Three Questions to Explore

01 **Language and cultural expectations**

Does L2 instruction reshape the cultural expectations learners bring from their L1?

02 **Proficiency and understanding**

Does linguistic proficiency in an L2 necessarily lead to an understanding of its cultural expectations?

03 **Diversity and meaning**

How does linguistic and cultural diversity shape meaning in the classroom?

These are not simply questions about learning another language, but about what happens when different expectations of meaning meet.

Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda

- Samantha Jones

Modality, meaning, and misinterpretation in multilingual classrooms

Eight weeks of grammar teaching changed nothing.
Three hours on culture marked a turning point.



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The University of Queensland, St Lucia · 23–25 November 2026
Programme: Day 3 · Session 8, Work-in-progress - institutional settings · 1:40–2:00 pm

WHERE ‘COULDA, WOULDA, SHOULDA’ COMES FROM

The same three words, together since 1961: a newspaper, a film song, then prime-time television.

1606

coulda

first recorded use - Oxford English Dictionary

1913

woulda

first recorded use - Oxford English Dictionary

1933

shoulda

first recorded use - Oxford English Dictionary

1961

all three

Louis Effrat, The New York Times: an example of woulda, coulda, shoulda in horse-racing commentary, as quoted by Merriam-Webster.

1977

Lou Rawls

‘If I Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda’ - soul song written by Gamble & Huff

2001

Samantha Jones

Sex and the City
HBO S4 E11: The episode title that carried the phrase into everyday circulation (in my life).

2025

Sermin Erden

Classroom Investigation

MODAL MEANING ACROSS ENGLISH, DUTCH, TURKISH

FORM INVENTORIES: HOW MANY DISTINCTIONS EACH LANGUAGE MAKES

ENGLISH	
You can go	ability
You can't go	negative ability
You may go	permission
You might go	uncertain possibility
You could go	weak option
You should go	advice
You must go	obligation
You have to go	external obligation
You must not go	prohibition
You will go	future
You would go	conditional

11 DISTINCT FORMS

DUTCH	
Jij kunt gaan	ability
Jij kunt niet gaan	negative ability
Jij mag gaan	permission
Jij zou kunnen gaan	uncertain possibility
Jij zou kunnen gaan	weak option
Jij zou moeten gaan	advice
Jij moet gaan	obligation
Jij moet gaan	external obligation
Jij mag niet gaan	prohibition
Jij zal gaan	future
Jij zou gaan	conditional

9 DISTINCT FORMS

TURKISH	
Sen gidebilirsin	ability
Sen gidemezsin	negative ability
Sen gidebilirsin	permission
Sen gidebilirsin	uncertain possibility
Sen gidebilirsin	weak option
Sen gitmelisin	advice
Sen gitmelisin	obligation
Sen gitmek zorundasın	external obligation
Sen gitmemelisin	prohibition
Sen gideceksin	future
Sen giderdin	conditional

7 DISTINCT FORMS

Sources: Cambridge University Press (n.d.); Groefsema (1995); Huddleston & Pullum (2002); Haeseryn et al. (1997); Göksel & Kerslake (2005). Modal form inventories and cross-linguistic comparisons compiled by the author, a proficient speaker of English, Dutch and Turkish.

INSTANCE 1 · STAND-ALONE EXPRESSION

One regret, said in three languages. Three different things get regretted.

ENGLISH

Coulda, woulda, shoulda.

literal

what was possible · what was intended · what was expected

focus

modal evaluation of past possibilities

DUTCH

Tja, had gekund.

literal

“Well… it could have happened.”

focus

missed possibility

TURKISH

Keşke, keşke, keşke.

literal

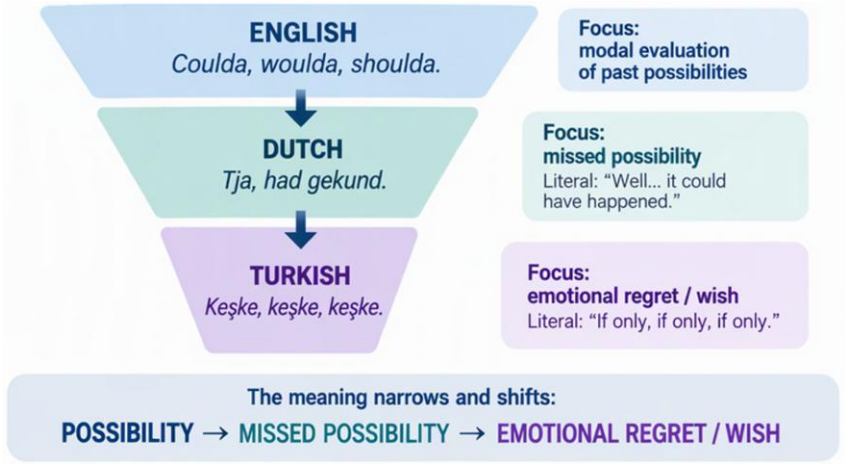
“If only, if only, if only.”

focus

emotional regret / wish

THE MEANING NARROWS AND SHIFTS

English keeps the modal machinery visible. Dutch keeps only the missed opportunity. Turkish keeps the wish.



INSTANCE 2 · RESPONSE TO GUILT

The same regret, but now as an answer to someone else.

ENGLISH

I should’ve told Aidan.
- coulda, woulda, shoulda.

focus

modal evaluation of past possibilities

DUTCH

Ik had ’t tegen Aidan moeten zeggen.
- Tja, had gemoeten.

literal

“I should’ve told Aidan”
“Yeah, it should have happened.”

focus

missed obligation

TURKISH

Keşke Aidan’a söyleseydim.
- Keşke, keşke, keşke.

literal

“If only I had told Aidan.”
“If only, if only, if only.”

focus

personal regret

THE SHIFT

English names the obligation, Dutch names the missed obligation, Turkish names the person’s regret.

INSTANCE 3 · NARRATIVE REFLECTION

The same regret again, now inside a sentence about someone else.

ENGLISH

She has to let go of the coulda, shoulda, woulda.

focus
modal evaluation of past possibilities

DUTCH

Ze moet stoppen met nadenken over wat had gekund.

literal

“She must stop thinking about what could have been.”

focus
rumination as a mental process

TURKISH

keşke şöyle yapsaydım, keşke böyle etseydimi, unutmalı

literal

“She needs to forget about; If only I had done this, if only I had done that.”

focus
counterfactual regret

WHY IT MATTERS

“We all watch the same episode but feel different things.”
“So, do we really experience the same meaning?”

ELICOS and AMEP: two sectors, two ecologies

ELICOS · INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students

Purpose

English for further study, work, career development, travel or personal interest.

Funding and access

Fee-paying courses for overseas students; providers and courses must meet CRICOS and ELICOS requirements.

Learner backgrounds

International student cohort with varied linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds. Many have previous formal schooling.

Teaching context

Coursebooks and structured syllabuses commonly provide a progression through language forms and skills.

AMEP · SETTLEMENT

Adult Migrant English Program

Purpose

English for settlement, everyday communication, community participation and employment.

Funding and access

Australian Government-funded; free for eligible migrants and humanitarian entrants.

Learner backgrounds

Highly diverse educational backgrounds; some learners are highly educated, or have interrupted or little previous formal schooling, or limited literacy in their first language - adult learners across a wide age range.

Teaching context

Unit study guides inform delivery; teachers plan and assemble materials to meet learner needs and learning outcomes.

THE DIFFERENCE THAT MATTERS

Not a difference of level. A difference of linguistic ecology: what the classroom can take for granted about English before a learner walks in.

I changed sector, not method

IN ELICOS I COULD ASSUME

A staged account of English. Each modal arrives at a level with a meaning already attached. The coursebook had decided what might mean before I met the class.

A1-A2	can, can't; could (recognition); may, might, should; have to
B1	must, mustn't, should, ought to, may, might, could, will, would
B2-C1	should have, could have, might have, needn't have; advanced modal combinations and deduction

IN AMEP I COULD ASSUME NOTHING

One room, fourteen countries, ages 24 to 72, several with interrupted schooling. The assessment needed correct use of ‘modals’. I assembled the materials myself. Based on their level of English and assessment requirements

Level 1	Learners ranging from **pre-Level 1 literacy** (limited or no prior schooling, emerging literacy) through to beginning English users developing basic speaking, reading and writing skills
Level 2	Learners developing greater independence in everyday communication, community participation and digital skills
Level 3	Learners preparing for work, further study and more complex social interactions using a broader range of language resources

The reality

In ELICOS, learner progression could be tracked through CEFR stages; in AMEP, the diversity of learners' educational and literacy backgrounds created a much more complex picture of language development.

Programme descriptors; ELICOS coursebook materials examined (Empower, Cambridge UP; Life, National Geographic Learning).

Author’s own teaching experience, ELICOS and AMEP, TAFE Queensland.

How many times have you taught these as “yes”?

> Have you ever taught (or been taught) that **should, will, could, might, may,** can actually mean that something ***WON’T*** *happen*?

WHAT THE COURSEBOOK SAYS EACH ONE IS FOR

should	will	could	might	may
obligation · advice	prediction · certainty	past ability · remote possibility	weak possibility	permission · possibility

Have you ever taught a modal verb as a **possibility**, only to discover...

it meant something else?

SHOULD • WILL • COULD • MIGHT • MAY

"I might come to the party."



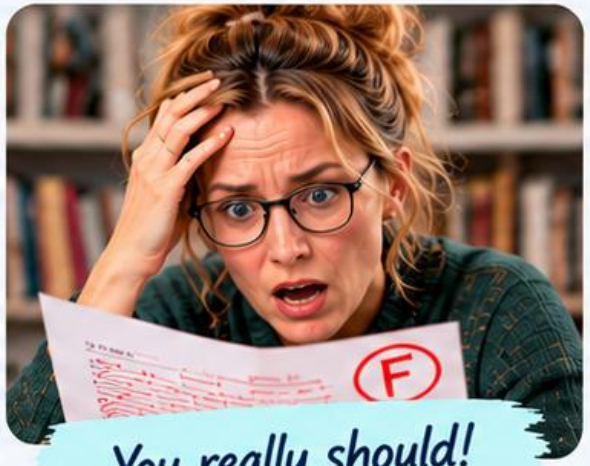
Probably not!

"We should have drinks sometime."



Just a polite phrase.

"You might want to revise this."



You really should!

"We could look at that later."



Not now, probably never.

The same words. A different meaning.
That's the pragmatic puzzle!

???

When Words Mean More Than They Say

A learner who parses these compositionally hears an invitation, a plan, a suggestion and a promise. All four are reasonable readings of the words. None is the intended one.

EXPRESSION	WHAT A LITERAL READING HEARS	WHAT IT OFTEN MEANS
“I might come to the party.”	a possibility - probably yes	**probably not**
“We could look at that later.”	we will return to this	**not now, and probably never**
“You might want to revise this.”	an optional suggestion	**change it**
“We should have drinks sometime.”	an invitation	**I am ending this conversation politely**

THE INSTRUMENT

Four expressions, two printed options each. Identical at every measurement point, administered in writing, not rehearsed.

Haugh & Sinkeviciute (2021); Groefsema (1995); Coates (1983); Brown & Levinson (1987); Meyer (2014); Travis & Torres Cacoullos (2023); Erden (2026).

Where the literal reading comes from

HOW THE GRADED SERIES SEQUENCE MODALITY

A1	**can / can't**	ability	*clear function, low abstraction*
A2	**have to / should**	obligation vs advice	*introduced early*
B1	**may / might / could**	epistemic possibility	*abstraction rises*
B1+	**past modals**	counterfactual regret	*must + have + V*
B2	**modals of deduction**	epistemic stance	*high abstraction*
B2+	**mixed in discourse**	pragmatic shading	*what our learners needed*

WHAT THE COMMERCIAL SERIES TEACH

Will / Can't	**100%**
Must / Couldn't	**75%**
Could / May / Might	**50%**

Empower (Cambridge UP); Life (National Geographic Learning)

"ELICOS learners climb this sequence level by level. AMEP learners do not.
None of the textbooks explicitly teach the cultural meaning behind these expressions."

Twenty-two learners, one room, fourteen countries

22
adult learners, one class

24–72
age range, one room

14
countries of origin

48 + 3
hours: form, then function

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

Japan · South Korea · China · India · Eritrea · Kenya · Sudan · Afghanistan · Iran · Syria · Ecuador · Colombia · Mexico · Congo

Countries are not languages, and neither is a proficiency level. Fourteen countries of origin is a fact about the room, not a variable in the design.
No claim is made about any first language.

MONDAY AND WEDNESDAY, 6–9 PM

One evening class, one teacher-researcher, 2 semesters.

In Semester 1, Term 1 and Term 2, 2025, the teacher notices a gap and plans data collection for Semester 2, Term 3 and Term 4, 2025.

Same four items, in the same order, at all three points.
Participation separate from assessment; nothing graded.

WHY THE ROOM MATTERS

A class like this cannot be treated as one level with one starting point. Whatever the finding is, it has to survive that variance.

Erden (2026), classroom data; participation was separate from assessment and not graded.

Three measurement points

WEEK 1
T3 Baseline
four items, no warning

WEEK 9
T3 After grammar
8 weeks · 48 hours

WEEK 11
T4 The intervention
3 hours on culture

WEEK 18
T4 Follow-up
seven weeks later

Week 1 · Lesson 2 · No instructions

8 WEEKS · 48 CONTACT HOURS · FORM-FOCUSED

Eight weeks of form-focused modal instruction. Students received explicit, form-focused instruction in modal verbs, progressing from basic expressions of ability (can/can't) and obligation or advice (have to/should) to epistemic possibility (may/might/could), past modals expressing counterfactual regret, and modals of deduction.

Week 11 · 3 HOURS · ONE LESSON · FUNCTION-FOCUSED

Compared grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation across varieties of English.
Explored how language choices can carry different meanings across social and cultural contexts.
Personal stories and examples included modal expressions**, without** identifying them as the lesson focus or teaching the four test sentences.

THE COMPARISON IS THE ARGUMENT

A dose sixteen times larger produced no change at all. A dose of three hours produced most of the change. There is no control class, so the inference rests on that asymmetry, not on randomisation.

Groefsema (1995); Schmidt (1990); Erden (2026), classroom data.

ARE MODALS MORE ABOUT POLITENESS THAN POSSIBILITY?

The same request, four times. Each one adds a layer of mitigation, not information.

“Bring me a glass of water.”

bare imperative
no mitigation. In English this reads as an order.

“Could you bring me a glass of water?”

+ modal past form
In Dutch, “could” puts distance between speaker and request.

“Could you please bring me a glass of water?”

+ please
explicit politeness marker, on top of the modal.

“Could you please bring me a glass of water, please?”

+ please again
over-marked. Australian English hears it as sarcastic.

PRE-2015

NETHERLANDS

Geef mij maar een glas water

Direct. No modal of permission, no politeness padding.

2015

ENGLAND

Could I have a glass of water?

The first argument with my partner hangs on this request.

2024

NETHERLANDS

Zou je mij alsjeblieft een glas water kunnen geven?

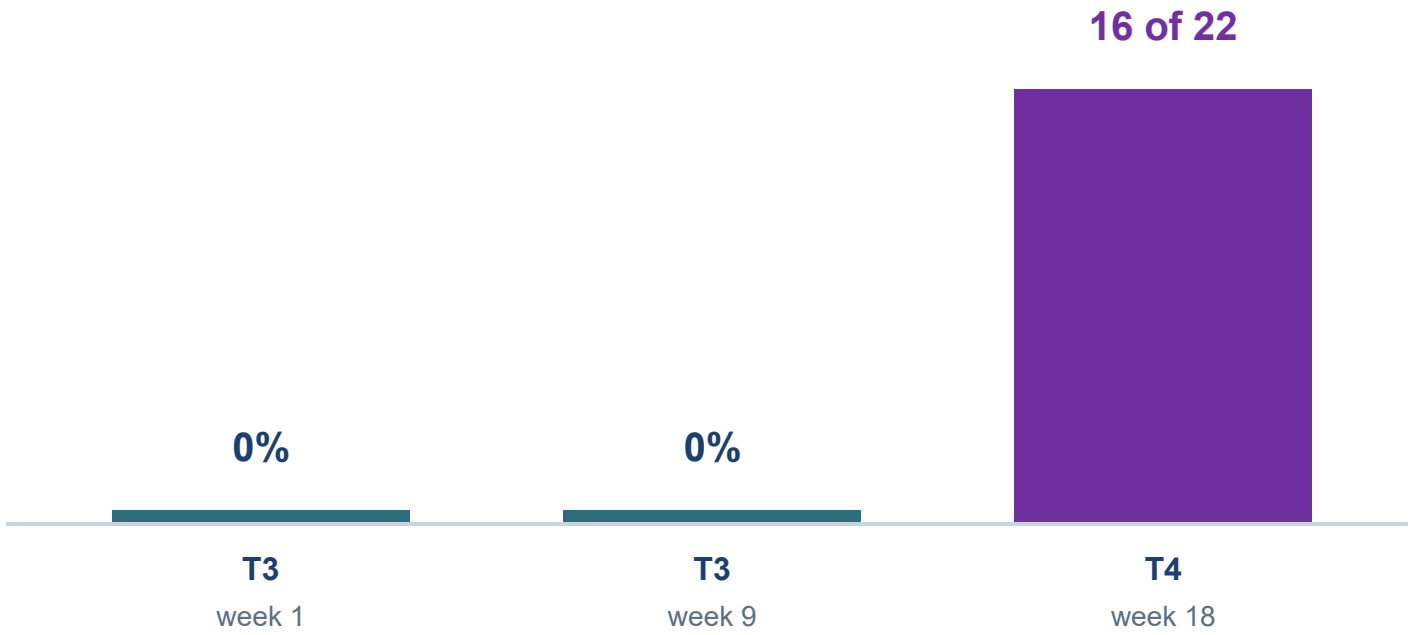
My best friend's kitchen. Dutch that had become English.

WHAT THIS SHOWS

Absorption runs both ways. I carried L1 politeness norms into English and was read as blunt and rude. I carried English hedging back into Dutch and was read as overly formal. The transfer shows what contact does.

Schmidt (1990); Von Stutterheim et al. (2021)

Nothing in eight weeks. Most of the class after three hours.



share selecting the intended reading

WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

16 of 22

select all four intended readings at week 18.

0

of the sixteen reverted between T3 and T4.

p = .00003

McNemar exact, within-subject, T3 → T4: b = 16, c = 0.

Level against a 50% guessing baseline: p = .052 - not significant. The claim is about change within each learner, not about how many guessed correctly.

The dose asymmetry, not the total, is the finding.

Erden (2026), classroom data; McNemar exact test, T3 → T4; Ren, Li & Lü (2023).

The production evidence in this classroom study

“I might join you sometime.”

Week 15, an unrelated speaking task. A student, unasked, then winked and said:

“Teacher, I said no like an Australian.”

THE CLAIM I WILL DEFEND

Control of modal form does not entail knowledge of conventionalised interpersonal meaning. Form-focused instruction did not repair the gap. Three hours on cultural function did.

NOT ON THE TEST

No item asked for this. Nothing was rehearsed, prompted or modelled in the previous lesson.

NOT A BY-PRODUCT

Eight weeks of grammar had already failed to produce it. It appeared after the culture lesson.

NOT AN OUTLIER

Sixteen of twenty-two learners moved. The applause Amir got from his classmates showed they all understood.

From Weeks 12–20, learners brought conversations from everyday life into class. They shared stories about using modal expressions at work and with neighbours, often checking with me and classmates whether they had understood the speaker’s intended meaning. These discussions gave us opportunities to revisit and make sense of modal use in real interactions.

Schmidt (1990); Von Stutterheim et al. (2021); Erden (2026), classroom data.

And the researcher still misses it

A SOCIAL CLUB, BRISBANE

ADAM Hey Lisa, are you playing volleyball today?

LISA Yeah! I might later…

ADAM (immediately) That's a no, right? You're not playing today.

LISA Hahaha… yeah, nah! I'm not… hahaha

(and points at her glass of wine)

"yeah, nah" - the Australian double marker, doing the whole refusal

WHAT I HEARD

"She might play. I'll join when she goes."

might = about 50% a glass-half-full reading

WHAT ADAM HEARD, INSTANTLY

"That's a no. She isn't playing."
The polite refusal, decoded under a millisecond

Four years

I have known Lisa in Brisbane

Four or five meetings

my English husband has had with her

SO, WHAT SEPARATES US

Not exposure and not proficiency - he had neither on his side. What separates us is which politeness system we were socialised into, and Dutch does not carry the downgrade English requires.

Author's own experience (February 2026); Haugh & Sinkeviciute (2021).

Three things a programme can act on

01 Name the illocution, not the form

02 Teach the variety, and name it

03 Treat social contact as curriculum

THE THREE QUESTIONS A THREE-HOUR LESSON CAN RUN ON

What is said? · What is the speaker doing? · How is it understood here? - form, function, context, in that order and in the same week.

WHAT THE CONTRIBUTION IS

“Knowing the form is not the same as knowing what it means between people.”

NEXT STEP: FROM CLASSROOM OBSERVATION TO FORMAL EXPERIMENT

In Semester 1, 2027, I will teach a new daytime class, allowing for more instructional time than the evening classes (approximately 16 hours per week across three days). I will seek employer approval to formalise data collection and conduct a properly recorded experiment.

Schmidt (1990); Meyer (2014); Erden (2026), classroom data.

Three Questions to Explore

01 **Does L2 instruction reshape cultural expectations?**
L2 instruction can challenge, expand and reshape learners' existing expectations, but it does not automatically replace the cultural frameworks they bring from their L1.

02 **Does linguistic proficiency necessarily lead to cultural understanding?**
No. Knowing how to use a linguistic form does not necessarily mean understanding its pragmatic, social or cultural implications.

03 **How does linguistic and cultural diversity shape meaning in the classroom?**
Diversity brings different interpretations and expectations into the classroom, creating opportunities to question assumptions, negotiate meaning and develop intercultural understanding.

These are not simply questions about learning another language, but about what happens when different expectations of meaning meet.

Questions



“Meaning doesn’t live in words alone; it lives in the cultural systems behind them.”

HEAR ME ON READING RADIO
DIGITAL — Look for Reading Radio between 4KQ and 4TAB
RADIO — Tune into 1296 AM
ONLINE — Listen via our website or iHeartRadio
ON THE GO — Download the Community Radio Plus or iHeartRadio app

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Coursebook materials examined: Empower (Cambridge University Press) and Life (National Geographic Learning), A1–C2. Quoted as illustrative material, not as empirical evidence.