

## Effect of English Non-Modal Operators on Proficiency and Performance of Undergraduate Students in Hazara University, Pakistan

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### Abstract

This study focuses on the problems posed by the English non-modal operators to the undergraduate level students of Hazara University, Mansehra, Pakistan. The data was collected from hundred students selected through non-random and convenience sampling technique. A proficiency test was used as a tool for data collection. The test was focused on all the uses of non-modal operators. The results show that some of these problems were caused by the intervention of some of grammatical concepts like tense, aspect, back shifting and voice. While some grammatical operations like negation, interrogation and insertion/omission had no role and so were found comparatively easy. These operators when used after wh-word such as when, while, before and if posed difficulty for the subjects. Similarly, different forms such as non-tensed form and uses such as dynamic and non-dynamic of non-modal operators were also problematic for the subjects. The highest frequency of error was found in the use of non-modal operator for emphasis and surprise. However, the degree of difficulty posed by non-modal operators in idiomatic expressions was not significant.

**Keywords:** Non-modal Operators, Students Problems, Interplay, Negation, Inversion, Grammatical Operation, Tense, Aspect, Verb Phrase.

### 1. Introduction

The present study is about the problems in the use of English non-modal operators (primary auxiliaries). Non-modal operators are important elements of English language showing most of the grammatical concepts like tense, aspect and voice etc. In most Indo-European languages, the different tenses (past tense for example) are shown through auxiliary verbs (Singh, 2018). The non-modal operators are so important in English language that students should always be asked to have better knowledge of them through practice of different assigned tasks (Anwar et al., 2019). In the absence of such practices, the undergraduate students face many problems in the form of errors in the correct grammatical use of non-modal operators as visible signs of deviation from accepted standard forms in language reflecting second language learners' interlanguage competence (Huddleston, 1984). Grammar is one of the basic elements of the language system, which becomes a pre-requisite and essential for second language learners. It is a set of rules defining how words are combined to form acceptable higher units of meaning within a single language (Ur, 1996).

Modern English grammar identifies eight grammatical categories in English categories on the basis of their semantic, morphologic, syntactic, or functional uses. These categories are noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, determinative, coordinator and subordinator (Huddleston, 1984). Out of all these lexical categories, verb is the most important of all the categories in terms of its contribution in grammar to denote a lot of grammatical concepts along with its own meaning. English Verb is a word used to show process, action or event and some cases a state (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). It is a word which is conjugated (has different forms) according to tense, aspect person and mood. English verb phrases require auxiliaries (operators) along with the main verbs. English non-modal operators are a subtype of operators in English. The non-modal operators are words that occur along with the main verbs to form verbal groups in a given sentence and function as auxiliary or helping verbs (Ayoola, 2006).

The primary auxiliaries which include 'be', 'have' and 'do' can function both as lexical verbs and auxiliaries (Damanik, 2010). The modal auxiliaries 'shall' 'should' 'can' 'could' 'will' 'would' 'might' 'may' 'ought' 'must' 'need' 'dare' and 'used to' in addition to the role of auxiliary verbs also show the mood of the speakers (necessity, possibility, etc.) (Nolasco, 1990). Likewise, Stageberg (1981) is of the view that the English non-modal operators are always closely associated with the main verbs. In his opinion, English non-modal operators are divided into two types: i) Primary auxiliary; and ii) Periphrastic auxiliary.

The 'Be and Have' are primary auxiliaries (Tejedor, 2020), while 'Do' is periphrastic auxiliary (Cancino *et al.*, 1975). The primary auxiliary 'Do' is used to replace inflected forms of verb (Pettersson, 2019; Stageberg, 1981). For example: "It does work" for "It works". In this sentence, the inflected form of verb, 'works' replaces the periphrastic auxiliary 'Do'. The non-modal auxiliaries (the English primary auxiliaries) have different forms that can be grouped into present and past forms (Sledd, 1959).

Table 1: showing different forms of non-modal operators

Present tense	Past tense
Am	was
is	was
Are	were
Has	had
Have	had
Do	did
Does	did

The English non-modal operators are important for English language learners. Students of all levels make errors and mistakes due to their lack of knowledge of grammatical rules. These problems are very pronounced in their use of non-modal operators which along with certain grammatical operations are important to represent grammatical categories like tense and aspect. The present study investigated these problems in the use of these English non-modal operators at undergraduate level. The study specifically focused on those uses which were supposed to have been learnt by undergraduate students. The comprehension of students increases with learning different meaning of the auxiliary verbs (Haq, 2020).

All types of English auxiliary verbs are problematic for learners if they have limited knowledge of their application and uses (Hassan, 2015). It is true that learning a second language is not always easy because of the complex nature of language learning and especially when the

structures of the second language are in contradiction with the structures of the learners' first language. The misuse of auxiliary verb is not even peculiar to the students but also among the older users of the language. This study aimed at bringing to the fore, the various conventional uses of the auxiliary verbs only while pointing out at the same time the common areas of misuse by these students and users of the language.

These findings are significant in the sense that they may enable both the students and other users of the English to overcome the problems of the learning and uses of the auxiliaries. The study would reveal the common problematic areas and showed how their misuse hinder effective communication. The present study is highly significant in identifying the problems in the use of English non-modal operators by undergraduate level students through an extensive investigation of different and important uses. The study serves as complement to many studies carried out about the uses of English non-modal operators by undergraduate level students. The study is helpful to the students to know about their errors which are altogether ignored by both students and teachers. Teachers of English language will be spurred into more research for better and improved methods of teaching English language so as to minimize and eradicate grammatical errors in the use of non-modal operators. These problems could be tackled through less rigorous teaching and through enforcement and the application of grammatical rules. The study might be helpful for syllabus designers while designing courses at undergraduate level, especially, to design materials about the use of non-modal operators.

## **2. Literature Review**

The existing literature like Gleason (1965), Boadi *et al.* (1968), Quirk (1985), Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Young (1980), Stageberg (1981), Halliday (1985), Michener (1986), Oji (1988), Bamgbose (1990), Nolasco (1990) and Ayoola (2006) on non-modal operators mainly focuses on auxiliary verb usage and error analysis (cited in Nguyen, 2010). The three non-modal operators *be*, *have* and *do* serve the purpose of helping the main verb to form a VP having different forms (Sledd, 1959; Oji, 1988; Thomson *et al.*, 1986). They precede the lexical elements in any English construction (Muir, 1972) having more or less forms than lexical verb. English language learners no doubt, commit grammatical errors of different kinds while using/speaking English. The errors in the use of non-modal operators are especially prominent although they are very important elements of grammatical units and so should be acquired by the learners (Onuigbo, 2005). The access to principle and parameters (Çakır, 2011) in second language learning has been a question of interest to researchers. The researchers have hypothesized different possibilities in this regard.

Cook (1989) and White (1992) are of the view that second language learners have either direct access, an indirect access, or no access to universal grammar. Some grammatical properties like tense and aspect were considered outside the compass of universal grammar previously but now strongly believed to be inside this compass. Coder (1981) suggests that the first language morphology acquired by children is strongly influenced by the semantic aspects of the verb (lexical aspects inherent in verbs or predicates) whereas tense distinction is being neglected. The same tendency was observed in second language acquisition (Robison, 1995). Different types of errors were identified in the previous studies in the use of non-modal operators. The findings in these studies identified seven types of errors in the use of auxiliaries. These errors were the errors in agreement, tense missing auxiliary, wrong verb's form, addition, misordering and misformation (Manokaran *et al.*, 2013). These errors are basically about the placement and lack of placement of auxiliaries in the sentence.

The placement or wrong placement of auxiliary is sometimes because of its relationship with other part of the sentence, for example, agreement which is actually the cross matching of a particular form of auxiliary with suitable verb in light of the tense or aspect/voice etc. selected (Ratmanida *et al.*, 2019). The most common of errors is the omission of the auxiliary by second language learners because they just focus on the content words ignoring the functional words like auxiliaries (Miller & Pullum, 2013). The learners omitted non-modal operators in elicited utterances as compared to in imitated utterances. In these imitated utterances, the auxiliary forms were produced with least errors (Johnson, 1985). Errors of omission were mostly found in declaratives than in questions (Cekiso *et al.*, 2015). The errors of omission were found in the sentences like those produced by second language learners as: a) we going home; and b) you doing good job; produced by second language learners.

The omission of non-modal operators has been predicted by various theories of the acquisition of non-modal syntax. Some of these theories also include the theories assuming the abstract grammatical understanding (Rice *et al.*, 1995; Wexler, 1994) and also those assuming that learners learn syntax of operators on the basis of distributional relationship available to the learners in the input they hear (Theakston *et al.*, 2003; 2005). Agreement error, for example, the errors in the singular noun (boy) with the plural verb (are) in the example \*the boy are jumping and the use of singular verb (is) with plural noun (boys) in the example, \*the boys is jumping. The agreement errors in auxiliary forms was very low compared to other types of error but still a more detailed examination of these errors suggested that the errors in the use of non-modal operators is an important issue. The agreement errors were great in questions compared to the errors in declaratives (Cekiso *et al.*, 2015).

The use of an incorrect non-modal operator was found in examples where the one non-modal operator has to show a particular grammatical category was used instead of another non-modal operator. However, if a suitable non-modal operator is not used in an appropriate context, then the ungrammaticality arises. The types of errors where the one non-modal operator is replaced with another non-modal operator were more in declaratives than in the questions (Theakston *et al.*, 2001).

The Congolese students also used non-modal incorrectly demonstrating that these students were not able to use non-modal operators in English affecting their academic writing (Cekiso *et al.*, 2015). The use of an incorrect verb, sometimes not compatible with a particular non-modal operator is another type of error (Cekiso *et al.*, 2015). The misuse of English auxiliary verbs are accounted for a number of factors, like lack of exposure to L2 verbs, poor learning environment (Hassan, 2015), faulty teaching of verbs, lack of conducive environment, inappropriate methodology of teaching, negative attitude towards the target language and lack of knowledge of rules among others (Jacob, 2014).

This study is delimited to the investigation of issues in the use of non-modal operators only ignoring other aspects like incorrect verb forms unless not directly linked to the use of a non-modal operator. The patterns shown in the results above show that the errors produced by learners are either the errors in a specific auxiliary form or these errors were induced according to the form of the clause/sentence (whether declarative or question). These errors were more in questions than in declaratives suggesting that agreement marking might develop separately in these two types of utterance. The rate of errors in the use of 'be' was greater than the rate of errors in the use of 'have'. Even the sub-forms of 'be' and 'have' had different rate of errors.

The types of errors where one non-modal operator is replaced with another non-modal operator were more in the declaratives than in the questions.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The present study was concerned with the investigation of problems in the use of English non-modal operators at undergraduate level. The study focused on those aspects of the use of non-modal operators which the researchers assumed to be problematic for undergraduate students. The population of the present study was all undergraduate level students in Hazara University, Mansehra. A representative sample of hundred students from ten departments was selected through non-random and convenience sampling technique. The study used a descriptive survey design to collect the data from the selected participants. Descriptive survey design was selected because it involved quantitative approach for the analysis of the data to analyse and describe the problems for students.

A proficiency test was designed focusing on different uses of non-modal operators. This instrument was used because the present research was about the problems in different uses of non-modal operators. The test contained different items about different uses of non-modal operators. Its focus was on the issues in the use of tense and tense related concepts along aspect which is segmentation of action/process. The test also contained questions about the uses of non-modal operators which were used to show certain grammatical operations like back-shifting, voice, negation, insertion/omission and interrogation. Equally, there were some questions about the use of modal operators to show emphasis and substitution. Besides, some questions were asked about different forms of non-modal operators (base form and non-tensed form) used for different uses like their dynamic and non-dynamic uses suiting different forms. Moreover, some questions were included about the use of non-modal operators along with other words like *wh*-word, if followed by non-modal operators bringing changes in the structure of the sentences. Lastly, the test contained some questions about the idiomatic expressions like *have to*, *had something done* and *it is said* having a form of the non-modal operators. All these uses of the non-modal operators were supposed to create problems for the undergraduate students.

The test was checked for correct and incorrect responses' percentage. The correct and incorrect percentages for these options helped the researchers to confirm (or reject) the hypotheses about different uses of non-modal operators. If a particular use of non-modal operator was problematic for students, less correct responses were noted for that use and if a particular use of non-modal operator was not problematic for students, more correct responses were noted for that use. The collected data was analysed in the light of the theoretical model of error analysis by Corder (1981). These errors were either in form of mis ordering, mis formation, addition and omission of non-modal operators. Each error was identified but different types of errors were ignored as the study focused on the problems in different uses of non-modal operators instead of the types of errors committed and as a result, the errors committed were analysed focusing on different uses of non-modal operators. The limited knowledge of the students about different uses of non-modal operators and application of these rules guiding their correct usage were focused instead of the theoretical aspects of non-modal operators. Most of the grammatical operations are performed by non-modal operators and without their proper knowledge and the application of the same for conveying and comprehending the message, undergraduate students cannot achieve proficiency in English.

#### 4. Results and Analysis

The test focused on different types of grammatical operations (uses of non-modal operators) like negation, making interrogative sentences, passive constructions, showing emphasis, inversion, and omission etc. along with other uses. The results are presented according to these uses of non-modal operators.

Table 2: Showing results for different uses of non-modal operators

	Correct Responses (%)	Incorrect Responses (%)
Negation by Non-modal Operators	85.8%	14.2%
Interrogative by Non-modal Operators	85.3%	14.7%
Passive Constructions by Non-Modal Operators	67%	33%
Emphasis/Surprise by Non-Modal Operators	20.3%	79.7%
Tenses by Non-Modal Operators	78%	22%
Tag Questions by Non-Modal Operators	32%	68%
Verb phrases containing non-tensed non-modal operators	61.2%	38.8%
Omission/Substitution by Non-Modal Operators	74.2%	25.8%
Subject Verb Inversion by Non-Modal Operators	25.3%	75.7%
Insertion of DO	65.1%	44.9%
dynamic Have	51.4%	48.6%
non-dynamic Have	63.5%	36.5%
Perfect Aspect	54.73%	45.27%
Past Tense	65.5%	34.5%
Progressive Aspect	67.3%	32.7%
Non-Modal Operators as Base Form	39.7%	60.3%
have to	75.2%	24.8%
Non-Modal Operators after if (if I be/do/did/had)	57.1%	42.9%
it is said/supposed to	72.5%	27.5%
have something done	65.5%	34.5%
wh word followed by operators	58%	42%
Narration with non-modal operator	49.2%	50.8%

The above table shows that undergraduate level students faced no significant difficulty in the use of non-modal operators for showing negation (85.8% correct responses) and their use in integrative sentences (85.3% correct responses). The students on the other hand, had somewhat difficulty in the use of non-modal operators in showing different tenses with auxiliaries (78% correct responses), *have to* (75.2% correct responses), omission and substitution (74.2% correct responses), after the expression *it is said/supposed to* (72.5% correct responses), progressive aspect (67.3% correct responses), the use of non-modal operators in passive constructions (67% correct responses), after *have/do something done* (65.5% correct responses), dummy *do* use (65.1% correct responses), non-dynamic use of *have* (63.5% correct responses) and non-tensed auxiliary in verb phrases (61.2% correct responses).

The students had significant difficulty in the use of non-modal operators if they are preceded by a *wh-word* (58% correct responses), after the word *if* (57.1% correct responses), perfect use (54.73% correct responses), dynamic use (51.4% correct responses) and narration with the help of non-modal operators (49.2% correct responses). While students had highly significant

difficulty in some of the uses of non-modal operators like their use non-modal operators for emphasis and surprise (20.3% correct responses), subject verb inversion (25.3% correct responses), tag question (32% correct responses) and the use of base form of the verb (39.7% correct responses).

The results suggest that students could contextualize the time and could choose the correct form. But they did not perform well when pragmatic constraints on tense and aspect were involved. Similarly, grammatical transformation with the help of non-modal operators, different forms and uses of non-modal operators and non-modal operators used after certain words and phrases bringing changes in the basic structure of the sentence were also found problematic for students. The idiomatic expressions with auxiliaries, insertion, omission, emphasis and negation with the help non-modal operators were easy for students. The results as a whole suggest that students have significant difficulty in the correct use of the non-modal operators despite their important uses in English grammar and as a result their English proficiency is highly influenced by this.

## 5. Discussion and Findings

The present study has specifically focused on the problems in the use of non-modal operators. These problems were recorded in the form errors in the correct use of non-modal operators. The errors were grammatical in nature in the form of omission, addition, mis ordering and misinformation of English non-modal operators (Agustin, 2018). Some of these problems are because of the interplay of some of grammatical concepts like tense and aspect (Nguyen, 2010) as hypothesized in the present study. Even this interplay was found in other grammatical operations like back-shifting and voice. While some grammatical operations like negation, interrogation and insertion/omission have no interplay and so, were assumed to be comparatively easy. These operators when used along other words like after *wh-word* and *if* were also assumed problematic for students. Similarly, different forms (non-tensed form) and uses (dynamic and non-dynamic) of non-modal operators were equally important and hypothesized to be problematic for undergraduate level students.

Lastly, the idiomatic use of non-modal operators was investigated in some fixed expression having a non-modal operator. The only English tense which the students found difficult was future perfect tense where the rate of errors was more than for any other English tense. To use English tenses correctly, contextualization of time and pragmatic constraints on non-modal operators must be taken into account and students had problems in these types of sentences. English tenses along with contextualization of time have some pragmatic constraints on past tense and perfect aspect. Both these like structures were found problematic and used one structure instead of another (Tajiri, Komachi, & Matsumoto, 2012). Similarly, grammatical transformation like voice, back shifting and interrogatives with the help of non-modal operators was found problematic for undergraduate students, especially in longer sentences and in the structures having words like '*let*' and other forms of '*be*' like '*being*' and '*been*'.

The tag questions too were problematic for the students like uses of auxiliaries after certain words and phrases bringing changes in the basic structure of the sentence. The students already familiar with the basic word order in declaratives and interrogatives considered these sentences to the same. When the auxiliaries are used after *wh-word*, students found them problematic. They had no idea that *wh-word* when used for subject and object in the sentence allows or

forbids the use of non-modal operators and so committed error in their use. Similarly, they had no idea that the longer sentences beginning with wh-word have different structures from the structures of the short sentences beginning with wh-word and they committed errors in their uses too. Almost the same number of errors was noted in the structures that begin with the word *if*. The clauses beginning with *if* have factual remoteness which is a broader term than counterfactuality. The factual remoteness in English signifies two uses thus ignoring a third use with modal operator as: a) Unreal condition with *if*.....; and b) It is found in clause functioning as complement to the verb *wish*.

There is no contrast of tense in the structures with the above uses. This is especially true in cases with counterfactuality in the structure having the verb *wish*. This is not part of the meaning of the past but has counterfactually. The students found this especially difficult and used present form of non-modal operator instead of its past tense form. Non-modal operators when used in idiomatic expression like *have to*, *it is said/supposed to*, *have something done*, were not significantly difficult for the students suggesting that these expressions have been learnt as such and were used properly. The base forms of the non-modal operators (*be* and *have*) were wrongly used to a significant extent by the students because the students matched the respective form of the non-modal operator with the subject ignoring the rule that the base form of the non-modal operator is used after another operator and other such words. The findings in the present study confirm the hypothesis that the base forms are highly pragmatic for the students.

The non-dynamic use of non-modal operator was comparatively easier than dynamic use of 'have' suggesting that students had no idea about the dynamic use of non-modal operators. Another interesting use of non-modal operators is its insertion or omission in clause. The insertion of *do* was found more problematic than omission because insertion involves only one of the non-modal operators 'do', while omission involves all non-modal operators (Kertz, 2010). Negation with the help of non-modal was quite easy for students like its use for surprise but the use of non-modal operator to show emphasis was very difficult for them. The use of emphasis is commonly ignored by second language teachers and students have no idea at all about this use of non-modal operator. The non-modal operator *do* is especially important for emphasis which the student did not know and so students wrongly selected this use of non-modal. The findings of this research study suggest that students at undergraduate level have significant difficulty in the correct use of non-modal operators and so should be given proper attention and enough time.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study was concerned with the problems in the use of English non-modal operators by undergraduate students. The present study focused on all those aspects of uses of non-modal operators which were assumed to be problematic for the selected students. The findings showed some of these problems because of the interplay of some of grammatical concepts like tense and aspect and contextualization of time and pragmatic constraints on non-modal operators were ignored by students. Even this interplay was found in other grammatical operations like back shifting and voice. While some grammatical operations like negation, interrogation and insertion/omission had got no interplay and so were found to be comparatively easy. Grammatical transformation like voice, as whole was found problematic and transformation in indirect narration and interrogatives was found highly difficult like inversion of auxiliaries. Similarly, the auxiliary use in longer sentences was difficult than its use in shorter sentences

and its use after certain words like *wh-word* and *if* having factual remoteness (unreal conditions) and clauses functioning as complement to the verb wish representing counter factuality was difficult. Idiomatic expressions with auxiliaries were not significantly difficult unlike the base forms of non-modal operators (*be* and *have*).

The verb phrases containing non-tensed forms of non-modal operators were incorrectly used by students like the dynamic use of non-modal operators. The insertion of *do* was found more problematic than the omission of a non-modal operator. But the results as whole, did not find any difficulty in the use of negation. Representing surprise was comparatively easy for students while students had no idea at all about the use of non-modal operator to show emphasis. The use of emphasis is commonly ignored by second language teachers and students have no idea at all about this use of non-modal operator. The non-modal operator *do* is especially important for emphasis which the student did not know. The findings of the study suggest that students at undergraduate level had significant difficulty in the correct use of non-modal operators and so should be given proper attention and enough time to practice correct uses of non-modal operators. The study is highly significant in knowing about the errors committed by undergraduate level students in the correct uses of non-modal operators having implication for teaching English non-modal operators in line with their correct uses taking into account the problems faced by students at undergraduate level.

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