
*Developing lower learners'
proficiency in noticing and using
modals of obligation*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Modals on the outset appear to be generative, or follow some pattern. This is favorable, as this relieves some of the burden of memorizing and helps learners quickly build fluency. However, using modals is not so well defined. Depending on the context, intonation, and relation between the sender and receiver, the meaning can greatly change even while using the same auxiliary modal. This is why I feel it is imperative for low-level learners to be aware of, if not at least be exposed to, the concept of modality and its functions in the English language.

On the subject of modals, Palmer (1979:49) said:

There is no doubt that the over all picture of the modals is extremely "messy" and untidy...This subject is not one that lends itself to any simple explanation.

He goes on,

(This) must not be taken to imply that we cannot look for a fairly generalized common meaning or a set of closely related meanings for each modal.

With that forewarning, I present this paper. In this essay, I will focus primarily on the language system of grammar in regards to modals of obligation or necessity as they related to lower level learners. The focal point will be on the three verbs *must*, *(have) to*, and *(need) to*.

2. ANALYSIS

For this discussion, modals will be divided two different ways. The first division is regarding meaning. Yule (88) states that:

English modals typically convey some indication of the speaker's perspective or attitude with respect to the situation or state of affairs being described. That perspective can be based on what is known or what is social determined in the situation.

That is to say, modals are usually used to perform one of two main functions.

1. **Epistemic** (Intrinsic) – speakers add their own perspective. These modals usually deal with deductions and conclusions.
2. **Root** (Extrinsic, and sometimes called *deontic*) – speakers comment on what is known of social norms. These modals usually deal with obligations and permission.

The second division of modals is regarding form. I will divide modals into two general categories. Bieber (484) gives some common features as follows.

1. **Central modals** – e.g. *can*, *must*, and *should etc.* Some features are they:
 - a. Are invariant forms taking the role of auxiliary
 - b. Generally do not carry a meaning of tense/time
 - c. Proceed the negative particle *not* in negation
 - d. Proceed the subject in *yes/no* questions
 - e. Are followed by the bare infinitive
 - f. Generally cannot occur with another modal in the verb phrase
2. **Semi-modals** (quasi-modal/periphrastic) – e.g. *(have) to*, *(be able) to*. Some features for our discussion are they:
 - a. Can carry a meaning of tense/time and person
 - b. Can occur as non-finite
 - c. Can co-occur as an infinitive with another central modal verb

There are also marginal auxiliary verbs (sometimes categorized with semi-modal) e.g. *(ought) to*, *(need) to* that have a distinguishing feature of being followed by 'to' infinitive.

2.1 Analysis of Meaning and Use

2.1.1

Must / (Have) to

Regarding obligation, these modals are used to mean a course of action to which the receiver is often morally or legally bound, with limited or no choice. If the action is not taken, the receiver will encounter a serious repercussion.

As a negation:

- **must not means an action is prohibited**, or not allowed. E.g. “You must not smoke.” i.e. smoking is not permitted. In essence, there is no choice.
- **not (have) to means there is no obligation**. E.g. “You don’t have to go home.” i.e. If you go home or if you don’t go home, both are okay. There is a choice.

There are finer semantics between the objectivity and subjectivity of usage as it relates to the context (sender, receiver, relationships, setting, etc.) however I feel those finer meanings are out of the scope of this paper.

2.1.2

(Need) to

Regarding obligation, this modal means a course of action to which it is beneficial for the receiver to do the action. The use is similar to *(have) to*, however there is an implied advantage in doing the action. In a negation, *not (need) to* means there is no obligation. In academic writing, it can also occur as a true modal without the following ‘to’.

2.2 Analysis of Form

2.2.1

Must / (Have) to

	Past	Present	Future
Affirmative	had to	must / have(has) to / have (got) to	must / will have to
Negative	didn’t have to	mustn’t / don’t have to / doesn’t have to	won’t have to / will not have to

- *(have) to* is interchangeable with *(have got) to*, with *(have got) to* being more common in spoken British English.
- Note difference in meaning of *mustn’t* and *don’t have to* as pointed out in 2.1.1.
- *Don’t have to* and *won’t have to* is usually contracted in spoken English.
- *Must* is not used in the past.

	must	(have) to
Y/N Question	must + subject + v1	do / does + subject + have to + v1
Wh- Question	Wh + must + subject + v1	Wh + do / does + subject + have to + v1

2.2.2

(Need) to

	Past	Present	Future
Affirmative	needed to	need(s) to	will need to
Negative	didn’t need to	do not need to	will not need to

- Note the conjugation of need as a regular verb (third person ‘s’, use of v2 in the past tense, and use of will to signify a ‘future’.)

	(need) to
Y/N Question	do / does + subject + need to + v1
Wh- Question	Wh + do / does + subject + need to + v1

2.3 Analysis of Pronunciation

2.3.1

must

must	strong form /mʌst/	or	/mʌs/
	weak form /məst/	or	/məs/

Depending on following sound in connected speech, there often is an **elision of the /t/ phoneme**.

mustn't	/mʌsnt/
must not	/mʌs nɒt/

With the movement from the /s/ to the following /n/ sound, **in a negation there is an elision of /t/ phoneme at the end of must**.

2.3.2

(have) to

have to	/[h]æv tə/	or	/[h]æftə/	or even	/[h]əftə/
has to	/hæs tə/	or	/hæz tə/		
had to	/hætə/				

In connected speech in North Americans, it is **not uncommon to have an elision of the /h/ phoneme**. As in most cases of 'to', it has a weak vowel. Because the /t/ is unvoiced and follows /v/, **the /v/ assimilates to a /f/ sound**. In past tense, *had to*, there is a linking of the /d/ and /t/ **so they appear as one sound**.

2.3.3

(need) to

need to	/ni:dtə/	or	/ni:'tə/
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Again, in speech it is common for the **/d/ and /t/ sound to geminate and appear as one sound**.

3. ISSUES

Here are issues regarding modals of obligation that low-level learners may encounter and my teaching experience with such issues.

3.1 Issues with Meaning and Use

3.1.1

A major issue with modals of obligation, as with all modals, is that **understanding the modal is difficult or nearly impossible if the context is not well establish**. Cook states “The problem lies not in the surface positioning of modals nor in their wide range of meanings, but in associating the right modal with the right meaning.” (Cook, 1978:5) Context is paramount in deducing and giving meaning. Byrd takes the point further to say “The **difficulties** in interpreting an already complex system have often been **compounded by teaching methods that present modals as a list.**” (Byrd, 1995)

I especially noticed this problem when teaching low-level Arabic speakers with an in-house published course book that did little to establish context, but rather gave a list of modal auxiliaries and their ‘meanings’. As there are no modals in Arabic, this topic already proved challenging. This challenge was increased when the same word had several different meanings.

Example:

Each of the following sentences uses *must* but each with varying meaning.

- *You mustn't point your feet at the Buddha.* (a prohibition)
- *You must be careful with your wallet on that street.* (an advice)
- *You must have eaten pat thai by now.* (a deduction)

3.1.2

Must and (have) to, although having similar meaning in positive statements, **as negations have different meanings** (as pointed out in 2.1.1):

must not means there is a prohibition, or an action is not allowed.

Example:

- You mustn't wear shoes in International House Bangkok, i.e. shoes are not allowed to be worn in the institute.

not have to indicates a lack of obligation.

Example:

- You don't have to wear shoes in my house, i.e. you can wear shoes if you want to, but you are not requirement to. Either way is fine.

3.2 Issues with Form

3.2.1

Lewis (Lewis, 2002) observed **learners usually overuse *must* and avoid (have) to** completely. While in my experience, I personally haven't seen this, he says the reason is teachers frequently give examples only beginning with *I must* and *I have to* where there is little difference of meaning between the two.

3.2.2

Some languages do not have a concept of modals or quasi-modals, such as Arabic and Spanish, and they specifically have **issue using quasi-modals in the interrogative form**. Swan and Bernard (Swan and Bernard, 1987) said Spanish and Catalan have only one category of verbs that all show the normal range of tense. Unlike English, there is no separate category of modal auxiliaries and learners find the concept difficult to grasp. Specifically for our discussion, **have can be a main verb or an auxiliary verb**, which can be confusing.

Example:

You have shoes. -> Do you have shoes? -> What do you have?
You have to go to the store. -> Do you have to go to the store? -> Where do you have to go?

3.3 Issues with Pronunciation

3.3.1

Refer to section 2.3 Analysis of Pronunciation, to see the elisions, assimilations and geminates regarding the modals of obligation in discussion. Because of these pronunciation characteristics in connected speech, this can create comprehension issues for learners when listening to native speakers (for examples, please refer to section 2.3.)

4. SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING

4.1 Suggestions for Teaching Meaning and Use

- **Establish context.** After the set up, **get the meaning from there.**

- **Noticing.** Get learners into the habit of **noticing** or looking out for **modals in different texts**. As they are pointed out, go through CCQs related to the modal, then **change the modal to see how the meaning changes** and if more relevant CCQs should be asked. While teaching low-level Arabic speakers, I felt this greatly helped their noticing, understanding and using of modals.

- **Use Concept Checking Questions** (See Appendix A). Workmans (2003:OHT35) will greatly help with the negation difference as pointed out in 3.1.2. (See Appendix C).

- "Avoid statements about either *must* or *(have) to* being "stronger" than the other (Lewis, 2002:108).

- As stated in 2.1.1 there is a subtle difference in the use of *must* and *(have) to*. Scrivener (2002) gives his suggestion for teaching the difference (See Appendix B), however

1. I feel at this level it would create more confusion than clarity, and

2. It's not practical to remember so many rules at this level.

- **Reformulate.** When monitoring listen for language that could be better replaced by a modal. Write the language on the board at the end of the activity and ask learners to reformulate them.

Example:

My job starts at 10, so I leave at the institute at 9:30. I cannot be late.

Have students reformulate using *must* or *(have) to* > I must be at my job before 10.

4.2 Suggestions for Teaching Form

- **Writing dialogues** with stipulations, e.g. a minimum of 6 modals, 3 modals are in question form, etc., is an exercise I have used with low-level Arabic speakers. It personalized the context and encouraged them to search for natural expression of modals. They also had to focus on the form, differentiating between central modals and semi-modals in question form.

- To address the over use of *must* as oppose to *(have) to* as put forth in 3.2.1, Lewis (Lewis, 2003) suggests teachers **present a wider range of examples** such a traffic signs, and **making sure to introduce examples with subjects other than "I"**.

4.3 Suggestions for Teaching Pronunciation

- After learners are aware of what to listen to, **expose them to authentic text** that has the target sound during listening skill lessons, or record you own if need be. Make sure the modals and weak forms you want students to practice are in the text.

- **Drills** can help learners develop their intonation and production of the weak forms. This is especially true for young learners. Chants or an audio-lingual approach can also work well. They help with pronunciation, but are void of meaning. Ideally you would want a social context that encourages communication by having a communicative goal.

- **Role Plays** provide a way for learners to lower their affective filters and build fluency producing target sounds they noticed during the exposure to authentic text.

4.4 Suggested Activities

Some activities as suggested by Case (2013)

- **Draw the prohibitions**

Learners draw pictures of prohibition on the board while classmates try to guess the prohibition. This could also be extended as a creative activity and where after viewing signs of prohibition, learners draw their own signs and present them to the class. Classmates will then have to guess what the different signs mean and use the modals of prohibition to make the sentences.

This activity is ideals for learners who are more visual-spatial. It explores other skills that learners have that may be over looked in a language class.

- **Why prohibit that?**

During a receptive skills lesson, learners try to guess why things have been prohibited in particular places or at particular times. Afterwards, they read or listen and check. They can then discuss whether those are good reasons or not.

- **Guess from the prohibitions**

In pairs or groups, learners draw from a set of cards related to a country, place, activity, job etc. that also has a list of rules that are true for one particular topic. Other members have to guess what is being spoken about. This will expose students to authentic use of the modals.

- **A class contract**

The teacher brings, as an example, a 'class contract' with expectations and prohibitions for the learners in the class. Afterwards, learners draw up rules for their teacher and English class that everyone agrees to keep. This is meant to be lighthearted and get learners practicing modals of obligation in a less serious context.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Based on concept checking questions by Scrivener (Scrivener, 2010:220,1) for modals of obligation.

1. You need to install the new software on your computer.
 - a. Is it important for me to install the new program? (Yes)
 - b. Do I have a choice about to install it or not? (Yes)
 - c. Is it a good idea for me to do it? (Yes)
2. Henry's parents said that he has to be home before 11.30.
 - a. Can Henry leave before 11.30? (Yes)
 - b. Can he go home after 11.30? (No)
 - c. What will happen if he goes home later? (He will be in trouble with his parents)
 - d. Does Henry have a choice about what time he goes home? (No)
3. You don't have to take your shoes off in our house.
 - a. When you come to our house is it essential that you take your shoes off? (No)
 - b. Can you take them off if you want to? (Yes)
 - c. Is there a problem if you don't take them off? (No, it's your choice)

Appendix B

Adapted from Scrivener (Teaching English Grammar, 2010:222)

With my students, I prefer to suggest five basic but realistic and usable guidelines [for differentiating when to use *must* and (*have*) *to*]. I know they are incomplete and a simplification - but they do offer some manageable starting points:

- 1) If you are talking about laws or rules or requirements, use *have to*.
You have to get a fishing licence.
- 2) Use *must* after *I*.
I must try to lose some weight.
- 3) But use *have to* if you are talking about something a person doesn't really want to do.
I have to eat less chocolate.
- 4) Use *have to* with adverbs of frequency.
I usually have to finish my homework before I can watch TV
- 5) If you are giving friendly suggestions or advice about what someone could do, use *must*.
You really must try the fish.

have to / don't have to / mustn't

What is the difference in meaning between *have to*, *don't have to* and *mustn't* in these three sentences?

- 1 I *have to* start work at 7.00am.
- 2 I *don't have to* get up early on Sunday mornings.
- 3 You *mustn't* smoke in class.

Concept

have to means that something is necessary, you have no choice.

don't have to means that something is not necessary, you have a choice, you can do it if you want.

mustn't means that something is prohibited, it is essential you do *not* do something.

Concept questions

I have to start work at 7.00am.

- 1 Is it necessary to start work at 7.00am? (Yes)
- 2 Is there a choice? (No)

I don't have to get up early on Sunday mornings.

- 1 Is it necessary to get up early on Sunday? (No)
- 2 Is there a choice? (Yes)
- 3 Can I get up early on Sunday if I want to? (Yes)

You mustn't smoke in class.

- 1 Can I (Am I allowed to) smoke in class? (No)
- 2 Do I have a choice? (No)
- 3 Is it prohibited / forbidden? (Yes)
- 4 Is there a rule against it? (Yes)