Understanding the context

Sometimes it is difficult to understand the meaning of what people say, even if you can understand all the individual words. This is because you need to apply both your language knowledge and your knowledge of the world if you want to fully understand what people say. If you come from a different culture from the speaker, as well as from a different language background, this can be difficult, as you may not be familiar with the context. For example, if someone says: 'come for the weekend, you can have the spare room' you need to understand that in Australia people often have an extra bedroom in their house where guests can sleep if they stay overnight. If you don't know about that, then the sentence will not make sense even if you understand all the words.

In the following sentences, see if you can work out what was said immediately before the sentence. Ask yourself how you know, and what factors helped you to make your decision. You can then start to use those skills in real conversations. An example is given for you.

Example sentence: 'I wish I could. I haven't got enough willpower, that's the problem'.

Your conclusion: The speaker doesn't have enough 'willpower', so must be talking about something that is difficult to do, and not very pleasant. However, he wants to do it because he uses the word 'wish', so it must be something that will produce a benefit for him. The use of 'could' shows that he is talking about an action, and shows that he hasn't been able to do it yet. Using my knowledge of the world, I can think of many things which can produce a benefit, but which are difficult to do if you lack willpower; things like giving up smoking or losing weight or getting more exercise. Taking all of these things into consideration, the sentence before was probably something like 'Why don't you give up smoking?' or 'You should try eating less if you want to lose weight'.

Now work out what words came immediately before these sentences. Of course, there are likely to be many possibilities, but see if you can find an explanation that fits, and think about how you came to that conclusion.

1. 'See? I told you it would get colder.'
2. 'What do you mean - your book?'
3. 'OK, I'll take you home, if you really want to go.'
4. 'I've told you twice already. Quarter to four.'
5. 'Go on then, overtake him.'
6. 'I'd love one. I haven't had a thing all day.'
7. 'I'm quite capable of telling her myself, thank you.'
8. 'All right. I'll be down in a minute.'