

Grammar L1GLO5

Modals of Ability: Present and Past Forms

Learning Outcome 5: Modals (ability): *can / could*

NOTICING A Read the sentences. Answer the questions below.

1. When I started running, I could only run 500 meters. I wanted to run five kilometers and I started running three or four times a week. Three months later, I can run ten kilometers.
2. I couldn't read very well when I was younger. I found it difficult. A teacher helped me and I started to read every day. I still can't read long books with lots of difficult words, but I can read quite well now.
3. My friends and I couldn't cook before we started university. We started watching some videos online. The person in the videos said that everyone can cook. I believed her and slowly I got better at cooking.

Which underlined word do you use for things that people ...

- a. have the ability to do now? _____
- b. do not have the ability to do now? _____
- c. had the ability to do in the past? _____
- d. did not have the ability to do in the past? _____

Modals of Ability: Present and Past Forms

When you have the ability to do something, you have the power to do it and it's possible for you to do it. There are four words you use to talk about people's ability.

When you talk about ability now, you use *can* (ability) and *can't* or *cannot* (no ability).

When you talk about ability in the past, you use: *could* (ability) and *couldn't* or *could not* (no ability).

B Read the sentences. Choose the correct option.

1. I (can't / couldn't) paint, but I'm good at drawing.
2. (Can / Could) Khaled play this instrument? We need one more player.
3. When I was a small child, I (can't / couldn't) speak English.
4. I (can / could) help you with your project.
5. (Could / Can) Noor speak when she was one year old?
6. You (can / could) sing very well. I love hearing you sing.
7. I (can / could) play football all day when I was at school.

C Make notes about the things below. Think about how to use *can/can't* and *could/couldn't* to talk about them.

1. something you couldn't do in the past but can do now.

2. something you could do in the past but can't do now.

D Work in pairs. Use your notes from exercise C to tell your partner about the things you chose.