Language focus Unit 4: Ability

1. *Can* and *be able to*

*Can* and *be able to* are both used to express ability. However, *can* only has present tense (*can*) and past tense (*could*) forms. If another form of the verb is required, *be able to* is used.

**Present** 🡪 She can / is able to speak three languages fluently.

**Past** 🡪 She could / was able to read when she was two.

**Infinitive** 🡪 I’d like to be able to ski.

**Present Perfect** 🡪 He’s never been able to save money.

**Will (future)** 🡪 She’ll be able to drive to work when she passes her test.

**ABILITY IN THE PRESENT**

We use *can* or *be able to* to talk about present ability. *Be able to* is more formal than *can*.

*I can run faster than you.*

*He is able to speak without moving his lips*.

The negative form of *can* is *can’t* or *cannot*. To form the negative of *be able to*, *not* is used before *able*. You can also use *be unable to*.

*I cannot understand why she married him.*

*Many of my students aren’t able / are unable to pronounce the word ‘taught’ correctly.*

*Be capable of* + gerund can also be used to express ability. It means to have the ability, capacity or potential to do something.

*The team has some excellent players and is capable of winning the championship*.

The negative form *be incapable of* + gerund can be used or *not* can be placed before *capable*.

*She is incapable/isn’t capable of looking after herself*.

**PAST ABILITY**

1 When we talk about general ability in the past, both *could* and *was / were able* to are possible.

*She could sing really well when she was a child.*

*My grandfather could play the trumpet when he was 90.*

*Be capable of* can also be used in the past.

*Joe wasn’t capable of making toast without burning it*.

2 When we talk about ability to do something on one occasion in the past, **COULD IS NOT POSSIBLE (podía)**. We have to use: *was/were able to, managed to + infinitive or succeeded in* + gerund (pude/logré/conseguí).

I managed to / was able to speak / succeeded in speaking to Frank last night.

Yesterday the firefighters were able to / managed to control / succeeded in controlling the flames.

\*However, *could* can be used for ability on one occasion when it is used with verbs of the senses: *see, smell, hear, feel, sense, taste*.

*I knew my wife had arrived; I could smell her perfume*.

When we talk about INABILITY to do something on one occasion in the past, *COULDN’T, WASN’T / WEREN’T ABLE TO, DIDN’T MANAGE TO* and *DIDN’T SUCCEED IN* are all possible. TODAS VALEN TANTO PARA GENERAL COMO PARA SPECIFIC

*I couldn’t do the homework yesterday*.