *dare* refer to a type of verbs

that contextually indicate modalities such as likelihood, ability, permission, request, capacity, suggestion, order, obligation, or advice.

While Eastwood (1994) and Jacobs (1995) address the verb group as a whole, modal verbs are subdivided into *modal auxiliaries* and *semi-modals* in (A.J Thomson & A.V. Martinet, 1986) and *the modal auxiliaries* and *marginal modal auxiliaries* in (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1974). Apart from that, other verbs, and expressions, namely *had better, have to* and so on clearly express modality in the same way core modal verbs do, thereby they are sometimes referred to in terms of meaning contribution, Wikipedia.

Regardless of differences in terms, the authors all agree that *will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, must and ought to* known as core modals possess more common features than *need* and *dare*, which categorized as semi-modals.

Grammatical features of English modal verbs

Eastwood (1994:114) and Jacobs (1995:217-218) and A.J Thomson & A.V. Martinet (1986:106-107) and Quirk & Greenbaum (1974: 39-40) categorize modal verbs as defective verbs because the verbs *will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, must* and *ought to* possess following grammatical features which make them different from other ordinary verbs.

First, core modal verbs take no tense suffixes. It means they do not always have a tense. They mostly refer to the present or future. For the past, other equivalents are used. For example, the sentences *We*

must know now, We *must* know soon and We *had to* know then express *the present, future* and *past*, consecutively, Eastwood (1994:114). In the Example, **had to** replaces **must**, and a modal verb plus *have + past participle* [**might have arrived**] is used to denote the past tense.

Second, modal verbs are always the first words in the verb phrase. They have the same form and never have endings like *-s, -ing*, and *-ed*. The bare infinitive is put after modal verbs, except for *ought to*. Take the following examples in Eastwood (1994:114) to illustrate the point: (a) *It will be windy,* (b) *He **must arrive** soon,* (c) *You **should look after** your money* and (d) *The letter **might arrive** tomorrow.* In the example above, *will* and *must* are used in their finite forms though they follow the third singular persons *It* and *He*. In other words, while other ordinary verbs can be inflected, modal verbs are grammatically defective; for instance, the verb *work* can take various endings like *-s, -ed* and *-ing,* but **shoulds* and **mayed* cannot, Wikipedia.

Third, the negative marker *not* follows core modals though it can precede ordinary verbs. Consider the examples in Eastwood (1994:114): *Your desk **shouldn't** be untidy* and ***Don't** leave your desk untidy*. In the example above, **not** follows **should**, but it combines with **do** preceding the ordinary verb **leave** to make a negative command.

Semantic features of English modal verbs

The uses of modal verbs are sometimes interchangeable, but typical meanings are associated with certain modal verbs. Eastwood (1994:114), Jacobs (1995:217-218), A.J Thomson & A.V. Martinet (1986:106-107) and Quirk & Greenbaum (1974: 52-57) all agree on the uses of modal verbs. The major functional meanings include *necessity, obligation, permission, probability, possibility, request, ability, suggestions, order, advice, unreal situations, habits* as well as other less common uses as is summarized in Eastwood (1994:128-129).

Will can be used to express *prediction* and *possibility*. Take the following uses as examples. While **will** in (a) and (b) respectively future and present predictions, in (c) it shows prediction for a habit. (a) Tom **will** be at home tomorrow; (b) Tom **will** be at home now; (c) Tom **will** always arrive late. Further uses include (d) *willingness, (e) formal order* or *(f) decision.* For example, (d) *I will help you;* (e) *All pupils will attend* and (f) *I'll have coffee.* **Shall** is used to express *a future prediction, promise* and *formal rules* like in (a) *I/We shall be away next week*, (b) *You shall have the money* or (c) *A game shall last an hour*, respectively.

Similarly, **would** can correspondingly express *request, past willingness* and *unreal prediction* like in (a) ***Would** you help me?(b) The baby **wouldn't** go to sleep, and (c) A holiday **would** be great.* **Must** can be used to show *logical necessity* like in (a) *You **must** be tired* and *necessity* like in (b) *You **must** be careful*. The negative forms of the two verbs correspondingly show *necessity not to do something* like in (c) *You **mustn't** forget* and *no necessity* like in (d) *You **needn't** hurry*.

Both **should** and **ought to** can be used to express *obligation, advice* and *probability*. Here is an example for obligation and advice *You **should/ought to** work hard* and the use of **should/ought to** to show probability *It **should/ought to** be fine tomorrow.* **May** and **might** can be used to express *permission, possibility and request/order.* For example, *You **may** go now* (permission); *The plan **may/might** go wrong* (possibility), and *You **might** help me* (request/order).

Can is polysemantic. It can show *permission* like in (a) *You **can** go now*, *request* like in (b) ***Can** you help me?, offer* like in (c) ***Can** I help you* and *suggestion* like in (d) *We **can** meet later.* **Can** also express *general possibility, possibility, impossibility, ability* and *opportunity* in following cases in turn: *Maths **can** be fun; The story **can't** be true; I **can** play the piano* and *We **can** watch TV in the evenings.* Similarly, **could** is used to express *past permission* like in *You **could** park here years ago*; it is also used to *ask for permission* like in *Could I ask a question*; *to request* like in ***Could** you help me?* to give *suggestion* like in *We **could** meet later*, to show *past and unreal ability* like in *I **could** play the piano* and *I **could** take better photos if I had a better camera*, respectively.

2.2. Contexts of communication

People communicate for various reasons, including to inform, persuade and to entertain. Communications, according to Gordon (2022), are resulted from different contexts which enable communicators to develop a basic understanding of a particular situation. The authors also categorize communication contexts as interpersonal, intrapersonal, public and mass. Intrapersonal communication is when a person is involved in communication with themselves while interpersonal communication is mostly perceptible having an externalized expression as it involves two or more people. Public communication takes place when one person presents his/her views in front of many people. Similarly, this communication can also be in written form where one person is writing for others. Mass communication involves sending out one single message to an entire group.

In the study, the term *communicative context* is restricted to one particular means of mass communication, newspapers. The researchers extracted sentences in newspaper articles and employed them as instruments to collect data related to research participants' understandings of meanings and uses of modal verbs. Besides, academic context as is used in the study refers to bookish situations in which the meanings and use of modal verbs are introduced and assessed.

In brief, the concepts of modal verbs, their meanings and uses which are presented by Eastwood (1994:114) and Quirk & Greenbaum (1974: 52-57) serve as the theoretical framework of the study. Importantly, the concepts, syntactic and semantic characteristics presented by the authors are employed as criteria for the writers to design the survey questionnaires.

III. Methodology

3.1. Context of the study

The study is conducted at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open

University. At the time of the study, the study participants have completed the first three out of 8 terms in their degree course in English. The participants have completed the Practical Grammar subject. Theoretically, they have been provided with essential knowledge about English practical grammar. In fact, mastering a language, especially a foreign one, is hard when it comes to subtle uses of the language. Added to that, students attend lessons once per week with 12 sessions, making up a total of approximately 25 classroom hours, which means self-study is badly needed if the students are to master the language aspect. Ideally, the study would support the researchers to find out students' difficulties and solutions to tackle them.

3.2. Participants of the study

As the study is part of the tertiary education program, the size of population is kept to a minimum. One hundred of second-year students from four classes are asked to join the study. 90% of the participants are females at the age of 19. There are certain reasons to choose the second-year students. For one, the students are all candidates who have passed the national high school graduation examination, which serves as the standard and benchmark for the selection of students. Second, after studying English in the same learning environment for three consecutive terms, they should have reached almost the same level of English proficiency, upper intermediate, and should have developed an awareness of different aspects of the English language, to some extent. Also, the second-year students have already done a course in

English practical grammar, making them qualified research participants in the study.

3.3. Methods of the study

The study focuses on the common meanings and uses of modal verbs with further investigation into the uses of modal verbs in real situations and problems the second-year students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University face when they study the modal verbs, their meaning and uses. Therefore, different document-based research methods are employed to conduct the study. Particularly, the document-based research methods prove to be effective in the description and analysis of different aspects of modal verbs. Obviously, the research and analysis on the use of modal verbs in newspaper articles would not be effective without the key quantitative research method.

3.4. The instruments of the study

The main data collection instrument is a survey questionnaire on the meanings and uses of modal verbs, basing on the concepts of modal verbs, their meanings and uses which are presented by Eastwood (1994:114) and Quirk & Greenbaum (1974: 52-57) and are the theoretical framework of the study.

Accordingly, the survey consists of three parts, each of which serves a distinct purpose. The first part consists of 15 multiple choice questions which are designed to collect data about students' knowledge of the English modal verbs, i.e., how to use each of the listed modal verbs in short sentences, illustrating grammatical rules. The second part presents 10 multiple choice questions which are designed to test students'

knowledge about the semantic uses of modal verbs.

As the two parts are designed with short, less complex sentences, they are designed to check students' understanding of fundamental syntactic features, meanings and uses of the English modal verbs in the classroom or in academic-inclined contexts.

Part 3 aims at checking students' understanding of modal verbs in more communicative-oriented situations. The questions are 23 extracts from authentic sources published by VOA and CNN. Each extract contains a highlighted modal verb, and students are asked to choose an appropriate meaning among the suggested ones.

As is mentioned earlier in Gordon (2022), public communication takes place when one person presents his/her views in front of many people. Similarly, this communication can also be in written form where one person is writing for others. Mass communication involves sending out one single message to an entire group. Thus, the sentences elicited from the authentic sources published by VOA, BBC and CNN are employed as communicative texts to check students' mastering of the meanings and uses of the verb category.

3.5. Data collection and data analysis

The data collection process starts when a questionnaire survey is designed, taking advantage of the available software application, google forms. Once the development of the study instrument is completed, the survey link is sent to target participants to collect data. 92 out of 100 responses were collected, proving the effective use of the data collection instrument and reliable data.

The study continues with the data analysis process, in which students' responses are sorted, basing on specific criteria. Reponses are also compared and contrasted to assess students' knowledge of meanings and uses related to particular modal verbs. The data analysis process also looks for connections between students' mastering of grammatical rules concerning modal verbs and their uses in real communicative situations.

IV. Findings and discussion

Information from the analysis of the data shows how students use modal verbs syntactically and how they differentiate modal verbs semantically in contexts. More importantly, analyzing the information collected also shows how students understand semantic functions of modal verbs in realistic settings. A close investigation of the collected data, moreover, gives clues to students' problems, concerning both syntactic and semantic aspects of the modal verbs, and solutions to the problems are also addressed.

4.1. The uses of English modal verbs

The section discusses findings on the use of modal verbs in both classroom and communicative contexts.

4.1.1. The academic use of English modal verbs

As is mentioned in the description of the data collection instrument, the first

part of the survey consists of 15 multiple choice questions which are designed to test students' knowledge of modal verbs, i.e., how to use each of the listed modal verbs in short sentences, illustrating grammatical rules. Basically, core modal verbs denoting *necessity, obligation, permission, probability, possibility* and *ability* are used, and these subcategories are discussed in turn. On the whole, students' responses indicate that students master the use of modal verbs in classroom contexts though few considerations need addressing.

Five questions, 1, 2, 7, 8 and 10, test students' use of *must* and *mustn't*. The rate of correct responses is over 85% for the first three questions while it is slightly over 70% for the last two. For Question 8, among 72% of the grammatically correct responses, 9% of the responses (the choice of *have to*) refer to the obligation from some internal source or to the reminder of some external authority, instead of choosing the semantically accurate option *must*. Question 10 shows students' problems concerning time reference. Though about 71% of the students choose the verb denoting the strongest degree of certainty, 32% of them wrongly use the past deduction instead of the accurate present form. More than a fifth of the students choose a verb denoting a low level of certainty, *may*, which semantically mismatches the preceding part of the sentence.

Questions 3, 9 and 11 test how students use the verb *can* and *could*. Questions 9 and 11 also shows students'

problems concerning time reference. For Question 9, though about 96% of the students choose the verb denoting the strongest degree of certainty, 25% of them wrongly use the past deduction instead of the accurate present form. In Question 11, 67% are able to differentiate the past from present deduction forms, about 15% inaccurately opt the present. For Question 3, more than half of the students inaccurately choose *should* as a verb denoting advice while 44% correctly opt *can* to show possibility in the context. Generally, the problem to be considered here is the knowledge of semantic notions, i.e., one modal can be used in to denote other meanings apart from its primary one.

Five other questions, 5, 13 and 6, 14, 15 respectively test students' use of *might* and *should/shouldn't*. Between 83% and 86% of the students use *should* correctly while about 30% confuse the present and past time reference (Questions 14 and 15). The rate of correct responses is about 94% for the use of *might*, denoting probability in Question 5.

Question 13 asks students to complete the sentence *I don't know why she got so many bad grades. She …… lazy studying.* The question indicates students' problems with both time reference and meanings. Under 50% of the responses (choosing might have been) are correct while almost a third of the responses (choosing *must have been*) are inappropriate semantically as *I don't know* cannot be equivalent to *must,* which denotes certainty. The rate of students choosing the present time reference for

deduction (choosing may/might be) without considering the clue for the past form *she got* is quite high at about 23%.

Question 12 reveals significant information concerning students' understanding of *must*. While 13% correctly understand the sense of obligation, (despite their inaccurate option of time reference), 21% incorrectly use *must* as a mean of deduction though they probably refer past obligation.

The second part presents 10 multiple choice questions which are designed to test students' knowledge about the semantic use of modal verbs. Following is the interpretation of the collected data. A majority of the responses are accurate with some low rates of wrong answers, confusing the semantic functions of modal verbs. 92% and 77% of the responses are correct as is illustrated the use of *may* referring to the act of asking for permission and making offers in Question 16 and 17 in turn. For Question 18, 83% correctly understand the meaning of *mustn't*, expressing prohibition while 14% inaccurately interpret it as obligation. Questions 19 and 22 indicate the use of *should* to express advice with 87% and 92% correct responses. The percentages of students choosing the right answers which denote *request, ability, possibility, lack of necessity* and *obligation* are remarkable, above 80%. In Question 21, 12% wrongly perceive *can* as expression of possibility instead of expression of ability and 23% (Question 23) misunderstand *must* as expression of *prohibition* instead of its

accurate meaning of *obligation* in the context *You **must** stop when the traffic lights are red*.

4.1.2. The communicative use of English modal verbs

The last part of the research instrument aims at checking students' understanding of modal verbs in more communicative-oriented situations. Therefore, twenty-three extracts from authentic sources published by VOA and CNN are selected. Each extract contains a highlighted modal verb, and students are asked to choose an appropriate meaning among the suggested ones.

In general, about 65%-70% of the students interpret the use of modal verbs appropriately in communicative contexts. The lower rate, compared to the rate of correct responses in academic context, is understandable because in realistic settings a wide variety of factors which affect the understanding of the meanings need to be considered.

With regard to extracts illustrating the use of modal verbs to express different degrees of certainty, the rate is higher among verbs having the primary meaning of assumption or speculation. For Extract 26 and Extract 33, the use of *will* to show prediction, showing a high degree of certainty, is correctly perceived by 87% and 65% of students consecutively while Extract 27 illustrates the use of *would,* which students accurately understand as the verbs indicating certainty 44% though categorizing it as a mean to express possibility 33% is not wrong. However,

the option of 12% students (choosing the function of request making) is a confusion between the primary and secondary use of *would*.

Five other extracts also denote the use of modal verbs to express different degrees of certainty. Extract 36 and Extract 38 illustrate the use of *might*, with respective high proportions of 86% and 93% recognizing the expression of possibility. The high level of accuracy sounds convincing as the primary semantic function of *might* is to denote possibility. In contrast, a problem concerning the use of *can* is seen in Extract 37.

Nearly 44% of the students accurately understand the use of *can* which, in the context [*The Center for Disease Control sail people should get a flu vaccine by the end of October. But the agency said the shot **can** still be effective later in the year*], expresses *possibility* – the chance of a flu vaccine shot being effective even if the shot is taken later in the year, passing the critical, most effective, time. Nonetheless, about 32% inappropriately choose the expression of *ability*. Perhaps, students autonomously choose its primary semantic function without analyzing the very context in which *can* is used.

A similar case is noted for the use of *may* in Extract 40 [*Now, cold weather is coming to the northern half of the world, and doctors think the upcoming winter **may** bring a bad flue season*] and 41. More than 70% of the students accurately understand the use of *may* which expresses *possibility* – the chance of flu spreading extensively in the coming winter as well as the chance of changes in labelling laws being announced by the European Union. However, about 10% inappropriately choose the expression of *permission*. Perhaps, students autonomously choose its primary sematic function without analyzing the very context in which *may* is used

The analysis of extracts illustrating the use of modal verbs to express different degrees of *necessity, a lack of necessity, obligation and prohibition*, the rates of accurate answers are quite low. Extract 28 and Extract 47 illustrate the use of *must* and *needn't* to show *necessity* and *a lack of necessity*. While 82% answer correctly by choosing the expression of lack of necessity in Extract 47, in Extract 28, almost 40% of the students accurately understand the use of *must* which expresses *necessity* while nearly 41% choose the primary semantic function of *must*, denoting *obligation,* and 15% interpret it as requesting *expression*.

Similarly, students' misunderstanding of the use of *should, must* and *mustn't* as is seen in responses for respective extracts 29, 32 and 48 should be considered. About 60% respond correctly for the use of *mustn't* as expression of *prohibition*, and under 50% in Extract 32 choose the correct use of *must* as expression of *obligation*. The wrong option goes for the expression of *necessity* (17%) and *request* (26%). The most problematic case is seen in Extract

29 [*The officials argue that because richer, developed countries produce more climate-harming pollution, they* **should** *be responsible for giving money to poorer countries who suffer because of it.*] Just under 10% of the students correctly perceive the use of *should,* an alternative for *would* as expression of *mild obligation* in the context. The Extract can be paraphrased as '*Developed countries are expected to be responsible for their causing pollution*'. Nearly 54% inaccurately choose the primary meaning of *should*, expressing advice, for the context while the choice of *should* as expression of advice is accurate in another context, (73% in Extract 31).

Extracts 30, 42, 43 and 44 are concerned with the use of *can, can't, couldn't* and *wouldn't* to express *willingness*, *impossibility* and *ability*. In Extracts 43 and 44, 70% students are correct when they identify the use of *can* and *could not* to express *ability*, but in the latter, 16% of students mistakenly understand the use of *could not* as expression of *not granting permission*. More than 60% students choose *cannot* in Extract 42 as expression of *impossibility* while about a quarter inaccurately choose the expression of *prohibition* without considering the clue *admitted* as it is normally used to give further comment to opinions. 65% do well in Extract 30, concerning the use of *would not,* expressing *unwillingness*.

4.2. Problems and suggestions for the use of English modal verbs

4.2.1. Problems related to the use of modal verbs

The analysis of the data collected by the questionnaire survey shows a number of problems students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University make. The problems are related to the use of modal verbs in both the classroom settings and communicative situations.

Regarding semantic use of modal verbs in the classroom, a majority of students can use modal verbs accurately, whereas a noticeable percentage make mistakes related to the time reference, confusing *present* and *past deduction* and particular meanings of modal verbs in particular situations. For instance, in Question 10 [*The kids are calm today. They ....tired*], 30% chose *must have been* instead of choosing *must/may be*

In terms of communicative use of modal verbs, a considerable rate of students can perceive the appropriate meanings of modal verbs in communicative settings. However, most mistakes can be seen in the choice of primary semantic functions instead of the secondary meanings in particular situations.

Take Extract 27 [*Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on the state television that Russia* **would** *only use nuclear weapons 'to prevent the destruction of the Russian Federation.'*] as an example. 44% of the surveyed students correctly chose the option of

certainty though 33% categorized it as a means to express *possibility* is not wrong. However, 12% and 11% choosing the respective functions of *request making* and *willingness* reveal a confusion between the primary and secondary uses of *would.* Similar problems have been thoroughly analyzed in four.

4.2.2 Suggestions to the use of modal verbs

As most mistakes concerning the use of modal verbs in the classroom are related to time reference, it is essential for students to understand the subcategories of modal verbs, their clusters of meanings and their use to refer to assumption, whether it is speculation for future or deduction for past events.

Regarding mistakes in communicative settings, it is advisable for students to distinguish the primary and secondary meanings among a cluster of semantic uses of modal verbs. Bear in mind that, the use of modal verbs varies in contexts to appropriately denote subtle shades of meanings, corresponding to attitudes, opinions, beliefs, etc. of the English language users.

V. Conclusion and recommendation

This research studies common meanings and uses of modal verbs. It also addresses the uses of modal verbs in communicative contexts and problems a particular group of students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University face when using the verbs and suggestions on how to avoid them. The research starts

with the section, reviewing different aspects of studies on modalities before stating methodology of the research, the study outcome, and then suggest solutions to students' typical problems.

Following are the main outcomes.

- Overall, students' responses indicate that students master the syntactic use of modal verbs denoting necessity, obligation, permission, probability, possibility, ability in classroom contexts though few considerations need addressing.

- Regarding students' knowledge about the semantic use of modal verbs, a majority of the responses are accurate with some low rates of wrong answers, confusing the semantic functions of modal verbs. Generally, the problem to be considered is the knowledge of semantic notions, i.e., *one modal can be used in to denote other meanings apart from its primary one.*

- Most students can accurately interpret the use of modal verbs appropriately in communicative contexts. The lower rate, compared to the rate of correct responses in academic context, is understandable because in realistic settings a wide variety of factors which affect the understanding of the meanings need to be considered, and the evidence proves correlation between students' problems in classroom and real-life situations.

As most mistakes concerning the use of modal verbs in the classroom are related to time reference, it is essential for students to understand the subcategories of modal verbs, their clusters of meanings and

their use to refer to assumption. Besides, it is advisable for students to distinguish the primary and secondary meanings among a cluster of semantic uses of modal verbs.

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Author address: Faculty of English – Hanoi Open University
Email: maihuong74@hou.edu.vn