

## 7C Modals of ability and possibility

7.10

I **could ride** a bike when I was four years old.  
 We **couldn't watch** our favorite show because the TV broke.  
 I'll **be able to go** on tour with my band when I finish college.  
 I **wasn't able to go** to the concert because I was sick.  
 My dad **hasn't been able to play** squash since he hurt his knee.

### can and could

We use *can/can't* and *could/couldn't*:

- to say that somebody has or had the ability to do something.  
*He can play the piano really well.*  
*I couldn't drive five years ago.*
- to say that it is or was possible to do something.  
*I have my car here, so I can drive you to the station.*  
*I can't talk to you right now – I'll call you tonight.*  
*I couldn't use my cell phone when I was in the country – there was no signal.*
- with verbs of the senses, such as *hear* and *see*.  
*I can't hear you very well. Please speak more loudly.*  
*It was very foggy, and I couldn't see the cars in front of me.*

### be able to

We also use *be able to* + base form to talk about ability and possibility. It sounds a little more formal than *can* or *could*. We can use *be able to* with all tenses, forms, and with modal verbs.

*Are you able to speak any foreign languages?*  
*I wasn't able to finish the report yesterday.*  
*She's never been able to swim very well.*  
*Sorry, but I won't be able to come to the party tonight.*  
*We love being able to sleep late on weekends.*  
*I'd like to be able to speak Italian.*

**Look!** We can't use *can* with most tenses, structures, or modal verbs. We use *be able to*, instead.

*I will be able to go to college if I pass my exams.* NOT ~~*I will can go to college...*~~  
*I'd like to be able to play the guitar.* NOT ~~*I'd like to can play the guitar.*~~

We can use both *would you be able to* or *could you* to make polite requests.

*Could you open the window, please?*  
*Would you be able to pick up some milk later?*

1 Choose the correct options to complete the sentences.

- I *can't / couldn't* speak to my father yesterday.
- I've *been able to / could* paint since I was a child.
- I'm sorry, but I won't *can / be able to* meet you for lunch tomorrow.
- Have you *could / been able to* speak to John yet?
- I love *can / being able to* stay in bed all morning.
- Maria says she'll *can / be able to* come for dinner.
- I'd like to *be able to / can* speak Chinese.
- You should *can / be able to* find a cab outside.

2 Complete the sentences with affirmative (+) and negative (–) forms of *be able to*.

- I'd love \_\_\_\_\_ walk to work, but it's too far away. (+)
- I \_\_\_\_\_ make any calls on my phone since yesterday. (–)
- I'm afraid that I \_\_\_\_\_ come to the meeting tomorrow. (–)
- The doctor \_\_\_\_\_ see you yesterday, but he's free today. (–)
- If I finish all my work today, I \_\_\_\_\_ go out tonight. (+)
- I've always \_\_\_\_\_ make new friends easily. (+)

3 Complete the text with the correct form of *can*, *could*, or *be able to* and the verbs in parentheses. There may be more than one answer.



My dad's Irish, my mom's Mexican, and I grew up in Belgium, so I've always <sup>1</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ (speak) different languages, plus I studied Russian and Swedish in college. At first, learning Russian was difficult as I <sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ (not understand) the alphabet, but I speak it well now. I travel a lot for my job, and I really love <sup>3</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ (talk) to local people in restaurants and markets – in my opinion, you <sup>4</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ (not get) to know a country if you don't make an effort to understand its language. I'd like to learn Mandarin as I'm going to Beijing for work next year. There's a Mandarin course at my local language school in May, so I'll <sup>5</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ (take) classes, and this time next year, I might <sup>6</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ (have) a conversation when I go to the market in Beijing!