



# IIT Madras

## BSc Degree

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## English - II (Advanced English)

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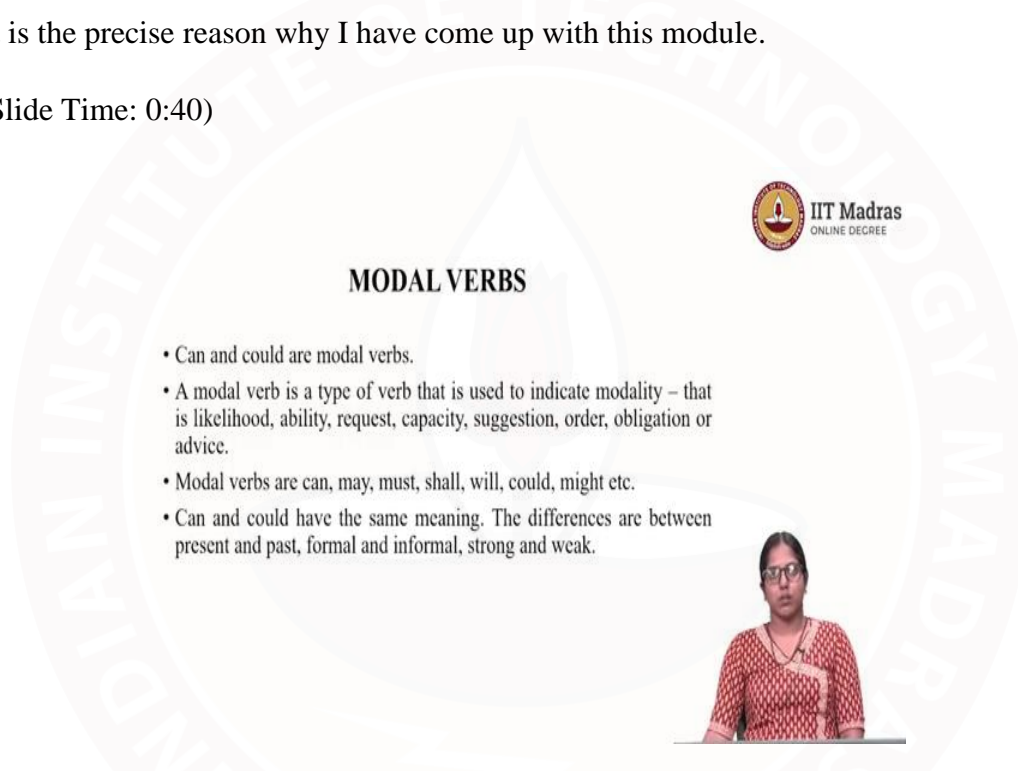
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

### **Modal Verbs: Can or Could**


Hello all welcome, today's module is on modal verbs can and could. We will look at the use of these two modal verbs, 'can and could'. A lot of us get these two words mixed up in a sentence, and that is the precise reason why I have come up with this module.

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**MODAL VERBS**

- Can and could are modal verbs.
- A modal verb is a type of verb that is used to indicate modality – that is likelihood, ability, request, capacity, suggestion, order, obligation or advice.
- Modal verbs are can, may, must, shall, will, could, might etc.
- Can and could have the same meaning. The differences are between present and past, formal and informal, strong and weak.



So, before we talk about the use of can and could, let me quickly talk to you about modal verbs. So, a modal verb is a type of verb that is used to indicate modality, that is, likelihood, ability, request, capacity, suggestion, order, obligation or advice. There are quite a few modal verbs; the primary modal verbs are 9 in number. I have listed a few modal verbs here; they are can, may, must, shall, will, could, might, etcetera.

Now, can and could have the same meaning, the difference is that one is used in a formal occasion, the other one is used in an informal occasion, some are used to express something very strongly, some are used in weaker or milder ways, if you want to use a particular sentence in a very mild way then you would use one of these modal verbs and not the other. Similarly, we use

can for the present and could for the past. So, these are the differences that they used in present and past, formal and informal, strong and weak forms.

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## CAN vs COULD

1. Can – Ability (present)  
I can play tennis.  
He can swim.
2. Could – Ability (past)  
I could play tennis when I was in school.  
He could beat anyone in swimming in his prime.



Now, let us get to it, can versus could. So, they used to express, like I have already said, a few modalities and the first modality is ability. So, can is used to express ability in its present form. For example, I can play tennis; he can swim. So here, when I say I can play tennis, I am talking about my ability. Whereas could is used to express ability in its past form. For example, I could play tennis when I was in school. So, in this case, I am talking about something that I could do back in the past, and it is something that I cannot do anymore, not in the present. Therefore, I say I could play tennis when I was in school. It means this person does not play tennis any longer.

Similarly, the, look at the other example, he could beat anyone in swimming in his prime, in his prime means, in his best years when he was young and healthy and energetic. So, he could beat anyone in swimming in his prime. So, again, he is not as good as he was back then; at present, he does not swim, or maybe he swims, but he is not as good as how he was in the past. Maybe he does not beat anyone in swimming anymore. I hope I made that distinction clear.

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## CAN vs COULD



1. Could (can) – possibility  
The bus could be late. (present)  
If you don't study, then you could fail the exam. (future)  
He could have been successful in his career, had he listened to his boss. (past)
2. Can – general possibility  
You can fall sick if you get drenched in rain.  
Living in New York can cost a fortune.



The next modality is possibility. When we talk about possibility, we could use both can and could but could is used more often than can when we talk about possibilities. Now, let us check the use of could with regard to possibility. Let us check the example; the bus could be late; this is in its present form.


So, let us suppose you and me are both waiting at a bus station and it is time for the bus to arrive, but we do not see it. Now, I might say hmm, I think the bus could be late. So, I am making a guess of the current situation, saying what is possible. Now, here is another use if you do not study, then you will fail the exam. So, this is future tense; if you do not study, you could fail the exam. So, I am guessing about the possibility of a person failing in future.

Now, am I sure that you will fail in the exam? No, I am not sure. But am saying, you could, meaning there is a possibility, you might pass, you could pass, but I am saying it is also possible that if you do not study, you could fail. So, this sentence, if you see like I have already said talks about a future possibility.

Now, the question is, can you use could to refer to past possibilities? The answer is yes. An example of that is the third sentence that I have given here; he could have been successful in his career, had he listened to his boss. So, I hope I made the part on possibility with regard to could very clear. Now, let us check the use of can.

Like I have already said, when you talk about possibility, we mostly use could except for general possibilities. Like if you are stating about or you are talking about general things in the world. For example, you can fall sick if you get drenched in the rain. Another example is, living in New York can cost a fortune. So, you see that these are just general statements about what is possible in the world. So, it is when we are talking about these general possibilities that we use can, but in every other context when we talk about possibility, we use could.

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## CAN vs COULD

**POLITE EXPRESSIONS**

1. Making suggestions – could  
We could try Thai food this time.  
We could ask the teacher to postpone the exam.
2. Making requests – can and could  
Can / Could you pass me the salt, please?  
Can / Could I speak to Vaiga, please?  
Note: Could is more polite than can.






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Now, another use of can and could these two modal verbs is to make polite expressions. And within polite expressions, I have categorized them into four. The first is in making suggestions. So, when you make suggestions, you should always use could. So, two example sentences are given here.

We could try Thai food this time. So, here you are suggesting something. So, let us suppose I have all gone out; a bunch of friends have gone out for dinner, so you would like to make a suggestion, and this is how you phrase the sentence. We could try Thai food this time, or we could ask the teacher to postpone the exam. So, you are talking about, or you are making a suggestion.

Now, the second context is when you make requests and when you make requests, you can use, or you could use both can and could. Two example sentences are given here. Can you pass me the salt, please? Could you pass me the salt, please? Can I speak to Vaiga, please? Could I speak to Vaiga, please?

Now, when you get a sentence, let us suppose the question is something like, and if I am asking you to fill this blank using can or could, what do you think is the appropriate word or the appropriate modal verb that can fit this blank? Well, the answer is can, because had it been an informal context, had it been a formal context, one should use please, or one could have used, please.

So, now that I have not given you this particular word please or please does not follow this sentence, can is more appropriate here, guessing that it is informal, it is an informal context. However, if I give you or it is also possible that we know it is not wrong to say, could I speak to Vaiga.

But if the question is, let us suppose I have not given, there is a blank here and the sentence that follows the blank is dash I speak to Vaiga, please? If you see please here, then you need to understand that it is a formal context. So, it is always appropriate, or it is right to fill it up with could instead of can. Why? Because could is more polite than can. So, I hope I made that clear.



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## CAN vs COULD

### POLITE EXPRESSIONS

c) Making offers – can and could

Can/could I get you something to drink?

Can/could I help you with that madam?

d) Ask for permission – can and could

Can / Could I borrow your notes please?

Can / Could I take a day off this week?



It is absolutely okay to use can when you talk to your boss, if you are very friendly, if your boss is very friendly with you if you share a good rapport with your boss. But if you are in unfamiliar situations, if you are in a very formal occasion, if you are an English native, if you are in a country where people speak English natively, which is mostly in Britain and the US, then I would suggest you to use could over can because people there are very particular about polite use of words and polite expressions in speech.

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### ACTIVITY

1. Daughter : "Mom, the phone is ringing.

Mom: ----- you answer it? It ----- be grandpa.

2. I ----- run three kilometres without a break when I was a kid.

3. Many swimmers ----- hold their breath for more than 3 minutes under water.

4. ----- I get you something to eat?

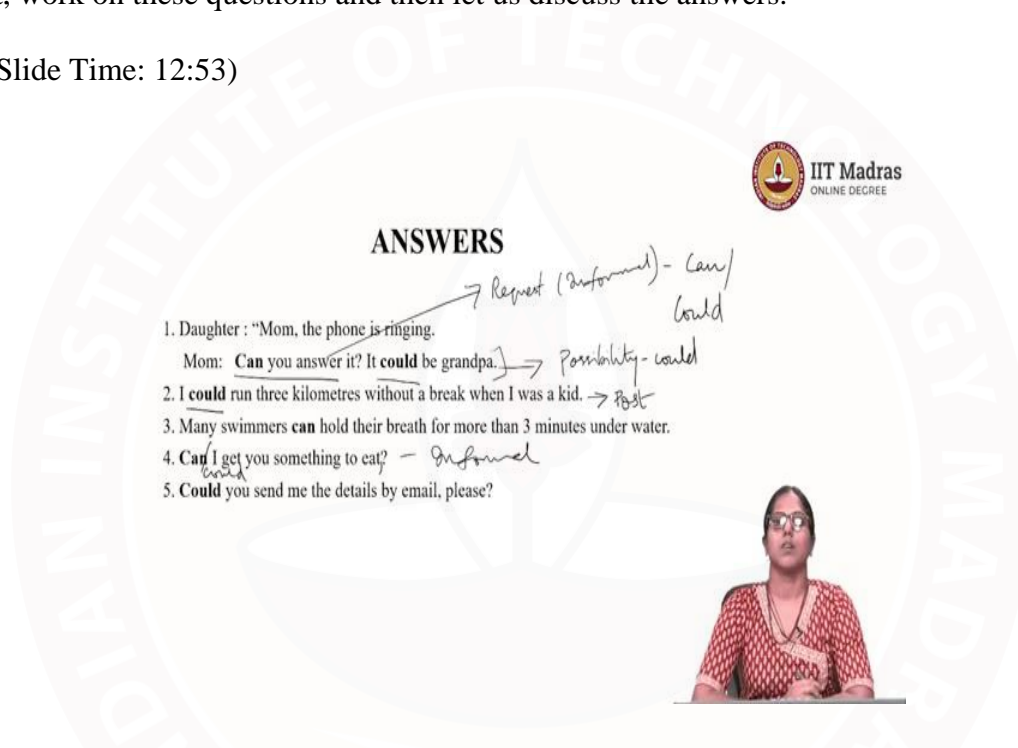
5. ----- you send me the details by email, please?



Let us do a, so with all that we have learned so far, let us do a small activity and see and test our understanding of the concepts that is discussed so far. The first one is, well the daughter tells her mother, mom the phone is ringing, mom says dash you answer it. So, it is a question; it dash be grandpa. The second sentence is I dash run three kilometres without a break when I was a kid.

Third, many swimmers dash hold their breath for more than 3 minutes underwater. Fourth, dash, I get you something to eat. Fifth, you send me the details by email, please. Pause the video for a moment, work on these questions and then let us discuss the answers.

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**ANSWERS**

1. Daughter : "Mom, the phone is ringing." → Request (informal) - Can/ Could
- Mom: Can you answer it? It could be grandpa. → Possibility - could
2. I could run three kilometres without a break when I was a kid. → Past
3. Many swimmers can hold their breath for more than 3 minutes under water.
4. Can I get you something to eat? - Informal
5. Could you send me the details by email, please?

How many of them did you get right? So, let us discuss the answers. Daughter, mom the phone is ringing. Mom, can you answer it? This is a request, and it is a mom and daughter, so informal, so it is absolutely okay to use can; no harm in using could. And then, it could be grandpa. Why? Because we are talking about the possibility, it is not a general possibility; we are not talking about something that is very general a possibility that happens in the world; it is something very specific to their context. So, therefore, only could can be used and not can.

Now, again if you see, I could run 3 kilometres without a break when I was a kid. So, here you are referring to something of the past. So here, it would be completely inappropriate to say I can run 3 kilometres without a break when I was a kid, because can cannot be used in past references.



Let us look at the third sentence; many swimmers can hold their breath for more than 3 minutes underwater. Why? Because we are talking about a possibility that is something that is possible in the world, so you are talking about something that is not very particular to any context like the one that we have, unlike the one that we have discussed before about the mother and daughter, here we are talking about a general possibility, and therefore, it is can and not could.

Now, the next one is can I get you something to eat? Again, a request and here you could use both can and could; I have not used could there because this seems to be like a very informal setting, else I suppose someone should have used please here. But it is also quite okay; I mean it is absolutely okay to use could as well.

So, I would say why not put can and could. It is fine to use could but if you see please here like in the fifth sentence you should use could, you should prefer using could over can, here both are fine, it is absolutely too, it is absolutely okay to say to use could when you are talking to your friends in a very informal context, no harm in that. But in a formal context, it is always better to be polite. So, with that, we come to the end of this session; I will meet you with a different topic on a different day, until then stay safe, take care, bye.