
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Is talking on the phone embarrassing?



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello, and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Neil.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Neil

Sam, do you know Stephen Fry?

Sam

Not personally, but I know of him. Stephen Fry is an English writer and comedian and is well known for being extremely intelligent and very **knowledgeable** about many things cultural, historical and linguistic.

Neil

To be **knowledgeable** means 'to know a lot about something'. I wish I was half as **knowledgeable** as he is!

Sam

I wish I were a quarter as **knowledgeable**!

Neil

There is still time, Sam! And maybe this week's question will help you become just a little bit more **knowledgeable** on the topic of the telephone. The first long distance telephone call was made in 1876. Approximately what was the distance of that call? Was it:

A: 10km?

B: 15km?

Or C: 20km?

What do you think Sam?

Sam

So when you say long distance

Neil

For the time, yes. Remember the telephone was only a baby in 1876.

Sam

In that case, I'll say approximately 15km. But that's just a guess - a long distance guess.

Neil

We'll find out if you're right at the end of the programme. Stephen Fry is also known as a **technophile**. The suffix 'phile' means 'a lover of that thing'. So a **technophile** is someone who loves technology. Fry was a guest on the BBC podcast Word of Mouth and was talking about the technology of communication. It seems he's not a fan of the telephone. But why not?

Stephen Fry

I think the telephone was a really annoying **blip** in our communications and that's old technology. I mean that's 1880s, 90s. When you're on the telephone to someone, especially if you're British – you know, that Bernard Shaw thing – oh, you know, the moment one Englishman opens his mouth another Englishman **despises** him - when you're speaking to someone on the telephone all the age, **class**, education, vocabulary all come into play because it's **in real time** and it's embarrassing. I hate being on the telephone to people - especially strangers in shops and things like that because it's embarrassing and awkward.

Neil

So, why doesn't he like the telephone?

Sam

Well, he uses a quote from the writer George Bernard Shaw. It's not the exact quote but the meaning is that as soon as an English person speaks, another English person **despises** them. To **despise** someone is a very strong emotion and it means 'to really hate someone'.

Neil

So, what is it about the English person's voice that leads others to **despise** them?

Sam

Stephen Fry goes on to explain that there is a lot of information about someone that people get from their voice. You can make a judgment about someone's age, level of education and **class** from the way that they speak and the vocabulary they use.

Neil

Class refers to your economic and social position in a society. In Britain, we talk about three classes: upper class, middle class and working class. The family into which you are born dictates your **class**. These used to be a lot more important in British society but there are still different prejudices and negative feelings related to the relationship between the **classes**.

Sam

Exactly, so hearing someone's voice on the telephone might make you think something negative about someone based on very old-fashioned ideas of **class**. What makes it worse is that these conversations happen **in real time**. This means they are 'happening live', 'not recorded', so you have no time to really think about it.

Neil

So he may be a **technophile**, but he's not a fan of the phone!

Sam

Indeed. He called it a **blip**, which is a word for when something is not quite right - when there is a fault or a mistake which is usually not long lasting.

Neil

So do you think he's right?

Sam

Well, actually, I don't like to talk to strangers on the phone very much myself, but that's just me. But I do think that although the **class** divisions in British society are much less obvious and much less important than in the past, we still do make judgements about people based on how they speak and those judgements can often be completely false.

Neil

Right, nearly time to review our vocabulary, but first, let's have the answer to today's question. The first long distance telephone call was made in 1876. Approximately what was the distance of that call? Was it:

- A: 10km?
- B: 15km?
- Or C: 20km?

What did you think, Sam?

Sam

I guessed 15km. But it was just a guess.

Neil

Well, sadly, on this occasion it was not a correct guess. The correct answer is approximately 10km or 6 miles. Congratulations if you got that right. Now on with the vocabulary.

Sam

We started with the adjective **knowledgeable**, which means 'knowing a lot about something'.

Neil

A **technophile** is someone who loves technology.

Sam

To **despise** someone is to hate someone strongly.

Neil

Class refers to a group in society you are said to belong to from your birth. Certain stereotypes are often attached to different classes to do with intelligence and education, for example.

Sam

In real time is an expression that means 'happening live, without any pauses or breaks'. So for example, you aren't listening to this programme **in real time**,

Neil

Well, I am.

Sam

Well, of course, you are **Neil**, because you are here with me as we are recording. But if you're listening to the podcast, it's no longer **real time**. It's been recorded and edited.

Neil

And we had one other word, didn't we?

Sam

Yes, a **blip**, which is a temporary fault, or mistake.

Neil

Well, that's all we've got for this programme. For more, find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and our YouTube pages and, of course, our website bbclearningenglish.com, where you can find all kinds of other programmes and videos and activities to help you improve your English. Thank you for joining us and goodbye!

Sam

Bye!

VOCABULARY

knowledgeable (adjective)

knowing a lot about something

a technophile

someone who loves technology

a blip

a temporary fault or mistake

to despise

to hate strongly, to detest

class

an artificial grouping of society dictated by birth

in real time

happening at that moment, live, not recorded