

THE USE OF "CAN" VS. "BE ABLE TO"

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the use of "can" and "be able to" to express ability. We are specifically concerned with: What is present in the mind of the native speaker which makes him use one form and not the other? and in what situations, if any, is "can" truly interchangeable with "be able to"? In an attempt to answer these questions, research for this paper has concentrated on three areas--survey of explanations in grammar reference books, textbooks and articles, usage analysis from native speaker written and spoken sources, and, lastly, questionnaire results and analysis.*

II. Survey of Literature

"Be able to" has often been treated as a substitute for "can", furnishing, by means of its own elaborate inflection, ways of distinguishing meanings which "can" is not fitted to cope with (Frank, 1972; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973; Long, 1974), for example:

- *Being able to* speak Japanese has helped George greatly in his work.
- It would be wonderful *to be able to* speak Japanese.
- George *has been able to* speak Japanese since he was a small child.

(Long, "Problems in English Grammar" *TESOL Quarterly* 1974, 8, p. 315)

Long, in the above article, also points out one interesting aspect of "could" as opposed to "was able to". According to him, the past form "could" is used not only as a factual indicative concerned with past time, where "was able to" and "were able to" are used, but also as a hypothetical subjunctive concerned with present and future time where "would be able to" is used:

- Fortunately even in my high-school days I *could* (or *was able to*) type.
- Laura *could* (or *would be able to*) state our case effectively tomorrow.

Most typically, subjunctive "could" deals with what is felt as improbable or unreal:

- Marian *could* spend next summer doing her thesis. (but she probably won't).
- This *could* be a very pleasant apartment. (but it isn't yet.)

Even indicative "could" is often associated with unreality when it is combined with perfect infinitives:

- Marian *could* have spent last summer doing her thesis. (but she didn't.)

* This study was conducted at UCLA in 1978.

Long explains that since “was able to” is much less commonly associated with unreality than “could”, it is a preferred form in sentences such as “Finally I was able to reach the finish line” (i.e. it deals with some definite past time and accomplishment—the person who produced the sentence did reach the attainable line)

Frank in *Modern English* (1972) states that three kinds of ability may be indicated by “can” and “be able to”. One is physical ability (e.g. I *can* lift this stone.) ; a second is a learned ability, in the sense of knowing how to do something (e.g. She *can* type.) The third type of ability is more general—it is equivalent to having the power or chance to do something (e.g. I *can* see you tonight.) While the first two kinds of ability are used mostly for live beings, especially human beings, the third type can be used for things as well as persons (e.g. This factory *can* produce dozens of machines a day). It is only in this sense of ability, which is related to possibility, that “can” and “be able to” may be used for future time. As has been pointed out by Hannah (1976), since the above meanings of “can” are essentially ability, and since the kind of ability involved is apparent from the context, it seems that only the meaning of ‘ability’ is necessary and that delineating three meanings is a source of potential confusion.

Ehrman in *The Meanings of Modals in Present-Day American English* (1966) explains that the basic meaning of “can” is that the action is “free to take place”. That is, there is no obstruction to the occurrence of the event. Under this general meaning, the concept of ability, permission and possibility all fit quite logically. No mention is made of “be able to”, however.

Leech in *Meaning and the English Verb* (1971) points out that one distinguishing mark of the ‘possibility’ meaning of “can” is its occurrence in passive sentences—e.g. “This game can be played by young children” means “It is possible for this game” ; but the corresponding active sentence “Young children can play this game” could be interpreted in the ‘ability’ sense. While “can” is generally voice-independent (with sometimes slight differences in meaning between the active and passive), “be able to” is not. Corresponding to “he’ll be able to sell it”, one will rarely find “It’ll be able to be sold”, though this seems to be acceptable for some contortionistic speakers.

Hannah, in a 1976 M.A. thesis—“Toward a Systematization of English Modals”—concludes from her data gathering that the quasi-modals occur more in speech than in writing. “Be able to” is the only exception. Commenting on this, Celce-Murcia (personal communication) suggests that it may be because “can” is the first modal native speakers acquire as children. It is also the first modal introduced to second-language learners. Since “can” covers a wider range of meanings than “be able to” does, it tends to occur more, especially in speech.

Citing examples of “be able to” from a novel—*The Trial of Dr. Adams*—Joos (*The English Verb*, 1968), points out that in nine out of ten instances, the exact time is prominent: there is a carefully chosen indication of the time measured by clock or calendar (e.g. *before, at the time, as soon as, at a quarter to eleven, the time will come when...*). It is only once that he finds a formula “I should like to be able to assist...” in which the grammatical versatility of “be able to” is an adequate motive for using it instead of “can” or “could”. Grammatical versatility is, according to Joos, an occasional value of “be able to”; its principal value is time-focused freedom, time-limited freedom. When clock-and-calendar time is irrelevant, “can” and “could” will be used; the former for everything but remote tense. Joos’ presentation of this ‘can/be able to’ distinction seems to be contradictory with the fact that in many instances the use of “can” is perfectly acceptable even when the exact time is prominent, e.g. “I’m sure I can finish this term paper by Wednesday”.

Most ESL textbooks, on the other hand, treat “be able to” as synonymous with “can”. Danielson & Hayden, in *Using English; Your Second Language* (1973) for example, use “can” and “be able to” interchangeably in their examples:

- *Can* he speak Arabic?
- Yes, he *is able to* carry on a conversation without any difficulties.
- *Could* they speak Arabic when they first went to Lebanon?
- No, they *weren’t able to* say anything in Arabic.

Rutherford in *Modern English* (1975) calls “be able to” as well as “have to” and “going to” real verb forms and list them along with “began to” and “happens to”. This is misleading in terms of semantics since the quasi-modals are functionally similar to the regular modals whereas some of the other items in the list are not. As in *Using English, Your Second Language*, the exercises used in Rutherford’s book are therefore the same old pattern drills which work well for form but do not convey a clear sense of meaning.

Hayden, Pilgrim & Haggard (*Mastering American English*, 1956) also give examples of “can” and “be able to” without any explanations.

- He *can* swim the length of the pool.
- I’m *able to* drive in traffic now.
- He *is now able to* walk without crutches.
- They *were able to* go after all.

Looking at the above examples, I personally think that there is a subtle semantic distinction between “can” and “be able to”: “can” is used in a neutral sense; something potential; “be able to”, on the other hand, suggests ‘an ability that is put into use *with special effort*. This is why *now* and *after all* are used in such contexts.

Praninskas (*Rapid Review of English Grammar*, 1975) explains that “can” is also used in reference to an ability expected at some time in the future, e.g. “The doctor can see you this afternoon” the clerk said. She does not discuss the use of “be able to”, however.

III. Data Gathering

The spoken samples below were gathered from Carterette & Jones’ *Informal Speech* (Adult-18 pages; p. 366-438) and the New York Times’ *The White House Transcripts* (p. 57-123). As for the written samples, I went through the editorial and letter-to-the editor sections in the *L.A. Times*, the *Herald-Examiner* (Nov. 1, 2, 3, 1978) and the *UCLA Daily Bruin* (Nov. 15, 16, 17, 1978). In these sources, “can” is used primarily in the present or in a timeless situation as in “I don’t think I can take the long road to law school right now....“and”....but we don’t go by how many words you can type a minute (*Informal Speech*, p. 378). “Be able to”, on the other hand, is used mainly in future and present perfect tenses. Examples of these are :

“...I wanted to be sure that when I go to Hawaii this summer that I’ll be able to get away with it”. (*Informal Speech*, p. 420)

Dean – “I think this is something we will be able to quietly and slowly document”. (*The White House Transcripts*, p. 81)

“Apparently you haven’t been able to do anything on my project of getting on the offense”. (*The White House Transcripts*, p. 123)

So far, I have not been able to see any of the fat cut in the government that we were promised by proposition 13. (a letter to the editor in *L.A. Times* Nov. 2, 78)

There are also occasions of “be able to” used in present and past tense forms. In such situations, however, “be able to” seems to have a special semantic connotation that is lacking in “can”, i.e. it seems to signal ‘an ability that is put into use with special effort’ :

– “If we (Younger) can get issue-oriented, we can win”. “If he (Gov. Brown) is able to evade the issues, then, well, I think he’s going to win” (*Herald-Examiner*, Nov. 3, 1978).

– I find it amazing that with the Election files stolen, the Bruin is still able to present dollar amount figures for specific expenditures. (a letter to the editor in the *UCLA Daily Bruin*, Nov. 16, 1978).

– At first I could not find a reason to vote for either the incumbent or the GOP candidate for lieutenant governor. Upon reflection I was able to think of just one. (a letter to the editor of the *L.A. Times*: Nov. 1, 1978)

Based on the review of literature and the findings from data gathering, a summary of the hypothesis suggested in this paper regarding “can” vs. “be able to” follows :

1. Native speakers use “be able to” when it is grammatically impossible to use “can”, i.e. to express future, perfect or progressive, gerundive forms.
2. Native speakers tend to substitute “can” for “will be able to” if an adverb or adverb phrase which signals future is given in the context. However, in formal situations, “will be able to” is a preferred form.
3. Native speakers use “could” in informal situations; “was able to” in formal situations.
4. Semantically, native speakers use “be able to” to the exclusion of “can” to express an ability that is put into use with special effort.

IV. Questionnaire results

A questionnaire was administered to two groups of subjects :

1. A non-academic group consisting of seventeen people.
2. An academic group consisting of seventeen students from various departments at UCLA.

Hypothesis 1 : Native speakers use “be able to” when it is grammatically impossible to use “can”.

Items tested : #6, #2

#6. A comment from a UCLA English professor :

English is not an easy major. Students who go through this major often wonder if they _____ use their degree. Studying English provides language skills, which are the skills that should be marketed.

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|------------------------|
| a. will be able to | 33 | 97% (predicted answer) |
| b. can | 1 | |
| c. both <i>a</i> and <i>b</i> | | |
| d. something else | _____ | |

#2. Mary is getting married. She says :

I want a double-ring ceremony. John and I have already gone out shopping for an engagement ring, but I _____ find anything I like.

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|----|----------------------------------|
| a. can't | 12 | |
| b. haven't been able to | 20 | 59% (predicted answer) |
| c. both <i>a</i> and <i>b</i> | 1 | |
| d. something else _____
(specify) | 1 | - couldn't find anything I liked |

Among the twelve people who chose *a* for item #2, nine of them were from the non-academic group. Some of them commented that *b* is too long and therefore sounds too formal for this situation.

Hypothesis 2 : Native speakers tend to substitute “can” for “will be able to” if an adverb or adverb phrase which signals the future is given in the context. In formal situations, however, “will be able to” is a preferred form.

Items Tested : #4 (*can*-informal), #1 (*will be able to*-formal)

#4. I don't think George _____ run tomorrow. He just sprained his ankle.

a. can	12	35% (predicted ans-not realized)
b. will be able to	20	
c. both <i>a</i> and <i>b</i>	2	
d. something else	-	

(specify)

One subject who chose *b* commented that he could not verbalize this, but he thought that *able* sounded more appropriate in this situation. Had I provided a sentence which does not stress ‘ability’, I might have got a different result.

#1. This is what one concerned citizen wrote to the *L.A. Times* regarding inflation :

What the Carter Administration should do is persuade the Federal Reserve to slow the growth in our money supply. Only then _____ put the inflation under control.

a. will we be able to	27	79% (predicted answer)
b. can we	6	
c. both <i>a</i> and <i>b</i>	1	
d. something else	-	

(specify)

Hypothesis 3 : Native speakers use “could” in informal situations; “was able to” in formal situations.

Items Tested : #7 (*could*-informal), #3 (*was able to*-formal)

#7. I still remember a time when kids _____ do their homework without a telephone.

a. were able to	11	
b. could	20	59% (predicted answer)
c. both <i>a</i> and <i>b</i>	-	
d. something else	3- did	

(specify)

#3. While many experts on teaching reading have stressed the importance of grammatical structure in the comprehension of advanced technical material in a second language, I _____ find any studies which have dealt directly with the relative importance of vocabulary and structure as determiners of comprehension.

a. was not able to	23	67% (predicted answer)
b. could not	5	
c. both <i>a</i> and <i>b</i>	4	
d. something else	2	have not been able to, did not (specify)

Hypothesis 4 : Semantically, native speakers use “be able to” to the exclusion of “can” to express an ability that is put into use with special effort.

Item tested : # 5

#5. Several days ago, the engine in my car conked out. I was miles from civilization. Yet, mustering my limited knowledge of mechanical matters, I _____ jerk and nudge the wretched wreck along the highway until I got to a gas station.

a. could	3	
b. was able to	27	79% (predicted answer)
c. both <i>a</i> and <i>b</i>	--	
d. something else	4	jerked and nudged, managed to (specify)

One of the subjects who chose *d* commented that ‘jerked and nudged’ sounds more casual (and therefore more appropriate in this context) than ‘was able to jerk and nudge’.

There were very few comments made on the questionnaire considering the number of subjects tested. However, from my conversation with some of the subjects after the test, I learned that they were very aware of the formal/informal constraints of “be able to” and “can”. Some even admitted that they would use “be able to” mainly in writing.

V. Suggestions for Further Research

Although responses to 6 of the 7 questions resulted as predicted, more testing should be undertaken in order to prove the hypotheses completely. What should be looked at more carefully is the complex interaction between the formal/informal constraints and the semantic connotation of “be able to” (i.e. extra effort). The use of “be able to” with another modal to express ability in hypothetical situations should also be compared and contrasted with that of “can/could”.

VI. Implications for the ESL Teaching

Students should be made aware that “can” and “be able to” are not completely synonymous. At the beginning levels, students should be taught the grammatical distinctions between the two. Later at the intermediate/advanced levels they should become aware of the effect that informal versus formal contexts (as well as the semantic connotations) have on the choice of the two constructions.

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Language Usage Study

Directions : Circle the letter of the one item you prefer over the other. Please include any comments you may have about the item in the space.

Note : There are no right or wrong answers. The purpose of this study is to find out how people actually use English; we are not looking for what is 'correct' or 'proper' according to the grammar books. *Please put down what you would really use.*

1. This is what one concerned citizen wrote to the *L.A. Times* regarding inflation.

What the Carter administration should do is persuade the Federal Reserve to slow the growth in our money supply. Only then _____ put the inflation under control.

- a. will we be able to
- b. can we
- c. both *a* and *b*
- d. something else _____
(specify)

comments :

2. Mary is getting married. She says :

I want a double-ring ceremony. John and I have already gone out shopping for an engagement ring. but I _____ find anything I like.

- a. can't
- b. haven't been able to
- c. both *a* and *b*
- d. something else _____
(specify)

comments :

3. While many experts on teaching reading have stressed the importance of grammatical structure in the comprehension of advanced technical material in a second language, I _____ find any studies which have dealt directly with the relative importance of vocabulary and structure as determiners of comprehension.

- a. was not able to
- b. could not
- c. both *a* and *b*
- d. something else _____
(specify)

comments :

4. I don't think George _____ run tomorrow, He just sprained his ankle.

- a. can
- b. will be able to
- c. both *a* and *b*
- d. something else _____
(specify)

comments :

5. Several days ago, the engine in my car conked out. I was miles from civilization. Yet, mustering my limited knowledge of mechanical matters, I _____ jerk and nudge the wretched wreck along the highway until I got to a gas station.

- a. could
- b. was able to
- c. both *a* and *b*
- d. something else _____
(specify)

comments :

6. A comment from a UCLA English professor :

English is not an easy major. Students who go through this major often wonder if they _____ use their degree. Studying English provides language skills, which are the skills that should be marketed.

- a. will be able to
- b. can
- c. both *a* and *b*
- d. something else _____
(specify)

comments :

7.

Trudy



I still remember a time when kids _____do their homework without a telephone.

- a. were able to
- b. could
- c. both *a* and *b*
- d. something else _____

comments :

Age _____

Sex _____

Occupation or Year in School/Major _____