

Few v a few; little v a little

Q: On quantifiers: one of the exercises I chose from Grammar in Use (Murphy) is *She's lucky. She has few problems.*

How can I explain the absence of 'a', i.e. *few* problems and not *a few* problems
When I gave the explanations on *few/a few* (with countable nouns) and *little/a little* (with uncountable nouns), I told the students the negative nuance of *few/little*...
e.g. *there were few people there* (= not many, a negative notion)

v

there were a few people there (= some, a neutral/positive notion)

Similarly,

We have little time left (= not much, a negative notion)

v

We have a little time left (= some, a neutral/positive notion)

But here, how can I make them understand (some get it, others don't)?

Of course the positive aspect of things is to have *few* problems, a small quantity then... And how to contrast it with the typical example:

There's a little milk left (which is the good thing) v *There's little milk left* (which is not a good thing?)

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A: A few / few. It's a very subtle difference and I wonder how important it really is to spend a lot of time on it in class, frankly? Perhaps only at advanced level. Otherwise I just teach what is frequently used e.g.

there is/are a lot/some there isn't/aren't a lot/many.

There were a lot of people there

There weren't a lot of people/many people there

There were some people there

There weren't a lot of people/many people there

We've got a lot of/some time left

We haven't got a lot of/much time left

It's already a headache for many learners to get their heads around count nouns and non-count nouns, and then to decide on much, many etc. this further issue of *few* v *a few* and *little* v *a little* is simply just too much sometimes!!!

But if you do teach it how about this tip: *A few* has got more words than *few*. So more = + .. so *a few* = positive

You could also call out sentences, one at a time. Learners have to hold up a green (?) card if the idea is a positive one and a (red?) card if it's a negative one eg

We've got little time left (red)

We've got few volunteers (red)

We've got a little time left (green)

We've got a few volunteers (green)

Even if they get mixed up, it can be good fun – and certainly helps learners to become more sensitive to the concept.