Modals (*can*, *will*, *should*, etc.), also known as modal auxiliaries, are difficult to learn because they seem to function like a verb but don't follow the same rules. For example, modals act more like the auxiliary verb *do/does* when *do/does* precedes a verb; however, modals are different from *do/does* in that they do not change for tense or the subject's number. We will examine the forms, meaning, and use of modals in more depth.

The forms of modals fall into two categories (Yule, 1998): simple modals and periphrastic, or phrasal, modals. Simple modals are single words such as *can, will, could,* and *would.* Each simple modal has a present and past tense form, but these tense forms do not function the way tense functions in other verbs. For example, *can* is often used for the present tense, and *could* is used as the past tense of *can*; however, *could* can also be used in other contexts to refer to present or future time (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). In short, modals do not follow the usual grammar rules for verbs and so fall into their own special category.

The other type of modals is periphrastic modals (Yule, 1998), more commonly known as phrasal modals. Phrasal modals look like phrases: *be able to, have got to, be going to,* etc*.* Phrasal modals use the common verbs *be* or *have*, which can make these modals easier for students to learn because they follow more familiar grammar rules.

Modals are used to indicate certainty, possibility, necessity, inference, or prediction. For example, the sentence *It **must** be easy to live so close to the store* is an inference that expresses a high level of certainty. If the sentence changes to *It **might** be easy to live so close the store*, the sentence is still an

inference, but the modal *might* expresses a much lower level of certainty: it might be easy to live near the store, but it might not be easy. Changing the modal in a sentence can also change the degree of certainty that the speaker has about the situation. Therefore, learners must recognize the varying degree of certainty, possibility, or necessity that a modal can express. They also must understand that a modal is used to communicate the speaker's perspective in any given situation. Again, this can be difficult for learners to grasp given that a modal looks much like a verb but functions differently.

Modal use often depends on context and the degree of formality and politeness that a social situation requires. For example, modals such as *could* and *would* are considered more polite than their present tense counterparts *can* and *will.* English language learners need instruction and practice to understand these slight differences in use.

In this month's Teacher's Corner, we present four activities that focus on the form, meaning, and use of modals in everyday English. The activity offered in Week 1 uses common classroom instructions to help learners differentiate between modals expressing necessity and those expressing possibility. Week 2 gives learners a chance to recognize equivalent simple and phrasal modals. In Week 3 an activity explains how to teach a common speech act. We end the month with a common icebreaker activity adapted to emphasize modals.

References

Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course (2nd ed*.). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Yule, G. (1998). *Explaining English grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Additional Resources

For additional information about modal verbs, check out this resource and many others available

on the American English website:

- [Modal Verbs & Adverb Clauses of Reason: Stranded on the Moon](#)