

So, you have been learning English for five, ten, twenty years now. You are making some progress with every passing year, but you also keep forgetting words and phrases, or occasionally lose the motivation to learn. For this reason, you may sometimes have doubts whether you are learning in the best possible way. Educational specialists have recently discovered that if you want to learn something relatively quickly, efficiently and permanently, you must learn in a brain friendly way. But what does this actually mean? To throw some light on the subject, we held an interview with Stella Collins, a recognised specialist in brain friendly learning and teaching.

Be Friends with Your Brain

by Emilia Królak

An interview with Stella Collins, author of the book *Neuroscience for Learning and Development*

English Matters: What does it mean to learn and teach in a brain friendly way?

Stella Collins: What do you notice about learning something you enjoy? It might be a hobby, something you learn at work or perhaps a language.

You will find you have a strong reason to learn; you actively seek relevant information and materials; you explore ideas and repeatedly test your skills. Because it is pleasurable, you repeat the activities and improve your skills or knowledge. You probably share your enthusiasm with others and perhaps even teach them. It feels natural and not like hard work.

When you learn in a brain friendly way you are involved, immersed, fascinated and persistent. At the end of the day, your brain, and maybe your body, will feel as if they had a work out, but aren't drained. At

night when you sleep your brain starts to lay down long term memories, so you can build on them again the next day.

For example, I've moved to Spain, so if I want to eat, work or communicate, I must speak Spanish. I explore Spanish in a multimodal, diverse way, and everything fascinates me. I test, practice and repeat my Spanish in real life situations, and I gain friends, food and information, so I'm rewarded too.

Brain friendly learning is about designing and delivering learning that is natural and gets results. It helps to know something about the neuroscience and psychology of learning, you need a design and delivery process to ensure you cover all the stages of learning, and you can be creative and

Celebrate your mistakes and learn from them, repeat often and test yourself with quick quizzes. Act out scenarios, find activities in English, move whilst you learn to connect brain and body. A simple tip is set your phone to English and you'll find you quickly learn without having to translate.

EM: What are the key, brain-friendly methods of learning vocabulary and grammar?

SC: Your brain processes patterns, so seek the patterns that occur naturally in language. Learn like children learn. They discover patterns because they listen, form a mental hypothesis, test it, note the response, adjust and keep using language in real situations. Native English speaking children can say 'put on my hat' and 'put off going to bed' long before learning the theory of 'phrasal verbs'. Map out the patterns you find, draw and create mental pictures. Trying to learn lists of words or grammatical terms is difficult, dull and not productive.

EM: How can we boost our motivation to learn?

SC: Find a strong personal reason to learn, even if it's something you've been

o neuroscience 'njʊərəʊsaiəns / 'nʊrʊsaiəns |
neuronauka, nauka o mózgu

1 doubt daʊt | wątpliwość

relatively | względnie

efficiently | skutecznie

actually | w rzeczywistości, faktycznie

recognised | uznany

to seek sth | szukać, poszukiwać czegoś

pleasurable 'pleʒərəbl | przyjemny

to improve sth | polepszać coś

involved | zaangażowany

immersed | zanurzony, zagłębiony (w coś)

persistent | wytrwały

work out | wycisk, trening

drained | wycieńczony

2 diverse daɪ'vɜːs / daɪ'vɜːrs | różnicowany

psychology saɪ'kɒlədʒi | psychologia

to cover sth | tu: przejść przez coś, objąć coś

physical | fizyczny

to support sb | wspierać kogoś

advice | rada

3 to act out sth | odgrywać coś

tip | wskazówka

to occur | pojawiać się, występować

hypothesis haɪ'pɒθəsɪs | hipoteza

to adjust | dostosowywać się

dull dʌl | nudny

to boost sth | wzniecić coś, wzbudzić w sobie coś, zwiększyć

asked to learn at work – what will be a good result for you? Make the process enjoyable and part of your daily routine, so you create a learning habit. Set goals and reward yourself when you reach them. Often we're presented with material that might be dull, so find ways to make it more fun. Draw pictures, create mindmaps, act out scenes, build models – whatever works for you. Our brains can't work well without our bodies so use your body too – stand up, walk around, learn physically as well as mentally. And remember that as humans we are social, so work with other people who are learning too, and share what you know.

EM: What is the role of emotions and stress in the process of learning?

SC: Stress is bad for learning. It reduces your capacity for high level thinking and damages your long term memory. On the other hand, emotions make learning 'sticky'. When we feel motivated or curious, we release dopamine, a neurotransmitter that makes us feel good, and it's addictive so we want more of it. Find a learning activity that makes you feel great and you'll be happy to repeat it. For me, that's talking to people in Spanish and seeing they understand; I feel happy, remember the experience better and want to repeat it, so it becomes a virtuous circle.

EM: What else can we do to learn or remember better?

SC: Memory is complex and there are many ways to improve it. Here's a memorable set of ideas:

- **Link** to what you already know. Build on your current neural networks rather than creating new ones. Make the links curious, multisensory and richly encoded.
- **Emotions** are vital. What isn't emotional usually isn't important, so we don't waste energy remembering it. Use your emotions to remember.
- **Anchors** are links you create between ordinary actions or objects and your learning. It's easier for your brain to process concrete information rather than abstract information, so connect a real chair with the word 'chair,' rather than translating one word 'krzesło' into another word 'chair'.
- **Repetition** – neuroplasticity is repetitive firing of the same neurons together until they 'wire' together. You can never repeat enough, but you can improve the way you repeat; spaced repetition with breaks over time is more successful than

massed learning, where you cram in all the information at once.

- **Novelty**, anything new, makes us pay attention because it may prove to be something dangerous, and we only remember what we pay attention to.
- **Stories** use all of these ideas to create a flow we remember better than a set of disconnected items. Your brain responds more strongly to stories than facts.

Connecting ideas together to create a new word also helps you to learn, i.e. take the first letter from Links, Emotions, Anchors, Repetition, Novelty and Stories and you get the word LEARNS – that's all you have to remember!

We hope you will be inspired by Stella's tips on how to learn in the way most favourable for your brain. Even if

neuroplasticity 'njʊərəʊplæ'stɪsəti | neuroplastyczność

to cram in sth | *tu:* wkuwać coś

to pay attention to sth | zwracać na coś uwagę

to prove | udowodniać, dowodzić

Stella Collins

Stella Collins is Creative Director at Stellar Learning and the author of Kogan Page's sellout book *Neuroscience for Learning and Development*, already translated into three other languages, as well as many articles devoted to the subject of brain friendly



Stella Collins

you cannot follow in her footsteps and move to an English speaking country to fully immerse yourself in the world of English, you can certainly do many of the things she mentions to learn in a wiser, more effective and pleasurable way. Good luck! //

4 to set a goal | wyznaczać cel

mindmap | mapa myśli

capacity | zdolność

to damage sth | uszkodzić coś

on the other hand | z drugiej strony

to release sth | wyzwalać, uwalniać, produkować coś

dopamine 'dɒʊpəmi:n | dopamina

addictive | uzależniająca

virtuous circle 'vɜ:tʃuəs 'sɜ:kəl | spirala sukcesu

current | obecny

to waste sth | marnować coś, tracić coś

anchor 'æŋkə(r) | kotwica, *tu:* hak pamięciowy

learning in journals and magazines.

She also founded the Brain Friendly Learning Group, a network for learning professionals with an interest in the brain. Stella says 'There is no such thing as a boring topic – just boring training'. She has a BSc in Psychology, an MSc in Human Communication, is a Fellow of the Institute of Training and Occupational Learning and has a business background in the IT industry. Contact Stella via www.stellarlearning.co.uk or follow her on twitter @stellacollins

to found sth | zakładać coś