

UNIT 26 Can, could and be able to

a) We use **can** (**do**) to say that something is possible or that someone has the ability to do something. The negative is **can't** (**cannot**).

- You **can** see the sea from our bedroom window.
- **Can** you speak any foreign languages?
- I'm afraid I **can't** come to your party next Friday.

Be able to is possible instead of **can**, but **can** is more usual:

- Are you **able to** speak any foreign languages?

But **can** has only two forms: **can** (*present*) and **could** (*past*). So sometimes you have to use **be able to**:

- I **haven't been able to** sleep recently. (**can** has no present perfect)
- Tom might not **be able to** come tomorrow. (**can** has no infinitive)

b) **Could** and **was able to**

Sometimes **could** is the past of **can**. We use **could** especially with these verbs:

see hear smell taste feel remember understand

- When we went into the house, we **could** smell burning.
- She spoke in a low voice but I **could** understand what she was saying.

We also use **could** to say that someone had the general ability to do something:

- My grandfather **could** speak five languages.
- When Tom was 16, he **could** run 100 metres in 11 seconds.

But if you mean that someone *managed* to do something *in one particular situation*, you have to use **was/were able to** (**not could**):

The fire spread through the building very quickly but everyone **was able** (= managed) **to** escape. (*not 'could escape'*)

- They didn't want to come with us at first but in the end we **were able** (= managed) **to** persuade them. (*not 'could persuade'*)

Compare **could** and **was able to** in this example:

- Jack was an excellent tennis player. He **could** beat anybody. (= He had the ability to beat anybody.)
- But once he had a difficult game against Alf. Alf played very well but in the end Jack **was able to** beat him. (= He managed to beat him *in this particular game*.)

The negative **couldn't** is possible in all situations:

- My grandfather **couldn't** swim.
- We tried hard but we **couldn't** persuade them to come with us.

For **can** see also Unit 31. For **could** see also Units 27 and 31.

UNIT 26 Exercises

26.1 *In this exercise you have to use can or be able to. Sometimes it is possible to use either; sometimes only be able to is possible.*

Examples: George has travelled a lot. He can (or is able to) speak four languages.
I haven't been able to sleep very well recently.

- 1 Tom drive but he hasn't got a car.
- 2 I can't understand Martin. I've never understand him.
- 3 I used to stand on my head but I can't do it now.
- 4 Ask Ann about your problem. She should help you.

26.2 *In this exercise you have to complete the sentence with could ...*

Example: I can't sing now but I could sing very well when I was a child.

- 1 He can't play tennis very well now but he quite well when he was younger.
- 2 She can't run very fast now but when she was at school she faster than anyone else.
- 3 I can't swim very far these days but ten years ago I from one side of the lake to the other.

26.3 *This time you have to answer the questions with was/were able to.*

Example: Did you persuade them?

Yes. It was difficult but we were able to persuade them.

- 1 Did they find your house?
Yes. It took them a long time but they
- 2 Did you win the match?
Yes. It wasn't easy but I
- 3 Did the thief escape?
Yes. The policeman chased the thief but he

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26.4 *Now you have to complete a sentence with could, was/were able to or couldn't.*

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Examples: My grandfather was very clever. He could (or was able to) speak five languages.

I looked everywhere for the book but I couldn't find it.

The fire spread quickly but everyone was able to escape.

- 1 He had hurt his leg, so he walk very well.
- 2 She wasn't at home when I phoned but I contact her at her office.
- 3 I looked very carefully and I see a figure in the distance.
- 4 They didn't have any tomatoes in the first shop I went to, but I get some in the next shop.
- 5 My grandmother loved music. She play the piano very well.
- 6 The boy fell into the river but fortunately we rescue him.