

Modals of Ability – Past

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Grammar Notes

A. Introduction to Modals

Modals (also known as *modal verbs*) are words that come before the main verb.

Modals give the verb extra meaning, such as:

- ability (*can/could*)
- advice (*should*)
- necessity (*must*)
- possibility (*might*)

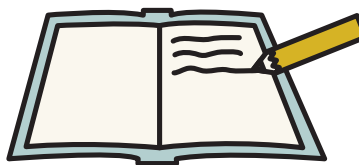
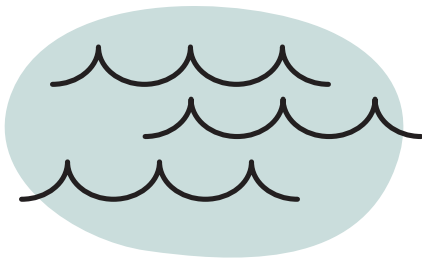
Pattern

modal + base verb

Modals are always followed by a base verb. A base verb is a verb with **no ending** (-s, -ed, -ing, etc.) added to it.

Examples

- I **can swim**.
- He **could swim** when he was a child.
- She **should study**.
- They **must finish** their homework.
- We **might go** to Disneyland next summer.



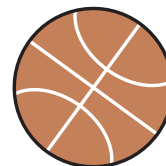
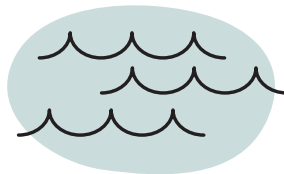
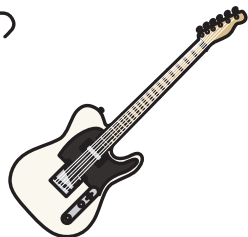
Grammar Notes cont.

B. Could

Could is a **past** modal of ability.

Could describes when someone **was able to do something** in the past.

	Use	Examples
Positive	Use could + base verb when someone was able to do something in the past.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You could sing well when you were a child. He could play the guitar when he was ten years old. Children could play outside five years ago, but it's not safe now.
Negative	Use could not + base verb when someone was not able to do something. The short form of could is couldn't .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I could not swim when I was young. They couldn't finish their homework last weekend. She couldn't speak French last year, but she can now.
Question	<p>Use could + subject + base verb to ask if someone was able to do something.</p> <p>Use yes + subject + can or no + subject + can't to give a short answer to a question.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could you understand what the teacher said? Yes, I could. / No, I couldn't. Could she play basketball when she was eight years old? Yes, she could. / No, she couldn't. Could the students play tennis last year? Yes, they could. / No, they couldn't.



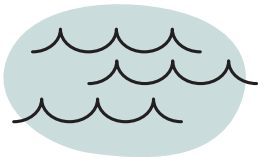
Exercise 1

PICTURE DICTIONARY

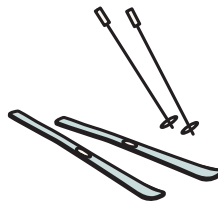
What could you do when you were a child?
With a partner, talk about what you *could* and *couldn't* do.

Example:

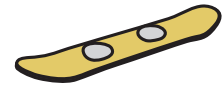
- A: I could swim when I was a child.
B: I could swim too.
- B: I could ski when I was a teenager.
A: Oh, I couldn't ski. My parents never took me skiing.
- A: I couldn't snowboard when I was young, but I can now.
B: I couldn't snowboard when I was a kid, and I still can't.



swim



ski



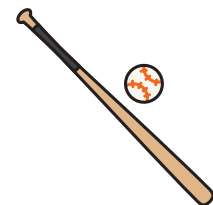
snowboard



skate



play basketball



play baseball



Exercise 1 cont.



play tennis



play the guitar



play the piano



use a computer



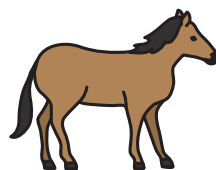
dance



sing



ride a bike



ride a horse














cook

Exercise 2

FILL IN THE BLANKS

Write *could* + *verb* in the blanks.

#	Activity	Sentence
Ex		She _____ <i>could play</i> _____ baseball when she was a child.
1		We _____ when we were young.
2		He _____ a computer when he was five years old.
3		I _____ a horse when I was a little girl.
4		They _____ 15 years ago.
5		I _____ when I was in university.
6		My sister _____ a bike when she was a child.
7		I _____ when I was 18 years old.
8		My classmate _____ basketball when he was in elementary school.
9		My friend _____ well when he was a child.
10		My sister _____ the guitar when she was a teenager.

Exercise 3

WRITE THE QUESTIONS

Look at the answers. Then write questions using *could*.

Ex. *Could he cook when he was in university?*

Yes, he could cook when he was in university.

1. _____

Yes, I could use a computer when I was ten years old.

2. _____

Yes, they could ski when they were children.

3. _____

No, my brother couldn't dance when he was a kid.

4. _____

No, my cousin couldn't play the guitar when she was young.

5. _____

Yes, she could play basketball when she was a teenager.

6. _____

No, I couldn't use a computer when I was two years old.

7. _____

Yes, he could play baseball when he was in high school.

8. _____

No, my friends couldn't snowboard when they were kids.

9. _____

Yes, I could ride a horse when I was 11 years old.

10. _____

Yes, my parents could play tennis 20 years ago.

Exercise 4

FIND SOMEONE WHO

Write questions using different ways to express past time (*when you were young, when you were a child*, etc.). Then walk around the classroom and ask your classmates questions. Write your classmate’s name on the right if he or she answers “yes.”

#	Find someone...	Question	Classmate
1	who could ski.	<i>Could you ski when you were six years old?</i>	
2	who could skate.		
3	who could swim.		
4	who could use a computer.		
5	who could ride a bike.		
6	who could cook.		
7	who could play the piano.		
8	who could play baseball.		
9	who could sing.		
10	who could dance.		

Exercise 5

COMPLETE THE STORY

Complete the story by using *can*, *can't*, *could*, or *couldn't* with the verbs below the blanks. Remember that *can* and *can't* are **present** modals of ability and *could* and *couldn't* are **past** modals of ability.

Then and Now

A lot has changed in the last 100 years. In the past, most people _____ because cars
1. drive, not
were new technology and expensive. Many people _____ these days because cars are
2. drive
common and more affordable. Most people also _____ because there weren't many
3. fly, not
airplanes around 100 years ago. Now we _____ almost anywhere in the world!
4. fly

Most people _____ a computer 100 years ago, but they probably
5. use, not
_____ a telephone. Nowadays, most people _____
6. use 7. look up
anything they want on their computers and cellphones. People _____ their phones
8. use
to make calls, send text messages, play games, and take pictures. But they _____
9. travel, not
through time. Maybe one day time travel will be something that everyone _____ !
10. do

Exercise 7

QUIZ

Circle the correct answer.

1. He couldn't ski when he was a child,
but he _____ now.
a) can
b) could
2. A: Can you ride a horse?
B: No, I _____ .
a) can't
b) couldn't
3. I'm afraid of the water because I _____ swim.
a) can't
b) couldn't
4. They _____ play basketball when they were kids.
a) can
b) could
5. A: Could you sing well when you were young?
B: Yes, I _____ .
a) can
b) could
6. My brother _____ play the guitar.
He plays every night.
a) can
b) could
7. I _____ dance when I was in high school.
That's why I'm taking lessons now.
a) can't
b) couldn't
8. She _____ ride a bicycle when
she was only three years old.
a) can
b) could
9. He _____ play tennis last year, but he can now.
a) can't
b) couldn't
10. I couldn't sing well when I was younger,
but I _____ sing better now.
a) can
b) could
11. A: _____ he cook?
B: Yes, he can.
a) Can
b) Could
12. She _____ speak French when she
was in high school, but she can now.
a) can't
b) couldn't

Answer Key

LESSON DESCRIPTION:

In this lesson, students learn how to use *could* and *couldn't* to describe past abilities. Students will also demonstrate their understanding of when to use present and past modals of ability in context.

LEVEL: Low Int

TIME: 2 hours

TAGS: modals, modal verbs, modals of ability, could, couldn't, can, can't, mixed tenses, grammar, grammar exercises

Exercise 1

Answers will vary. Have students discuss their past abilities in pairs (following the example) or as a class.

Exercise 2

- | | |
|--------------------|----------------|
| 1. could snowboard | 6. could ride |
| 2. could use | 7. could cook |
| 3. could ride | 8. could play |
| 4. could skate | 9. could sing |
| 5. could dance | 10. could play |

Exercise 3

1. Could you use a computer when you were ten years old?
2. Could they ski when they were children?
3. Could your brother dance when he was a kid?
4. Could your cousin play the guitar when she was young?
5. Could she play basketball when she was a teenager?
6. Could you use a computer when you were two years old?
7. Could he play baseball when he was in high school?
8. Could your friends snowboard when they were kids?
9. Could you ride a horse when you were 11 years old?
10. Could your parents play tennis 20 years ago?

Exercise 4

Answers will vary. Monitor your students for correct question formation. If your students can handle it, encourage them to ask a follow-up question. For example:

A: Could you ski when you were six years old?

B: Yes, I could.

A: Did you go skiing often?

B: Yes, we went every weekend in the wintertime.

Exercise 5

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1. couldn't drive | 6. could use |
| 2. can drive | 7. can look up |
| 3. couldn't fly | 8. can use |
| 4. can fly | 9. can't travel |
| 5. couldn't use | 10. can do |

Exercise 6

Answers will vary.

Exercise 7

- | | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| 1. a | 3. a | 5. b | 7. b | 9. b | 11. a |
| 2. a | 4. b | 6. a | 8. b | 10. a | 12. b |