
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The English We Speak

Can't put my finger on it



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Feifei

Hello and welcome to The English We Speak, where we explain expressions used by fluent English speakers so that you can use them, too! I'm Feifei, and I'm joined by Georgie. How are you?

Georgie

I'm fine, thank you. But Feifei, you look quite different today. Is it the hair? The makeup? New skincare routine? I can't quite put my finger on it.

Feifei

Yes, Georgie. I got a haircut at the weekend. Thanks for noticing!

Georgie

Ah, yes. Well, it looks great – really suits you. Anyway, I said, "I can't put my finger on it", and that is the phrase we're looking at in this programme.

Feifei

Yes, we are. If you can't put your finger on something, it means you can't identify the cause of something. So, you knew I looked different, but you didn't know why – you couldn't put your finger on it.

Georgie

It can also be used when you can't remember something or someone. For example, I walked past a man in the street this morning and I knew I recognised him, but I just couldn't put my finger on where I knew him from. I'm still thinking about it!

Feifei

Right. So, both meanings are about not being able to recall information from your brain – either you can't remember something, or you can't work out the cause of something.

Georgie

Right, and because of that, it's mostly used in the negative – I can't put my finger on something. It can be used in the affirmative form, but it's rarer. For example, I was finally able to put my finger on why I don't like nuts – it's the texture!

Feifei

Let's hear some more examples.

Examples

There's a really strange smell in the studio. I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

This cake tastes weird. I can't really put my finger on why, but I think I followed the recipe wrong – put the wrong ingredient in.

I really feel like I've left something behind at home today, but I can't put my finger on what it is.

Georgie

'Can't put my finger on something' is especially used when something is strange, wrong or just different.

Feifei

Yes, and it's most common in the first person. Mostly we use it to express our own confusion about something.

Georgie

One last thing to say about it is that we often say it with the word 'quite' – I can't quite put my finger on it. It means you feel like you're close to knowing or remembering that thing, but not yet.

Feifei

OK. Let's recap. We learnt the phrase 'can't put my finger on something' which means you can't figure out the reason for something, or you can't remember something. Thanks for joining us.

Georgie

Goodbye.

Feifei

Bye!