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English Modality and Saudi EFL Students: An Investigation of Application Trends

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Abstract---This study explored the competence of Saudi EFL students in the use of English modality. It aimed to: 1) Identify Saudi EFL students' level regarding use of modal verbs; 2) Identify the modal(s) they use most accurately; 3) Examine whether there is a significant difference in their ability attributed to the semantic function expressed by modality; and 4) Determine whether students' level impacts their competence in the use of modals. An existing test was adapted, developed, and administered to 31 students at three universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Findings revealed students' low proficiency in the use of modals—only 24.35% of the test items were correctly answered. Might was the most correctly used modal—37.09% of the students used it accurately. The study found significant differences between students' use of modals attributed to the semantic function. Significant differences were also found between the use of modals of possibility and obligation for the sake of possibility, and between volition and obligation for the sake of obligation. However, no significant difference between students' responses attributed to the study level was reported. The study emphasized greater academic space for the component of English modals and adoption of learner-appropriate pedagogies.

Keywords---competence, modality, pedagogies, Saudi EFL learners.

Introduction

Modals or auxiliary verbs in English comprise a special category of verbs that express necessity, ability, possibility, or doubt and occur alongside the main verb. A modal verb “rarely has just one meaning, and rarely is one meaning expressed by only one modal” (Folse, 2016). Given this “special,” and rather difficult, status, modality is considered among the primary challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Cournane & Pérez - Leroux, 2020; Bensaid, 2015; Hinkel, 2011; Saeed, 2009; Torabiardakani et al., 2015; Yang, 2018). This

troublesome fact may stem from the differences between Arabic and English (Torabiardakani et al., 2015), it could also be a result of students' low level of competence (Saeed, 2009), or the superficial education they received. The target, however, remains attainment of native-like fluency and accuracy; the recent research trend, therefore, is to construct a learner-corpus and compare students' production at different levels—spoken or written—with native speakers' corpus (Cournane, 2014, 2019; Deshors & Gries, 2016; Litvinova et al., 2018; Sun, 2014; Torabiardakani et al., 2015). Corpus linguistics—a language study technique that has significantly developed since the 1990s—has improved research in modal verbs (Deshors & Gries, 2016). This cutting-edge advancement in scientific methodologies and methods is ideal for a wide range of inquiries requiring massive datasets and computer-aided analyses. A detailed corpus study has the potential to contribute valuable information related to the use of modals in different varieties of English. When examining the London-Lund and LOB corpora, Nesselhauf (2011), found significant trends that have been utilized as a starting point for future studies comparing the application of modals in different varieties of English. For example: (1) Shall is used to express obligation much more in written than spoken text; (2) There seem to be significant differences between genres in terms of the relative frequency of the “root” and “epistemic” uses of certain modals; and (3) The epistemic use—must, should, may, and shall—is more frequent than root use in written text.

However, researchers have to often create their own corpora because of the lack of publicly available corpora that chronicle specific English use. The genre and subject of the text, the type of text, and the quantity and diversity of the corpus must be considered when compiling the corpus (Riadil, 2020). Modal verbs have been explored in different contexts—by Yang (2018); Li (2017), in China; by Torabiardakani et al. (2015), in Iran; and in the Arab world, by Saeed (2009); Btoosh (2019); Bensaid (2015). There are very few studies on the use of modals by Arab learners; notable studies are even fewer (Saeed, 2009). Hence, modality in the Saudi context seems an underexplored area in recent times. Therefore, this study is significant because it explores the reasons behind EFL students' poor performance in the use of English modals, and possible solutions in the Saudi EFL context to correct this imbalance (Matthewson, 2013; Salkie, 1996; McMullen, 2009).

Literature review

Modal verbs, or modality, are among the most difficult grammatical categories to master for EFL learners because various language functions can be expressed by a single modal. Furthermore, the same modal may perform different functions. Biber et al. (1999), classify modal verbs into three types. The first expresses possibility, permission, or ability, and includes can, could, may, and might. The second constitutes the obligation or necessity modals, such as must and should. The last type comprises prediction or volition modals, that is, will, shall, and would.

Mujtaba (2016), notes that training students in the use of modal auxiliary verbs is a challenge for EFL instructors. Likewise, EFL students must endeavor to master the use modal auxiliaries in their writing via rigorous practice. Studies have

indicated that EFL learners are more likely to employ modal verbs in context and circumstance as compared to native learners, which makes it even more pertinent for them to master these. Differently put, native speakers of English employ modals differently than foreign learner of English.

Additionally, students of English linguistics and language must be familiar with the viewpoint and descriptive rules of English language to be more efficient in their language applications. EFL learners must acquire different types of grammatical rules at different stages of learning during their language development (Waters, 2012). In other words, certain language assignments may require EFL students to become more familiar with specific grammar rules or terms. For instance, terms like what establishes a subject-verb agreement, a sentence, and others, so that they can discuss with teachers their errors, and as modals constitute only one aspect of grammar, the rules need to be simplified so that EFL learners can easily acquire and efficiently use them. In this context, Genc (2017), cites the example of German students of English who are hesitant and skeptical about several grammatical components of the language, such as the pragmatic category modals and how they are used to account for varied contextual insinuations. It is natural for teachers to an assume explicit instruction as the answer to this and similar problems; however, the matter is not so simple (Havril, 2015; Sjaifullah, 2019; Kumar et al., 2016).

It has been a long-standing question whether foreign language classes should include explicit grammar instructions (Sun, 2015). Nonetheless, there is ambivalence about what should be taught and what should not. Teachers need to be more aware of the content and quantity of knowledge to be transferred to students to facilitate their successful attainment of the four skills in learning a foreign language. This will enable the students to become better users of the target language (Bybee et al., 1994; Chan, 2015; Hymes, 1972).

Hinkel (2011), notes that teaching the use of modal verbs to learners is a good starting point in academic writing in both L1 and L2. Additionally, the study explores and analyzes the modal verbs used in educational essays written in both British and American English varieties. Given the importance of modals in a phrase or expression, it is critical to identify EFL learners' difficulties with employing modals and devising solutions.

Many linguists are interested in categorizing the use of modal auxiliaries in different dialects of English and in different genres of writing (Lindquist, 2009). Given the uncertainty of the definitions associated with modals, both the semantic theory and succinct grammar have been challenged (Hwang & Lardiere, 2013). Many classification schemes have been devised by researchers to investigate the functional role of modals. Verstraete (2001), uses the deontic, epistemic, and dynamic categories to discuss modals. The functional properties of modal verbs have been perceived by Azar (2002), who lacks a thorough comprehension of classes. However, researchers agree on the significance of modal auxiliaries in depicting the language exchange mode, despite their differences in marking.

In the Iranian context, [Torabardakani et al. \(2015\)](#), studied advanced EFL students' use of modal auxiliaries on nine language functions. They pursued a learner-corpus of 136 written compositions; the result revealed the wide use of certain functions—such as, the increased use of can for ability, and its decreased use for possibility. Likewise, in the Chinese context, [Yang \(2018\)](#), explored the use of modal verbs in writing compositions of Chinese students. A learner-corpus was constructed to compute the data using the Antoconc 3.2.4w application. The findings showed that Chinese learners used modal verbs regularly. They maximally used the modals can, will, and could, and minimally used may, when compared to proficient language users.

A few studies have investigated modality in Arab learners' language output ([Al-Sharafi, 2014](#); [Btoosh, 2019](#); [Bensaid, 2016](#); [Saeed, 2009](#)). [Saeed \(2009\)](#), explored the acquisition of English modality by Arab learners of English. The study included university students who scored 500 and above in the TOEFL. The result established that students scored low in the recognition and production of modal verbs. Similarly, [Btoosh \(2019\)](#), studied Arab learners' application of English modality in academic writing. A corpus was used to compare Arab learners' writing production with that of native speakers. Findings indicated a significant difference between the Arab and native written productions in terms of frequency of occurrence of modal verbs. The study identified a tendency in the former to overuse must, should, and can and underuse epistemic modals such as may, might, could, and would. [Bensaid \(2016\)](#), investigated Arab EFL learners' difficulties with using English modality. The study focused on the occurrence of modal verbs in textbooks, and reported that the primary difficulty is the interference of the mother tongue: Arabic. Students revealed the tendency to use the particle “to” after a modal as in “*he must to go.” Students also used double modals, as in “* He will can go to school.” This, and similar, studies indicate a need for further research into the trends and reasons for poor acquisition and application of English modality in the Saudi context—a perceptible gap that this study attempts to fill by evaluating the status of Saudi learners' repertoire of modal verbs ([Master, 1997](#); [Naghdipour, 2016](#); [Abanomey, 2013](#)).

Research Questions

With the research gap duly identified after a review of literature, the following research questions were finalized:

- What is the proficiency level of Saudi EFL students in modality use?
- For which modal do Saudi EFL students score the highest?
- Is there any difference in the use of modal attributed to the semantic function?
- Are there any differences in students' results attributed to their level?

Methods

Participants

The study used a non-probability sample of 31 EFL students studying in different Saudi universities, and enrolled in three successive levels from level 2 into 4, aged

between 20 and 22 years, and with similar cultural background. Their participation was voluntary.

Instrument

A test validated by [Alshehry \(2019\)](#), was adapted for this study. It comprised 22 items to measure participants' competency in the use of English modals. A 40-minute test was simultaneously administered to all participants with due official permission during an EFL class.

Data analysis and Results

The study adopted a complex analysis model. The test carried 22 marks—one mark for each test item. Upon obtaining the responses, the percentage of students who had correctly answered the test items was computed using Microsoft Excel, 2016 (see Table 1). Next, the percentage of students who had correctly answered items for each of the eight modals was calculated (see Table 2). Finally, the eight modals were reclassified based on three semantic functions, and participants' scores were recalculated according to this classification. One-way ANOVA was computed using SPSS, version 27 to measure the statistical significance among the three semantic functions and the three levels (Tables 3, 4, and 5).

To prepare the result for the SPSS, as previously mentioned, 11 questions were grouped, and average mean scores were calculated. These questions were associated with the semantic function of ability/possibility/ permission, and their answers were can, could, may, or might. The code of the second language function pertaining to obligation/necessity and all questions related to these—these questions were to be answered with must or should—were calculated; similarly, the average mean score of the four questions associated with these was calculated ([Lee & Al Khateeb, 2021](#); [Al-Nafisah, 2011](#); [Masrai, 2016](#)). Finally, the last language function, that is, volition/prediction connected with seven questions of the test was assessed. The answers to these questions were would and will. The average mean score of each semantic function was used for the SPSS operation. The research questions were answered as follows.

What is the proficiency level of Saudi EFL students in modality use?

Table 1 summarizes the proficiency level of Saudi EFL students in using modality. On average, they gave correct answers for 5.541 items out of 22, and incorrect answers for 16.549 items out of 22. In other words, approximately one-quarter (24.35%) of the questions were correctly answered, and approximately three-quarters (75.65%) were incorrectly answered.

Table 1
Saudi EFL students' competence in modality use

Number of Students	Number of questions	Correct answers		Incorrect answers	
		Average	Percentage	Average	Percentage
31	22	5.541	24.35	16.549	75.65

For which modal do Saudi EFL students score the highest?

Table 2 presents EFL students' competency in each of the modal verbs. Results show that modals occurred 686 times in the test but the students gave only 192 correct responses. The modal might was the most correctly used: 23 times (37.09%) out of 62 occurrences. Must attained the second place with 32 correct usages (33.33%) out of 93 occurrences. Could was third—it was correctly used 31 times (33.33%) out of 93 occurrences. May was correctly used 25 times (26.88 %) out of 93, and would was correctly used 33 times (26.4%) out of 125 occurrences. Will was correctly used on 24 occasions (25.80%) out of 93, whereas can was correctly used 21 times (22.58%) out of 93. Should was the least correctly used: only three times (9.67%) out of 32 occurrences.

Table 2
Saudi EFL students' frequency and percentage of correctly using modals

Modal	Students' correct use			Total correct occurrences
	Frequency	Percentage	Rank	
Can	21	22.58	7	93
Could	31	33.33	3	93
May	25	26.88	4	93
Might	23	37.09	1	62
Will	24	25.80	6	93
Should	3	9.67	8	31
Would	33	26.4	5	125
Must	32	33.33	2	96
Total	192	27.98		686

Is there any difference in the use of modal attributed to the semantic function?

To answer this research question, one-way ANOVA was used to analyze the variances between the three semantic functions. Table 3 shows students' scores in the three functions. Based on the Sig. value, the differences in students' responses to the three semantic functions were significant (Sig = .000). Table 4 shows the most significant of the three functions.

Table 3
One-way ANOVA for analyzing the difference between the semantic functions

Semantic functions	N	Means	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Ability/possibility/permission	31	.2323	.05408		
Obligation/necessity	31	.0581	.01352	413.398	.000
Volition/ prediction	31	.0083	.00193		
Total	93	.0995	.10166		

The Scheffé test was used to detect the language functions in which the students scored higher and significantly better than others. Table 4 shows a significant difference between possibility and obligation for the sake of possibility; there is also a significant difference between volition and obligation for the sake of obligation.

Table 4
Scheffé test for calculating the Sig. values among the three semantic functions

(I) area	(J) area	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Possibility	Obligation	.17419*	.00818	.000	.1538	.1946
	Volition	.22396*	.00818	.000	.2036	.2443
Obligation	Possibility	-.17419-*	.00818	.000	-.1946-	-.1538-
	Volition	.04977*	.00818	.000	.0294	.0701
Violence	Possibility	-.22396-*	.00818	.000	-.2443-	-.2036-
	Obligation	-.04977-*	.00818	.000	-.0701-	-.0294-

Are there any differences in students' results attributed to their level?

Table 5 shows that the tested students belonged to levels 2, 3, and 4. The majority of the students belonged to the second level (N =66); they scored (M=.0857, Std= .08332). A total of 24 students belonged to the third level; they scored (.1286, Std =.12669). Only four students belonged to the fourth level; they scored (M=.0995, Std =.20253). The Sig. value of .096 implies that the differences in students' answers were insignificant.

Table 5
One-way ANOVA for analyzing the semantic functions

Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Second Level	66	.0857	.08332	2.411	.096
Third Level	24	.1286	.12669		
Fourth Level	3	.1714	.20253		
Total	93	.0995	.10166		

Conclusions

The study revealed Saudi EFL students' low proficiency level in use of modal verbs. Less than one-quarter of the test items were correctly answered. This is in line with previous research conducted in the Arab world (Saeed, 2009; Saoudi, 2010), which found that Arab EFL learners encounter difficulty in using English modal verbs. Might—used to express permission and possibility—was the most correctly used model in the test: more than 35% of the students used it correctly.

This finding is in line with Saeed's (2009), observation, who stated that might and can are among the less difficult English modals for Arabs.

The study reported a significant difference in students' use of the semantic functions of modals. The difference is attributed to the ability/possibility/permission semantic function expressed by modals. This finding is confirmed by Torabiardakani et al. (2015), who found that advanced EFL students used modals more appropriately for expressing ability. Finally, the study did not find any significant difference in students' answers attributed to the study level, which implies that students' proficiency level in the use of modals did not improve with progression of formal education. One justification is that the curriculum is not designed to enhance students' ability in this grammatical element; another reason is the immense difference in the element of modality between Arabic and English (Saeed, 2009).

Recommendations

The study concludes that curricular and mother tongue factors are responsible for the poor proficiency of Saudi EFL students in the use of English modals. Therefore, it is recommended that modals be introduced to EFL students in a planned manner and with due consideration to their acquisition in the mother tongue. The rationale behind this is that language learners tend to transfer learning strategies from the mother tongue to the target language. Hence, planned, stepwise introduction is likely to enhance their grasp of the target language. Furthermore, instead of introducing the students to all the modals simultaneously, it may be beneficial to limit the input to a few modals from the same category/function to provide adequate time and opportunity for the new information to crystallize.

Limitations

The researcher believes that learning outcomes can be better evaluated in longitudinal studies—that is, testing the sample over a substantial duration may enlarge the scope of results. Therefore, future studies may consider comparing learner output in use of modals over a few months of learning. Additionally, the sample size was small and gendered—it included only male participants; this somewhat limited the scope of the study.

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Appendix

Dear Saudi EFL students

This is a Discourse Completion Task aimed to measure your ability in using the English modal verbs. You have thirty-questions to answer. Try to read and answer them by yourselves. You are requested to send back your response by pressing the submit button at the bottom of the test. You are not required to write your name. If you want to get the results of this research, you can access the study soon as it is to be published.

A- Demographic information

What is your university's name?

What is your study-level?

First level----- second level,third level.fourth level.

What is Your Level of Proficiency (circle one): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Are you (male/female)?

B- Discourse Completion Task

Directions: Choose the most appropriate verb form from each string of the verbs listed in parentheses below to complete each short dialogue between Jane and Susan. For a few dialogues, more than one answer can be possible; when that is the case, choose the answer that you think best fit the context.

- (Jane is talking to Susan about their abilities)
Jane: Do you like dancing?
Susan: Yes, and I ____ (shall/ **can**/ will/ may) sing, too.
- (Jane and Susan are talking on the phone)
Jane: How is the weather there today?
Susan: It's rather cloudy; it ____ (shall/ can/ would/ **may**) rain. (The speaker indicates a certain measure of possibility)
- (Jane is surprised when she enters her room)
Jane: My plants ____ (have dying/ **are dying**/ dying/ die) here. Why is that?
Susan: Plants ____ (**must**/ could/ would/ might) have sunlight. You need to move them outside the room.
- (Jane has been sick for a week)
Jane: These pills ____ (have making/ **are making**/ makes/ is making) my stomach sick!
Susan: You ____ (**must**/ could/ would/ might) be careful with these pills.
- (Jane and Susan are talking about what to do today)

- Jane: What's your plan for today?
 Susan: I ____ (shall/ can/ **will**/ should) go to the movie theatre at 3:00 p.m.
6. (Jane and Susan are watching T.V. at Susan's home, but it's close to dinner time, so
 Susan offers to cook)
 Jane: I don't want you to cook for me.
 Susan: Ok, you ____ (shall/ can/ **will**/ could) regret it.
7. (Jane is angry because her friend, Sarah, lied to her)
 Jane: I still don't understand why Sarah lied to me.
 Susan: ____ (Will/ **Might** / Must/ Would) I speak to her and find out why?
 (The speaker expresses a higher degree of politeness than may, ought, or should)
8. (Jane is sad. She is talking to Susan about their sister's death)
 Jane: Our sister was born with brain damage, which ____ (leading/ **led**/ have lead/ lead) to her death.
 Susan: If we ____ (should/ **could**/ would/ might) have helped, we would.
9. (Jane and Susan are waiting for a group of friends to come to a picnic)
 Jane: The group ____ (depart/ departing/ **departed**/ have departed) very early this morning.
 Susan: They ____ (**should**/ could/ would/ must) arrive soon.
10. (Jane is feeling regretful)
 Jane: I am sorry for losing your keys!
 Susan: It's ok, such things ____ (shall/ **can**/ will/ should) happen.
11. (Jane and Susan are waiting for their friends)
 Jane: Where are our friends now?
 Susan: Very close; they ____ (shall/ can/ **will**/ could) appear very soon.
12. (Jane and Susan are looking at a race brochure)
 Jane: I ran a mile in five minutes when I was 19 years old.
 Susan: I ____ (should/ **could**/ shall/ will) run faster at that time.
13. (Jane and Susan are cleaning the garage and Susan seems sick)
 Jane: Don't worry about the heavy box.
 Susan: Thanks, but I ____ (shall/ **can**/ will/ may) lift it.
14. (Jane and Susan are at a school meeting)
 Jane: I ____ (**am leaving**/ leave/ leaves/ left) now. I have a class.
 Susan: Ok, I will see you later.
15. (Jane is at Susan's home)
 Jane : ____ (Shall/ Must/Will/ **May**) I go now? (The speaker is asking for permission to go)
 Susan: Yes, you can go whenever you like.
16. (Jane is talking to Susan after a party is over)
 Jane: Sarah's son is still here, and I am wondering why he has not left with his buddies.
 Susan: Sarah told him he ____ (shall/ will/ **would**/ might) not go. (He didn't have permission to go)
17. (Jane is at Susan's home)
 Jane (making a very polite request): I'm going to a new movie this evening; ____ (should/ may/ **would**/ might) you go?
 Susan: Yeah, sure.
18. (Jane and Susan are walking)
 Jane: Why are you collecting these rocks?

Susan: You don't know! We ____ (should/ will/ would/ **might**) discover gold!

Jane: It ____ (am/ **is** / are/ has) impossible!

19. (Jane is a teacher, and Susan is Jane's student)

Jane: Class is over.

Susan: But ____ (shall/ should/ must/ **may**) I ask a question?

20. (Jane and Susan are reading the Driver's Guide)

Jane: The new law ____ (forbidding/ **forbids**/ forbid/ have forbidding) owning unregistered cars.

Susan: Really! Then I ____ (**must**/ could/ would/ might) register my car.

21. (Jane and Susan are coworkers in a library)

Jane: New books keep arriving, dozens of them every day.

Susan: I ____ (will/ could/ **would**/ might) like to read every one of them.

22. (Jane and Susan are talking about their friend, Sara)

Jane: Yesterday, I ____ (talking/ **talked**/ have talked/ talk) to Sara. Do you know how old she is?

Susan (politely): I don't know. I think she is 25, but I ____ (should/ **could**/ would/ will) be wrong

1.	shall	should	will	would	must	shall	could	might	would	would	should	can	should	will	shall	should	may	will	may	could	could	should
2.	shall	should	can	shall	must	will		must			will	can	should		may	shall	would	should	should			
3.	shall	should		shall	must	shall	could	must	could	should	can	can		can	may	shall	may	should	may	must	would	could
4.		should	can	would	would	can	shall	might	would		will	will	could	can	shall	should					would	could
5.	shall	should	can	would		can	will	might	would	could	will		could	would			would	might	should	must		should
6.	will			would	must	can	will	might	would	could	should	will	could	will	can	should	would	should	may	must	might	
7.	shall	should	can			can	shall	must	might	would	can	can	should	will	can		may	will	may		would	would
8.	shall	should	will		must				could	would		can		could	shall	should	would	will	may	could		should
9.	may	should	can	would	must	shall	can	might	could	would	should	can	should	can	may	shall	would	should		must	might	should
10.	shall	should	must	would	could	shall		must	would		will	will	should	will	shall	might	would	might		must	would	
11.		should	will	shall	must	will	shall	must	would	should			could		shall	shall	would	might	should	must	would	could
12.	shall	should	will	would	must	shall	will			could	will	can	could	will	can	should		might	may			could
13.	will	should	can	shall	could		shall	might		could	will	can	should	will		shall	may		may	would	would	should
14.	may		will	would		shall		might	would			can	could	can	shall	shall	would		may			might
15.	shall	should	will	shall		will	shall	must	would	would	can	will		can	may	should	would	should		would	might	would
16.	shall	should	can	would	would	shall			could	would	should		should	will	may		may	will	may		could	should
17.	will	should	should	would	could		will	might	would	would	will	will	should		shall	should	would	should		must		should
18.	can	should	should	would		can	will		would		can	can		can			may	will	may	could	would	
19.	will		will		must	can	shall	must			will		could	can	can	should		should	may		would	could
20.	shall	should	will	would	must	can		might	could		will	can	could	would	can	shall	would	should	should	must		could
21.		should	will		must	shall	could	might	would	should		will	could	will		might	would		may		might	
22.	shall	should	will	would		will	shall	might	would	could	can	can	should	will	may	shall	may	might		must	would	
23.	shall	should	can	must	must	shall	will	must	would	could	can	can		could	shall		would	should	should	must		would
24.	will	would	can	would	must		will	might	might		should	can	should	can	shall		would	will	may		might	should
25.	shall	should		would	must	shall	shall	must		would	will	will	should	will	can	should	would	will	may	could	would	should
26.	shall	should		must	could	will		must	could	would	can		could		shall	shall	would	should	may	must	would	
27.	will	should	must	would	could	shall	will	might	would	would	will	will	could	will	may	shall		might		must		could
28.	may	should	should	would	would	shall	will	might	would		will	can	should	will	may	should	may	might		must	would	could
29.	may	should	should	can	must	will	shall	might	could	could			could	can	shall		would	might	should		might	should
30.	shall	should	should	would			shall	must	could	could	can	can	could	can		should	would		may	would	might	A
31.	shall	should	should	shall	must	shall	shall	must	would	would	can	will	could	can	can	should	would	should	may	must	would	would