

'Could'

This is one of the most intractable common mistakes for learners. Two factors are involved:

1. In Korean you seem to use the "equivalent" idea 할 수 있었다 more often than we do in English; for example, a Korean might say "졸업할 수 있었다" but in the same situation the native English speaker would simply say "I graduated," unless the English speaker wanted to emphasize possibility or 'manage to.'
2. If you want to easily avoid mistakes, use *was able to* when you intend to express past possibility. Here are the rules from *Practical English Usage* (Michael Swan, Oxford U. Press):
(122.3) We use *could* for 'general ability' – to say that somebody could do something at any time, whenever he/she wanted. (*Was/were able* is also possible.)

She could read when she was four.

My father could speak ten languages.

We do not normally use *could* to say that somebody managed to do something on one occasion. Instead, we use *was/were able, managed* or *succeeded* (in . . .ing).

How many eggs were you able to get (NOT ~~*could you get*~~)

I managed to find a really nice dress in the sale. (NOT ~~*I could find . . .*~~)

After six hours' climbing, we succeeded in getting to the top of the mountain. (NOT ~~*we could get to the top . . .*~~)

(122.4) In certain cases, it is possible to use *could* to say that somebody was able to do something on one occasion. This happens with *see, hear, taste, feel, smell, understand, remember* and *guess* (see 125).

I could smell burning.

It also happens in some subordinate clauses.

I'm so glad you could come.

In negative clauses, and with negative or limiting adverbs like *only* and *hardly*, we also use *could* to refer to one occasion.

I managed to find the street, but I couldn't find her house.

I could only get six eggs.

She could hardly believe her eyes.