

Expressing ability

About this activity

Modal verbs can be confusing for learners. They have so many different meanings and this can be difficult for them to understand. One way you can solve this is by only teaching one functional meaning at a time. For example, using can and could to express ability in the past and present.

Stage 1: introduction	<p>Tell the learners about some things you can and can't do now that you could or couldn't do when you were a child. Use images to elicit the ideas. For example, <i>When I was young I couldn't cook chicken soup but now I can; I can't play basketball; when I was a child I could sleep easily.</i> Write the sentences on the board next to the corresponding image.</p>
Stage 2: Presentation	<p>Ask the learners to identify the verbs and which ones are about the past and the present. Mark the form. For example:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">When I was young I couldn't cook chicken soup but now I can S+couldn't+V S+can+V</p> <p>Ask the learners to repeat the sentences after you. Then say 'play basketball'; and ask them to say the full sentence 'I can't play basketball'. The learners then repeat the task in pairs.</p>
Stage 3: Practice	<p>Next, get the learners to practice the grammar. Put them in groups of four or five and give them some pictures showing activities people can and can't do. They can then write sentences about the pictures. Alternative: the learners play 'Say and point', where one learner says a sentence and the other points to the corresponding picture. <i>NB put a cross through some of the pictures to indicate the negative or a question mark to indicate the interrogative.</i></p>
Stage 4: Production	<p>Ask the learners to write questions to ask each other about their abilities. For example, 'Can you play basketball well?' 'Could you speak English when you were small?' Put some examples on the board and then the learners write their own. Model an example discussion with 2/3 learners and write it on the board.</p>

For example:

Student 1: Can you play basketball well?

Student 2: Yes I can. / No I can't.

Then get the learners to survey the rest of the class. For feedback, ask the learners what they found out about their classmates.

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