

Problems and difficulties

by Adrian Doff

Level: Intermediate and above

Time: 20 minutes

Aim: – To use common expressions for talking about problems and difficulties.
– To talk about problems you had and how you solved them.

There are three ways of using this worksheet:

- Give the worksheet to students to work through independently and then in the next lesson go through the exercises and deal with any points that arise.
- Use the worksheet for an active classroom lesson. The notes below give ideas for doing this.
- Do not give the worksheet out in class but use it as the basis for your own lesson, getting ideas and phrases from the students and presenting language on the board (use the notes below to help you). Then give out the worksheet at the end and ask students to do the exercises for homework.

Warm-up

Warm-up: Establishing the concept

Write the word *difficult* on the board. Ask students to tell you the noun form, *difficulty*, and add it to the board. Ask them to think about learning English: what do they think are the most difficult things about it, or what have they had the most difficulty with? The main purpose of this is to get students thinking about the topic, but it will also indicate to you whether they can use phrases with *difficult* and *difficulty* correctly.

Larger classes: In pairs, students exchange ideas with their partner. Then talk about them with the whole class together. Give out the worksheet.

Worksheet

Language focus

1. **Reading the texts.** Read the texts at the top of the worksheet and ask students what they think they are about.

Expected answers:

- a) Going to live in Japan and trying to learn the language.
- b) Starting your own business and managing to make it profitable.

2. **difficult to.** Read the examples and point out that *difficult* and *hard* often mean the same. Refer back to the texts at the top of the worksheet and show how we could also say 'I found it hard to understand what people were saying' and 'It wasn't difficult to find work'.

Focus on the expression *find it hard / difficult to*. If you like, show how we can also say *find it easy to*.

To practise these expressions, continue the topic of learning English. Mention specific activities, e.g. writing emails, spelling words, using verb tenses, talking on the phone, writing essays, reading novels, understanding films. Ask students whether they find these things easy or difficult to do in English, and why.

Larger classes: Do this as a quick pairwork activity, writing topics on the board for students to discuss. As a round-up, ask a few students what they found out from their partner.

3. **difficulty.** Read the examples and point out the set phrase *have difficulty in + -ing* (not *have difficulties in*). Make sure students can pronounce *difficult* and *difficulty* correctly.

To focus on these expressions, give a few situations for discussion, e.g.:

- Starbucks faced cultural difficulties in East Asia. What kind of difficulties do you think these were?
- Imagine you travel overland across the Sahara Desert. What difficulties might you run into? How could you overcome them?

4. **problems, trouble.** Read the examples and point out that *have problems* and *have trouble* can often be used as alternatives – they can both be followed by *with + noun* or *verb + -ing*. Refer back to the texts at the top of the worksheet and show how we could also say 'I had a lot of trouble with the language' and 'People seemed to have problems understanding me', 'I had problems earning enough', 'I had trouble finding suitable employees'.

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Write a few things on the board that people often have problems with, e.g.: things in your home, computers, cars, getting up in the morning. Ask students whether they have problems with these things and whether they usually solve the problems themselves or get other people to help.

Practice

1. Talk or write:

Students write sentences. Then ask them to read out what they have written.

Alternative: Give students a few moments to think about the topic, and possibly make a few notes. Then ask them in turn to talk about it.

Larger classes: Do this as pairwork, then ask a few students what they said.

2. Exercises:

Let students do the exercises in pairs, thinking of as many possible answers as they can. Then go through them together.

Possible answers:

1. a) have difficulty (trouble, problems)
b) problems with (trouble with)
c) difficult to
d) had difficulty (problems, trouble)
2. a) tackle **or** solve
b) ran **or** got
c) find
d) solve **or** overcome **or** deal with

Other language areas you could explore:

1. Kinds of problem or difficulty

- *financial problems, personal problems, communication problems, staff problems, organizational problems*

2. Adjectives

- *a serious problem, an intractable problem, a persistent problem, a major problem*

3. *hard* as an adjective and adverb

- *hard work, hard labour, a hard life; work hard*

4. Other adjectives that mean *difficult*

- *a tricky problem, a tough assignment, a challenging job*

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BUSINESS & ESP WORKSHEET

A When I first came here, I had a lot of **problems** with the language. I **found it difficult to** understand what people were saying, and people seemed to **have trouble** understanding me when I spoke Japanese.



B I had a lot of **difficulties** when I first started. It wasn't **hard** to find work, but I **had trouble** earning money. I also **had problems** finding suitable employees.



difficult to

difficult hard

to ...

It's very **difficult to** find reliable sales people.
At first it was quite **hard to** write emails in English.

Difficult and *hard* mean the same.

We can also say *find it difficult / hard to*:

We find it very difficult to find reliable sales people.

At first **I found it quite hard** to write emails in English.

Adjective: **difficult**
Noun: **difficulty**

I found it **difficult to** write emails in English.
I **had difficulty** writing emails in English.

We can also talk about *difficulties*. Notice these expressions:

face / experience difficulties When Starbucks opened cafés in East Asia, they **faced serious cultural difficulties**.

get (or run) into difficulties The project started well, but it soon **ran into difficulties**.

overcome difficulties We have managed to **overcome most of the difficulties** by talking to our clients.

problems, trouble

have problems with + noun
have problems (with) + -ing

We're having serious **problems with** the new computer software.
We're having **problems (with) installing** the new computer software.

Notice these expressions:

solve / sort out, be faced with a problem They called in a technician, who managed to **solve the problem**.

tackle, address (or deal with) a problem The new manager is going to **tackle the problem** of staff shortages.

We can also say *have trouble with / have trouble ... -ing*:

We're **having trouble with** the new computer software.

I **have trouble** writing emails in English. (= I have problems with it)

Note: We can also say *have difficulty (in) doing something*:

I **have difficulty writing emails**.

Talk or write

Think about your job.

What problems or difficulties have you had?

What about your company?

Write a few sentences, using expressions from the worksheet.

Exercises difficulty trouble with problems have difficult had to

Add two words from the box to each gap. How many different answers are possible?

- a) He speaks a bit of English, but I _____ understanding him sometimes.
- b) Are you still having _____ your car?
- c) I found it quite _____ translate the article into English.
- d) The magazine was so popular that we _____ printing enough copies.

Write a suitable verb in each gap.

- a) We urgently need to _____ the problem of people arriving late for work.
- b) They found oil, but they _____ into difficulties when they started drilling.
- c) After a 12 hour flight, I always _____ it very difficult to sleep.
- d) We still need to _____ a few minor problems before we bring the car onto the market.