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Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda:
Modality, Meaning and Misinterpretation in Multilingual AMEP Classrooms

Eight Weeks of Grammar Teaching Changed Nothing. Three Hours on Culture Marked a Turning Point.

Modal interpretation in 22 adult migrant learners: a classroom-based study in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)

This classroom-based study followed 22 adult migrant learners' interpretations of four modal expressions at three measurement points. Eight weeks of form-focused teaching produced no measurable change between Weeks 1 and 9. In Week 11, learners took part in a three-hour lesson comparing American, British and Australian English across grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, enriched with personal anecdotes and examples that included modal language. The four target expressions were not taught. At Week 18, 16 learners (73%) selected all four intended readings. The design shows a marked change over time, but cannot establish that the lesson alone caused it.

01 THE PUZZLE

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is a federally funded program providing free English language tuition to eligible migrants and humanitarian entrants, with a focus on settlement, everyday communication and participation in Australian life. In contrast, English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) are generally fee-paying and cater primarily to international students, often providing pathways to further academic study. The diversity of learners within the AMEP classroom became central to this study.

Four everyday expressions. Four intended meanings. Not one learner selected all four intended readings.

EXPRESSION	LITERAL READING	INTENDED
"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, never**
"You might want to revise this."	an optional suggestion	**change it**
"We should have drinks sometime."	an invitation	**I am ending this**

Source: Groefsema (1995); Brown & Levinson (1987); Meyer (2014); Travis & Torres Cacoullos (2023); Erden (2026).

02 WHO, WHERE, AND WHEN

22	adult learners, one evening class (every Monday and Wednesday from 6-9 PM)
24–72	age range
14	countries of origin: Japan · South Korea · China · India · Eritrea · Kenya · Sudan · Afghanistan · Iran · Syria · Ecuador · Colombia · Mexico · Congo
48 + 3	hours: form-focused instruction, then function/context-focused instruction in week 11

03 TWO SECTORS, TWO ECOLOGIES

The same language feature sits inside two different teaching ecologies.

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. Learners arrived with schooling, study habits and a written pathway. The lesson was about accuracy, and accuracy was measurable.

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, I started with modals of probability.

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

Illustrative synthesis of the ELICOS coursebook materials examined; not a prescribed CEFR sequence. Empower (Cambridge University Press) and Life (National Geographic Learning).

Sources: Collins (2023); Coates (1983); Saville-Troike (2012); Travis & Torres Cacoullos (2023).

04 THE DESIGN

WEEK 1 — Baseline — 0%
WEEK 9 — After 8 weeks form-focused grammar — 0%
WEEK 11 — English varieties: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation — 3 HOURS
WEEK 18 — 7-week follow-up — 73%

16 of 22 learners (73%) selected all four intended readings at follow-up.

Form phase: Mon/Wed, 6–9 pm, six hours weekly for eight weeks.

Forced-choice metapragmatic judgement: four expressions, two printed options each, identical at all three points.

Weeks 1 and 9: task only; no answers or feedback. Week 11: three-hour comparison of US, UK and Australian English (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation), with personal anecdotes and examples including modals; the four target sentences were not taught. Week 18: same task. Week 19: intended meanings discussed after all responses were collected.

WEEK 11 · THE THREE-HOUR LESSON

01 ENGLISH VARIETIES
US, UK and Australian English
Compared grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation across varieties of English.

02 LANGUAGE IN USE
Meaning in everyday communication
Explored how language choices can carry different meanings across social and cultural contexts.

03 PERSONAL ANECDOTES
Examples from lived experience
Personal stories and examples included modal expressions, without identifying them as the lesson focus or teaching the four test sentences.

05 THE RESULT

No measurable change from Week 1 to Week 9. At Week 18, 16 of 22 learners selected all four intended readings.

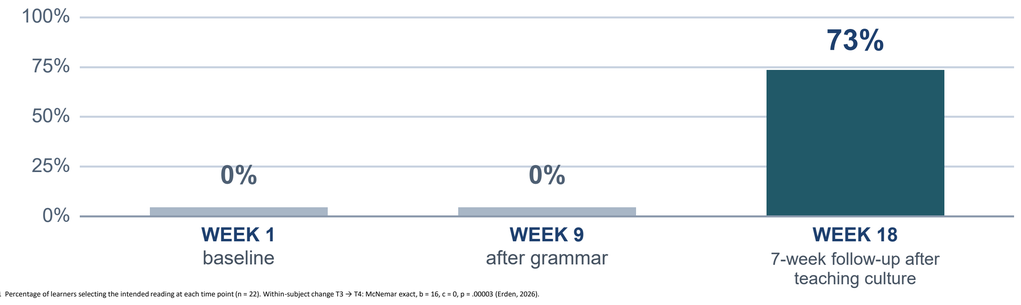


Fig. 1 Percentage of learners selecting the intended reading at each time point (n = 22). Within-subject change T3 → T4: McNemar exact, b = 16, c = 0, p = .00003 (Erden, 2026).

It was not just about knowing the grammar. It was about understanding what speakers were doing with those words in everyday Australian English interactions.

Acknowledgements: The twenty-two learners who took part; participation was separate from assessment and not graded.

06 NOT ON THE TEST

"I might join you sometime."
Week 15: an unrelated speaking task. A student winked and said:
"Teacher, I said no like an Australian."

Source: Erden (2026). Initial encounters: Haugh & Sinkeviciute (2021).

"Meaning doesn't live in words alone; it lives in the cultural systems behind them."

07 WHO SHIFTED · AND WHO DIDN'T

TWO RESPONSE PATTERNS

16 re-organised — at ceiling
6 did not move — at floor

The six learners who did not change were also the six oldest, and all six failed the end-of-term assessment; age and proficiency are therefore perfectly confounded. Four of the six reported very limited English-speaking contact outside class. This raises a question about interaction opportunities but does not by itself explain the difference. Responses were binary: all four intended readings or none. The design cannot establish that the intervention alone caused the change.

Why the shift occurred: Meyer (2014); Von Stutterheim et al. (2021); Erden (2026).

08 IMPLICATIONS for ELICOS and AMEP PRACTICE

Teach how modal meaning works in interaction, not only how modal forms are structured in textbooks.
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.

Source: Brown & Levinson (1987); Ren et al. (2023); Schmidt (1990).

09 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

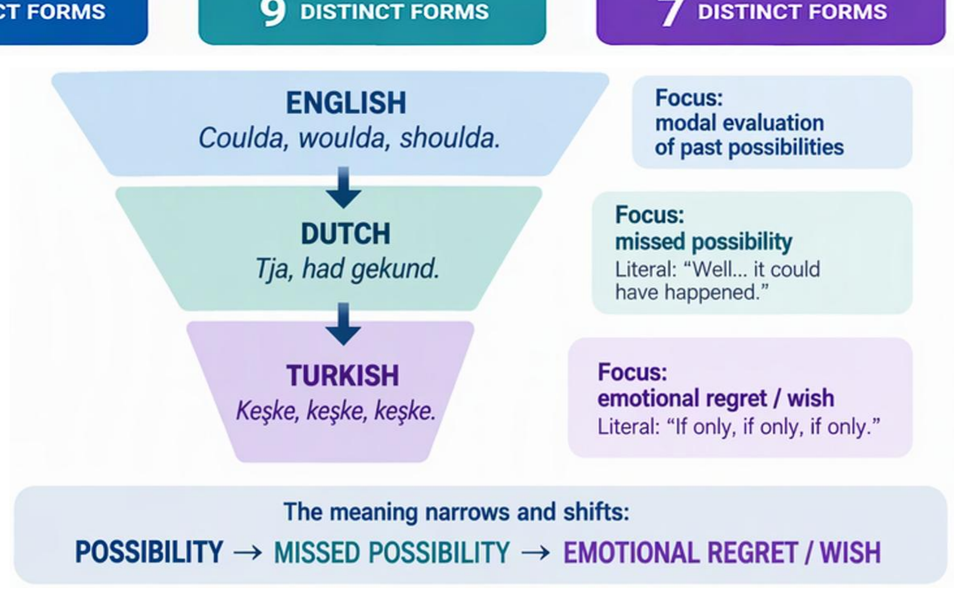
Same words, different meanings? Exploring how cultural conventions shape modal interpretation, and how dictionary meanings can differ from what speakers intend in context.

Source: Collins (2023); Travis & Torres Cacoullos (2023); Von Stutterheim et al. (2021).

DISTINCT FORMS 11 English · 9 Dutch · 7 Turkish

FORM INVENTORIES: HOW MANY DISTINCTIONS EACH LANGUAGE MAKES

ENGLISH		DUTCH		TURKISH	
can	ability	kan	ability	gidebilirsin	ability
can't	negative ability	kan niet	negative ability	gidemezsin	negative ability
may	permission	mag	permission	gidebilirsin	permission
might	uncertain possibility	zou kunnen	uncertain possibility	gidebilirsin	uncertain possibility
could	weak option	zou kunnen	weak option	gidebilirsin	weak option
should	advice	zou moeten	advice	gitmelisin	advice
must	obligation	moet	obligation	gitmelisin	obligation
have to	external obligation	moet	external obligation	gitmek zorundasın	external obligation
must not	prohibition	mag niet	prohibition	gitmemelisin	prohibition
will	future	zal / zult	future	gideceksin	future
would	conditional	zou	conditional	giderdin	conditional
11 DISTINCT FORMS		9 DISTINCT FORMS		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.

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