BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Why we forget the things we learn

Georgina

Hello. This is ٦ Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Georgina.

Rob

And I'm Rob.

Georgina

Do you have a good memory, Rob? Can you remember people's names, or where you left your car keys?

Rob

Well, I can remember people's faces, but I have a terrible memory for names. And sometimes I'll be eagerly reading a book but then a week later I can't remember a single thing about it!

Georgina

Well, you're not alone. Many people find it hard to remember things they've read or learned while other, sometimes useless, information sticks with them.

Rob

In this programme, we'll be finding out why we forget the things we've learned, whether that's someone's name, a word in English or where you put your wallet.

Georgina

But first let me ask you my quiz question, Rob - before I forget. You and I might struggle to remember someone's phone number but Chinese student, Chao Lu, has a record-breaking memory. In ٢٠٠٥, she recited the numbers of pi, the mathematical equation describing the proportions of a circle – but how many digits did she manage to remember? Was it:

a) ٤٨,٠٠٠?

b) ٦٨,٠٠٠? or

c) ٨٨,٠٠٠?

Rob

Wow! It sounds like Chao Lu has an incredible memory! I'll say she remembered b) ٦٨,٠٠٠ digits of pi.

Georgina

OK, Rob, let's remember to find out the answer at the end of the programme.

Rob

OK, will do. Someone like Chao Lu might have a photographic memory – the ability to remember things in exact detail, like looking at a photograph. But for the rest of us, things are more complicated.

Georgina

Dr Jared Horvath is an educational neuroscientist at the University of Melbourne. According to him there are two rules which explain how we remember information.

Rob

Listen to Dr Horvath talking to BBC World Service programme, The Why Factor, and see if you can hear the two rules he mentions:

Dr Jared Horvath

Rule number one is repetition is key. The odds of remembering something after a one-off are incredibly slim…unless you can immediately link it to something you already understand – so, my middle name is Cuney… if I ever meet someone named Cuney I'll never forget that 'cos I have an immediate link… but if I meet someone named Joe… so a one-off, we all pretty much suck at it - unless we focus. So then rule two then becomes, we remember what we focus on.

Georgina

The first rule for remembering is repetition. The odds – meaning the probability, of remembering something are low if you learn it as a one-off - something that only happens once.

Rob

Dr Horvath's second rule is about focus: we remember what we focus on. This involves making links between new information and something you already understand.

Georgina

These are the most effective methods of remembering, and most of us suck at – or are bad at – other ways of remembering things.

Rob

Now, of course, one group of people who need good memory is students. Do you remember cramming for school exams, Georgina?

Georgina

Ah yes, staying up late trying to revise everything the night before an exam. I remember doing that - but it didn't work!

Rob

Yes. Dr Horvath's research found that students who cram for tests forget around ٩٠٪ of what they studied within ٧٢ hours.

Georgina

He thinks education shouldn't be about trying to cram students' heads with facts and figures. It should involve something more meaningful, as he explains to BBC World Service's, The Why Factor:

Dr Jared Horvath

The thing that I like about education is its really moving from a model of 'just memorise as much as you can' into what we now call deep learning which is, instead of giving you a hundred things and I just need to know that you can remember them, I'm going to give you ten things and instead of just being able to remember them, I want you to be able to describe it deeply and come up with new ways of looking at it.

Rob

Traditionally, education involves memorising – learning information exactly as it is so that you can repeat it later.

Georgina

But being able to repeat something like a parrot doesn't always mean you understand it. Dr Horvath advocates a technique called deep learning – a complete way of learning something that means you fully understand and will not forget it.

Rob

So, remember: repetition, focus and deep learning are the memory muscles we

need. Maybe that's how Chinese student, Chau Lu, developed her record   breaking memory. You do remember your quiz question, don't you, Georgina?

Georgina

Yes, thank you, Rob - my memory isn't that bad! I asked you how many digits of the mathematical equation, pi, she could remember.

Rob

And I said b) ٦٨,٠٠٠ digits.

Georgina

Which was… the correct answer! Actually, the number was so long it took her over ٢٤ hours without a break to recite it all!

Rob

Oh Wow! Her brain must have be aching after all that. OK, let's recap the vocabulary from this programme starting with a photographic memory which is the ability to remember things in exact detail, like looking at a photograph.

Georgina

The odds of something happening mean the chances that it will happen.

Rob

A one-off is something that only happens once.

Georgina

To suck at something is an informal way to say 'be bad at doing something'. It's more common in American English.

Rob

If you memorise something, you learn it exactly so that you can repeat it later.

Georgina

And finally, deep learning describes a complete way of learning something so that you fully understand it and will not forget it.

Rob

OK, well, that's all from us, but don't forget to join us again soon for more trending topics and top tips to help you remember useful and everyday English vocabulary. Bye for now!

Georgina

Bye!

VOCABULARY

photographic memory

the ability to remember things in exact detail, like looking at a photograph

the odds of

the chances or probability that something will happen

a one-off

something that only happens once

suck at (something)

be bad at (doing) something (US)

memorise

learn something exactly so that you can repeat it later

deep learning

a complete way of learning something that means you fully understand it and will not forget it