

Scientists close to invisibility

■ Scientists have succeeded in creating a new device which can bend light and make solid objects invisible. The team of scientists couldn't say when the device would be ready for production, but once they have managed to perfect the device, they are hoping to be able to use it for a range of different uses, both civilian and military.



Presentation

You can use *can*, *could* and *be able to* to talk about ability:

*The new device **can** bend light.*

*They will **be able to** use the device for a range of uses.*

*They **couldn't** say when the device would be ready.*

can / could

Use *can/can't (cannot)* to talk about ability in the present. If you want to talk about ability in the past, use *could/couldn't*.

*It **can** bend light. (= present)*

*We **can't** show you until next week. (= future)*

*They **couldn't** say anymore. (= past)*

be able to

There is no infinitive or participle form (-ed or -ing form) of *can* or *could*. When we need an infinitive or participle form, we use *be/been/being able to*.

*We'll soon **be able to** put the device into production.*

*They haven't **been able to** find a sponsor.*

***Being able to** speak Japanese is very important.*

could and was/were able to

You can use both *could* and *was/were able to* to talk about general abilities in the past:

*He was the best person for the job. He **could** speak Japanese and he had experience of working in the arts.*

*I was the only one in my class who **wasn't able to / couldn't** swim.*

We use *was/were able to* (not *could*) to talk about success in a particular task or activity:

*She **was able to** find a substitute for Tim. (not ~~She could find a substitute for Tim.~~)*

You can use both *couldn't* and *wasn't/weren't able to* to talk about not succeeding in a particular task or activity:

*She **couldn't/wasn't able to** help him.*

manage to and succeed in

You can also use *manage to* (+ infinitive) and *succeed in* (+ -ing) to talk about success (or lack of success) in a particular task or activity, but not to talk about general abilities:

*Once the team **manage to** perfect their device, they will be able to put it on the market.*

*Scientists have **succeeded in** creating a new device.*

Exercises

1 Complete the sentences using *can*, *could* or *was able to*. Use negative forms where necessary. Sometimes more than one form is possible.

- 1 A: ¹..... you speak Dutch?
 B: No, not really. I ²..... speak it when I was a child, but then my family left the Netherlands and I lost touch with the language.
- 2 A: Did you go to the concert last night?
 B: No, I ³..... get a ticket.
- 3 A: Do you know if Sarah ⁴..... get home alright last night?
 B: Yes, she caught the last train with just minutes to spare!
- 4 A: How's the snow?
 B: Amazing! Another ten inches fell two nights ago. I ⁵..... get to the office yesterday morning!
- 5 A: I'm sorry, I ⁶..... come to the meeting this afternoon. Something's come up.
 B: OK. Don't worry. I'll take notes for you.

2 Complete the sentences with the words in brackets. Use negative forms where necessary.

- 1 I'm really sorry we to the party last night. (able/come)
- 2 She finally a job as a waitress. (manage/find)
- 3 My father's going to give me some money so I my first car. (able/buy)
- 4 We were only at home for a few days and unfortunately we all the people we'd wanted to see. (not succeed/visit)
- 5 She did as well as she could, but on this particular occasion she just the exam on time. (able/finish)
- 6 The cup fell off the table, but luckily he it before it hit the floor. (manage/catch)

3 Choose the correct options.

- 1 He loved the water and could / couldn't / wasn't able to swim when he was three.
- 2 I'd love to *can* / *could* / *be able to* swim like him.
- 3 She teaches French and she *can't* / *could* / *is able to* speak Chinese as well.
- 4 He's lost his driving licence. He *can't* / *couldn't* / *hasn't been able to* drive for the last two years.
- 5 We're a bit worried about Jake. He's six years old, but he still *can* / *can't* / *couldn't* read.
- 6 You used to *could* / *be able to* / *was able to* see the sea from here, before they built that block of flats.
- 7 He was heartbroken, but he *can* / *could* / *couldn't* understand why she'd left him.
- 8 I'm having laser treatment on my eyes, so I'll *can* / *could* / *be able to* read without glasses.

4 Write sentences about yourself.

- 1 I can, but I can't
- 2 I'd love to be able to
- 3 When I was I could
- 4 I couldn't until I
- 5 I was really pleased when I succeeded in for the first time.
- 6 I'll never forget the time I managed to