
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The English We Speak

Scratch the surface



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 very well, thank you, Feifei. How are you?

Feifei

Quite stressed actually! I've got so many things on my to-do list, and I feel like I've barely scratched the surface.

Georgie

Oh, that's a rubbish way to start the week. Well, 'scratch the surface' is the phrase we're looking at in this programme. What does it mean, Feifei?

Feifei

Well, let me paint a picture in your mind. Imagine you want to dig a deep hole in the ground. I arrive five minutes later, after you start, see you haven't made much progress, and say, "You've barely scratched the surface!" What am I telling you?

Georgie

Well, in other words, I've only broken up the surface of the ground, and I've still got a long way to go if I want to dig a deep hole!

Feifei

Right. Now, that's a very literal way of thinking about this phrase. We mostly use it metaphorically. If you've only scratched the surface of a subject or a problem, you've dealt with it only in a very superficial way, without going into it deeply.

Georgie

That's right. Let's hear some more examples from our BBC Learning English colleagues.

Examples

I'm supposed to clean the flat in time for a dinner party tonight. I've hardly scratched the surface. I've got loads to do.

I've been researching a holiday for next year. I want to go somewhere hot and sunny, but I've just scratched the surface so far. I've got lots more places to look at.

I went to a talk last night on climate change in Australia. It's such a big topic and I feel like they barely scratched the surface.

Feifei

Now, let's talk about its use. Remember, we're using it to talk about doing only a small part of something. So, you'll often hear the phrase in combination with the words 'only' and 'just'. For example, I've only scratched the surface of this topic. The news article just scratches the surface – there's still more to find out.

Georgie

Yes, and if you want to exaggerate and express that you haven't made much progress at all, you can use the words 'barely' or 'hardly'. Like you said at the beginning, you've barely scratched the surface of all those tasks on your to-do list.

Feifei

I know, talking of which, shall we wrap up so I can get on with the rest of my work? So, we've learned scratch the surface, which means to deal with a topic or problem, only in a superficial way. Thanks for joining us.

Georgie

Goodbye.

Feifei

Bye!