

The Iraqi EFL University Students' Use of Modals in Requests and Offers as Politeness Markers

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استعمالات طلاب الجامعة العراقيون المتعلمين للغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية للافعال المساعدة

في التأدب اللغوي لأسالوبي الطلب والعرض

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ملخص البحث

تحاول هذه الدراسة (استعمالات طلاب الجامعة العراقيون المتعلمين للغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية للافعال المساعدة في التأدب اللغوي لأسالوبي الطلب والعرض) الاجابة على بعض التساؤلات ومن بينها التساؤل الاتي: الى أي مدى يكون طلبة الجامعة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية قادرين على التعرف أو/و انتاج استعمالات تأدب في اسلوبي الطلب والعرض باستعمال الافعال المساعدة الانكليزية الرئيسية؟

وقد تم تبني فرضيتين في هذا المضمار:

1. ان صعوبة طلبة الجامعة العراقيين المتعلمين للغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية تنحصر في الاستعمالات الاكثر ملائمة للافعال المساعدة للتعبير المتأدبة في اسلوبي الطلب والعرض وان مدى الصعوبة هو اكبر على مستوى انتاج مثل تلك الاستعمالات منه في التعرف على الاستعمالات المرجوة.

2. ان اغلب اولئك الطلاب يميلون الى استعمال الازمنة المضارعة لتلك الافعال اكبر من ميلهم الى استعمال الازمنة الماضية منها.

ولقد تم تبني الاجراءات اللازمة لاثبات فرضيات البحث والتي تتضمن تقديم خلفية نظرية حول الاستعمالات التداولية لتلك الافعال واستعمالاتها في التأدب ومن ثم اختبار عينة من الطلبة لمعرفة ادائهم على مستوى التعرف ومستوى الانتاج لمثل تلك الاستعمالات واجراء بعض الاحصائيات المطلوبة.

هذا وقد توصلت الدراسة الى بعض النتائج النظرية والعملية التي اثبتت فرضياتها. ومن المؤمل بأن تكون هذه الدراسة ذات فائدة لبعض العلوم ذات العلاقة ومنها علم اللغة التطبيقي وعلم التداولية وتقنيات تعليم اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية بالاضافة الى مدرسي اللغة الانكليزية.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Problem

Iraqi EFL university students are expected to encounter a difficulty of appropriately using modal auxiliaries to express politeness. This is supported by Quirk, et al. (1985:220), who argue that "the use of modal verbs is one of the more problematic areas of English grammar." Although, traditionally most of these verbs are paired into past and "nopast" forms, e. g., (can could, may might, will would, shall should), the past forms are rarely usefully classified as such from the point of view of meaning. These verbs are often used for pragmatic purpose, e.g., in requests and offers. This is also supported by Crystal (2003 b.: 212), who points out that such verbs express meanings "which are much less definable, focused, and independent than of lexical verbs."

Investigating the use of modal verbs by Iraqi EFL university students to express politeness, therefore, raises some enquiries, among them: To what extents Iraqi EFL university students are able to recognize and/or produce polite language uses involved with modal verbs?

1.2 The Objectives

The study aims at:

1. Presenting a theoretical account about expressing politeness via modals.
2. Testing the EFL university students' ability of recognizing and producing polite uses via modal auxiliaries.

1.3 The Hypotheses

The study will adopt the following hypotheses:

1. The difficulty faced by Iraqi EFL learners in using modals as politeness markers is limited to the more appropriate uses of such modals. The range of this difficulty is higher on the production level than in the recognition one.
2. Most of the Iraqi EFL university students incline to use the present forms of the modal auxiliaries more than the past forms.

1.4 The Procedure

The study has adopted the following procedure in order to achieve its aims:

1. Providing a theoretical background about the pragmatic uses of modals in which these verbs are used as politeness markers.
2. Testing the EFL university students' recognition and production of using the modal verbs as politeness markers.

1.5 The Limits of the Study

The study is limited to investigate the Iraqi EFL university students recognition and production of using (can, could, will, would, may, might, and shall) in requests and offers.

1.6 Value of the Study

The study is hoped to be of a benefit to different fields of the study of English such as pragmatics, techniques of teaching English as a foreign language, and teachers of English.

2. A Theoretical Background

2.1 Definitions of Modals

According to Quirk and Green Baum (1973: 26), verbs in English are divided into two types lexical or main verbs like (work , write , play) and auxiliary verbs that are subdivided into primary like (do , have , be) and modal auxiliaries like (can , may , shall , will , etc.). The modals convey a range of judgment about the likelihood of events (Crystal, 2003 b: 212).

Modal verbs can also be defined as "those auxiliary or helping verbs which are used to express different meanings like possibility, probability, certainty, permission, request, suggestion, obligation, and necessity" (Pahuja, 1997:93).

The above mentioned definitions views modals from both semantic and pragmatic points of views. This is because expressing 'necessity', 'possibility', 'certainty', and 'obligation' are of a semantic interest (see Crystal, 2003 b.: 299). So, there is a need to identify the pragmatic criterion which decides expressing politeness via modals. It is negative politeness and creating a distance between speaker and other that express such politeness as the following section illustrates.

2.2 The Relationship between Politeness and Modal Verbs

In order to identify the polite use of the modal auxiliaries, the study will adopt Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory of politeness. It is believed by Yule (2006: 134) that this model is the most thorough treatment of the concept of politeness ever done. The basic notion of this model is "face", which is defined as "the public self-image".

In Brown and Levinson's (1978) frame work, face consists of two related aspect : 'positive' which means the need to be connected, to be belonged, and to be a member of the group, and 'negative' which means the need to be independent and free from imposition. Positive face relies on intimacy whereas the negative one is used to save the negative face of hearer. When someone represents threat to another person's public self image, i.e., uses direct speech to order another one to do something, for example, (Give me that paper), he is acting

as if he has more social power than other and that is called "face threatening act". If the person does not have that social power and he uses indirect speech in a form of question or request, e.g., (could you give me that paper, please?), this will remove the assumption of social power and that is called "face saving act" (ibid).

Therefore, it has already been assured by Yule (1995:64) that the typical form of negative politeness is a question containing a modal verb. It avoids imposition, hence expresses politeness, e.g., (could you lend me the paper?). The modals are used tactfully in interrogatives as in yes, no question and tag question, e.g.

Close the door, will you?

Can I have another piece of cake? (Richard and watts, 2003: 191).

Modal auxiliaries are often associated with politeness in English. English speakers seem to be more sensitive to a politeness rule that says "don't impose" when someone appears to be imposing upon another, there is a tendency to soften that act of imposing by using modal verbs or mentioning willingness (will, would), potentiality (can, could) or possibility (may, might) (Yule, 1998 : 140-4).

A closely related to the present study is the concept of "attitudinal past". According to Quirk, et al. (1985:188), this concept is used with some verbs to express volition or mental state. Some modal verbs reflect the tentative attitude of the speaker rather than the past time. In the following example both the present and the past tenses refer to a present state of mind, but the past "is somewhat more polite", e.g. 'I wonder /wondered if you could help us'. This use is also expressed by "special use" of the progressive aspect, e.g., 'I was wondering if you could help me.' They (ibid) argue that such use contrasts with the less tentative and "less polite" use of the simple present, e.g., 'I wonder if you can help me'. It enables us "to avoid the impoliteness which might well result from expressing ones attitude too directly, e.g., in making a request". This is supported also by Crystal (2003 b: 224).

Modal auxiliaries are often associated with particular pragmatic uses in request, offer, etc., in which they express implications of "tentativeness" or politeness (Quirk, et al., 1985: 220). The study is, therefore, limited to request and offer as some of the pragmatic uses in which modal auxiliaries are expected to express politeness.

2.3 The Uses of Modals in Polite Request

It is important to make requests sound polite and the most important way of doing so is using modal verbs. This is supported by Alexander (1988:217), who points out that there are numbers of variations concerning straightforward request forms to express degrees of politeness like (can, could, may, might, will, and would). The same idea has been already discussed by Brown and Levinson (1978:140) who give the following examples:

(1) Pass me the salt.

(2) Can you pass me the salt?

In their (ibid) point of view, (2) is more polite than (1) because request (2) employs a modal verb (can) that makes it more polite.

This is also suggested by Angela and Philip (1992:207) when they state that interrogatives, particularly (yes, no questions or tag questions), are more polite than statements because they give the addressee the option of refusing, as in:

(3) You can take me home.

(4) Can you take me home? (Leech, 1983: 120)

Example (4) conveys a high degree of 'optionality' more than (3) does. The more optional the act appears, the more polite the request is.

2.3.1 Polite Requests via Can and Could

The use of 'could' is more polite than that of 'can' because constructing a request with a past form of modal verbs, which have hypothetical (unreal) meanings, is more polite than that with a present form (Quirk, et al., 1985:233). Example of this idea is the following pair:

(5) Could you pass me the salt?

(6) Can you pass me the salt? (Foley and Hall, 1988: 177)

Request (5) is more polite than request (6) because it adopts an oblique (past) form (Angela and Philip, 1992: 218).

Although 'can' is the commonest and most informal form, 'could' is more formal, polite and hesitant (Alexander, 1988: 216). Consider also the following pair:

(7) Can I have another piece of cake?

(8) Could I have a look at that book sometime? (Richard and watts, 2003: 191).

So both 'can' and 'could' express polite request, but they differ in the degree of politeness. The modal 'could' expresses a higher degree because it widens the distance between speaker and hearer, as in:

(11) Excuse me, could you tell me how to get the airport? (Murphy, 1985: 72)

(12) Could I just borrow a tiny bit of paper? (Grundy, 2000: 157).

(13) Can we go to the park? (Yule, 1998: 44), this is equally true for all modals which have past forms.

2.3.2 Polite Requests via Will and Would

Requests by means of 'would' are more polite than those by 'will', particularly when 'would' means willingness (volition) (Quirk, et al., 1985:229), e.g.

(14) Would you please be quite?, or (15) "Would you help me to address these letters?"

Similarly in the following:

(16) Would you pass me the sugar? (Less direct, more polite)(Eastwood, 1994: 126)

(17) Will you give me a call when you get to the hotel? (Foley and Hall, 1988: 193)

Hypothetical 'would' when followed by a verb such as (love, prefer, and like) is used to indicate a tentative desire in polite request, e.g.

(18) Would you like taking part? (Quirk et al., 1985: 235)

So both 'will' and 'would' achieve politeness by indirect requests. 'Would', however, expresses the highest degree of politeness and could be the best option, as is illustrated in the following:

(19) I want a drink. (Direct, impolite).

(20) I would like a drink. (Indirect, polite) (Eastwood, 1994: 126)

Similarly in:

(21) Would you lend me some money?

(22) Will you give me a ride? (Yule, 1998: 101,105)

Request (21) is more polite than request (22) because it communicates a higher degree of optionality.

2.3.3 Polite Request via May and Might

A request via 'might' in the past form that has the hypothetical meaning is more polite than that by 'May', e.g.

(23) Might I trouble you for a glass of water?

(24) May I take one of these? (ibid)

Request (23) is more polite than (24) because it employs an oblique (past) form.

'Might' also tends to be more polite than 'can' and 'could' (Foley and Hall , 1988 : 177), because it is more formal and hesitant than 'can', 'could', and 'may' but, it is less common than these forms, e.g.,

(25) I wonder if I might borrow some coffee.

(26) Could I see your driving licence?

(27) Can you (please) open the door? (Quirk et al., 1985: 233)

The modal verb 'may' is, however, more formal than 'can' and 'could', for instance:

(28) May I share your table?

(29) Can I have another sweet?

(30) Could I use your phone? (Thomson and Martinet, 1990: 121)

Requests by means of other modal verbs like 'shall', 'should', 'must', 'ought to', 'used to', 'need', and 'dare' are less polite or abrupt uses.

2.4 The Use of Modals in Polite Offers

According to Al-Hamash, et al. (2006: 25- 6), offers are made polite by using modal verbs in a question form and the commonest modals which are used to express polite offers are the following:

A. Would + like, as in:

- (1) Would you like another cup of tea?
- (2) Would you like me to type this letter?

B. Shall, as in:

- (3) Shall I get you a chair?
- (4) Shall I make some more sandwiches?

C. Can, as in:

- (5) Can I open the door for you?
- (6) Can I get some ice cream for you?

D. Will and Could:

The verbs 'will' and 'could' are also used in offers, as in:

- (8) Sit down; I'll wash up this evening. (Foley and Hall, 1988: 192)
- (9) Will you have a piece of cake? (East Wood, 1992: 129)
- (10) Could I help you? (Murphy, 1985: 72)

E. May and Might:

As for 'may' and 'might', they are also used in offering. They tend to be more polite than 'can' and 'could', but they are less common, as in:

- (11) Might I help you?
- (12) May I help you? (Foley and Hall, 1988: 193)
- (13) Can (could) I carry your bag? (Michael and Walter, 1997: 117)

3. The Test of the Study

A concise theoretical background to the academic test adopted is introduced in the upcoming sections. This is before discussing testing the EFL students under discussion.

3.1 Definition of the Test

In order to achieve the aims of this paper, a test has been constructed to specify the students' particular strengths and weaknesses and to discover their potential abilities in dealing with modal verbs and how they are used to express polite requests and offers.

In this chapter, a description of the test is presented including a short view about the characteristics of a good test, the designation of test, its material and to whom it is applied.

3.2 The Characteristics of a Good Test

3.2.1 Validity

Validity, according to Al- Joboury (1999:22), is the degree to which a test measures what is supposed to measure. In validity two questions must be considered.

- 1-What precisely does the test measure?
- 2- How well does the test measure?

There are four kinds of validity:

3.2.1.1 Content Validity

It is the most important type of validity which means the extent to which the test adequately covers the material to be tested. A valid test must be based upon careful analysis of the subject which must be tested and must be designed as to present adequately each portion of the analysis (ibid).

3.2.1.2 Empirical Validity

It is the best way to check the effectiveness of a test and to determine how well the test measure and how test scores are related to some independent , outside criterion such as marks given at the end of a course or instructors' or supervisors' ratings (Harries, n.d. : 19-20).

3.2.1.3 Face Validity

Face validity simply means the way the test looks to the examinees, test administrators, educators and the like and its importance should not be underestimated (ibid).

3.2.1.4 Structure Validity

It is the degree to which a test measures the underlying concept it sets out to measure. It is often arrived at by correlating the scores of people on a test for which construct validity is designed with these of a test that is taken as "bench mark" (Boyle and fisher, 2007: 66).

3.2.2 Reliability

Reliability means the stability of the test scores. If the same test is given twice to the same group of the students under the same condition, it will give the same results. A reliable test requires multiple sample , standard condition ,standard tasks and standard scoring (Al-Joboury , 1999: 23).

3.3 The Subjects

A random sample of students from the fourth stage in the Department of English, College of Education for Human sciences, University of Babylon, during the academic year (2011-2012). The sample of the study consists of twenty students (males and females).

3.4 Test Material

The majority of the items of the test have been taken from the references consulted and mentioned in The Bibliography. Some questions have been constructed by the researcher. The items have been selected in such a way that they cover, as far as possible, the topic of the study.

3.5 Test Design

The test consists of two questions and each question includes thirteen items (six for requests and seven for offers). The first question assesses the students' performance at the recognition level. The second question assesses the students' performance at the production level. The students are given situations and they are required to form polite requests and offers for them by using modal verbs.

3.6 Results and Discussion

3.6.1 The Students' Performance at the Recognition Level

Table (1) shows the results of the test at the recognition level:

Table (1): The Students' Achievement at the Recognition Level

Item	Number of correct (more appropriate) Responses	Percentage	Number of incorrect (less appropriate) responses	Percentage	Total
1	11	55%	9	45%	20
2	7	35%	13	65%	20
3	11	55%	9	45%	20
4	13	65%	7	35%	20
5	13	65%	7	35%	20
6	11	55%	9	45%	20
7	13	65%	7	35%	20
8	14	70%	6	30%	20
9	9	45%	11	55%	20
10	12	60%	8	40%	20
11	5	25%	15	75%	20
12	15	75%	5	25%	20
13	10	50%	10	50%	20
	144	55,5	116	44,5	200

Table (1) shows that most of the learners faced no difficulty in recognizing the more appropriate use of modals to express polite requests and offers; the total number and percentage of the correct responses are (144,55,5%). As for the incorrect responses, they are (116, 44, and 61%).

A detail analysis of the same test shows that:

1. Recognizing Polite Requests:

In items (1), (3), (4) and (5), respectively, most of the students' answers are correct. This means that the students are able to recognize that 'could' is more appropriate than 'can', that 'would' is more appropriate than 'may', that 'can' is more appropriate than 'will', and that 'will' is more appropriate than 'must'. But, in item (2), most of the students' answers are incorrect which means that students cannot understand or recognize that 'might' is more appropriate than 'would'. This is in requests.

2. Recognizing Polite Offers:

In offers, the students are able to recognize the more appropriate modals to express polite offers. Items (7), (8), (10), and (12). The majority of the responses are correct which means that the students are able to recognize that would is more appropriate than both will and shall and that can is more appropriate than will. But, in the items (9) and (11), most of the students think or believe that could is more appropriate than may and that may is more appropriate than might, whereas the reverse is the correct choice.

3.6.2. The Students' Performance at the Production Level

The Following table shows the results of the test at the production level:

Table (2): The Students Achievement at the Production Level

Item	Number of correct (more appropriate) responses	Percentage	Number of incorrect (less appropriate) responses	Percentage	Total
1	7	35%	13	65%	20
2	9	45%	11	55%	20
3	4	20%	16	80%	20
4	4	20%	1	80%	20
5	14	70%	6	30%	20
6	5	25%	15	75%	20
7	15	75%	5	25%	20
8	3	15%	17	85%	20
9	13	65%	7	35%	20
10	12	60%	8	40%	20
11	8	40%	12	60%	20
12	5	25%	15	75%	20
13	5	25%	15	75%	20
	104	40%	156	60	200

Table (2) shows that most of the students face difficulty in using the more appropriate modals to produce polite requests and offers. The total number and percentage of the less appropriate responses (156,60%) are more than the number and percentage of the correct or more appropriate responses (104,40%). The students face no difficulty in producing correct, but less appropriate forms of requests and offers by using modal verbs.

A very important point to be noticed is that a large number of students start their responses with can or could in requests and would with offers. Therefore, a detailed analysis of the students' performance at the production level shows the following:

1. Producing Polite Requests:

Table (2) shows that the students are less familiar with some uses of past forms of the modal verbs which are capable of expressing wider ranges of politeness than the present forms. For example, in requests (1-6), 'can' is more frequently used than other modals such as 'will', 'would', 'may', and 'might', even more than 'could'. The students also use 'may' more than 'might'. However, Table (3) shows that most of the students tend to use the present forms of modals:

Table (3): The Students' Tendency of Using Modal Auxiliaries in Requests

Item	The Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
1	Can	49	40,8%
2	Could	33	27,5%
3	May	12	10%
4	Might	3	2,5%
5	Will	5	4,1%
6	Would	18	15%
Total	6	120	100%

2. Producing Polite Offers

In offers, a large number of students start their responses with would and there is less use of other modals such as could, may, might, and will. That means that students are used to use or to be restricted to some modals to form polite requests and offers and they cannot pragmatically differentiate between can(present form) and could(past form). Exceptionally, the students use would more than will in both requests and offers. It has been proved that the past forms of the modal auxiliaries are capable of expressing a wider range of polite requests and offers. Analysis of the frequent uses of some of these 'pairs' (4) shows that most of the students incline to use the present forms of these modals.

Table (4): The Students' Tendency of Using Modal Auxiliaries in Offers

Item	Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
1	Can	40	28,5%
2	Could	8	5,7%
3	May	11	7,8%
4	Might	9	6,4%
5	Will	7	5%
6	Would	50	35,7%
7	Shall	15	10,7%
Total	7	140	100%

4. Conclusions

The study has reached to some theoretical and practical findings, as in the following:

4.1 Theoretical Findings

1. Modal auxiliaries are the most commonly used politeness markers in requests and offers. They express a kind of negative politeness strategy because they widen the distance between speaker and hearer.
2. The past forms of the modal auxiliaries express a wider range of politeness than the present ones; hence they are the best speaker's choice particularly in formal situation.

4.2 Practical Findings

1. The results of the test do not contradict with the hypotheses of the study; the students face difficulty in using the more appropriate modal at the production level more than that at the recognition level.
2. The majority of the students form their requests and offers by using the present forms of the modal verbs rather than the past forms. Exceptionally, they incline to use 'would' to form polite offers. This means that the second hypothesis has been verified.

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Appendix (1)

The Test of the Students' Performance at the Recognition Level

Q. Tick the more polite requests and offers from the following:

1. Can I borrow your pen, pleas?
Could I borrow your pen, please?
2. Excuse me, might I leave my coat here?
Excuse me, would I leave my coat here?
3. May I share your table?
Would I share your table?
4. Excuse me, can you receive a package for me, please?
Excuse me, will you receive a package for me, please?
5. Will we have a better choice?
Might we have a better choice?
6. May I have some more tea, please?

- Could I have some more tea, please?
7. Shall I get you a chair?
Might I get you a chair?
 8. Would you like another cup of tea?
Shall I get you another cup of tea?
 9. May I help you, Sir?
Could I help you, Sir?
 10. Will I show you the way? – Oh thank you.
Can I show you the way? – Oh thank you.
 11. Might I be of some assistance?
May I be of some assistance?
 12. Will you have a piece of cake?
Would you have a piece of cake?
 13. Could I open the door for you?
Can I open the door for you ?

Appendix (2)

The Test of the Students' Performance at the Production Level

Q. Use different modals for the situations below to form the polite requests for the items (1-6) and polite offers for the items (7-13).

1. The room is cold. (Ask your brother to close the door)
 2. You are sitting at lunch with your family. (Ask your sister to give you the salt)
 3. Ali has a good book and you want to look at that book.
 4. You are in a journey with your friend; you want to use his phone.
 5. You need some money. (Ask your cousin to lend you)
 6. You are in the street with a friend. (Ask him to call you a taxi)
 7. Offer another cup of coffee for your friend.
 8. Offer to carry a heavy bag for an old man.
 9. The weather is very hot. Offer ice cream for your friend.
 10. Your grandfather is hungry and he needs a sandwich. Offer a sandwich to him.
 11. Offer to type the letter to your father who is sick.
 12. Offer to help your mother in washing the dishes.
- Your friend has home work. Offer to help him with his home work.

Appendix (3)

Possible Answers of the Tests at the recognition and production levels

A. Possible Answers of the Recognition Test:

1. Could I borrow your pen, please?
2. Excuse me, might I leave my coat here?
3. Would I share your table?
4. Excuse me, can you receive a package for me, please?
5. Will we have a better choice?
6. May I have some more tea, pleas?
7. Shall I get you a chair?
8. Would you like another cup of tea?
9. May I help you, sir?
10. Can I show you the way? Oh- thank you.
11. Might be of some assistance?
12. Will you have a piece of cake?
13. Could I open the door for you?

B. Possible Answers of the Production Test:

1. Will you close the door?
2. Can you pass me the salt?
3. Could I have a look at that book sometime?
4. May I use your phone?
5. Would you lend me some money?
6. Might you call a taxi?
7. Shall I get you another cup of coffee?
8. Might I help you?
9. Can I get some ice cream for you?
10. Could I get you another sandwich, grandfather?
11. Would you like me to type this letter?
12. Sit down; I'll wash up this evening? Or will I do washing- up?
13. May I help you in your homework?

Appendix (4)**A Letter to the Jury**

Dear Sirs

Would you kindly give your opinion of the attachment test which aims at investigating Iraqi EFL university students' use of modals as politeness markers?

Thanks in advance.

Researcher

Appendix (5)**Jury Members**

1. Prof. Riyadh, T. K. Al-Ameedi (Ph.D.)
2. Lecturer. Salih, M. 'Adai (M.A.)
3. Lecturer Hussain, H. Mayuuf (M.A.)
4. Lecturer Muneer, Ali (M.A.)