

## Conditional Sentences: ELT typology and corpus evidence

### Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a pilot study examining the representation of the typology of conditional sentences presented in English language teaching (ELT) materials (coursebooks and grammars) in a random sample of 1,000 conditional sentences from the British National Corpus. The if-clause and main clause of the conditional sentences in the sample was annotated for the form of the main verb (particularly tense and aspect), the modal auxiliaries and other lexis expressing modality, time reference and modality. Each sentence was also annotated for the type of relation holding between the two clauses, as well as their relative time reference.

ELT materials essentially use the typology in logic (real, counterfactual and hypothetical conditionals), with the addition of two more types, 'zero' and 'mixed'. The vast majority of ELT materials provide information about the following aspects of conditional sentences:

- a. The tense-aspect marking of the main verbs in the if-clause and main clause.
- b. The modal auxiliaries that can be used in each clause.
- c. The time reference of the conditional sentence (not of each clause).
- d. The user's attitude towards possibility.

Maule (1988) examined 100 conditional sentences collected from television and found that there was a large group of sentences that could not fit in the framework of the 3 types. The study supports this finding, but also points towards the need to adapt the typology and information offered in ELT materials.

The paper reports on the frequency of the five ELT types in the sample and outlines the cases that the typology does not cover. It also presents some preliminary findings regarding patterns in tense marking and modal expression on one hand, and time reference and modality on the other, briefly discusses implications for a pedagogical treatment of conditionals and proposes a tentative adaptation of the ELT typology.

### Reference

Maule, D. 1988. 'Sorry, but if he comes I go': Teaching conditionals.' *ELT Journal* 42/2.

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BAAL 2003

September 4-6, 2003

Conditional Sentences:  
ELT typology and corpus evidence

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Focus

The frequency of the types of conditional sentences usually presented in ELT materials (Zero, First, Second, Third and Mixed).

The relative frequency of the ELT types in the sample.

The frequency of 'special cases' in the treatment of conditionals in ELT materials.

The frequency of modality types and modal verbs/lexis in the conditional sentences in the sample.

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Corpus-based studies on conditional sentences in English, discussing pedagogical implications

Ferguson, G. (2001) 'If you pop over there: a corpus-based study of conditionals in medical discourse'. *English for Specific Purposes*. 20: 61-82.

Fulcher, G. (1991) 'Conditionals Revisited', *ELT Journal*, 45/2: 164-168.

Maule, D. (1988) "'Sorry, but if he comes, I go': Teaching conditionals." *ELT Journal*. 42/2: 117-123.

Wang, S. (1991) 'A Corpus Study of English Conditionals'. Unpublished MA thesis. Victoria University of Wellington.

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## The sample

Random sample of 1,000 if sentences from the written sub-corpus of the BNC.

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## Structure of the paper

- ELT Typology: description and approach
- Annotation scheme
- Findings and discussion
- Further steps

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## ELT typology

Verb Forms (tenses and modals)		Time Reference	Meaning (Modality)
If-clause	Main Clause		

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### Three basic implicit assumptions behind the 'three/five types' approach

- There are one-to-one form-meaning relations.
- Modality is expressed by modal verbs only.
- Conditional sentences express only attitude to likelihood.

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#### Coursebooks examined

Acklam, R. & Burgess, S. (2000, 2nd Ed.) Gold FCE. London: Longman.  
 Capel, A. & W. Sharp. (2000) Objective First Certificate. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
 Capel, A. & Sharp, W. (2002) Objective Proficiency. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
 Duckworth, M. & Gude, K. (1999) Countdown to FCE. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
 Evans, V. & Dooley, J. (2002) Upstream Intermediate. Newbury: Express Publishing.  
 Evans, V. & Dooley, J. (2002) Upstream CPE. Newbury: Express Publishing.  
 Gude, K. & Duckworth, M. (2002) Masterclass CPE. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
 Haines, S. & Stewart, B. (2000) Landmark Upper-Intermediate. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
 Harris, M., Mower, D. & Sikorzynska, A. (2000) Opportunities Intermediate. London: Longman.  
 Newbrook, J. & Wilson, J. (2001) New Gold CPE. London: Longman.  
 May, P. 1999. Knockout First Certificate, Student & Book. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
 Nolasco, R. (2000) New Streetwise Upper Intermediate. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
 Prodromou, L. 1998. First Certificate Star, Student & Book. Heinemann.  
 Soars, L. & Soars, J. (1998) New Headway Upper-Intermediate. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
 Stanton, A. & Stephens, M. (2001) Fast Track to FCE. London: Longman.

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### First conditional

Present Simple, Present Perfect, Present Progressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>will, can, may, could, might</i></li> <li>+ infinitive</li> <li>• Imperative</li> </ul>	present or future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possible, probable.</li> <li>• Possible future events that depend on other future events.</li> </ul>
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## Second conditional

Past Simple, <b>Past Progressive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>would, could, might</i> + infinitive</li> </ul>	present or future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less probable, less definite, impossible, unreal, imaginary, unlikely situations</li> </ul>
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## Third conditional

Past Perfect <b>Past Progressive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>would, could, might, should</i> + <i>have</i> + past participle</li> </ul>	past	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unreal</li> <li>• No longer possible</li> </ul>
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## Zero conditional

Present Simple, <b>Present Perfect, Present Progressive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present Simple</li> <li>• <b>Imperative</b></li> </ul>	present or future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expresses real situations.</li> <li>• Is always true/ the case.</li> <li>• Describes rules and situations where one event always follows the other.</li> <li>• Expresses eternal truths.</li> <li>• We use it to say what always happens.</li> </ul>
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### Mixed conditional

Past Perfect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>would, could, might, should</i> + infinitive</li> </ul>	Links past and present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change in past situation would affect present situation</li> </ul>
Past Simple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>would, could, might, should</i> + <i>have</i> + past participle</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change in present situation would affect past situation</li> </ul>

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### Special cases

**Modals in the if-clause**

- will (= insistence, willingness)
- would (= request)
- should (= politeness)
- could
- are to

**Open conditions in the past** (Past → Past)

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### Annotation

- Conditional?
- Tense and aspect marking
- Time reference
- Modality
- Modals
- Level of inclusiveness of ELT typologies

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Not Conditional

WHETHER

He finished his beer sadly, wondered **if** he would have been better off, after all, among them at the club.

ALTHOUGH

Even in his anger and growing fear, the conditioning of his background and breeding rose, **if only** briefly, above his Pres distress.

EVEN THOUGH

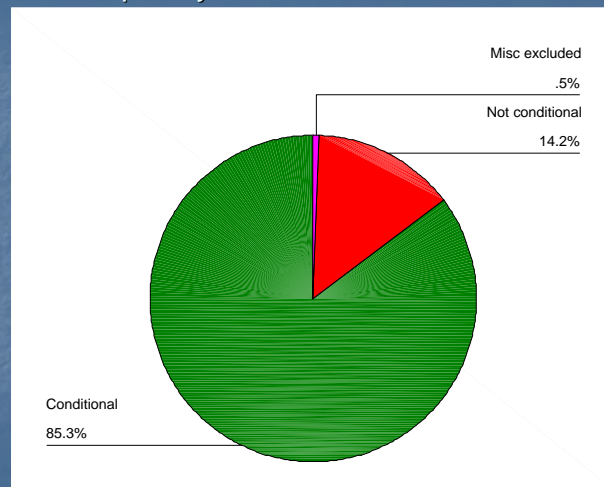
It was a 35mm affair **even if** a rather simplified one with a built-in flash.

AS THOUGH

**As if** in protest, George uttered a blood-curdling, lunatic-sounding cackle, and fell fractionally forward.

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Frequency of conditional sentences



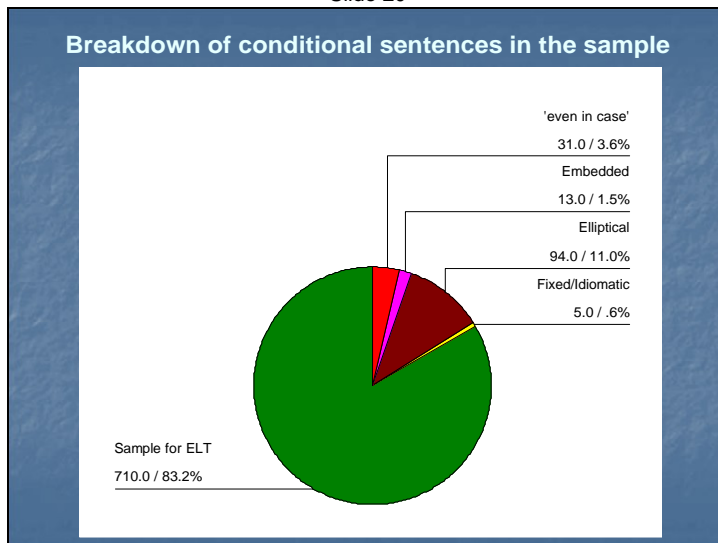
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ELT three/five types typology:  
Different levels of inclusiveness

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Description	If-clause	Main clause
Three types, <b>basic</b> . • As in logic.	• Simple tenses	• <i>Will</i> in First • <i>Would</i> in Second and Third
Five types, <b>common</b> . • Only the elements that are common to all accounts. • First type of Mixed only	• Simple tenses	• Present Simple in Zero • <i>Would</i> in Mixed
Five types, <b>inclusive</b> . • Elements presented in any of the books examined.	• Progressive aspect • Perfect aspect in <i>Zero</i> and <i>First</i>	• All core Epistemic modals in First, Second, Third, Mixed • Imperative in Zero and First • <i>Should</i> in Third and Mixed
Five types, <b>extended</b> . • Elements consistent with the existing typology.	• Modal lexis • Perfect aspect in <i>Zero</i> and <i>First</i> types	• <i>Could</i> and <i>might</i> in First. • Rest of Root modals in First, Second, Third and Mixed • Both Epistemic and Root marking
Addition of sentences with features of both Zero and First		• Modal in Zero • Present in First

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**Even if = even in case**

**Even if** parents succeed in coming to terms with letting their children go, their best efforts are likely to be undermined by the "dirty washing" gambit, or proprietorial claims to "my room" which the child will not relinquish.



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## Ellipsis

Most directors would like to keep the company's business premises free from further encumbrances **if** at all possible.

A SCIENTIFIC laser unit has been stolen from Telford College in Edinburgh and police have given warning the equipment could be dangerous **if** mishandled.

**Abdomen: When to seek advice**

**Urgently, Right now!**

**if** the stool is bloody, black or tar-like.

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## Embedded

**IF** YOU won the pools, it's a cert you'd celebrate with a slap-up party for friends -- and that's how we're winding up our great series of free contests.

They themselves might suffer from the climate, but **if** they managed to survive and interbreed the chances are that in a few generations their offspring would have reverted to wild-type coats once again, as a result of the inevitable mixing that would occur among the stray cat colonies.

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## Idiomatic

They were following the perimeter of the cricket ground in full view of at least twenty-two other boys, and Richard **was damned if he was going to trail** in Murray's wake before this audience.

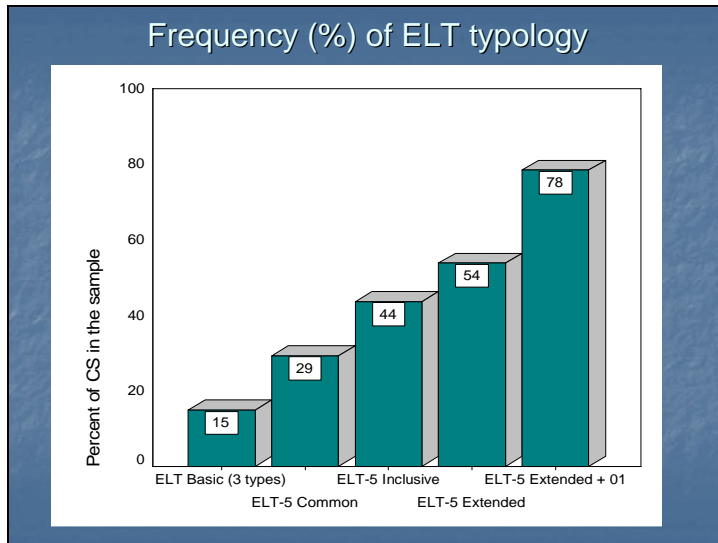
He's not a bad sort, for a brother **if you know what I mean**"

And that is why I'll see Greg Martin **if it's the last thing I do.**"

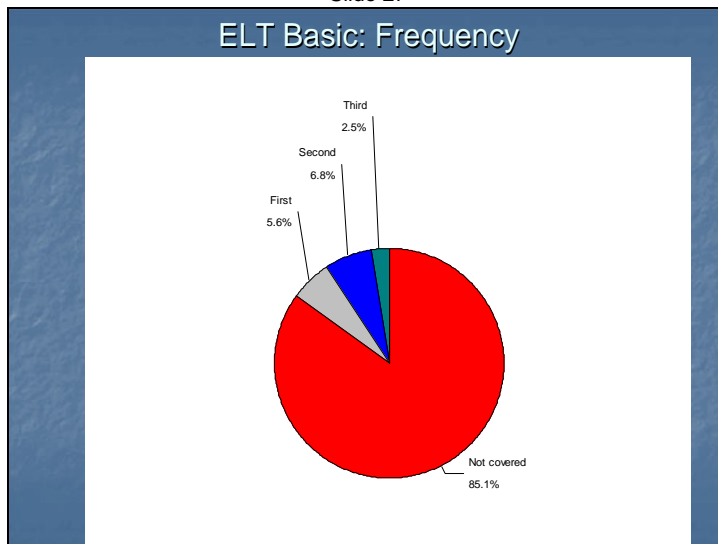
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	Basic	Common	Inclusive	Extended	Extended with 0+1
Zero	NA	87	113	133	427
First	40	41	80	119	
Second	48	57	77	90	90
Third	18	19	29	29	29
Mixed	NA	4	11	11	11
	<b>106</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>557</b>
	<b>14.9%</b>	<b>29.3%</b>	<b>43.6%</b>	<b>53.8%</b>	<b>78.5%</b>

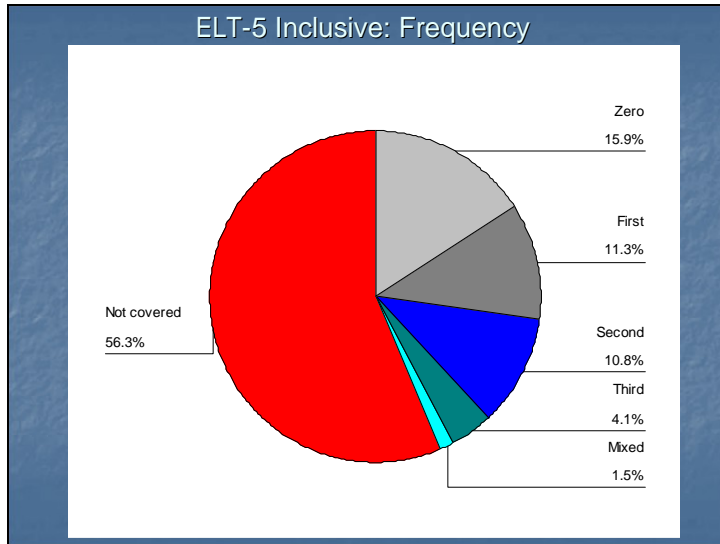
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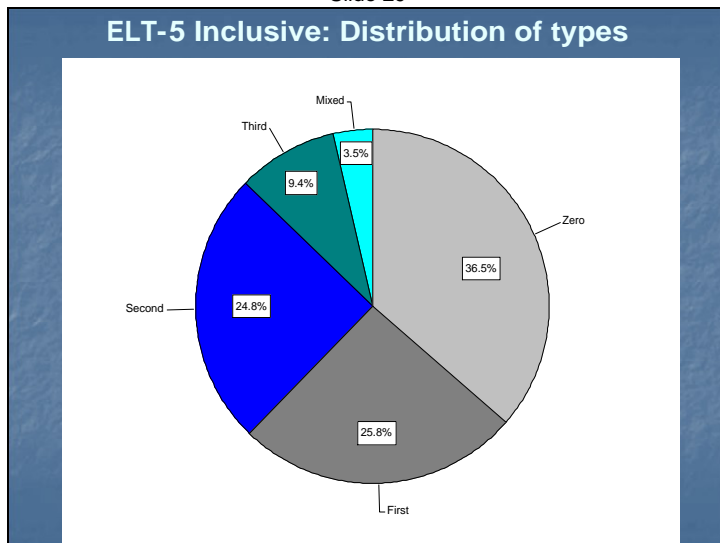
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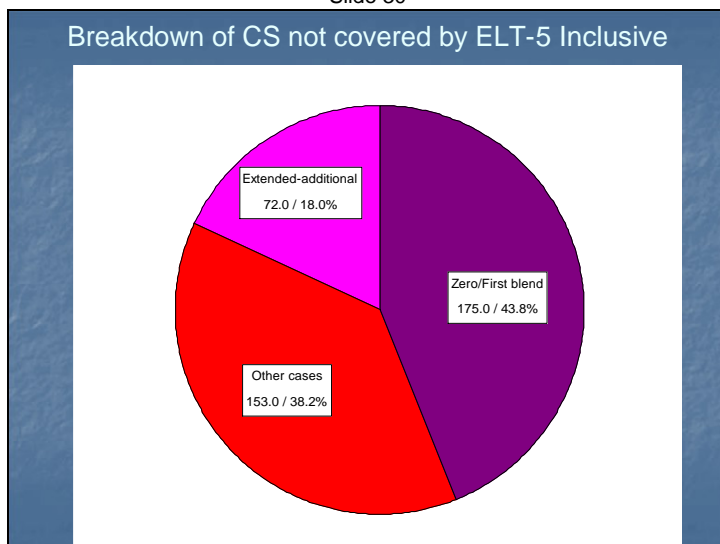
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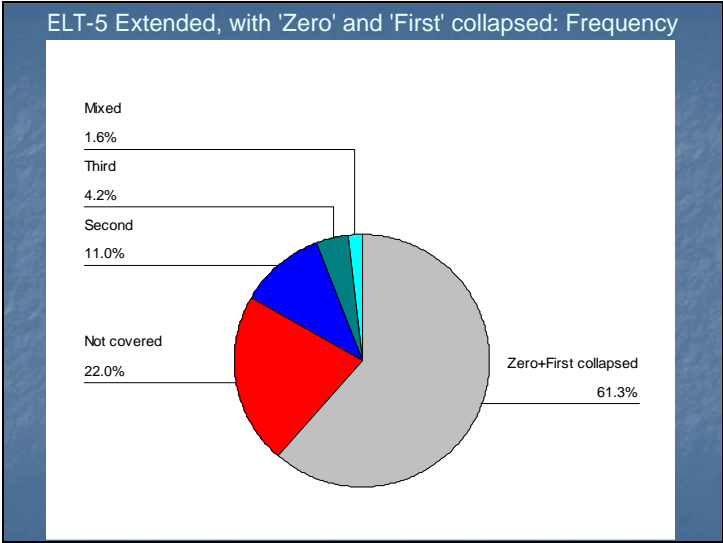
Sentences with features of both Zero and First

"**if** you think I'd dream of sharing so much as a blanket with you after that you're crazy!"

**if** a Troll suffers harm his flesh will almost instantly re-grow.

**if** Bridges is right, this still does not avoid possible legal argument over the "reasonableness" of the contract between purchaser and provider, nor over how well contracts are complied with.

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Mood and Modality in the main clause

Epistemic	367	51.7%
Statement	171	24.1%
Root	123	17.3%
Epistemic + Root	21	3.0%
Ambiguous modality	13	1.8%
Question	13	1.8%
Present Subjunctive	2	0.3%
	<b>710</b>	<b>100%</b>

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## Epistemic modality in the main clause

	Frequency	% of all CS	% of Epistemic
Certainty	184	25.9%	50.1%
Possibility	136	19.1%	37.0%
Ability	20	2.8%	5.5%
Combinations	16	2.3%	4.4%
Probability	11	1.5%	3.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>51.7%</b>	<b>100%</b>

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## Modal expressions in the main clause

Central modals	392	55.1%
Imperative	49	6.8%
Combinations with central modals	32	4.5%
Other modal expressions	30	4.2%
Marginal etc. modals	16	2.2%
Central modals in <i>that</i> -clauses	4	0.6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>523</b>	<b>73.7%</b>

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## Central Modals in the main clause

	Modal + lexical verb only		Including combinations	
<i>would</i>	115	16.2%	126	17.7%
<i>will</i>	83	11.7%	92	13.0%
<i>can</i>	46	6.5%	47	6.6%
<i>may</i>	39	5.5%	43	6.0%
<i>could</i>	29	4.1%	29	4.0%
<i>might</i>	21	2.9%	27	3.8%
<i>should</i>	26	3.7%	27	3.8%
<i>must</i>	26	3.7%	26	3.7%
<i>shall</i>	7	1.0%	7	1.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>55.1%</b>	<b>424</b>	<b>59.6%</b>

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## Co-occurrence of modalities

The Home Secretary will no doubt give his consent, **if** otherwise the decisions of junior ministers are liable to be quashed on judicial review.

Conversely **if** the definition changed, there would probably be a corresponding change in the pupil's actions in that context.

Companies potentially need to acquire information about all the environmental factors shown in the diagram, **if** they are to survive and prosper.

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## Root modality in main clause

	Frequency	% of all CS	% of Root
Deontic	113	15.9%	91.8%
Volition	10	1.4%	8.2%
	<b>123</b>	<b>17.3%</b>	<b>100%</b>

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## Modal expressions in the if-clause

Central modals	57	8.0%
Modal idioms	35	4.9%
Other expressions	23	3.2%
Semi-auxiliaries	7	1.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>17.1%</b>

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Central modals in the if-clause

<i>can</i>	26
<i>could</i>	15
<i>must</i>	5
<i>should</i>	3
<i>would</i>	3
<i>will</i>	2
<i>may</i>	1
<i>might</i>	1
<i>shall</i>	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>

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Modal idioms in the if-clause

<b>be to</b>	<b>30</b>
have to	4
would rather	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>

Semi-auxiliaries in the if-clause

be going to	5
be likely to	1
be willing to	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>

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The three most frequent modal expressions in the if-clause

Modal expression	Frequency	% of sample (N=710)	% of modals in if-clause (N=122)
be to	30	4.2%	24.6%
can	26	3.7%	21.3%
could	15	2.1%	14.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>10.0%</b>	<b>60.2%</b>

It is interesting that whereas the Third and Mixed patterns, with a frequency of 4.2% and 1.6% respectively, are presented as part of the main ELT framework, the use of *be to* and *could* in the if-clause, which have comparable, if not higher frequencies, are treated as special cases, with *can* not even mentioned.

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### Past tense in if-clause referring to past time (32.2% of 'If + Past tense' occurrences)

The students had no room in which to wait between lectures, but it was suggested to MRCVS that students who lodged near enough might go home **if** they wanted to, or more usefully spend their non-lecture time in the dissecting room or in the stables, although the Bell & Crown inn, with a good fire, was close at hand.

After a decade of being made to feel that you were somehow lacking as a person **if** you didn't manage to cram thrice-weekly workouts into your schedule, it was high time that a good reason not to exercise emerged.

"That little mistake was corrected when you got my note this morning, as you know very well!" Kate raised her eyebrows. "I received no note from you this morning, or any other time!" "Don't strain my credulity again!" She couldn't help the tinge of pink that flooded her cheeks at his expression as those blue eyes studied her with contempt. "Well, **if** you didn't put it under my door yourself, maybe you'd better just check with Reception downstairs."

I think that the high frequency of 'If + Past tense' with past reference qualifies it to be included in the main ELT typology, rather than treated as a special case.

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## Further research

- Analysis of sample from the spoken sub-corpus of the BNC.
- Examination of the distribution of ELT types according to genre.
- Examination of a larger sample of elliptical conditional sentences.