

Ask about English

number / amount



BBC WORLD SERVICE LEARNING ENGLISH



bbclearningenglish.com
© British Broadcasting Corporation 2005

BBC Learning English – Ask about English

A question from Yang Zeng:

I am a Chinese student living in Tokyo, Japan.
I have a question to ask you about "number" and "amount."

When we count something like ships, how to express the total?

- a) The amount of ships
- b) The number of ships

Which is the appropriate expression?

Amos Paran answers:

Hi Yang Zeng.

You may know that one of the divisions that we make between different nouns in English is whether the noun is countable or uncountable.

Examples of countable nouns are words such as ship, bottle, chair, table, pound, computer...

Examples of uncountable nouns are words such as water, furniture, money, equipment...

Now, whether a noun is countable or uncountable makes quite a difference to the grammatical structures that this noun will be found in.

For example, countable nouns have plurals – ships, bottles, chairs, tables. Uncountable nouns don't have plurals, and grammatically, most of them are singular – so, 'this equipment is really expensive'.

The result of this is an additional difference between countable and uncountable nouns – and that is whether we talk about 'amount' or 'number'. We use 'number' with countable nouns. So we would say, 'the number of ships', 'the number of chairs' and so on. With uncountable nouns we use the word 'amount' – so we talk about 'the amount of furniture', 'the amount of water', 'the amount of equipment', and so on.

Amos Paran is the Course Leader of the MA in Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) by Distance Learning at the Institute of Education, University of London. His main teaching and research interests are reading in a foreign language and the use of literature in foreign language teaching and learning.

Audio available online at:

www.bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials/1535_questionanswer