

Ask about English

Rote learning



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Dahlia asks:

I just want to know the meaning of this word: rote learning, what's the exact meaning?

Martin Parrot answers:

What is 'rote learning' ? Rote learning is learning something by repeating it, over and over and over again; saying the same thing and trying to remember how to say it; trying to say it fluently and fast. Now, it doesn't help us to understand - it helps us to remember - and often we learn a poem, or a song, or something like that by rote learning. What have you learnt by rote learning, Dahlia?

Dahlia: My most studying is like rote learning.

Martin: Oh, is it.

Dahlia: I just keep saying it to pass my exam, without understanding, most of what I read, or study.

Martin: Well, if you need to remember it for the examination, then I'm sure that's very useful. It's an interesting term, rote learning. It describes the technique for learning - but often we say "I learnt something by rote", and we use the expression "by rote".

Question: If Dahlia wants to learn some useful vocabulary, that could also help her to pass the exam, but she wants to know the meaning as well, what else can you do apart from rote learning then?

Martin: Reading and underlining words, and words that come up several times, looking them up and then perhaps putting them on a list, and perhaps using some rote learning. But, Dahlia, I'm interested in what you learnt by rote for your exams - is this your English?

Dahlia: No, it's not my English. It's something related to my studying. I'm studying economics...

Martin: Yes...

Dahlia: ...and there is a lot of subjects quite difficult to understand every single word.

Martin: Yes?

Dahlia: So, we just keep just rote learning it - you know, to pass the exam...

Martin: Yeah

Dahlia: ...but, erm, many words is hard to know the meaning of.

Martin: That's right, and it doesn't actually help to understand it, does it?

Dahlia: Yeah. Most of our books are translated from, from Russian to Arabic...

Martin: Yeah?

Dahlia: ...so... quite difficult sometimes to understand everything.

Martin: It is. I think sometimes in learning a language rote learning can be useful. I know that I worked in China at one time, where my students astonished me by how good they were at rote learning, and I used to set lists of words for them to learn and the next day I'd discover that they remembered them. And then as a teacher I'd just have to help them understand them.

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Question: In terms of learning a language, could you offer an alternative to a student at home who maybe does want to learn vocabulary and improve their vocabulary, and maybe isn't finding rote learning good. So, I mean just as a practical tip, what other ways of learning are there?

Martin: I think rote learning may be useful for remembering it - to understand it, we have to see vocabulary in a context - so we need to be not necessarily reading a long book, but reading text in which those words occur. The best is when perhaps the word is used several times in different contexts, and we can understand from the context what it means. A good bilingual dictionary is such a useful tool as well.

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