

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 ¹ _____ (speak) different languages, plus I studied Russian and Swedish in college. At first, learning Russian was difficult as I ² _____ (not understand) the alphabet, but I speak it well now. I travel a lot for my job, and I really love ³ _____ (talk) to local people in restaurants and markets – in my opinion, you ⁴ _____ (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 ⁵ _____ (take) classes, and this time next year, I might ⁶ _____ (have) a conversation when I go to the market in Beijing!