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Britain's sick day culture

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Contents

The Article	2
Warm-ups	3
Before Reading / Listening	4
While Reading / Listening	5
Listening Gap Fill	6
After Reading	7
Discussion	8
Speaking	9
Homework	10
Answers	11

9 February, 2006

THE ARTICLE

Britain's sick day culture

A recent study from Britain shows that February 6 is the day when most Britons take the day off from work sick. Professor Cary Cooper, who conducted the research, said fake illnesses were particularly common on this day. Apparently, early February makes many workers feel gloomy. Dr. Cooper said: "many people are still feeling the post-Christmas blues". The study showed that over 50 percent of 4,000 people who were interviewed took at least one sick day each year, when in fact, there was nothing wrong with them. Most people phoned their boss and pretended to have a cough or sore throat.

There were many reasons for workers taking a "sickie". Even though British workers get more vacation than Americans, they wanted more public holidays. Other reasons included a need to recharge batteries after the New Year break, an extra-long weekend, a bad hangover or to catch up on sleep. Many people said they didn't want to take just one day from their total vacation days. Most British workers prefer to take off a two-to-five week block, rather than "waste" their holiday here and there. The good news for bosses is that the number of workers lying to take a day off is decreasing.

WARM-UPS

1. HOLIDAYS: Write down some or all of the national holidays in your country. Talk about these in pairs / groups. What do you do on each of the holidays? What other holidays do you think your country should have / celebrate?

2. CHAT: In pairs / groups, decide which of these topics or words are most interesting and which are most boring.

Recently / Britain / February 6 / being sick / feeling gloomy / fake illnesses / coughing / sore throats / national holidays / New Year / vacation / bosses / lying

Have a chat about the topics you liked. For more conversation, change topics and partners frequently.

3. FEELINGS DAYS: Look at this list of days of the year. In pairs / groups, talk about how you usually feel on these days. What kinds of things do you usually do around these times?

- February 6
- April 22
- June 17
- July 31
- September 8
- October 19
- November 24
- December 31

4. EXCUSES: Take part in mini role plays. Student A is a boss / teacher, student B is a worker / student. The boss / teacher does not think the worker's / student's excuses for taking a day off are good enough. The excuses are below:

- a. I had to wait for the TV repairperson.
- b. I had a bad headache.
- c. The car didn't start.
- d. I was exhausted from the weekend.
- e. I had a toothache.
- f. I had to meet my friend at the airport.
- g. I was depressed.

5. SICK: Spend one minute writing down all of the different words you associate with the word "sick". Share your words with your partner(s) and talk about them. Together, put the words into different categories.

6. OFF SICK: Which of the following are good reasons for taking a day off from school / work sick?

- Wanting more national holidays
- To recharge one's batteries
- To go on a date
- Because it was raining
- Having a hangover
- To catch up on sleep
- To avoid a busy day at work / school
- Feeling blue

BEFORE READING / LISTENING

1. TRUE / FALSE: Look at the article's headline and guess whether these sentences are true (T) or false (F):

- a. The British government has introduced a national sick from work day. T / F
- b. February 6 is the day on which most sick days are taken in Britain. T / F
- c. Londoners take an average of 30 days a year off sick. T / F
- d. Most people feign coughing or a sore throat when phoning in sick. T / F
- e. Another word for a day off sick is a "sickie". T / F
- f. Americans have more national holidays than Britons. T / F
- g. Britons prefer to take their holiday in two-to-five week chunks. T / F
- h. The incidence of workers taking sick days in Britain is on the increase. T / F

2. SYNONYM MATCH: Match the following synonyms from the article:

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------|
| a. shows | squander |
| b. fake | blue |
| c. gloomy | play-acted |
| d. in fact | recover |
| e. pretended | reveals |
| f. vacation | overall |
| g. recharge batteries | holiday |
| h. total | actually |
| i. waste | falling |
| j. decreasing | invented |

3. PHRASE MATCH: Match the following phrases from the article (sometimes more than one combination is possible):

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| a. the day when most Britons | feel gloomy |
| b. fake illnesses were particularly | to take off a two-to-five week block |
| c. early February makes many workers | a cough or sore throat |
| d. ...when in fact, | after the New Year break |
| e. pretended to have | take a day off is decreasing |
| f. taking | common on this day |
| g. a need to recharge batteries | here and there |
| h. Most British workers prefer | take the day off from work sick |
| i. "waste" their holiday | a "sickie" |
| j. the number of workers lying to | there was nothing wrong with them |

WHILE READING / LISTENING

GAP FILL: Put the words in the column on the right into the gaps in the text.

Britain's sick day culture

A _____ study from Britain shows that February 6 is the day when most Britons take the day off from work _____. Professor Cary Cooper, who conducted the research, said _____ illnesses were particularly common on this day. Apparently, early February makes many workers feel _____. Dr. Cooper said: "many people are still feeling the _____ -Christmas blues". The study showed that over 50 percent of 4,000 people who were interviewed took at _____ one sick day each year, when in fact, there was nothing _____ with them. Most people phoned their boss and _____ to have a cough or sore throat.

There were many _____ for workers taking a "sickie". Even though British workers get more _____ than Americans, they wanted more public holidays. Other reasons included a need to _____ batteries after the New Year break, an extra-long weekend, a bad _____ or to catch up on sleep. Many people said they didn't want to take _____ one day from their total vacation days. Most British workers prefer to take off a two-to-five week _____, rather than "_____" their holiday here and there. The good news for bosses is that the number of workers _____ to take a day off is decreasing.

post
gloomy
sick
pretended
recent
least
wrong
fake
recharge
waste
vacation
block
hangover
reasons
lying
just

LISTENING

Listen and fill in the spaces.

Britain's sick day culture

A _____ study from Britain shows that February 6 is the day when most Britons take the day off from work sick. Professor Cary Cooper, who _____ the research, said fake illnesses were particularly _____ on this day. Apparently, early February makes many workers feel gloomy. Dr. Cooper said: "many people are still _____ the post-Christmas blues". The study showed that over 50 percent of 4,000 people who were interviewed took at least one sick day each year, when _____, there was nothing wrong with them. Most people phoned their boss and _____ to have a cough or sore throat.

There were many reasons for workers taking a "_____". Even though British workers get more vacation than Americans, they wanted more public holidays. Other reasons _____ a need to _____ batteries after the New Year break, an extra-long weekend, a bad hangover or to _____ on sleep. Many people said they didn't want to take just one day from their total vacation days. Most British workers _____ to take off a two-to-five week block, rather than "waste" their holiday here and there. The good news for bosses is that the number of workers _____ to take a day off is decreasing.

AFTER READING / LISTENING

1. WORD SEARCH: Look in your dictionaries / computer to find collocates, other meanings, information, synonyms ... for the words **'sore'** and **'throat'**.

- Share your findings with your partners.
- Make questions using the words you found.
- Ask your partner / group your questions.

2. ARTICLE QUESTIONS: Look back at the article and write down some questions you would like to ask the class about the text.

- Share your questions with other classmates / groups.
- Ask your partner / group your questions.

3. GAP FILL: In pairs / groups, compare your answers to this exercise. Check your answers. Talk about the words from the activity. Were they new, interesting, worth learning...?

4. VOCABULARY: Circle any words you do not understand. In groups, pool unknown words and use dictionaries to find their meanings.

5. STUDENT "SICK DAY" SURVEY: In pairs / groups, write down questions about holidays and sick days.

- Ask other classmates your questions and note down their answers.
- Go back to your original partner / group and compare your findings.
- Make mini-presentations to other groups on your findings.

6. TEST EACH OTHER: Look at the words below. With your partner, try to recall exactly how these were used in the text:

- | | |
|--------------|--------------|
| • February 6 | • sickie |
| • fake | • Americans |
| • gloomy | • batteries |
| • 50 percent | • catch |
| • in fact | • block |
| • boss | • decreasing |

DISCUSSION

STUDENT A's QUESTIONS (Do not show these to student B)

- a. Did the headline make you want to read the article?
- b. Do you ever take days off from work/school because you are sick?
- c. Have you ever lied to be absent from work/school?
- d. What do you think of truancy or people lying to take days off from work?
- e. Is there a time of the year in your country when people generally feel gloomy?
- f. Are there regional variations in your country regarding who are the best workers / students?
- g. Have you ever telephoned anyone pretending to be sick?
- h. Are you are good at thinking up excuses or lying?
- i. Are you ever doubtful when another student / co-worker is off sick?
- j. How often and when do you get the blues?

STUDENT B's QUESTIONS (Do not show these to student A)

- a. Did you like reading this article?
- b. What do you think about what you read?
- c. Do you think there are enough national holidays in your country?
- d. What do you do to recharge your batteries?
- e. Is it easy for you to think of an excuse and take a day off because of a fake illness?
- f. Do you ever waste your holiday, time or money?
- g. Do you think bosses or teachers are suspicious when workers or students call in sick?
- h. Do you think calling in sick straight after a weekend is suspicious?
- i. Do you think someone should be punished if they take a day off when they are not really sick?
- j. Did you like this discussion?

AFTER DISCUSSION: Join another partner / group and tell them what you talked about.

- a. What was the most interesting thing you heard?
- b. Was there a question you didn't like?
- c. Was there something you totally disagreed with?
- d. What did you like talking about?
- e. Which was the most difficult question?

SPEAKING

EXCUSES: In pairs / groups, think of five excuses you would use to take a day off sick. Talk about what you could do to make your excuse more believable.

Change partners / groups. Tell each other your excuses. Give each other feedback on the quality of each excuse and the possibility of a boss / teacher not believing it.

Return to your original partner(s) and share what you heard from your earlier partner(s).

Conduct a class survey to find out what the most common excuses were. What were the most inventive excuses? Which ones would you try or never try?

HOMEWORK

1. VOCABULARY EXTENSION: Choose several of the words from the text. Use a dictionary or Google's search field (or another search engine) to build up more associations / collocations of each word.

2. INTERNET: Search the Internet and find information on sick days and holidays in your country. Share your findings with your class in the next lesson. Did you all find out similar things?

3. SURVEY: Conduct your own "sick day" survey among your family and friends. Report your findings to your partner(s) in your next class. Did you all write about similar things?

4. SICK: Write about the times you have been sick. Did you always take a day off from school or work? Read what you wrote to your classmates in the next lesson. Did everyone write about similar things?

ANSWERS

TRUE / FALSE:

a. F b. T c. T d. T e. T f. F g. T h. F

SYNONYM MATCH:

a. shows	reveals
b. fake	invented
c. gloomy	blue
d. in fact	actually
e. pretended	play-acted
f. vacation	holiday
g. recharge batteries	recover
h. total	overall
i. waste	squander
j. decreasing	falling

PHRASE MATCH:

a. the day when most Britons	take the day off from work sick
b. fake illnesses were particularly	common on this day
c. early February makes many workers	feel gloomy
d. ...when in fact,	there was nothing wrong with them
e. pretended to have	a cough or sore throat
f. taking	a "sickie"
g. a need to recharge batteries	after the New Year break
h. Most British workers prefer	to take off a two-to-five week block
i. "waste" their holiday	here and there
j. the number of workers lying to	take a day off is decreasing

GAP FILL:

Britain's sick day culture

A **recent** study from Britain shows that February 6 is the day when most Britons take the day off from work **sick**. Professor Cary Cooper, who conducted the research, said **fake** illnesses were particularly common on this day. Apparently, early February makes many workers feel **gloomy**. Dr. Cooper said: "many people are still feeling the **post**-Christmas blues". The study showed that over 50 percent of 4,000 people who were interviewed took at **least** one sick day each year, when in fact, there was nothing **wrong** with them. Most people phoned their boss and **pretended** to have a cough or sore throat.

There were many **reasons** for workers taking a "sickie". Even though British workers get more **vacation** than Americans, they wanted more public holidays. Other reasons included a need to **recharge** batteries after the New Year break, an extra-long weekend, a bad **hangover** or to catch up on sleep. Many people said they didn't want to take **just** one day from their total vacation days. Most British workers prefer to take off a two-to-five week **block**, rather than "**waste**" their holiday here and there. The good news for bosses is that the number of workers **lying** to take a day off is decreasing.