



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU



THE USE OF MODAL VERBS AND ADVERBS BY ESTONIAN SCHOOL-LEAVERS IN THEIR ENGLISH STATE EXAMINATION ESSAYS

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Aims of the study

- project “Looking for CEFR criterial features in Estonian learner English”
- use of modal verbs and adverbs in Estonian learners’ English state examination essays
- correspondence to the progression of such verbs and adverbs identified in English Profile Project (EPP)

Aims of the study

- Research questions:

Which modal meanings and functions do Estonian learners use most?

How do Estonian learners' modal verb usage patterns align with EPP findings at levels A2, B1, and B2?

How does modal verb and adverb usage improve with advancement to higher proficiency levels?

English modal verbs (I) (Quirk et al 1985, Biber et al 2002, Carter and McCarthy 2006)

- **central/core modals:** *can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would, must*
 - invariant, defective verbs
 - auxiliaries
- **marginal modals:** *dare, need, ought to, used to*
 - auxiliary negation, inversion
 - restricted to BrE
- **semi-modals/modal idioms:** *had better, have to, have got to, be supposed to, be going to, etc.*
- **main verbs with modal meaning:** *hope, begin, want, permit, insist*

English modal verbs (II)

Main meanings:

- permission/possibility/ability: *can, could, may, might*
Mary can stay out late. He may be at home now. Susan could run very fast when she was a girl.
- obligation/necessity: *must, should, had better, have (got) to, need to, ought to, be supposed to*
I must phone my mother today. You'd better see a doctor. You shouldn't smoke. I 'll have to leave now.
- volition/prediction: *will, would, shall, be going to*
I'll do it, if you like. You'll feel better after a cup of hot tea.

Each modal can have two different types of meanings: intrinsic and extrinsic.

English modal adverbs (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:767ff)

- Adverbs expressing modal meaning:

necessarily, probably, possibly, surely, certainly, definitely, obviously, likely, truly, unquestionably, allegedly, maybe, perhaps, etc.

He must have made a mistake. He has surely made a mistake.

They should be in Berlin by now. They are probably in Berlin by now.

- express epistemic modality
- a scale of strength: *necessarily – probably – possibly*

Previous studies

- **Developmental patterns:** Li 2022, Yang 2018, Öksüz & Fordyce 2016, Chen 2010, Aijmer 2002, Hyland & Milton 1997
- **Overuse:** Li 2022, Yang 2018, Aijmer 2002, Holmes 1988
- **Misuse at semantic/pragmatic level:** Li 2022, Yang 2018, Öksüz & Fordyce 2016, Hyland & Milton 1997, Holmes 1988
- **Influence of L1 and culture:** Li 2022, Yang 2018, Öksüz & Fordyce 2016, Aijmer 2002, Holmes 1988
- **Need for broader modal repertoire:** Yang 2018, Aijmer 2002, Hyland & Milton 1997

Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

- provides a common language for discussing proficiency and recognising qualifications
- language-neutral, illustrative descriptors to describe proficiency levels A1–C2
- criticism for lacking empirical data and L1-specific detail
- reference level descriptions use corpus data to align CEFR levels with actual learner performance

English Grammar Project (EGP)

- part of the English Profile Project (Cambridge University Press & Assessment 2025)
- created to develop level descriptions for English
 - A2: Simple sentences without object: *You can get there by train.*
 - B1: Verb + object + infinitive: *I helped her (to) bake the cake.*
 - B2: Adverbial subordinate clauses with -ing that precede the clause to which they are attached: *Talking about spare time, I think we could go to the museum.*
- based on a large collection of Cambridge examination answers
- level descriptions highlight typical language use and common mistakes at each proficiency level
- the data are limited to written examinations and may not fully reflect real language use

MODALS: FORM (EGP)

A1

- affirmatives
- questions
- negatives

A2

- limited use after *if*

B1

- negative questions
 - question tags
- modal perfect forms
- with limited range of adverbs
- expanded use after *if*
 - reported speech
 - future in the past

B2

- modal progressive forms
- with expanded range of adverbs

C1

- passive constructions
- neg. modal perfect forms
 - inversion
- with wide range of adverbs

C2

- *may/might as well*

A1

- ability
- possibility
- plans and intentions
- wishes and preferences

A2

- permission
- prohibition
- obligation and necessity
 - advice
 - suggestions
- imagined situations

B1

- past possibility
- deductions
- likelihood
- predictions
- imagined past situations
 - past willingness
 - plans/intentions
 - desired situations
 - indirectness
- general truths/tendencies
(*Sitting all day can be stressful.*)

B2

- past speculation
- past deductions
 - obligation
- negative rules (prohibition)
 - habitual past
- commands/requests
- focusing attention (*as you may + verb*)
- emphasis (*I can say that...*)
 - concessions (*I must admit...*)
 - expectations

MODALS: FUNCTION (EGP)

C1

- criticism/disapproval
 - habitual behavior
 - formal instructions

C2

- rhetorical questions
 - hedging
- concessions in subordinate clauses (*Whatever it may be...*)

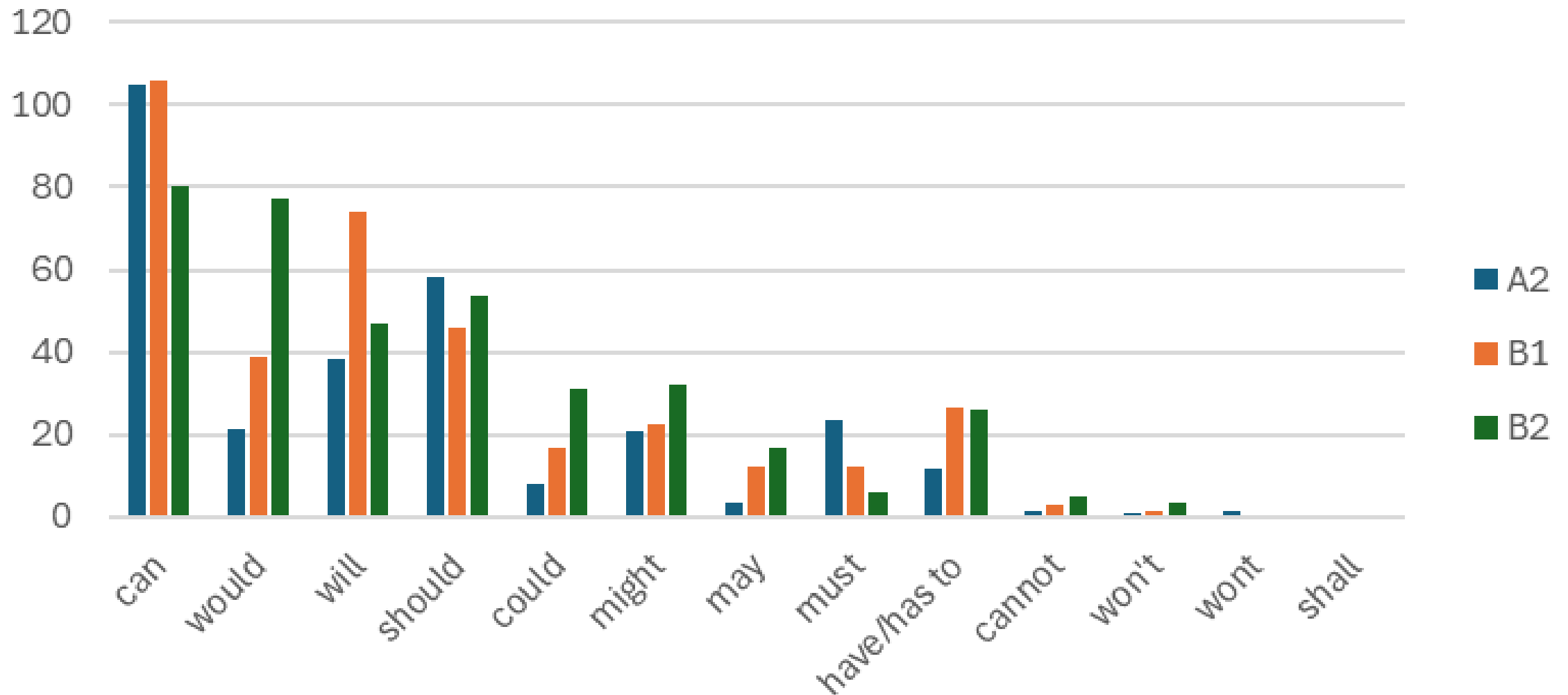
Material

- school-leavers' English state examination essays from years 2015, 2018, 2019, 2022 and 2023
 - Estonian L1
 - total 108,856 running words
 - divided into three proficiency groups CEFR
 - A2 (15,756 running words)
 - B1 (44,179 running words)
 - B2 (48,921 running words)

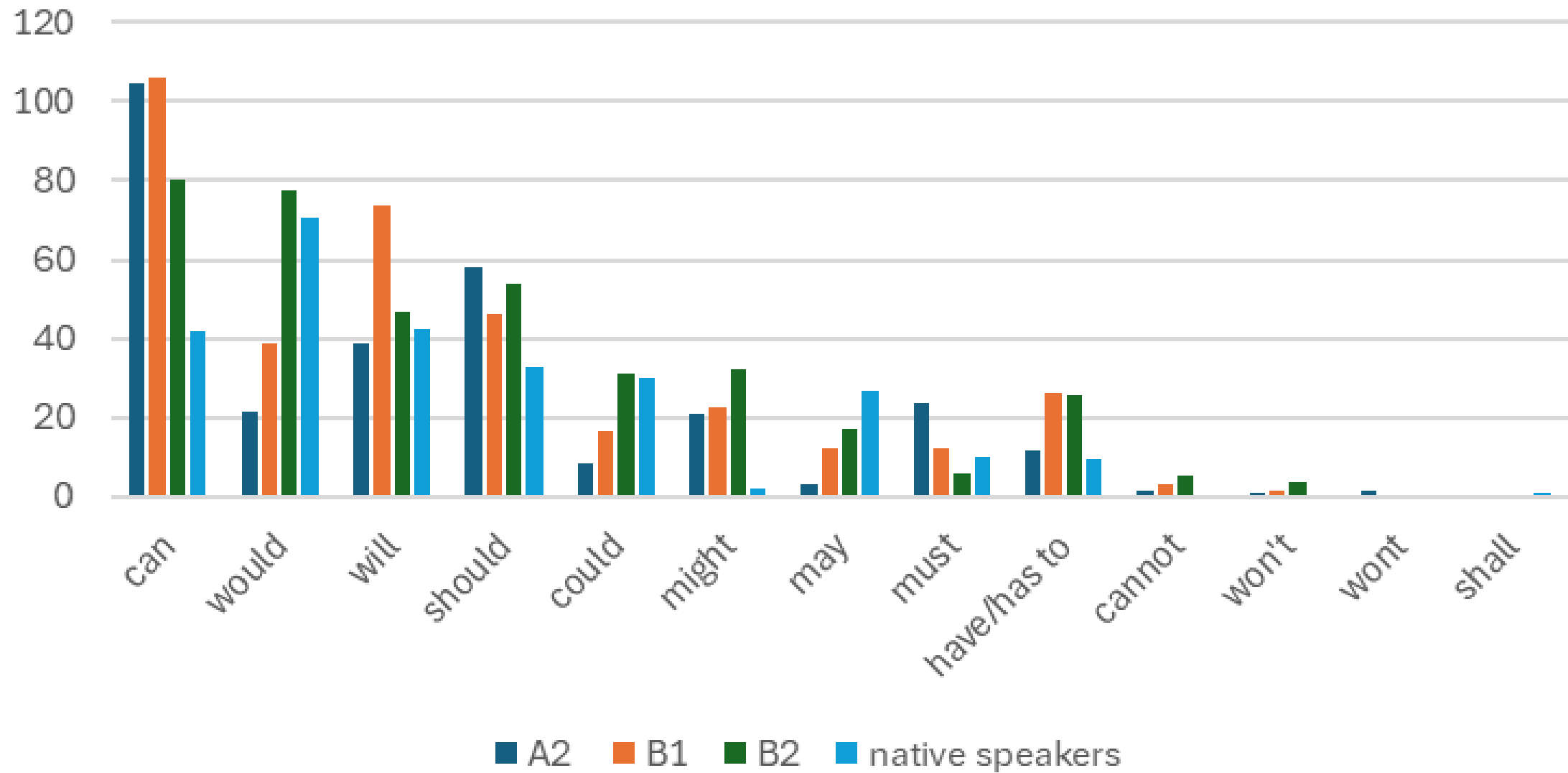
Methods

- digitised, keyboarded and checked essays
- AntConc, Word, N-gram and KWIC tools
- normalised frequency per 10,000 words

Results: NormFreq of modal verbs across A2, B1 and B2



Results: native speakers (A-level essays)



MODALS: FORM (EGP)

A1

- affirmatives
- questions
- negatives

A2

- limited use after *if*

B1

- ~~negative questions~~
- ~~question tags~~
- ~~modal perfect forms~~
- ~~with limited range of adverbs~~
- expanded use after *if*
- reported speech
- passive constructions (in fixed phrases)
- future in the past

B2

- modal perfect forms
- ~~modal progressive forms~~
- ~~with expanded range of adverbs~~

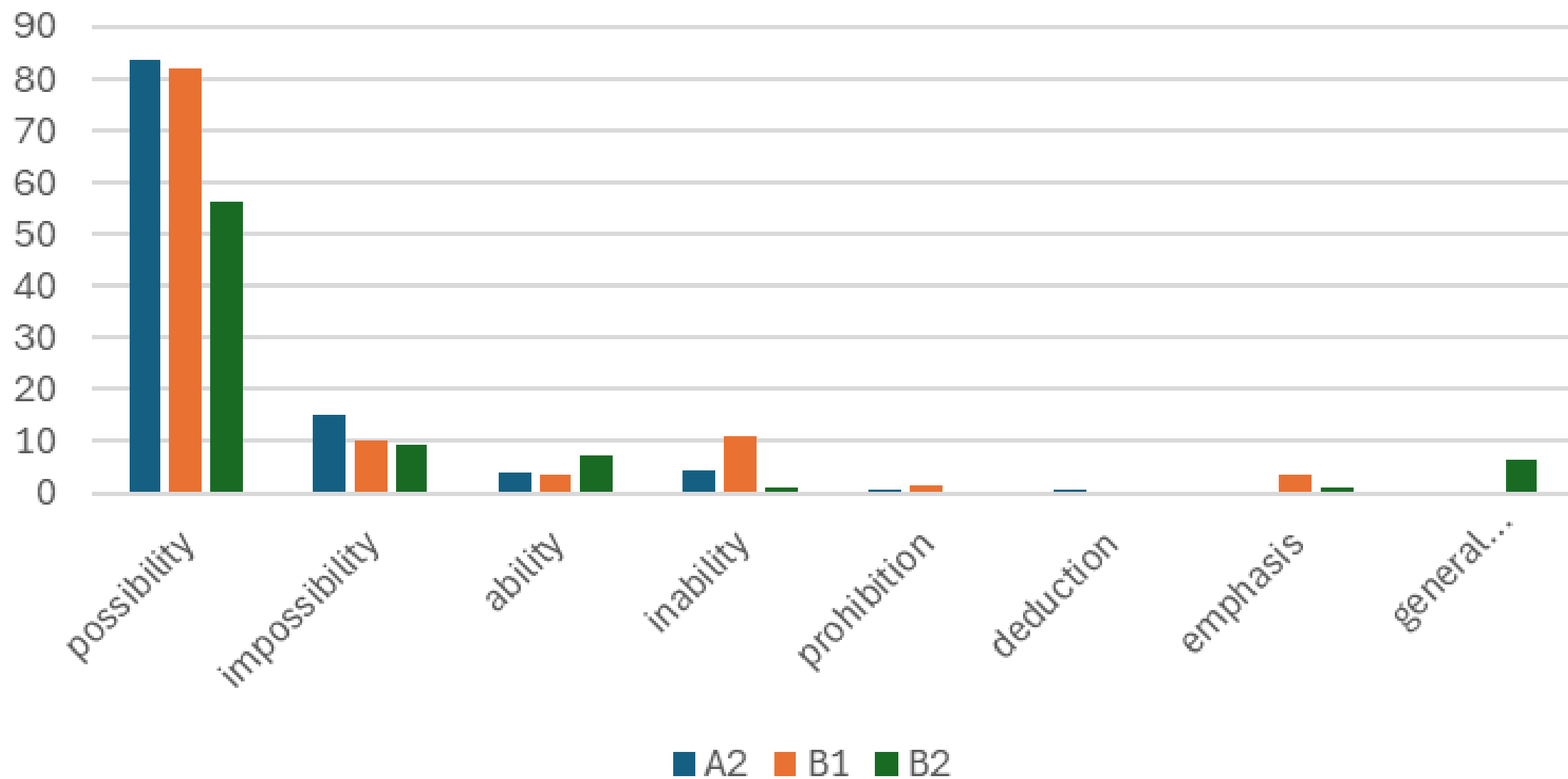
C1

- ~~passive constructions~~
- ~~neg. modal perfect forms~~
- ~~inversion~~
- ~~with wide range of adverbs~~

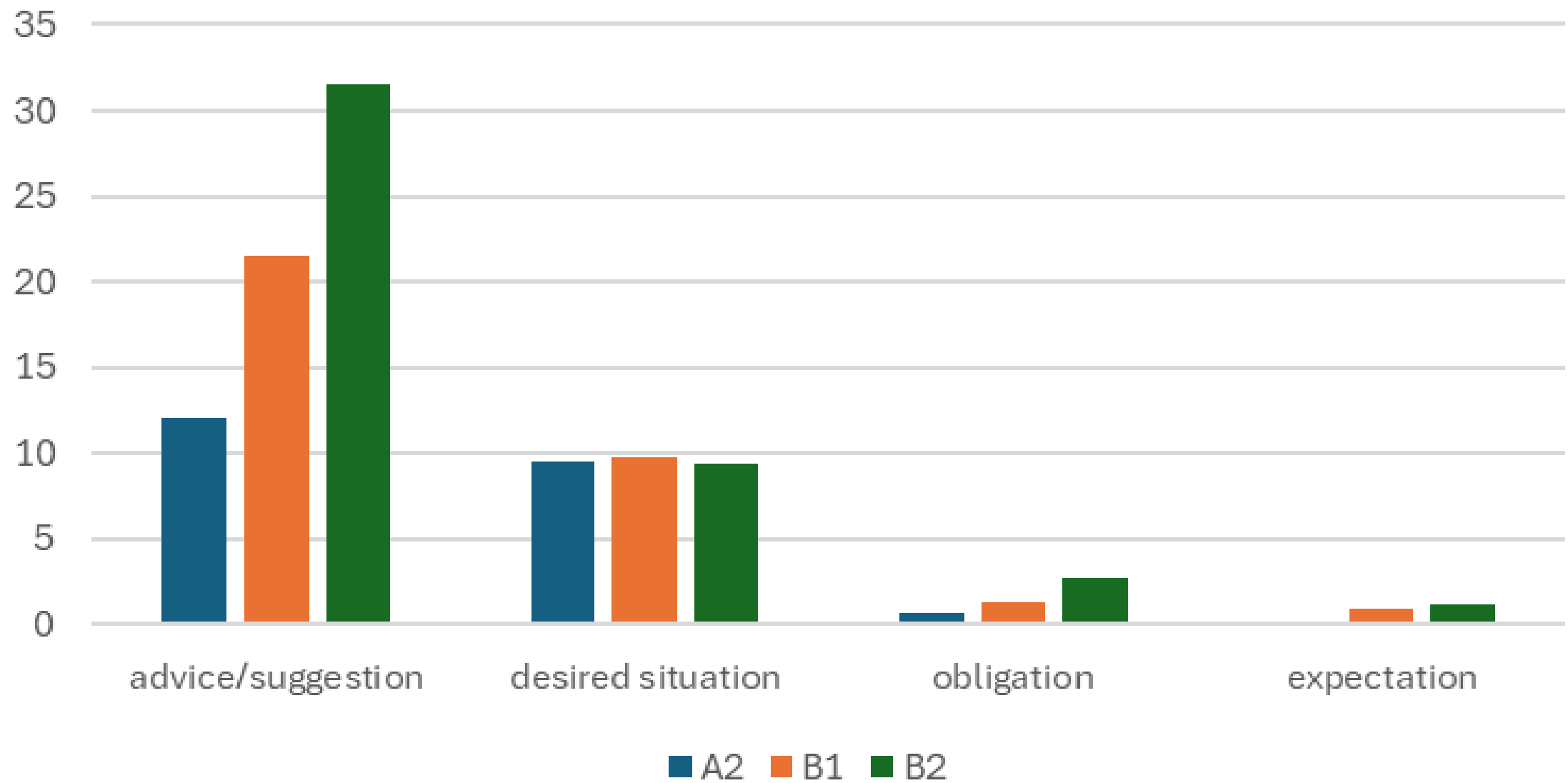
C2

- *may/might as well*

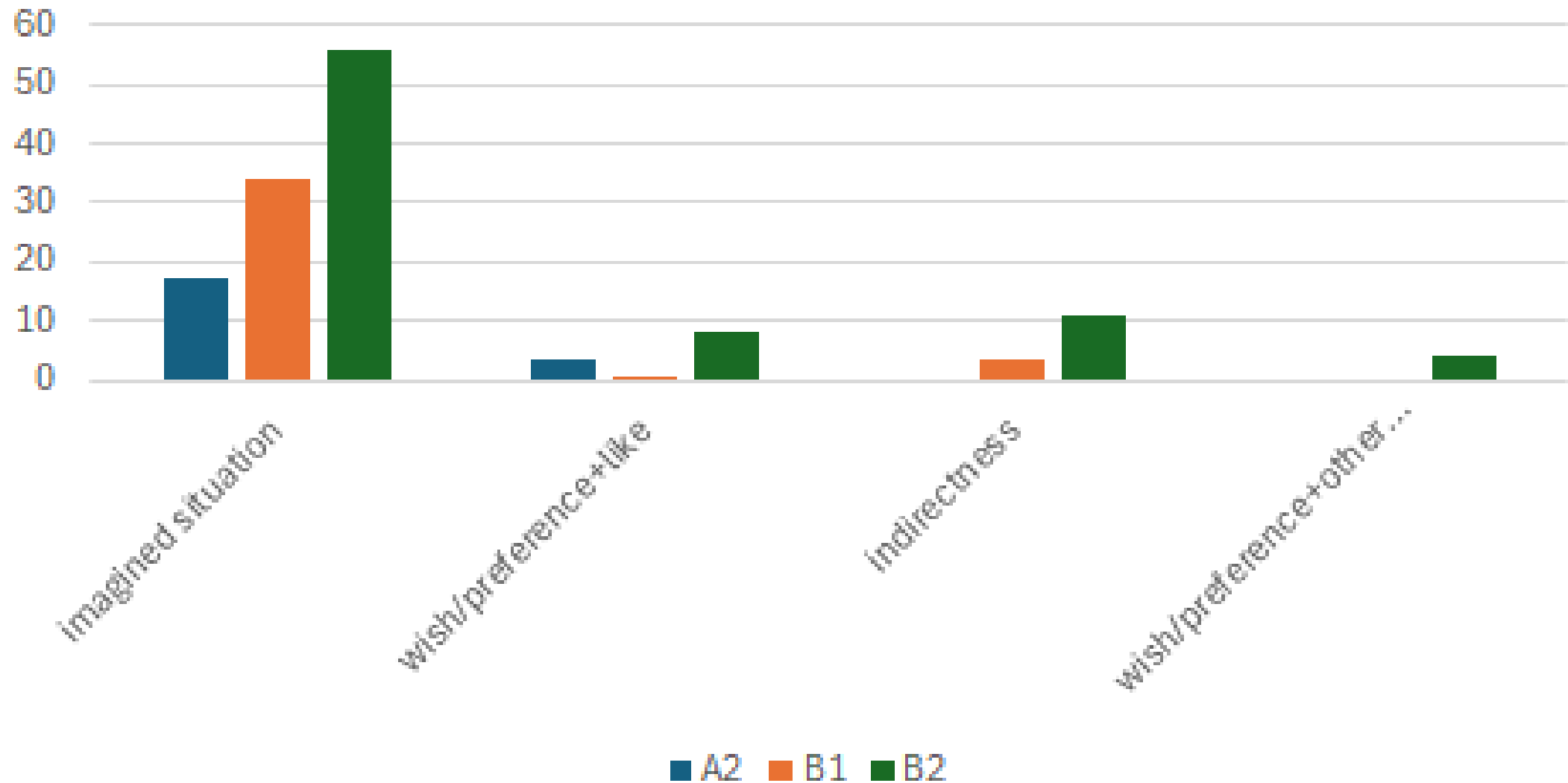
Functions of CAN (NormFreq)



Functions of SHOULD (NormFreq)

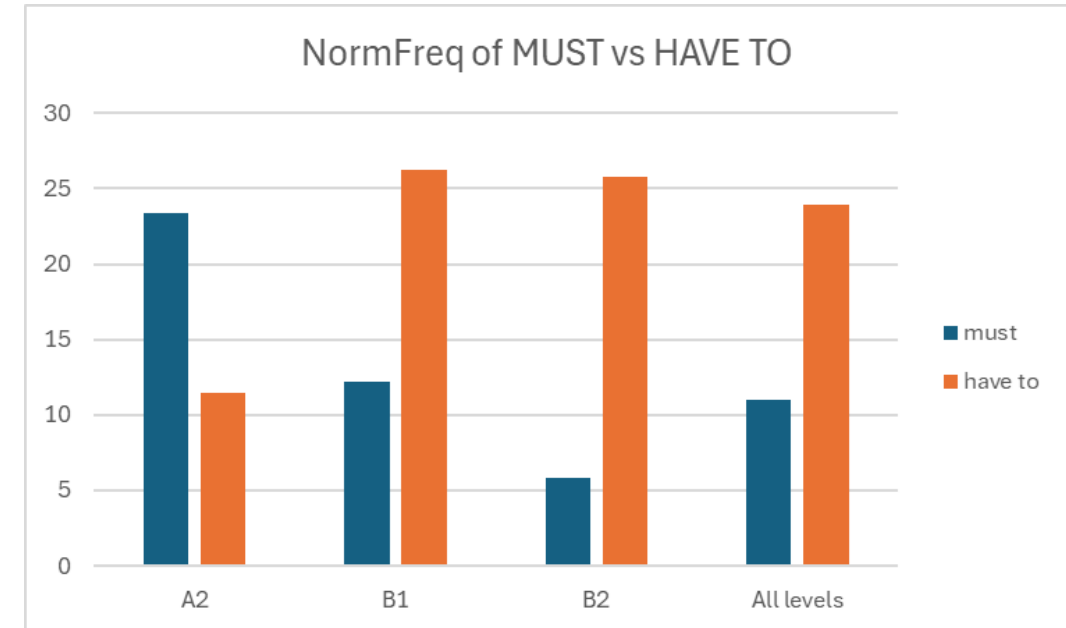


Functions of WOULD (NormFreq)



Results: other modals

- *will* – prediction and plans/intentions
- *must/have to* – obligation/necessity
- *may/might* – possibility
- *could* – very similar to *can*
- *shall, had better, (have) got to, dare* – not used
- *(be) supposed to* – 2x at B2
- *ought to* – 1x at B2
- *need* – only lexical use
- task influence – hypothetical future situations; lifting from the prompt



Lifting from the prompt (I)

SHOULD SMART DEVICES BE BANNED IN THE CLASSROOM?

Write an essay discussing the advantages and disadvantages of using smart devices in the classroom and expressing your own opinion.

are extremely popular nowadays. However, some people think that they	should	be banned in the classrooms. I am only partly
the classroom or not. In my opinion, the smart devices	should	be banned in the classroom, because students can not
and students will not disappear. In my opinion smart devices	should	be banned in the classroom. The usage of smart
for studying are obvious. Some people say that smart devices	should	be banned in the classroom. Smart devices are for
thousands of papers every year. In my opinion, smart devices	should	be banned in the classroom because I think that
with these devices. However, some people think that smart devices	should	be banned in the classroom. Firstly, smart phones and
students away from studying. My opinion is that smart devices	should	be banned in the classroom, as it is one
a lesson because of those reasons. I think smart devices	should	be banned in the classroom. Nowadays pretty much every

Lifting from the prompt (II)

Many Estonian people have left their native country to study or work abroad.

- Do you see this as a problem? Why/Why not?
- What might motivate them to return? Discuss at least two ideas.

opportunities to dissapare their language and culture. One idea what	might	motivate them to return is more universities what means
also electer, clothes and food are to expensive. But what	might	motivate them to return? I think if the actsises
study or work abroad. A known fact is that homesickness	might	motivate them to return and also better job might
orizon and will teach younger generation. Furthermore, homesickness	might	motivate them to return. People goes to different country
can not stand the different culture. Moreover, better job also	might	motivate them to come back. Many Estonians have left
as a problem. Because every year people leave Estonia. What	might	motivate them to return? First things first, people want
level to be able give more money for people. This	might	motivate them to return. Also people leave Estonia to
can work and where they can have big payment. What	might	motivate them to return? It is a very hard
to Estonia. There are my thinks about this and what	might	motivate them to return. Some people say that Estonian

Lifting from the prompt (III)

Estonian students must study fifteen subjects in Forms 10–12. Some people think that students should be able to choose only five subjects to concentrate on.

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of studying fewer subjects?
- Should the present system be changed? Why/Why not?

study and this is very good for Estonian. Estonian students	must	study fifteen subjects in Forms 10-12, but some people think
tivation. Estonian schools are TOP 10 in the Europe. Estonian students	must	study fifteen subjects in Forms 10-12, but some people think
what they want. I think it is normal when students	should	be able to choose only five subjects to concentrate
when you know where to go after the school you	should	be able to choose only five subjects what you
study, I could relate to the topic. The current system	should	be changed because it forces students to stay in
to work long days in the future. The present system	should	be changed in some ways but not subjects from

A1

- ability
- possibility
- plans and intentions
- wishes and preferences

A2

- permission
- prohibition
- obligation and necessity
- imagined situations
- advice
- suggestions

B1

- past possibility B2
- deductions B2
- ~~◦ likelihood~~
- predictions A2
- ~~◦ imagined past situations~~
- ~~◦ past willingness~~
- plans/intentions A2
- desired situations A2
- indirectness A2
- general truths/tendencies B2

B2

- past speculation
- past deductions
- obligation
- negative rules (prohibition)
- habitual past
- commands/requests
- focusing attention
- emphasis
- ~~◦ concessions~~
- expectations

MODALS: FUNCTION (EGP)

C1

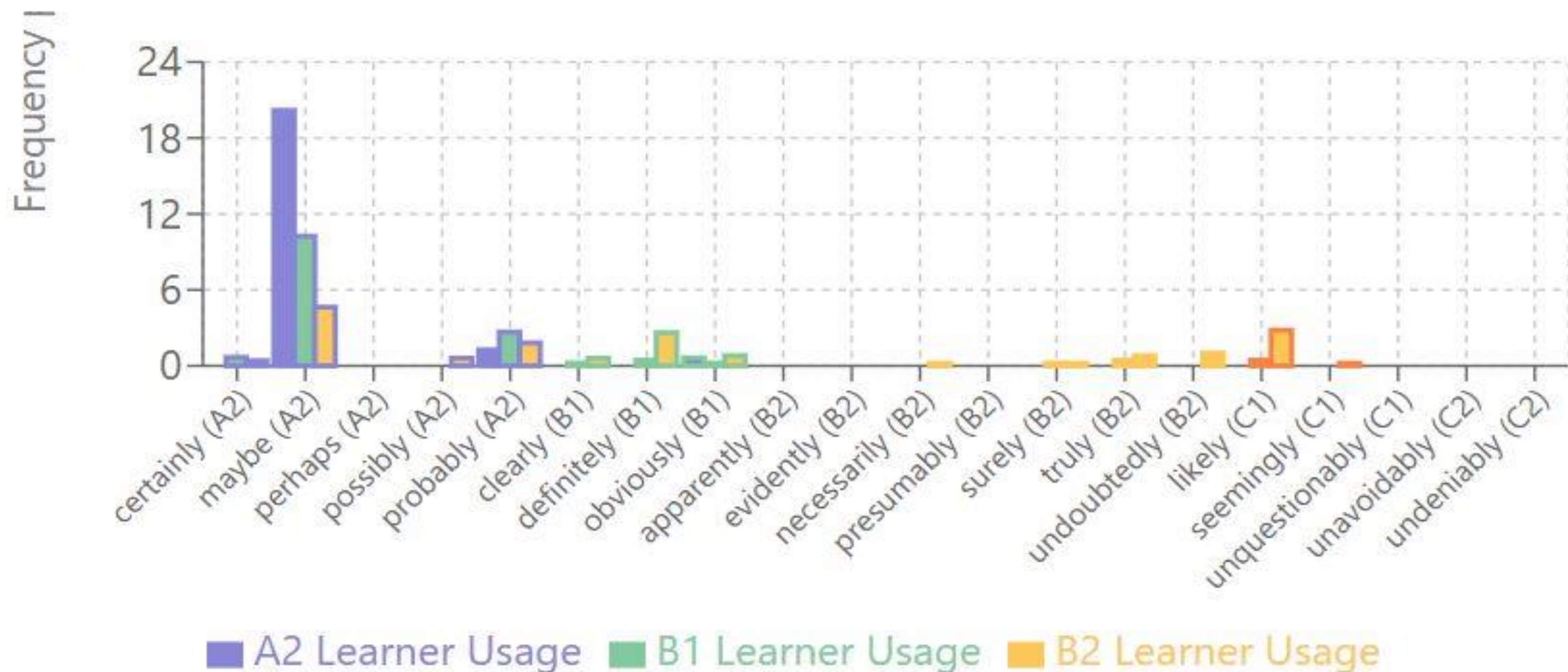
- emphasis/focus B1
- criticism/disapproval
- habitual behavior
- ~~◦ formal instructions~~

C2

- ~~◦ rhetorical questions~~
- ~~◦ hedging~~
- ~~◦ concession~~

Modal Adverbs: Expected vs. Actual Usage

Comparing English Vocabulary Profile classifications with actual learner usage



Modal adverbs

- A2 adverbs (*maybe*) show highest usage among A2 learners, with usage decreasing as proficiency increases
- B1 adverbs show more varied patterns, with *definitely* being more common among B2 learners
- B2 adverbs generally show higher usage among B2 learners.
- C1 adverb *likely* shows significant usage across B1 and B2 levels despite its higher classification
- Many higher-level adverbs (C1, C2) show very little or no usage across all learner levels.

Conclusion

- *can, would, will, should* are the most frequently used modals
- most frequent functions: possibility (*can, may, might*), advice and suggestion (*should*), imagined situations (*would*), indirectness (*would*)
- a variety of different forms not so big when compared to EGP
- modal perfect in B2 level in essays
- A2: functions very similar to EGP A1-A2 functions
- B1: 'fluid'
- B2: just some functions added
- A2 adverbs are used most by A2 learners; higher-level adverbs show less or no usage across all proficiency levels.
- task influence on the choice of modal verbs and constructions

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Thank you for listening!