Making the English Modal Perfects Accessible to Young EFL Learners through Integrative Approaches

Thitiwun Thuannadee[1]
Sethawut Techasan[2*]
Dechathorn Pojchanaphong[3]

Abstract

The abstract and complex grammatical structure of the English modal perfect can be intimidating for young EFL learners. Traditional structural explanations alone can leave students disengaged, while purely communicative approaches may not provide the explicit support needed for mastery. This pedagogical article proposes a conceptual instructional framework that integrates multiple approaches to address this challenge. Drawing on Bowen and McCreary's (1977) examination of the modal system, theories of multimodal learning, and Vygotskyan scaffolding, the article outlines how these perspectives can complement one another in teaching modal perfects. A multimodal approach ensures that students interact with language through diverse sensory channels, incorporating visual input, auditory cues, and kinesthetic activities to reinforce understanding. Teacher's Scaffolding further supports learners' transition from guided practice to autonomous use of the target structure. To illustrate this integration, the article introduces a classroom activity, "The Modal Perfect Mystery Activity," which situates modal perfects in an engaging and meaningful context while drawing upon multimodal materials and scaffolded interaction. By using these integrative approaches through the classroom activity, young learners can build a more solid foundation for grammatical competence, preparing them for deeper language acquisition in later stages of learning.

Keywords: teaching modal perfects, young learners, multimodality, scaffolding, EFL classroom

[1] International College, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand

[2] Theodore Maria School of Arts, Assumption University, Samut Prakan, Thailand

[3] Faculty of Business Administration and Liberal Arts, Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna, Chiang Mai, Thailand

* Corresponding author: sethawut.techasan@gmail.com

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Introduction

Teaching modal perfects to young learners is important because these structures play a central role in expressing deduction, possibility, obligation, and regret about past events. It supports the development of their pragmatic awareness and inferential skills in real-world communication.

Developmental research indicates that comprehensive modal representations of possibility, necessity, and counter factuality emerge relatively late, approximately around age four, and are closely linked to the acquisition of modal language (Leahy & Carey, 2020). In English Language Teaching, “young learners” typically refers to primary-level EFL students aged 6–12 (Cameron, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Pinter, 2017). At this stage, children’s cognitive and linguistic development enables them to engage with complex grammar when instruction is effectively scaffolded. Teaching modal perfects emphasizes meaning over form, as notions of past possibility and prediction derive from everyday experiences. In fact, learners’ growing maturity and expanding verb knowledge primarily contribute to improved accuracy in using these structures.

Linguistic research further indicates that perfect constructions represent epistemic and modal meanings, including inference and indirect evidentiality, rather than solely conveying temporal reference (Izvorski, 1997; Katz, 2003). These findings indicate that mastering modal perfects may enhance higher-order cognitive abilities, such as reasoning concerning evidence, uncertainty, and alternative outcomes.

However, English modal auxiliaries are considered challenging for learners of English (Leech, 2003; Palmer, 2001, 2003). Modal perfects are formed by combining "have + past participle" with modal verbs. Learners frequently misinterpret these constructions by assuming that they merely represent the past tense of modals (Bowen & McCreary, 1977). For instance, the phrase "She must have eaten" expresses a logical deduction regarding the past, as opposed to "She must eat," which implies a present necessity. EFL learners encounter challenges in using modal perfect constructions due to their inability to distinguish between the various functions and contexts in which they are employed (Kurniati & Kurniati, 2019). These challenges encompass difficulties in understanding the function, form, and usage of modals (Kurniawan et al., 2024).

Research on the instruction of English modal perfect constructions remains limited, particularly with young EFL learners. Most studies have examined modal perfects from theoretical or psycholinguistic perspectives, showing that advanced second language learners

can syntactically process and produce these forms but tend to underuse them in discourse due to pragmatic, cultural, or contextual factors rather than grammatical constraints (Conroy & Cupples, 2010, 2013).

Research on teaching modal perfects remains limited and has primarily centered on adult learners. Theodore (2023) demonstrated that guided data-driven learning (DDL) can enhance adult learners' awareness and readiness to use modal perfects, although gains in accuracy were modest. Likewise, Bourgeois (2004) showed that instruction aligned with strategy and modality supports adult learners' acquisition of the present perfect, underscoring the importance of metacognitive awareness and contextualized practice. Nonetheless, these findings cannot be readily generalized to young learners. While previous research has offered valuable insights into the nature and acquisition of English modal auxiliaries, it often examines the issue from isolated perspectives. Explanations of grammatical structures provide detailed accounts of form–meaning relationships but typically presuppose cognitive maturity and metalinguistic awareness, limiting their applicability in classroom contexts for younger learners (Bowen & McCreary, 1977; Leech, 2003; Palmer, 2001).

These challenges presented by modal perfects, which are typically introduced at later stages in language learning, can overwhelm learners if they are not taught effectively. However, if modal perfects are introduced in developmentally appropriate ways, early exposure to the complex structures can have pedagogical value (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, the English modal system's intricacies are extensively documented in resources such as Bowen and McCreary (1977) but practical strategies for young learners are frequently absent.

This article contends that young EFL learners can effectively engage with modal perfects through an integrative approach that integrates Bowen and McCreary's framework, a multimodal teaching approach and scaffolded interaction into an engaging classroom activity.

The Rationale Behind Teaching Modal Perfects to Young EFL Learners

Since modal perfect constructions are frequently perceived as sophisticated grammatical structures, the introduction of these structures to young learners can provide the learners with developmentally appropriate support and can result in substantial cognitive and linguistic advantages. This early exposure to modal perfects establishes a foundation for long-term syntactic development, enabling children to become acquainted with complicated sentence structures that will subsequently enhance their academic and communicative abilities. Additionally, acquisition of modals contributes significantly to children's pragmatic

skills (Bell et al., 2024). This linguistic preparedness equips learners to more easily comprehend and apply advanced grammar. Engagement with modal perfects not only promotes language development but also stimulates cognitive function. These structures are inherently abstract in nature, necessitating that learners discern hypothetical causes, evaluate past actions, and express non-literal meanings such as deduction, regret, or possibility. The interaction between young learners and such abstract forms fosters the development of inferencing skills and critical thinking that extend beyond language learning.

Additionally, the introduction of modal perfects improves the expressive abilities of children. Learners encounter and contemplate events that involve hypothetical reasoning or lost opportunities from a young age. The linguistic tools provided by modal perfects enable individuals to convey their thoughts, such as "I should have cleaned my room" or "She might have forgotten her lunch," thereby enhancing their communicative abilities. (Collins, 2009)

However, it is imperative that these advantages are consistent with instructional strategies that are suitable for the student's age. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes in his theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that young learners thrive when instruction is scaffolded, providing support that is just beyond their current level of comprehension. Children can engage with abstract language in a manner that is both accessible and rewarding by utilizing visual support, meaningful practice, and carefully structured guidance. In this manner, the instruction of modal perfects to young learners is not only feasible but also pedagogically sound and developmentally enriching.

Traditional teaching approaches such as explicit explanation of rules and forms to teach complicated verb forms, including perfect and modal formulations, have primarily focused on clear rule explanation and controlled practice. While such methods may improve formal accuracy, they frequently provide insufficient support for the abstract meanings embedded in modal perfect constructions such as inference, evaluation, and counterfactual reasoning.

The absence of instructional research for young learners could be related to the cognitive difficulty of the modality. According to developmental research, full modal conceptions arise later and are closely related to language development (Leahy & Carey, 2020). Integrative grammar approaches that link formal and semantic aspects have thus been recommended as better suited for teaching complex tense-aspect forms (Mardar, 2012). While other frameworks, such as DDL or communicative approaches, may be applicable, the current paper uses Bowen and McCreary's (1977) semantic categorization because it provides a clear

form-meaning mapping that can be effectively scaffolded and adapted for young EFL learners using multimodal support.

Bowen and McCreary in Practical Implementation

Bowen and McCreary (1977) propose that the presentation of modal perfects in mini scenarios is effective for promoting structural recognition among young learners. Their methodology is predicated on contextualization, which enables students to observe modal perfects in concrete, relatable scenarios rather than abstract definitions. Building on this contextualized approach, subsequent studies have extended the idea of linking form and meaning through alternative but conceptually related instructional methods. For example, the studies by McCormick (2008) and Faqeih (2012) advance similar arguments and, although not directly employing Bowen and McCreary's (1977) paradigm, tacitly refer to the notion of systematic form–meaning alignment via contrastive analysis and metalinguistic feedback. These findings demonstrate the pedagogical significance of semantically grounded instruction.

In addition, visual aids, including stick-figure drawings, oral modeling, and guided repetition, can be employed to simplify the structure, thereby offering learners a scaffolded approach to comprehension. For instance, a teacher may depict a figure standing in the rain and state, "He forgot to bring his umbrella." The modal perfect is illustrated in context by the statement, "He might not have checked the weather." Students can infer meaning through context, which promotes comprehension and retention without the necessity of formal definitions, because of this straightforward visual and verbal coupling. Subsequently, students are directed through a variety of scenarios, which facilitates the natural emergence of the structure as they exercise with increasing autonomy. To enrich the context as proposed by Bowen and McCreary, multimodality is thought to be crucial to include in the instructional design.

Multimodal Instructional Design

Multimodal pedagogy highlights that meaning-making transcends linguistic input and arises from the integration of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Multimodal instructional design is increasingly acknowledged as essential in language classrooms, rather than merely supplementary (Lim et al., 2022) and this draws upon the integration of multiple sensory channels to enhance comprehension and retention, particularly for young learners engaging with complex structures such as modal perfects. As

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) emphasize, meaning-making is not confined to linguistic input alone; instead, it emerges through the interaction of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modes. In the ESL classroom, visual strategies may include infographics, comic strips, and animations that provide concrete illustrations of abstract grammatical forms. For example, a comic strip depicting a child missing the school bus can be paired with the sentence "He should have woken up earlier," enabling learners to associate visual context with modal perfect construction. Auditory modes such as songs, rhythm-based sentences, and storytelling help to reinforce intonation, rhythm, and grammatical patterns in a memorable way. Kinesthetic learning, involving role-plays, movement-based games, and physical sentence-building activities, caters to young learners' need for active engagement. This multimodal layering ensures that abstract grammatical forms like modal perfects become accessible through multiple points of entry, accommodating diverse learning styles while reinforcing form-meaning connections.

Multimodal instruction is increasingly recognized as an essential pedagogical approach to meet the demands of 21st-century learning, in accordance with frameworks for creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking. Guo et al. (2024) conducted an analysis of global trends in multimodal teaching spanning from 1995 to 2023. The bibliometric analysis indicated that early childhood education and digital multimodal literacies are expanding fields of research, particularly in Asia.

Recent studies demonstrate the influence of multimodal learning on language acquisition. Aloizou et al. (2025) proposed a Learning Experience Design framework aimed at multimodal learning in kindergarten, which combines digital and physical resources through station-based activities. Their findings demonstrated that multimodality improved engagement, comprehension, and collaboration, even in very young learners. Rahmanu et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review spanning eleven years of research and concluded that multimodal immersion significantly enhances vocabulary, speaking, and writing skills. Gestures, visuals, and technology-driven tools proved particularly effective in fostering accessible learning environments.

In EFL contexts, Carcamo and Pino (2025) demonstrated that multimodal texts, which combine linguistic and visual elements, enhance learners' reading comprehension and critical thinking by alleviating cognitive load and facilitating inferencing. Fadzil et al. (2024) confirmed the efficacy of multimodal learning in ESL writing classrooms, where learners enhanced their creativity, multimodal composition skills, and confidence. Al-Jarf (2024) demonstrated that

podcasts, digital stories, flashcards, and graphic novels effectively facilitated the integration of grammar, vocabulary, and skills among college-level EFL students. These studies collectively offer empirical evidence for the implementation of multimodal designs at various English instruction levels. For young EFL learners in particular, multimodality tends to be more effective when supported by scaffolding.

Scaffolding in Action

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of scaffolding emphasizes the significance of providing students with support within their ZPD, where they can complete tasks with the help of others that they are unable to complete independently. This method is particularly effective when instructing complicated grammatical structures, such as the modal perfect. The teacher initiates scaffolding in the classroom by presenting distinct models of appropriate usage, frequently accompanied by visuals and context. The subsequent phase is guided practice, during which students are provided with the opportunity to construct their own sentences with the guidance of the teacher, prior to transitioning to independent practice.

Incorporating Bowen and McCreary's Idea of Teaching Modal Perfects, Multimodal Methods, and Scaffolding

By integrating a variety of methodologies, including Bowen and McCreary's structural insights (1977), multimodal materials, and Vygotskyan scaffolding, it should be possible to provide effective grammar instruction on modal perfects to young EFL learners. A multimodal approach ensures that students interact with the language through a variety of sensory channels by incorporating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements. Furthermore, learners are assisted in their transition from guided practice to independent use of modal perfects by scaffolding from instructors and peers. This article proposes a teaching activity called “The Modal Perfect Mystery Activity” that incorporates these theoretical frameworks.

The Modal Perfect Mystery Activity

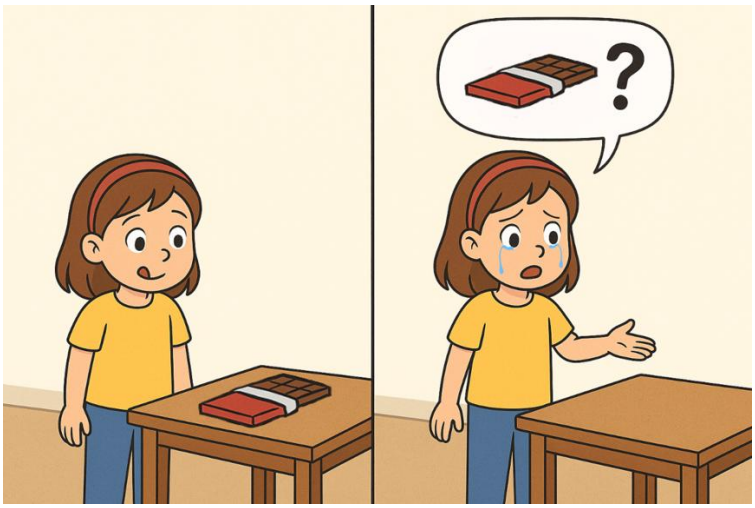
The Modal Perfect Mystery Activity is a classroom activity that is in accordance with this integrative approach. In this activity, the classroom instruction is divided into two phases: instruction and activity.

Phase 1: Instruction

At the beginning, the teacher introduces the concept of modal perfects to students by providing substantial context. To illustrate, the teacher makes simple stick figure images or shows pictures on the blackboard to represent various events. For example, the first picture below depicts a girl standing by a table with a chocolate bar on it. The second picture depicts the same girl standing by the same table but without the chocolate (See Figure 1). Then the teacher explains that the girl's feeling by saying, "She is sad." with relevant tone and gesture. The teacher also says, "She's sad because someone must have taken it." The sentence that the teacher said may also be provided on the blackboard or the screen, with past modals in italics.

Figure 1

Examples of pictures in instruction phase



To promote internalization of the structure, similar inputs are provided to the students. The teacher repeats these instances by pointing to additional appropriate images and demonstrating the structure through repetition. Rather than asking the students to explain the modal perfect structure, the teacher lets the students notice the structure by providing substantial similar input.

From the above instruction, this phase seeks to simplify the learning process by utilizing multimodality and scaffolding, while promoting active participation and comprehension by meaningful exposure (Bowen & McCreary, 1977). Furthermore, this technique can help promote the cognitive approach and allow the students to learn through contexts, resembling

what Bowen and McCreary's (1977) suggest. They believe that this technique will offer students with the necessary background of experience enough input to enable them to comprehend complicated patterns such as modal perfects.

Phase 2: Activity

After the students become familiar with modal perfects, the activity phase can be conducted in three constructive rounds.

In the first round, the class is divided into small groups. Each group is provided with scenario cards with pictures, for example, a picture depicting a boy named Tom who sadly holds a paper with an “F” grade on it. The teacher also gives the students sentence cards with complete sentences, for example, a card containing the sentence, "He could have studied harder" or "He could have paid more attention in class." The students then match the sentence cards and scenario cards. There can be more than one possible match. Meanwhile, the teacher walks around the classroom, giving a point to a correct answer and giving appraisal to the students. If the students can’t find the correct matching, the teacher can provide some hints and encourage them to try again.

In the second round, each group of students is given another set of scenario cards, for example, a picture of a boy feeling sad at a bus stop with the sentence “Tom missed the bus.” Each group is given incomplete sentence cards with the first half, for example, a card saying, “He should have …”, and the second half saying, “come earlier.” The students match the first half with the second half according to the provided scenario cards. During this stage of the activity the teacher walks around the classroom, giving a point and appraisal to the groups that can make correct matching. If the students have any difficulties, the teacher can provide some hints and encouragement.

After receiving substantial inputs from the first and second rounds, students have developed familiarity with the modal perfect structure. In the final round, each group of students is given another set of scenario cards and a list of verbs. The students choose a scenario card and help each other select the verb to form a complete sentence based on the scenario using the modal perfect structure. The teacher can walk around the classroom to see if the students can write complete sentences on paper. The teacher may ask the students to read the sentences aloud.

With this activity, the students can reinforce their comprehension of modal perfects while remaining engaged and motivated by earning points for correct usage. In an interactive,

supportive environment, this approach, in conjunction with scaffolding and multimodality, assists the learners in establishing a firm understanding of complicated grammar structures.

Furthermore, it is believed that this activity would be beneficial to ensure that the students had a better knowledge of the modal perfects. It is also thought that monitoring, rather than merely lecturing, would be an interesting way to perform the formal assessment. According to Vygotsky (1978), Vygotsky's scaffolding is a form of instruction that assists students in comprehending educational material by requiring them to collaborate with an instructor or peers who possesses a more profound comprehension of the subject matter. According to this theory, students can acquire more information when they collaborate with others who possess a wider range of expertise than the student who is studying the materials. The content is broken down into smaller pieces by the educators or students who are going to be teaching the learners. This allows the learner to broaden their grasp of the topic more than they would be able to do on their own. The focus is on what students are capable of doing on their own, as opposed to what they are capable of doing with the assistance of another person. We think it could be blended perfectly with Bowen and McCreary (1977). Additionally, active involvement and group conversation improve students' learning comprehension and retention through collaborative discovery. Scaffolding also creates a supportive learning environment where students receive personalized advice to meet educational objectives. Therefore, this proposed activity is believed to represent an example of how to blend Bowen and McCreary's (1977) guidelines with multimodality and scaffolding learning activities.

Accessing Learning in Modal Perfect Mystery Activity

To evaluate the effectiveness of the activity and to monitor students' progress, teachers can incorporate simple, age-appropriate assessment methods. Observation checklists can be used to note the learners' correct use of modal perfects, participation levels, and use of contextual clues during group work. Additionally, brief self-assessment forms with smiley-face scales allow students to reflect on their confidence and understanding after the activity. Teachers may also administer short oral or written quizzes using pictures or scenarios similar to those in the activity to assess students' ability to independently apply modal perfect structures. These formative assessments not only help teachers identify areas needing further scaffolding but also encourage learners to take active responsibility for their own language growth.

Expected Learning Outcomes in Teaching Modal Perfect to Young EFL Learners

Teaching cognitively demanding grammatical structures such as modal perfects to young EFL learners is both theoretically justified and pedagogically beneficial, as it can foster language proficiency and cognitive growth when grounded in second language acquisition theories and supported by systematic scaffolding. When effectively implemented, such instruction produces meaningful and lasting learning outcomes.

The heightened neurocognitive plasticity of young learners enables them to process and internalize complex linguistic forms more effectively during early brain development. Although constructions such as must have or might have (followed by a past participle) are often viewed as developmentally inappropriate, research in second language acquisition challenges this assumption. Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar asserts that learners possess an innate language faculty activated by meaningful linguistic input (Chomsky, 1986). For young EFL learners exposed to both their first and an additional language, this innate capacity facilitates the acquisition of complex grammatical features across languages.

Moreover, when instruction is scaffolded according to learners' cognitive readiness, complex forms become attainable. Drawing on Krashen's Input Hypothesis, targeting structures just beyond learners' current interlanguage competence (i+1) encourages acquisition without overload (Krashen, 1985). In this sense, well-crafted activities act as the "plus one," helping learners notice and internalize modal perfect constructions. Complementing this, Vygotskyan scaffolding within the ZPD enables teachers to gradually withdraw support as learners gain independent control of form and meaning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Overall, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that teaching modal perfects to young EFL learners is not simply a pedagogical challenge but a feasible and promising approach that advances both linguistic competence and cognitive development.

Challenges for Implication

Teaching complicated concepts, such as modality, can be difficult due to their abstract nature. Educators should employ scaffolded queries and real-world examples to address this issue by connecting the grammar to common situations. As children's modal acquisition is mostly input driven (Bell et al., 2024), students can more effectively comprehend the meanings and applications of complex language structures when they are grounded in substantial familiar contexts. From a usage-based and developmental view, learners often acquire language in chunks and meaning-based constructions, rather than in a linear, form-by-

form sequence (Cameron, 2001). Thus, young learners may understand complicated ideas through contextualized input and everyday reasoning. The authors view that modal perfects, when taught through meaning-focused contexts (such as visual evidence, stories and problem-solving tasks) can therefore be processed as functional expressions of past inference, rather than as abstract grammatical combinations.

Another obstacle that arises when working with young learners is their limited attention spans. Activities that are dynamic, fleeting, and involve movement are more likely to maintain engagement. This method is designed to meet the stimulation and variety requirements of young learners, ensuring that they remain engaged and attentive throughout the lesson.

Additionally, many students are unable to completely engage with complicated structures such as modal perfects due to vocabulary restrictions. The pre-teaching of fundamental verbs and their past participle forms is advantageous in order to resolve this issue. These foundational verbs are essential for the development of sentences that are both accurate and meaningful, thereby facilitating the experimentation of students with modal perfects. When learners incorrectly presume that modal perfects are directly equivalent to their simple modal counterparts, they frequently encounter the issue of excessive generalization.

Therefore, educators should underscore that modal perfects do not always correspond to simple modals. In order to prevent this misunderstanding, offering comprehensible input enables students to comprehend the subtleties of modal meanings and prevent overgeneralization, thereby ensuring clarity and precision in usage. Educators can cultivate a more effective and supportive environment for teaching complex grammatical structures, such as modal perfects, by thoughtfully confronting these challenges.

Conclusion

In EFL classrooms, modal perfects can be potentially accessible to young learners, despite the fact that they are, conventionally speaking, considered inappropriate for students of young age. Teachers have the ability to simplify abstract language without sacrificing its richness by implementing the ideas provided by Bowen and McCreary (1977) through the use of multimodal and scaffolded instruction systems. These difficult forms can be learned through effective classroom management and substantial, meaningful context. By doing this, teachers can both prepare young learners for more advanced language use and encourage them to develop a love of the English language at a young age.

The Authors

Thitiwun Thuannadee is a lecturer at the English Language Department, International College Khon Kaen University. Her research interests lie on English for Communication, and EFL.

Sethawut Techasan is a full-time lecturer at Theodore Maria School of Arts, Assumption University. His research interests include materials development, ESP, linguistics, and Global Englishes.

Dechathorn Pojchanaphong is a lecturer at the English for International Communication Program at Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna. His research interests are Global Englishes, English for International Communication, and EFL.

AI Declaration Statement

The authors used Perplexity in order to locate related studies to gain insights into relevant topics. ChatGPT and Gemini were also used to check for grammatical errors and refine the language for greater academic clarity. After using these tools/services, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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