
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

The fear of numbers



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Sam

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Sam.

Neil

And I'm Neil.

Sam

Neil, would you describe yourself as '**a numbers person**'?

Neil

If you mean, am I someone who understands numbers and is good at using them and interpreting data, then no!

Sam

OK. So, maybe like me, you weren't good at maths at school?

Neil

No, I wasn't. Algebra, geometry, times tables – it was all very confusing.

Sam

We're not alone, Neil. But the fear of numbers might just be in our heads and we might have enough number knowledge to get by with. That's what we'll be exploring in this programme while looking at some relevant vocabulary. But, sorry, Neil, I'm going to start with a maths question! It's thought the largest number in the world is called a googol. It's written with a 1 and how many zeros? Is it...

- a) A hundred zeros
- b) A thousand zeros, or
- c) Ten thousand zeros?

Neil

I'll guess ten thousand zeros.

Sam

OK. I'll reveal the answer later on. But let's talk more about the fear of numbers now. Of course, numbers are important in our lives but one bad experience at school can put us off them for life. '**Put off**' means make someone dislike something.

Neil

What put me off maths was it was not only complicated but very theoretical – and not very practical – useful for real-life situations. And the problem now is, it's easy to be fooled by fancy figures that we get told about.

Sam

This is something The Why Factor programme on BBC World Service has been exploring. They spoke to Charles Seife, who's an author and professor at New York University, who explained why we are at the mercy of people who throw numbers at us....

Charles Seife, author and professor, New York University

Because we are **primed** not to question numbers, certain people have learned that numbers are perhaps the most powerful tools for deception... advertisers, marketers, politicians, who try to convince the public through **spurious oratory** - have learned that the one thing they can't get challenged on is numbers or challenges are ineffective.

Neil

Interesting words from Charles Seife there. He explains that numbers might be a powerful tool for deceiving people. Many of us are **primed** – so, told to behave in a certain situation and in a certain way – not to question numbers, accept them as fact.

Sam

Yes, and this is dangerous. So, when politicians, for example, do good and effective public speaking – known as **oratory** – the information they give could be **spurious** – that means false, not correct or inaccurate. But numbers are more persuasive – they make you believe something is true.

Neil

So, unless you're confident with numbers, you're unlikely to challenge the facts and figures that you are given. So, Sam, if I said to you ten per cent of the ten million people who eat meat have a twenty per cent chance of being five per cent overweight – would you challenge that?

Sam

I'd have to go away and work that out! As I said, Neil, I'm not a numbers person. Even talking about numbers makes me anxious.

Neil

Well, interestingly, The Why Factor programme explained that girls are more anxious about learning maths, but even if they feel more nervous about maths, they aren't any worse with numbers than their more confident classmates. It's just the fear that's stopping you!

Sam

Well maybe, but one bad experience can knock our confidence and ability to use maths.

Neil

Take comfort from Paula Miles, who teaches statistics to psychology students at St. Andrews University. She told The Why Factor that she thinks there's no such thing as 'a numbers person'....

Paula Miles, St Andrews University

There is no such thing as someone who is a 'number person' or not. If we're taught in the right way, then I think we all have the **potential** to be a numbers person. I'm not saying we're all going to grow up to be mathematicians but we're all going to get to a point where we have the basic **numeracy** skills that we need to be able to cope in our environment...

Sam

I feel a little better now! We all have the possibility within us – or **potential** – to be a numbers person.

Neil

Yes, I think it's about survival. We want to develop **numeracy** – basic mathematical skills – to use numbers in a particular situation that we are in. We might not be a genius like Einstein, but we know enough to work things out.

Sam

I wonder if you worked out the answer to my question correctly, Neil? Earlier, I asked about what's thought to be the largest number in the world - called a googol. How many zeros does it have? A hundred zeros, a thousand zeros, or ten thousand zeros?

Neil

I said ten thousand zeros.

Sam

Sorry, Neil. A googol is ten to the 100th power – so a mere 100 zeros.

Neil

I don't think I'll be using that number anytime soon. But I might be using some of the vocabulary we've discussed today, including **a numbers person...**

Sam

... that's someone who understands numbers and is good at using them and interpreting data – not like us!

Neil

If you are **put off** by something, it means you are made to dislike something. And to be **primed** means told to behave in a certain situation.

Sam

The skill of effective public speaking is known as **oratory**. And **spurious** means false, inaccurate, or not correct.

Neil

And when we have the possibility within us to do something, we describe it as our **potential**. And having **numeracy** means having basic mathematical skills.

Sam

But now we've reached the number six – six minutes of English. Thanks very much for listening and goodbye.

Neil

Bye.

VOCABULARY

a numbers person

someone who understands numbers and is good at using them and interpreting data

put off

made to dislike something

primed

told to behave in a certain situation

oratory

make good and effective public speaking

spurious

false, not correct or inaccurate

potential

have the possibility within you to do something

numeracy

having basic mathematical skills