English Modal Verbs: Ability – Can / Can’t

(PT: saber, conseguir, poder)

The verb ‘can’ is followed by a verb in the base form.

Examples:

I **can play** the piano.	*Eu sei tocar piano.*
He **can’t play** the guitar.	*Ele não sabe tocar violão.*
I **can speak** English, but I can’t speak French.	
They **can play** football, but they can’t play basketball.	
Can you **play** chess? Yes, I can.	*Sabe jogar xadrez? Sim, sei.*
Can he **play** tennis? No, he can’t.	
Can you **understand** me?	*Você consiga me entender?*
Can you **help** me, please?	*Você pode me ajudar, por favor?*
Can I **help** you?	*Posso ajudá-lo(a)?*

Exercise 1: Translate the following sentences using *can* or *can’t:*

1. Ele sabe cozinhar.

_____

2. Eu não sei nadar, mas sei correr.

_____

3. Ele não consegue me ver.

_____

4. A: Você pode me emprestar uma caneta? B: Sim, claro.

_____

5. A: Ela sabe falar inglês? B: Não, ela não sabe.

_____

6. A: Você pode ir para minha festa amanhã? B: Sim, posso.

_____

Ability – Past/Present/Future

The word '**can**' is only used for the *present* or *near future*, and '**could**' in the *past* (Past Simple). However, these words can't be used using the Present Perfect or Future Simple tenses, we must use '**be able to**'.

A) can/could

Present Perfect	Past Simple	Present Simple	Near Future
---	**could**	**can**	**can**
---	When I was young, I **could** play guitar. When I was young, I **couldn't** play guitar. When you were young, **could** you play guitar?	I **can** play guitar. I **can't** play guitar. **Can** you play guitar?	I **can** work next week. I **can't** work next week. **Can** you work next week?

Note: *The forms "~~will can~~", "~~did can~~", ~~do can~~", ~~does can~~" and "~~have can~~" don't exist!*

B) be able to

Present Perfect	Past Simple	Present Simple	Future Simple
has/have been able to	**was/were able to**	**am/is/are able to**	**will be able to**
I **have been able to** play guitar since I was young. I **haven't been able to** play guitar since I was young. **Have** you **been able to** play guitar since you were young?	When I was young, I **was able to** play guitar. When I was young, I **wasn't able to** play guitar. When you were young, **were** you **able to** play guitar?	I **am able to** play guitar. I **am not able to** play guitar. **Are** you **able to** play guitar?	I **will be able to** work next week. I **won't be able to** work next week. **Will** you **be able to** work next week?

Suggested video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyPH-IHuMTc (19 mins)

Exercise 2: Translate the following sentences to English using "be able to":

1. Ela sabe falar oito idiomas.

_____

2. Ontem ele não podia falar, pois teve dor de garganta.

_____

3. Eles não vão poder ir amanhã, pois estão doentes.

_____

4. Quando você era jovem, você sabia andar de bicicleta?

_____

5. Eu sei falar inglês desde que eu era criança.

_____

Using modal verbs

Since '*can*' and '*be able to*' refer to ability, how do we talk about '*possible ability*' or '*hypothetical ability*'? We can't use two modal verbs together, so we must use a modal verb with '*be able to*' to express such ideas.

Present or near future:

- **would be able to**

  Would you **be able to** come to my party tomorrow?

  Alternative: Can you come to my party tomorrow?
- **could be able to**

  Could you **be able to** play piano for us on Sunday?

  Alternative: Could you play piano for us on Sunday?
- **might be able to**

  I **might be able to** fix your computer on Friday.

  Alternative: Maybe I can fix your computer on Friday.
- **should be able to**

  A: Can you work tomorrow? B: I **should be able to**.

  Alternative: A: Can you work tomorrow? B: Probably.

  My computer **should be able to** do this calculation.

  Alternative: My computer can probably do this calculation.

Past:

- **should have been able to**

  He **should have been able to** answer that question, but he completely blanked out.

Third conditional:

- **would have been able to**

  I **would have been able to** finish the project on time if my computer hadn't crashed.

  You w**ouldn't have been able to** finish it even if you had had enough time.
- **could have been able to**

  We **could have been able to** solve the puzzle if we'd had more time.
- **might have been able to**

  She **might have been able to** catch the train if she had left the house earlier.