

# THE PRAGMATIC USES OF AUXILIARY VERBS *CAN*, *COULD*, *WILL* AND *WOULD* FOR COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSES

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## A. Introduction

The focus of this study is to explore the pragmatic considerations in the study of English as a foreign language in Indonesia. In Indonesia, English is taught in a 'traditional way; i.e. the emphasis is placed on linguistic competence' (Saunders, 1991:84). After years of study, many Indonesian learners still find it difficult to communicate in English. Those who can use the language to communicate with native speakers of English find difficulty in adjusting themselves with the cultures of the English speaking communities, which are not officially learned. Language planners and learners of English in Indonesia do not seem to realise that "human communication is strongly related to cultural backgrounds of the communicator and his audience" (Sitaram and Cogdell, 1976:1), and that "language is inextricably linked with its culture" (de Young, 1986:21). Brown (1980:129) puts the relationship between culture and second language learning more strongly by saying that "second language learning is often second culture learning".

Cultural understanding of the target language should be included in the learning of English in Indonesia. Similarly the culture of Indonesian learners should also be adequately addressed to see how it differs from that of the English speaking communities. There are various definitions of culture. Brown (1980:122) defines culture as "a way of life, the context within which we exist,

think, feel and relate to others". It is the "glue" that binds a group of people together. Other writers, Harding and Riley (1986:42) argue that "culture, the way of life of the society in which we grow up influences our habits, our customs, the way we dress and eat, our beliefs and values, our ideas and feelings, our notions of politeness and beauty".

Second or foreign language learners need to study the culture of the target language users. Sitaram and Cogdell (1976: 5) state that "if a person wants to communicate in other cultures, he should develop a new insight into human communicative behaviour. He needs to know that other peoples are not like what they thought they were". Learners of English in Indonesia with little or no opportunity to practise their English with native speakers of English realize the important role culture plays in language learning, and do their best to acquire this cultural knowledge. This is difficult though because "most aspects of culture are assimilated unconsciously, simply by living in a particular society" (Harding and Riley, 1986:42). It is likely then that Indonesian learners will not be successful in learning English if they do not at the same time learn the culture in general, and most importantly the cultures closely linked and attached to the use of the English language itself.

This essay focuses on the pragmatic use of modal auxiliary verbs **can**, **could**,

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**will, would;** some problems experienced by learners; and some suggested strategies which may solve these problems. It is divided into six main parts. *Firstly*, it begins with an introduction covering the relationship between culture and second language learning, then it presents the purpose and design of the essay, followed by a discussion of the use of modal auxiliary verbs **can, could, will, would**, from the view points of forms, functions and usage and their equivalents in Indonesian. *Fourthly*, it presents some likely cultural-related difficulties faced by Indonesian learners in using the modal auxiliary verbs due to the lack of equivalents, specific meanings and cultural differences. Then, it suggests some strategies and practical learning steps in order to make cultural consideration an integral part of the teaching of **can, could, will, would**, and lastly the conclusion.

In this essay all Indonesian words/sentences and English specified and referred words are underlined. Sentences in English used as examples within sentences are typed in bold. For easy reference, each sentence used as an example is numbered. Certain abbreviations will be used for efficiency. BI is Bahasa Indonesia (the Indonesian language); MAV means Modal Auxiliary Verb(s). An example is as follows:

1. Can which is one of the most common MAV in English means dapat in BI.

2. Can in **He can speak French well** expresses ability or capability.

## **B. Discussion of the use of can, could, will, would.**

Discussion of the MAV below is based on grammar and usage. The examples are drawn and adapted from Leech (1989), which presents and describes the most current usage of can, could, will, would.

### **1. Can**

In English, can has three main uses, i.e. ability (comparable to be able to), possibility (comparable to may), and permission (comparable to may) (Leech, 1989:72-74; Thomson and Martinet, 1980:118-120; Quirk and Greenbaum, 1979:52-53). In BI the equivalent of can is dapat. This word is used to

express ability and permission but normally not for possibility. To express possibility  mungkin is used. When can means be physically able to as in (1), know how to as in (2), it has the same meaning with dapat in BI. The sentence structure is also similar. Can't which indicates inability to do something as in (3) and (4) is equal to tidak dapat in BI. In (5) and (6) can is used to express possibility. The best equivalent in BI is  mungkin. It is rather difficult for learners to conceptualize dapat to refer to possibility. Similarly, can't which expresses impossibility as in (7), (8), (9) has tidak mungkin in BI as its closest equivalent. Can in (10), (11), (12), (13) expresses permission. The equivalent in BI is both dapat and boleh (meaning may in English). In usage, there is a cultural note to remember. In BI (10) is used only to other people of equal or lower rank, age, or status. A different sentence in BI is used when the sentence is directed to other more superior people. Consequently, Indonesian learners often say in English **You are pleased to borrow this radio until tomorrow**, which is not usual though grammatically correct. This phenomenon occurs as well in (11), (12), (13). In (13) for example, Indonesian learners will be tempted to ask their company director **"When will you allow us to start work?"**. These will be discussed more deeply in later part of the essay. Can't and cannot in (14), (15), (16) express that something is forbidden or not allowed, and in BI the closest equivalent is tidak boleh.

(1) I can climb that hill in five hours.

Saya dapat mendaki bukit itu dalam lima jam. (BI)

(2) Can you drive a car?

Dapatkah Anda menyetir mobil? (BI)

(3) Grandma can't see well now.

Nenek tidak dapat melihat dengan baik sekarang. (BI)

(4) They can't speak well.

Mereka tidak dapat berbicara dengan baik. (BI)

(5) The weather can be very hot in Jakarta.



Cuaca  mungkin  sangat panas di Jakarta. (BI)

- (6) If it rains, we  can  have a discussion indoor.

Jika hujan, kita  mungkin  mengadakan diskusi dalam rumah. (BI)

- (7) She  can  speak English but with Italian accent.'

Dia  dapat  berbicara bahasa Inggris tetapi dengan aksen Italia. (BI)

- (8) She  can't  be English -She must be Italian.

Dia  tak mungkin  orang Inggris -Dia pasti orang Italia. (BI)

- (9) They  can't  have spent all the money.

Mereka  tak mungkin  telah menghabiskan semua uang. (BI)

- (10) You  can  borrow this car until tomorrow. (10)

Anda  dapat  meminjam mobil ini sampai besok.

- (11) The students  can  live at a University flat.

Mahasiswa  dapat  tinggal di asrama University.

- (12)  Can  I pay by credit card?

Dapatkah  saya membayar dengan kartu kredit?

- (13) When  can  we have vacation?

Kapan kami  dapat  berlibur?

- (14) I'm sorry you  can't  smoke in this building.

Maaf Anda  tidak boleh  merokok di gedung ini. (BI)

- (15) Visitors  cannot  walk on the grass.

Pengunjung  tidak boleh  di rumput itu. (BI)

- (16) You  can't  fly without a valid ticket.

Anda  tidak boleh  terbang tanpa tiket resmi.

Can  used in requests in (17) and (18) has a similar structure in BI. There is a difference in who will perform the action. In (17) it is the listener or the addressee who will be expected to perform the action, while in (18) it is the speaker who will perform the

action. In BI the form of requests depends heavily on the social distance, power between the speaker and the addressee and the situation where the request is made. This will be discussed more elaborately in a later part of this essay.

- (17)  Can  you open the door please?

Dapatkah  Anda membukakan pintu? (BI)

- (18)  Can  I help you with the suitcase?

Dapatkah  Saya membantu membawakan koper Anda? (BI)

## 2. Could

Could  is the past tense of  can  but the meaning is not always the same.  Could  can be used with the perfect (e.g. They could have arrived), with the progressive (e.g. They could be coming late), with the passive (e.g. They could be delayed), and with the Perfect Passive (e.g. You could have been killed) ( Leech, 1989:101). In (19) and (2)  could  means  possible  but  not likely  which can be expressed into  mungkin  in BI. Learners may find it difficult to change the concept of  could  as the past tense of  can  which should express  capability , or the  knowledge of how to do things . The concept of  could  is new and should be semantically separated from the concept of  can . Another type of  could  is in (21). Here  could  has the meaning of past possibility. (21) presents enormous problems for learners structurally and semantically. The core problem is that BI has an equivalent meaning but does not have the exact equivalent structure. As can be seen in (21)  had  and  have  are both expressed using  telah  in BI.

- (19) Well! It  could  be very windy tomorrow.

Mungkin  banyak angin besok. (BI)

- (20) One day I  could  become a rich man.

Suatu hari saya  mungkin  menjadi seorang kaya.

- (21) Well, if he had been more careful,

Jika dia lebih berhati-hati,

he  could  have avoided the accident.

dia  mungkin  telah dapat menghindari kecelakaan.



Could is used for asking permission in (22), which is expressed with boleh in BI. In (23) could is used to express suggestion, advice and perhaps irritated feelings. It has, to a certain extent, the notion of anger. In this case seharusnya is the best equivalent in BI.

- (22) Could I talk to you for a few minutes?

Bolehkah saya berbicara pada Anda sebentar?

- (23) You could be more thankful.

Anda seharusnya berterima kasih.

I've been working all afternoon.

Saya telah bekerja sepanjang sore.

- (24) You could have informed me

Anda seharusnya memberitahu saya

the boss was not in good mood.

bahwa bos marah.

### 3. Will

Will is followed by an infinitive (the basic form of the verb). Will can also be used with other forms to form verb phrases, e.g. with the perfect (The exams will have finished), with progressive (Next week I'll be giving a lecture on business and the law), passive (The rules will be changed), perfect passive (The car will have been sold by now) (Leech, 1989:543). Generally, will is used to denote prediction in the future, as in (25), or for the present time, as in (26). Will is also used to denote a habitual action at the present which is predictable. This can be seen in (27). In (28) will is used to denote a decision taken about the future. Other uses of will also include expression of intention, (29) willingness (30). The negative of will is won't which sometimes mean more than just negative willingness, as in (31). In (31) will not means closer to refusal rather than unwillingness.

- (25) Susan will arrive here in half an hour.

Susan akan tiba di sini dalam setengah jam. (BI)

- (26) It's eleven o'clock. Norma will be in bed by now.

Jam sebelas. Norma akan tidur sekarang. (BI)

- (27) An elephant will never attack people.

Gajah tidak akan pernah menyerang manusia. (BI)

- (28) I will buy the blue shirt.

Saya akan membeli kemeja biru itu. (BI)

- (29) I will give you a call as soon as possible.

Saya akan menelpon Anda secepat mungkin. (BI)

- (30) I will help you file these letters.

Saya akan membantu Anda mengarsip surat-surat ini. (BI)

- (31) Harry is stubborn. He won't listen to my advice.

Harry keras kepala. Dia tidak mau mendengarkan nasihat saya. (BI)

### 4. Would

Would, often shortened to 'd, is a very common modal auxiliary. It is followed by the basic form of the verb (Leech, 1989:551). Would is the past form of will, and indicates unreal meaning in main clauses. Would with unreal meaning is commonly used in conditional sentence. Would in this case indicates something we do not think is true at present or probable in the future. (32) is the example. In (33) would is followed by perfect form. It indicates that something unreal in the past. Would (34) is frequently used for polite request. (34) is considered more polite than (35). Would may also express a past habit (37) and past intention (38). Would may also express past insistence (39) and refusal (40).

- (32) If I were rich I would buy an expensive car.

Jika saya kaya saya, akan membeli mobil mahal.

- (33) If you had come, I would have been happy.

Jika Anda datang, saya akan senang sekali.

- (34) Would you please open this door? (polite)

Maukah Anda membukakan pintu ini?



- (35) Will you please open the door? (less polite)

Tolong, bukakan pintu ini.

- (36) I believe John wouldn't help you.

Saya percaya John tidak akan mau membantu Anda.

- (37) Before we got married, I would wait

Sebelum menikah, saya biasa menunggu

or my girl friend in front of her office.  
pacar saya di depan kantornya.

- (38) I promised that I would return

Saya berjanji bahwa saya akan mengembalikan

the car they had lent me.

mobil yang telah mereka pinjamkan pada saya.

- (39) I tried to explain that it was not my fault,

Saya mencoba menjelaskan bahwa itu bukan salah saya,

but he would keep interrupting me.

tetapi dia terus menyela perkataan saya.

- (40) I tried to explain the problem to him,

Saya mencoba menjelaskan masalah itu kepadanya,

but he wouldn't listen to me.

tetapi dia tidak mau mendengarkan saya.

### C. Possible learners' cultural-related difficulties

Learners may have difficulties interpreting and using the English MAV (can, could, will, would) due to the diversity of meanings. When the English MAV express meanings with exact equivalents in BI, learners may have little difficulties. From the notes above, however, MAV express more than single meanings. There are still further exceptional or idiomatic meanings, which are sometimes more frequently used. The fact that will, would, can, could are extensively used for requests in daily life employed in such diversity of forms and

modifications may cause difficulties to learners.

In English the four MAV above are frequently used to make indirect request. By making the requests indirect, the speaker wishes to apply the notion of politeness. The force of requests when made indirect become less strong, and the addressees will not necessarily feel that they are being given a request which impedes their freedom. When the requests are made very direct, for examples by using the imperatives consisting of verb infinitives, the impact speakers give to the addressees may be different. Not only will such requests sound rude, but also they seem to strongly impose the addressees to perform the requests. It is Beal (1990) who found that the reason for regarding the Australian French as arrogant has been due to the direct requests they frequently make to Australian English speakers, who tend to use the indirect requests.

The indirectness of requests in English, by using certain linguistic devices, as the MAV can as in (2), (17), (18), could as in (22), (23), (24), will as in (35), would as in (34) resemble the structure of requests in Indonesian. Interrogative sentences are frequently intended as requests. The differences lie in the frequent modification of requests. In Indonesian, apologies often or almost always go with indirect requests. In English, it is please which frequently accompanies indirect requests. Another example is the type of indirect request in Indonesian made by younger speakers to older people. In this particular request, the indirectness is not only linguistically made, but the speakers themselves offer to perform the requests. The typical request in English: Would you mind opening the window, please is an example of polite request. An Indonesian learner, however, may prefer to say Would you mind if I open the window please when the request is directed to older people or people of higher rank. Barna (1972) writes that there are stumbling blocks in interpersonal communications and "the first is obvious it hardly needs mentioning is language which includes vocabulary, syntax, idioms, slang, dialects, and so on all cause trouble" and further explains that "a worse language



problem is the tenacity with which someone will cling to "THE" meaning of a word or a phrase in the new language once he has grasped it, regardless of connotation or content". Unfortunately, the extensive use of can, could, will, would as linguistic devices for making such a wide variety of requests are not well dealt with in learners textbooks and in class activities.

#### **D. Possible Learning Strategies**

Understanding the culture of the target language is essential. Learners of English in Indonesia should be taught the culture of the English speaking communities which are common. These may include the way of life, the way of speaking, the use of language functions such as in requesting, thanking, expressing agreement, appreciation, criticism, starting and ending a conversation, etc. Morgan states (1994:4) that culture in the sense of the shared conventions and assumptions that operate unconsciously and unquestionably within a community is also seen as valid and desirable by those bodies who draw up and publish modern language syllabuses.

In the Indonesian context, it is the responsibility of the Language planners in the National Education Department to include the cultural awareness in the design of curriculum and make it concrete in the teaching of English. Useful strategies should be found and included in classroom activities.

#### **1. Possible Learning Strategies**

**Focusing on use and communication not grammar theory.** The fact that "will you and would you" is so widely used in English as requests should be clearly informed to the students. The imperatives they have learned so far as the only expressions of requests need to be corrected. Using those "will you and would you" in real spoken production is not likely to be separated from the cultural awareness. As Richard (1983:129) states 'for the speaker of a foreign language, any conversational exchange with a native speaker of the target language is a form of cross cultural encounter'. The fact that culture deserves attention is stressed by Brown

and Yule (1983) who claim that "cultural assumptions which would be normally presupposed, and not made specific by native speakers, may need to be drawn explicitly to the attention of speakers from other cultures". In this case, learners should be informed about the level of politeness in conjunction with the making of requests.

**Willingness to learn a new culture.** It is necessary to explain to learners of English that every nation with their national language has specific way to express ideas in written and spoken language. So, understanding and learning English cultures is vital for learners' success in fluent communication. Wolfson (1983:62) writes that in interacting with foreigners, native speakers tend to be rather tolerant of errors in pronunciation or syntax. In contrast, violations of rules of speaking are often interpreted as bad manners since the native speaker is unlikely to be aware of sociolinguistic relativity.

The expressions of "please" and "thank you" which are so common in English need to be properly studied. The omission of "please" in requests and "thank you" as an expression of gratitude may reduce the smoothness of interaction.

**Creating suitable learning environment.** Indonesian learners are commonly quiet and shy. They are ashamed to practise their English in front of other people, and afraid of making mistakes in front to other students. Rogers who had a long history of teaching in Asian countries (1979:24) claims that learners are often acutely embarrassed if they make mistakes and are corrected or laughed at. To counter this, learners can be invited to increase their courage and self confidence by having a lot of *ask and answer exercises* to be done in groups.

Teacher-centred classroom activities should be changed into learner-centred. If teacher centred classroom activities are to be maintained, students will not find time to practise their English. They gain only listening input. The class members should be split into groups and learners should be encouraged to learn and gain input from their peers. This can be achieved by adopting group work and pair work effectively.



Many studies have indicated the usefulness of the group work. Barnes (1975: 131) sees that 'group work can contribute valuably to some kinds of learning, so long as the groups are not left unsupported'. Bligh (1986:26) suggests that teachers should "encourage student interaction, not display their own knowledge." This suggestion is extremely important and may take real efforts for most Indonesian teachers to put into practice.

**Selecting useful activities.** Useful activities should be selected and used for the benefit of the learners. Paulston (1987:6) writes that it is useful to use "social formulae and dialogue, community oriented tasks, problem solving activities, and role play" to develop communicative competence. Scarino, A. et al. (1992) provide a taxonomy of resources, activities, and exercises which promote communicative use of the target language. Bott (1979: 45-58) explores the use of question-answer dialogues to enforce communication.

### E. Conclusion

The traditional way of learning English in Indonesia has basically focused on language forms. Learners read passages, and then do some grammar exercises. They have little or no opportunities to practise the language in real situation. English dialogues which are used to learn how to communicate in English are normally associated with grammar, and do not represent the real English needed for interaction. This particular kind of learning-teaching situation produces learners who can understand English grammar theories and vocabulary, but lack the conversational skill for interaction in English.

Most Indonesian learners begin to study English at the age of thirteen after the first language grammatical knowledge has been firmly established in their mind. When they use English, either for written or oral purposes, it is highly possible that they are under the influence of the first language's linguistic and cultural rules. In the light of this possibility, it is important to find ways for the inclusion of cultural understanding along with their efforts to master English.

To conclude, cultural considerations have to be included in the learning of English in Indonesia. In order for learners to be able to communicate in English using the culture they have learned, certain strategies have to be taken. These strategies may include a number of useful activities. However, everyone involved in the learning process should be well aware of the likely difficulties which may arise in conjunction with the implementation of certain strategies.

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