

34 Ability: **can**, **could**, **be able**

- **Can** (present or future) and **could** (past) refer to a general ability to do something. **Can** is also used to refer to an ability to do something specific at a time in the future:
*She **can** sing really well.*
*I **can** come and see you next week.*
*I **can't** swim so I won't come to the pool with you.*
*He **could** read when he was four.*
*I **couldn't** understand the language when I first came here.*
- **Can** and **could** refer to the ability to do something, but not to the doing of it. We use **can** or **be able** to talk about ability:
*Will you **be able** to/**Can** you come on Saturday?*
*My parents live quite a distance away so we're **not able** to/**can't** see them very often.*
*He had a motorbike accident at the age of eighteen and after that he **wasn't able** to/**couldn't** walk.*

 We use **be able** to talk about ability + achievement of the action:
*Jan gave me a lift home so I **was able** to stay at the party till late.*
*We got lost but we **were able** to find our way home again with the map.*
- We use **will be able** and not **can** to talk about skills that will be acquired in the future:
*I'll **be able** to drive by next summer so we can hire a car.*
***Will** you **be able** to read textbooks in German when you've finished this course?*
- We use **can** + **be** + adjective or noun to talk about possibility:
*The sea **can be** quite warm in September./The sea is sometimes quite warm in September.*
*She **can be** very charming when she wants to be.*
- We use **be able** for different grammatical forms that are not possible with **can**:
*I like **being able** to work at home.*
*We'd like **to be able** to help you but we can't.*
*I've **been able** to work much faster since I got that new computer.*
- We use **can**, **could** and **could have** in conditional sentences. We also use them in sentences with an implied condition:
*I **can** help you if you want me to.*
*I **could** do it if I had the time.*
*You **could** do that job easily. (if you had that job)*
*I **couldn't have** done it if I hadn't had your help.*
*I **could have** got here earlier but I didn't know you were waiting. (I could have got here earlier if I had known you were waiting.)*

Practice

- 34** Complete the sentences with the correct form of **can**, **could** or **be able**. If it is possible to use **can/could** or **be able**, use **can/could**.
- 1 He is very fit for his age. He *can run*. (run) really fast.
 - 2 I'd like *to be able to work*. (work) with you one day.
 - 3 He (not climb) up to the top: he was too scared.
 - 4 If they hadn't phoned for an ambulance, he
..... (die).
 - 5 I love (spend) all morning in bed at the weekends.
 - 6 We (go) to that concert tomorrow if the tickets haven't sold out.
 - 7 I think you should go in the spring: it
(be) very crowded there in the summer.
 - 8 I (not understand) what he says: he speaks too quickly.
 - 9 Do you know where Nick's glasses are? He
..... (not see) very much without them.
 - 10 (speak) another language fluently is a great advantage when you're looking for a job.
 - 11 Jonathan (not say) anything until he was about three years old.
 - 12 We (not phone her up) because her phone had broken, but fortunately we
..... (get) a message to her.
 - 13 Amy's exam results weren't very good. She
..... (do) better.
 - 14 I (not sleep) very well for the last four nights. It's been too hot.
 - 15 She tried to think of other things but she
..... (not put) that awful memory out of her mind.
 - 16 You should (go out) when you want to.

- 17 (you come) to the party on Saturday?



- 18 I (ride) this bike soon: I just need more time to practise.
- 19 He doesn't do very much when he's here. He (be) more helpful.
- 20 I (play) tennis really well a few years ago, but not anymore.