

Teaching Modals Across the Levels

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Principles to teach

When dealing with modals, students must understand the concepts of *form*, *meaning*, and *use*. Students need to learn that modals have unique rules for making the present, past, progressive, perfect, and passive forms. However, once learned, students will see the forms for pure modals are very regular.

A much larger obstacle is meaning and use. A single modal can have various meanings, which must be built upon incrementally. Furthermore, use means not only what the various contexts a modal is used in, but also how it can collocate with other words.

Below is a review of these three key principles:

Form

- Modals rarely follow the rules of other verbs.
- Modals have different forms (present, perfect, progressive, negative).

Meaning

- Modals have different meanings, some of which can seem contradictory.
- Modal sets (e.g. of uncertainty) express different shades of meaning.
- Modals express “flavors of the verb.”

Use

- Modals are not always interchangeable.
- Responses to modals vary (response not always another modal).
- Modals collocate with vocabulary.
- Modality includes more than modals (adverbs, linking verbs, prep phrases).
- Modals are highly dependent on:
 - genre/context
 - register

Collocation websites

Modals naturally collocate, or go together with, other words, including adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and even clauses (such as *I think that* with *should*). Websites like the ones below are a helpful resource for teachers wishing to create materials around words that collocate with specific modals. These websites also include example sentences that can be pulled and used for extension activities.

1. Just the Word

<http://www.just-the-word.com>

*Free. Extremely user friendly. Also good for students & classroom use.

2. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>

*Free, but eventually requires registration. A more sophisticated corpus tool, allowing many filter options. Best for teachers.

Extension activities

There are many ways teachers can extend students' learning and get the grammar "off the page." The goal is to have students notice and create real-life examples to help bring the grammar to life. Below are a few examples of extension activities that can be used in and out of the classroom to reinforce students' use of modals.

- 1) Have students keep a grammar journal. Offer writing prompts that elicit the modal being taught, or use prompts from your textbook.
- 2) Have students go on a "modal scavenger hunt" around their school and report back.
- 3) Keep a modal "Wall of Fame" in the classroom.
- 4) Have students collect examples of modals from outside sources to share and analyze.
 - a. What is the context?
 - b. What do these examples have in common?
 - c. Which meaning of (insert modal) is this?
 - d. What is another way the writer/speaker could have said this? How would it change the meaning?
- 5) Have students create key sentences for themselves.
- 6) Have students write sentences that include collocations with modals.

Use the phrases below for your next grammar journal. Add words <i>before</i> and <i>after</i> the phrase.
1. can certainly be
2. can often feel
3. can't stand waiting
4. can't imagine why
5. can't believe that
6. can't afford to buy
7. so that we can deal with

Grammar mini-lessons for writing

A “mini-lesson” is a short, 15-20 minute lesson, usually taught before students will use the structure, such as just before a first or second draft. The grammar point should be chosen very carefully to match the kind of assignment students will be doing. In the example below, the clause *so that I can* was taught just before students wrote the first drafts of their process essays.

....so that I can....
...so that you can...

Use “*so that I can*” to show your purpose or intention for doing something. Use “*so that you can*” to show the importance or result of your suggestion.

EXAMPLES:

I need to speak English *so that I can continue my education.*

I'm getting a BA in business administration *so that I can find a better job.*

You should try to make friends *so that you can feel more comfortable in America.*

A. Finish these sentences with your own ideas. Use *so that I/you can* + verb.

1. I'm taking classes at North Harris *so that I can improve my English.*
2. I want to open my own small grocery store
3. I will work hard and persevere
4. When you make cheating notes, use small paper
5. You need to adapt to American culture

B. Now write a sentence for your essay below. Use *so that I/you can*. Use this sentence in your essay and underline it.

Resources

- Hinkel, E. (2012). Innovative and Efficient Construction Grammar. *Selected papers from the 21st International Symposium on English Teaching*. English Teacher's Association, Republic of China (ETA-ROC), Taipei, 51-59.
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