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Lesson 5

Exploring the Past

By: Raihane KH
Learn English Differently

Grammar Explorer

was-were able to.

Function

Expressing past abilities

Part Two

Read the following short text:

The Story of Helen Keller, The Girl Who Could Not See, Hear or Speak

I'd like you to know the story of Helen Keller, who could neither see nor hear from the time she was a baby. Yet the brilliant girl was able to overcome all those handicaps, to graduate from a college with honors and become a useful citizen.

I must say there was nothing wrong with Helen Keller when she was born. Her father and mother were very proud of their pretty baby, who tried to say "pa-pa" and "ma-ma".

For nineteen months Helen grew bigger and stronger. She was able to walk when she was a year old; she could say a few words.



But one day the child fell ill. She must have been very ill. For days she was laid up with a high fever and soon the parents learned that their darling would never be able to see and hear. The little child was now doomed to a life of silence and darkness. She could not hear what was said to her and did not know how to talk, she was unable to play with other children.

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- ✓ Notice the underlined parts in the text.
- ✓ Why do you think you should use “could” and “was able to”?
- ✓ Do you think there is a difference between them?

Use

“could” and “was/were able to” are used to express past abilities; things that one could or was able to do in the past.

Rule:

-“**could**” can be used to describe general abilities, talents and skills: I could eat/ I could talk/ I could laugh, etc.

E.g. By the time he was four, Wassim **could** read and write.

-“**was/were able to**” can be used to describe specific occasions, i.e., when speaking about achievements.

For example, everybody has been trying to convince your friend to volunteer but no one seems to succeed, then you come and talk to her and she’s convinced!

You’d say: “I **was able** to persuade her to volunteer”.

(As if you are saying: “I succeeded at convincing her.)

Note:

- You can replace “was/were able to” by “managed to”.
- You can use both “could” and “was/were able to” for specific occasions with stative verbs (hear, taste, smell, see, understand, believe, imagine, etc.).

Special Occasions: ‘was/were able to’/’managed to’ + verb (infinitive).

General abilities: ‘could /’was/were able to’ + verb (infinitive).

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Examples

General Abilities (when you can use both)

- When I was young, I **could** speak two languages.
- When I was young, I **was able to** speak two languages.

Special Occasions (when you can use only "was/were able to)

- Yesterday, I **was able to** surprise my sister.
- I **was able to** get a really good price on the car.

Special Occasions' Exceptions (when you can use both)

✓ To describe inabilities (the negative form).

- He studied for months but **couldn't** pass the final exam.
- He studied for months **but wasn't able to** pass the final exam.

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