

## GRAMMAR · LESSON 10 · B1

# At twelve, I couldn't. Now, I can. Next summer, I'll be able to.

Ability: can, could, be able to — three forms across time

Three small words tell the whole story of a skill: what you **couldn't do**, what you **can do** now, and what you **will be able to do** soon. Plus the distinction B1 exams love to test: *could* vs *was able to*.

🕒 50 min

🎯 Ability

📄 CEFR B1

👶 Ages 11-16

## What you'll learn

- Use **can / could / will be able to** for present, past, and future ability.
- Know when the past needs **was able to / managed to** rather than *could* (the B1 trap).
- Use **be able to** after *to*, after other modals, and in perfect tenses — where modals cannot go.

1

WARM-UP · 4 MIN

## Three moments of ability

Most of us have a skill we couldn't do, then learned, and are still improving. Ride a bike, swim, cook, play an instrument, speak a second language. Name one in your own life — you'll come back to it in this lesson.

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| Q1 | Name one thing you couldn't do at the age of 7. Why not?                      |
| Q2 | What's one skill you can do now that would have amazed your 10-year-old self? |
| Q3 | In one year, what will you be able to do that you can't do today?             |
| Q4 | Tell a story: a moment when something was hard, but you managed to do it.     |

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GRAMMAR FOCUS · 18 MIN

## Past, present, future — three forms

English has three main ways to talk about ability. **Could** (or *was/were able to*) for the past, **can** (or *am-is-are able to*) for the present, and **will be able to** for the future. There is no 'will can' — that's rule number one.

PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
<p><b>could</b> <b>was/were able to</b></p> <p><b>General ability in the past.</b></p> <p>At six, I <i>could</i> ride a bike.</p>	<p><b>can</b> <b>am/is/are able to</b></p> <p><b>Ability right now.</b></p> <p>I <i>can</i> speak three languages.</p>	<p><b>will be able to</b> □ <b>will can</b></p> <p><b>Future ability.</b></p> <p>By June, she'll <i>be able to</i> drive.</p>

⚠ **The B1 trap: *could* vs *was able to* in the past**

□ Yesterday, after two hours, I **could finish** the marathon.

□ Yesterday, I **was able to finish / managed to finish** the marathon.

*Specific achievement → only 'was able to' / 'managed to'.*

□ When I was 10, I **could swim** 50 metres.

□ When I was 10, I **was able to swim** 50 metres.

*General past ability → both forms are fine.*

□ I **couldn't find** my keys this morning.

□ I **wasn't able to find** my keys this morning.

*Negatives → both work for both general and specific.*

□ **Shortcut:** If you can replace "was able to" with "**managed to**", you're in specific-achievement territory — don't use *could*. *Exception:* sensing verbs (*see, hear, feel, smell, understand, remember*) prefer **could** even for specific moments: "*I could see the top of the mountain from the window.*"

## ↳ Why we need 'be able to' at all

Modals like *can* and *could* can't combine with other modals, and they don't have an infinitive or a perfect form. **Be able to** fills every gap.

<b>FUTURE</b>	<p><b>will be able to — never 'will can'.</b>  <i>After this course, you'll be able to hold a conversation in Italian.</i></p>
<b>INFINITIVE</b>	<p><b>After want to, hope to, would love to, need to — you need the to-infinitive form.</b>  <i>I'd love to be able to draw portraits.</i></p>
<b>AFTER MODALS</b>	<p><b>After must, should, might, may — two modals can't sit together.</b>  <i>You must be able to swim to join the diving club.</i></p>
<b>PERFECT / -ING</b>	<p><b>With have been, being — modals don't conjugate this way.</b>  <i>She has been able to drive since she was 17.</i></p>
<b>PAST SPECIFIC</b>	<p><b>was/were able to or managed to — for a single successful achievement in the past.</b>  <i>Even though the door was stuck, he was able to open it.</i></p>
<b>POLITE SHIFT</b>	<p><b>Could you...? is a polite request, not an ability question.</b>  <i>Could you pass me the salt, please? (= would you)</i></p>

### ⚠ Three classic B1 mistakes

- ❑ ~~Yesterday I could swim across the lake.~~    ❑ **Yesterday I was able to / managed to swim across the lake.** (Specific achievement, not general ability.)
- ❑ ~~Next year I will can drive.~~    ❑ **Next year I'll be able to drive.** (Never 'will can'.)
- ❑ ~~I'd love to can speak Japanese.~~    ❑ **I'd love to be able to speak Japanese.** (After 'to', use *be able to*.)

## 3

## KEY VOCABULARY · 6 MIN

## Ten words for skills and learning

Word	POS	Meaning	Example
<b>skill</b>	<i>n</i>	something you can do well, usually after practice	<i>Driving is a skill you don't forget.</i>
<b>to manage to</b>	<i>v</i>	to succeed in doing something difficult	<i>I finally managed to solve the puzzle.</i>
<b>beginner</b>	<i>n</i>	a person starting to learn something	<i>As a beginner, I could only play two chords.</i>
<b>to improve</b>	<i>v</i>	to get better at something	<i>My English has improved a lot this year.</i>
<b>to master</b>	<i>v</i>	to learn something so well you can do it perfectly	<i>She hopes to master the violin by 18.</i>
<b>struggle</b>	<i>v/n</i>	to find something very difficult	<i>He struggled with maths, but now he's top of the class.</i>
<b>effort</b>	<i>n</i>	energy and work you put into something	<i>With enough effort, you'll be able to do it.</i>
<b>to give up</b>	<i>phr v</i>	to stop trying	<i>I almost gave up, but I kept going.</i>
<b>confident</b>	<i>adj</i>	sure of your ability	<i>She's confident she can pass the exam.</i>
<b>progress</b>	<i>n</i>	the process of getting better	<i>You've made real progress since September.</i>

## 4

READING · 12 MIN

## From Zero to the Harbour

## From Zero to the Harbour

THE PULSE · ISSUE 12  
LEARNING TO DO THE THING

Four summers ago, Noor couldn't swim one metre. This summer, she's training for a two-kilometre open-water crossing in Alexandria. Plus four more teens whose lives were rewritten by one stubborn skill.

## Noor, 15

Alexandria · Egypt

N

"At twelve, I couldn't even put my face in the water. Now, my coach says that by twenty, I'll be able to swim twenty kilometres if I want to."

When Noor was twelve, she **couldn't swim**. Not a single metre. In Alexandria, where she lives, this was embarrassing — her city is built along the sea, and most of her friends **could swim** before they **could read**. Her mother, who grew up inland in Aswan, had never really learned either, so Noor had nobody at home to teach her. Every summer she sat on the edge of her cousins' pool while they laughed, dived, and splashed. Every summer she said to herself: next year, I **will be able to** do this.

For two summers, nothing changed. Then, at thirteen, something shifted. Her school opened a new pool, and a swimming coach, Madame Reda, noticed her sitting alone on the bench. "**Can you swim?**" she asked. Noor shook her head. "**Could you swim** when you were younger?" Noor shook her head again. Madame Reda smiled. "Good. We start from zero together."

By the end of that first term, Noor **could float**. By the end of the second term, she **could swim** one length of the pool — clumsy, slow, but real. She still remembers the exact moment she **was able to swim** the full twenty-five metres without stopping, without panicking, without touching the bottom. It was a Tuesday in March. Her friends clapped. Madame Reda only smiled. (*Notice the grammar shift: "could float" and "could swim" describe her general new ability; "was able to swim" the full length describes one specific moment of success.*)

Two years later, Noor **can swim** 1,500 metres in open water. She **can read** currents; she **can keep** her breathing steady even when the waves push against her. She trains four times a week. This time next summer, when she turns sixteen, she **will be able to** attempt her first real goal: a two-kilometre charity swim from the old lighthouse to the breakwater, along the harbour of Alexandria.

"It's funny," she said recently. "When I was twelve, I **couldn't even put** my face in the water. Now, my coach says that by the time I'm twenty, I **will be able to** swim across the whole Bay of Abu Qir — twenty kilometres — if I want to. I don't know yet if I want to." She paused. "But I **can** at least picture it now. At twelve, I **couldn't** even picture it."

... FOUR MORE SKILL JOURNEYS ...

**J** Jun, 14 · Seoul · South Korea

## Code

Two years ago, Jun **couldn't even change** the colour of a button on a website. Now he **can build** simple games in Python and he **can read** JavaScript without a dictionary. "By the end of next year, I **'ll be able to make** a full mobile app," he says. When a teacher asked him to fix the school library's booking system last month, he **managed to do** it in one weekend. "I **couldn't** when I was twelve. I **can** now. That's all that's changed."

**Z** Zara, 13 · Karachi · Pakistan

## Cricket

Zara joined her school cricket team at nine, but for two years she **couldn't hit** the ball at all. Her coach was patient. "In our last match, she **was able to score** 45 runs — her first real half-century," the coach said. Zara **can play** both spin and fast bowling now, although she still says she **can't quite read** the hardest spinners. "In a year," she insists, "I **'ll be able to**." She doesn't look like someone who gives up easily.

**L** Luís, 16 · Lisbon · Portugal

## Surfing

Luís lives five minutes from Carcavelos beach, and by the time he was twelve he **could already stand** on a board. But standing up is the easy part. For four years he **couldn't do** a proper turn. Last October, in one session, something clicked — he **was able to complete** three clean turns in a row. "I still **can't do** tricks," he admits. "By next summer, though, I'm determined to **be able to pull** off at least one aerial."

**F** Fatou, 14 · Dakar · Senegal

## Djembe

Fatou started playing djembe when she was eight. At the beginning she **couldn't keep** time for more than eight beats. Now she **can play** twelve different West African rhythms from memory and she **can lead** a group of ten drummers. Last month she **was able to perform** a fifteen-minute solo at a national festival. "When I'm twenty," she says, "I **'ll be able to teach**. That's the real goal — not just playing, but teaching."

**Past** (could / was able to)**Present** (can)**Future** (will be able to)

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PRACTICE · 8 MIN

## 8 quick choices

Choose the correct option (A, B or C). Answers on the last page.

1	When I was five, I ___ read. · A) didn't can B) couldn't C) wasn't able
2	After hours of trying, she ___ the jar open. · A) could get B) can get C) managed to get
3	By next summer, I ___ drive — I start lessons in March. · A) will can B) 'll be able to C) could
4	I'd love ___ speak three languages one day. · A) to be able to B) to can C) being able
5	When the fire started, luckily we ___ through the back door. · A) could escape B) can escape C) were able to escape
6	Sorry, I ___ come to the party tomorrow — I'm at a wedding. · A) can't not B) won't be able to C) couldn't
7	My grandmother ___ still ___ a bike at 70 — she cycled every day. · A) could / ride B) can / ride C) managed / to ride
8	You must ___ at least 500 metres to join the diving club. · A) can swim B) be able to swim C) could swim

6

SPEAKING · 5 MIN

## Your own ability timeline

Work with a partner. Each answer should use at least **two** forms — a past one (*could / was able to*), a present one (*can*), and ideally a future one (*will be able to*). Give real examples, not vague ones.

Q 1 Name a skill you couldn't do at age 10 that you can do well now. How did you learn it?

Q 2 Is there something you managed to do once that you still can't do reliably?

Q 3 What's a skill you'd love to be able to do but haven't started learning yet?

Q 4 Describe one time in your life when you managed to do something difficult.

Q 5 What will you be able to do by the end of this school year that you can't do today?



8

COMPREHENSION QUIZ · 6 MIN

## 10 questions — let's see what stuck

Circle the best option (A, B, C or D) for each question.

1	At age 8 I ___ already ___ the piano surprisingly well. · <b>A)</b> can / play <b>B)</b> could / play <b>C)</b> was able / playing <b>D)</b> managed / playing
2	It was hard, but finally I ___ my passport in the last drawer. · <b>A)</b> could find <b>B)</b> managed to find <b>C)</b> can find <b>D)</b> will find
3	Don't worry — I ___ help you with the homework tomorrow. · <b>A)</b> can will <b>B)</b> will can <b>C)</b> 'll be able to <b>D)</b> could
4	She's been ___ drive since she was 17. · <b>A)</b> can <b>B)</b> could <b>C)</b> able to <b>D)</b> to be able
5	When we were little, we ___ any English at all. · <b>A)</b> couldn't speak <b>B)</b> didn't can speak <b>C)</b> weren't able speak <b>D)</b> not could
6	The door was locked, but luckily the kitten ___ through the small window. · <b>A)</b> could escape <b>B)</b> can escape <b>C)</b> was able to escape <b>D)</b> couldn't escape
7	In five years, AI systems ___ many jobs humans do today. · <b>A)</b> will can do <b>B)</b> will be able to do <b>C)</b> could do <b>D)</b> can to do
8	I tried for an hour, but I ___ the Wi-Fi. · <b>A)</b> could fix <b>B)</b> didn't can fix <b>C)</b> couldn't fix <b>D)</b> managed fix
9	I'd really love ___ play guitar like my older brother. · <b>A)</b> to can <b>B)</b> to be able to <b>C)</b> being able <b>D)</b> can
10	When I was twelve, I ___ swim 500 metres without stopping — every Saturday at the pool. · <b>A)</b> could <b>B)</b> was able to <b>C)</b> could / was able to both work <b>D)</b> managed to



## ANSWER KEYS

## Check your answers

## Practice · Part 5

1	<b>B — couldn't</b>	General past inability → couldn't. Never 'didn't can'.
2	<b>C — managed to get</b>	One specific past success → managed to / was able to, not 'could'.
3	<b>B — 'll be able to</b>	Future ability → will be able to. Never 'will can'.
4	<b>A — to be able to</b>	After 'to' (infinitive) → to be able to.
5	<b>C — were able to escape</b>	One specific past success → were able to, not 'could'.
6	<b>B — won't be able to</b>	Future inability → won't be able to.
7	<b>A — could / ride</b>	General repeated past ability → could ride.
8	<b>B — be able to swim</b>	After another modal ('must') → be able to. Two modals cannot combine.

## Quiz · Part 8

1	<b>B — could / play</b>	General past ability over time → could play.
2	<b>B — managed to find</b>	One specific past success → managed to.
3	<b>C — 'll be able to</b>	Future ability → will be able to. 'Will can' does not exist.
4	<b>C — able to</b>	After a perfect auxiliary (has been), modals don't fit → able to.
5	<b>A — couldn't speak</b>	Past inability (general) → couldn't. Couldn't is the natural negative.
6	<b>C — was able to escape</b>	One specific past achievement → was able to.
7	<b>B — will be able to do</b>	Future ability → will be able to.
8	<b>C — couldn't fix</b>	Past failure (negative) → couldn't. Standard for negatives.
9	<b>B — to be able to</b>	After 'love + to' → to be able to.
10	<b>C — could / was able to both work</b>	Regular general past ability (every Saturday) → both forms work. 'Managed to' would suggest one specific difficult success.

**Brilliant work finishing Lesson 10!** You now hold the three forms of ability across time: *could / was able to* for the past, *can* for the present, and *will be able to* for the future — plus the B1 trap that trips up so many students. In **Lesson 11**, we move from *ability* to *obligation*: *must*, *have to*, *should* — three modals that tell you what you must do, what rules force you to do, and what you probably should do.