

Expressing ABILITY

1. To talk about an ability in the present, we use "can" or "be able to"

- I can / am able to speak two languages.
- He can / is able to swim.
- My brother can't / isn't able to drive a car.

2. To talk about a general ability in the past, we use "could" or "was / were able to".

- I could / was able to run very fast.
- I could / was able to jump so high.

3. If we talk about a specific success in the past, we should only use "was / were able to".

Since the exam was difficult only a few students could / were able to pass it. (managed to pass it)

Mozart _____ compose little pieces of music even when he was five.
(General ability)

We _____ reach to the top of the hill before it got dark yesterday.
(Specific success in the past)

Attention:

There is no difference between them when used in a negative sentence.

Because of the great financial difficulties, John couldn't / wasn't able to finish his university education.

4. We use "can" instead of "be able to" in passive forms.

This game _____ (play) by two or more players.

Exercises

Complete the sentences with the correct form of either "can" or "be able to".

Only use "be able to" if absolutely necessary!

1. I haven't _____ concentrate recently at work. I don't know what it is.
2. My brother _____ cook very well. He is a chef in a French restaurant.
3. When he was only 2, my friend Lee _____ speak quite well.
4. I have to go to a business dinner tomorrow night so I _____ (not) come to the party. I'm very sorry.
5. Kevin lived in Italy for six years, so he must _____ speak Italian quite well. He will help you with your homework.
6. This telephone is terrible. I _____ (not) hear you at all.
7. When the car drove into the lake, one of the passengers _____ (not) open the door and had to be rescued.
8. Despite the arrival of the storm, they _____ finish the football match.
9. When I was very young, I used to _____ touch my toes, but I can't now!!
10. The house was totally empty all day yesterday and I _____ finish that book I was reading.
11. My mother tells me that her grandfather was one of the best musicians of his time in the city and _____ play the piano like a professional.
12. I hope to _____ speak English very well after this course finishes.

Match the expressions and their meanings.

- a. We managed to score a goal in the last minute and win the match!
- b. We succeeded in scoring two goals in the first term. Now we just have to keep the match under control.

1. _____ = to accomplish an aim, especially in the manner desired
2. _____ = to accomplish an aim, especially with difficulty

Structure

managed to score → manage + infinitive

succeeded in scoring → succeed + in + gerund

Talk to your classmates and share with them something you managed to do and something you succeeded in doing.